Learning How To Live

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Learning How To Live

by 1clevergurl

Summary

Regina Mills, a reclusive pianist, moves from Boston to Storybrooke, Maine with her newly adopted son, Henry, to escape an abusive past and pick up the pieces of her life. There, she finds herself falling for a painfully shy, ruggedly beautiful handyman with a past of her own who shows her that sometimes second chances are the most beautiful chances of all and ‘perfect’ doesn’t always mean flawless.

Notes

A/N #1 - All TV shows, movies, books, and/or other copyrighted material referenced in this work, including the characters, settings, and events therein, are the properties of their respective owners, not me. This work is an interpretation of that material and is not intended to be used for profit. All references are made in a fictional context and for entertainment only, and are not intended to be libelous, defamatory, or taken as factual.

A/N #2 – One or two lines of italics normally represent thoughts in someone’s head. Multiple lines or paragraphs of italics; especially when contained between separator lines, usually denotes a flashback to an event. Separator lines represent a separation of scenes or character vantage point or a flashback/reference to a past event.

A/N #3 – This is a slow-burn Swan Queen with trigger warnings for those who are survivors of abuse. Some of the flashbacks will touch on that subject matter (not in graphic detail). Much of my own life is, quite literally, in these pages; events/situations that I have endured.
and feelings that I have struggled with for many years.

A/N #4 – If you are looking for something lighter (no trigger warnings), I will suggest my other work, ‘Photos From a One Life Stand’.
The Job

“Oh, Emma, thank goodness you’re here!”

Emma had barely set one foot into the door of the workshop when she heard Marco’s voice call out to her with his thick, Italian accent.

“Hey Marco! What’s the occasion? You’re usually not this happy to see me,” teased Emma with a grin.

“Oh, come on now, you know you’re my favorite apprentice.”

Marco took the sides of Emma’s face in her hands and turned her head this way and then the other, depositing fatherly kisses on her cheeks.

“I’m your only apprentice, Marco,” laughed Emma as she set down her tool box and belt on the ground and placed her rolled set of tools gently on the bench. Untying the center knot, she unfurled the cloth to its full length revealing a collection of chisels, picks, sets and blades used to carve intricate details into wood.

Emma had been Marco’s apprentice for the past twenty years, since the not-so-tender age of eight.

Emma left her foster home that day fully intending NOT to go to school. Instead, she cut between houses, stepping through hedges and climbing over fences occasionally, until she came upon a small, run-down woodshop located behind an equally dilapidated home that was owned by an older man named Marco. He lived alone and provided a limited handyman service to the town residents, though most of the handyman jobs came to him out of a sense of charity from the residents versus him having any skillset above and beyond what they could get from any typical handyman in town.

Where Marco’s true skill and passion lay was in wood carving. Marco created some of the most beautiful clocks, boxes, miniatures, toys and dolls that anyone had ever seen. They didn’t bring in a lot of income, but combined with the early pension that he received when he was laid off from his job, it kept him afloat…..barely.

Emma approached the side door of the wood shop and checked the handle. It turned and the door creaked open. There were several windows in the shop covered in a film that looked to be a combination of years of dampness and sawdust. It allowed sun to filter into the shop, but provided little visibility to anything on the inside or outside. Emma hoped she could get her hands on some of the smaller tools that Marco owned. She had seen a few similar items in the hardware store in town, in the locked display case, and they looked to be pretty valuable. If she could grab a few of those, she might be able to sell them somehow when she was in Portland. Her foster mom and dad made frequent trips there to buy weed and other drugs from their dealer. When they went, they would drag along Emma and leave her to her own devices on the streets until they finished their ‘transactions’. They had some warped idea that the police or judge might go easier on them, if they were busted with drugs and a small kid in tow. Emma was smart enough to know that it would just lead to another foster family, but she didn’t have a lot of say in the matter, so she may as well take advantage of the situation if she could. A few dollars in her pocket might mean one or two days of lunch at school and a less empty feeling before she went to bed at night. She learned pretty early that her lunch money was going into someone’s arm, nose or stomach.
Emma took a minute to get her bearings and stepped over to the workbench where a small music box lay closed. Carved on the top of the box was a picture of two, Atlantic Puffins. Emma knew she was there for a different reason, but the box was so tempting, and the tools she wanted lay beside. It was a quick ‘grab and go’, if needed. Surely, it wouldn’t hurt to take a peek.

Picking up the box, she wound the key on the bottom until it was tight. Setting it back on the bench, she opened the lid. The inside was simple. A thin piece of glass covered a simple mechanism that consisted of a rotating drum and a comb that held a series of ‘keys’ of different lengths that would catch on small nubs on the drum to create different notes. The song it played was a slow sort of tune, a repetitive three-note pattern interspersed with some lower notes. It was sad and beautiful all at once and stirred something in Emma. Turning over the box, she could make out four words scribbled there in pencil, ‘Sonata’, ‘14’, ‘Moonlight’, ‘Teresa’. Emma had no clue what it all meant and didn’t have a ton of time to ponder it, because she heard steps on the driveway leading up to the shop. Slamming closed the lid to ensure the box’s silence; Emma grabbed the tools and bolted for the door. She reached the door about the time it opened from the outside, running directly into Marco. In a brief moment of pause, Emma looked at Marco and Marco at her. He saw the tools in her hand and her eyes went wide. Turning to run, she heard one thing as she was stopped dead in her tracks by a hand on her collar.

“GOTCHA!”

Emma squirmed and kicked to no avail as Marco held on tightly. Figuring out quickly that she wasn’t going to be released, Emma stopped fighting, hoping to conserve energy in case she could find a way to make a break later.

“What are you doin’ in my shop? Stealin’ my tools? What’s a seven-year old gonna do with those?” asked Marco in his heavy, Italian accent.

“I’m EIGHT and PUT ME DOWN!” demanded Emma.

“I’ll put you down when we get to your house! Now, show me where you live!”

Emma wasn’t going to win this fight. Even though he was older, Marco’s grip was like a vice. Plus, she now had a bigger problem. Her foster parents were about to find out two things: one, she hadn’t gone to school and, two, she had been caught stealing. Emma was in some deep shit. Despite her foster parent’s own lack of self-control and nasty habits, they ruled with an iron fist when it came to Emma’s behavior. There was zero tolerance for stepping out of line and Emma had the bruises and breaks to show for it.

Arriving at Emma’s foster family’s front door, Marco knocked a few times to announce their arrival keeping a solid hold on Emma’s collar in the process. There seemed to be a lot of shuffling happening and Marco looked at the door quizzically wondering when it would open.

As soon as they are done hiding their stash, thought Emma.

The door opened just enough to reveal a large man in a dirty, white tee-shirt and jeans holding a beer. He had a five o’clock shadow and blood shot eyes. His hair looked like it hadn’t been combed for days or maybe even weeks.

“What do you want?” he snarled at Marco.

From behind him, a distinctly female voice was heard,

“Who’s at the door?”
“Nobody,” shouted the man over his shoulder, “Go back to bed!”

Looking back at Marco, the man continued,

“Well? I ain’t got all day, old man.”

Marco suddenly felt very small and frail under the stare of the man in the doorway. Perhaps this hadn’t been the best idea for him or the girl, but they were here now and there was no turning back.

“Is this your daughter?” asked Marco.

“Foster kid,” the man corrected.

“Yes, well, I caught her stealin’ from my shop a few moments ago,” finished Marco.

“Is that so?”

The man turned his attention to Emma as if this was the first time he had noticed her there and leered at her. Reaching out, he grabbed her bicep roughly and pulled her closer to him as he leaned down to snarl at her,

“Were you stealin’, girl?”

Emma’s mouth gaped a few times before she was able to meekly deliver a one-word response,

“Yes.”

Throwing Marco a sickly grin, the man twisted his hand and yanked Emma away from Marco’s grasp by her arm.

“You don’t have to worry. She won’t be bothering your stuff anymore. Have a good day,” he finished with a sickening smirk. Yanking Emma over the threshold, he slammed the door behind him. Marco heard a loud smack and the clattering of tools dropped from a hand, before he turned and made his way quickly off the porch. God, what had he done?

Marco was outside of his workshop when Emma and the man returned the next day. Emma’s head was bowed and she kept her focus on the ground.

“Go on. Say what I told you to,” demanded the man of Emma.

“Here are your tools,” whispered Emma as she reached out a trembling hand in front of her. It was grasped around the few tools she had managed to grab from the bench the day before. She didn’t look up, but waited for Marco to take them from her hand.

“What else did I tell you to say?”

“I-I’m sorry,” finished Emma. She barely looked up at Marco, but what he saw was enough to make him sick. Emma’s eye was swollen shut, black and blue, and her lip was split and swollen. Her one, open eye was filled with tears that she was trying hard not to let fall.

The man saw Marco’s face twist in repulsion. Not wanting to lose the money he was using to feed his habits, he played off Emma’s injuries in an attempt to curtail a possible call to Social Services.
“Damn kid fell out of the treehouse yesterday after you left. Looks worse than it is. You don’t need to worry about her.” Marco could tell that the last sentence was thrown in as more of a threat than an assurance.

Emma had already returned her gaze to the ground and remained quiet.

“So, old man, are we done here?”

Marco nodded slowly.

As the man turned, he grabbed Emma by the arm roughly causing her to lose balance. He spat out,

“We need to figure out something to do with you to keep you occupied and out of any more trouble.”

Marco hesitated only a moment, before he spoke,

“Wait….”

“Now what do you want, old man?” asked the man harshly.

“Actually, I could use an apprentice here at the shop. Someone to help me with little stuff…nothing dangerous, but it would keep her busy, if that’s what you are looking for?” Marco held his breath, hoping he could get some sort of a positive response from the man. He probably couldn’t get her taken away from these people, but he might be able to limit the time she had to spend with them.

“You want her? Take her,” growled the man as he shoved Emma roughly at Marco. Leveling his gaze at Emma, the man added with an index finger pointed in her direction, “And I better not hear about you causing any more problems, do you hear me?”

Emma swallowed hard and nodded her head as the man turned and stalked off, leaving Emma standing alone in the driveway with Marco. Placing a fatherly arm around her shoulders he could feel her almost skeletal frame beneath her threadbare clothes. Marco guided her towards the house gently,

“Well, how about we start with a little bit of lunch and some ice, eh?” From that day forward, Emma never again went to bed hungry.

Emma started off doing the little stuff, just as Marco promised; sweeping, cleaning, organizing things around the workshop. It wasn’t difficult work, and a lot of it probably didn’t even need to be done, at least not as many times as he would ask her to do it, but Marco wanted to make sure that he could show that she was busy and helping, in case her foster father ever decided to show up again. The last thing Marco wanted was for that man to believe Emma would be better off at home. Marco knew from meeting him and seeing Emma’s face the first day that home was definitely NOT the place where she needed to be. In fact, Marco wanted to make sure Emma was at home as little as possible, so she was invited to come to the shop as soon as school was let out each day and she could stay as late into the evenings as she wanted, as long as her foster parents were OK with it. Ultimately, Emma’s foster parents didn’t seem to care about the hours she kept. In fact, they seemed almost thankful to be rid of her; one less thing to worry about as they plunged down the rabbit hole in their drug-addled stupors.

Weekend work wasn’t required or expected, but Emma knew that she was welcome to come then as
well. Most Saturdays and Sundays, Marco would find Emma seated across from him at the workbench, watching him closely and carefully, memorizing every step and detail, as he built and carved his wooden treasures. She listened quietly as he told stories of his childhood in Italy as a toy maker’s apprentice.

Over the years, Marco would come to know many things about Emma: She had wrapped herself in thick walls to protect herself emotionally. She lacked self-esteem and self-confidence. She was incredibly shy and socially awkward. She was vulnerable and she had been used and abused in the worst ways by a system and families that didn’t care. Despite all of it, though; despite every obstacle she endured, Emma managed to remain standing. She grew stronger; she persevered. She preserved and nurtured her sense of compassion and competitiveness and insatiable curiosity. She saw beauty in common and not-so-common things; in the things that others took for granted or never noticed. She was a gentle spirit and a kind soul with such capacity for unconditional love. Marco knew that, some day, the right person would come along and that love would be given, almost unleashed, with unparalleled fierceness and devotion.

For now, though, Marco simply wanted to pull down the walls and reach the person within, to show Emma everything about herself that was beautiful; things that he saw revealed in small slivers when the armor would part. He wanted so badly to show her who she really was and what she was capable of. So he set about removing the bricks, one by one, and sometimes, more than once. There would be many times when they regressed back to square one over the years.

“I think you missed a few wood shavings over there.” Marco nodded his head at a far corner of the wood shop with a grin.

Each day, Marco came up with a task that only Emma would have the special or unique ability to accomplish, either because of her size, her speed or her knowledge of the shop. Somehow, Emma managed to turn every one of the tasks into some sort of competition, trying to accomplish everything asked as quickly, safely, efficiently and correctly as possible while Marco looked on with a semi-critical eye.

“Did not!” said Emma defensively.

“I don’t know, Emma. I think I see something there.” countered Marco.

Frustratedly, Emma would lead Marco over to the corner by the hand, so that she could show him that, indeed, she had NOT missed the spot in question.

“See?”

“Huh. I guess you’re right, Emma.” Marco would nod and smile at her proudly.

There were the times when Emma saw that she had, in fact, missed something or done something wrong. In those cases, she would huff at herself and redo the work to make sure that, the second time, it was done correctly. There was never a third.

Even in those times, Marco would nod and smile at her proudly and, little by little, the smiles between them became much more frequent.
“Emma, come here.”

A twelve-year old Emma drew closer and hesitated just short of where Marco was seated. Marco could see the bruises on her wrists. She was walking slowly and slightly hunched over. It seemed like her steps were painful and she hobbled a bit as she walked.

“You want to tell me what happened?”

Emma shook her head. Her chin quivered and her eyes filled with tears. Marco held out his arms to her and she limped the last few steps, crawling into his lap and pressing her body into his. Marco wrapped her in his arms and rocked her as she shook beneath his embrace.

Marco always asked, but Emma never told. Each time, he called Social Services. He told them what he believed was happening. He begged them to investigate. They came; usually long-delayed. They left empty-handed. Emma’s silence protected that family. They didn’t offer the same protection in return.

I guess sometimes the devil that you see is better than the devil that you don’t see… thought Marco.

“Emma, you’re late today, eh?”

Emma furrowed her brow at Marco in confusion.

“They’re gone, Marco,” said Emma softly. “The only thing left is that old, broken-down, yellow Beetle in the driveway. The house is empty.”

Marco figured the man and woman had gotten in trouble with the law or their dealer and decided that a change of residence was in order. He was surprised they had managed to hold out this long, though he never thought they would leave Emma; throwing her out like yesterday’s paper. Their capacity for cruelty still surprised and sickened Marco, even after everything he had seen through the years.

Walking to his workbench, Marco opened a small drawer and pulled out a key. Returning to Emma, he placed the key in front of her on the table before patting her hand gently and silently pointing a finger to a door in the loft of the woodshop.

“I’m gonna call Fredrick and have him bring the truck tomorrow. You and he go get the car, eh?”

The next day, Emma and Fredrick retrieved the yellow Bug from the other house. Fredrick looked the other way as Emma busted a window and retrieved only one thing from her former residence, a white baby blanket with purple stitching that spelled out ‘Emma’. It was one of those things that she just couldn’t let go, kind of like the dream that, maybe, someday, she might find her real birth parents, and they would welcome her back with open arms. At least dreaming was free.

Returning to the workshop that afternoon, Emma opened the door to her new ‘home’. A twin mattress sat atop a hand-carved frame in one corner; a single chair and small table sat in another. A small sink surrounded by a few cabinets formed a kitchen and a small bath with a sink, toilet and shower sat off the main living area separated by a door. It was as good, if not better, than any place she had lived before. The sounds and smells of the wood shop crept through the spaces in the floorboards. They created a cozy space, a safe space, for her. She needed one of those right now,
more than ever.

Marco had placed some essentials around for her, made the bed, laid towels in the bath, gave her a few cups and glasses. She walked over to the small table by the chair where a pink box lay. A small card on top read: ‘To Emma’ in Marco’s writing. Opening the box, she gently lifted out the cupcake with a candle atop. Lighting the candle, Emma closed her eyes and whispered,

“I wish I had a family that loved me,” before blowing out the candle.

It was her 16th birthday.

“Beautiful work, Emma.”

Marco ran his hand over the heavy, mahogany table. The top was as smooth as silk and shone with a satiny finish. It was big enough to seat six and was one of the largest pieces ever made in the workshop. When they received the order, Emma asked to own the project, independently, from start to finish. Marco had every confidence she would pull it off; she had been assisting Marco in building furniture since she was 13, and after seven years, one would say that the student had far surpassed the teacher. He knew that something about this project had spoken to her heart. He knew it would be flawless.

The edges were inlaid with acorns and leaves all carved by her own hand. In the center of the top of the table, she had carved a substantial scene that was as real as if someone was standing at the edge of the woods taking in the view of the rocky coastline of one of the Storybrooke inlets.

Emma stopped her work briefly to look up at Marco through thick-lensed glasses that she pushed up further onto her nose with her index finger. She grinned at him.

“It’s finished.”

“It’s beautiful,” repeated Marco with a proud smile and a nod before leaving her alone in the shop.

Standing, Emma walked over to the table and ran calloused fingers over the furrows and ridges of the scene. She smiled as she thought about the cabin and inlet that inspired it. She hoped someday she would see it again. Removing her glasses and rubbing tired eyes, Emma shut off the lights to the workshop and retreated to her loft to sleep.

Who in the hell offers to host a bar-b-que for 200 people the following weekend on something that looks like this? thought Emma as she stood looking at the mess of missing, rotten and warped boards before her.

Normally Emma worked in the shop, building furniture and refining her carving skills, but this job had come up and the guy was willing to pay a steep price, so Marco couldn’t very well refuse. With so little time left, Marco needed ‘all hands on deck’, literally, so here she stood with him and Fredrick trying to figure out a game plan to knock this out within the next few days.

They had gotten the demo done the first day and had already laid the framework for the new deck by the middle of the second. It was one of the hottest days of the year and Emma walked to the edge of the deck to get a drink of water from the cooler they had brought with them. She was wearing her
typical khaki shorts, white tank and work boots with thick socks. A sheen of sweat covered her skin and the fabric of the tank clung uncomfortably to her. Her hips were wet from sweat that was collecting under the heavy suede of her tool belt and the hammer and nails jingled slightly as she stepped. She stood at the end of the deck, back facing Marco and Fredrick, as she enjoyed the view of the woods and the temporary refreshment that the water offered.

“What are you lookin’ at?” asked an annoyed Marco. He had noticed Fredrick watching Emma with too much interest over the course of this job.

“How’s?” Fredrick responded in a daze, bobbing his head a bit to be able to take in Emma’s backside from several angles.

“I’m gonna tell you this one time, Fredrick. You look at her and you treat her like you would your sister or, so help me, you’re gonna deal with me. I won’t tell you again, Fredrick.”

Fredrick looked at Marco and could see the seriousness in his eyes. There was no room for argument and nothing to be left to interpretation. Something told Fredrick that he didn’t want to have to deal with Marco; not about this. Emma was most definitely off-limits and was not to be thought of in any way, other than platonically.

Marco looked at Emma one last time before returning to his work. The awkward, little girl of eight had grown into an incredibly beautiful woman of twenty-five.

“You’re sure I can’t convince you to stay, Emma?”

“Thanks, Marco, but I think I’ve been a burden long enough and you need your space back. I think maybe it’s time I tried adulthood on for size. Plus, I am just moving into town. I’m not going very far.”

Emma continued to sit. She knew she should probably leave for the apartment but her feet felt heavy, and she hesitated one last time, trying to memorize the sounds and smells of the wood shop that wouldn’t be with her tonight at the new place. Marco wouldn’t be a stone’s throw away anymore and everything familiar would be cut away; at least until morning when she returned again to work. The next eight hours and two miles seemed so daunting to her.

Without thought, she reached for the music box and began to wind the key like she had a thousand times before. It was the same one she had opened the morning she met Marco.

When the key was tight, she set the box on the table and ran her fingers over the top. The picture of the Puffins had worn slightly from her hands over the years. Opening the lid, the song began to play; that same, haunting, lamenting, beautiful three note melody that she had heard so many years ago and that had provided her comfort over the years. She needed that comfort tonight.

"Have I ever told you the story?” asked Marco pointing to the box, "about the song?"

Emma shook her head as she watched the music box, unfocused.

“That particular song, it’s Sonata Number 14, but some people, they call it ‘Moonlight Sonata’. Beethoven, he wrote it many, many years ago....way before even I was born," Marco chuckled a little bit to lighten the mood, "so you know that means it’s old."

Emma grinned a little to appease Marco but kept her eyes trained on the box.
"Anyways, he dedicated it to one of his students, a young woman. They say he loved her very much." Chuckling again, Marco added, "He actually loved many, many women very, very much," Emma grinned again, "but this woman, she received this song. Many years later, his secretary, he found a love letter from Beethoven that he addressed to his 'Immortal Beloved'. For a long time, he thinks maybe it's this woman. Scholars, they think it may be another. No one knows for certain," Marco shrugged. "I guess I'm just a romantic, but I would hope that anyone that receives such a beautiful song as a gift, she should be someone's 'Immortal Beloved'. What do you think?"

The key had wound down and the last few notes played slowly as Marco finished talking. He wasn't expecting an answer necessarily and it was doubtful that he would receive one anyways. Emma had no way to know what a love like that might feel like, at least, not yet.

Emma rose from the chair and turned from the box to take her leave.

"Emma..." Marco reached past her to the table, "why don't you ...take this with you?" He handed her the music box.

Emma took it gently in her hands and then hugged her arms around Marco, laying her cheek atop his shoulder. Breaking from the embrace she turned quickly so that he wouldn't see her tears and she used her palms to wipe them from her eyes as she set off into the night.

Fredrick heard the familiar 'schwaff' and thud of the arrows into the target. The shots were coming in rapid fire succession and the shafts huddled in a compact grouping that was situated very close to the bulls eye. Only one person, aside from he and his father, could shoot like that, and only one other person was allowed on their personal archery range.

He could see the muscles in Emma’s back and arms contracting strongly due to the draw weight of the bow and a heavy sheen of sweat clung to her skin. The beads of wet salt rolled down occasionally to gather in the fibers of a tank top that was already saturated. As Fredrick came around, he could see the tears gathered in Emma’s eyes and rolling down her cheeks, and she blinked hard a few times between each shot to clear them from her field of view. Based on Emma’s appearance and the mangled state of the target, she had been here awhile.

“Drop the tip and rotate left. That’s why the cluster’s off center,” stated Fredrick. He had learned early on that ‘what’s wrong?’ was not a conversation starter when it came to Emma. She talked when she was ready, not before; and, many times, not at all.

Emma released a guttural cry of sadness, frustration and anger with the liberation of each of the remaining arrows in the quiver, before dropping her bow arm to her side, closing her eyes and tipping her head back to face the sky. The sky was a brilliant blue and the sun was warm and bright on her face. She couldn’t give a damn if it was sunny or raining today. In fact, rain would have been much more preferable given her mood. If she was going to get royally fucked, Mother Nature should at least cooperate and drive the miserable point home. Typical. Nothing ever seemed to go the way she hoped it would.

“She left me, Fredrick. Ashley left me,” she said eventually with a defeated sigh.

Fredrick couldn’t say that he was all that surprised. Ashley had been in the relationship for a good time and to collect what little Emma could give her. Emma had been in it for the long haul. Everyone that loved Emma knew that Ashley’s demands would eventually exceed Emma’s ability to supply. In the meantime, they could only watch as Emma worked her ass off trying to give Ashley
everything she wanted, even if it meant missed meals and walking five miles to a job because she couldn’t afford gas. Every relationship Emma had ended this way; she was relegated to playing nothing more than a forgotten stepping stone in someone else’s quest for bigger and better things.

“Come here, Emma.”

Fredrick stepped forward and held his arms out so that he could offer comfort, if Emma wanted to take it. He knew better than to touch Emma first. A misguided joke where he had bear-hugged her from behind had resulted in a broken nose and several broken teeth, compliments of her fists, elbows and knees. It had taken several hours before Marco and his father had found her huddled in the back corner of the woodshop, shaking, rocking and humming some tune, over and over, to herself while she held her hands over her ears.

This time, Emma accepted the offer and allowed Fredrick the rare gift of hugging her. As he did, he placed his chin on the top of her head.

“She wasn’t the one, Emma. But I know you’re gonna find her. You’re gonna find that special, incredible woman. And, when you do….you’re not gonna know what hit ya, kid....”

“Emma….Fredrick quit last night,” said Marco with an exasperated sigh.

Emma can’t say this came as much of a shock to her. Fredrick’s family owned the most successful wilderness adventure and outdoor outfitter business in the state. Why he had been working with Marco for even this long was a mystery to Emma, and she figured that he would have gone ‘full in’ on the family legacy a long time ago. Of course, he did have his moments of rebelliousness and stupidity, so maybe his parents were just biding their time while he worked that stuff out of his system. Still, for as reckless as he could be, he really did try to take Emma under his wing and he, along with his family, had taught her everything she knew about the outdoors and all of the sports that went along with it. He was the closest thing to a true sibling that she had and she was going to miss him being at the shop each day.

“Okay…..” Emma trailed off wondering where this was leading to.

“There was a big job that I was gonna send him to; lots of renovation at a nice cabin on the edge of Storybrooke. This job could bring in some money for a few months, and we could use the money, Emma…..” Marco looked at her with pleading eyes. “I will split it with you, 50-50.”

Emma could definitely use the money; that was for sure. As of last night, she was the proud owner of an eviction notice delivered, personally, by her landlord. Evidently, that lady’s patience threshold for $100 shorted payments ended around month five. The studio apartment hadn’t been much, but it was Emma’s. Not anymore, though. Even at 50-50, she doubted she would be able to front enough to work out a deal, so, as of Wednesday; she was going to be out on her own with zero living options. She definitely didn’t want Marco to know about her eviction. All he’d do was worry and offer for her to return to the loft. Returning just seemed like such a failure.

I guess the Bug will have to do for a bed for now, thought Emma.

“Come on, Marco. You promised no more handyman stuff. I thought you were going to keep teaching me to carve?”

“Emma, I don’t know what else I can teach you. You carve pictures that Michelangelo himself would envy,” Marco raised his palms toward the sky like he was trying to get Michelangelo to back
him up personally on this one. “Be a good girl and help me out here, eh?”

Emma sighed as she looked at Marco. His eyes were almost begging her to help. He couldn’t do this work anymore. He was getting too old and too frail. It was now her turn to take care of him, and she didn’t intend to let him down.

“What’s the address?” she said as she held out her hand for the paperwork and began gathering her stuff to leave.
Henry had been crying off and on for much of the previous night and morning. Regina imagined that the sights, sounds and scents of a new and unfamiliar place must be confusing for him. Even Regina seemed to be a bit confusing for him still. It had only been three months, she wasn’t his birth mother, and she had no real experience with a newborn.

Regina was doing the best she could, but most of the time she still felt like she was failing miserably. It always seemed like it took her twice as long to comfort him or to get him to smile or to get him to interact with her compared to the other mothers that she had seen in her adoptive parenting classes. Maybe, she wasn’t as ready or capable of raising a child as she thought she was. The other women all seemed to have help and she was…..well….alone.

“I just don’t understand why you insist on going through with this idea of adopting a child,” stated Cora sternly. She finished in an exasperated tone,

“You should be focused on your compositions and concerts. THAT is why you trained for so many years. Don’t you want to be successful, Regina?”

“I am successful, Mother. I compose for movies. I have played with the Boston, New York and London Philharmonic Orchestras. I have even played concerts in your beloved Carnegie Hall. I have done everything that you and Daddy hoped I would do, but I am 32 years old, and I feel like I need something else in my life besides a piano and sheet music and an orchestra,” responded Regina in an almost pleading tone.

Why couldn’t her mother understand for once? When her father, Henry, was alive, he was always the voice of reason, inserting himself between Regina and her mother to calm situations that always seemed to spiral out of control between them. He might not fully agree with the decisions that Regina made, but he let her make the decisions and faced the consequences with her when needed. At least he provided her with support. Her mother was not that kind or forgiving.

“Well, you can have that, dear. I just don’t think that now is the right time,” stated Cora with a too-sweet smile.

“When is the right time, Mother?” entreated Regina.

“Perhaps after you settle down with a nice man?” stated Cora flatly. She finished a bit more hopefully,

“I hear David is available or, perhaps, Robin or Killian?”

“Mother, please. I don’t want to have this conversation with you again.”

Cora rolled her eyes and tutted.

“Ahhhh, yes. I forget that your proclivities lie elsewhere,” Cora twisted her lips into a scowl.

“My ‘proclivities’ have no bearing on this, Mother. And they are my own.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, Regina, your personal life, relationships and associated aftermaths are a
source of embarrassment for you and for me. I know what our friends say about you. They are not kind.”

“Those are your friends, Mother, not mine. Maybe you should choose more wisely.”

“Oh, my dear Regina,” sighed Cora as she cupped the side of her daughter’s face, “I just don’t want to see you get hurt. I want what’s best for you. That’s all I have ever wanted.”

Regina could hear the complete lack of sincerity in her tone.

“No, Mother, you want what’s best for you, and, if you won’t support me, then I will do this on my own.”

“Yes, then I suppose you will…..” Regina heard her mother say curtly as she slammed the door of her parent’s penthouse.

And now, as if the addition of a new baby wasn’t enough, Regina had also added a complete relocation to the mix.

She was actually surprised that she wasn’t crying as much as Henry at this point. She was very close to it today. Maybe she HAD rushed in. Maybe she HADN’T thought it through enough.

“I just don’t get why you want to move from Boston, Regina,” stated Kathryn as they carried her cello case up the stairs to the performance center.

“Now that I have Henry, I can’t take the chance of another break-in. Thankfully, I wasn’t home when they came in. I….we….might not be that lucky next time.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. It just seems like such a drastic step. Who the hell lives in Maine?” teased Kathryn trying to lighten the mood. She could tell that Regina was scared.

“Evidently, us, now,” Regina took a deep breath and put on a brave smile for her best friend.

Kathryn stopped them at the top of the stairs and they settled the case on the ground. Taking Regina’s hands in her own, Kathryn squeezed them tightly and gave Regina a reassuring smile.

“You’re gonna be just fine, sweetie. And I’ll come visit you, as often as I can. We can pick berries and wrestle lobsters and do whatever else it is that they do up there.”

“I hope so,” chuckled Regina nervously as the tears brimmed in her eyes.

“You know what else I don’t understand?” added Kathryn.

“What’s that?”

“Why the fuck I didn’t play the piccolo,” huffed Kathryn as she wrestled the cello through the door.
Well, it’s too late to turn back now, thought Regina.

“Come on, handsome,” sighed Regina as she held Henry in her arms. They just couldn’t seem to find that perfect cuddle that suited them both.

After about 15 minutes, Henry had only quieted some. Regina hoped a bottle might help soothe him, since she was having no success on her own, and she laid him back in his crib for a moment, so she could retrieve it from the kitchen. She had the bottle in her hand and was returning to his room when she heard the knock on the door.

She hadn’t been expecting anyone, at least not immediately. She had asked Kathryn to give her and Henry a few weeks to settle in before visiting. They needed some time to bond and Regina needed time to unpack. About the only thing she had managed to get set up so far was Henry’s crib, his playpen, her grand piano and the recording and mixing equipment that the insurance company had replaced after the break-in.

Setting the warm bottle back on the counter, she walked to the front door to see who was there.

Emma had been driving for about 30 minutes. She knew the address; she had come there several times with Marco and Fredrick as families moved on and off the property. Each family had tried their best to apply their own, unique touches to the place, but Emma thought it always looked a little cobbled together. It needed someone with an artistic eye, and the desire to stay for more than a few months, to bring it all together. She wondered what the new owner had in mind.

The log home was nestled into a heavily, wooded area off the main road. In Emma’s opinion, it sat on one of the most beautiful inlets in Storybrooke. If this new family was looking for ‘secluded’ and ‘private’, then they had most definitely gotten their wish. The main house was two stories, even though there was only a single level of livable space. The remaining height was filled with beautiful, heavy beams and woodwork. Large, iron chandeliers illuminated the space and gave it an old-world feel. Thankfully, the original owner had strayed from the typical ‘antler’ décor that most of the homes sported. There was a huge, stone fireplace in the living room that could provide enough warmth to heat the home in even the coldest Maine winters, and apart from the private areas like bedrooms and bathrooms, there were no doors, no walls, no sense of confinement; rooms flowed together and occupied the same space. The back of the house, overlooking the lake, had huge windows that extended from the floor into the peak of the roof. They filled the living area with light during the day and, at night, they filled the yard, with the soft glow of the inside lights. A beautiful, teak deck extended from the back leading into the lush grass. About 100 feet of green space was all that separated the house from the rocky shoreline and a huge dock that extended into the inlet. There was a small guest house in the back, but she had never entered it. It seemed to be an afterthought to many of the owners. No one had ever requested work to be done on it, and she wondered if it was even habitable anymore. It might provide a good place to store the tools until the job was completed. She needed to get the trailer and truck back to Fredrick, and her Bug wasn’t capable of hauling everything back and forth every day. Worst case, she might be able to use the garage, but she didn’t remember it being that big.

Emma spied the almost hidden entrance to the property and turned off the main road. She bounced along on the gravel drive for a bit before it opened into a small area that could accommodate several cars. Shoving the truck into ‘Park’, she hopped out and headed towards the house. The solid wood,
front door was recessed about 10 feet into a covered front alcove and flanked by enormous copper lights that were covered heavily in patina. After Emma knocked, she put on her glasses to re-read some of the notes that Marco had written on the job sheet. She hadn’t called ahead, so she hoped that the family was home. Turning her back to the door, she stepped out into the sun in an effort to see better.

*I really need to get this prescription updated,* thought Emma as she brought the papers closer to her face.

“Emma, you havin’ a hard time with your eyes?”

An eight-year old Emma shrugged as she pressed her face close to one of her school books to continue reading.

Marco asked only two things of Emma: that she do her homework and go to school. When Emma wasn’t helping to clean the shop during the week, she was sitting across from Marco at the work bench reading, writing or filling out worksheets on various subjects. Emma seemed to struggle with all of them, except art. That was where her true passion lay and, even at the age of eight, she could draw and paint some of the most beautiful things.

“Well, if you’re gonna help me make some of these pretty things someday, you’re gonna have to be able to see. How about we visit my friend in town and see what he has to say?”

Emma shrugged her shoulders again and Marco took it as agreement to the plan, so the next day found them at the optician’s office where Emma got an exam and a definite diagnosis of farsightedness. The doctor even went so far as to describe Emma as ‘blind as a bat’ when it came to reading. Luckily, Marco’s doctor friend knew of his limited income and Emma’s situation. It just so happened that the doctor ran a collection program at the store where people could turn in old frames for a discount on new ones. It wasn’t a very successful program. He only had one set of glasses that had been turned in so far, a pair of thick, black, squared-off frames that were entirely too big for Emma considering her young age, but they would have to do. The doctor cut and inserted the lenses in the glasses under the promise of a carved jewelry box for his wife for Christmas; a price to which Marco readily agreed. Once the glasses were ready, the doctor placed the oversized frames on Emma’s face. They fell forward immediately, but, one thing was sure, things were a whole lot clearer.

Opening the door, Regina saw the back of a young woman of about 30 who was standing in the sun reading some papers on a clipboard held close to her face. Her blonde hair was pulled back into a ponytail and she was dressed in khaki shorts that didn’t quite reach to mid-thigh and white tank top. Work boots covered her feet and were topped with thick socks that covered her legs up to the base of her calves. Beyond her was a truck that was pulling a covered trailer.

“May I help you?” asked Regina, still unsure of why this woman was standing in her driveway.

At the words, Emma turned and looked up from her clip board. Regina caught her breath a bit. The woman was ruggedly beautiful. She had broad shoulders and very toned arms. Her tank clung to
her torso and Regina could see the dips and ridges of her stomach muscles through the tight fabric. Strong thighs and calves completed her very, athletic frame. What was most striking to Regina though, were her brilliant, green eyes that were slightly magnified by her black-framed glasses. The woman pushed the glasses further up onto her nose with her index finger before speaking quietly.

“Hi. I’m looking for,” she brought the clipboard close to her face again, “‘R. Mills’?”

“I’m Regina Mills.”

“Oh, um, well, M-Marco sent me. M-My name is Emma Swan. I am your handyman.” Emma was still skeptical that she was even talking to the right person, and she stepped back to look up at the house and make sure she had the right one. Sure enough, it was.

Whoever Emma was expecting to open the door, this woman was certainly NOT what she had pictured and that was a VERY good thing. She was about 5’4” and slight, probably no more than 110lbs. She wore a pair of khaki pants that hugged her hips and thighs nicely before flaring a bit at the bottom. A cap-sleeved, deep-plum, v-neck shirt closely followed the curve of her waist and hips and the neckline dipped low to reveal the light olive skin of her chest and tops of her breasts. Barely a hint of cleavage was revealed, but it was enough to have Emma’s gaze pause a bit before she took in the rest of the woman before her. The woman’s hair was a deep, rich brown that fell thick and straight to the top of her shoulders. The ends flipped out slightly, hinting at some natural wave or curl. Much of it had been pushed behind her ears, but some errant locks fell forward occasionally to play about her face. She tucked them away every now and then, only to have them fall forward again. Her eyes were a deep brown that complimented her hair beautifully and they were surrounded by thick, dark lashes. Her dark eyebrows were perfectly coiffed and arched. She wore very little makeup and she really didn’t need to because her skin was basically flawless save the scar on her right, upper lip. She looked a little stressed, and the vein in her forehead protruded slightly as her brow furrowed a bit. Emma could hear a baby crying in the background and Emma looked briefly at her hand to see if there was a ring. There wasn’t, but that didn’t really tell Emma anything definitive.

“Oh, yes, I’m sorry. I wasn’t expecting you today.”

“Yes, Ma’am, I’m sorry I didn’t call beforehand. I can come back some other day if you want.”

“No, it’s fine. Why don’t you come in? I need to give Henry a bottle and then we can talk.”

“Uh, OK.”

Emma followed Regina into the house, pushing her glasses up onto her head as she stepped through the door. The home was exactly as she remembered it; slightly cobbled together, but still beautiful. Boxes were scattered about, some opened, some partially unpacked and some sealed. About the only thing that seemed to be fully set up was a gloss black, concert grand piano that had been placed in front of the picture windows that lined the back of the house. It was probably one of the largest pianos that Emma had ever seen and had to be over nine feet long. The top board was propped open to its full height exposing the spruce soundboard, and a multitude of felt hammers and brass strings. The bench was turned perpendicular to the line of the keys, so that the player would have to sit on one of the ends to play. It was about the only way the bench would fit considering the amount of other items that surrounded it. To the left of the bench sat a relatively large, digital mixing board while several, black music stands were lined to the right. Sheet music seemed to lie everywhere, on or around the piano, board, stands and floor. Some sheets were printed, while other sheets were half-filled with what looked like hand written musical notes. A large set of earphones was draped over one of the stands and was connected to the board. It was an expensive and impressive setup.
Her gaze shifted to the windows and, as she looked at the inlet, she couldn’t help but smile a bit. It was exactly as she had remembered it when she carved it in that dining table. God, she loved the beauty that was Maine, and whoever played here got a front-row seat to it.

She watched Regina as she stepped to the counter and retrieved a bottle that had been placed there. She disappeared into a room and returned a moment later with a baby that couldn’t have been over three months old. She held him almost tentatively and a bit awkwardly, like someone that wasn’t truly comfortable with children; like a first-time Mom. She was trying to give him a bottle, but Emma could tell that he wasn’t in a comfortable position to take it. They seemed to both be getting frustrated and it was causing him to cry and wriggle even more in her arms.

A twelve-year old Emma awoke from a very light sleep to the sounds of a crying baby. She couldn’t understand how her foster family had managed to convince the State that they were capable of raising yet another child, but they had somehow managed it.

Emma pulled back the covers and crept out of bed. Opening the door a crack, she looked both ways to make sure her foster father wasn’t around before stepping out into the hallway and tip-toeing to the kitchen. A bottle of formula sat in a pot on the stove. It had been heated, but quickly forgotten as the adults retreated to sleep off their latest, celebratory bender. Right now, they couldn’t give twos-shits if this baby was screaming at the top of its lungs. She doubted their muddled brains even registered that it was crying at all. Thankfully, the bottle was still warm.

Returning quietly and quickly to the baby’s room, Emma lowered the side rail and lifted the three-month old baby from the crib, struggling to cradle him in her arms as she fed him the bottle. Eventually, he finished and she hoisted him onto her shoulder. There she bounced and rocked him and rubbed his back until he burped and then fell asleep soundly.

“T’im glad you’re not a girl. I will be gone someday and I won’t be able to protect you from him,” she whispered as she placed him back in his crib and crept back to her room.

“First-time Mom?” asked Emma quietly.

“Is it that obvious?” asked Regina exasperatedly as she tried to give Henry the bottle again. He pushed it away and Emma watched both of them with concerned eyes.

“Ma’am?” Emma leaned down a bit to try to catch Regina’s eyes.

“Yes?” sighed Regina. She was on the verge of tears.

“Mind if I give it a try? I had a little brother in one of my foster homes, probably not much older than your son. I helped take care of him sometimes.” Emma looked away and twisted her mouth, wondering if she had just overstepped her boundaries. It was only the first day and she didn’t want to lose this job for Marco. He needed the money. They both did.

“Ummmm,” hesitated Regina.

“I promise. I won’t hurt him, Ma’am. I’ll stand right here beside you.” added Emma as she looked at the ground and rubbed the back of her neck awaiting a response.
“Yes, of course.”

Since their first day together, Regina had been the only person to hold Henry. She might not be the best, first-time Mom, but she was definitely the most over-protective. There was just something that she sensed about this woman beside her that made her feel like everything would be all right; that she should accept the help being offered.

It took several tries before they were able to get their grips positioned to pass him off safely. Emma finally had to still Regina’s arms from trying to anticipate her approach before they could transfer him. As soon as he was comfortably in Emma’s grasp, she moved him over to cradle him in her left arm; his head rested in the crook of her elbow and her forearm supported his back. Her hand supported his bottom and she nestled him tightly into her stomach.

“How may I assist?” Emma asked quietly, pointing to the bottle that Regina held.

“Oh, yes,” stated Regina as she handed over the bottle. She was amazed at how easily and surely Emma held Henry. As Emma brought the bottle to his mouth, he reached out his hands to grasp the side and took the nipple eagerly into his mouth, sucking strongly. Emma smiled at him and watched fascinated as he drew strongly at the bottle. It was no time before it was half gone. Her eyes flicked up briefly to see Regina watching them. She seemed devastated and Emma felt sorry for her. She knew that Regina was trying her best. Parenting didn’t come as easily to some as it did to others. She had learned it out of sheer necessity. A quiet baby didn’t draw attention and didn’t anger foster parents.

“Maybe you want to hold him again, Ma’am?” offered Emma.

Regina nodded her head. Emma pulled the bottle away. Henry moved his head around a bit and grasped his hands in the air trying to find it again. Emma shifted Henry in her arms, so she could hand him to Regina easily. Regina held out her arms and Emma laid him in a way that closely approximated how she had been holding him. When she saw that Regina had him firmly in her grasp, she gave the bottle to Regina who offered it to him. He refused it. Emma stepped back and looked. Something seemed not right about the position, but she couldn’t put her finger on it from this vantage point.

Regina watched Emma reach out a couple of times towards her arms. She looked like she was trying to figure out something. As Regina concentrated on offering the bottle to Henry again, she felt Emma behind her. She was looking over her shoulder and had wrapped her arms around Regina slightly.

“May I touch your arms?” whispered Emma in her ear.

Regina was confused but intrigued. Emma was so bold and so determined; so focused on taking care of Henry that Regina wasn’t sure Emma even realized or cared how intimate their own position had become. It was actually a welcome change that someone would be willing to completely ignore the typical definition of social convention and personal space in an effort to simply help her. And God knew; she could truly use the help right now. Regina nodded her permission.

Reaching around with her left arm, Emma slid it under Regina’s and grasped the back of her left hand, moving it into a better position to support Henry. With her right hand, she grasped the bottle, covering Regina’s hand with her own in the process. She brought the bottle and Regina’s hand to Henry’s mouth. Reaching forward again, he grasped the sides of the bottle and pulled it eagerly to his lips. Regina released a breathy laugh of relief as she felt how comfortable and natural the position was for both of them. Emma’s hands lingered on hers for only a moment before she stepped off to the side. She had shoved her hands into her pockets and was looking at the floor.
“Emma?” said Regina quietly.

“Yes, Ma’am?”

“Thank you.”

Emma looked at Regina for only a moment and offered her a quick smile before looking back at the floor and twisting her mouth in thought.

“And, please, call me Regina….”

Emma nodded at her without looking up.

Henry finished his bottle shortly after, draining every last drop he could. Regina placed the empty bottle on the table and bounced him a bit in her arms. She felt like the weight of a thousand pounds had been lifted from her shoulders.

“You might want to burp him,” said Emma quietly. She wasn’t sure how much this woman knew about parenting, but she figured out pretty quickly, in real life, that a baby with gas was no laughing matter.

“Ummmmm….” Regina looked at Henry and then at Emma and her eyes seemed to be pleading for some kind of help. She had never really been successful in doing this either.

After laying a cloth over Regina’s shoulder, Emma stood in front of her and tried to direct her as best as she could on how to lay Henry over her shoulder and pat his back to get the elusive burp that she was looking for. No matter what Emma said or how she directed, they couldn’t quite get there.

“Maybe you could just show me again? Like you did before?” asked Regina tentatively.

Emma walked over and stood behind Regina once more. This time, Emma was acutely aware of the intimacy of the position and it made her more nervous and unsure. Her heart beat loudly in her chest. She knew Regina would feel it too if she got too close. Wrapping her arms again around Regina, she touched her arms, situating them into a position that felt natural and comfortable. Henry’s chin rested on Regina’s right shoulder and he grasped her shirt as her right arm supported his bottom. He slumbered contentedly against her. Taking Regina’s left hand in her own, Emma showed her a repeated pattern of circular rubs and pats that had worked for her in the past before stepping back and out of the way. It wasn’t long before Regina got the results she was looking for. She placed a soft kiss on his head as Emma beamed a proud grin of success at the ground. Regina finally felt like she and Henry were making progress.

“If you can give me a moment, I will put him down to sleep and we can talk?” whispered Regina quietly.

Emma nodded.

“Please, make yourself comfortable on the couch.”

Emma walked over to the leather sofa that sat in front of the fireplace. She sat bouncing her knees nervously as she held tight to the clipboard.

It wasn’t long before Regina sat beside her.

“I know you probably think me a fool for not even being able to hold a baby correctly.”
“Not really, no. It isn’t easy. It takes practice,” said Emma softly. There was no judgment or malice in her voice, just recognition that it was, in fact, not easy.

They sat in awkward silence for a minute, looking everywhere but at each other, before Emma finally spoke. Pulling her glasses back down over her eyes, she drew the clipboard to her face once again to read the details. Regina suppressed a smile as she watched her stunning, green eyes become slightly magnified yet again.

“So…..Marco has only a few notes here about the work to be done. Maybe you can help me understand what you are looking for?”

“I am interested in redesigning the kitchen and perhaps the master bedroom and bath. I would also like a nursery for Henry. I have the room picked out.”

“OK, well maybe you can walk around with me and show me what you are thinking. Based on that, I can draw up some plans or sketches that you can show your husband and your family.”

“It’s just Henry and I,” said Regina quietly, pushing a stray lock of hair behind her ear. Without skipping a beat, Emma continued,

“Well, Henry may still want to see those sketches to provide the stamp of approval on the nursery. He seems like he might be a pretty tough customer,” she offered Regina a shy grin. “Why don’t we go take a look?”

Regina approached the future nursery door ahead of Emma. She reached out and twisted the knob, applying gentle pressure against the wood with her other hand. It wouldn’t budge. She rattled the knob a bit an applied more pressure with her other hand. She huffed a bit at the door in frustration before she felt Emma approach. She turned her head a bit to the right and saw that Emma was, again, directly behind her.

“It’s OK. Sometimes these doors stick a little,” said Emma.

Reaching over, she laid her hand atop Regina’s on the knob and twisted. Drawing back her hand, Emma slammed her palm against the center of the door, her hand passing close to the right side of Regina’s face and head. Regina gasped loudly as her eyes went wide.

Regina slowly became aware of steady beeps and mumbled words. She lay for a moment trying to sort through the noise, trying to make sense of her surroundings before opening her eyes. Her mind seemed slow and her body felt bound. Maybe the noise was the TV. Sarah sometimes stayed up late watching TV, but something about the conversation seemed too familiar.

“Well, this cancellation with San Francisco Symphony may very well be career ending,” came a familiar, condescending, female voice. This was met by an exasperated, pleading reply,

“Her injuries alone may very well be career ending. Do you understand how badly she is hurt? The doctors are saying that the surgeries and therapy required will be extensive and delicate and there are no guarantees regarding what capability will return to her shoulder, arm, hand or fingers.”

This male voice seemed so familiar as well, though Regina still couldn’t quite get her hazed mind to place it.
“Yes, well, perhaps if she didn’t keep such a dubious lifestyle. I mean, for goodness sake, they found her half clothed, lying in front of the door, covered in blood and bruises with a shattered liquor glass beside her. You realize what people are going to say, don’t you?” said the woman in a highly aggravated tone.

“You truly believe this couldn’t have happened if it had been someone else? If she had been with someone that YOU prefer she be with? Someone…like that damn music professor? The one that YOU insisted she continue studying with, despite what she told you was happening? And I don’t give a damn what people say. She’s my daughter. And yours. In case you have forgotten.” The male voice was slowly rising in volume and frustration.

“I spoke to the gentleman about his actions and we agreed that the whole situation was blown out of proportion. She was confused…….as she obviously still is in matters dealing with sex and love,” was returned calmly and coldly.

“How is she?” came a third, out of breath, voice. The voice was accompanied by the clicking of heels which stopped abruptly.

“Resting. Thank god you found her. Do they know what happened?”

“Sarah was drunk and angry. Only this time, it wasn’t just one hit; the neighbors said it went on for a while. They said Sarah was half out of her mind insane with anger, screaming at her. The police showed me the back of the door. Sarah’s knuckle indentations are there in the steel. The force she was using must have been incredible. I know it doesn’t seem like it, but, based on what I saw and what the police said, Regina is very lucky. It could have been much, much worse….not that it isn’t already bad enough.”

As the conversation had continued, Regina was becoming more lucid and aware of her surroundings. This definitely wasn’t the TV. These were voices, references and names that she recognized and they seemed to be talking about her. Forcing herself to open her eyes, she found that she only had a thin line of sight through the left side. The right didn’t seem to want to open for some reason. As she moved her mouth to speak, she met painful resistance and stopped her actions immediately. Pressing her tongue forward, she felt a series of wires and bands crisscrossing between her upper and lower teeth. The entire right side of her face and jaw felt hot and painfully swollen and her lip burned terribly.

Regina’s head bobbed forward slowly and uncertainly and the lid of her eye blinked tiredly as she looked down and tried to focus. She could see that her right arm had been placed in a sling that was bound tightly to her chest through a series of straps and harnesses. These same straps were connected to a set of tight, neoprene sleeves that encompassed and immobilized her shoulders and wrapped around her back and waist. Something seemed to be digging uncomfortably into the center of her back, though she had no idea what it might be, and her side seemed to be taped heavily. The discomfort in her back was just another layer of pain that now seemed to be surfacing rapidly in various places throughout her torso, chest and shoulders and ranged from dull aches to sharp, stabbing, burning pains.

Lifting her head slowly, she could see three people standing near the door. Blinking her eyes few more times, the figures came slightly more into focus. It was her mother, father and Kathryn and they continued their conversation, not noticing Regina’s timid and sluggish movements.

Sighing, her father said sadly, “Yes, she’s lucky, but physical recovery is still going to take a long time and the doctors say we should consider counseling to help her deal with what happened.”

“Well, I still feel that the entire situation was avoidable. Perhaps they can discuss THAT in
“counseling,” tutted her mother.

Mustering a bit of strength, Regina spoke quietly and breathily through only slightly opened teeth,

“Daddy?”

Three heads snapped immediately to look in her direction and her father hurried to her side, taking her left hand and holding it tightly. He watched a single tear roll from her eye, across her temple and into her hair. Those same events that she would recount numerous times to the counselor over the next two years, until she left for Maine, had already started flashing through her mind in recollection of the evening.

“I’m right here, sweetheart....”

Her father smiled gently at her and used his fingertips to push a lock of hair from her bruised and swollen face.

“Daddy, I’m so sorry,”

And he wrapped comforting arms around her as she cried...

Regina turned completely around and looked at Emma with terrified eyes. Backing herself up against the door, she stood stock still, but her eyes darted all around for an exit. Emma knew that look. She had seen that look in the mirror too many times. Emma had triggered something when she slammed her hand into the door beside Regina’s head. She knew all about triggers. They would control your life if you let them. They never went away and you did your best to just avoid them. That was very hard to do when the person behind you seemed to be supplying them readily. Emma dropped her arms immediately and stepped back to give Regina space, looking at the ground.

“I’m so sorry, Ma’am. I shouldn’t have done that. Please, I’m so sorry.”

Regina’s eyes watched Emma’s hands warily and her own hands shook slightly. She crossed her arms over her stomach and held tight to the seam on each side of her shirt. Emma looked up slightly and saw that Regina’s lips were moving slightly but words weren’t being released.

Pianissimo, forte, fortissimo, sforzando, smorzando, morendo, perdendo.....

Emma didn’t recognize the words, but she realized the technique and it seemed to be working as, several mantras in, Regina started to relax and her hands let go of the sides of her shirt. Her arms remained crossed over her stomach guardedly.

“I’m very sorry. I didn’t know not to hit the door,” whispered Emma still looking at the ground. Regina looked at her quizzically. When this had happened before, peoples’ first instinct was always to rush to her or at her, to touch her or to grab her; to invade her personal space. Her father did it one time trying to provide her comfort. She lashed out and hit him opening a gash in his forehead. After that first time, he would step back too, give her space, look down so she didn’t feel threatened, and help her say her musical words. There was an order. She knew it. He knew it too. No one ever acknowledged what started the whole thing: a slamming door, a hand banged too hard against something...And yet, Emma had addressed it directly.

“It’s – It’s OK, Emma.” Regina said quietly in return.
“L-Look. Maybe I should go. I am truly very sorry…” Emma was exasperated with herself. How could she have been so stupid and impulsive? She had her own triggers and, when pushed, she turned to the music box as her source of comfort. In those cases when the box itself wasn’t close, she would hum the tune to herself. It wasn’t ideal, but it worked. It brought her some sense of peace.

Emma turned to leave, wondering what she was going to tell Marco, when she felt Regina’s hand touch her forearm gently.

“Please, don’t go.” She said, barely above a whisper. Emma nodded and remained where she was, considering a move that would be safe for both of them.

“I can try again, if you would like to switch places with me. I will step back here for a second.” Regina looked at Emma again wondering how she could understand so well exactly how to react. Her actions weren’t forced. They weren’t judgmental. They were simply done out of kindness and understanding and gentleness. It was as if Emma knew all too well how this felt.

Regina stepped to the side and allowed Emma to pass. Emma kept her eyes trained on the floor. Stepping forward, Emma pushed up her glasses with her index finger before grabbing the knob with her hand and twisting. She nudged her shoulder gently against the door and felt it give.

The room was relatively non-descript. It had two long walls and two short ones. It was a canvas waiting for an artist.

The door opened into a five foot deep by eight foot wide space before opening into the larger room which measured about twelve feet by fourteen feet. The wall opposite the door had a fairly large picture window that overlookged the backyard, guest house, inlet and dock. The ceiling was vaulted with the same wood beams that extended throughout the rest of the home. Emma stepped into the center of the room and pushed her glasses atop her head again, turning and looking around at what she had been given to work with. Her mind was already alight with a million possibilities. Regina continued to stand nearer to the open door, keeping a safe distance between herself and Emma. She knew she had nothing to fear from this woman. It had been a mistake and an accident, but old habits and memories certainly did die hard.

“Wow,” said Emma softly, “what did you have in mind for Henry?”

Regina hesitated.

“I am honestly not sure,” she replied softly, “as you can see, my experience with children is pretty limited.” She took a deep breath before continuing quietly, “Henry is adopted and we are still getting to know each other.”

“Well, I am sure it will be fine. I can tell you love him very much and worry about him. Henry is a very lucky little boy,” said Emma, not skipping a beat, as she continued to look around the room.

Of course, she mentioned a foster home. Emma must know full well what all of this is like. After seeing her poor performance with Henry, however, Regina had to wonder why Emma would still think him lucky.

“You know what. It’s OK. I have an idea. Let’s just start simple.”

Emma and Regina talked across the room for a while. Emma asked questions about Regina’s
favorite colors, where she had seen them, why she loved them. She asked about the things that Regina and Henry enjoyed doing together. She asked about things that Henry would do that made Regina smile and laugh. She asked about his favorite toys and books. After twenty minutes, they stood in the center of the room facing each other; smiling shyly and timidly but still talking. By one hour, they were cross-legged on the floor, still talking, stealing glances at each other when they thought the other wasn’t looking. By one and a half hours, Emma had laid her clipboard aside, crossing her ankles and drawing her knees up; wrapping her arms around them as she hugged them to her chest. Her chin rested atop one of her knees as she watched and listened to Regina talk about Henry and the day she brought him home and the challenges they had already faced together.

*Henry is most definitely a very lucky boy*, thought Emma as she watched and listened to Regina.

When as much had been said as could be said between relative strangers, Emma spoke,

“Would you mind showing me his current room? Just so I can see some of the things we talked about.”

“Of course.”

Emma had pushed herself from the floor before Regina had the time to think about her next action. Looking up, she saw that a hand had been extended in front of her.

“Let me help you.”

Regina smiled quickly at Emma before placing her hand in the one that had been offered. It was rough and calloused, like someone’s that had seen too much work already for a lifetime, but supportive and strong. Regina led them down the hall to the door of the room beside the one they had been in. There was enough light in the room to allow them to look around comfortably without disturbing Henry. Regina walked immediately over to the crib to make sure he was covered while Emma was drawn to the small rocking chair that sat in the corner. Looking down, she saw a small stack of leather-bound, Beatrix Potter books on the table beside. The remaining books were in a small leather box and sat on the floor beside the chair. Emma reached out and touched the stack of books, feeling the soft leather beneath her fingers.

“My father gave me those,” said Regina from right behind her. “We read one of them every night together in this chair. He likes to rock and he likes to touch the pictures. I think it’s the colors and the animals. Of course, he likes to chew on the leather corners too, as you can see.”

Emma chuckled a bit as she brought her glasses again over her eyes and lifted the first book closer to her face to see. She flipped through the pages of words and rich illustrations, pages almost brushing her nose from the proximity. Replacing the book on the table, she looked around the remaining room for a few more minutes before indicating that they could go. Once in the hallway, Regina turned to Emma,

“I am not sure if any of the information that I provided was helpful to you. I can be a lot more opinionated on rooms where I am more familiar, like the kitchen, but with a nursery, I am afraid that I am at a real loss.”

“Actually, what you gave me was great. Are you willing to take a chance on me?” said Emma as she looked directly at Regina with a soft smile.

“I-I’m sorry?” said Regina confused.

“I mean; I think I could turn this into something really special for you and Henry, if you are willing
to take the chance on me just doing it. It can be a surprise,” waving her clipboard and pushing up her glasses with her index finger, Emma finished, “I promise, I will try to make it a beautiful and special place for both of you.”

And, with a soft smile and nod, Regina took a chance on Emma.

Emma drove directly to the library when she got back into town. It was about 6PM and she knew the library was open till at least 8PM. She pulled the bug into the far back corner of the parking lot before entering the library. It seemed deserted. Emma bobbed her head about, seeing if there was anyone in the building at all.

“Emma!” said a chipper voice from behind her. Turning, she saw Belle, the young, town librarian, with a stack of books in her arms.

“Hey, Belle!” responded Emma with a shy grin as she helped her place the books on the front counter.

“I got in a few new art books the other day. Would you like to take a look?” asked Belle excitedly while looking directly at Emma with a playful grin trying to get her to smile. She seemed so serious and focused tonight.

“Maybe later,” said Emma quietly, “Belle, what do you know about Beatrix Potter?”

“Jemima Puddle-Duck, Samuel Whiskers, Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle, Squirrel Nutkin,” she started excitedly. Emma simply stared back in confusion at the litany of names that Belle assumed made sense to her but didn’t.

Belle laughed a bit when she saw Emma’s face and nodded her head to the side smiling,

“Follow me. It will make a lot more sense if I show you.”

Belle led Emma to the back of the library and pulled a large, older book from the shelf, bringing it over to the table where Emma sat putting on her glasses.

“I prefer this one because it has the original illustrations. The stories are timeless. I still enjoy reading them every once in a while…”

Emma had opened the book and was already leaned in closely; intently focused on the pages and taking in all of the illustrations.

“Well, I’ll just leave you to it then,” said Belle quietly with a grin when she realized that Emma was no longer listening to a thing she was saying.

Emma sat for the next couple of hours, reading stories and looking at the hand-drawn pictures. She was starting to understand why Henry and Regina enjoyed these stories so much.

Eventually, a quiet voice called Emma from her reverie, “Emma? It’s 9PM. It’s already an hour past close. I need to get home now.”

Emma looked up with her magnified eyes,

“W-what? Oh yeah. Sorry, Belle. Can I check this out for a while?”
Emma left the library and went to the wharf, continuing to read on a bench under the glow of a post lamp. The stories were cute and funny and filled with imagination. By the time she had returned to the car to sleep, she knew exactly what she was going to do with that room.
An Enveloping Canopy

Having only been an official resident for about 5 days, Regina wasn’t exactly sure when this sleepy little town of Storybrooke awoke on a Saturday morning, but 7AM was evidently NOT that time. When she and Henry had arrived around mid-afternoon the previous Monday, things had been so much different. Shops were open, a multitude of people stopped to talk on the street, there was a lot of activity; much more than she had expected. Now, it was almost like the town was deserted. Most of the shops were closed and dark and only a few people could be seen on the streets. She hoped things would open soon, she and Henry were running low on supplies and she didn’t want to have to travel one and a half hours to Portland, with an infant, just to get diapers and formula.

She followed the signs to public parking which seemed to be the same as the library and clock tower parking lot. Pulling in, she noticed the only other car was a bright, yellow bug in the far back corner which she immediately recognized as Emma’s. Perhaps, if she could find Emma, she could ask her about the typical habits of the town. She seemed to have lived there her entire life.

Parking a few spaces away, Regina stepped out of the car and walked to the back passenger side, opening the door to check on Henry and snug his covers up. As she opened the door, a pink piece of paper was disturbed by the wind and caught, fluttering, against her leg. Reaching down, she pulled it off, wondering if perhaps it had fallen from the back pocket of the seat of her car. Opening it, she read the top: ‘Three Day Eviction Notice for Non-Payment of Rent’. Under that, she read the addressee: Emma Swan, monthly rent: $400 and the amount in arrears: $500. A handwritten note was at the bottom: ‘Emma - I realize that your income is very limited, and it will be difficult to find alternate lodging at this price point, but I can no longer accept $100 short payments. Perhaps Marco or a friend would be willing to put you up for a while? I am very sorry. -Ingrid’. It was dated the previous Monday. The same day Regina had moved to Storybrooke.

Regina immediately felt guilty for reading something that seemed so personal. She couldn’t imagine the salary that Emma must keep if she struggled to keep up with a $400 monthly payment on an apartment. Emma didn’t strike her as a real ‘spender’, so she doubted her salary was going towards frivolous purchases. It certainly wasn’t going toward fashion, although, there was something more than a little appealing to Regina about the whole handyman outfit Emma sported daily.

Maybe it’s the boots. Yeah, definitely the boots… and the shorts… and the tank…. and the legs… and the incredible, strong arms….her taut stomach….that beautiful blonde hair and those incredible green eyes….God, even her glasses are sexy….

Regina took several deep breaths to calm herself. These feelings seemed so foreign to her anymore. Despite her therapist’s encouragement to try to get back into dating or casual relationships, her last true sexual encounter had been with the same woman that had put her in the hospital over two years ago, and, since Henry had come along, she had little time to think of anything aside from being a mother. She couldn’t risk being hurt again, not now that she was responsible for Henry. He needed her, so that was her rationale for abstinence.

Regina was snapped out of her thoughts by a solid thump from behind her. Turning, she saw the bottom of a wool sock pressed against the inside of the back window of bug. Curious, she turned around and approached the car slowly. She stopped abruptly when the second thud was heard and a similarly sized (and socked) foot appeared in the window right beside. Creeping to the side of the car, Regina looked in the back driver’s side window and saw Emma. She was covered in a thin blanket and her hair fell in soft curls around her on the seat. Her mouth was open slightly and she was sound asleep. She wore her tank and, Regina assumed, her shorts under her blanket. Her boots
were on the floorboard beside her and there were various food containers and wrappers there as well. Regina figured out pretty quickly that this must be Emma’s alternate living arrangements; a car…in a parking lot. Regina stood mesmerized for a few minutes watching the gentle rise and fall of Emma’s chest. One arm lay outside the covers and she could see the striations and definition of her muscles in her shoulder and bicep. She clutched the earpiece of her glasses between her fingers.

Returning to her car, Regina unbuckled Henry from his car seat and placed him in his carrier. Casting one last look at the bug, Regina set off on foot from the parking lot to explore the town.

Regina had to walk quite a ways before she found an open store. It was a small, handmade furniture shop at the edge of town. Her arms, in particular her right shoulder, were tired when she finally pushed open the door and heard the tinkling of bells announcing her arrival. It took a few moments before the elderly shopkeeper found his way from the back. When he did, Regina smiled at him kindly and went about perusing the items in the store with Henry. They were rustic, but had an intricate sophistication and beauty. They showcased beautiful carvings from an extremely talented hand.

Soon, she was drawn to a pair of carved, mahogany music stands that stood in a corner. She was getting lost in the labyrinthine detail. Unable to help herself and even more unable to explain her actions, she reached out and traced the numerous scrolls, raised vines, flowers, knots and small birds that lived among them.

After a while, the elderly gentleman walked to her from behind the counter.

“May I help you?”

The gentleman’s voice seemed familiar, but she couldn’t quite place it.

“I am just looking,” said Regina quietly as she drew back her hand.

“You have a handsome boy there, Miss,” stated the kindly, older gentleman.

“You seem to be the only shop open at this hour.”

“Ah, yes, this can be a sleepy little town sometimes,” he said with a kindly smile. “Well, welcome to Storybrooke. My name is Marco.”

“Marco?” said Regina surprised. “I am Regina Mills. We spoke on the phone.”

Regina thought back to their conversation the first day; how easy and relaxed it had become after a while. She thought about the following days. Emma had spent some of her time in the new nursery measuring, but many hours she would sit at the table, across the room from Regina, glasses on, face close to her notebook, sketching out ideas. Emma seemed to be lost in her own little world, twisting her mouth in thought or biting her lip and grinning as a new idea popped into her head that was quickly scribbled onto paper.

More than once, Regina had caught herself staring at Emma over the tops of the scores that she was editing as she sat on the couch, and, every time, Emma would catch her looking. Emma would give
Regina an adorably shy but playful smile before returning quietly to her work; surely, it was just both of them caught up in the excitement and anticipation of the new nursery……

“Miss Regina, are you OK?” asked Marco quietly when he hadn’t received a response. Regina was biting her bottom lip between her teeth while a soft smile played on her lips. Regina released her lip as she looked at Marco quizzically.

“I-I’m sorry, Marco. My mind wandered for a moment and I am afraid I didn’t hear what you said.”

“I asked if you and your husband were happy with Emma’s work so far?”

“Oh, it’s just Henry and me. And, yes, we are happy with Emma,” finished Regina shyly.

I can tell, thought Marco. He had seen this look before; men, women, it didn’t matter. The beginning of love; it always looked the same.

“You know. Emma, she made those music stands. I don’t know where she got the inspiration or why, but I haven’t seen something like that since I was a small boy, back in Italy.”

Motioning his hand to the remainder of the shop, Marco continued, “Many, many of the items in this shop, Emma, she made them with her own two hands,” Marco smiled at Regina as he spoke and watched her reactions closely.

“Emma, she can see beauty. She will find it and show it to you; even when you can’t see it. She draws it out. She nurtures it. She makes it feel safe and protected, so it wants to show itself too. Emma, she’s a special woman. She’s just painfully shy and,” chuckling softly, Marco added, “a little awkward and clumsy sometimes. Be patient with her. I promise. She will make sure she takes good care of you and your handsome boy.” Marco grinned at Regina who smiled back gently as she took in everything Marco was saying.

After tracing her fingertips again over the carvings on the music stand in front of her, Regina looked up at Marco.

“Well, all of these pieces are very beautiful. Perhaps Henry and I can come back and visit again soon? Right now, we have to be off to the grocery for formula and diapers.”

Marco looked at his watch and smiled.

“Yes. Well, by the time you walk back into town, you should be right on-time for the grocery to open, eh?”

“I hope so. Thank you, Marco, for all of your help. Thank you for sending me Emma.”

As Regina stepped from the shop, she cast one last, glance at the music stands. As the jingling of the bells on the door quieted, Marco chuckled to himself with a grin,

Oh Emma, your world’s about to be turned upside down.

Once she arrived back in town, Regina did, indeed, find the grocery open as Marco predicted. She managed to gather the items that she needed relatively quickly and found that, once the stores were open, the town did come alive again. They were just ‘late bloomers’ on Saturday mornings.

By the time Regina returned to her car, the feet in the window of the Bug were gone. She assumed
the occupant was as well. Buckling Henry into his car seat, she placed a light kiss on his nose, “Let’s go home, sweetheart. I have an idea.”

And they drove back to the cabin.

As she stood in one of the showers at the public beach, Emma tried hard to remember a time when she had a more horrible night’s sleep.

The bug used to fit her much more comfortably. Of course, it had been awhile since she had last slept in the car and she hadn’t been quite as tall then as she was now.

She really wasn’t sure how many more nights she might be able to take. For now, though, it would have to do.

Regina jiggled the key in the lock of the guest cabin door. She hadn’t had an opportunity to really look at the extra space, since she purchased the cabin. It was kind of an afterthought to the property and she could tell that the previous owners had all thought the same.

Once she did get the door open, she realized that the space was actually very large. A queen size mattress was snuggled against one of the short ends of the cabin. A small kitchen and dining area were available for cooking and eating on the other end and an almost-oversized fireplace sat in the middle of the single room with a small seating area in front. The furniture was worn, but acceptable.

*These Mainers do love their fireplaces,* thought Regina.

Outside the front door, there was a small porch that ran the length of the front of the cabin and was large enough for a few chairs to be set up comfortably and for their occupants to stay out of the rain. There was a small bath and shower area off the main living area that Regina entered briefly, noting that there was shampoo and conditioner already in the tray and fresh spray marks from a recent shower. Opening the bottles, she smiled as she recognized Emma’s scent.

Some of the cabin space had been taken up with the tools that Emma was using, but, with a little organization, there was no reason that it couldn’t be perfectly habitable and offer a much better alternative to the back seat of a car.

Walking around the cabin, Regina realized that it would take work, but not a lot, to get it to a place where a person would be happy to stay there for a time. Regina doubted that Emma would ever accept a handout, but not all exchanges needed to be based on cash. In the old world, they bartered; they traded goods and services. Regina had a desired good and Emma had a desired service. Better yet, Regina had an idea. Now, she needed to figure out how to get Emma to take the bait.

By Monday morning, Regina had come up with a conversation starter that might get Emma to take the guest cabin without it looking like charity. She had also managed to place clean sheets on the bed, add towels, provide cleaning supplies, stock up on toiletries, put some staples into the fridge and add other, essential items to the inventory of the cabin.
As far as the rest went, she was going to have to wing it. Hearing a knock on the door, Regina opened it to see Emma standing there. She looked relatively unrested and dark circles were under her eyes, but, she was truly trying hard to keep a chipper demeanor.

“Before we get started, I was wondering if you might take a walk down to the guest cabin with me?” inquired Regina.

“Uhhhhhhhh, OK.” Emma was wondering if Regina noticed the shampoo and conditioner that she had accidently left the other day.

Regina didn’t seem upset, so maybe this was about something else. Opening the door to the cabin, they entered together. Regina noted that Emma looked at the mattress with more than a little longing.

“I was looking at this area this weekend. I don’t think it would take a ton of work to turn it into something livable, but I am a bit short on cash having just moved…”

“I have an idea…” interrupted Emma quickly.

“Ummmmmm…” Emma paused before she just laid it all out there, “the drive here takes a while and, well, for me to get the earliest start, it might be good for me to stay on-site. Maybe we could trade a renovation for a cot?”

Regina looked at Emma wondering how she had gotten so lucky as to have Emma resolve the whole thing for her. Emma waited anxiously, hoping she hadn’t overstepped her bounds.

“Hmmm. That’s an interesting proposition.” Taking a moment to act like she was considering the offer, Regina responded with a grin, “I accept. Oh, and I have a lot of music composition that I have to complete today, so why don’t you just take the day to settle in here and make yourself comfortable and we can start bright and early tomorrow?”

Emma looked at Regina like she couldn’t believe her luck.

“Uhhhhhhh, OK. If that’s what you want.”

“I do,” said Regina as she turned and, mentally, patted herself on the back.

As the door closed, Emma fell face first into bed and slept very soundly until Tuesday morning, never noticing the clean sheets and other items that had already been added to the cabin in expectation of her arrival.

When Emma awoke on Tuesday morning, she did finally notice that a lot of the things she really needed had already been placed in the cabin; including two huge jars of peanut butter and jelly, a loaf of bread and a gallon of milk. Today’s breakfast was a welcome change to the crackers and tuna fish that she had been eating, but she was pretty certain that the items hadn’t found their way there on accident, and she knew she had Regina to thank for it. Aside from Marco, people just didn’t extend this sort of kindness to her, so she wasn’t really sure what to say or how to say it.

As she walked to the main house, Emma wondered how to even start this conversation. When the door opened, however, there wasn’t really time for a lot of discussion as Regina was in the midst of consoling a crying Henry.

“He got up a little earlier than expected and I am in the process of heating up his bottle. I am sure he
will quiet soon. Sorry we aren’t a little more organized around here this morning. Oh, and I know that you asked me to leave the keys for the bedroom door. They are on the sill in the room.”

Emma figured the conversation that she had wanted to have could take a back burner for the time being. Regina seemed to have her hands full right now.

Emma glanced back once more before retreating down the hallway and saw Regina smile an understanding smile as she kissed Henry’s hair. It looked like the conversation might not be needed at all.

Emma had started laying out her drawings on the floor of the new nursery when she heard Regina and Henry enter the room beside. Thankfully, Henry had quieted for Regina, once he had his bottle firmly in hand (and mouth).

Emma could hear some mumbling from the other room which she assumed was Regina simply talking to him. Soon, she heard the soft, rhythmic squeaking of a rocking chair and the soft tones of a voice that she recognized as Regina’s. Abandoning her work for the moment, Emma stepped closer to the wall that separated the two rooms and found that she could hear Regina’s voice quite well.

“… was a most terribly tidy particular little mouse, always sweeping and dusting the soft sandy floors.”

*Mrs. Tittlemouse*, thought Emma with a grin. She recognized the story from the book she borrowed from the library, but in her mind, it had never sounded as beautiful as it did when it tumbled from Regina’s lips. She almost had to laugh aloud when she heard Regina mimic the sound of Mrs. Tittlemouse, Mr. Jeremiah Fischer and the Bumble Bees. It wasn’t long before Emma sat on the floor, temple resting against the wall, smiling and laughing softly as she listened to the tale being told in the other room. No one had ever cared enough to read to Emma, and it wasn’t that this was Regina’s intention either, but it was nice to listen just the same.

*You are a very lucky boy, Henry*, thought Emma as the story unfolded for both of them.

Eventually, the story ended and Emma heard some noise from the other room as Regina laid Henry down in his crib. Pulling herself from the floor, Emma started her work with new-found inspiration.

Each work day, Emma tried to arrive at about the same time, so that she could hear, with Henry, the breakfast story that Regina would read. Sometimes she and Henry would get treated to two and three additional stories throughout the day. It didn’t matter how many times the same stories were told; the more the better as far as Emma was concerned. Each time, Emma would find something quiet to do so that she could listen to the beautiful voice that read in the other room and, each time, she would return to work determined to make something even more special.

Eventually, Emma became so familiar with the stories that she would move her lips along with Regina’s, reciting the words that she was sure that they both knew by heart. Each time, Emma would laugh quietly at the voices that Regina tried hard to make for Henry, who likely cared less, and smiled at the familiar routine.

In the evenings, by the light of the setting sun and then by the light of the lamp, Emma sat on the porch of the guest cabin; her back to the main house, looking out at the inlet, carving steadily on long panels. In those times, when Regina would walk to the dock, onto the deck or into the yard with
Henry, Emma would be sure to turn her back fully to them, guarding the panels, like she was protecting them from prying eyes.

She got the sense from the frequency of their trips outside that Regina was more than a little curious and was trying to get a sneak peek at something that Emma only intended to reveal at the perfect moment.

Regina swayed and rocked Henry gently on her shoulder while looking out the back windows of the cabin. She exhaled a sigh of relief and smiled softly into his soft hair as she saw the porch light flip on at the guest cabin, signifying Emma’s return from town. Emma had spent the day working in Marco’s shop with equipment that was too large, evidently, to carry on-site and Regina had to admit; she had missed Emma.

Even though Emma wasn’t much of a talker, Regina missed having the simple presence of someone else in the house. She missed the smiles and the fleeting glances that Emma stole when she thought Regina wasn’t looking. She missed the familiarity and predictability of their day together. She missed the safety she felt in Emma’s presence. She had no idea why, but Regina truly believed that Emma would there in an instant if she needed her to be.

As she continued to rock Henry and watch the guest house, Regina mused on how inexplicable some of her actions had actually become with regards to Emma. She had no idea how far along Emma was on the nursery. She had no desire to ask either. In fact, every day Emma returned to the main cabin to work on the room, Regina breathed a sigh of relief that it was one more day that they would have together. She had no idea what the room looked like aside from the original shell that she had showed Emma on the first day, but when Emma asked Regina if it could be a surprise; Regina, who normally insisted on strict control of her projects, readily acquiesced to Emma’s request without so much as a blink of the eye. She had trusted her, and that was something she hadn’t done with anyone in a long, long time.

Regina had also taken a very keen interest in the renovation and construction process compliments of one, Emma Swan, and she was learning quite a few useful things about it.

First, the cooler climate in Maine didn’t exactly counteract the exertion required to cut and carry materials from the yard to the door. By the time Emma made it to the house with whatever she was carrying, she had always worked up a fairly nice sheen of sweat on every exposed inch of skin.

Second, carrying these same materials very nicely highlighted muscled and toned arms, shoulders, backs, legs and other body parts.

Third, Emma actually was pretty awkward and clumsy as evidenced, one day, when the boards she was carrying caught on the wall in front of her, bringing her to a jarring halt which then caused her to trip over her own feet and fall down somewhere behind the kitchen island. Regina didn’t consider this a good ‘litmus test’, however, because it had all started with Emma continuing to walk while looking at her in confusion. The confusion was a reaction to the fact that Regina had been staring at Emma open-mouthed, plate in one hand and sandwich half way to her mouth with the other. Evidently her eyes had been following and freely roaming Emma’s sweaty body. So, technically, the whole thing had kind of been her fault.

Fourth, Emma had two, very sexy dimples on her lower back above her hips that were cutely displayed when her tank and shorts separated as she bent at the waist to remove her shoes. The piano bench offered the best vantage point for this viewing.
Regina also confirmed, during the aforementioned bends that Emma, indeed, had what her friend, Kathryn, always referred to as a ‘smokin’ hot ass’. Regina actually noticed this on the day they met, but the constant reminder was definitely appreciated and also best viewed from the piano bench. Regina had even gone so far as to throw Emma’s hammer out into the yard a few times to get a repeat performance. The confusion on Emma’s face as she retrieved the hammer each time and kept checking her tool belt for faulty pockets was both priceless and adorable.

The reality was: Regina was starting to have feelings that she hadn’t felt in over two years. Feelings she had only allowed herself to experience when life was a lot less complicated and relationships didn’t require a doctor or therapist to work through. Feelings she thought she had packed firmly away never to be retrieved again.

“Oh, Henry, what am I doing,” she said with a sigh as she turned from the windows and walked him to his room.

Emma sat on the front porch of the guest cabin in the evening light. She didn’t turn on the porch light as she did every other night. There was no need to. The nursery was complete. Now, all she had to do was wait. She didn’t tell Regina it was done. She didn’t have to. She’d figure it out.

Her chair was tipped onto the back two legs and her booted feet were stretched out, crossed and propped on the small table in front of her. Her head lay back against the top of the chair as she looked out on the inlet. It was a little while longer before, out of the corner of her eye, she saw a light in the back of the house flip on and she turned only briefly to verify what she already suspected; it was coming from the nursery. Grinning a little to herself, she resumed watching the inlet, wondering what was going on inside.

She prayed to every god that she knew that Regina would like it.

Regina sat on the couch reviewing music scores for a while after Emma left for the evening. Hearing Henry stirring on the monitor, Regina got up and headed towards the hallway where his room was located. Almost immediately, she noticed that something was different. The door of the new nursery, that was normally closed and locked, stood open. Regina thought it odd that Emma would have forgotten, since she had never left it like this before. In fact, she always seemed to be very diligent about the door remaining closed and locked. Curious, she stepped to the darkened doorway, flipped the switch and looked inside. Two lamps emitted a soft glow throughout the room which was entirely appropriate because, stepping inside; Regina couldn’t help but feel like she had just been transported into a small, shaded wood to live among Jeremy Fisher, Cecily Parsley, Squirrel Nutkin, Mrs. Tiggywinkle, Mr. Tod and all the other creatures that she and Henry would read about every morning, noon and night.

An entire wall had been covered from top of chair rail to ceiling with a hand-drawn and hand painted mural done in Beatrix Potter-esque style. It was a woodland scene where the traditional characters that she and Henry loved remained partially hidden amongst the bushes and trees or went about their business in plain sight; planting gardens, checking nuts for ripeness, cooking dinners, playing instruments, dancing, sewing, carrying on casual conversations. There was so much detail in the mural that everywhere Regina looked, or even looked again, she saw something new and different. In fact, everywhere she looked in the room, the detail was rich and personalized; done with such care and love.
In one corner, opposite the crib and mural, a comfortable, new, hand-carved rocking chair had been placed. Directly behind the chair, a painting of a large tree extended up and onto the ceiling creating a sort of enveloping, safe canopy. Inside the trunk, in the warm glow of a fire, sat Mrs. Tittlemouse in her chair holding a baby mouse in her lap, a crib beside. Looking closely, Regina noticed that the blanket of the crib held a name. It would be completely missed if one wasn’t paying close attention. The name was Henry. Regina stifled a smile and a laugh as she considered whether to be flattered or mortified about being portrayed as a mouse. Emma did make sure it was a cute mouse though….so she might be willing to let it slide, just this once.

Regina paused as her eyes landed on the space between the chair rail and the top of the wainscoting. Turning slowly in a circle, she saw before her the series of long panels that Emma had worked on religiously each evening on the porch of the guest cabin. She realized why Emma had kept them such a secret. Alone they were works of art, but together, they formed a masterpiece. Each panel took a small piece of the mural and played out the scene to completion; Benjamin Bunny’s mother had decided that the vegetables had grown to the point that they could be gathered, Squirrel Nutkin and his family seemed to have collected sufficient nuts to last the winter, Mrs. Tittlemouse finally got to sit down for a much needed rest only to have fallen asleep in her rocking chair.

Regina stood open mouthed and speechless for a long while, until Henry’s soft, hiccupping cries and grunts brought her back to reality. Walking to Henry’s old room, she lifted him gently from the crib and laid him against her shoulder, rubbing his back softly. He grasped her shirt and chewed her shoulder while he took in his surroundings.

“I want to show you something, sweetie,” said Regina in a low, soothing tone.

Returning to the nursery with Henry, Regina walked him around the room,

“Look at this Henry. Who is this?” asked Regina as she placed a soft kiss in his hair and pointed to a picture, “Is this Tom Kitten? And how about this? Do you see Mrs. Tiggywinkle? What's she doing, sweetheart?”

Regina wasn’t expecting any answers to the litany of questions she was asking, but the colors and pictures and the excitement in her own voice had already captured his attention and he seemed to be looking at everything with as much curiosity and wonder as she was. At a minimum, they seemed to be in full agreement with their amazement.

Regina laughed as Henry pressed his hands into her shoulder, pushing himself back. Bobbing his head a bit uncertainly, he seemed to be trying to take in everything. It was his picture book magnified tenfold, and Regina couldn’t help but think that he too felt like they were actually there, in the woods, with their favorite characters. When he finally lowered himself back down, Regina walked over to the rocking chair and sat with him. It was a perfect fit, the motion smooth and quiet. It wasn’t long before the repetitive motion caused him to fall fast asleep against her. They didn’t need a story this evening. They were already sitting in the middle of it.

Regina was sitting by the window in the study when her father found her. Leaning over, he placed a gentle kiss on top of her head before sitting down beside her. After a while, he spoke,

“Did you submit the application?”

“Yes. I am not sure why. Once they look into everything, I doubt they will see me as someone who is fit to be mother. It’s obvious that I can barely take care of myself.” Regina raised her arm
slightly in the sling that was cradling it after her fifth, and hopefully final, surgery.

“Regina, we all take wrong turns and make mistakes. I am sure they will realize that sometimes we put our faith in people who don’t end up to being who we thought they were. They will see that what happened wasn’t your fault, just as I have always told you.”

Regina continued to look out the window silently.

“Oh, my Regina,” her father said wistfully with a soft smile, “You can’t stop living. You can’t stop trusting in yourself and you can’t stop trusting everyone else because of the actions of one, no matter how hurtful they were. I truly believe that someday, you will find that one woman who will help you believe in love again.”

Regina looked at her father with slightly widened eyes.

“Come Regina, I am an old man, but I am not a fool. I fully expect that I will have a daughter-in-law, not a son-in-law,” pausing a moment, he added teasingly, “I would still like a house full of grandkids, though, so I am glad that we are taking steps in that direction.”

Reaching out her hand, Regina grasped her father’s hand tightly and smiled at him.

“Thank you, Daddy.”

“Yes, well, before we get all weepy, I do have a present for you,” he stated with a grin. Getting up, he walked to his desk and extracted a wrapped present before returning to his seat. Handing the present to her, he finished,

“I know that you are going to be an amazing mother, my dear.”

He watched as she looked several times between the present and him as if waiting for him to tell her what it was. He nodded to encourage her to open it. Peeling back the paper, she saw a leather case. Contained within were individual, leather-bound, first edition copies of every Beatrix Potter tale. Regina was so busy running her fingers over the detail of the leather and looking at the illustrations that she hadn’t noticed that her father had gotten up and walked toward the door.

When he reached the door, he turned,

“Regina?”

“Yes, Daddy?” she said as she turned to look at him.

“When she finds you, she will show you in every possible way that you are beautiful and special to her. Don’t allow yourself to be blind to it. Promise me you’ll take the chance when it happens?”

Regina nodded and her father smiled before turning and leaving Regina to her thoughts.

Regina laid Henry in his new crib before returning to his previous room to gather some familiar toys and blankets that she placed in the crib with him.

She turned on Henry’s caterpillar nightlight before turning off the other lights in the room and walking to the window. There, she leaned on the frame, arms wrapped around her stomach, watching Emma balancing on her chair on the porch of the guest house.
“How can I even begin to thank her?” whispered Regina to Henry. She watched for a few more moments, gathering her thoughts, before walking from the room quietly, padding to the back door, opening it quietly and setting off down through the yard.

Emma was so lost in her thoughts that she didn’t hear Regina’s footsteps approaching from behind.

“How can I even begin to thank her?” whispered Regina to Henry. She watched for a few more moments, gathering her thoughts, before walking from the room quietly, padding to the back door, opening it quietly and setting off down through the yard.

“Emma?” came a soft, familiar voice that startled her….badly. So badly, in fact, that her shift in weight caused her chair to lean too far, upsetting its equilibrium and sending it tumbling backwards with her in it. She and the chair had barely hit the ground before Emma had sprung back to her feet and wheeled around to face Regina.

“I’m sorry,” said Emma breathlessly as she reached down to pick up the chair at set it upright. She was so preoccupied with looking at Regina that each time she tried to stand the chair up, she managed to get only two legs planted firmly on any axis. It fell over about 3 more times before she finally looked down at the chair, planted the four legs, held it for a moment and then released it holding her palms up at it to make the point that it was to remain exactly where it was. At this point, she was out of breath, flushed and thoroughly flustered. She wrung her hands together as she looked down at the ground, not entirely sure what to say next.

Regina was looking at her with slightly widened eyes; the unexpected flurry of activities that she had inadvertently triggered with a single word had caused her to lose her train of thought.

Without thinking, Regina reached out and took each of Emma’s hands in her own trying to still them.

Emma crept through the door of Ashley’s apartment and shut it quietly behind her. Emma held her newly signed lease in one hand and a twelve-pack of beer in the other. She grinned as she stepped quietly across the floor of the living room towards the bedroom. Emma had heard shuffling behind the cracked door and she couldn’t think of a better place to surprise Ashley with the good news.

Ashley’s going to be so happy that I have a place of my own. Maybe this will be what we need to take the next step together, thought Emma. She froze when she heard the giggling and moaning of two women coming from the bedroom.

“Aren’t you seeing Emma, Ashley?” said the woman between panting.

“What she doesn’t know won’t hurt her, stop worrying.”

“I thought you two were serious.”

“Please, our relationship is not as long term as she seems to think it is. Besides, she’s just a handyman and she lives above the garage at that creepy old man’s place. She has no idea what she’s doing in bed and her hands are like fucking sandpaper. I can do better….in fact, I know I already have, baby. Now, why are we talking about Emma when you and I could be fucking?”

Emma’s head spun and her chest heaved in devastation as she took in the words being said. Turning around slowly, she exited the apartment just as quietly as she had entered and went back to her new apartment alone. She sat on the floor, back pressed into the corner of an empty living room drinking that same twelve-pack through the remainder of the afternoon and early evening. She rocked herself and rubbed her hands continuously against the fabric of her jeans trying to wear
down the roughness and regain the softness that had left her skin so long ago. When her phone rang, she didn’t flinch or get up, letting the answering machine pick up instead.

“Emma, it’s Ashley. Pick up the phone, baby. I thought we were going out….I need you tonight…..” She said with a whine.

Emma stared at the phone seething as she listened to the message. Calming herself, she continued drinking as the phone rang several more times.

“Emma, seriously, where are you? I am not going to wait around all night. Pick up the fucking phone.”

The message barely registered to Emma this time and she stared blankly at the machine. When the phone rang the tenth time, she simply watched the blinking light with tired eyes.

“You know what, Emma? Fuck you. We’re through. By the way, I’ve been fucking Anna for the last two months and she is so much better at it than your sorry ass. It won’t be long before you realize what you’re missing. See you around loser.”

Emma’s face twisted in rage as she threw the half-full bottle at the machine, clipping it with the edge of the glass and knocking it onto the floor, effectively silencing it forever. The shattered bottle lay behind the kitchen counter, a trickle of beer still running from the shards and pieces that lay on the floor.

At least she still had a few more bottles. It should be enough to get a loser through the evening and night…..

“I didn’t mean to scare you.”

Emma pulled her hands gently from Regina’s and she began wiping the palms nervously and roughly down the sides of her shorts over and over and over again while keeping her eyes fixed on the ground.

Regina noticed her hands shaking as she wiped them and wondered if perhaps she shouldn’t have grabbed them. There was almost a sad and ashamed look in Emma’s eyes.

“I guess I just wasn’t expecting you.”

“Well, Henry wanted to come, but it was past his bedtime…” said Regina with a concerned grin.

Emma grinned and huffed a small, nervous laugh, still looking down at the ground and continuing to wipe her hands on her shorts, a little more softly now.

“Emma, I have no idea how to even begin to thank you, “said Regina softly.

Emma stopped wiping her hands on her shorts and looked up at Regina.

“You like it?” Emma whispered in amazement as she looked up into Regina’s eyes with a furrowed brow full of hope and confusion.

Regina kept her eyes focused on Emma’s as she reached slowly for her hands again. Grasping them, she cradled them with her own, palm side up. She continued to watch Emma’s eyes as she softly stroked Emma’s rough fingers with her thumbs, wiping them lightly over the callouses at the base of
each finger and then softly over her palms.

“Emma, the talent that you have in your two hands is nothing short of amazing. Thank you for sharing it with me and Henry. It really does mean a lot to us….to me…."

Emma simply nodded and gulped before breaking their gaze and looking again at the ground. This time, she didn’t pull her hands from Regina’s, opting instead to lose herself in the soft caress of Regina’s thumbs as her hands continued to shake lightly in Regina’s. Regina simply watched Emma, embracing her hands and continuing the motion of her thumbs until she felt them stop shaking. Regina reluctantly released when the nervous shaking of her own hands was no longer masked by Emma’s.

Wrapping her sweater around herself, Regina hugged her arms around her stomach. Turning on her heel, she stopped after a few steps, looking back over her shoulder at Emma before saying quietly,

“I do hope you’ll stay. We like having you here, Emma…."

Emma nodded and smiled.

“I’ll stay as long as you need me to, Regina,” was whispered in return.

As Regina shut the door of the main cabin behind her, Emma voice dissipated into the night air,

“And I’ll stay forever if you want me to…."


A Visitor

Chapter Notes

I wanted to take a moment to thank each and every one of you for taking this journey with Regina and Emma and I. I am, quite honestly, OVERWHELMED at the incredible number of comments, well wishes, kudos and other encouragements that are being provided.

As I have mentioned on Tumblr and in some of my comments, I am always incredibly unsure about sharing my works and hitting 'Post' for each chapter is an extremely nerve-wracking experience. It truly means the world to me that every one of you has continued to be so supportive and positive.

I will try my best to respond to each of your comments as soon as possible. Please be patient with me. I have been inspired by so many of you on Tumblr that I have decided to take a Photoshop class recently. I am attempting to find that delicate balance between work, school and free time, and that's not happening as fast as I would like :)

I hope that I can continue to live up to your expectations in the remaining chapters. I wish each of you love and happiness always….please enjoy!

Where the hell is the driveway, Regina?!??!??

Regina poised her fingers over the keypad of the phone to return the text when another came through.

Nevermind. Found it!

Regina smiled as she stepped out the front door of the cabin and into the warm, morning sun, ready to welcome Kathryn to her new home and ready to have a little bit of fun with her best friend. God, she missed their talks and Kathryn’s carefree attitude. Regina always felt like she let herself live a little more when Kathryn was around.

It was only a few more moments before Kathryn’s Range Rover came bouncing down the gravel driveway. Kathryn looked a bit perturbed at the teeth rattling ride she was experiencing on the unpaved driveway, but the look went away as soon as she saw Regina. Kathryn’s smile was as huge as her wave as she rolled to a stop and threw it in park.

“REGINA!!” Squealed Kathryn as she walked quickly around the back of the car and captured Regina in a HUGE hug.

“Oh, Kathryn, I missed you!” replied Regina as she returned the hug just as strongly.

Stepping back, Kathryn cupped a hand to Regina’s cheek and offered a gentle smile.

“How have you been?”

“Better, now that you’re here,” smiled Regina as she grasped the hand at her cheek and held it tightly in her own.
“That’s right, baby! You need more Kathryn in your life! Even if it does mean that I have to drive all the way to bum-fuck-nowhere to accommodate you, Your Majesty!” Kathryn laughed as she stepped back towards the car.

“You trade cars, Regina?” teased Kathryn while motioning to the yellow bug in the driveway. “Going for something a bit more rustic and vintage, so you fit in better here in Maine?”

Regina was about to respond when Kathryn flung open the back of the Range Rover.

“Voila!”

“My God, Kathryn, how much wine did you bring?” said Regina in shock at the number of bottles.

“I had no idea what I might be dealing with here or how far from civilization we might be. We might get stuck here for some reason, so we need to be prepared.”

“It’s summer, Kathryn, not winter,” said Regina with a playful roll of her eyes.

“I didn’t say squat about snow. Bears, Regina, bears. Mosquito swarms. Angry tree huggers…you really did no research on this place did you?”

Regina just shook her head in mock shame and waved Kathryn past and through the open front door before hoisting the second case of wine from the back of the car.

After depositing cases in the kitchen, Regina and Kathryn stood in the living room surveying the majority of the living spaces from a central vantage point.

“Wow! Well, it’s definitely rustic. I never really imagined you going all Grizzly Adams, Regina, but the view is incredible and you have a lot of room, and way to go with the completely, fuckable fireplace!”

“The what?”

“You know, the kind of fireplace that you could totally have sex in front of….all you need is a bear skin rug and a nice, Maine Lumber Jill and you’ll be all set,” winked Kathryn.

“You really don’t have a filter, do you?” asked Regina dryly with a sarcastic grin.

“Nope! Now, where’s that sweet nephew of mine?”

Regina led Kathryn back to Henry’s nursery and allowed her to step inside first so she could see her reaction. She was still in shock of the room herself.

“Holy shit, Regina! Oh my God!” said Kathryn as she walked around the room looking at and touching everything she could. “Who did all of this? It’s amazing!”

Regina bit her lower lip as she smiled,

“I have a handyman who is helping me…..”

“A handyman, huh?” responded Kathryn in a sultry and now very interested voice.

“I wonder if he realizes that he is barking up the wrong lesbian, especially if he is trying to impress you with his talents. Lucky for him, I am here to save the day and take care of business,” finished Kathryn with a satisfied smirk.
Regina stood looking at Kathryn with her mouth slightly open, not really sure how to explain the handyman situation.

Suddenly Kathryn’s eyes went wide.

“Please don’t tell me it’s the beer-bellied, flannel-wearing, pants falling down, ZZ Top-bearded, fifty-something, sardine-smelling handyman type. If so, I amend my previous statement to ‘not a chance’…”

Looking at Regina pointedly, she continued,

“If, however, we are talking about the tight tank-wearing, sexy-sweaty, strong-muscled, hot-bodied, smokin’-assed, brown-haired, blue-eyed handyman type, then, my previous statement stands.”

Tapping her foot a few times, she looked at Regina directly waiting for an answer.

“Blonde-haired, green-eyed, actually,” gulped Regina.

“Well, not my first choice, but I can work with the hand I have been dealt. They certainly grow them better than I thought they would here in Maine,” said Kathryn with a HUGE, excited smile.

Regina smiled at her nervously.

“Yes. Yes they do.”

“Well, let’s go down to the dock and have a look at this view, shall we?” And with that, Kathryn grabbed Regina’s hand, spinning her and dragging her out the back door as she stumbled to keep up with Kathryn’s new found, and evidently, horny energy.

Regina and Kathryn took a few steps onto the dock when they heard a noise coming from below them,

“Watch your step up there,” said a female voice.

“Emma?” said Regina quizzically. Looking down between the boards, she saw Emma looking up at her with a grin.

“There are some loose boards and nails up there. I don’t want you to get hurt, so just watch your step.”

Kathryn looked at Regina with a cocked eyebrow and mouthed,

“Emma? Who the hell is Em-“

That was about all Kathryn got out before she saw a hand reach over the edge of the front of the dock and place a ratchet on the boards. After a brief ascent up the ladder, Emma stood on the dock in front of them in a set of incredibly large, army green waders that were being held up by suspenders. Only the straps of her tank, her bare arms, top of her chest, shoulders and higher were exposed. Regina released a breathy chuckle at the sight and Emma looked at her with a shy grin before throwing a confused look at Kathryn, who was staring back at her in just as much confusion.

“Hang on just a minute,” said Emma quietly. Slipping the suspenders off her shoulders, she allowed the top of the waders to fall slightly before pushing the material down her torso and legs and stepping
out of the attached boots and onto the dock in her wool socked feet.

As Emma was bent over at the waist, Kathryn shot Regina a ‘you got a lot of explaining to do’ glare before focusing back on Emma who was in the process of straightening back up again and didn’t notice the exchange.

Stepping forward, Emma extended her hand to Kathryn.

“Hi. I—I’m Emma. I’m Regina’s handyman.” Emma’s eyes were darting all over the place. She was always uncomfortable introducing herself. She was actually a lot more used to being ignored and actually enjoyed the fact that everyone just left the handyman alone to do their work.

“Is that so?” said Kathryn as she shook Emma’s hand but looked over at Regina with a devious smirk.

“Yes, Ma’am,” answered Emma.

Realizing that she needed to make an intervention before the situation got out of hand; Regina stepped forward a bit and laid a hand on Emma’s forearm. It seemed to have a calming effect and she looked up into Regina’s eyes.

“Emma, this is my best friend Kathryn,” said Regina with a soft smile.

Regina could almost see Emma breathe a sigh of relief and relax when she realized who Kathryn was and she looked at Emma quizzically wondering why she would have been concerned in the first place.

After shaking hands, Emma stepped back and turned to address Regina directly.

“I didn’t realize you were having company. If you can give me a couple days, I will have the dock fixed up and you two can sit out here and enjoy the view. I just don’t want you getting hurt. I hope that’s OK. Two days max.”

“It’s fine, Emma. That would be perfect,” said Regina with a beautiful smile that was returned in the form of a goofy grin.

The whole time this exchange was taking place, Kathryn’s eyes were darting from Emma to Regina and back again in complete amusement.

Holy shit, these two are clueless, chuckled Kathryn to herself, fucking clueless.

In between, Kathryn was taking in Emma. Her description of the perfect handyman fantasy was being played out right in front of her; everything except the male part at least. Here she was: the tight tank-wearing, strong- muscled, hot-bodied, smokin’-assed, blonde-haired, green-eyed Mrs. Fixit….of Regina’s dreams.

Motherfucker, sighed Kathryn with an eye roll, I was so looking forward to getting laid this week.

Realizing Regina and Emma were just standing there making clueless, googley eyes at each other and no sound was actually being generated, Kathryn rolled her eyes again, grabbed Regina by the elbow and turned to Emma.

“Emma, it was great to meet you and I hope we can see you again, real soon. Regina and I need to get back to the house to check on Henry, so I’m sorry, but we have to run for now.”
Regina looked at Kathryn in complete confusion as to why they were making such an abrupt exit since Henry was sound asleep when they had last seen him. Once again, she was being spun around and drug up through the yard. They only reached the back deck before Kathryn couldn’t hold it in any longer.

“HOLY FUCK, REGINA! THAT is your handyman?!?!?!” said Kathryn in a frantic shout-whisper.

Regina was watching Kathryn intently, eyes wide, trying to figure out if she was upset, excited or having a stroke. Regina nodded her head dumbly with a slightly open mouth.

“S-She lives in the guesthouse,” replied Regina in a whisper.

Now it was Kathryn’s turn to have her mouth fall open, lowering her head, she looked back up at Regina through her lashes.

“Let me get this straight...so to speak. You live fifty feet from the fucking Lesbian Promised Land and you have NOT tapped that like a maple tree, yet? Jesus fucking Christ, Regina, even I would even go gay for a night with that!!” Kathryn’s volume had risen slightly and she was looking at Regina incredulously.

“I don’t even know that she’s gay, Kathryn.” Regina breathed exasperatedly through gritted teeth.

Kathryn’s mouth just fell open in disbelief and open and closed silently as she tried to form words. Eventually, she pulled a sentence together which she provided to Regina,

“What. The. Hell. Regina. Is your gay-dar completely broken or what? Even I can tell that she trades fur like the Thirteen Colonies! And it is completely obvious that she thinks the sun rises and sets over you, and Henry, if that nursery is any indication. Are you blind or just in denial?”

Regina snapped her head up and looked at Kathryn wide-eyed.

“W-What did you just say?”

“I said, are you blind?”

“Fuck,” whispered Regina as she thought back to her father’s words.

“Now THAT sounds like the best idea you’ve had yet,” said Kathryn as she threw her arm around Regina’s shoulders. Kissing her temple, she leaned their heads together before guiding her into the house.

“You are so clueless. Thank God I am now here to help,” stated Kathryn as the door shut behind them.

Kathryn and Regina were in the kitchen getting lunch together, drinking wine and catching up when they heard a knock at the back door. Regina smiled when she opened the door to see Emma standing there.

“Regina, I am going to need to go for today. Marco needs help moving some stuff from the shop to the tent for the festival.”
Regina furrowed her brow in confusion and continued to look at Emma as if awaiting further explanation. In the meantime, Kathryn had crept closer to hear the exchange, but remained behind the door and out of sight.

“Festival?”

“Ummmmmm, yeah, you didn’t see the fliers in town? I figured for sure you would have heard someone talking about it. It’s a pretty big deal around here.”

Regina shook her head.

“It’s the WaterFire festival. It’s a smaller version of what they have in Providence, more lights than fire mainly to keep the town from burning down, but it’s nice all the same. You almost need to see it for yourself because I don’t think I can do a very good job of describing it. It really is kind of beautiful,” responded Emma with soft smile.

They stood looking at each other for a few moments in silence, not really sure what else to say. Meanwhile Kathryn rolled her eyes and shook her head before stepping from behind the door and standing behind Regina.

“Sounds fun! When does it start?” said Kathryn excitedly.

“They light the braziers tonight at 8PM and it goes through Sunday at Midnight. There’s food, drinks, artisans, you name it. About the only thing they don’t have for sale is baby formula.”

“Hear that Regina,” said Kathryn bumping Regina with her elbow, “it’s BYOF.” Regina looked annoyed at Kathryn for her pitiful attempt at a joke.

“Anyways, I do need to go help Marco now,” said Emma addressing Regina directly, adding hopefully, “Maybe I will see you there?”

“Maybe,” replied Regina quietly. Grinning, Emma turned and walked out of sight towards her car.

Shutting the door, Regina turned to Kathryn with an unamused look which Kathryn returned with a cocked eyebrow and satisfied smirk.

“Get dressed, babycakes. We’re going to a festival…” finished Kathryn with a laugh.

When they arrived at 6PM, it seemed that the festival was already in full swing and it must be pretty widely known considering the number of people that seemed to have invaded the town and were now milling about all over. Regina and Kathryn walked slowly, pushing the stroller in front of them and taking in all of the sites.

Occasionally, Regina would bob her head around, looking through the crowd as if searching for someone.

“Well-ell-ell, what do we have here?” said Kathryn with a sexy voice and a smirk. She had stopped dead in her tracks as she intently checked someone out across the street.

Regina looked up from adjusting Henry’s covers and tried to follow her line of sight. Standing behind a pickup truck was Emma. She was joined there by a well-built, blue-eyed, shoulder-length brown-haired, 30-something year old man who was dressed in jeans and a flannel shirt that he had
unbuttoned to the bottom of his pecs revealing his slightly hairy chest. Both he and Emma were laughing and talking with each other.

Kathryn looked over at Regina and she looked to be a combination of infuriated and heartbroken as she watched Emma with this man.

“Whoa there, Tiger. Keep your claws in. She ain’t switchin’ teams as long as there’s a chance in hell that you’re coming up to bat,” chuckled Kathryn as she looked back at Emma who was waving at them. Emma’s smile was HUGE and, while she was motioning them both over, her full focus was on Regina.

“That being said, I wouldn’t mind getting a closer look at this guy’s bat, so let’s get a move on, shall we?” stated Kathryn as Regina rolled her eyes for the hundredth time that day and huffed as they set off towards Emma and her friend.

“You made it,” said Emma with a grin. “Regina, Kathryn, this is Fredrick. He worked in Marco’s shop until recently when he decided to go into the family business.”

“And, what business would that be?” inquired Regina as she reached down to tuck in Henry’s covers again.

“Outdoor adventure. I can help you take a walk on the wild side,” said Fredrick with a brilliant smile that was pointed directly at Kathryn.

“Is that so?” said Kathryn with a smirk as she slowly looked Fredrick up and down. Regina blushed and looked on, mortified, as she watched Kathryn’s blatant flirting. Emma just closed her eyes and shook her head in exasperation at Fredrick’s antics.

“So, Emma, “said Regina, trying desperately and embarrassedly to change the subject and quell the sexual innuendos that were being thrown about in rapid succession by her best friend and some guy that looked like an Abercrombie model, “did you get everything moved for Marco?”

“Yeah. Actually, Fredrick and I were about to load a few things in this truck, then maybe, I,” Emma jumped a bit and looked at Fredrick annoyed as he hit her shoulder hard with the back of his hand and then flicked his eyes towards Kathryn, “I mean, weeeeee,” said Emma slowly to make sure she had read Fredrick right, to which he nodded, “can show you around a bit?”

Emma shot Fredrick another annoyed glance for good measure as she rubbed her sore shoulder before turning and smiling again at Regina.

“I…” It was Kathryn that socked Regina in the shoulder this time, “I mean…we’d…like that,” corrected Regina taking her own turn to look at her friend in annoyance.

Fredrick and Emma set about loading several heavy pieces of furniture into the truck that was parked there, much to Regina and Kathryn’s visual pleasure. A few times, Regina thought Kathryn might break out in a round of applause over what she was witnessing. Her potential outbursts always seemed to coincide with a certain, male backside being displayed directly in her line of site. For as shy as Emma was, Fredrick seemed to have no compunction with making his interests, or assets, known.

Once done, both Emma and Fredrick jumped down from the truck bed. Raising the tailgate, Emma thumped the back of the truck twice with her palm indicating they were all set and the customers
drove off, leaving the four of them, and Henry, standing together.

Emma ran over to Marco to let him know they were going to walk around and he waved her off with a smile throwing a congenial wave at Regina, as well, which she returned.

“OK, let’s go then,” said Emma.

It wasn't long before Kathryn and Fredrick were walking side by side behind Emma and Regina, then lagging behind, then lagging way behind. After 30 minutes, they were nowhere to be found. Regina looked around nervously to see if she could spot her friend. Noticing, Emma tried to make her feel a little more at ease.

“I know Fredrick can be over the top, but he’s really a good guy and completely harmless. He’ll take care of Kathryn.”

“Actually, I am less worried ABOUT Fredrick than I am worried FOR Fredrick. I can’t necessarily guarantee HIS safety around Kathryn. She can be kind of a handful,” said Regina teasingly.

“I can tell,” said Emma with a grin, “but she seems good for you.”

“Well, she was there for me when….” Regina trailed off and hesitated and Emma could see a flash of incredible fear and pain in her eyes.

Regina banged her palm loudly against the headboard in her bedroom trying to get Kathryn’s attention. The pain meds they had given her after surgery had made her nauseated and she was now vomiting heavily into her mouth.

In the desperate attempt to grab the cutters from the nightstand so she could release the banding and stop choking, she had knocked them to the floor. Now, she was searching frantically with her fingertips as liquids were gushing in spirts from her lips and nose and falling onto her pyjamas and the bed.

She needed to get her mouth opened to draw a clean breath, because all she was succeeding in doing now was breathing in liquid which was causing her lungs to burn. That kicked off a fit of coughing that simply added more confusion to the heaving and choking that was already happening.

The door of the bedroom opened and it took Kathryn only a moment to figure out what was going on.

“Oh God, Regina!” was all she said as she ran to the side of the bed and found the cutters on the floor.

Regina’s eyes were wild with fear as she grasped at Kathryn’s arms and shirt which was now covered in Regina’s vomit as well.

“I have to cut them, Regina. Please hold still. Don’t fight. I know you’re scared,” Kathryn’s voice and hands were shaking as hard as Regina’s as she tried to steady both of them enough to cut each of the bands. Several times, the cutters and teeth made sickening, hard, clacking contact.
When the final band was cut, Regina rolled to her hands and knees, opening her mouth to expel the remaining contents from her heaving and drawing in a deep, fresh, welcoming breath before wrapping her arms around her stomach and laying her forehead on the pillow. She remained there, shaking from fear and exhaustion, mouth open as saliva, blood and the remaining contents of her stomach leached slowly out onto the sheets. The pain in her jaw was excruciating from the movement and the newly, ripped stitches, but it was welcome relief to the feeling of drowning. Kathryn rubbed her back in gentle circles trying to ground her and give her some sense of comfort.

“It’s OK. It’s all good now,” was whispered over and over.

Eventually, Kathryn coaxed Regina onto her side and supported her head in her lap. Regina lay with her eyes closed and her hand shaking on Kathryn’s knee. Kathryn simply petted fingertips through damp and dry hair for a bit, giving Regina time to recover and relax.

“Sweetie, do you think you can stand, so we can get you cleaned up?” asked Kathryn softly.

Regina nodded her head against Kathryn’s knee before helping to press herself out of bed and onto her feet. Regina felt like a child as Kathryn helped her dress in clean clothes and wiped her face and hair with a damp rag as she sat on the toilet in the bathroom, crying from pain, humiliation, fear… she didn’t even know how to sort her emotions out anymore.

Eventually, the rag was doing nothing more but wiping away the tears that were falling freely from her eyes.

Helping Regina to her feet, Kathryn wrapped her arm around the top of Regina’s shoulders to support her walking. Before they took a step, Kathryn kissed her on the temple and laid her cheek on top of dark hair.

“I love you, ‘Gina. It will all be OK someday. I promise. Now, let’s get you to the hospital.”

“Well, let’s just say she has been with me through a lot of stuff,” finished Regina with a gentle, but sad, smile.

Emma wondered if whatever it was that Regina was hesitating to say had something to do with the night by the nursery door. She certainly wasn’t going to pry. She didn’t know Regina that well, but she wanted to; she wanted to know everything about her. But in this moment, the one thing that she wanted more than anything was to take away every bit of the pain and fear that she saw in Regina’s eyes.

That shouldn’t be there. You should never look like that, Regina, thought Emma.

Hopefully, there would be a time to talk about everything in the future, but today wasn’t that day, so Emma tried to steer the conversation in a more light-hearted direction.

“We should probably grab something to eat and then head down to the wharf so we can get a good seat for the lighting.”

When they arrived at the wharf, Emma located a bench right in the middle of the boardwalk with an unimpeded view of the strip of water where the braziers were set up, ready to be lit. There were ten
braziers total, five to the right and five to the left. Each iron brazier was about five foot in diameter and contained a huge amount of wood and accelerant so that they could burn for a long time into the evening without a lot of tending. Each was mounted on an ornate post that was submerged in the water about 20 feet from the edge of the boardwalk.

Regina lifted Henry out of his stroller so that she could feed him his bottle before the lighting of the torches. While she did, Emma pointed out a few things to her.

“They light these in a unique way starting from the far right end,” Emma pointed the last brazier on the right. There was a small dock just beyond there that extended out into the water.

“Each one will get lit, in turn, until the last one,” Emma pointed to the far left brazier, “is reached. Once that happens, the Festival has ‘officially’ started. Sometimes the lighting can take a while, but people get into it and seem to enjoy the show.”

At this point, Regina wasn't sure what she should be expecting, but it certainly sounded intriguing. She looked at Emma’s eyes that were reflecting some of the lights of the harbor and smiled,

“I can’t wait to see it,” she said.

_I hope so_, grinned Emma.

About 20 minutes before the lighting, Emma excused herself from Regina,

“I need to go talk to someone for a few minutes, I will be back. Will you and Henry be OK? I won’t be long.” Emma looked at Regina with concern and Regina laid her hand on Emma’s forearm, tracing soothing circles unconsciously with her thumb,

“We’ll be fine. We will save you a seat,” said Regina with a smile.

“Sounds good. I’ll be back.”

As Emma departed, Regina looked around and noticed that the wharf had become a VERY popular place. Despite there being space on the bench, no one had asked yet to sit beside her and Henry, which was just as well, because it made it easier for her to hold a seat for Emma. She was just tucking Henry back into his stroller and putting away an empty bottle when Kathryn came hurrying around and crashed into the seat beside her. Regina jumped a bit from the intrusion, but cocked an eyebrow quickly as she realized it was Kathryn.

“And where have you been all this time?” Asked Regina even though she was fairly confident she knew the answer considering Kathryn’s very satisfied, relaxed and smug look.

“I, my dear, have been lighting Fredrick’s rather sizeable torch in the cab of his truck.”

“You do realize that I still have to face these people after you leave right?”

“Don’t worry, sweetie, mobs with pitchforks and torches are a thing of the past. Besides, it was… So. Damn. Hot…..Regina. And he is….So. Damn. Hu--;,” Regina held up a palm to stop her mid-sentence, but it didn't stop Regina from seeing the visual measurement indication of Kathryn’s parted hands.

_Groaning, Regina continued, “If you weren't my best friend, I would probably be sick right now.”_

Before they could say any more, Fredrick sidled up behind the bench and stood watching the water with his arms crossed over his chest. Regina noticed that one more button seemed to have opened on
his flannel shirt and he smelled an awful lot like Kathryn’s perfume.

Regina took a deep breath and sighed. Despite her occasional lack of good sense, Kathryn, figuratively and literally (sometimes), took life by the balls every day and enjoyed every minute of it. Regina wondered when the last time was that she had taken chances and truly enjoyed life. Definitely, it was over two years ago, maybe longer than that, maybe never. She was shaken from her thoughts by the sound of a familiar voice.

“Is this seat taken, Miss Regina?”

“Marco,” said Regina standing up in greeting, “of course not, please, sit down.”

Marco grasped Regina by the shoulders and placed light kisses on each of her cheeks in greeting. It made her smile that he remembered her so well from their meeting at the shop. Bending down to the stroller, Marco addressed that occupant as well.

“Well, hello, Mister Henry. It’s good to see you too!” said Marco with a quick tickle on Henry’s tummy.

“Now, where’s that Emma gone off to? I thought she was with all of you?” stated Marco as they took their seats again.

“I’m not sure,” responded Regina, “She said she needed to speak to someone and that she would be back, but I haven’t seen her for a bit and I think the lighting is about to start.”

“Don’t you worry, Miss Regina,” said Marco while patting her hand, “I am sure you will see her soon enough. She won’t miss this one.”

About the time Marco uttered the words, all of the lights on the wharf were extinguished, leaving everyone in almost total darkness. There were occasional whoops and catcalls, but for the most part, the crowd was silent with anticipation. Regina continued to scan the crowd to the left, right and behind, looking for Emma to return.

I wanted to watch this with you, Emma. Please come back, thought Regina nervously, worrying her lip while bouncing her knee.

Meanwhile, Marco watched Regina from the corner of his eye, grinning.

No sooner had Regina thought the words that an excited murmuring started to build through the crowd, followed by some cheering that started to rise in volume. Regina looked around confused as to its source. Behind her, Fredrick cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted,

“GO EMMA!!! YOU CAN DO THIS!! JUST LIKE WE’VE ALWAYS DONE!!”

Regina’s upper body snapped around to look at Fredrick and she followed his gaze to the right. Her mouth fell open when, there, standing on the short dock beyond the rightmost brazier was Emma Swan and, WOW, did she look different.

She was dressed in a tight pair of skinny jeans that were covered partially in a pair of knee-high, brown boots. She wore a short-sleeved, off-white, Henley shirt with bands around the bottom of the sleeves that hugged her biceps tightly. The inside of her left arm was covered with a wide swath of leather while her right hand was covered with a three fingered, leather glove. A long bag hung from her left hip and extended down her leg. Her hair was down, and thanks to the direction of the very slight breeze, it was blowing back from her face. There was a small cauldron beside her that had been lit and a few flames licked up from over the edge. In her left hand, she held a beautiful, carved,
recurve bow.

“Well, hot damn….” whispered Kathryn as she glanced at Regina with a smirk.

Withoutthinking, Regina reached out and grasped the sleeve of Marco’s coat. Her eyes didn’t leave Emma’s form and her mouth had fallen open slightly. Marco chuckled a bit and patted Regina’s hand gently before laying his palm and fingers atop. Regina was so preoccupied with watching Emma that she didn’t even notice the contact.

Emma was looking down and away from the crowd, trying to blot out the noise and trying to concentrate. Eventually, she reached into the bag at her hip and extracted an arrow, or at least Regina thought it was an arrow. The shaft was long, but it had a wad of material at the end versus the typical arrowhead.

*They light these in a unique way,* thought Regina.

Dipping the arrow in the cauldron beside her, Emma lit the tip. A hush fell over the crowd as she placed the arrow in the bow and drew back. At the apex of the draw, the fire at the tip of the arrow was close enough that Regina could see Emma’s beautiful face. Her eyes were absolutely dancing in the flickering light playing at the end of the arrow.

Emma rested her fingers and the drawn string against the right corner of her mouth, focusing her concentration on lining up the shot for the first cauldron. Her brow was furrowed as she watched the brazier. Suddenly, Regina noticed that Emma’s eyes flicked to her exact seat and she saw her grin as she released the string and let the arrow fly. In an instant, the cauldron erupted in flames that shot 10 to 15 feet in the air before dying down to a manageable and comfortable height.

The crowd erupted in applause, catcalls, whoops and screams and Emma, teasingly and shyly, chuckled and wiped her brow indicating that she was happy that the arrow hit its mark. The crowd laughed with her.

Emma continued the lighting methodically…five…seven…eight…nine….Each arrow hit its mark efficiently and direct center.

The crowd had pretty much been worked up into a frenzy at this point and everyone was shushing each other as they watched Emma dip the last tip into the cauldron. It was the longest shot from the dock and the target was small. There was no way she would hit. No one in recent memory had hit all ten in the first try.

You could hear a pin drop as Emma raised the bow and drew the string. She lined up the shot and stood stock still. This time, she flicked her eyes to Regina and locked green eyes with brown. And they didn’t move from Regina’s as she released the arrow.

Almost in slow motion, people that were seated rose to their feet and turned to the left, following the path of the arrow to the cauldron. Those that were standing turned left as well to watch the arrow fly.

As Regina rose, she did the exact opposite, she turned right and stared directly at Emma who had lowered the bow and watched her with a gentle smile. Neither watched the arrow; neither had to. They knew exactly where it was going to fall. That’s why, when the crowd erupted, neither one of them even flinched.

Regina immediately lost sight of Emma as the crowd swarmed the dock and she searched with her eyes frantically for a few moments before she realized it was a lost cause.
“Well….there’s a talent you don’t see every day….” smirked Kathryn as she looked at her friend who was still standing and staring at the dock, searching for Emma in disbelief and completely oblivious to what Kathryn was saying.

You are so far gone, Regina, thought Kathryn with a grin. God, she’s needed you, Emma. Where the hell have you been for all these years?

Regina sat on the bench hoping that Emma might show up. She hadn’t seen her for a while, but there had been a lot of excitement at the dock, and, as Marco had explained, this ‘one arrow, one cauldron’ lighting hadn’t happened in a long, long time. Evidently previous ‘volunteers’ lacked a lot of Emma’s skill and that could sometimes mean a VERY LONG lighting ceremony.

Kathryn and Fredrick had already retreated to the festival (or, more likely, his pickup) with a ‘don’t wait up’ ultimatum and Marco had gone back to the tent to engage with the late shoppers.

Regina lifted Henry from his stroller and placed him on her shoulder, covering him with a blanket since the night had become rather chilly since the sun had set. She draped the blanket over him and her chest to try to get a little bit of warmth.

“Are you cold, Regina?” came Emma’s familiar, quiet voice from behind her. She saw Emma’s hand pull the blanket up a bit to cover Henry’s head and insulate him further from the night air before she laid her palm protectively over his crown for a moment.

“I guess I wasn’t expecting it to get this cool after sundown.”

“Lean forward,” said Emma softly.

Regina felt the fabric of a warm, fleece blanket slip between her back and the bench and then felt the sides being wrapped around her and Henry by gentle hands.

“I think that will help a bit,” said Emma as she rounded the end of the bench to sit beside Regina, closest to Henry. They sat in silence for a while just watching the flames jump in the cauldrons, their light reflecting and sparkling in the slight rippling of the water at the surface.

“That was……amazing,” whispered Regina softly still in awe of what she had witnessed.

“I’m glad you liked it,” said Emma without looking away from the flames in front of her, “I did it for you and Henry. I wanted to make sure you had a good time at the festival.”

Regina turned her head to look at Emma with a slightly opened mouth. Emma continued to look straight ahead as if nothing out of the ordinary had been said.

“Are you warming up?” Emma inquired after a moment.

“I-I’m sorry?”

There was definitely a warmth that was starting to spread through her body, but Regina doubted it had anything to do with the blanket that was currently wrapped around her shoulders. It was a warmth created by the knowledge that Emma had done these things…..the nursery…..the festival lighting…..for the sole purpose that she and Henry have fun or be surrounded by beauty.

“Are you warm enough?” asked Emma again. This time she blew into her own hands and rubbed
them together a bit. Regina wasn't sure if the last part was being added as a visual explanation of the question or if Emma, too, was cold. She could see the bumps rising on Emma’s exposed skin, so she assumed it wasn't just being done for show.

Without thinking, Regina offered,

“I think there is enough blanket for all of us, if you are cold?”

“I’d like that, if you wouldn't mind.”

After a bit of adjustment of both fleece and bodies, Emma found her left arm wrapped around Regina’s shoulders. Her right hand was holding the front flaps of the blanket closed in front which caused her arm to support Regina’s underneath Henry. Emma’s upper body was turned slightly, so that Regina’s shoulder was snuggled into the front side of her chest and the juncture of their bodies formed a kind of cocoon around Henry. He slumbered soundly against Regina’s shoulder, submerged in the warmth of bodies and blanket.

Emma took a few moments to breathe deeply, inhaling the scent of apples and lavender that now surrounded them, before looking down at the top of Henry’s head and chuckling softly,

“Well, Henry seems to be a little less than impressed with the lighting, but, did you enjoy it?” asked Emma as she looked up through her lashes at Regina’s face. Turning her head slightly, Regina caught those beautiful, emerald eyes with her own and had to catch her breath. The ends of their noses were only about two inches apart.


“You didn't smile, though…” said Emma. Regina could see the gentleness and concern swirling in her eyes and she could feel Emma’s breath on their lips.

Unable to help herself, corners of Regina’s mouth curled up, slightly at first, but then more, until she revealed a beautiful, gentle smile which Emma returned as they look into each other’s eyes.

“There it is,” whispered Emma happily as they settled into a comfortable silence and continued to watch the fires well into the night under the warmth of the blanket.
Tending Fires

Regina lay in bed on her stomach, face towards the window where the blinds were slightly cracked allowing a thin sliver of light into the room which was now falling across her face and causing her nose to itch. She smiled a bit at the tickle, but her countenance showed very little change. Regina had already been smiling, even before the sun started its antics.

It was the first time Regina had woken up with a smile in a very long time.

Without opening her eyes, Regina stretched out her right hand with a sigh and slid it across the middle of the bed towards the other side. She knew Emma wasn’t there, but she could imagine the incredible feeling of her hand being stopped by the clasp of Emma’s before being pulled in tightly for a groggy, deep, ‘Good Morning’ kiss that would lead to an incredibly passionate, before-breakfast, love-making session.

As her hand slipped further over the soft sheets, it was grasped by another. Confused, Regina gasped and opened her eyes with a furrowed brow wondering if there was something she didn’t quite remember about the previous evening.

“‘Morning, Sunshine!’ said Kathryn with a cocked brow and a mischievous grin, ‘Whatcha thinkin’ about, because you look awfully happy for someone who was supposed to be sleeping…’”

Regina rolled her eyes and flopped onto her back, staring up at the ceiling before turning her head and smiling, biting her lower lip trying to make it less obvious how happy she was this morning.

“SOMEBODY had a good night! Spill it! I want details!” laughed Kathryn as she kicked her feet and wiggled her body around excitedly on the mattress. No matter what Regina was about to tell her, Kathryn knew one thing: Emma had brought back Regina’s smile.

Regina told Kathryn about the evening, everything Emma said and their hours cuddling on the bench, while watching the fires and holding Henry.

“You like her, don’t you?” asked Kathryn with a grin as they now both lay on their stomachs, facing each other, claspig supporting hands in the middle of the bed.

Regina looked at Kathryn for a long time with hesitant eyes, considering her response carefully. Kathryn was her best friend, but Regina didn’t want Kathryn to see her as impulsive or stupid or naïve or childish either. At the same time, she needed someone to tell her that what she was feeling wasn’t wrong; that this may truly be what she had been searching for; that this wasn’t some dream and fantasy that she had manufactured in her own mind as a way to cope with all the loss and loneliness and heartache she seemed to feel continually.

“I think I am falling in love with her, Kathryn.”

“Good, sweetie” said Kathryn with a grin as she reached out to push Regina’s hair behind her ear, “because I can tell she’s already there. She’s just waiting for you.”

Regina’s expression turned from one of contentment to one of fear in an instant and Kathryn could see Regina was already retreating into her safe, isolated space that was filled with excuses as to why this wouldn’t work.

“Kathryn…what if….”
Kathryn placed her index finger over Regina’s lips, effectively quieting her.

“It won’t. Not again. Not with her. I can tell, Regina. Take your time. She’ll wait, but she won’t wait forever. And neither should you…”

Regina nodded and her eyes were brimmed with tears.

“Now get up! We gotta go get you some clothes! We are going camping!!” said an excited Kathryn when the seriousness of the situation became more than she was willing to entertain for the morning.

Regina looked at Kathryn in complete disbelief as the words came out of her mouth.

“W-What?”

“We’re going camping, sweetie! Fredrick invited us and I think it will do you some good. It will give you a chance to see a little bit more of this incredibly awesome state that you are living in,” said Kathryn with a grin.

“When you arrived, you claimed that we were overrun by bears, mosquitos and tree huggers, now, you want to see more of this ‘incredibly awesome state’?” said Regina with a cocked eyebrow and a smirk. “Not to mention… since when do you like camping?”

“OK. Fine,” said Kathryn with an exasperated sigh that told Regina that she was about to come clean about her ulterior motives.

“Maybe you aren’t the only one that wants to get to know someone a little better. And, maybe, I want to see a little bit more of Fredrick outside of the confines of a Ford F250,” stated Kathryn with a wink. “If this is what it takes, then, hell, I LOVE camping!”

Regina drew a deep breath before looking at Kathryn seriously.

Ugh, here it comes, thought Kathryn.

“It all sounds like fun, but I can’t go camping with Henry. He’s too small and too much could go wrong. We can’t be that far away from a hospital or a pharmacy or a grocery in case he needs something, and I can’t just leave him with someone,” said Regina with desperate eyes.

Wow, and where have I heard this before? thought Kathryn.

“So what’s the deal with Emma?” asked Kathryn as she and Fredrick came up for air.

“What about her?”

“Well, is she seeing anyone?”

“No that I know of.”

“Good, because I know of a certain, interested party.”

“I hope you say your friend Regina, because that’s the only person Emma seems to talk about….when you can get two words out of her…..” chuckled Fredrick softly.

Kathryn smiled and nodded excitedly at Fredrick.
“That would be the interested party.”

Fredrick looked at Kathryn and got very serious all of a sudden.

“Look, Kathryn, I don’t know what your friend Regina is looking for but I hope she isn’t just looking for some one night stand. Don’t get me wrong, I don’t get that impression from her, but I don’t want to see Emma get hurt. It’s kind of my duty as her friend and surrogate brother to look out for her. She doesn’t need any more rejection in her life and she definitely doesn’t need to be used.”

“Regina’s not a one night stand kind of person, Fredrick.”

“Good, because I think there are a few things you need to know about Emma’s past…. ”

“Yeah, and I think there are a few things you should know about Regina’s…. ”

After walking Regina and Henry to their car and seeing them off, Emma walked slowly back to the tent where Marco was sitting and talking to customers, townsfolk and festival-goers.

The fleece blanket that had been wrapped around Regina and her was cradled in her arms and she held it up, over her nose and mouth so that she could continue to take in the scent of lavender and apples that was already fading too fast from the cloth. It was a scent that stirred her deeply and her mind swam with images of a future that she didn’t even want to allow herself to even think about, because the possibility of it happening seemed so remote that it hurt to even consider the perfection that seemed so beyond her reach.

Still, it was hard to deny that she had felt Regina’s body relax into hers over the course of the evening, and the smiles and the laughter that had taken so long to find seemed to have been reserved only for her.

Emma was so engrossed in her thoughts that she didn’t even notice that Marco had been shaking his head, rolling his eyes and chuckling while watching her smell this blanket, nor did she notice Fredrick and Kathryn enter the tent behind her.

“Emma,” said Fredrick as Kathryn stood beside him, “what do you think about taking a little camping trip this weekend?”

“I can’t Fredrick,” said Emma with a shrug, “I need to help Marco with stuff around here…..”

“We were thinking about inviting Regina, too,” added Fredrick hopefully, thinking this might be the enticement she needed. It actually had the exact opposite effect of what he had anticipated.

Emma turned to look at Fredrick with an absolute fierceness in her eyes. Grabbing him by the bicep, she pulled him over to the corner of the tent so that they could talk in private.

“Absolutely not,” said Emma in a harsh, hushed tone, watching Kathryn to ensure she couldn’t hear what was being said. “Henry is too small to go camping. You know we’d be too far out and EMS wouldn’t be able to find us if something goes wrong. I can’t take that chance, Fredrick. He means everything to Regina and I can’t risk him not being safe. Or her for that matter…..Why would you even suggest this to Kathryn, or to Regina? Are you an idiot?”

“I am not talking about going to the camp, Emma. I was thinking about staying someplace closer and more on the beaten path…..”
Recognition dawned on Emma’s face as she considered what Fredrick was saying.

“Look, Emma. I am not going to force you to come, but I know Kathryn’s going to invite her regardless. My family needs to hire you for the day, anyways, because the Coast Guard is coming out tomorrow and they are only sending one guy. He’s going to need a second set of hands and I don’t know how to do this. I know you do. Even if you don’t stay, you can always make sure that the old quarters are set up safely and in a way that Regina and Henry might like,” turning his head, Fredrick called out to Marco, “Marco! My family needs Emma’s help tomorrow. That OK?”

Marco waved his hand in a nonchalant, ‘go on and take the day’ fashion. Fredrick placed the keys to his family’s store in Emma’s palm and closed her fist around them.

“Look, Mom and Pop know you might be coming by and said to take whatever you think you need.”

Fredrick turned and walked back towards Kathryn on the other side of the tent. Placing his arm around her shoulders, he guided her from the tent.

“Don’t worry. She’s coming…..”

“Emma will be there……” Kathryn watched Regina’s eyes as she took in the last sentence.

“Really?”

“Yep, apparently Fredrick needed her to help out with a few things while we were there. And this camping experience isn’t as rustic and isolated as you may be thinking. Honestly, I think you are really going to like it. Henry will be in good hands and close to everything. I promise.”

“Well, I guess…..as long as you are sure that Emma will be there…..”

Kathryn settled a pair of thick socks and hiking boots near the gap at the bottom of the fitting room door.

“Put these on too, Regina.”

Kathryn saw Regina’s hand reach out and pull the shoes and socks in with her. There was a momentary pause.

“Seriously, Kathryn,” huffed Regina from inside the small room, “I already look ridiculous enough as it is, and now, you are telling me that I have to wear these too?”

“Put them on. You can’t walk or hike in sandals,” looking over into the stroller, she added quickly, “Think of it as a precautionary measure. You’re doing it to keep yourself safe for Henry,” Kathryn patted herself on the back for that last second wording addition. Dragging Henry’s well-being into it would get the job done. Looking over at Henry in the stroller, she smiled as she took his small hand and high-fived him for their brilliance.

There were a couple more minutes of banging around before Regina finally conceded with a groan.

“I’m coming out.”
“No need. We all know you’re gay. Can I just see the damn outfit, please?” chuckled Kathryn.

Regina opened the door of the fitting room a crack and poked her head through, looking right and left to verify their aloneness before opening the door wider. She stood in the doorway, hip cocked out casually, eyes closed, shaking her head and pinching the bridge of her nose in embarrassment of the outfit that she was currently wearing.

“Wow, where the hell have you been all my life?” asked Kathryn teasingly.

“Seriously, Kathryn, I look and feel like a complete idiot,” responded Regina with an exasperated tone.

“No, sweetie, you look hot and sexy. Actually, you look better than that…you look like a MELF!”

“It’s MILF, Kathryn, and I would most definitely NOT use that word to describe what I look like in this, or any other, outfit!”

“No, sweetie, in that outfit, you are most definitely a MELF….”

“Do I even want to know what a MELF is?”

“A Mom that Emma would Love to Fuck,” said Kathryn slowly while making what looked like a cross between sign language and gangster hand signals to emphasize each letter.

Regina threw up her hands as she rolled her eyes and spun around, bending down to swipe something off the floor before retreating back into the dressing room and closing the door.

_and wait till Emma gets a gander at the flip side_, chuckled Kathryn to herself.

“You know, sweetie, you should apply to be a model in one of those magazines that does a ‘Naughty in Nature’ spread. You’d be a shoe in,” teased Kathryn through the door, completely unable to help herself.

“NOT HELPING!” came the response from beyond the door as a lone, middle finger was raised for emphasis over the top gap of the door.

After a few more minutes, Regina returned to the hallway redressed in her more conservative khaki pants, black shirt and sandals.

“I am not sure why I let you talk me into this,” said Regina with an exasperated sigh.

“Oh, sweetie, we’re just getting started on your new wardrobe. Have you seen the flannel bra and thong combos over here?!”

“Oh god……” groaned Regina.

They had only been driving for about 15 minutes down the coastal highway of Storybrooke, but Regina sat anxiously in back beside Henry’s car seat. She fidgeted nervously and pulled at the hem of the shorts she was wearing, trying unsuccessfully to cover more of her thighs.

Each time a road would appear Regina would hold her breath in anticipation of the left turn that would take them further into the interior of the woods of Maine. Each time they passed, she would breathe an equivalent sigh of relief that they were still on the main road.
This whole trip was a bad idea and this outfit was an even worse idea, thought Regina as she wished, now, that she had refused to be a part of this entire, insane, last-minute trip. Those two cases of wine and the sofa in the living room were looking awfully good to her right now.

About 20 minutes from the cabin, Fredrick made a turn onto a small gravel road that led to the right, leading them closer to the edge of the coast. For some reason, a turn to the right was much more reassuring to Regina, but she wasn’t sure why. They were still just as far from town. The only difference is that they weren’t quite as camouflaged by trees. She was still pondering where they might be headed when they broke into the clearing.

A beautiful view of the ocean extended in front of them and she could see that they were on a bluff about 30 feet higher than the surface of the water. To the left, a small white house could be seen whose yard was surrounded by a picket fence; behind that, was a 50 foot spire. A familiar, yellow bug sat in the small drive of the house and Regina allowed herself to relax a bit at the sight of it.

Emma, she thought with a sense of relief as she smiled and released a nervous breath.

Emma stood outside of the fence talking to a man who was dressed in a dark blue uniform.

“I sure am glad you were here, Ma’am. I think you figured out the exact issue. There shouldn’t be any more problems from this point forward.”

“Well, I am glad I could help, “responded Emma as she wiped her hands in a rag trying to get some oil and dirt off, “good to know it’s going to be working again. I am sure a lot of people have missed it.”

“Do you need me to send out a Seaman at nightfall to assist?”

“No, I think we can handle it. We’ll radio for confirmation when done.”

“All right then, thanks again for your help, Ma’am.”

Emma shook the gentleman’s hand before he jumped in a white jeep marked with a single, red diagonal stripe that read ‘USCG’ and drove off down the road that Fredrick’s truck had just travelled. Emma provided a single wave of her hand in goodbye before turning and jogging over to Fredrick’s truck.

“Here we are, “said Fredrick with a grin as he put the truck in ‘Park’.

Turning quickly toward Regina in the backseat, Kathryn reached out her hand and popped another button open on Regina’s shirt so that it was now open to the top of her bra.

“Much better, sweetie,” stated Kathryn with a devilish grin as she practically pushed Regina out of the door, “Now, get out of the truck. Here comes Emma….”

Regina slid off the high seat and dropped to the ground. Emma came around the open door about the same time as Regina’s feet touched down.

As Regina straightened up and pushed the hair behind her ears that had fallen forward from the impact, Emma stopped dead in her tracks and her mouth fell open. Whatever Emma had expected to see Regina wearing when she came around the side of the door; this was not it. This was So.
Regina was wearing a pair of olive-colored, hiking shorts that extended somewhat short of mid-thigh. Toned, smooth legs led to a pair of olive and deep purple hiking boots and olive and tan socks that were scrunched around her ankles. Her shorts were slung low on her hips and revealed a bit of the olive skin below her belly button which was visible because the lower two buttons of her purple, white, black and gold flannel shirt were open. In fact, only about three of the eight buttons were actually secured which gave Emma an equally incredible view of both her stomach and the smooth skin of Regina’s chest, tops of her breasts and edges of her purple, lace bra. Her tanned and toned arms were visible below sleeves that were rolled causally.

“Holy shit,” breathed Emma quietly, immediately praying that Regina didn’t hear what she had just said. Kathryn raised her eyebrows at Fredrick, though, since she had read Emma’s lips quite clearly.

As Regina stepped back slightly, her foot touched a bit of uneven ground and she bobbled a bit. Reaching out to catch her balance, she grabbed a strong, supporting hand that had been offered. Looking up, she locked her brow eyes with Emma’s green and held on firmly.

“Sorry. My hands are dirty,” said Emma quietly as she continued to try to get her breathing under control from the sight of Regina’s outfit.

“It’s OK. A little dirt never hurt anyone,” said Regina with a grin. Her reward was a thankful smile. Emma had barely gotten her breathing and capacity for thought back under control, when Kathryn’s voice kicked off the next round of excitement.

“Oh, Regina, don’t forget your bag that’s on the seat,” she said casually with a smirk at Fredrick.

Without thinking, Regina spun around and rose on her toes, laying her upper body across the seat and stretching her arm forward to try to grasp the handles so that she could pull it towards her.

Emma’s eyes went comically wide and she visibly gulped before her mouth fell open again and her chest heaved as she tried to draw breath.

The fabric of the shorts had tightened across the firm, nicely rounded muscles of Regina’s backside and the hem had risen on both legs to the point that they now extended barely past the point where the tops of Regina’s legs ended and the curve of her ass started. Her shirt had ridden up as well and revealed the beautiful curve of her hips, smooth skin of her lower back and the two dimples at the base of her spine. Nicely toned calves relaxed and contracted as she bounced on her toes slightly to try to reach the bag.

Seeing that Regina was struggling to grasp the bag, Emma stepped forward to help, not putting significant thought into her next series of moves,

“Here, let me help you,” Emma said as she reached out her hand and grasped the side of Regina’s hip; half of her palm on fabric, the other half on skin. She pressed the front of her hips into the side of Regina’s rear as she bent over too. The front of her chest lay over the side of Regina’s back and her arm extend alongside Regina’s as they both tried to grasp the handles of the bag.

With one firm grip of her hand on Regina’s hip, Emma raised on her toes and pressed herself forward, pinning Regina firmly and momentarily between her and the seat.

“Got it!” declared Emma in victory as her fingers slipped around the handles. Proudly, she looked up to see Kathryn stifling laughter before looking down to see the position that she had put herself and Regina into on the back seat of the truck. Emma released Regina’s hip immediately like she had
been holding a hot coal, but not soon enough. The feeling of the softness of the skin of Regina’s hip was now permanently burned into her fingertips. Straightening up, Emma blushed a deep shade of red and started stuttering an apology as Regina rose from the back seat as well, blushing just as deeply.

“I-I’m so sorry,” said Emma with huge eyes as she looked directly at Regina.

“Oh hell, Emma, don’t worry about it. ‘Shorty’ was going to be there all day trying to get that bag. You just did us all a favor. Now let’s get in there. I want to see this place!” Said Kathryn excitedly as she and Fredrick hopped out of the front of the truck.

Emma trailed behind Regina as she walked to the other side of the truck, still unsure if Regina was upset and mentally kicking herself for what had just happened. She opened the door, so Regina could lift Henry onto her shoulder and cover him with a blanket to shield him from the coastal winds. She grabbed the bags that Regina pointed out and loaded them into her arms to carry into the building.

“Regina,” whispered Emma before Regina shut the door so they could talk more privately. “I really am sorry. I was just trying to help get the bag. I didn’t mean…” Regina noticed that Emma looked slightly nauseated. She, on the other hand, couldn’t quell the feeling of butterflies in her stomach as she remembered the feeling of Emma’s warm body pressed against hers from thigh to fingertip.

“Emma….” Regina sighed before looking directly into her eyes with a grin, “Kathryn’s right. I would have NEVER reached that bag.”

Emma smiled back at her and released a ragged breath, knowing that everything was okay between them.

“Ready?” asked Emma.

“Yes,” said Regina with a smile. She would be lying if she said that she wasn’t excited to be staying in a lighthouse on the coast of Maine. She would be lying even more if she said that the whole thing wasn’t enhanced by the presence of one, Emma Swan.

Emma and Regina entered the narrow font door of the main house and looked around at the small kitchen and accommodations.

“Ummmmmm, Fredrick said that he and Kathryn are going to take the main house. We’ll need to head upstairs. Are you OK carrying Henry? There are a lot of steps….”

“I think we’re good,” said Regina immediately looking up the staircase with an anticipatory grin.

“OK then, after you….”

The choice of order was just blurted out, but it turned out to be ideal – for Emma. By giving Regina a slight head start, Emma found that she could remain eye-level with the most incredible backside that she had ever laid eyes on. Every step Regina took was incredible to behold as muscles and fabric tightened and relaxed in rhythm. Emma gulped as she thought about kneading and massaging Regina’s backside from the dimples in the small of her back to the tops of her thighs as they made love. Several times Emma stumbled on the steps from lack of concentration which she immediately blamed on shifting bags.
The ascended the spiral staircase slowly; stopping occasionally to check that everything was OK for each or to collect the bags that Emma dropped from lack of attention. On the next floor up, they found the living area. It was simple. A small fireplace was faced by a sofa and couple of chairs on each side. A small, collapsible, camping crib and playpen was set up in front of the sofa so the occupants could watch a child play in front of the fire. It was an odd and relatively modern accessory to find in a lighthouse and Regina doubted that it was a coincidence that it was there. The same could be said for the absolutely new baby gate that was securely attached to the door separating the living area from the stairs.

As they continued to walk up the spiral stairs, Emma explained some of the details of the place.

“The Government’s been selling some lighthouses to private investors and home owners, since they don’t need them as much anymore. Fredrick’s family bought this one, so they could preserve the place for the Storybrooke residents. They hold weddings and receptions out here in the summer months and, sometimes, it gets rented out for the honeymoon.”

“Do they use the light?”

“The Coast Guard would like to. There are some bad shoals around here, but there were some issues with the conversion from fuel to electric, so it hasn’t been on in a long time. We might have solved that problem today though….I guess we’ll see a little bit later.”

It was only a few steps more before they found themselves in front of a door on the third floor that led to a small bedroom. Emma leaned over the baby gate and placed the bags on the floor before opening the gate so Regina and Henry could step inside.

“This is your and Henry’s bedroom. I brought in a small crib that attaches to the side of the bed, so that he can sleep right beside you and you’ll know he’s safe. You shouldn’t even have to get up to take care of him. I hope it will be OK for the night. Oh, and there are baby monitors in the living room below, library above and the light that connect to this room, so he can stay in here while you explore.

“Are you leaving?” asked Regina quickly as she immediately lost her smile and looked at Emma quizzically and concernedly.

“I thought maybe you and Henry wanted some time to yourself.”

“Kathryn said you were staying…” Regina trailed off dejectedly, lowering her eyes to the floor.

“I can stay if you would like,” said Emma, dipping her head to catch Regina’s eyes, “I will sleep on the couch in the living room below you. I have a monitor. If you need me, you can….well….just talk.”

“I would like that, Emma.”

Emma smiled softly and nodded in agreement.

Me too, thought Emma, before adding aloud,

“In about an hour, how about we go see if that light works?”

Emma had gone downstairs to make up a bed on the couch, so Regina dug through her bags trying
to find something to change into. The evening was getting cooler and, while she enjoyed the reaction that the hiking clothes had gotten, she wasn’t really comfortable flaunting this amount of skin and she wanted to change into something a bit more practical and more ‘Regina’.

*I am so going to kill you, Kathryn,* sighed Regina as her hand rifled through the bag and pulled out items, laying them on the bed, one by one. Everything that she had packed this morning from her regular wardrobe was nowhere to be found. The only items available to her were the things that Kathryn and she had bought at the outdoor outfitters. This meant her available wardrobe now consisted of: her current outfit, a pair of what Regina considered to be too-tight cargo pants, a second flannel shirt and shorts combination, and a fleece vest.

*Thank god she was kidding about the flannel bra and panty combos,* thought Regina as she pulled out a lace bra and panties that now seemed to be her lone tether to her ‘normal’ clothing.

Having no other choice, Regina resigned herself to an evening outfit that consisted of the cargo pants, purple flannel shirt (now buttoned a bit more modestly) and black, fleece vest before sitting on the edge of the bed and bottle feeding Henry as she rocked and cradled him in her arms.

Laying her cheek atop his soft hair, she spoke softly to him while staring off at nothing, “Oh, Henry, who am I kidding? Why would she even be interested in us; or in me for that matter? I like Emma; I really do, but I’m so scared. I can’t risk you being hurt. I need you to be safe. I need *us* to be safe. I can’t go through that again.”

She wasn’t even thinking about the monitors in the lighthouse….

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Emma threw together a makeshift bed on the couch that consisted of a blanket and a pillow. It wasn’t much, but Regina wanted her to stay and, frankly, she wanted to be there to make sure that she and Henry were okay throughout the night. From the looks of it, Fredrick and Kathryn weren’t going to be coming up for air anytime soon which would leave Regina on her own if anything were to go wrong and she wasn’t there.

Throwing some kindling and logs on the grate of the fireplace, she lit the wadded up paper beneath blowing gently to ensure the flames caught. There was something beautiful about fire, the color, the warmth, and the way it danced. It sure beat the alternative.

Emma sank to the ground and wrapped her arms around her legs, shivering in the corner of the shed while her teeth chattered. The metal walls and her thin sweater and shirt offered little protection from the bitter cold of the outside.

*She had no idea how long she had been there. Time had a way of playing tricks in this kind of bitter cold. What seemed like one hour could very well be only fifteen minutes.*

*It didn’t matter, even fifteen minutes was too long considering her only offense was not soothing her baby brother fast enough so that his crying didn’t interrupt her foster father’s TV show.*

*She looked up at the dark figure in the doorway as the door opened, trying to keep her shaking and jerking head still enough to focus.*

*“Get in the house, NOW!!”*
Slowly and unsteadily, Emma struggled to her feet and shuffled towards the door, still holding herself and bracing for the winds she was about to step in to.

“I would move a little faster if I was you. You wouldn’t want me to assume you would prefer these accommodations tonight. Would you?”

Emma tried to lift her feet and move faster, but all she succeeded in doing was catching her toes or the side of her feet on the ground and stumbling more.

“You’re so fucking clumsy and useless. I’m not sure why we put up with you. Now, get in the DAMN HOUSE!!” he finished as he grabbed her roughly by the back of the collar and threw her out of the shed door and onto the gravel driveway where she landed, painfully, on her knees, tearing her pants and bloodying them.

“You better not have fucked up those pants, because I’m not buying you a new pair!”

Standing back up, Emma made her way slowly into the house. It had been one hour.

The crackle of the monitor broke Emma’s train of thought and she picked up the receiver wondering if Regina was trying to say something to her. There was the sound of zippers being opened and closed and then the swish of liquids that Emma assumed was formula being shaken, but hearing nothing more and assuming everything was OK, she started to put the monitor back on the table. She froze halfway.

“Oh, Henry, who am I kidding? Why would she even be interested in us; or in me for that matter? I like Emma; I really do, but I’m so scared. I can’t risk you being hurt. I need you to be safe. I need us to be safe. I can’t go through that again.”

Emma was sure that none of what had been uttered had been meant for her ears, but now, here she was, the unwitting recipient of Regina’s private conversation with her son.

Emma was furious, nauseated and heartbroken all at once. Whoever had hurt Regina had hurt her badly. They had taken away her trust, taken away her sense of security, taken away her self-confidence and self-worth. They had made her afraid, and no one should be afraid.

Emma might have even believed that they had taken Regina beyond her reach, but Regina words told her otherwise. Regina wasn’t there, not yet. There was still a chance, and Emma intended to give her every reason in this world to take that chance on her.

If nothing else, she needed Regina to find the safety that she so desperately sought, for Henry and for herself. Living in fear wasn’t living; it was existing. And no one understood that better than Emma.

Emma sat for a few moments thinking about everything she heard. Rising from the couch, Emma exited the door and started to ascend the stairs with a sigh.

*I think it’s about time we both took some chances and really started living.*

Emma tapped her knuckles lightly on the frame of the door, and waited for Regina to turn around. She could tell from Regina’s face that she didn’t realize that the monitor had broadcast her private
conversation. Emma was glad for that and hoped the realization wouldn’t dawn on her anytime soon.

“Would you like to see if the light works?”

Regina grinned and nodded, “Henry’s down and out, so we should be good for a bit.”

Emma stepped over to the side of the crib and looked inside curiously; smiling when she saw Henry cuddled under the blankets she had left. They weren’t Beatrix Potter, but they had bear and moose and foxes and pine trees. They were a real fit considering their location.

“When we get back, I’ll light your fire.”

Regina’s eyes went wide with surprise and Emma’s eyes went wide as well as she realized what she had said. Her mouth gaped open a few times before amending,

“I-I mean, I will light a fire. I-In the fireplace. W-When we get back. Downstairs. F-From upstairs.”

Oh holy night, this isn’t going well at all, thought Emma nervously as she mentally face palmed herself and she looked around the room trying to avoid Regina’s eyes. Regina couldn’t help but grin at the embarrassing situation that Emma had placed herself in with her word choice and she covered her grinning mouth with her hand trying not to make the situation worse. Gathering herself a bit, Regina added,

“How about you show me that light, Emma?”

“Yeah. I think that would be a great idea,” said Emma as she turned on her heel and walked quickly out the door and into the darkened staircase where she turned several shades of red.

They ascended the stairs slowly, stopping briefly to look into the library before making their way to the top of the lighthouse where the six foot tall lens stood encased in a glass room with a 360 degree view of Storybrooke and the ocean. Regina could even see the lights of the town on one side which gave her a bit more comfort regarding their location.

Emma could see Regina furrowing her brow as she looked about like she was trying to find a particular building.

Standing beside her, Emma pointed to a well-lit building that was very close to them.

“So, there, closest to us, is the Storybrooke Hospital, and right over there is your cabin,” she could see Regina visibly relax as she got her bearings and realized that her cabin and current location weren’t as remote as she had imagined. Pointing a bit further out along the coast, Emma continued, “and there is the clock tower and library and the main town. You can kind of see the Waterfire braziers there in a line; if it helps you get your bearings.”

As Emma walked to the other side of the glass room, Regina followed her and looked out over the ocean. There was still a slight orange tinge on the horizon from the remnants of the setting sun, above that, the sky had turned a deep azure color blending into almost black. A million stars littered the sky. As Regina stood mesmerized by the sight, Emma went about her business, preparing a few things around the thick glass of the lens.

“I am going to need your help, if that’s OK?”

Regina nodded her head excitedly and grinned.
“OK. I am going to flip a few levers around the sides of the lens to get the power flowing. When I say, OK, “ Emma walked over to a box on the wall where a large, red button was concealed by a plastic cover, and flipped up the cover, “I need you to hit this button with your palm. Can you do that?”

“I think so,” said Regina who was hanging on Emma’s every word.

“Oh and, Regina?” Regina raised her head and looked in Emma’s eyes.

“Yes?”

“Cross your fingers . . . .” Said Emma with a grin as she slipped behind the glass.

Regina could feel the hum increasing in the catwalk as every lever was flipped into place. By the time Emma had completed her circuit of the lens, there was a definite vibration under Regina’s feet.

Emma emerged from behind the glass and had a look of excitement in her eyes as well. Taking a visibly deep breath, she stood facing Regina. Looking directly at her, Emma said,

“Ready?”

“Ready,” responded Regina with a smile as she held her palm over the button and one hand in the air with fingers crossed. Emma held up both hands with fingers crossed and smiled.

“Hit it,” said Emma.

Regina pulled her hand back and slammed her palm against the button and . . . .nothing . . . .at least for a moment. Then Regina felt a shift in the vibrations under her feet. Looking at Emma’s eyes, she saw her wink with a lopsided grin as she moved to shield Regina from a direct view of the lens. It was probably for the best, because in the next instant, the light that emanated from the lens was absolutely brilliant . . . .almost as brilliant as Regina’s smile and the laugh that erupted from her beautiful lips.

Emma turned Regina gently by the shoulders so she focused out the windows of the room and not at the light. Regina could see the swath of ocean being lit from rocky shore to rocky shore before the light retreated and then returned again.

“Whew!” said Emma behind her with a chuckle.

“It’s amazing,” said Regina in complete awe.

“Oh, we have to do one more thing,” said Emma as she walked to a box at the side of the room. Flipping the box open, Regina could see a radio which Emma tuned before holding out the mic to Regina.

“You need to verify with the Coast Guard that the light is working . . . .”

Regina looked at Emma in confusion and then fear as she realized that she had no idea what to tell the Coast Guard.

“I-I can’t do that. I have no idea what to say.” Regina’s eyes darted towards the steps like she was looking for an escape.

“It’s OK. I can help you,” said Emma as she bounced the mic at Regina gently.

Regina walked over and took the mic from Emma with a shaking hand and Emma moved to stand behind her. She held Regina’s hand steady around the receiver.
“Now, you’ll press this button when you talk and then release to listen.”

Emma said the exact phrase for Regina who nodded when she had it. Regina pressed the button, Emma’s fingers over hers, then stated tentatively,

“Coast Guard Cutter, this is Storybrooke Lighthouse on Channel 16, over…” Regina furrowed her brow, twisted her mouth and bit her lip in anticipation, hoping she hadn’t messed up too badly. Emma nodded her head and smiled in reassurance.

They waited a moment before the radio crackled to life again.

“Storybrooke Lighthouse, this is Coast Guard Cutter. Switch Channel 68, over.”

“See,” said Emma quietly, “you’re perfect.”

Emma kept a tight hold on Regina’s hand over the mic as she brought her lips close and whispered the next words directly in Regina’s ear. Regina’s eye fluttered closed as she felt Emma’s warm breath against her skin.

“Storybrooke Lighthouse switching 68, over.”

Emma switched the channels and told Regina the next command, brushing her lips softly over the shell of Regina’s ear as she did. Regina’s voice sounded a bit more shaken as she said the next command.

“C-C-Coast Guard Cutter, confirm visibility of Storybrooke Lighthouse, over.”

“Roger that, Storybrooke Lighthouse. Confirm visibility from 5 miles.” There was a pause before the radio crackled again, “To whom am I speaking, Ma’am? Over.”

Regina looked at Emma; perplexed at the question.

“Tell them your name. It’s OK, “whispered Emma as she nuzzled her lips a bit more firmly against Regina’s ear. Emma was about a heartbeat shy of losing control and taking the lobe of Regina’s ear between her lips.

“Regina Mills, over.”

“The Coast Guard thanks you for your help, Regina Mills. Coast Guard, out.”

This time, when Emma whispered the command in Regina’s ear, she too closed her eyes and allowed herself to indulge in the touch of Regina’s ear against her lips.

“Storybrooke Lighthouse returning to stand by Channel 16, out.”

As Emma moved to hang up the microphone, Regina sighed at the loss of contact, stopping her arm halfway as she reached out to pull Emma back to her. Regina’s hand was already back at her side when Emma turned to her with a huge smile and laughed,

“You were AMAZING!” said Emma.

Regina smiled and laughed as well at the fun that she had just experienced.

“You think so?”

“Yeah. Yeah, you are.” Emma breathed.
Emma took a moment to look directly into Regina’s eyes and smiled before stating more seriously,  
“You know, you may have just saved a life tonight.”

“Oh, I doubt that, Emma.”

“Well, for someone out there, you may have done more than you know….” trailed off Emma, 
wondering if Regina knew that person was already standing right in front of her.

After looking at each other for another moment, Emma broke the silence,

“Maybe we should go check on Henry and I can light that fireplace, so you are both warm tonight? It’s gotten a little cold, I think.”

For the first time tonight, Regina noticed the coolness of the air and she nodded to Emma. She looked one last time at the ocean as the light swept across before they descended the steps.

“Well, there is a nice fire going, so you and Henry should stay toasty,” stated Emma after wringing her hands together a few times and holding them out in front of the flames.

Turning, she smiled at Regina before walking towards the door. Grasping the frame of the door, Emma stopped before looking at Regina over her shoulder.

“I had a lot of fun with you tonight….thank you,” said Emma with a smile before descending the steps.

“I did too,” said Regina softly behind her before she watched Emma descend the steps.

Turning, Regina opened her bag, sighed and shook her head as she pulled out the sleepwear that Kathryn had packed for her.

*What the hell is it with you and flannel, Kathryn?* Regina held up the pants and button up, long sleeved pajama shirt and groaned wondering if she could look any more like a lumberjack this trip.

Having no other choice, Regina changed into the pajamas and then searched through Henry’s bag, finding one of his books. He was asleep, but their ritual was so engrained that she couldn’t help but read to him.

Lowering the side rail, she turned towards Henry, slipped on her glasses, and started to read.

Emma lay on the couch on the floor below, listening to Regina’s voice as she read to Henry and then sang him a Spanish lullaby. Before long, there was only silence, and then light snoring, coming through the monitor.

Emma lay for a while on the sofa, arms behind her head thinking about the evening. She shook her head and smiled as she wondered how a night so simple could be so perfect. Reaching down with the tips of her fingers, Emma brushed them across her lips as she remembered the feel of Regina’s ear against them; the smell of her hair; the sound of her voice. She was starting to need this woman in every way; almost like she needed breath in her lungs. Emma lay lost in those thoughts for a long while. Finally, noticing that her own fire was burning down, she crept up the stairs to Regina’s
bedroom to check on her and Henry.

*She sure does love flannel,* chuckled Emma as she looked at the blue and green checked material.

Regina lay on her back with her eyes closed, one, flannel-covered arm up and bent so that her hand rested near her forehead. Henry’s book lay face down and open atop her stomach and her other hand rested atop the cover, holding it in place. Gently, Emma took her wrist and lifted it so that she could slide the book out before replacing Regina’s hand on her stomach. Closing the book, she laid it on the stand beside the bed.

Emma paused for a moment looking at Regina before tentatively reaching in with both hands and grasping the sides of Regina’s black, thick framed glasses and sliding them slowly from her face. Regina barely stirred. Folding in the ear pieces, Emma laid them atop the book and peeked in the crib to make sure Henry was OK before placing a few more logs quietly on the fire. As Emma left the room, she grabbed the doorframe and looked over her shoulder, glancing one more time at them,

“Please, just give me a chance to show you how incredible and beautiful you are, Regina….“
Regina stood on the dock biting the skin around her fingernails as Emma packed a few things in the bottom of the canoe.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” asked Regina as she glanced nervously between Emma and the house several times. “Henry just got over that ear infection. In fact, I am not entirely sure he is completely over it. What if it flares up again? Marco may not know what needs to be done and I don’t want Henry to have to wait until we return before he can get medical attention. He was so sick and in so much pain.”

Emma ran into her bedroom, slamming and locking the door behind her. Jumping up on the bed, she huddled against the headboard, wrapping her arms around her legs which were drawn closely to her chest. Her eyes were wide as she watched the door, and she rocked a several times trying to give herself a few moments of comfort before he came in. He wouldn’t leave, not tonight. Her foster mother was unconscious, compliments of the unholy mix of drugs she had taken earlier and he was drunk. He always stayed so much longer and it hurt so much more when he was drunk. He banged loudly on the door screaming at her to open it.

“I KNOW YOU’RE IN THERE! HOW DARE YOU LOCK THIS DOOR! THIS IS MY HOUSE! YOU LET ME IN YOU LITTLE BITCH OR YOU’LL BE A SORRY LITTLE GIRL!”

Emma knew that, no matter what, she was going to be a ‘sorry little girl’ tonight. She closed her eyes tightly and continued to rock. Please, just this once, go away…

Emma opened her eyes suddenly. Her chest was heaving as she tried to draw strangled breaths and she was covered with a layer of sweat. The sheets beneath her were as soaked as her tank. The sheets of the bed were wrapped around her arms and legs, limiting her movements, just like her foster father’s hands and body would do. Emma looked around trying to get her bearings and she realized she was in Regina’s guesthouse and she was alone. Looking at the clock, she saw that it was only 11PM. Closing her eyes, she took a few deep breaths, trying to relax. She jumped slightly when she realized that the pounding on the door in her dream was being repeated on the guesthouse door. Untangling herself from the sheets, Emma tentatively stepped out of the bed. She crept to the door, scared of who might be outside.

Still the timid 12-year old, even at 28, thought Emma. She doubted that would ever go away.

She had almost reached the door, when it registered to her that a baby was crying.

“Emma, please hurry. Something’s wrong with Henry.” Regina’s voice shook as she pleaded with Emma to open the door.

Emma quickly took the last few steps to the door and opened it. Regina stood before her, eyes filled with panic and tears as Henry struggled, red faced, against her shoulder. His hands were clenched in tight, shaking fists which he held against the sides of his head. Regina’s shoulder was covered in saliva from where he had been and was still crying, open-mouthed against her. She bounced him and rubbed his back, doing anything she could to give him some level of comfort. Regina’s hands
were shaking and Emma could tell that she was terrified.

“Regina, what’s wrong?”

“I don’t know, Emma. He was fussy this evening and didn’t want to eat, so I laid him down thinking maybe he was tired. He was so restless. I have been holding him and rocking him for the last few hours and he won’t stop crying. Please, Emma, I don’t know what to do.”

Emma reached out and felt his forehead. He was burning up with a fever.

Emma grabbed a pair of sweat shorts that were at the end of the bed and slipped them on. Quickly, she pulled on her socks and work boots. She grabbed a hoodie from the hook beside the door.

“What have you taken his temperature?”

Regina looked at Emma devastated and shook her head. How could she have been so stupid? She was so busy rocking Henry and trying to get him to quiet down that she forgot to do something as simple as taking a temperature.

Without thinking, Emma cupped Regina’s cheek in her hand and lifted her face so that she would look at her. Emma brushed her thumb gently against Regina’s cheek. It calmed her enough to focus on what Emma was saying.

“Regina, it’s OK. Henry has a fever. I am sure it is nothing serious, but we should probably get him to the hospital just in case. Let me hold him for a bit. I know your arms are tired. Why don’t you go get the keys to the car and lock the house? I will meet you up there. OK?”

Regina nodded and Emma took Henry from her arms, holding him against her shoulder just as Regina had been, rubbing his back gently. Emma pressed her cheek to his tiny head and made light shushing noises trying to comfort him just a little. She closed and locked the guesthouse door before going directly to the car. Regina was already waiting. Emma placed him in his car seat and buckled him in before turning to Regina. She ran her hand down the top of Regina’s arm as she spoke,

“I can drive, if you want to sit in the back with Henry.”

Regina nodded nervously and Emma opened the door for her to get in beside the car seat. Taking the wheel, Emma got them to the hospital in record time.

Regina was already checking Henry in when Emma entered the Emergency Room. Emma found a chair in the corner and sat watching quietly. She couldn’t offer much help here. She wasn’t Regina or Henry’s family. She felt helpless, but all she could do was wait.

Thankfully, the waiting room was empty and things seemed to be relatively quiet, because Regina and Henry were taken directly back to an exam room. As they started through the doors, Regina looked back at Emma and offered her a smile which was returned encouragingly before they followed the doctor back.

It was almost an hour before Emma saw Regina again. Emma was tapping her foot nervously and
rocking back and forth in her chair, when the door opened. She stood immediately when she saw Regina walking through. Regina’s arms were wrapped around her waist and she looked at the ground, heading straight towards Emma as she stood in the corner. Henry wasn’t with Regina and Emma drew a breath, frightened of what Regina was about to tell her. As soon as she was close enough, Regina slipped her arms inside of Emma’s hoodie and hugged her tightly, laying her head against Emma’s chest.

“Thank you, Emma. He’s going to be OK.” was whispered in a small voice as Emma wrapped strong arms around Regina’s shoulders. Emma breathed a sigh of relief and closed her eyes as she rested her chin atop Regina’s head. For the second time that evening, Emma forgot herself and leaned down to place a gentle kiss in Regina’s hair.

It was several minutes before Regina pulled away from Emma’s embrace. Using the palms of her hands, she wiped the tears from her eyes. She recounted everything the doctor had told her about Henry. He had an ear infection which was the cause of his fever. He was given antibiotics and ear drops for the pain. They wanted to keep him for another hour for observation. If he was stable, he could go home.

“Would you go back with me and sit for a while?”

Emma nodded and smiled gently at Regina. Taking Emma’s hand, she led her back to the room where Henry was finally resting comfortably in a small crib. Emma stepped to the side of the crib and watched him sleeping. His face was still a little flushed and his onesie was soaked from the sweat of his fever, but he had quieted. She ran trembling fingers through his thin, soft hair and smiled softly. She didn’t notice Regina watching her.

Emma sat in one of the seats of the room and Regina took the one beside her. Emma kept her eyes trained on the floor as the weight of the night hit her and she bounced her knee nervously. Quietly weaving her arm through Emma’s, Regina slipped her hand into Emma’s and entwined their fingers. Regina gripped Emma’s bicep and she laid her head against Emma’s shoulder while they waited.

It was past 2AM when they pulled back into the driveway. Henry was finally sleeping peacefully and Regina had fallen asleep, exhausted, in the seat beside him, her head resting against the car seat. Emma pulled the key to the house from her pocket. She hated to use it, because she felt it should only be used with permission from Regina when she needed to enter the house to fix something, but she didn’t have the heart to wake her. Opening the door to the car, Emma unbuckled Henry first and took him inside, placing him in the crib in his room. He barely stirred.

Emma went to Regina’s room, turning down the sheets and flipping on the bedside lamp before returning to the car. Emma lifted Regina gently in her arms. Regina’s forehead rested against Emma’s neck as she carried her ‘bridal style’ into the house. Taking her into the bedroom, Emma placed Regina in the bed and pulled off her shoes before pulling the covers over her. She tucked a lock of hair behind Regina’s ear before bending down and placing a kiss on her temple. Emma drew a breath as she realized what she had done. There were so many things she wanted to say to Regina in that instant. Instead, she sighed before turning off the lamp and exiting the room. Regina found Emma asleep on the couch the next morning.
Regina trailed off and Emma could see the hand that was at Regina’s mouth was shaking. Walking over to her, Emma looked up to the deck where Marco held Henry. He was bouncing him gently and Henry was sound asleep. Emma threw him a crooked grin and an awkward wave which Marco returned with a huge smile.

Taking Regina’s hands in each of her own, Emma rubbed calming circles over the backs with her thumbs as Regina continued to watch Marco and Henry.

“Hey,” Emma said quietly.

Regina turned and Emma could sense the hesitation in her brown eyes.

“We are only going to be gone for a couple hours. I promise. Marco has everything under control and I brought 15-mile walkie-talkies just in case. He has one.”

Emma hated admitting that to Regina. She didn’t want Regina to think that she anticipated or expected an emergency of any kind. Emma was just knew from experience that it was better to be safe than sorry. She hadn’t really thought about the walkies being used as baby monitors, but if acting like that was the primary reason behind them being taken, then maybe it was for the best. She didn’t dare mention the pistol that was packed in the small duffle now sitting in the bottom of the boat. Some things were just better left alone and unsaid. She expected no reason to pull it anyways.

Emma jogged up to check with Marco one more time. He patted Emma’s shoulder gently in reassurance and waved to Regina who waved back nervously.

Regina had been very hesitant in accepting the invitation when Emma proposed this trip. It had been almost two weeks since Kathryn left and even longer had passed since they had been at the lighthouse. Emma felt Regina retreating back into isolation and work, so she suggested a short paddle into some of the nearby inlets. Emma thought it might be good for Regina to familiarize herself with the area she now called home. There was such beauty in Maine, and perhaps, the natural setting could serve as some sort of inspiration to Regina. The woods and the water had always provided such peace to Emma’s body, mind, soul and heart. She hoped Regina could find some peace there as well. Regina needed that. She was exhausted from being the sole provider of Henry’s care, and his illness the previous week had really taken its toll. He was her only companion in an otherwise solitary existence.

Emma knew what that was like all too well. Marco had been her only friend for most of her life, and later she had met Fredrick, but there were times, especially now, when she longed for more; someone that could better understand her; someone with whom she could share an emotional connection; someone with whom she could share a physical connection beyond a brief hug or a pat on the head. The few times that she had sought those connections with someone, she had simply been used or her heart had been broken, so she had become very cautious with whom she let in anymore. She wasn’t so presumptuous as to believe that Regina would want to provide any of that for her, so she didn’t even dare to hope, but maintaining her ambivalence was becoming harder and harder each day. Regina always seemed to be on her mind.

“The water isn’t very deep. We will stick close to shore. We’ll only be gone for a few hours.”

“Emma, I can’t just leave Henry.”

“Marco can watch him. He practically raised me, Regina. I trust him completely. I promise,
“Regina, I would never let anything happen to you or Henry.”

Regina nodded her head.

“I trust you, Emma.”

“Ready to go?” asked Emma when she returned to the dock.

“As ready as I will ever be,” responded Regina tentatively casting one last glance towards the house.

Emma stood in the canoe and balanced it firmly with her feet. It was tied to the dock and the water was calm, but Emma wanted to make sure Regina felt like she was on solid ground. Offering a hand to Regina, Emma helped her step from the dock onto the front seat. As Regina stepped down, she lost her balance and fell forward into Emma, wrapping her arms around Emma’s neck in an effort to catch herself. Emma caught Regina, in turn, wrapping her arms around her waist and back. As both Regina and Emma looked up, they realized that their faces were so close that each could feel the breath of the other against their lips. Their eyes locked for a moment before Emma looked away shyly. Her heart was racing and she was barely breathing.

“Let’s get you settled,” Emma mumbled as she untangled Regina’s arms from around her neck and helped her sit on the small seat at the front of the boat. Regina gripped her hands tightly onto each side of the canoe as Emma cast off the lines. Using her oar, she eased the wooden canoe away from the dock.

The beautiful, cedar canoe cut through the cove easily. Marco had been kind enough to bring it with him to the house and, even after all these years, Emma still thought it was one of the most beautiful things that she and Marco had ever made. They had built the canoe with their own, two hands when she was around 14 years old, but it had been used only a few times throughout the years. The struggle to continue to live always seemed to take priority over actually living, for both of them.

Emma couldn’t think of a better reason to bring it out than today, though. It was a perfectly clear day and the sky was a brilliant blue. There was almost no wind, so the surface of the coves and inlets were like glass. The water was so clear that, looking over the side of the canoe, a person could see the rocks, large and small, that littered the bottom. The late afternoon sun shone brightly and most of the week had been unusually warm, even for July, almost 90 degrees. Thankfully, there was no humidity, so it made the paddling much easier and much more enjoyable for Emma. Of course, Emma would argue that she had the best seat in the house.

Emma watched Regina as she sat at the front of the boat. She kept her eyes fixed on the tree line, but Emma couldn’t tell if it was because she was taking in the scenery, watching for wildlife or looking for the fastest way ashore in the event of an emergency. She hoped it was one of the former, but, considering the vice-like grip Regina had on the side of the canoe, she couldn’t be certain. Regina wasn’t saying anything and Emma wasn’t sure if she should break the silence, but she was actually starting to get a little worried that this trip wasn’t having the calming effect that she had hoped it would.
Emma slipped the canoe silently into a calm inlet that was lined by a pebbled shoreline. Several large rocks were submerged, individually or in groups, off the bank forming little islands. The tops of all of the rocks were deserted except one.

“Well, would you look at that,” whispered Emma softly from her seat at the back of the canoe. She dipped the oar into the water gently to slow the boat and come around for a closer look.

Regina, still gripping the sides of the canoe with tight hands, twisted around in her seat a bit so that she could see Emma’s face. Emma’s attention was focused beyond Regina but Emma felt Regina’s gaze, so she grinned a little, like she was about to share a secret, and tilted her head back to point at something near the shore with her chin. Regina turned back around trying to follow Emma’s gaze. There, on the rocks, stood two, small birds, only slightly taller than either of their hands held upright. They were stout little things with a large patch of black feathers covering their crown and back. Their chest and bellies were bright white and pale grey feathers shaped like a sideways teardrop covered their eyes and cheeks. Most impressive were the beaks which looked like a parrot’s in shape, but much larger and more proportioned to their face. These were covered in concentric arcs of colors, starting with grey at the base and moving to yellow and then a brilliant orange from about halfway out to the end. Their feet were awkwardly large and as bright orange as the tips of their beaks. They were facing each other, rocking back and forth out of time on their very large feet, wagging their heads from side to side. Occasionally, their bills would touch in a series of rapid clicks before they separated slightly to sway and repeat the process again.

Regina was mesmerized by their beautiful colors and their curious movements. So entranced was she by their dance that she didn’t hear or see that Emma had left her seat and scooted closer to her, crouching just behind, steadying herself with a hand on each side of the boat. Regina jumped slightly when she heard Emma start to whisper, her warm breath ghosting over Regina’s ear and cheek.

“Do you know what they are?” breathed out Emma quietly.

Regina shook her head only slightly as if the slightest of movement or noise would scare them, or Emma, off.

“They’re Atlantic Puffins. Some people call them ‘Clowns of the Sea’ because of their colors and the way they walk,” Regina could feel Emma grin against her ear, “I’m a little surprised that these two are here. I would have expected them to be underground by now. They must have been holding out for their perfect mate…..Looks like they found each other.”

Regina turned her head slightly so that she could see Emma’s face. Her green eyes sparkled with wonder and reverence, and she watched the pair of birds like she and Regina had just been given an all-access pass to one of the most incredible shows on the earth. Regina could understand to an extent, the dance was certainly beautiful, but there was something more there that Regina was missing that Emma alone was privy to.

Sensing Regina’s confusion, Emma edged forward unconsciously, still intently watching the birds. Emma’s hands now gripped the edge of the canoe just behind Regina’s, her strong arms supporting Regina’s own, outlining their gentle curve from wrist to shoulder. Emma’s chest was pressed against Regina’s back and her face had moved forward so that her cheek brushed against Regina’s as she spoke. Emma’s knees rested on the edge of the seat to either side of Regina’s hips.

“You see,” continued Emma, “Puffins spend most of their early lives alone, but once they reach five or six years old, which would be the equivalent of our age now, they come to the shore and burrow into the grasses of the hillsides. That’s where they build their nests. The nesting colonies are huge, but each Puffin selects only one mate and they stay with them for life. Do you see what they are
doing there?"

Regina watched the birds that were still bobbing and weaving. The light clacks of their beaks broke the silence intermittently. She nodded against Emma’s cheek.

“It’s called ‘billing’. Pairs do it during courtship or to renew their bond each year when they come to the colony to mate.” Emma smiled gently before finishing. “We’re watching them fall in love.”

Regina was barely breathing and she could feel herself trembling at Emma’s words. She wasn’t sure if Emma could feel her slight shaking, but she wasn’t sure if she cared, either. In that moment, Regina saw that Emma was more unique and more special than anyone she had ever known. She saw beauty in everything around her; revealing it for others with her hands, with her words, with her heart.

As Emma watched the pair intently, she couldn’t help but grin and bob her head slightly. Their dance was so animated that she wanted to be a part of it. She barely noticed that her cheek was brushing Regina’s with each pass. Regina noticed, though, and she closed her eyes to revel in the feel of Emma’s skin against her own. She sank back, against Emma’s chest, into her strong arms. As they continued to watch, Regina’s grip loosened from the sides of the canoe and her hands slipped back, covering the tops of Emma’s hands with her own.

Now, it was Emma’s turn to tremble and she breathed in deeply, trying to ground herself. She wanted to memorize the feel of Regina’s body molded so perfectly into her own; the feel of her soft skin. Emma prayed silently that it wasn’t a mistake or an accident. She prayed that Regina hadn’t simply been lost in a moment of loneliness; Emma providing a convenient comfort. Emma wanted to memorize the moment, because she was afraid that it might never happen for her again.

Emma turned her head slightly towards Regina. The side of her forehead rested against Regina’s temple and she kept her eyes focused on the bottom of the boat.

“W-we should probably go,” whispered Emma, “and give them some privacy.” Turning her head further, she closed her eyes and nuzzled her nose gently against Regina’s cheek. “The sun will start to set soon and I am sure you are worried about Henry.”

Regina closed her eyes and nodded, feeling her cheek brush against Emma’s nose. Emma’s breath was warm on her face.

“Emma?” whispered Regina.

“Yes.”

“Thank you….for an incredible day.”

Emma simply nodded.

They remained there, heads touching, for what felt like an instant and forever. Neither wanted the moment to end, but as suddenly as she had come, Emma was gone again, and Regina heard the oar dip into the water as the boat glided forward towards home.

The sky above had darkened as the sun was slipping below the horizon, creating orange, pink and yellow bands that painted themselves just above the tops of the trees. They could see the soft glow of the lights emanating from the huge picture windows at the back of the log home. It gave the
whole place a homey, safe, and warm feeling. A single light attached to a pole cast a soft glow on the dock and they could see Marco waiting there with Henry. He was helping Henry wave as they approached. Emma’s heart skipped a beat as she watched Regina smile beautifully at Marco and Henry, and she couldn’t stop her own smile from appearing. Emma’s smile didn’t go unnoticed by Marco, nor did the direction of her gaze.

Emma tied the canoe tightly to the cleats on the dock. Jumping out of the boat, she walked to where Regina was seated and offered her a hand getting out. Approaching Marco, Regina took Henry from his arms and placed a gentle kisses on his forehead and chubby cheeks before laying him on her shoulder.

“Thank you, Marco.”

“You’re welcome, Miss Regina. You got a good boy there,” said Marco as he tapped him gently on the hand with his index finger. Henry responded by releasing a huge yawn and snuggling further into Regina’s shoulder. His eyelids were starting to close. Behind them, Emma pulled the oars and bag from the canoe and laid them on the dock. Regina looked between Marco and Emma,

“I should put him to bed. I think he’s had a long day.”

Marco smiled and nodded, stepping back to let her and Henry pass. As Regina started up through the yard, she glanced briefly over her shoulder and offered a gentle smile to Emma. Emma smiled back before looking down at the dock.

Emma had crouched down and was starting to untie the back rope from the cleat.

“Give me a minute, and I will pull the canoe and load it,” said Emma softly. Her mind was a million miles away.

Marco stepped forward and laid his hand on Emma’s shoulder to stop her movements. When their eyes met, he spoke softly. He looked so old.

“It’s OK, Emma. Why don’t you keep it here, eh?”

“But, it’s your canoe.”

“No, Emma, it’s OUR canoe and it’s been gathering dust for too long. Maybe, you and Miss Regina can go out in it again sometime.”

Emma nodded and they stood for a few minutes in a comfortable silence before Marco spoke again,

“You had a good day today, eh?”

Emma nodded as she looked down at the dock and smiled softly thinking about that perfect moment with Regina in the cove.

“I haven’t seen you smile like this in a long time, Emma. She’s good for you.”

Emma looked at Marco and her mouth fell open slightly. She wasn’t sure what to say. She didn’t need to worry as Marco’s spoke again.

“I see the way you look at her, Emma. Your father, Marco,” he pointed to himself with a finger and then shook it a bit as he chuckled, “he’s old, but he’s not dead.” Then, pointing that same finger at
Emma, he teased, “You….You’re in love.”

Emma’s mouth opened slightly as the weight of Marco’s words hit her. He stood there smiling gently at her as her eyes filled with tears.

“Emma, you’ve been my child, since you were eight years old,” Marco reached up and touched Emma’s cheek with his palm, “and I couldn’t have asked for a better daughter. I’m so proud of you.”

The tears fell from Emma’s eyes and rolled down her cheeks.

Marco stepped forward and embraced Emma tightly. It had taken him so many years for him to break down those walls, for her to stop flinching when he hugged her, for them to learn to trust. No matter how old she was, to him, she would always be that shy and awkward little eight-year old girl in his woodshop. She stood in his embrace, her cheek rested against his shoulder. He stroked her hair and spoke to her in soft tones.

“She’s in love with you too, Emma. I can see it, but she’s afraid to let you in. She’s afraid of being hurt. Be patient with her.”

Emma pulled back and looked into Marco’s eyes. She nodded at his words.

“I knew somebody a lot like her once upon a time,” Marco smiled softly at Emma and brushed his index finger gently on the tip of her nose.

“Now, how about you walk an old man to his car?” Marco nudged his head towards the driveway.

Emma smiled gently and nodded. Turning, they walked side-by-side slowly up through the yard. Emma opened the car door for Marco and helped him slip into the seat, shutting the door behind him. He rolled down the window and Emma leaned to look in. He tapped her on the cheek twice, softly, before tapping his fingers again atop her heart.

“You’re a beautiful woman, Emma Swan.”

Closing the window, Emma stepped back as Marco pulled out of the drive and onto the road.

As Emma walked back down to the dock, she noticed that the lights of the cottage were off. Casting one last glance at the windows, she whispered,

“Goodnight, Regina….”

Regina clicked on the small caterpillar nightlight before placing Henry gently in his crib and covering him with his blanket. Leaning down, she placed a soft kiss on his head and lingered, just a little longer, to brush her fingers gently through his soft, brown hair. The happy and contented moments in her life came all too rarely and she was determined to no longer just allow them to pass her by. She feared that she may have done just that this afternoon, though.

“Te quiero, hijo mío” whispered Regina as she clicked the door closed to Henry’s room.

Regina saw that Emma and Marco were still talking down on the dock as she shut off the lights to the living room and kitchen, leaving the house in darkness save for a few night lights that emitted a soft glow here and there. Regina retreated to the Master Bath. Lighting only a few candles, she
stepped into the shower to quickly rinse away the remnants of the day. She sighed as she felt the water against her skin, knowing it was rinsing away the tactile memory of Emma.

As she reentered the darkened bedroom, towel wrapped around her and drying her hair, Regina looked through the large bay window that overlooked the dock and inlet and saw that Emma was standing on the dock. She was alone. Regina sat on the seat that spanned the window and watched her quietly.

Emma stood on the dock for a while simply looking at the water. It shimmered under the light of the full moon that now hung low in the sky. The air still had a comfortable warmth. Crouching, Emma untied her work boots and stepped out of them. Slipping off her socks, she placed them into the boots for safekeeping. She stood, looking again at the water then down at her toes, wiggling them in their new-found freedom. Without thought, she crossed her arms and grasped the sides of her tank, pulling it up and over her head before tossing it atop her shoes. Reaching behind her, she unsnapped her bra and let it slide down her arms and onto the growing piles of clothes. Lastly, she reached to the front of her shorts to unbutton and unzip them. Placing her hands on her waist and slipping her fingers under the bands, she slid her shorts and boy shorts over the curve of her hips, passing the fabric over her strong rear, thighs and calves before stepping out and kicking them to the side.

Reaching behind her head, Emma pulled the band from her ponytail and let her long blonde hair fall in gentle curls over her back and shoulders. She hesitated for only a moment before stepping forward and diving into the water.

Emma stretched her arms over her head, undulating her body like a porpoise to propel herself forward. She closed her eyes as she swam, sensing the moonlight through her lids, completely submerged and encompassed by the beautiful silence of the water that glided smoothly and effortlessly over her skin.

The coolness of the water contrasted with the warmth of the air as Emma bobbed up for a breath. Looking around, she saw that she had travelled some distance away from the dock, but she felt safe and knew that she was in no danger of being disturbed. She floated there on the surface for a while, smiling gently, moving her arms and enjoying the feel of the water. She was lost in the complete feeling of tranquility that had washed over her heart and soul. Finally, turning over, she remained at the surface and used strong strokes and kicks to propel herself back towards the dock.

Regina leaned against one wall of the bay window, legs outstretched before her on the cushion, and watched curiously as Emma stood on the dock, wondering what she might be thinking about. She hoped, in that instant, that Emma might be thinking about her, just as she was thinking of Emma. She watched Emma take off her heavy boots and socks and wondered, briefly, if Emma even had the extra money to buy another set of shoes. When she moved into the guest house, she didn’t seem to have many possessions, except her beloved roll of woodworking tools and a small blanket with her name embroidered on the edge in purple.

The bright moonlight illuminated Emma’s broad shoulders and toned arms and her white tank clung tightly to her torso. Regina couldn’t help but think about the first day when she opened the door to find Emma standing there in the sun.

Regina could see the outlines of the muscles of Emma’s back through the thin fabric. When Regina
hugged Emma at the hospital, she had felt those same muscles contract and relax strongly under her hands and wondered later what it might feel like to trace her fingertips over their ridges and dips during a passionate night of lovemaking. The curve of her hips gave way to long legs with solid thighs and calves. Regina was about to close her eyes to imagine what remained under Emma’s clothing when she caught Emma’s movement. Regina drew a deep breath and leaned forward slightly as she watched Emma remove her tank, and then her bra, and deposit them on the dock. She moaned softly as she watched Emma’s shorts and undergarments slide over her legs soon after. The body that had just been revealed was as athletic and sexy as Regina had imagined it would be, and she had only seen half of it. As Emma’s hair cascaded over her shoulders and back, Regina reached out her hand and traced her fingertips over the pane of glass, following the perfect curve of Emma’s form just before she dove into the water.

By the light of the moon and with the clarity of the water, Regina could see Emma’s strong and slender body as she swam. She seemed so free, so unburdened, so relieved from the weight of life that Regina couldn’t help but smile for her and with her.

Placing her palms on the edge of the dock, Emma dipped her head back to smooth her hair before pressing down and lifting her body from the water. She stood facing the house, but she didn’t notice Regina in the window as she turned her head, pulling her hair over her shoulder and twisting it to remove some of the water. Padding softly over to the bag that lay on the dock, Emma pulled out a large, soft towel that she laid over the boards. Once done, she lay on her back atop the towel, looking at the millions of stars that shined brightly in the sky. She smiled softly as she recalled the day, thoughtlessly tracing light, random patterns over her stomach with her fingertips as she rested her left arm beneath her head. She thought about Regina, the weight of her arms cradled in her own, the softness of her cheek, the scent of lavender and apples that clung to her hair and clothes. She thought about Regina’s lips; the ones that had been so close to hers. She thought about her delicate hands that felt like velvet and how Regina’s fingers traced again and again over the backs of her own. Why hadn’t she just been bold? Why hadn’t she just taken the chance? Was it so wrong to believe that maybe Regina felt something just as strong for her too?

As she remained lost in her thoughts, Emma trailed her fingertips lower, brushing them through a small patch of soft, blonde curls that were damp from the water and a now-growing arousal. She slipped her middle finger lower pressing just inside the top of her slick folds and closed her eyes. She imagined what it would be like to feel the softness of Regina’s lips, the warmth of her mouth and tongue as it slid slowly past her own, exploring tentatively at first then becoming more urgent and more bold. Holding the picture in her mind, Emma’s middle finger was joined by her ring finger as both slowly began circling her hardened clit.

Emma lifted her knees to place her feet on the dock to either side of the towel and drew her left arm from behind her head. The fingers of her freed hand found her lips and parted them; giving full access to her fingers as her legs relaxed and fell open exposing her completely. Laying her head back against the dock, Emma tilted her chin up, her mouth falling open slightly. She imagined Regina’s head doing the same if they ever made love, exposing her jaw and neck to Emma’s open mouthed kisses, the nipping of teeth, the gentle sucking of skin, the flicks of a tongue.

Emma hips began to move, slowly at first and then more strongly, finding a rhythm in time with her fingers. She imagined it was Regina’s fingers instead of her own, circling her clit before dipping lower to tease her entrance, barely slipping the tips inside before repeating the motion again and again. Sliding her left hand back up her stomach, Emma felt the raised skin of her breast and the hardened skin that surrounded her nipple before grasping the firm bud between her thumb and
middle finger, pinching, pulling and twisting gently as her emboldened fingers now alternated between strumming her clit and driving deeply inside, burying themselves from tip to base.

Emma’s breathing became ragged and her eyelids fluttered as short, throaty moans escaped her parted lips. Her hips twitched and bucked erratically as she felt herself coming undone, muscles tightening around her fingers as the ache between her legs built unbearably and sought relief.

Regina gasped quietly as she watched Emma draw the length of her body from the water and stand facing the house.

Emma’s breasts were small and firm and the cold of the water had caused her nipples to harden into stiff peaks. Her abs were rock solid and Regina could see the clear separation of each muscle. They contracted and twitched as Emma breathed in and out, slowly and heavily from the exertion of her swim. The dip of the muscles at the top of her hips pointed towards the apex of her thighs where Regina could see a small patch of blonde curls. As the muscles of Emma’s arms tensed and relaxed and her hands squeezed the water from her hair, Regina’s eyes tried to follow each drop, watching them collect together before running in rivulets between Emma’s breasts, through the indentations of the muscles of her stomach and down her thighs and calves; pooling at her feet.

Emma’s gait was soft, but purposeful, as she stepped to the bag in search of a towel that she laid on the dock. The bright moonlight danced on Emma’s wet skin as she settled back atop the towel, lost deep in thought and oblivious to Regina’s attentions. Regina watched Emma’s fingers trace slowly across the skin of her stomach and Regina thought about how each one of them had felt under her fingertips when she brushed them in the cove. She thought about Emma’s warm breath on her jaw and how close her lips had been as she nuzzled her nose into Regina’s cheek. Why hadn’t she just taken the chance? She had only needed to turn her face a little bit more. Emma must have sensed it too; the need, the want, the desire. Did Emma feel the same way for her as she felt for Emma?

Regina’s grip loosened from where she had been holding the towel around herself and she leaned closer to the window as her breath quickened and she watched Emma’s hand move between her own thighs. The towel fell around her on the cushion, leaving her naked body exposed in the window. As she watched Emma, Regina tried to imagine what it would feel like to have those same fingers between her own thighs, touching softly, exploring, teasing gently; gaining the confidence and urgency of a familiar lover with each passing moment.

Without thinking, Regina leaned back against the wall and lifted her knees to place her feet on the cushion; mimicking Emma’s own movements on the dock. She slipped her middle and ring fingers past a thin line of short, coarse, dark hair; pressing inside soaked folds. She allowed her knees to fall open, exposing herself completely as she kept vigil over Emma. Her fingers began circling her already swollen and sensitive clit slowly as she watched Emma’s head tilt back, mouth falling open slightly. Regina could easily imagine tracing her thumb over the curve of Emma’s lips, tugging her lower lip down gently before kissing her and slipping her tongue inside to explore eagerly and deeply.

Regina’s fingers slipped lower and hesitated for only an instant at her aching entrance before being pressed inside to their full length. Watching Emma’s hips, it took only a moment for Regina to match her movements and she slid two fingers in and out several times before adding a third, relishing the feeling of fullness that this beautiful woman on the dock was providing, even if only in Regina’s mind. Regina’s rested against the pane of glass, her thumb tracing the curve of Emma’s body while her fingers rolled and teased her clit to an almost uncomfortable hardness. Her chest heaved and she gasped for breath, praying that her lover would give her release.
Withdrawing one last time, Emma teased her soaked fingers back and forth quickly over her sensitive bundle of nerves driving herself to the release that she so desperately needed. Squeezing her eyes shut tightly, she arched her back strongly and threw her head back, mouth open, as the gush of hot, sticky, wetness coated the apex of her thighs and the underlying towel. A single, beautiful word escaped her lips, moaned reverently into the night air,

“Regina….”

Regina’s mouth opened and she drew a strong breath as she watched Emma’s back lift from the dock. In an instant, she was there with her, teetering on the edge of release. Had she been able to keep her own eyes open for another instant to watch Emma’s lips, all of her fears would have been quelled; her greatest desire confirmed. Instead, her own eyes flitted closed as her hips jerked one last time and her own, warm wetness coated her fingers and hand. A single, gasped word breaking the silence of the room,

“Emma….”
Playing The Field

Chapter Notes

Since it is highly unlikely that I will be able to put a coherent thought together for the next few days (after seeing our lovely ladies on screen this evening for the 4b premier), I wanted to provide you with the next chapter.

I will continue to hope and believe :)

Emma looked up to see Regina’s lips moving and her fingers planted firmly in her ears. Shutting off the saw, Emma removed her sound muffs and looked through her sawdust-covered glasses only to see and hear that Regina had stopped talking.

“I’m sorry?” said Emma as she looked at Regina quizzically and turned her, now exposed, ear to hear Regina better. As she waited for a response, Emma brushed the fine coating of wood from her toned arms.

“I SAID, “ Regina stopped suddenly as she realized that she now sounded much louder than the first time she had attempted to speak.

Seeing that the saw had stopped moving and Emma had pulled off the muffs, she chanced removing her fingers from her ears as well. She was met by the more comfortable sound of the natural outdoors, and she sighed in relief.

Regina started again, this time, more quietly,

“I said; I was wondering if you would like to join me for dinner this evening around 7PM? I am making lasagna.”

Emma slid her glasses atop her head revealing two clean patches of skin around her eyes. Regina found the look amusing and endearing at the same time, and she smiled at Emma who grinned back shyly without really knowing why they were smiling.

“Oh…ummmm…thank you for the offer, but I…uhhhhh…well, I need to be in town tonight around 7PM, and I don’t want you to have to change your plans for me. I am sure I can find something here.”

Emma gestured to the guest house, but trailed off half-heartedly and let her arm drop limply to her side when she realized that dinner was now going to consist of a few saltines and a can of tuna eaten at a table for one. She hated declining a dinner with Regina, and that lasagna sounded really good, but a promise was a promise.

“Oh,” said Regina dejectedly as she looked down at the ground, pushing a strand of hair behind her ear, biting her lower lip and trying to figure out what else to say.

_God, how can someone look so beautiful?_ Emma rolled her eyes skyward in desperation as if begging for someone or something to end the beautiful ache that she seemed to feel every time she was in Regina’s presence. She prayed that Regina didn’t notice the effect she had on her. If Marco was right, and Regina did have these same feelings as she did, Emma was truly starting to wonder if
she would have the patience to wait for them to be revealed.

For the past several weeks, Regina had been inviting Emma to dinner as often as she could. She originally tried to convince herself that it was out of concern.

The rare times that Regina saw Emma return from town with groceries, she had held only a few, half-empty bags and Regina couldn’t help but wonder how many evenings, when they weren’t eating together, she was going to bed hungry. Emma and Marco certainly didn’t seem to have much to offer each other in the way of money, and if her payments were their only source of income, then it definitely didn’t stretch far enough for two.

When Regina finally let herself be brutally honest, she knew her motivations were more than that.

Ever since that day in the cove, Regina found herself looking out into the yard a little more often as she played; lingering her gaze a bit longer on Emma than she probably should; forgetting words a bit more when they talked. It was amazing how distracted she could get by Emma’s simple, quiet presence.

She accepted the comfortable silence they shared at dinners, and she cherished the moments, however brief or rare, when Emma would reveal something; something that allowed Regina to see beyond the almost painful shyness and really get to know the beautiful woman that sat with her.

She craved the physical proximity, even if it meant a dinner spent with her heart pounding a little harder than normal; her hands grasping utensils a little more strongly than needed; her concentration focused on keeping the nervous quavering out of her voice when she actually was able to string a coherent sentence together.

She needed to know if her feelings could be reciprocated, if Emma might feel the same way about her as she did about Emma. She needed to know; if she took a chance; if, for once, she just trusted her heart, and went all in, would Emma do the same. God, she hoped so, because every minute she spent with Emma was like adding a note to an amazing symphony; a symphony that she didn't want to end.

Emma was pulled from her thoughts by Regina’s voice.

“What if you stopped a little early today? I promise I won’t tell Marco, “offered Regina with a playful grin. “I can have the lasagna ready around 5 PM, and you can join Henry and me for an early dinner. He and I have to go into town for a few things this evening, so, perhaps, we can drop you off somewhere and bring you home afterwards?”

Regina prayed that her voice didn't sound too hopeful, but she didn't want to give up so easily on dinner and the thought of having Emma’s company on the trip to town was an opportunity that she couldn't let pass.

“Ummmm, OK. I just don’t want to be too much trouble,” finished Emma quietly as she kept her eyes focused on the cutting table, fingers toying with one of the scraps of wood that lay there.
“It’s a date, then.”

Regina’s eyes widened and she gasped a little as she realized what she said. Luckily, Emma wasn’t looking at her or she might have found Regina’s reaction almost comical. Regina drew a breath to try to say something that might clarify her statement, but no words would come to her, so she simply turned on her heel and walked quickly back up to the house, leaving Emma alone by the saw. Grinning a little, Emma whispered to herself,

“It’s a date.”

Emma sat quietly, looking at the passing forest through the window of the car. Every so often the trees would open and she would catch a glimpse of the rocky shore, a tranquil inlet or a dense bog. Normally, Emma would be taking in every detail of their beauty, but this evening, she barely paid them any attention. It was so hard to concentrate when every breath she took in that car was filled with the fragrance of lavender and apples; that scent that was so uniquely Regina. Every time she breathed it in, she was back in that cove; her face and her body nestled against Regina’s. Her heart just seemed to ache.

She knew she should talk; make some sort of idle conversation, but she was finding it hard anymore to figure out what to say to the person that seemed to be consuming her thoughts, every minute of every day. Everything she could say just seemed so….ordinary.

Instead, Emma lost herself in her thoughts. She replayed the details of the dinner that she had just shared with the beautiful woman beside her. The lasagna had to have been the best one Emma had ever eaten, and she almost groaned every time she saw the fork slide from between Regina’s lips. Emma most definitely stopped breathing for a moment when she caught Regina staring at her as she sipped from her glass of red wine. And, then, there was the incident with the sauce. She guessed she could have just told Regina about it being on the side of her mouth. She probably should have. Instead, without thinking, Emma had reached up and wiped it from the corner of Regina’s mouth with her thumb. She just hadn’t been expecting Regina’s lips to part and the resulting tug that she saw on her lower lip. Emma caught herself, but she wondered if Regina saw her lean forward; her own lips parting in anticipation of a kiss that didn’t happen.

Emma wasn’t sure how many more dinners she would be able to manage. It was getting to the point that her hands were shaking so badly with each bite that it required all of her concentration to lift a fork to her own lips and have it look like the most natural thing in the world.

_Oh, God, I wonder if she saw my hand shaking when I touched her face to wipe away the sauce?_

Regina stared at the road wondering if she would ever be able to formulate a coherent thought again. It was probably a good thing that Emma wasn’t very talkative, because she needed this time to sort out exactly what had happened at dinner.

She had been focused so intently on watching Emma eat the lasagna that she hadn’t even realized how long she had been staring over her glass of wine. It must have been awhile, because even Emma noticed. Her heart skipped a beat, several actually, when she saw those beautiful, emerald eyes staring back at her. And, then, there was the incident with the sauce. Emma could have just told her about it. Instead, Emma had reached up and wiped it from the corner of her mouth with a
thumb. She hadn't meant for her lips to part, but she never felt this way, and that touch was the perfect beginning to a perfect kiss….that, again, didn't happen. Emma had leaned forward; her lips had parted too. Did she really not feel the same?

Regina was sure how many more Italian dinners she could handle with Emma if they were all going to end with her wiping sauce from Regina’s lips while her own heart beat wildly out of her chest.

_Oh god, I wonder if she felt me shiver when I thought about the softness of her lips on mine?_

As the stores and houses of Storybrooke began to appear with more frequency, Regina slowed a bit.

“Where can I drop you?” asked Regina praying that she hadn't just put herself in the position of being a parent that was dropping a child off for a date. She hadn't considered that Emma might be going to see someone; surely she wouldn't have accepted the ride if that was the case. Regina chastised herself for not being more curious about Emma’s plans.

“Storybrooke Hockey Center, please,” said Emma still looking out the window. Regina had managed to work herself up into enough of a frenzy that Emma’s answer had caught her completely off guard.

“Oh,” said Regina startled, “are you going to watch a game?”

“Nah, Fredrick asked me to be on the intramural team that they are pulling together. We are going to scrimmage tonight.”

Emma could see that Regina was a confused so she continued,

“We are going to play a little so they can determine people’s skill levels. It’s just for fun, but you’re welcome to come and watch when you and Henry are done. The game starts at 7:45PM,” offered Emma.

“You know, we might just take you up on that,” grinned Regina.

Emma smiled a huge smile at Regina knowing that she might actually see her in the stands.

“I hope you do,” said Emma quietly as she exited the car and closed the door gently behind her so as not to wake a sleeping Henry. As Emma walked to the front doors, Regina turned to Henry,

“What do you think, sweetie. You want to watch Emma play hockey?” Regina smiled and quickly put the car into gear, so she could run her errands and get back for the start of the game.

Regina stood at the top of the stands holding Henry in his carrier and looked down at the ice. There seemed to be a lot of people and very little organization. If this is what a ‘scrimmage’ was, then Regina wasn't really sure how they were going to get anyone’s skills assessed. Looking around at the stands, she soon saw Marco motioning to her to come and sit with him in some seats about half way up from center ice. She smiled at him and then made her way down the steps.

“Good evening, Marco,” said Regina as she placed Henry’s carrier on the seat between them. Marco seemed to enjoy Henry’s company, and she loved to watch how grandfatherly Marco was with him.
It reminded her of how her own father might have been, if he had been alive to see Henry. Her father would have been so proud. She knew he would have been.

“Good evening, Miss Regina,” smiled Marco, “and hello to you too, Mister Henry,” stated Marco as he tickled his belly gently through the blankets that she had placed atop him in the carrier. Henry simply pursed his lips in response several times before continuing to sleep.

Regina pulled her thin, blue cardigan sweater tighter around her. She hadn't expected the rink to be this cold.

At least, Henry is warm, she thought.

Marco looked at Regina and grinned as he watched her scan the ice for Emma. He noticed she was cold and proceeded to pull his coat off, draping it over her shoulders. He had years of experience at the hockey rink; playing on it himself, repairing it or watching Emma play. He knew to dress in layers, but Regina obviously didn't.

She’ll learn, he grinned to himself.

“Thank you, Marco,” she said as she pulled the coat tighter around herself, still scanning the ice.

“You came to see someone play tonight?” inquired Marco innocently. He was already certain as to why she was there.

“Yes, Emma invited me to the game,” replied Regina, still scanning the ice intently.

“Well, you’re in for a real treat,” Marco pointed a finger towards the corner of the ice where a lone person was gliding, looking down at the ice, switching between forward and backward skating smoothly and easily.

Emma was wearing so much equipment that she hadn't been recognizable to Regina. Her basic uniform consisted of thick, padded shorts and socks that extended from her ankles to somewhere under the hem of her shorts. Her large jersey hid more thick pads that covered her shoulders, upper arms, chest and torso. She held a hockey stick in heavily gloved hands and her skates were covered in so much duct tape that Regina wondered if there was any actual leather underneath. Her hair had been draw up, under her helmet, and a protective cage obscured her face. She seemed lost in thought as she continued her pattern of skating, alone in the corner.

“Emma,” Marco continued, “she’s been skating since she was knee high to Jiminy Cricket, “ Marco held his straight palm off the ground to emphasize her estimated starting height.

Regina released a breathy chuckle at the description but continued watching Emma. Eventually, Emma looked up into the stands. When she did, she stopped skating and her emerald eyes locked with brown. She didn’t even realize that her mouth had formed the words that Regina saw,

“You came.”

Emma’s smile was brilliant.

Regina soon figured out why Emma wore so much padding. It seemed that most of the participants in this ‘game’ were less interested in making goals than they were at doing physical damage to one another. More than once, Regina cringed and looked on in concern as Emma was smashed against
the glass, knocked onto the ice or, in a few cases, thrown over the side wall into the areas where the non-playing participants sat.

Marco was trying to explain some of the rules of the game, but Regina was only half-listening. She was doubtful that any of those rules were even being enforced, anyways. Emma was being thrown about in a manner that Regina found rougher than necessary. At one point, Emma had actually ventured to look up into the stands and offer a small wave and smile. It was met with an immediate hard hit from the side that Regina was pretty sure had broken ribs, at least, until Emma got back off the ice and waved again, this time with a more timid and embarrassed grin.

“Now watch this,” Marco pointed at the ice where Regina saw Emma was guiding the puck. She deftly weaved in and out of the other players, pulling the puck back and forth to avoid it being intercepted. Taking a few, last, forceful glides towards the goal, Emma swung back strongly and launched the disc. All the goalie could do was watch the puck sail past into the net.

Regina was on her feet in an instant, not even realizing that she was, clapping and cheering. Emma offered her a gentle, thankful, bashful smile and Marco grinned as he watched the entire exchange that was taking place.

It was only another half an hour before the majority of the participants decided they had exerted themselves enough and agreed to retire to the local bar for self-congratulatory beers. Soon, Emma was the only player remaining on the ice, skating her familiar pattern, and Regina, Marco and Henry were the only spectators.

Eventually, Emma looked up and realized that the four of them were the only people remaining in the Center. She skated to the side of the ring and opened the latch on the wooden door. Putting the guards on her blades, she made her way over to Regina, Henry and Marco.

“Did you enjoy the game?” she asked softly of all of them. Marco knew there was only one response that she truly cared about though.

“Very much,” responded Regina, adding quietly, “are you hurt? You took a lot of hits out there.”

“Nah,” grinned Emma shyly, “I’ll live.”

Emma caught Marco looking at her out of the corner of her eye and she glanced his way. He tipped his head towards Regina and she saw him move his fingers subtly. Emma furrowed her brow at Marco trying to interpret what he was doing. Marco repeated the pattern, this time, tipping his head twice towards Regina, widening his eyes and pursing his lips. This time, Emma caught the walking-gliding pattern that his fingers were making.

“Regina?”

“Yes, Emma?”

“Have you ever, ummmmmm, ice skated?” asked Emma, hoping she had taken Marco’s cue correctly. She saw him nod at her.

“No, but it looked like fun,” she said with a soft smile, then adding with a more teasing grin, “when you weren’t being knocked around.”

Emma looked down at the floor shyly and twisted her mouth in a grin.

“Would you like to try it?” Emma looked into her beautiful chocolate eyes, adding, “With me?”
Regina hesitated, looking at Henry.

“Don’t you worry Miss Regina. Me and Mister Henry, we have some catching up to do, eh?” Marco tickled Henry’s tummy again through the blankets.

“Why don’t you two go and have some fun?” Marco added with a gentle smile.

Emma got Regina’s shoe size and retreated to the front counter briefly before returning to the rink with a pair of hockey skates. She led Regina to a seat at the side of the rink. Taking off her jersey and then her pads, Emma laid them on the seat next to Regina before kneeling in front of her. Regina couldn’t help but smile as she looked at Emma in her padded shorts, stockings, suspenders and thermal, long-sleeved shirt. She was definitely going to have to learn how to dress appropriately for Maine weather and activities.

Emma slipped off Regina’s shoes and laced up the skates for her, massaging the leather around her ankles to loosen them a bit.

Emma looked up and noticed Regina was wearing Marco’s jacket. It was way too big for her and Emma was afraid Regina might get tangled, once she was in the rink.

“Marco’s jacket is a little big for you to wear on the ice. May I?” Emma indicated that she wanted to remove the jacket and all Regina was capable of doing was nodding.

Emma leaned forward and closed the distance between them. Her cheek brushed Regina’s as her hands slipped inside the shoulders of the jacket. She pressed the coat over Regina’s shoulders, sliding the fabric down her arms. Emma reached over and grasped her jersey in one hand, not stepping away. Turning her head just a bit, she whispered in Regina’s ear,

“This is lined and it might fit better.”

Regina simply nodded and her breath stuttered as she felt Emma’s lips against her ear.

Emma slipped her jersey over Regina’s head and arms. Regina could still feel the warmth of Emma’s body in the fabric and smell her fresh scent mixed with the sweat from the previous game. She was having a hard time controlling the flutters in her stomach.

Emma ascended the stairs quickly to return Marco’s jacket. As she handed it to him, he gave her a quick wink and she returned the gesture with a timid smile.

Returning to where Regina was seated, Emma held out her hand,

“Ready?” Emma said with a gentle smile.

Taking Emma’s hand, Regina allowed herself to be led to the ice.

Regina had been tentatively shuffling along the edge of the ice for about fifteen minutes, gripping the wall with both hands tightly and watching her own feet intently. Emma glided along slowly beside her, hands clasped behind her back. She watched Regina closely, making sure to remain very close in case she started to slip. Eventually, Emma turned and skated backwards so that she could look at
Regina.

“It might be easier if you let go a little,” said Emma tentatively.

Regina stopped and looked up at her quizzically.  *Story of my life……*

“With one hand, at least,” added Emma tapping the back of Regina’s outside hand with her forefinger.

Regina did as Emma instructed and found that she was able to glide a bit easier and push a bit more strongly. She traveled a further distance between steps and she laughed a little and bit her lower lip, reveling at her new-found, but still limited, freedom. Emma smiled with her.

“How do you trust me?” asked Emma softly.

Regina glanced up at Emma smiling, and nodded. As she did, Emma turned quickly and situated herself behind Regina. She pressed her body close, reaching up to push a lock of hair behind Regina’s ear before placing her cheek against Regina’s. She grasped Regina’s free hand in her right and gripped Regina’s hip firmly with her left. Regina released a deep breath and closed her eyes momentarily before relaxing and leaning back into Emma’s arms and chest.

She felt Emma’s nose nuzzle a bit into her cheek and felt Emma’s lips ghost over her skin as she heard the words Emma whispered,

“Just let go……”

And as Regina released her hand from the wall, she felt herself and Emma surge forward.

Regina couldn't help but laugh as they picked up speed, gliding effortlessly around the ring. Her left hand found Emma’s on her hip and she entwined their fingers tightly there. She could feel Emma smile against her ear, and soon, Emma joined Regina in laughing. It was the most beautiful sound that Regina had ever heard.

Emma made sure at least one of her hands was always supporting Regina as she moved around her, skating behind and in front as she kept them moving quickly over the ice. At one point, Emma faced Regina and wrapped strong arms around her, lifting her from the ice and twirling her around as they both laughed and Regina wrapped her arms tightly around Emma’s broad shoulders and neck.

As Emma lowered Regina back onto the surface of the rink, she looked down to make sure Regina’s skates had touched the ice securely. Looking back up, Emma hadn't realized how close Regina’s face was to her own. As the corner of their lips brushed gently, their laughter muted slightly, eyes widened and gasping breaths were drawn. Emma stopped them in the middle of the rink, closer to one of the goals and stepped back a bit. She still held each of Regina’s hands in her own. She opened her mouth to say something, but finding no words to explain what almost just happened, she stood looking at Regina quietly for a moment before turning her green eyes again to the ice. Regina could see Emma grin a bit before she looked back up.

“Wanna have a little more fun?“

Regina smiled and nodded, encouraging her to continue. She prayed that this night might never end.

“Wait here,” said Emma as she released Regina’s hands and skated to the players’ bench. Leaning
over the wall, and giving Regina an incredible view of her padded backside in the process, she grasped three items from behind. As Emma skated back towards Regina, she could see what Emma retrieved.

Emma scraped to a stop in front of Regina and handed her a stick. Regina looked at Emma hesitantly before taking it from her grasp and holding it very awkwardly. Placed on end, it was almost as tall as Regina herself. Emma held a stick as well, but the lower half was much wider than Regina’s own. Emma dropped the puck on the ice between them before skating backwards with a grin towards the goal. Once there, she wriggled her hips and legs back and forth roughing the surface of the ice in front of the net. Regina’s mouth fell open slightly as she watched Emma’s strong, writhing movements. Crouching down, Emma placed her elbows on her knees and held her stick out in front of her, protecting her space.

“Try to get it past me,” challenged Emma. She squinted her eyes playfully in mock determination, before throwing her a wink and a grin.

*Game on*, thought Regina as she raised a single, sculpted eyebrow at Emma; one side of her lips curved into a cocky smirk. She could see Emma’s eyes widen as she gulped in front of the net. Emma’s face suddenly became a lot more serious as she realized that Regina fully intended to take her challenge seriously.

Regina held the stick firmly in her hands as she had seen the players doing earlier in the evening and found that she could slide it on the ice to help keep her balance. Dropping her head, she looked up at Emma through her thick lashes, pursing her lips before giving her a sexy grin. Emma’s heart raced as she looked at Regina from across the ice. Some of Regina’s hair had fallen from behind her ears and it carelessly dangled in front of one of her eyes. Emma could see the more formal collar of her oxford shirt and cardigan sweater peeking out of the neck of her old, ratty hockey jersey, which was still too large for Regina, and she briefly wondered how incredible it might be to see Regina standing in the doorway of a bedroom wearing just the jersey and a thong. Emma caught herself before she groaned audibly at the end of the rink.

*Game on*, thought Emma as she lowered her head as well and looked back at Regina through her lashes.

Emma tightened her grip on her stick as she moved back and forth from side to side continuing to grind her blades further into the ice to give her leverage to dive, if needed, when the puck came to her. Regina couldn’t help but chuckle a little at the padded shorts and socks that Emma wore. She knew that they were necessary to play, but she also knew that masked an incredible body that she had been privileged enough to see one night under the moonlight. Emma’s grey Henley, however, clung very nicely to her toned torso and arms and Regina found the suspenders kind of sexy. She wondered briefly if Emma knew that all six of the buttons of the shirt had opened, revealing a very nice view of her cleavage. She also wondered what it would feel like to peel every piece of this uniform off of Emma, hot and sweaty, after a game while Emma ran her fingertips through her hair and caressed her face. Regina breathed in deeply just to keep herself from moaning.

Regina pushed forward tentatively and caught the puck with the stick, pushing it slowly and steadily in front of her. Several times she had to stop and restart as the puck skirted away and she had to retrieve it and bring it back to center. Each time, she shot a serious but playful look at Emma to let her know that she was still intending to carry through with this challenge, and, each time, Emma gave her a ‘game face’, followed by a quick grin.

When Regina got close enough to the net to feel like she could try to make a shot, she stopped. The puck carried a few feet forward before stopping as well. Taking a few steps to the side Regina
looked from the puck to the net to Emma several times trying to size up her shot. Suddenly, Regina pushed extremely hard with her right foot as she drew her arms backs, squeezed her eyes shut and swung the stick forward with all of her might.

Emma hadn’t really considered the need for a helmet or upper body padding when she had come up with this challenge. She hadn’t really considered that Regina might have the amount of strength in her swing that she did. It didn’t really matter at that point, because the puck had already come off the ice and was on its way. Emma leaned out of the way and turned her head about a millisecond too late and she felt the puck clip the edge of her left brow. She didn’t have a lot of time to consider how it felt, though, because as she swung back around, she saw Regina, wide eyed and flailing her arms as she headed straight toward Emma and the goal. Regina had completely abandoned her stick a few feet back and was grasping at the air as she tried to either stop or stay on her feet. She really didn’t care which one at this point.

Emma threw her own stick out of the way before digging her blades into the ice, hard. She leaned forward and opened her arms trying to gauge how fast Regina was coming at her and how hard she might hit. As soon as Regina was close enough, Emma wrapped strong arms around her in a bear hug and twisted her body so that she would take the full brunt of the impact. Emma ‘oomphed’ as she hit the ice, shoulder blades first, and ‘oomphed’ again as Regina fell atop her.

When it seemed like all motion had finally stopped, Emma opened her eyes. Her back hurt, was incredibly cold and was slightly wet from being on the ice. There was a painful sting at the edge of her left eyebrow. Regina lay on top of her; their bodies touching from chest to knee. The top of Regina’s head was pressed under Emma’s chin, her forehead resting on Emma’s chest. Regina’s arms were drawn up tightly between them and her eyes were squeezed shut.

The first thing that Emma became acutely aware of was the location of her own hands….they were gripping Regina’s beautifully firm and shapely ass. Barely resisting the temptation to squeeze, Emma slid her hands up quickly and grasped the sides of Regina’s hips instead. The second thing she noted was the location of Regina’s hands….they were palming her breasts. The third thing she noticed; it was cold….very cold. Number two and three definitely made for a very interesting, but awkward combination.

“Regina?” Emma whispered.

Not getting a response, Emma tried again, but not before she slid her palms slowly and firmly from the small of Regina’s back to her shoulder blades. When Emma spoke, she ran her fingertips through the hair at Regina’s temple.

“Regina?” Emma repeated softly.

Regina’s eyes fluttered open and she heaved a sigh of relief that everything seemed to have come to a standstill. It took a moment for her to get her bearings and her eyes widened when she realized that she was staring directly down Emma’s porcelain cleavage. Her hands reflexively squeezed before she realized where those had landed as well. She almost groaned when she felt something brush against her palm.

*Oh God, she must be cold.....*
Since her hands were trapped between them, Regina wasn’t sure how she could remove them discreetly and subtly, so, for now; they were going to have to remain where they were.

*Oh God, she is REALLY cold….*

Regina bit her lower lip as she tried to calm her breathing. The brush of Emma’s fingertips at her temple brought her back to present and she raised her head. Brown eyes locked with green for a moment before her brow furrowed.

“Emma!” Regina gasped softly. There was more than a little concern in her voice. A small trickle of blood was running down into Emma’s hairline.

“You’re hurt,” said Regina finally extracting one hand to reach up and brush a thumb above Emma’s left eye. Unconsciously, Regina’s other thumb stroked in time with the one at Emma’s brow creating a painfully, rigid peak that strained against the fabric of her bra.

“I-I t-think I’ll live. I-It just brushed me,” stuttered Emma wondering if Regina even realized that her other thumb was teasing her nipple. She turned her head to look at the net beside them so Regina wouldn’t notice her eyelids fluttering. It was becoming a serious struggle trying to control her breathing.

“W-Well, you got it past me,” said Emma with a grin as she looked at the net.

“What?” said Regina confused.

“T-Take a look,” replied Emma.

Regina turned her head to follow Emma’s gaze and saw the black puck lying at the back of the net.

“You scored,” chuckled Emma softly before groaning a little, rolling her eyes slightly from the continued stimulation of Regina’s thumb.

*Oh God, please stop teasing,* thought Emma as Regina’s thumb continued its incessant circling. It was becoming almost unbearable.

As Regina looked back at Emma smiling, Emma couldn’t help but raise her head from the ice, drawing her face closer to Regina’s. Her breath was stuttering from slightly parted lips. Seeing Emma’s head rise, Regina dipped her head lower, her own lips parting as their faces drew closer. Regina’s hand kneaded harder and her thumb now brushed more urgently flicking the tip of Emma’s rock hard nipple. When their lips were close to touching, Regina pinched Emma’s nipple softly between her thumb and forefinger, rolling it gently. Suddenly, a loud click was heard and the lights on the ice dimmed significantly.

Startled, Emma tilted her head back quickly and looked at the ceiling confused before she realized what had happened.

“They want to close the rink,” Emma sighed out as she laid her head back against the ice and closed her eyes in frustration, “they want us to go.”

Regina lowered her forehead to Emma’s shoulder and released a huff. Emma felt Regina’s head nod against her before her body reluctantly slid from on top of Emma. Emma stood and offered a hand to Regina. As Regina rose, Emma pulled her close. Her left palm and fingers splayed against Regina’s lower back, holding their hips as tightly together as was possible with Emma’s padded shorts. Emma’s right hand reached to cup Regina’s cheek gently. Regina’s left reached up to grasp Emma’s wrist as her thumb now traced soft circle on the back of Emma’s hand. Emma could feel
Regina leaned her face into their touch. There was almost a desperate look in Regina’s eyes as their faces drew closer. Just as their lips began to touch, Henry cried behind them and Regina’s snapped her head around to look into the stands. She saw Marco trying to soothe Henry in his carrier by dangling and shaking a ring of pastel butterflies in front of him.

“Emma, I…….”

Emma could sense Regina’s concern about Henry. *She’s even beautiful when she worries…*

“Come on, I think Henry misses his Momma,” said Emma as she led Regina across the ice towards the stands.

Guiding Regina over to the rink wall, Emma opened the small door and allowed Regina to pass through. By the time they arrived, Henry had already stopped crying and Marco waved gently to indicate that everything was all right.

“Let’s get your skates off so that you can check on him,” said Emma softly.

Helping Regina sit, Emma knelt in front of her once again and untied her skates, slipping them from her feet. She helped Regina slip on her regular shoes that still sat on the bench where they had left them.

“Emma…” sighed Regina

“Regina, it’s OK,” Emma placed her hands atop both of Regina’s that were rubbing nervously against the fabric of her pants legs, “please go check on Henry. I want you to see that he’s OK,” Emma offered with a gentle smile.

Regina nodded quickly before climbing the steps and joining Marco where he sat with Henry. Emma gathered her remaining pads from the bleacher seats before retreating to the locker room to shower and change.

Marco and Regina were waiting in the lobby of the Hockey Center with Henry when Emma returned from the locker room. She was dressed in a pair of faded, tight, low-rise, boot cut jeans, her work boots and her tank. Her hair was damp from her shower and it fell over her back and shoulders, causing the material of the tank to dampen to the point that the color of Emma’s skin could be seen underneath. She had treated the cut on her brow with a small butterfly bandage. Emma smiled as she approached them and noticed that Regina was holding her jersey tightly in her hand.

“Hey Emma!” said Marco exuberantly as he wrapped an arm around Emma’s shoulders and pulled her into a half hug. He placed a kiss on top of her head and Emma grinned and blushed at the show of affection.

“You played a good out there tonight, Emma.” He hesitated a bit before adding, “Not quite as good as Miss Regina, but good all the same,” Marco winked at Regina as he teased Emma. Regina smiled beautifully back at Marco before her eyes fell on Emma who continued to look at the ground with an endearingly, goofy grin.

Addressing Emma and Regina, Marco continued, “Me and Henry, we had a bet. He said that Emma was gonna block the shot. I said ‘no way’. Miss Regina, she’s gonna make the goal,” Marco pointed teasingly a Regina with his index finger. “You’re boy, he owes me some of that delicious lasagna that I’ve heard so much about.”
Regina looked down at a sleeping Henry and grinned as she teasingly mumbled, ‘traitor’. She then blushed as she realized that Emma told Marco about their dinner. She couldn’t help but wonder how much detail Emma had actually shared. Her blush deepened when she realized that he had been watching their entire exchange from the stands. She had been so caught up in the moment that she had momentarily forgotten that it hadn’t just been she and Emma in the arena.

They all stood together for a moment in silence; Regina still blushing, Emma’s eyes widening as she came to the same realization as Regina had about Marco watching them on the ice, and Marco patting himself mentally on the back for getting the promise of a good Italian dinner. It was Marco that finally broke the silence.

“I should go. You three, you drive home safe, eh?”

Regina nodded and smiled at him kindly.

“Oh, and Miss Regina?”

“Yes, Marco?” asked Regina tentatively wondering if they were about to get called out for what happened on the ice.

“You tell Emma ‘no more early days’,” he shook his index finger between the two of them in mock seriousness. “She needs to finish that beautiful kitchen for you. I’m gettin’ hungry already just thinkin’ about that lasagna!”

Both of them breathed out relieved chuckles.

As Marco turned from them and shuffled off, he shook his head and rolled his eyes, wondering just how long it was going to take before they let happen between them what so obviously needed to happen. Rolling his eyes to heaven, he raised his hands a bit looking for a little help,

“Oh, Michelangelo, date a queste due una piccola spinta,” mumbled Marco; hoping that, indeed, Michelangelo would hear his prayer and give them that small nudge in the right direction.

Emma and Regina drove home encompassed in much of the same silence that had enveloped them on the drive in. The only difference was that, this time, the car was filled with some sense of nervous anticipation and soft smiles played at each of their lips as they each thought about the events of the evening. Several times, Emma looked over to see Regina rubbing the material of her jersey between her fingers. It lay across Regina’s lap possessively throughout the drive home. Emma wondered if she was getting it back at all, although she secretly hoped Regina might want to keep it. She’d steal Fredrick’s jersey, if she needed to get another. He deserved it after that cheap shot from the side.

Looking back over her shoulder, Emma saw that Henry was sleeping soundly in his car seat. She was amazed at how much he looked like Regina, even though he was her adopted son. He was a lucky, little boy to have been adopted by her. Emma’s own experience told her that it was a very, rare thing to find someone that would love you so fiercely; care about you so deeply; worry about you so completely. She was happy that he had found that with Regina. As she turned back around, she smiled gently at Regina, who she saw watching through the rear view mirror.

After about ten more minutes of driving, they arrived safely back at the cabin. As they pulled to a stop, Emma could hear Henry making muted, insistent, grunting sounds from his carrier in back. He kicked his feet a bit, loosening his blankets, which had become too hot for him since they were out of the cold of the hockey arena. As Emma stepped out of the car, Regina came around to her side and
Emma opened the door for her so that she could retrieve Henry from the car seat.

“Thank you,” said Regina as she lifted Henry to lie on her shoulder. As Regina’s hand came up to support his back, Emma saw she was holding the jersey against him like a blanket. She wrapped it underneath him as she supported him with her arm.

“Emma, could you open the door for us? The keys are in my hand underneath Henry.”

Emma found the keys that were dangling from Regina’s fingertips and inserted them in the lock, opening the door and walking ahead to turn on a few lights for them. She laid the keys on the counter before turning around to face Regina. Henry was fully awake and was pressing small fists against Regina’s shoulder so that he could lean up. His head bobbed uncertainly as he looked around.

“I think he’s hungry,” said Emma softly.

“Yes, well, it’s been a few hours since dinner and I think Marco may have eaten his popcorn during the game,” Regina smiled teasingly at Emma as she looked up at her through her lashes.

“I should let you take care of Henry then,” said Emma hesitatingly, not really wanting to leave, but knowing she had to. As she turned and placed her hand on the doorknob, Regina called to her from behind.

“Emma?”

Emma looked back at Regina expectantly, wondering what she was going to say.

“Your jersey…..” she held it tightly, but offered it to Emma.

Emma smiled gently at her.

“Why don’t you keep it? It looks beautiful on you, Regina.” There was an unmistakable sincerity in Emma’s eyes as she said the words.

Regina simply smiled and nodded her head in acceptance.

“Have a good night, Regina. Thank you for the ride to the Center.”

“You’re welcome, Emma,” said Regina as the door closed behind her.

When she returned to the guest cabin, Emma removed only her work boots before lying down atop the covers. She had spent the last hour just staring off into space and thinking. It seemed that every perfect evening in her life had been in the company of the beautiful woman that sat 50 feet beyond her grasp right now. She could still feel the light brush of their lips. How close they had come to that elusive kiss that Emma was longing for. Reaching up, she touched her brow and winced a little. The bandage was still there. It was only a small cut, but the hit was enough that over the course of the last hour, it had started to bruise and swell a bit.

Rising from the bed, Emma pulled a pack of ice from the freezer of the small unit in the cabin. She crossed her arms over her chest, holding the pack to her brow as she leaned against the frame of the window and looked up towards the main cabin. The lights in the living area were on and she could see Regina rocking Henry gently against her shoulder.
Maybe I’ll watch them, just for a little while…thought Emma as she leaned her head against the window frame and smiled gently.

Henry drank hungrily from his bottle and it was gone in only about a half an hour. When he was done, Regina laid him on her shoulder and rubbed his back, rocking him gently in front of the windows at the back of the cabin. He was already sleeping soundly, but Regina was lost in her thoughts and the rocking motion was keeping her in almost a trance-like state as she thought about every detail of the evening.

She thought about the soft brush of Emma’s lips against her own; how close they had come to that kiss that she longed for now, more than ever. She thought about Emma’s laugh and how free she felt when she was with her. She thought about the responsiveness of Emma’s body to her touch; the hardness of her nipple under her thumb as she, unintentionally, and then, intentionally, teased it. She thought about how gentle and patient Emma was with both she and Henry.

The few lovers Regina had in her life were nothing compared to this beautiful woman that she knew now.

Regina fought back the tears as she felt the smack across her cheek. It was the third, and the hardest yet. Her face stung and the skin of her cheek was warm and swollen.

“You’ll never find anyone that will treat you as well as I do,” said Sarah angrily.

Regina hugged her arms around her stomach and cast her gaze on the ground trying to avoid any look that might provoke her girlfriend.

“Please, stop,” Regina whispered as her chest heaved, trying to catch a breath that wasn’t finding its way into her lungs.

Sarah grabbed Regina’s chin between her forefinger and thumb, forcing Regina to look at her. She reeked of booze and there was no softness or patience in her eyes anymore.

“At least Carmen knows what she’s doing in bed and she’s definitely more beautiful than you.” She pushed Regina’s chin to the side roughly as she released it from her grasp.

“Go play your fucking piano, Regina. I’m tired of you. I’m going out…..”

Regina placed a soft kiss on Henry’s head as she walked him to the nursery. She looked around at the walls and saw all the wooden panels that had been painstakingly carved by Emma’s hands, especially for him. Laying him in his crib, she drew the blanket up and brushed her fingers through his hair before walking over to the wall. She was busy tracing her fingertips over every detail of one of the panels when she heard a knock at the door.

Who could be here at this time of night? thought Regina as she started to panic. She wished Emma
had a cell phone so that she could call her. She wished she wasn’t all alone.

Stepping from the nursery, Regina padded quietly down the hallway. The knocking was coming from the back door.

“Regina, are you awake? Can you open the door…please?”

Regina breathed a sigh of relief as she realized that it was Emma standing outside the door. She could tell that there was a tremor in Emma’s voice and she wondered what might be wrong. Unlocking the door, she opened it to see Emma standing in the same clothes she had worn at the rink; her hands were grasping the door frame on each side and her head hung, looking at the ground. As she looked up, Regina could see the desperation in her eyes.

“Emma, what’s wr--”

It was the only words that Regina managed to get out before Emma’s lips were pressed firmly against hers.

As they kissed, Emma pressed her hand against Regina’s lower back, drawing their hips close, just like at the rink, except, this time; there was only the fabric of Regina’s pants and Emma’s jeans separating them. Emma slipped the fingers of her other hand into Regina’s hair and massaged her neck gently. Emma could feel Regina’s head fall back slightly into her palm as her whole body seemed to relax into Emma’s touch. As Regina’s head lulled back, her lips parted slightly and Emma placed gentle, soft kisses across the length of each one before capturing both again with her own.

Emma shivered as she felt Regina’s hands slide up and knead her back firmly. The tips of Regina’s fingers clung to her shoulders. Emma wiped her tongue only once before she felt Regina’s lips part against her own. Tentatively, Emma pressed forward only to find that Regina’s was doing the same; the warm length of their tongues stroked softly, and then more firmly, against each other. Emma sighed heavily into their kiss before slipping her tongue further into Regina’s mouth. She explored eagerly but tenderly, memorizing every inch. Emma wanted so badly to concentrate on every catch of Regina’s breath, every moan. It was so easy to get lost in Regina’s touch, but Emma needed to know what Regina responded to; what she needed; what she wanted. All Emma wanted to do was to make her happy. God, she just wanted to take care of her. She just wanted to protect her. She just wanted to love her with everything that she was and everything that she felt like she could be when she was with Regina.

Reaching up, Emma slid both hands into Regina’s hair. She traced her thumbs against her jawline as they kissed. She tilted Regina’s head back gently and broke their kiss, dipping her head to trail soft lips along the underside of Regina’s jaw. She felt the cartilage of Regina’s throat contract and relax under her lips and tongue as Regina swallowed hard and Emma had to stop for a moment, panting against the skin of Regina’s neck. Emma untangled a hand from Regina’s hair and traced the pad of her forefinger across Regina’s brow and down her temple. She turned her hand over and brushed the back of her finger against Regina’s cheekbone and jaw before slipping her fingers, again, into the side of Regina’s hair, just above her ear, pulling her hair back to expose the side of her neck. She continued her gentle assault of open mouthed kisses against Regina’s throat and the underside of her jaw until she was satisfied that she had memorized every inch of skin. Emma trailed her lips softly to below Regina’s ear sucking sensitive skin and scraping her teeth gently before taking the lobe of Regina’s ear between her lips, teasing it with her tongue.

Emma kissed her way back across Regina’s cheek, capturing each of Regina’s lips several more
times with her own, licking and sucking softly, before placing her forehead against Regina’s and closing her eyes. Emma was breathing heavily and her chest heaved. Her hands and fingers shook in Regina’s soft hair.

“Oh, my Regina……” was all she could say.

It took Regina a moment to realize what was happening. All she could feel was the warmth and softness of Emma’s lips, the press of Emma’s hand against her lower back, the feel of Emma’s fingers against her neck and in her hair. It was everything she needed; everything she wanted, and her head swam with blessed emotion. Everything felt so natural and so right that Regina couldn’t help but relax into Emma’s touch.

It would have….it should have…been enough to receive a simple, soft kiss. It would have been more than Regina could have hoped for, but when Emma swept her tongue against her lips, she just wanted more. She wanted to know what it felt like to be with a lover that cared for her, protected her and loved her; a lover that showed her that she was beautiful. It had been so long since she had felt beautiful. It had been so long since she had felt like she was needed by anyone besides Henry.

As she allowed Emma to take control of the kiss, she felt Emma’s tongue slip into her mouth and against her own, and her eyes fluttered closed as her hands clung to Emma’s shoulders fiercely. Gasps and moans were the only sounds that she was capable of producing and even those were captured and muted by Emma’s mouth as soon as they were borne from her lips.

*Please Emma, I don’t want to hurt anymore. I don’t want to be alone anymore,* thought Regina as her head fell back into Emma’s hands and she felt Emma’s lips and breath on her neck.

Regina was able to respond feebly to Emma’s last few kisses. She was overwhelmed by all of the emotions that she was feeling and Emma’s touch made her physically weak. As their foreheads rested together, she could feel the warmth of Emma’s breath against her lips and chin and her hands could feel the muscles of Emma’s back contracting and releasing as she stood panting and gasping in her arms. She felt the trembling of Emma’s gentle fingers in her hair.

Regina’s eyes opened and she looked at Emma’s face. Emma’s eyes were closed as she quietly whispered, “Oh, my Regina…..”

“Yes,” was Regina’s whispered reply. And, as the words left her lips, she saw Emma open those beautiful emerald green eyes…..

Emma didn’t ask to come inside. In fact, she stayed only a little longer, her strong arms wrapped around Regina while Regina’s cheek rested against her shoulder. Occasionally, Regina would feel Emma nestle her face into her hair and place a soft kiss atop her head. She sighed, eyes closing and arms tightening around Emma each time it happened. Neither one wanted to let go, but neither wanted to rush. They knew that they would have their whole lives to enjoy what was to come, so, for now, they were satisfied to remain trapped in a single moment of shared peace. It was Emma that spoke first.

“I should go, Regina. It’s late.”

Regina nodded against Emma’s shoulder and squeezed her tightly one more time before taking a step
back from their embrace. When she looked up, Emma cupped her face in her hands and leaned forward placing a light kiss on her forehead before placing one, last, light kiss on Regina’s lips.

“I’ll see you in the morning, OK?” whispered Emma as she nuzzled her nose softly into the skin of Regina’s cheek, continuing to place light kisses there as she waited for a response.

Regina nodded.

“Lock the door behind me?”

Regina nodded again.

“Goodnight, Regina,” whispered Emma finally. Turning, she stepped away, stretching her arm back and sliding her palm over Regina’s until their fingertips brushed apart.

“Goodnight, Emma,” returned Regina as she smiled softly and closed the door.

Emma hesitated for only a moment, waiting to be sure that she heard the click of the lock behind her telling her that Regina and Henry were secure, before walking slowly down the yard to her cabin.

Inside, Regina leaned against the door and closed her eyes, taking a deep breath as she considered all of the events of the evening. Walking to her bedroom, she undressed, standing for a moment in the darkness in only a small pair of lace panties. Reaching out to the bed, she grasped Emma’s jersey and slipped it on, inhaling Emma’s scent as it surrounded her, before lying down and allowing sleep to take her.
Regina got out of bed and walked to the kitchen wearing Emma’s jersey, which hung to mid-thigh, and thick woolen socks. It was her new favorite sleeping attire.

“Hmmmmmm, you’re up early today,” said Regina with a grin as she wrapped her arms around Emma from behind. She kissed the back of Emma’s neck, which was conveniently exposed by her ponytail, before resting her chin on Emma’s shoulder. Emma laid her forearms over Regina’s and entwined their fingers, pulling Regina’s arms a bit more tightly around her. Henry’s carrier sat atop the temporary, kitchen counter, and he was sound asleep inside.

“I wanted to get an early start on the kitchen, but I accidentally woke Henry when I opened the back door, so I gave him his bottle.” Emma chuckled and grinned as she lifted the now-empty bottle from the counter and shook it back and forth between her fingers. “I think he broke his previous speed record.”

Regina opened her mouth to respond, but was cut off by Emma’s continued conversation. Emma still seemed nervous from the events of the previous night, and Regina wouldn’t push her on it, allowing her, instead, to continue talking about those subjects with which she felt safe. Regina didn’t want the time leading up to her departure to be fraught with heavy conversation and emotion.

“I wasn’t sure what you wanted him to wear today, so if the outfit I picked out isn’t right, I can change it for something different. We are going to spend the day hanging out here and working on the kitchen,” Emma looked up at the tarps and plastic around her, pushing her glasses up onto her nose with her index finger. Regina grinned as she glanced up to watch Emma’s movements. Regina found it so inexplicably sexy when Emma wore her glasses.

Again, Regina drew a breath to respond, but she was cut short by the sound of Emma’s voice.

“I’m sorry if I woke you I was hoping to give you a few more minutes to sleep, beautiful. Oh, and I made coffee, but I am not sure if I made it the way you like it. Maybe, you could show me that at some point. I have a travel mug that you can use to take some with you in case you like it.”

Regina laid her forehead against the back of Emma’s shoulder and bit her lip to stifle a smile. It had taken only two weeks for them to turn into such different people around each other. They had come so far, but they still had some distance to go...

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Emma and Regina spent every evening together since their first kiss, simply talking. Hours were passed sitting together on the couch and there were days when they didn’t move from those seats, except to attend to Henry, to eat or to open and pour another bottle of wine. They bared their hearts and souls to each other from the time they finished work until the wee hours of the morning; sometimes there was laughter; many times there were just tears. The single, perfect, beautiful constant through all of it was that, right there, right beside them, was the one and only person that they truly wanted to be there to provide them with the steadfast comfort of a warm hug, the healing kisses of gentle lips and the whispered words of support that each needed to help free themselves of chains that had held them captive for so long. And as the weight of their secrets was lifted, one by one, they found that they truly were starting to heal.

Regina learned so much about Emma; so much that simply broke her heart. She couldn’t believe
that this beautiful woman, who had captured her soul completely, had been treated so cruelly and neglected by so many. She was a forgotten pawn in an unforgiving and unfair game. Emma shared as much as she was comfortable and capable of sharing. Regina suspected that Emma silence was simply her way of sparing Regina from the details of the sick depravity that she had suffered, but Regina wasn’t naive. Regina understood and heard enough; she had lived enough, to be sickened and nauseated by the gaps she was forced to fill. Regina thanked God that Marco had intervened as much as he was able; as much as Emma had allowed. Throughout it all, what truly struck Regina was that Emma wasn’t bitter; she harbored no resentment or hate towards the people that had treated her so horribly. She simply looked at each experience, good and bad, as one more turn in the road that had brought her to this day. Emma truly believed that if she hadn’t had every one of those experiences, if she hadn’t been forced to make the decisions that went along with them, she would have never had the opportunity to meet Regina. The experiences helped to define her, but not control her. The experiences taught her who she was and who she didn’t want to be. They showed her that she had strength. They taught her who and how to trust. They showed her that true, unconditional love should feel like. To Emma, the present was what truly mattered. Regina mattered; Henry mattered and, while she never said it, Regina could tell that Emma hoped that she mattered to them.

Emma, on the other hand, learned much about Regina. She had suffered her own abuses; either at the hand of an uncaring, unsupportive and emotionally neglectful mother or at the hands of abusive lovers, male and female. Before she had realized who she was and her preference for women, her innocence had been stolen by a male, music teacher whom her mother defended by turning a blind eye to his indiscretion and blaming it on Regina’s own ‘confusion’. She had been put into the hospital by one of her female partners when they broke her collarbone, shattered her shoulder and cracked her ribs before breaking a heavy, liquor tumbler against her face and mouth. The bones of her shoulder and jaw were repaired after multiple surgeries, and the scar on her lip remained as the most visible, lasting memory of the encounter. She was left with no support system after the sudden death of her father and she was completely alone in raising Henry. Her childhood had been spent studying music so that one day she might attain her mother’s vision of fame and fortune. Regina loved music and she loved to play, but her current job, making music for movies, was a passion that her mother didn’t share and she was reminded of that daily; at least until Henry was adopted, then the calls between them had stopped completely. For as much as Emma had used her experience to help define herself, Regina had used her experiences as an excuse to isolate herself, to hide herself away, to stop taking chances, to stop trusting and to simply stop living. Emma was the first person that she had let into her and Henry’s lives in over two years.

The intermittent silences were filled each evening by tentative and gentle exploration of hands, lips and tongues. They hadn’t made love. They hadn’t removed clothes, but they did as much as they dared while each waited patiently for each other to finally be released of their debilitating bonds.

Emma placed a few logs on the fire. She knew Regina was leaving for Portland the next day, so she wanted them to spend as much time as they could together while still making sure Regina got enough rest to drive to where she needed to go. Portland wasn’t far, a one and a half hour drive, but Emma still worried. When she returned to the couch, she lay on her back looking at the fire, and Regina lay atop her, cheek resting on her chest as they watched the fire flicker lightly on the grate.

“You’re sure that you’ll be OK? Do you know where the studio is?” she asked for about the hundredth time as she kissed the top of Regina’s head and massaged the small of Regina’s back with her fingertips.
“Yes, dear, I have the address programmed in the phone,” said Regina as she drew her arms up tightly against Emma’s torso. Emma could feel Regina grinning against her chest as she indulged her with the same answer she had already supplied several times now.

Emma could hear Regina groan slightly with each knead of her fingers and she pressed her fingertips more deeply into the tight muscles of her back. As Emma continued to massage, she dared to slip her fingertips down further, under the waistband of Regina’s khakis and panties pressing firmly into the tops of the toned muscles of her backside just below the dip at the base of her spine. She could feel Regina’s body relax more deeply into her own and she sighed at the comforting warmth of her lover. Emma lifted her head slightly when Regina captured her lips and granted Regina’s tongue entrance, feeling the warm, soft muscle slip against her own, keeping cadence with the ministrations of her fingers.

Emma wanted to take it slow, to make sure this was what Regina wanted and needed tonight, to make sure she was ready, but with each passing moment her grasp of control was becoming more and more tenuous. She wanted Regina badly. She wanted to take her there, in front of the fire. She wanted to taste her sweet and salty wetness, wanted to feel the throbbing and clenching of her walls against her fingers, wanted and needed to hear Regina call her name in abandon and release. She couldn’t get enough of this woman and she wove her fingers through Regina’s silky locks as they kissed, not wanting her to pull away. The gentle rocking of Regina’s hips was creating an undeniably, painful ache that Emma tried to soothe by moving slightly to allow her leg to slip between Regina’s and Regina’s between hers. Emma could feel Regina’s reciprocating wetness as she guided the motion of Regina’s hips against her thigh, heat and moisture seeping through khaki and then denim.

“God, you’re so wet, baby,” panted Emma and she heard Regina hum and felt her nod as they continued to kiss. Emma felt her own gush of wetness; first at Regina’s acknowledgement and then again as Regina’s hand slipped down her front, lifting the hem of her shirt. Regina’s fingers tickled slightly as they traced her skin and she couldn’t help but gasp and spasm a bit at the stimulation being provided.

She felt Regina trail her index finger down the center of her abs, circling her navel several times before brushing lower.

Regina broke their kiss only for a moment to whisper,

“And what about you?”

“Oh God,” was all Emma lips could formulate as she felt skilled fingers pop the button of her jeans and lower her zipper. Her eyes fluttered closed as she felt delicate fingertips combing through her short thatch of curls. It was unbearable having Regina’s fingers this close and she wished that Regina would plunge her hand deeper and put an end to this absolute, teasing agony. Cupping Regina’s face with her hands, she groaned as she lifted her upper body from the couch, trying to deepen their kiss further, wanting to convey every emotion she was feeling right in that moment. She was intoxicated by the scent of their combined arousal and perfumes and she just wanted more…so much more.

Emma clenched her teeth and pressed her forehead against Regina’s as she felt Regina’s fingertips find the slick wetness that had spread to her curls and she could feel Regina’s fingertip press, accidentally or intentionally, between her folds, barely brushing her clit. She moaned as she closed her eyes and pulled air through gritted teeth. Her hands shook as she found the buttons of Regina’s shirt, undoing each one in turn, as far as she could go before finding the meet between their stomachs. The skin of Regina’s neck and shoulders was soft and smooth and her fingertips grazed
over it lightly, pushing back the side of her shirt slightly to expose Regina’s shoulder. Her fingers barely brushed against the dips and ridges in her beautiful olive skin when she felt Regina jerk from her grasp and sit up suddenly, covering herself in the process.

“I-I’m sorry. Did I hurt you?” breathed Emma almost in a panic as she also sat up, cradling Regina in her lap. She searched Regina’s face for some reason for the abrupt change in dynamic. She could already see the tears in Regina’s eyes and she wouldn’t look at her, opting, instead to look at the ceiling with her chin raised. Regina’s hand was wrapped in the fabric of her shirt and she was holding on so tightly that her knuckles were white. Emma searched through her immediate memory, trying to figure out what happened and what she had done when she realized….Regina’s scars. She could see Regina shake her head indicating that Emma hadn’t hurt her. It was something else, and Emma watched Regina’s eyes swirl with emotions that she had never seen in those beautiful orbs. She had seen it in her own eyes before, though; that horrible look of vulnerability and shame.

“Oh Regina,” sighed Emma, leaning forward, she rested her forehead against the back of Regina’s clenched hand as she wrapped her arms tightly around Regina’s body. How could she make Regina understand that she would never hurt her; that she was utterly and completely safe in her arms? That she would never see Regina as anything less than perfect; anything less than beautiful? Emma’s only solace to the guilt she now felt was the cradling of Regina’s free hand around her head and Regina’s cheek lain softly on the crown of her head.

“Emma, it’s not your fault.” Regina sighed from above.

“I shouldn’t have pushed. You weren’t ready,” whispered Emma as she returned her hands to Regina’s oxford, replacing each button in turn, until only a couple of them remained open, exposing her chest modestly.

“I guess I just need a little bit more time, Emma. I’m sorry,” Emma lifted her head as she heard Regina’s words, looking directly in brown eyes and cupping Regina’s cheek with one hand which she felt lay gently into her palm. She hoped her own eyes could convey the sincerity and earnestness of the words that she was about to say,

“Please, don’t ever apologize to me. I-I lo….” The remaining word was simply lost in breath and Emma looked at Regina desperately tried to get the remaining words to reform and then slip from her tongue. She saw Regina’s brow furrow and her mouth open slightly as she waited for Emma to finish the sentence, but her words were faltering. She would be devastated if Regina didn’t feel the same way; if she put herself out there only to be rejected. Regina was flawless and perfect, and she was just a poor handyman with nothing to offer but two hands and her heart. Perhaps the words were best left for a different time and a different day. Perhaps they would be better left to another person to say; someone that could care for Regina and Henry properly.

“I’ll wait as long as you need.”

Emma looked down and closed her eyes, heaving a deep sigh. How could she be such a coward? They sat a moment in silence, before Emma looked up again and stated softly,

“It’s 1AM, Regina. Would you mind if I held you for just a little bit longer? I’ll leave soon. I don’t want you to be tired for your drive.”

“Of course,” said Regina with a gentle smile.

Emma gently guided Regina’s body atop her own. Emma let her head fall back against the pillows and she sighed as she turned her head to look at the fireplace. She knew her eyes and face were
marked with all of the emotions of the evening. She pressed her fingertips into thick, soft hair as Regina against settled her cheek onto Emma’s chest.

“Promise me that you’ll be OK?” whispered Emma one more time.

“I have the address, Emma. I know exactly where I need to go. You and Henry will take care of things for me here. I will be back on Friday. I normally wouldn’t go, but I just don’t have the equipment that I need and the studio does. It will be OK.” She looked down into soft brown eyes as Regina ran delicate fingers through the hair at her temple. “Sweetheart, I promise. I will come back to you.”

As she nodded wordlessly, she felt the softness of Regina’s lips on her own. She pressed her tongue deeply into Regina’s mouth trying to convey all of the words that she had failed to say and her hands and fingers moved more guardedly and unsurely again as she brought them slowly back to that safe space that they both needed to be enveloped in for now…

Regina lay atop Emma, her cheek resting on her lover’s chest. She relaxed completely as she lost herself in the soothing rhythm of Emma’s breathing and her eyes were mesmerized by the fire that danced and popped in the chimney.

“You’re sure that you’ll be OK? Do you know where the studio is?” Emma asked again. Regina felt soft lips press into her hair, placing light kisses atop her head. Emma was worried about her, she could tell. It felt so good to be cared about, to be wanted. She relaxed even further into Emma as she felt her fingertips massage the muscles at the small of her back with her fingertips. She couldn’t help but groan slightly with each press. It felt so good…

“Yes, dear, I have the address programmed in the phone,” grinned Regina as she drew her arms up tightly against Emma’s torso. She would offer reassurance as many times as Emma needed.

Regina would be lying if she said that Emma’s touch wasn’t incredibly arousing and she could feel herself getting more and more wet as the minutes passed. The slip of Emma’s fingers beneath the fabric of her pants and panties was unexpected but welcomed and Regina prayed it was a prelude to the remaining evening where clothes would simply be discarded on the floor. Eventually, Regina raised her head and captured Emma’s lips with her own thrusting her tongue into Emma’s mouth deeply in time with the movements of her skilled hands. Regina’s breathing deepened and quickened as her hips rocked lightly against Emma’s. She could feel Emma starting to return her kisses with the same sense of urgency as the fingers of one hand now started to weave through her hair holding her lips tightly to her own. She could feel Emma’s hips move below her so that their thighs could slip together. Emma’s knee lifted to press against her core and her hands shifted again to press on Regina’s hips urging her further against her thigh; guiding and assisting her slow, circular grinding. Regina was more than happy to oblige Emma’s gentle demands.

“God, you’re wet, baby….”

Regina hummed against their kiss and nodded, feeling well the hot, sloppy wetness that was now coating her underwear and pants.

Regina’s right hand slid down Emma’s front, finding the hem of her tank and tugging gently to expose her abs. Regina’s warm palm lay against the exposed muscles and her thumb traced gentle circles over the taut skin before the exploration of soft fingertips started in earnest; tracing the dips and ridges of the muscles of Emma’s abdomen. God, Emma was so fucking athletic and toned.
Regina indulged herself and allowed a single finger to slide down the center of her stomach, circling her navel before slipping further down to trail over the rigid muscles of Emma’s lower abdomen. Emma’s muscles twitched strongly with each brush of her fingers.

“And what about you?” asked Regina teasingly, already knowing the answer.

“Oh God,” breathed Emma as Regina’s fingers loosened the button on her jeans, pulling the zipper down slowly after. If Emma’s kiss was any indication of her desire and need, then Regina could only imagine the restraint that Emma was exercising right now. Emma was so concerned about her being comfortable; being ready. Emma was so giving, too loving to demand anything for herself. She heard Emma moan as her fingers slipped inside the waistband of Emma’s boy shorts; tips pressing into and strumming a small thatch of soft blonde curls teasingly. Regina enjoyed the tickling thickness of them. It was sexy and rugged and beautiful.

As they kissed, Regina breathed in deeply, reveling in the heady, prominent scent of Emma’s arousal which was mixed with the spicy, crisp fragrance of the body wash that clung constantly to her skin and had slowly entwined itself in lavender, apples and Regina’s own sensual essence. She dipped her fingers slightly lower, now touching the slick wetness that was starting to accumulate in Emma’s curls, pressing in slightly further just one time to brush her middle finger barely against her clit. She felt Emma’s shaking hands slipping down and she groaned lightly as the buttons on her oxford were being released one by one. When Emma went as far as she could go with their bodies pressed so tightly together, she felt Emma’s fingertips trace lightly over the smooth skin of the side of her neck, slipping them under her collar to trace the tops of her shoulders. She was so lost in the passion of their kisses, the fervor of Emma’s touch, the intensity of her own teasing, that she didn’t even realize that Emma’s left hand was pulling back the side of her shirt to expose her shoulder. As Emma touched the scarring with her fingertips, the realization of her exposure hit her, causing her to gasp and pull back, as she quickly extracted her hand from Emma’s jeans and sat up and tugging closed the open sides of her oxford and holding them together with her hand.

Regina remained seated in Emma’s lap and, as Emma rose immediately to meet her in a seated position, she could see the confusion in Emma’s eyes; her voice filled with panic and fear,

“I-I’m sorry. Did I hurt you?”

Regina’s fingernails dug into the palm of her hand as her fist clenched the sides of her shirt closed, but she was oblivious to the breaking of her own skin. She looked to the ceiling, struggling to keep the tears at bay. She would be heartbroken if Emma thought, for even a moment, that this was her fault. She shook her head, hoping to quell Emma’s fears.

“Oh Regina,” she heard Emma sigh before she felt the soft pressure of Emma’s forehead resting against the back of her clenched hand and the warmth of Emma’s arms wrapped tightly around her body. Regina cradled her lover’s head, resting her cheek against Emma’s hair. She wished she knew what she could say to salvage even a shred of what should have been a beautiful night. She could only offer her reassurance,

“Emma, it’s not your fault.” Regina sighed.

“I shouldn’t have pushed. You weren’t ready,” responded Emma softly. Regina felt the sides of her shirt being drawn back over her shoulders as the sides were pulled back together. Emma’s hands were on her own, gently encouraging her to loosen her grip on the fabric, before each button was closed again. Regina breathed out slightly in relief, and she dared to look down,

“I guess I just need a little bit more time, Emma. I’m sorry.” She felt a gentle hand cupping her cheek and she couldn’t help but lean into Emma’s palm. Those beautiful green eyes stared at her
with such devotion and understanding.

“Please, don’t ever apologize to me. I-I-I lo….”

Regina’s breath caught in her throat as she heard the stuttered beginning of Emma’s words. Her mouth opened slightly and she looked at Emma pleadingly, praying that she would hear the words that she believed in her heart that Emma was trying to form.

Please, please don’t stop. Just say the words. Please, God, just say the words, so that I’ll know that I can say them back to you too, Emma, thought Regina frantically.

“I’ll wait as long as you need,” was all that Emma could offer and Regina felt a sinking despair. Maybe Emma couldn’t love her, and maybe Emma shouldn’t. She was damaged and ugly. She would only limit Emma’s endless potential with the burdens of her own fears and insecurities.

They sat a moment in silence, before Emma looked up again and stated softly,

“It’s 1AM, Regina. Would you mind if I held you for just a little bit longer? I’ll leave soon. I don’t want you to be tired for your drive.”

“Of course,” said Regina with a gentle smile.

Regina settled back atop Emma, comforted by her warmth, but mind swirling. She felt Emma’s head fall back against the pillows and hear her sigh. Looking up, Regina could see the conflict churning behind those beautiful green eyes. Regina laid her cheek on Emma’s chest and closed her eyes as fingers slipped into her hair.

“Promise me that you’ll be OK?” she heard Emma whisper one more time.

“I have the address, Emma. I know exactly where I need to go. You and Henry will take care of things for me here. I will be back on Friday. I normally wouldn’t go, but I just don’t have the equipment that I need and the studio does. It will be OK.” Regina looked up into worried green eyes and ran delicate fingers through the hair at Emma’s temple. “Sweetheart, I promise. I will come back to you.”

She felt Emma relax slightly, her unspoken fear of abandonment placated. Leaning forward, Regina placed her lips gently against Emma’s. They quickly fell into a deep, intense kiss; exploring cautiously again with tongues, hands and fingers, waiting until Regina would be ready to give herself to Emma completely.

“I needed to get up,” said Regina sleepily when she found a break in Emma’s one-sided conversation. Regina pulled the blankets in the carrier down a bit to see how Henry was dressed. Kissing Emma softly on the shoulder, she reassured her, “What he is wearing is perfect, Emma. And coffee sounds wonderful.”

“How you eaten?” asked Regina softly.

She heard Emma’s stomach growl in response.

“I had a few crackers, Regina. Don’t worry about me.” Emma stated nervously, hoping Regina hadn’t heard her stomach. Regina had enough to do today. She didn’t need the added worry of Emma’s nutritional needs.
Glancing at the clock, Regina realized she had plenty of time before she had to get to the recording studio in Portland. She put a gentle pressure on Emma’s hips to turn her around so that they were facing each other. She pressed herself against Emma as soon as she had turned, capturing Emma between her body and the counter.

“I wouldn’t,” said Regina as she caught Emma’s lips with her own. “Be a very good,” mumbled Regina as her tongue slipped deeply into Emma’s mouth. “Girlfriend,” whispered Regina as she broke their kiss. “If I didn’t give you something to eat,” finished Regina as her lips ghosted against Emma’s neck just below her ear. Emma’s breath caught slightly as she considered the potential double-entendre and she wondered if that was what Regina had intended. Regina’s tentative, exploratory teasing was agonizing, but Emma knew that Regina needed to do this. She needed to witness and know the effect that she was having on Emma to give her the confidence and reassurance that she was still sexy; that she was still desirable.

Still, Emma couldn’t help but pray that Regina would gain that reassurance quickly, because, quite frankly, the ache that had built was becoming excruciating and was no longer being soothed adequately by her own hand.

With that, Regina turned towards the stove. As she bent down to get a pan, the hockey jersey raised in back revealing a black, lace thong; a thong that left about one-quarter of an inch of Regina’s beautifully sculpted and toned ass to the imagination. Emma held her hand over Henry’s eyes, despite the fact that he was asleep, as her mouth fell open. Emma groaned slightly as she looked at the floor, wondering if Regina knew the teasing view she was providing.

“Now, what would you like to eat this morning?” asked Regina as she stood back up and turned to face Emma with a smile.

Emma enjoyed a HUGE breakfast of eggs, toast and bacon as Regina retreated to the bedroom to shower and change. When Regina finished, she returned to the living room. She was concentrating on placing a diamond and silver cufflink into one of the sleeves of the shirt as she entered the room. Had she been looking up, she would have noticed that Emma had stopped eating mid-bite and was simply staring.

Regina was wearing a pair of wide-legged black pants that hugged her hips nicely and a tightly fitted white button down shirt. Atop the shirt was a pin-striped, form-fitting vest. Her white shirt was unbuttoned just shy of the top of the vest and the final button strained beautifully against the ample curves of her breasts. The collar had opened slightly to reveal the beautiful, olive skin of Regina’s chest. As Regina turned a bit, Emma could see the top of a simple white bra and it provided a pleasing contrast to her tanned skin. Regina returned to the bedroom momentarily before stepping back out with a black jacket in her hand. She slipped her feet into a pair of black heels that instantly made her about 4 inches taller and made her backside all the more taut and rounded. She finally looked up at Emma who was standing at the counter, staring, with a fork full of food suspended halfway to her lips.

“Wow. You look......amazing,” breathed out Emma slowly as she looked directly at Regina. Putting her fork down, Emma lifted Henry’s carrier from the counter and walked over to where Regina stood in the living room. After placing the carrier securely on the sofa, Emma turned to face Regina. Regina was always nicely dressed, even when she was just working at the house, but this outfit was beyond anything that she could have imagined. Regina looked elegant and that seemed to give her a quiet confidence that Emma knew was there, just below the surface, trying to get out. She wished for Regina that this same confidence could be there every minute of every day.
“Do you like it?” Regina looked down shyly and fretted her bottom lip between her teeth. She still wasn’t used to hearing or accepting the compliments that Emma offered her so constantly and with such sincerity.

Emma took Regina’s hand in her own and hooked the index finger of her other hand under Regina’s chin so that she would look up at her.

“You take my breath away,” said Emma quietly as she leaned forward and placed her forehead against Regina’s. Grasping Regina’s other hand; Emma looked up through her lashes and into Regina’s eyes. “You are the most beautiful woman that I have ever seen, Regina Mills. I need you to know that. I need you to understand that. I need you to feel that too.”

Emma could see the tears brimming in Regina’s eyes, so she placed a gentle kiss on her lips stroking their tongues together softly. Emma wondered if Regina would ever see in herself what was so obvious to her; she was stunning, inside and out.

“Promise me you’ll be careful, Regina,” said Emma as she broke the kiss. Regina nodded and smiled softly.

Emma stood with Regina’s jacket in her hand as Regina lifted Henry from the carrier, placing a soft kiss on his chubby cheek before laying him against her shoulder. He pursed his lips several times before wrapping small fingers around the edge of her vest and shirt.

“You be a good boy for Emma, hijo.”

Regina kissed his soft hair several more times before replacing him in his carrier, removing her shirt gently from his grasp. Stepping back, she slipped her arms into the dress jacket that Emma was holding out for her and then repeated the process with her thin, black overcoat that she tied about her waist. Emma handed her the bag of music that she had packed the evening before snuggling the blankets tightly around Henry and picking up the carrier to walk Regina to the car. They shared one last, longing kiss before Emma clicked the car door closed quietly and stepped back so that Regina could pull out of the driveway. Emma and Henry stood watching and waving until Regina’s car was out of sight.

Looking down into the carrier, Emma sighed at a sleeping Henry.

“I miss her already.”

Regina sighed and laid aside her music on the bed. She tried to concentrate on the upcoming week, but her thoughts kept drifting back to Emma and Henry. She missed them terribly and her heart felt so incomplete without them there. Lifting herself from the bed, Regina walked to the window, drawing back the sheer curtain to afford a better view of the harbor. She couldn’t help but wonder what it would feel like to have them there with her, walking together through the quaint and quiet streets of the town, ducking into small shops filled with nautical oddities, eating lobster rolls down on the dock and stopping to watch the lights of the trawlers as they docked and undocked. She could imagine the warmth of Emma’s hand in hers as they explored; how Emma would curiously pick up every item, holding it adorably close to bespectacled eyes to appreciate the intricate detail of a fellow artisan’s handiwork. She could almost feel the press of Emma’s front against her back as they would stand on the docks looking out upon the harbor; Emma’s warm, strong arms wrapped tightly around her waist.
Regina had tried to venture out a bit on her own this evening, but the images of this longed-for life shared with Henry and Emma were flashing so vividly through her mind that she couldn’t help but become acutely aware of her complete seclusion here in Portland. The same isolation that she had worn as a familiar blanket for years was no longer comfortable. Returning to the hotel, she ordered room service, eating sad and alone, praying that the days would pass quickly so that she could return back to Storybrooke; to Henry and Emma.

Turning from the window, Regina moved to the bathroom and turned on the shower tap. She returned to the room and took her time; removing earrings, bracelet, necklace and cufflinks before placing them on the desk. She returned to the bath, where the steam from the shower had started to fill the space. After unbuttoning her vest, she proceeded to unbutton her shirt as well, her reflection sufficiently and safely obscured by a fogged mirror.

“Regina?” asked Dr. Hopper quietly.

Regina had been sitting quietly for a while now, staring at the floor. She was shaken from her thoughts by the sound of her therapist’s voice.

“I-I’m sorry. I didn’t hear the last question. Could you please repeat it?”

Dr. Hopper smiled gently at Regina. This was how most of their sessions went; Regina unable, unwilling or unsure how to answer his questions. Every week, she came faithfully to his office and every week he watched her struggle through her recovery. He knew the toll of domestic violence, the battering and bruising never just extended skin deep; it permeated souls and hearts; it shook foundations; it broke spirits. It changed people.

“I asked if you tried to look at yourself in the mirror this week...like we had talked about last time,” he said inquisitively.

“I look in the mirror to put on my makeup.”

“Well, that’s a good start, Regina,” encouraged Dr. Hopper. He knew that, even then, her eyes were avoiding the truly, soul-searching gazes that were needed to heal as they concentrated instead on painting on that mask she continued to wear.

“Did you uncover the mirror in your bath?”

“Yes,” she sighed. It was the truth, but not the whole truth. Dr. Hopper should know the truth, he deserved that from her. He was trying to help.

“No, just the steam of the shower do its dirty work instead...” Regina chuckled softly and shook her head amazed at her own weakness and fear.

“I see,” he responded in turn.

“Have you touched the scars, Regina?”

“Through a washcloth, yes. “ Regina swallowed dryly as she remembered the feeling; raised, thickened lines made worse by multiple intrusions needed to insert and extract pins, screws and plates.

“Well, that’s a start, too,” said Dr. Hopper with a supportive smile encouraging smile, finishing
softly, “Our time’s up Regina. Please keep working on the things we talked about?”

Regina nodded in tentative agreement.

“Yes, Dr. Hopper, I’ll try. See you next week…”

Closing her eyes, Regina reached out her hand slowly. She pictured Emma. The image helped calm her heart and her mind as her fingertips met the damp glass of the mirror. Stroking her fingers in an arc, she opened her eyes to look into the space that she had created. Her eyes easily found the damning evidence of her past mistakes and decisions, a woven pattern of light and dark marks on otherwise unmarred skin.

Her gaze faltered only briefly before returning to the mirror, fixing again on her shoulder. This time, Regina refused to look away. It was different when it was just her, but now, her past was trying to control and manipulate three lives, and that needed to stop. It needed to stop tonight. She wanted her life back. She wanted a life with Emma and Henry. She was tired of being afraid.

Stepping under the hot jets of the shower, Regina stopped her hand half way through its conditioned motion to grasp a washcloth as a barrier to her fingers. Picking up the soap in bare hands, she rolled the bar between her palms, building a lather. Reaching up with the trembling fingers of her left hand, she slowly and lightly brushed the dips and ridges etched into her skin, taking time to trace every scar. With each passing moment, she felt her own hand gaining strength, pressing more strongly into flesh, massaging the muscle underneath. She felt the heads of screws and the edges of plates. She felt the unyielding tissue that had grown around them. She felt like she was taking back her control, and she let the water of the shower wash away relieved tears.

The phone rang about three times before Emma successfully extracted herself from the floor and found the cordless. She offered a breathless ‘hello’ to the caller as she returned to sit on the blanket in the living room.

‘Emma?’ came a familiar voice at the other end of the line.

“How are you and Henry?”

“Hi Henry, it’s Mommy! Are you being a good boy for Emma?”

Henry rocked on his back, grasping his legs, smiling and laughing like his covered feet were the funniest things in the world. Even Emma had to laugh as she watched him, and she added to his fit of giggles by squeezing and tickling his small belly. She could hear Regina’s melodious laughter joining them through the phone and, save Regina being there with them, she couldn’t think of a more perfect moment or two people she would rather be with. She could still hear Regina laughing as she
brought the phone back to her ear.

“He discovered his feet,” laughed Emma as Henry continued giggling and rocking in the background.

“I thought maybe he was happy because you are feeding him junk food and letting him stay up late watching movies,” teased Regina.

“Nah, he asked, but I told him absolutely not, because then I would be in big trouble with his Mom,” chuckled Emma. She gulped when Regina’s response came through the phone, an octave lower, sexy and serious.

“Yes, that might actually earn you a nice spanking,” purred Regina.

“I…..ummmmm….uhhhhhh,” offered Emma, unsure of how to respond or react. She wondered briefly if Regina could feel the burn of her blush in Portland. She heard Regina laugh at her apparent speechlessness.

“Oooookkkaaaayyy,” she offered shyly, before mumbling, “I wish I would have given him those Doritos when he asked.”

She grinned when Regina offered another laugh in response. She was most definitely caught off guard tonight by Regina’s playfulness.

Regina soon switched to more casual topics, asking Emma about her day and telling her a bit about hers in return. Regina seemed happy. The trip was good for her. Emma continued to lower the volume of her voice as they talked. She had noticed Henry’s eyes getting heavy, finally closing as he slipped into sleep.

“Would you like to help me tuck him in?” she whispered quietly to Regina.

“Very much,” responded Regina, in almost an equivalent volume.

Emma lifted Henry from the blanket and walked him to the nursery, phone held between her ear and shoulder. Once there, she sat in the rocking chair, put the phone on speaker and sat it beside them on the small table.

“I’ll rock, if you’ll sing,” she said to Regina once they were settled comfortably. There was a moment’s hesitation only before she heard Regina’s voice over the phone, singing him a Spanish lullaby. Emma didn’t know the words, but she knew the tune well and she hummed it along with Regina so he would feel the vibrations as he lay against her chest. It was the best they could do right now, but it became their ritual for the next five nights. When the song was over, Emma laid him in the crib and covered him with a warm blanket. She made sure his caterpillar nightlight was turned on before grabbing the phone and audio monitor from the charging unit. Shutting the door behind her, Emma stepped into the hallway.

Emma sat on the couch talking to Regina for the next few hours. It would be just like every other night except for the distance that lay between them. One hundred miles may as well be a thousand.

“It’s getting late, Regina. I should probably let you go so you can get some rest,” Emma raised her head to look at the clock and saw that it was 1:30AM already. There was a long pause and Emma thought for a moment that they had been disconnected.

“I miss you, Emma,” said Regina in a quiet voice.
“I miss you too, Regina. I miss you so damn much,” sighed Emma.

“Stay with me tonight, please?” asked Regina.

“I’d like that,” returned Emma. “Are you in bed?”

“Yes. Are you?”

“No, but I can be. Hang on.”

Emma hesitated a moment. Regina had made up the guest room for her, but she wanted so badly to be closer to Regina. Regina must have sensed her conflict, because Emma breathed a sigh of relief at the next words.

“Emma?”

“Yes.”

“Will you….will you sleep in my bed?”

“Are you sure?”

“Definitely.”

Emma stripped down to her boy shorts and tank and slipped under the covers of Regina’s bed. The sheets were soft and silky smooth and they smelled of apples and lavender and everything Regina. God, she could get lost in this scent forever.

“What side do you sleep on?” asked Emma.

“The right, if you’re facing the bed. Why?”

“Because that’s where you’re going to sleep tonight too.”

Emma put the phone on speaker and laid it on Regina’s pillow. She lay facing the phone. She wished she could lie like this every night, looking into Regina’s eyes or holding her tightly from behind as they drifted off to sleep.

“Goodnight, Regina,” she whispered softly.

“Goodnight, Emma.”

Emma awoke to rustling on the baby monitor and a sleepy, familiar voice that brought a smile to her face.

“Sounds like Henry’s awake,” said Regina softly through the phone.

“Good morning, beautiful,” said Emma through a huge yawn. She smiled wider as she heard Regina groan through a stretch on the other end of the phone. She could only imagine how beautiful she looked right now.

“Hmmmmm, you should be careful. I could get used to hearing that,” countered Regina playfully.
“I’d never get tired of saying it….” responded Emma sincerely and quietly.

Emma could hear the faint grunts from the monitor growing stronger, signifying that Henry’s patience was coming to an end and he was ready to be fed.

“I better go take care of Henry,” said Emma.

“And I should get ready to go to the studio,” finished Regina.

“I hope you have a good day today, Regina.”

“You too, Emma…. Will I talk to you tonight?”

“God, I hope so….”
Emma was standing in the living room, bouncing Henry in her arms, when she saw the lights of Regina’s car stuttering through the trees. It was early Friday evening, but the sun was almost dipped below the horizon. She breathed a sigh of relief at Regina’s safe arrival as she opened the front door and stepped out into the driveway with Henry to welcome Regina home. Emma was helping him wave as the car approached the house and Regina waved at both of them through the front window of the car with a brilliant, beautiful smile.

“How was the studio?” asked Emma as Regina walked over to them.

“It was incredible, Emma,” replied Regina excitedly, “I’ve never experienced anything like it”. Closing the gap between them, Regina placed a soft, lingering kiss on Emma’s lips. Stepping back with a smile, Regina turned to Henry, clapping her hands and then opening her arms to him.

“And how was your week, sweetie. Were you a good boy for Emma?” Emma handed Henry to Regina and she immediately hugged him to her chest, kissing his cheeks and hair. As Regina held Henry against her shoulder, she looked at Emma dressed in her jeans and Henley. Her hair was loose and fell, damp, over her shoulders and back. She had shifted her weight so that her one hip was slung out and her hands were shoved deep in her back pockets. She was looking down at the ground with a crooked smile.

*God, Emma, do you know how beautiful you are?* Thought Regina as she bounced Henry and laid her cheek against his soft hair.

“I’m glad you had a good week, Regina. You sounded really happy every night on the phone. I’m glad it helped you smile,” she said quietly.

“You make me smile, Emma; you and Henry. I missed you both so much this week,” responded Regina with a tone that told Emma that she truly was happy to be back with them both. She placed her palm on the side of Emma’s face and brushed her thumb gently over her cheek as she looked at Emma adoringly, “It’s good to be home, Emma.”

Regina carried Henry to the door as Emma walked besides holding one of Regina’s hands tightly. As Regina untangled their fingers and placed her hand on the knob, Emma placed her hand on top to stop it from turning.

“I have a surprise for you, Regina,” said Emma quietly. “Will you close your eyes?”

Regina nodded and bit her lower lip as she smiled. She couldn’t imagine what it was, but if it was a surprise from Emma, she knew it would be perfect. It didn’t matter what it was.

Emma opened the door and walked backwards guiding Regina by one hand while Regina held tight to Henry with her other arm. Regina continued to smile as they walked and Emma grinned watching her.

“You’re not peeking are you?” teased Emma.

“You can’t tell from the way I am shuffling my feet?” laughed Regina.

“I figured it was the shoes….how do you walk in those things?” laughed Emma in return. A bit more seriously, she added, “Don’t worry. I won’t let you guys fall…."
Emma stopped them and positioned Regina in front of the kitchen so that she was facing it head on. Emma had set the lights so that they cast an almost romantic glow on the entire space. She prayed one last time to whoever would listen that Regina would love everything that she had done. Releasing Regina’s hands and stepping away from her, Emma whispered,

“Open your eyes, Regina.”

Regina opened her eyes and it took her a moment for her to adjust her vision and get her bearings. When she did, she couldn’t believe what she saw,

“Oh Emma,” she gasped.

Regina stood looking at the kitchen with her mouth open. Her jaw worked softly as she attempted to form words that simply wouldn’t come. Whatever she had envisioned in her mind’s eye when she described this space to Emma was nowhere near the perfection that presented itself now.

The kitchen was a balanced combination of rustic and sophistication. The entire space was filled with rich, dark mahogany cabinets which hung on the walls or sat upon huge, rectangular tiles of tumbled stone in various shades of grey. Grey and white marbled countertops covered the base cabinets; with the potential monotony of the color broken intermittently by random veins of burgundy and black. Under cabinet lighting accented the counters and the backsplash. The mixture of thin strips of grey stone, white marble and stainless steel, drew all of the elements together.

The stainless appliances were huge, probably too large for two people and probably made for a commercial kitchen, but they blended well with overall immensity of the remaining space. Wine glasses hung, upside down, from the cabinets waiting to be filled by the wine that was now stored overhead or chilling in the refrigerator below. They sparkled in the soft light that was being thrown by heavy iron pendants that hung from the tall ceiling. The gas stove was set into a grey stone alcove and Regina couldn’t help but wonder what it would be like to use it to make dinners there every night for Henry, Emma and herself.

What struck her most, though, was the island that sat in the middle of the kitchen and separated the space from the living room. It was the most stunning part of the kitchen and it was, in many ways, a perfect combination of both of them.

As Regina was taking in every inch of the kitchen, Emma was watching her reaction. She couldn’t tell for sure if Regina’s silence was a good or a bad thing yet, and it was starting to make her very nervous. Regina seemed to want to say something. Perhaps, she was just taking her time to formulate her disappointment in a way that wouldn’t be too devastating, but there was something in Regina’s eyes that told Emma that this wasn’t the case. Regina’s eyes flicked around taking everything in and, like the wine glasses, they were catching the light beautifully. Her eyes always seemed to return to the island. Emma hoped that they would. That was her present to Regina.

Walking over to Regina, Emma tried to get her attention by dipping her head to catch Regina’s eyes. Realizing this wasn’t working, Emma said quietly,

“Regina?”

Receiving no response, Emma tried again, this time brushing Regina’s bicep gently with the backs of her fingers. Regina turned her head and looked at Emma confused, like she was in an overwhelmed daze.
“Would you like me to hold Henry while you look?”

Emma reached out, with badly shaking hands, to transfer Henry to her arms and Regina stepped tentatively into the kitchen.

Regina walked slowly around the kitchen, taking in every detail, touching every surface. She forced herself to wait until the very end before she turned to the island. When that time arrived, she reached her hand out, fingers brushing over the surface. The back, center was inlaid with the same marble that was used throughout the remaining kitchen, but it was extended on three sides by a thick, dark wood that looked like something out of a medieval castle. Heavy wooden, supporting legs were wrapped at top and bottom with wide, iron strapping which was studded with square clavos.

Regina’s fingers moved to the wooden extension, hovering and hesitating briefly before she touched the intricate detail of the carvings that Emma had inlaid around the edge of the marble. Interwoven vines, tudor roses and lyon flowers filled a wide swath and, as she looked closely at the turns of the vines and petals, she noticed that they formed subtle, but still recognizable, clefs, notes, dynamics, signatures, codas and pedal marks. Her entire life’s passion and work had been captured there so delicately and painstakingly by Emma’s hand. Regina was concentrating so intently on the detail before her that she didn’t even hear Emma and Henry walk over to stand beside her. As Henry gurgled and reached out his small hand to grasp her sleeve, she looked up at Emma. Tears were brimming in her eyes and her hand covered her mouth.

“I-I don’t know what to say, Emma.”

“Well….I was hoping you might say that you wanted to cook dinner. For me. I mean…for us. I mean, with me….uhhhhh….with us…with Henry and me. Unless, you’re tired….If you’re tired, we can do it another time. Or we don’t have to. It’s entirely up to you. You may just want to catch up with Henry…..and it’s OK if you do. I completely understand. I just thought that, maybe….if you felt up to it…we could celebrate your good week?” Emma cringed an apprehensive smile. She was nervous from the excitement of Regina being home and the still-lingering uncertainty of whether Regina liked the kitchen. Emma felt like she was saying all the wrong things.

Trying to lighten the mood and salvage an awkward situation, Emma added with a soft chuckle, “we aren’t exactly sure what we are doing, but we are pretty good helpers. Isn’t that right buddy?”

Bouncing Henry a bit in her arms, Emma managed to get him to grin a bit and they both smiled at Regina hopefully.

“I would love that, Emma,” said Regina. “Now, please, just shut up and kiss me,” demanded Regina playfully as she leaned in and captured Emma’s lips in a deep, passionate kiss that conveyed everything that needed to be said. When they broke their kiss and Emma caught her breath, she continued,

“Good, because I have an idea. Mind taking a quick drive?”

Regina watched from the passenger window as Emma pounded her fist on the door of what looked like a warehouse that sat on the water. Docks extended from the back and several large trawlers seemed to have tied in there for the evening. Emma cupped her hands and looked through the small windows and Regina saw her nod and point around the side.

Regina bit her lip as she watched Emma walk down the slight incline towards the docks. All she could think about was the incredibly fun, and hopefully romantic, evening ahead. Once Henry was asleep for the night, maybe they could talk; maybe they could just try again; maybe she could show
Emma how much she had tried over the past week to overcome her fears and be the lover that Emma needed. Most of her evenings in Portland were spent naked or shirtless in front of the mirrors in her room staring at a reflection ignored for years. Fingertips traced scars until the length and direction of each one was committed to memory. In addition to the mirror exercises, she tried to recall and practice some of the other exercises that Dr. Hopper had asked her to try as well.

**Wear something that shows your shoulder.**

Regina had actually indulged and purchased a black, satin negligee with thin straps on her second day in Portland, which she grudgingly, and then willingly, wore it over the next four nights. Her jacket was abandoned in the studio on the last day as she played, in favor of a sleeveless camisole. If the technician noticed, he had been subtle and kind.

**For every scar, try to find a complementing beauty, Regina.**

That was the hardest one of all. It had been so many years since she had felt beautiful, that she wondered if she had ever really felt that way. God knew that enough people had told her that she was ugly; maybe it was easier to just believe them. Finally, she had given up on that exercise. Maybe, she would try again someday.

She had come so far this week; she just prayed she had come far enough. She wanted and needed to be with Emma. Completely.

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A man approached Emma as she reached the docks and she talked to him briefly before he retreated back into the building. Emma raised a finger and smiled at Regina showing that it would only be a few minutes more. No sooner had she done this than the man returned with a few bags which Emma held up triumphantly to show Regina before jogging back towards the car. Walking to the back, Emma opened the trunk and placed the bags inside before opening the driver’s door. Leaning over, she placed a chaste kiss on Regina’s lips before turning the engine over.

“Tonight, you’re going to become a real Mainer,” she said with a wink and a grin.

After about 20 minutes, they were back at the cabin and Emma walked to the trunk while Regina retrieved Henry from the car seat. Emma opened the trunk but immediately slammed it and leaned her backside against it while chewing on her thumb. She was looking at the ground deep in thought. Regina sensed that something might be wrong as she came around the back of the car, and she immediately snuggled Henry in tighter and grabbed Emma’s bicep looking at her with concern.

“Emma, what’s wrong?”

“Uhhhhh, you don’t happen to have a cooler do you?”

Regina looked at Emma confused for a moment before answering, still not understanding what was wrong.

“There should be one in the garage.”

“OK. I’ll be right back.”

As Emma started towards the garage, she yelled back over her shoulder, “Don’t open the trunk, Regina.”

Emma entered the garage and grabbed the cooler while Regina stood in the driveway, arms wrapped tightly around Henry, looking at the trunk nervously from all sides. She was starting to wonder what
exactly Emma had purchased from this guy.

Emma returned and opened the cooler, placing it near the trunk. Turning to Regina, she noticed her concern and immediately grinned to put her at ease.

“Nothing to worry about. I just need to catch our dinner…again,” and with that Emma threw open the trunk. Four lobsters were strolling about aimlessly while a fifth was dangling by one claw from the trunk lid. He had somehow managed to remove his bands and he looked pretty pissed. Regina leaned her face against Henry, using his hair to mask her smile and his head to stifle her laugh. Emma managed to grab the acrobat during one of his swings, though it took some finagling to get him to finally let go. The closer ones went next. The last two were trickier and Emma was half submerged in the trunk scouting for them. Regina was kind of glad they were playing hard to get considering the view they were affording her of Emma’s ass.

*Go lobsters,* was the only thing Regina could think, and she grinned.

Once every last lobster was safely ensconced in the cooler, Emma carried it into the house, rolling her eyes, chuckling and shaking her head.

A soft smile played on Emma’s lips as she leaned against the counter, watching Regina cook and listening to her talk about the week. She seemed so at ease, so happy, so at peace, so different from the woman she was even a week ago.

Emma figured it would be best to stay out of the way and observe, until instructed otherwise. She wanted Regina to enjoy the experience of cooking the first meal in her kitchen, but wanted to remain close enough in case she wanted or needed help. Emma split her attention between Regina and the playpen by the piano where Henry lay. Henry was, once again, fully enamored with his feet and didn’t have a care in the world. Regina laughed along with him as she heard his bursts of giggling every so often.

*God, you are so beautiful when you laugh,* thought Emma.

Eventually, Regina placed her hands on her hips, looking at the cooler skeptically. Emma, on the other hand, couldn’t take her eyes off of Regina. Regina was wearing the same outfit she was wearing when she left, save the overcoat and jacket, so she now stood in the kitchen in black pants, heels, white shirt and pin striped vest. If it looked incredible last Sunday morning, it was ten times better now as the steam from the pots had created a light sheen of sweat on her chest and face.

“I probably should know, having lived in Boston, but I never had much occasion to cook lobster there. It was just me, and then me and Henry,” said Regina as if she was trying to figure out how to figure this out.

Throwing up her hands playfully, Emma declared with an exaggerated sigh and grin, “Finally, someplace I can help!”

Regina looked at her quizzically as Emma opened the cooler and dumped each lobster, unceremoniously, into the huge pot of boiling water.

“15 minutes,” declared Emma.

“I didn’t know you cooked,” said Regina with a furrowed brow. Emma shrugged in return.

“After my fosters left, during the winter, when business was slow with Marco and we needed the extra money, I’d help on the boats pulling traps. The work sucks because it’s cold and you are
constantly wet and you have to go further out, but, it’s money, and dinner is free when you get back to the docks; even if it is a little monotonous.”

“I see,” said Regina as she looked at Emma with a sexy grin.

Regina approached Emma and slipped her fingers under the hem of her Henley, scraping her nails softly down Emma abs causing her to draw a sharp breath and close her eyes.

“Did you wear this to work?”

“I….uhhhhh…..” was all Emma could get out until Regina withdrew her hands and ended the excruciating teasing. Taking a deep, steadying breath, Emma considered her response. She by no means felt that her current attire was anything close to sexy, but she was also starting to get the distinct impression that Regina felt very differently.

“It was actually sexier than this,” grinned Emma.

“Tell me about it,” said Regina quietly.

“Heavy, yellow rain pants….“

As Emma ticked off the first item, Regina’s fingers found the top button of her Henley and popped it open, placing a light kiss against exposed skin before flicking her tongue quickly.

“Suspenders,” said Emma a bit more quietly. She had been caught completely caught off guard by Regina’s response.

As Regina popped another button, Emma leaned back on her palms and gripped the edge of the counter tightly with both hands.

“Uh huh,” whispered Regina against her chest, nodding slightly, before scraping the skin gently with her teeth, “Keep going….“

“B-boots,” Emma’s heart was all but beating out of her chest. There was no way that Regina couldn’t feel it against her lips as yet another button popped open and an open-mouthed kiss was felt.

“I know there’s more,” whispered Regina.

“Uhhhh….”

“It’s OK, sweetheart. Take your time…..”

As Regina kissed Emma’s soft skin, her hands began kneading Emma’s breasts, thumbs circling around hardened nipples.

“H-H-Henley,” the first stuttered letters were synchronized with Emma’s panting.

“There you go, “encouraged Regina as her hands rose to pop another button; her lips finding increasingly sensitive skin as she reached the top of Emma’s cleavage. Her fingers returned to pinch and tease Emma’s nipples through her shirt.

Emma wasn’t sure how many buttons remained, how many were opened or how many articles of clothing she had ticked off. It was truly hard to think at all. Reaching up, she threaded her fingers through soft, thick, dark hair holding Regina gently to her.

“I hope that wasn’t all you wore. You said it was cold,” Emma looked down to see that two buttons
remained. As she did, her eyes met Regina’s. She could see such a sexy playfulness swirling there tonight. The need of one for the other was almost palpable and the air almost crackled with sexual tension. Drawing her strength from Regina’s new-found confidence, Emma swallowed before breathing out,

“Sweater,” and she saw Regina smile at her before she looked down to continue her soft assault on Emma’s skin as yet another button popped open.

“Good girl. You dressed warm,” whispered Regina as she grinned against Emma’s chest.

Emma tightened her hand in Regina’s hair, careful not to hurt her, but trying to covey her incredible need. She knew her desire was visible; she could see Regina’s head rising and falling with her chest as it heaved. Her lips clung to Emma’s skin like they had become one person in some desperate struggle to find that last bit of acceptance, protection, safety and comfort.

“Almost there, Em-ma…” said Regina, deliberately drawing out her name.

Emma didn’t even care at this point and she moaned softly with every breath she took. Her head fell back as the last word escaped her lips in a whisper,

“Jacket,” and she felt the last button release before Regina’s tongue took a long, slow, sensual journey from between her breasts, over her chest, over her throat; tracing the underside of her jaw before she felt teeth scraping lightly on her chin. As Emma raised her head, she looked directly into Regina’s eyes. They had blown wide with lust and almost blackened. Emma’s eyes had darkened considerably as well. They stood facing each other, chests heaving not prepared for or sure of what to do next. They were both caught off guard and jumped slightly at the sound of the timer.

“15 minutes,” whispered Emma breathlessly.

Emma fed Henry as Regina finished the mushroom risotto and garlic bread. It was getting late, so his eyes were shutting intermittently as he pulled on the bottle until, finally, he simply fell asleep; mouth hanging open around the nipple. Emma walked him to his room and placed him in his crib, grabbing the monitor on her way out and turning it on.

Returning to the kitchen, she found Regina again, with her hands on her hips, looking at all of the food. Emma slipped behind her and squeezed her hips gently.

“Now, are you going to show me how to eat a full lobster?” asked Regina as she leaned back into Emma.

“Now, THAT is most definitely a skill you need to learn if you are going to live in Maine,” grinned Emma as her lips brushed gently against Regina’s ear and her arms encircled her waist.

Emma found the most sizeable lobster and spooned some risotto onto a plate before turning to the island counter. She stood directly behind Regina and grabbed her hands with her own.

“Now, as you know, the best part is the tail,” said Emma as she and Regina twisted the appendage from the body. Their fingers were getting drenched from the juice of the lobster.

Emma pressed lightly against Regina’s hands as the laid the tail on the side and cracked the shell. Taking it again in their hands, they broke the fins off the end.

“But, here’s the trick to get to the sweetest part,” whispered Emma. Regina watched as two of Emma’s fingers slid into the opening at the bottom of the tail. She extracted and pressed her fingers
in several times trying to remove the lobster meat from the shell by pressing it out the other side. Regina almost went weak, considering how intimate they had been no more than 20 minutes ago. She honestly didn’t give a damn about the lobster anymore, the only thing she could focus on were Emma’s fingers which is why when they were pulled from the shell for the last time, she took both into her mouth, sucking gently and swirling her tongue as she extracted every last bit of the sweetness from Emma’s fingers. She felt a pool of molten heat at the apex of her thighs almost immediately. Emma almost collapsed behind her, but remained coherent enough to guide them to their next step.

Pinching a bit of lobster from the tail she extracted, Emma dipped it in butter and lifted it to Regina’s mouth, tracing it over her lips. As Regina took the bite from Emma’s fingers, she looked over her shoulder allowing Emma to capture her lips in a soft kiss and flick her tongue to collect the remnants of the melted butter. They alternated between bites of lobster and risotto, offered from fingertips, until they ate their fill. As they took the last bite, Regina turned in Emma’s arms and they kissed, plunging tongues deeply into open mouths.

It was Regina that heard the monitor first, and Emma felt her step back, breaking their heated kiss. She could see the blush across Regina’s face and heaving chest, and Emma couldn’t help but grin as she watched Regina run a hand through her hair, trying to catch her breath and collect herself.

*She has no idea how sexy she is,* thought Emma.

“I should check on Henry,” Regina whispered with a soft smile as she nervously wiped damp palms down the front of her thighs and straightened her vest.

Emma nodded and returned a gentle smile as she felt Regina’s hand slip from hers. Emma didn’t want to push Regina, but she wasn’t sure how much longer she could wait anymore. She physically hurt because she needed Regina so fucking badly tonight and she groaned at the thought of spending another night in the guest house, trying to imagine Regina doing the things to her that she was relegated to doing to herself.....

“Fuck,” Emma sighed to no one....

Regina looked down at Henry and brushed her fingers gently through his hair. He had already calmed by the time she came to his room. He looked so peaceful. It was so different from the swirl of emotion that she was feeling.

Regina breathed deeply, remembering everything from the past week in Portland. She needed to show Emma that she was strong. She needed to show Emma that she loved her.

Whatever needed to happen between them; it needed to happen tonight. She ached for Emma....

“Fuck,” Regina sighed into the empty room....

Emma was opening a bottle of wine when Regina returned to the kitchen.

“Everything OK?”

“Yes. He’s fine.”

“Emma, I...”
“Regina, I….

Words were spoken at the same time and they both looked at the floor and chuckled a bit before looking back up at each other through lashes.

“You first,” said Regina quietly.

“I was just wondering.” Emma hesitated slightly because she felt like she was about to ask for the impossible, knowing full well that, for Regina, it was the simplest request in the world to fulfill, “will you play…. for me? I mean, if you aren’t too tired…I don’t think I’ve ever really heard you play.”

Despite being in the house almost daily, Emma had actually heard Regina play very little; maybe a note or a bar here and there. The electronics were so tightly integrated into the piano that Regina could actually “turn off” the sound to the room and channel all of it into the mixing board. This was then siphoned directly into the soundproof earphones that she wore as she played. Regina had explained that, by doing this, she could add effects or accompanying instruments and hear how the finished product would eventually come together. It also helped immensely when it came to Henry. Considering how beautifully animated Regina could become as she played some of her pieces, Emma was pretty sure the volume and excitement of some of the works would wake him up instantly. When he wasn’t sleeping or playing in a crib next to her, Regina relied on a visual and audio system that linked Henry’s room to where she sat. This way, he could be heard through the mixer and seen on a small monitor placed next to her seat. She was an incredible mother, of that, Emma was certain.

Regina looked at Emma curiously, “what would you like me to play?” She was amazed and excited that Emma wanted to hear her play.

“I don’t know….I-I’m sorry, Regina. I shouldn’t have asked…..” trailed off Emma quietly with a shrug.

Emma actually had no idea why she had asked. Why was this so important that Regina play, right now, right at this moment? It was like these words were coming from a different person and the reason for them was beyond even her comprehension. Why would she even ask for this? Why would she ask for something so intimate? The request seemed so selfish, now that she had actually said the words…..she wished she could take them back.

Regina smiled at Emma. She could see how hard it was for Emma to ask for anything for herself. In that instant, though, Regina knew the exact song that she would give to Emma. It was the song she always vowed that she would play to a perfect lover for a perfect love. To this point, she had only played the song to an empty apartment or an empty house, but now, she had found that perfection in Emma. Walking to the piano, Regina sat like she had a thousand times before, turning to Emma, she said quietly,

“This is the song I play when I close my eyes and think of you,” and Regina closed her eyes and began to play.

It took six notes for Emma’s hands to begin shaking almost uncontrollably. Nine notes for the glass to begin slipping from her fingers. And by the twelfth note, the crystal had shattered on the floor. Twenty years of her life slammed into her in an instant and it drew the breath from her lungs. It was the song that led Marco to find her in the shop; the song that set into motion every subsequent event that had led her to this day; the song that was her only comfort during some of the darkest and most difficult times of her life, and it was being played out for her by Regina’s own hand. It was the song from the music box.
"I guess I’m just a romantic, but I would hope that anyone that receives such a beautiful song as a gift, she should be someone’s ‘Immortal Beloved’. What do you think?"

Emma’s head was spinning and she tried to get some sense of clarity through this swirl of emotion that was now encompassing her. Her chest was heaving as she tried to draw a full breath. She was pulled back to the present by a shriek,

“EMMA!”

Emma’s head snapped up and she looked almost wild-eyed as she saw Regina rise from the bench in a panic. Emma held up her hand and Regina stopped in her tracks, unsure of what to do. She heard the glass break and could see Emma’s distress. She stood stock still watching Emma, heart beating almost out of her chest, waiting for some sign of what she should do.

Please don’t push me away.

Emma stood fully and her eyes were filled with tears as she kept Regina at bay with her hand.

“Please….please, don’t stop,” was all Emma could whisper as she covered her mouth with a shaking hand.

“Emma, I…”

“As Regina looked into Emma’s eyes and small slices of their nighttime confessions fell together, the moment of clarity dawned on Regina that this was the song that Emma had used all these years to find her peace. Emma was safe in the arms of her music.

Regina returned to the bench slowly, glancing a last time at Emma who lowered her hand, still shaking slightly, to her side. And she began again……

Emma walked over and stood behind Regina at the bench for a moment, watching her play and then listening with her eyes closed. The song was so much more beautiful and complex, sad and sensual than could ever be conveyed by a metal drum and combs. Straddling the bench, Emma sat behind Regina and Regina could feel Emma’s thighs surround her own as Emma’s stomach and chest pressed tightly to her back. Emma’s fingers and palms trailed slowly up Regina’s thighs before Emma wrapped her left arm around her waist. She used her other hand to push a lock of hair behind Regina’s ear before pulling aside her collar and exposing her neck. Regina could feel a flood of heat throughout her body as Emma’s lips found their destination at the base. Emma trailed her lips up soft skin until she reached just below Regina’s ear pausing momentarily to suck lightly before kissing back down a surface that had risen into excited bumps. At the curve of Regina’s neck and shoulder, Emma opened her mouth to suck and then swirl her tongue several times, as she did, she slid her left hand to Regina’s breast and began to knead softly.

Regina’s head fell back against Emma’s shoulder, her face falling to the side to give Emma full access to her neck. Her fingers continued to play but began to slip on the keys causing some notes in the song to become muddled and confused. It wasn’t long before her fingers slowed and stopped like the key winding down on the music box. It didn’t matter; the song had simply started what they now needed to finish together. Reaching up, Regina covered Emma’s hand with her own as it palmed and massaged her breast while her other hand reached up and back to tangle in golden locks. Her eyes rolled slightly behind closed lids. Emma placed her index finger on Regina’s chin, turning her head back gently so that she could look at Regina’s face and then capture her lips with her own.
Emma pressed her tongue forward slipping it within the warm and comforting confines of Regina’s mouth. Her tongue probed slowly and deeply, sliding and tangling with Regina’s, their strokes becoming more urgent as she felt Regina pull her head forward to press their lips more firmly together.

Regina’s left arm soon wrapped around Emma’s back trying to draw their bodies closer. As Regina held them close, Emma reached down with her right hand and began to twist the buttons of Regina’s vest open one by one never ceasing the teasing ministrations of her left hand on Regina’s breast. As the last button of the vest slipped open, Emma’s hand returned to find the first, straining button of Regina’s blouse. As each button opened, the lace of a bra was revealed followed by the smooth and flawless olive skin and toned musculature of Regina’s stomach. Emma pulled the side of Regina’s shirt and vest back, laying her palm directly atop the sheer cup of the bra. She could feel the hardened nipple and rigid surrounding skin as it strained against the thin fabric. Curling her fingers under the lace, Emma used the backs of her fingers to tease the hardened bud into an almost painful peak while her other fingertips traced random patterns over the flesh of Regina’s abs.

Emma released the front clasp of Regina’s bra and pulled the sides back exposing plump, full breasts. She captured the weight of each in her palms before moving her thumbs and forefingers immediately to dusky nipples, pinching, pulling and twisting softly. Emma gasped slightly as she felt Regina’s teeth bite her lower lip and she pinched more firmly in response to the silent encouragement that was being provided. Emma began to slide the sides of Regina’s shirt and vest back further, only to stop. Breaking their kiss, she placed her lips against Regina’s ear and whispered breathlessly, “Are you sure?”

Emma could feel Regina’s head nod and she recaptured Regina’s lips as she quickly pressed fabric over soft shoulders, toned arms and delicate wrists tossing the shirt and vest on the floor. It left Regina’s upper body completely exposed to Emma who explored every inch, building a sensual map with her fingers and hands. She would feel Regina draw breath into their kiss as she hit sensitive spots and Emma made note of them, planning to revisit every one of them later. She was careful to avoid Regina’s shoulder. She would let Regina guide her there when the time was right.

Lowering the cover over the keys, Emma pressed gently, so that Regina would lean forward. Regina rested her cheek on the fallboard and allowed her palms to slide to each side. Laying her weight gently atop Regina, Emma extended her arms as well, sliding slightly calloused hands over Regina’s shoulders, biceps and forearms before covering the backs of Regina’s hands and entwining their fingers. Emma laid her forehead against the back of Regina’s neck, breathing deeply as she took in the soft scents of lavender and apples. Sliding back, Emma bowed her head to the base of Regina’s spine, cupping naked breasts in gentle hands. Slightly parted lips placed feather-light kisses against each vertebra as fingertips pulled and rolled hardened peaks in a synchronized motion. Only three kisses up, Regina’s lower back dipped slightly and she raised her head to release a soft moan; fingernails scratching lightly against wood.

Lips traveling further up; Emma felt Regina shudder as she placed light bites against both shoulder blades, followed by tender kisses applied to the few faint scars that remained on Regina’s back. Emma knew that the worst had been confined to the front of her shoulder and Emma hoped that Regina would trust her to be gentle and understanding when the time came. The scars didn’t matter to Emma; Regina needed to know that.

“Will you stand for me, Regina?” was whispered between kisses and light licks and Regina finally drew herself up, pulling her arms over her chest modestly as she stood facing away from Emma.

Scooting forward to the end of the bench, Emma grasped Regina’s hips and turned her so that they
faced each other. Regina kept her right arm crossed over her breasts as her left palm reached to cover her right shoulder. As Regina dropped her gaze to the floor to the right of the bench, Emma stood directly in front of her. She could see that more bold woman from the evening had been replaced by a shy and unsure one who was now exposed and vulnerable.

She needs to know.

Emma took a cleansing breath and placed the crook of her index finger under Regina’s chin, turning Regina’s face so that she could look directly into brown eyes. Regina’s brown was furrowed and she seemed so lost and so afraid. Emma spoke slowly and deliberately, so that Regina wouldn’t miss a single word.

“Regina, I love you with everything I am. Please, don’t hide yourself from me.”

Regina gasped through parted lips and she studied Emma. It was as if this was the first time these words had been spoken to her by a lover with any sincerity.

Leaning forward, Emma brushed her cheek against Regina’s as she had so many times before, turning her head slightly to nuzzle her nose into Regina’s cheek. Her lips brushed against the corner of Regina’s mouth as she spoke.

“It’s the absolute truth, Regina. I love you,” Emma smiled gently, “You have no idea how beautiful you are to me. Please don’t hide. I promise that I won’t hurt you. I will never let anyone hurt you……ever again.”

Bringing her hands to cup Regina’s cheeks, she placed a soft kiss on trembling lips. Emma touched the wrist of Regina’s left arm gently and brushed her thumb against the back of Regina’s hand. She watched Regina’s eyes carefully and waited, tracing soothing circles with her thumb against the skin. She felt Regina’s arm relax before she lowered it to rest at her side, followed shortly by the other arm. Emma smiled at her softly and watched her eyes for silent confirmation that was granted. Emma captured Regina’s mouth in a brief kiss before trailing her lips along her jaw. Finding Regina’s ear, she sucked the sensitive skin below, swirling her tongue until she heard Regina moan softly in response. Moving lower, she placed kisses against the soft skin of Regina’s neck and across the top of her shoulder. Slipping her fingers into Regina’s hair and wrapping her other arm tightly around Regina’s waist to hold her close, Emma placed light kisses on the dips and ridges of Regina’s scars and could feel their length and thickness against her lips. She needed Regina to know that every inch of her was beautiful; even her flaws and rough edges were gorgeous and perfect. Emma sighed, relieved, as she felt Regina’s fingers entwine in her hair, gently encouraging Emma’s tender exploration and she felt the trembling of Regina’s chest as she sobbed quiet, relieved tears.

“So beautiful,” was whispered by Emma, over and over, between kisses.

Eventually, Emma stood. Kissing Regina’s lips one more time, she smiled as she cupped Regina’s face to brush the tears from her cheeks with her thumbs. Her reward was a beautiful smile, and a hand held against her own as Regina turned her face to place a kiss into her palm.

Emma grasped Regina’s hips as she sat again on the bench in front of her. Leaning forward slightly, she kept Regina’s gaze as she flicked her tongue. Regina’s eyelids fluttered and she gasped slightly as her sensitive nub felt the quick brush of warm, wet flesh. Almost immediately, the nipple, and the dark skin surrounding, hardened. Emma flicked her tongue teasingly several more times, before parting her mouth and taking Regina’s nipple between soft lips. She nibbled and sucked softly, alternating between light grazes and swirls of her tongue. She never took her eyes off Regina’s, even as she felt the fingers of one hand and then the other tangle in her hair and hold her gently to
Regina’s breast. Encouraged by Regina’s touch, Emma sucked and teased more strongly, earning a series of soft moans and gasps. Emma traced her open palm down Regina’s abs as her lips and tongue found Regina’s other nipple, providing it with some much needed attention while her fingers released belts, buttons and zippers. She could see Regina watching her intently, mouth open and panting as she pressed the fabric of pants and lace panties over curved hips and strong thighs, finally allowing them to pool on the floor at Regina’s feet. Grasping Regina’s hips, Emma pressed Regina back gently so that her rear rested on the key cover and she used her hands to part Regina’s thighs. Emma slid a single, index finger lightly and slowly over Regina’s slit as they both watched intently. There was no pressure, just feather light touches, but it was enough to spread copious amounts of wetness over smooth lips. Emma’s index finger was soon joined by her middle finger and both continued to apply teasing, indirect pressure to Regina’s clit through swollen folds. Regina’s eyes flicked between Emma’s eyes and her fingers, beseeching her silently to end this sensual agony. She felt Emma’s middle finger part her lips gently so that her index finger now slid barely against her clit, back and forth, back and forth, incessantly. Emma’s reward was a deep, prolonged groan following by a soft whimper as Regina’s head lulled back and her fingers scrambled for purchase against the wood of the piano. Her hips jerked and rolled strongly, chasing fingers that refused to quench her ache.

Regina gasped in frustration as Emma’s fingers were withdrawn and she opened her eyes to see if she had done something wrong. She was met with the sight of Emma drawing glistening wet fingers to her lips. They locked eyes as Emma ran her tongue from the base of her fingers to the tips before taking them into her mouth and sucking greedily.

Emma’s eyes fluttered closed as she tasted Regina’s wetness for the first time and she savored the sublime mixture of sweet and tang and saltiness. Regina watched speechless as Emma removed her fingers and then traced the tip of her tongue over her lips, collecting any trace of Regina’s essence that she might have missed. Emma then stood, chest heaving, and leaned forward, pressing tightly into Regina.

“Let me show you how incredible you taste,” said Emma as she threaded fingers though Regina’s hair and brought their lips together in a deep kiss. Every centimeter of Emma’s mouth was coated in Regina’s juices and Regina’s tongue probed hungrily. Emma was happy to oblige the exploration. She wanted Regina to know and experience everything that she did.

Breaking their kiss, Emma stooped and wrapped strong arms around Regina’s thighs, hoisting her up easily to sit on the top edge of the piano. Looking up at Regina, Emma whispered,

“Lay back, my love, let me take care of you…”

Regina nodded wordlessly, laying back and pulling her feet up to rest on the key cover. She could feel the light press of Emma’s palms on the inside of her knees, spreading her thighs wide and exposing her fully to Emma’s touch.

“So beautiful,” was whispered as Emma’s fingers massaged slowly up the inside of Regina’s thighs. She would say these words a million times if she needed to; if it meant Regina would finally believe them with her entire heart and soul.

Regina’s hips rolled gently encouraging Emma’s hands to continue their ascent. She had no idea how long she would be able to hold out. It had been so long and Emma was so attentive to her every need. Emma hands kneaded strongly as they reached the apex of her thighs and Regina felt Emma’s thumbs pressing into her lips on each side.

“God, you’re so wet, Regina,” breathed Emma in reverent amazement.
Regina groaned as she heard the lust dripping from Emma’s voice. She felt Emma lift her thighs atop her shoulders, spreading her even wider as Emma leaned forward. She moaned loudly as she felt Emma’s lips wrap around one of her own, massaging smooth skin strongly with her tongue. She sucked firmly and nibbled lightly, before releasing with a pop and providing similar attention to the other side.

Regina’s back arched with every touch and Emma could tell that Regina was going to come quickly, so she was avoiding, just for a bit longer, the one place that she knew would give Regina relief. When Regina came, she wanted her to have nothing left to give. Emma flicked her tongue, circling Regina’s entrance several times before wiggling the tip of her strong, warm muscle just inside. Emma could feel Regina’s hips pressing down and her heels pulling forward, trying to draw Emma further in. Obliging, Emma slipped the length of her tongue inside, pushing strongly against the resistance of Regina’s walls before withdrawing and repeating the process. As she found a rhythm, she could feel Regina’s hips begin to rock determinedly in time, pressing and pulling in opposition to deepen Emma’s thrusts. As they met, Emma would nuzzle the tip of her nose gently against Regina’s clitoris and she could hear the stuttered whimpers and gasps it was eliciting atop Regina’s moaning which was steadily increasing in volume.Emma slipped two fingers inside, pressing to the knuckle before withdrawing to the tips. She twisted her hand gently with each push.

Emma drew the length of her flat tongue against Regina’s clitoral area which reacted instantaneously, hardening and swelling. She flipped teasingly with the tip of her tongue until she felt Regina’s fingers entwine in her hair, urging her forward and guiding her to exactly where she wanted her to be. Opening her mouth, Emma pulled Regina’s clitoris in, sucking strongly as her tongue alternated broad passes and light flicks against the sensitive bundle of nerves. Emma could already feel Regina’s walls tightening strongly against her fingers and she curled them slightly with each stroke encouraging Regina’s movements with the tensing and release of her hand upon Regina’s thigh.

“Emma, please don’t stop. Please. I’m so close.”

Emma could feel Regina fighting her release, trying to hold on a little longer, and she hummed gently to add vibration to the mix of sensations. That was the final nudge that overcame Regina’s willpower. As her back arched from the surface, she held Emma’s mouth tight to her, reaching for the side of the piano with her other hand and curling her fingers around the edge at the last possible moment.

“Oh God, Emma!” was screamed as Regina came explosively and the sound was swallowed by the height of the ceiling and the expansiveness of the room.

Emma lapped greedily at the gush of wetness, relishing everything that Regina offered as it gathered on her tongue, lips, mouth and hand. She watched in awe as Regina came undone. For one, brief moment, Regina was a perfect combination of strength and vulnerability, tension and peace, release and reservation. She was indescribably gorgeous and Emma had a front-row seat to every blessed second.

She continued to swirl her tongue over Regina’s clitoris as Regina’s hips bucked wildly and Emma held her thigh strongly, trying to quiet her movements a bit so that she could focus attention where Regina needed it most. She drew out Regina’s orgasm with skilled tongue and fingers, guided by the volume and intensity of her moans, until Regina’s voice had died into soft whimpers and all that was left were the intermittent jerks and twitches of Regina’s hips, remnants of the aftershocks of her orgasm. Withdrawing her fingers slowly, she helped Regina place her feet on the fallboard again. Leaning over, Emma placed her elbows on the wood to either side of Regina’s torso, slipping her hands under Regina’s arms and gripping her shoulders tightly. She rested her cheek on Regina’s
chest, listening to the strong beat of her heart as fingers slipped lovingly through Emma’s hair.

Emma rested against Regina for several minutes, holding their bodies tightly together, until she felt Regina’s slight shaking beneath her and her fingertips noted the raised bump bumps of Regina’s skin.

“You’re cold,” said Emma and squeezed Regina tightly one more time before standing and looking to the fireplace. The fire had died to embers from the lack of attention, and the warmth of the room was depleted outside of the immediate vicinity of the hearth. “Let me take care of that.”

Emma lifted Regina from the piano, cradling her tightly as she walked to the couch, Regina’s arms wrapped tightly around her neck and shoulders, forehead resting against the crook of her neck. She crouched in front of the sofa, supporting Regina’s bottom on jean-clad thighs as her hand reached to grab and unfold the quilt that Regina kept draped over the back of the couch. She laid Regina on the quilt gently, before pulling the side over her and tucking it in, trying to trap her body heat among the folds to stop her shaking.

“That’ll help while I get the fire going again.”

Emma brushed Regina’s hair back and placed a kiss on her forehead before turning to the fireplace to settle a few logs on the grate. She stood watch for several minutes, back to Regina, making sure that the flames caught securely. She was lost in thought, trying to process the incredible range of emotions that she was feeling, as the warmth started to creep back into the room. She couldn’t remember a time in her life when she was happier or more content or more in love with someone.

She was pulled from her ruminations by the press of Regina’s body against her back and the softness of the quilt wrapped around her. Regina’s cheek rested against her shoulder and Emma closed her eyes, basking in the encompassing warmth of the fire in front and her lover behind.

“I love you, Emma. You have no idea how much I love you.”

Emma’s eyes filled with tears and she began to tremble in Regina’s arms. She didn’t dare turn around. She didn’t want Regina to see her cry, so she simply shook her head over and over, closing her eyes and hanging her head as she did so. The words that she had said to Regina with no expectation of return were now being repeated to her with the same sincerity. But these words; the ones that she had so badly wanted to hear all of her life; she couldn’t allow herself to believe. Why? Why would Regina love her? She was a cast off, a nobody, a handyman, an orphan; never good enough for anyone to keep or want besides Marco. Emma knew the words that people used: ‘awkward’, ‘clumsy’, ‘stupid’, ‘useless’, ‘poor’, ‘nothing’, ‘odd’, ‘worthless’, ‘loser’, ‘ugly’. There were other words; some worse; some ‘better’ which only meant that they were said using a less crass turn-of-phrase that was supposed to soften the blow, but didn’t. She’d heard these words for so many years, from so many people, that they had simply become true. She and those words had become synonymous in her own mind.

“Please don’t say that, Regina. You can’t love me,” Emma continued to shake her head as the tears rolled down her face. She could feel Regina moving so that she now faced Emma, arms still wrapped tightly around her torso, not allowing Emma to retreat from her grasp. Regina’s next words were said with a quiet tone of exasperation and incredulity, but there was no malice or anger behind them.

“How dare you, Emma? How dare you make love to me and tell me that you love me and then push me away when I say it to you? How dare you stand there and tell me who I can and cannot love? I am a grown woman and I will love who I want, Emma, and I choose to love you. And if I have to say it a thousand times before you believe it, then I will say it a thousand times. And then, I will say
it a thousand times more, and a thousand times after that, again and again and again, because I need you to believe it, Emma. I need you to believe that you can be loved; that you are worthy of being loved; and that you are loved by me…BY ME, Emma,” Regina’s voice had risen in volume as she made her impassioned plea and she pointed to her own chest, “Do you understand me, Emma? I LOVE YOU…..”

“People don’t love someone like me, Regina,” said Emma quietly as she shook her head again.

“Well, I don’t know about other people, Emma, but the person standing in front of you, right now, loves you very, very, very, very much…….” Between every ‘very’, Regina captured Emma’s lips in a punctuating, sensual, lingering kiss, until Emma had no choice but to acquiesce to her words. Each time, she allowed the kiss to deepen, no longer able or willing to deny Regina or her heart despite her lingering disbelief. She felt Regina slip her tongue deep into her mouth and she responded in kind, finally feeling the quilt slip from their bodies and onto the floor. Emma massaged the firm muscle of Regina’s backside while her other hand traced fingertips from base of her spine to her shoulder blades. She wanted to take Regina, again and again, tonight. She needed her. She wanted her. But as her lips and tongue slipped to lave kisses on the soft skin of Regina’s neck, she was stopped by a hand on her sternum and Regina stepped back slightly. Biting her lip, Regina shook her head and mouthed the word ‘no’ at Emma.

Emma watched Regina as she stepped forward again and slipped her hands under the hem of her Henley, fingernails scraping lightly down the muscles of her abs. Emma drew breath through gritted teeth, and her eyes fluttered closed for only an instant, but it was enough for Regina to see that her actions were having their desired effect. Regina’s hands rose further and Emma could feel the fabric of her shirt rise above her waist and then above her breasts until it was gathered under her arms. Raising her arms, she allowed Regina to slip the material up and off her frame.

Regina took a moment to trace her index finger along the top of each cup of Emma’s bra before placing several soft kisses on milky white skin of her chest. Opening her mouth, Regina sucked the skin atop one of Emma’s breasts as her hands released the clasp behind her back. Grasping the straps at Emma’s shoulders, she slid the bra down muscular arms before discarding it on the floor. Regina stepped back again slightly to admire the unbelievable body before her. It was the perfect combination of chiseled, curved, rugged and feminine and more incredible than she had allowed herself to dream or imagine. Emma’s breasts were slightly smaller than her own and nicely firm. Blush-colored nipples stood in rigid peaks surrounded by a coin of hardened, pink skin. Regina could see the ridges and furrows of the muscles of Emma’s stomach and they tensed and relaxed with each of her deep, slow breaths. Her pants were slung low allowing Regina to see the defined line at the top of her hips that disappeared nicely into her waistband. Broad shoulders led to incredibly strong arms which flexed slightly as Emma’s hands clenched and released nervously under Regina’s appreciative gaze. Everything was accentuated perfectly by the light of the fire. She noticed that Emma had averted her eyes under Regina’s gaze and her mouth twisted apprehensively.

Regina lay a warm palm against Emma’s abs and stepped forward to again, not wanting her to mistake adoration for scrutiny.

“I’m sorry, Emma…I can’t help myself….you’re just so….so….beautiful….” breathed out Regina.

Regina took Emma’s face in her hands and placed a loving kiss on her lips before dipping her head to capture one of Emma’s nipples in her warm mouth. Emma cradled Regina’s head gently to her breast while the fingers of Regina’s other hand found Emma’s other nipple, pinching and pulling softly in time with the tug of her jaw. Regina heard Emma’s soft moan of approval as her head lulled back and her eyes closed.
Taking Emma by the hand, Regina led her to the couch, encouraging her to lie down. Emma’s boots were badly worn and stretched from use and age and she kicked them off easily before reclining, back leaned against the arm of the sofa, one foot propped on the cushions while the other still rested on the floor. Her socks were filled with holes, just another testament to an impoverished life that she hoped Regina wouldn’t notice.

Emma watched with curious eyes as Regina knelt on the floor between her legs, face hovering just above her abs. Regina’s smile was sexy and she watched Emma’s eyes intently as she circled Emma’s navel several times with the tip of her tongue before dipping it inside and flicking it lightly to tease. Her lips trailed only slightly further before reaching the waistband of her jeans. Emma watched as delicate fingers released the button and then pulled the zipper down, pulling back the sides to expose the muscles of her lower stomach. Regina slipped her index finger into the waistband of Emma’s boy shorts, pulling down until she exposed a few blonde curls. Leaning forward, she trailed her lips along the soft skin and rigid muscles of Emma’s lower abdomen, feeling them twitch strongly in reaction to her touch. She could feel the soft hairs on her lips and she pressed her mouth into the damp, coarse thickness, breathing in Emma’s intoxicating scent. She licked her lips, tasting just enough wetness to leave her wanting more. Emma lifted slightly from the couch as Regina took the sides of her pants and shorts, slipping them over strong thighs and calves, abandoning them on the floor with their other clothing. Regina stood, pulling off Emma’s socks, before kneeling again, this time, on the couch.

She settled one knee to the outside of Emma’s hip, drawing her other thigh between Emma’s legs, close, but not quite touching her dripping wet center. Regina’s hand rested on the arm of the sofa near Emma’s shoulder, her naked body hovering above Emma’s own. This time, Regina’s fingertips trailed down Emma’s abs, slipping gently into blonde curls. She played there lightly, biting her lip and watching Emma’s eyes, enjoying the slight tickle of the hair against her fingertips. Leaning down, she brushed her lips against Emma’s ear as she spoke,

“This… I like….”

She felt Emma nod slowly against her cheek and could hear the soft whimpers as Emma struggled; torn between patience and desire.

With each circle of her fingers through hair, she dipped them lower. She lingered in the aroused wetness at the top of Emma’s slit only briefly before she plunged two fingers between slick folds and teased her hardened nub gently but firmly. She heard the soft gasp; the same one she had uttered just a few minutes ago. It was the one released only once in a lifetime; the first time a perfect lover provides that intentional, courageous, sensual touch. She watched as Emma’s green eyes widened in ardor; darkening to a beautiful, rich, emerald color.

Pulling her hand away, Regina held two glistening, dripping fingers in front of Emma’s lips; teasingly close yet excruciatingly far enough away that Emma knew that she was going to have to work for whatever came next. Regina’s fingers separated into a ‘V’ and Emma could see a few strands of her wetness hanging like gossamer threads between Regina’s digits. Placing her palms on the cushions of the couch, Emma pressed herself forward slightly, never taking her eyes from Regina’s. As she closed the small gap between her lips and Regina’s fingers, Emma’s lips parted slightly and her tongue pressed tentatively forward, the tip tracing lightly over the inside of Regina’s index finger.

Emma watched Regina lick her lips several times, finally biting and holding her lower lip between teeth, obviously enjoying what she was seeing. Emma kept her eyes fixed on Regina as she drew the flat of her tongue slowly from the base to the tip of one of Regina’s fingers, gathering additional wetness which spread deliciously over her tongue. The tip of her tongue flicked lightly and teasingly
over skin, tempting Regina to make her next move. Regina continued to watch for only a moment as she took panting breaths through slightly parted lips. Her eyes had darkened almost to black and they drifted back and forth between Emma’s eyes and her mouth as she leaned forward; lips and tongue challenging Emma’s as they worked together to extract all of the sticky, salty sweetness that they could from Regina’s hand. They kissed sloppily around and between fingers before Regina lowered her hand so that they could continue to kiss deeply, savoring and sharing Emma’s essence between them.

“I like this too,” whispered Regina as their kiss broke.

Regina settled back slightly, pressing her core against Emma’s propped thigh as her fingers found her lover’s wetness once more. Her fingertips pressed firmly against Emma’s entrance without pushing inside and Regina heard Emma release a muted, throaty moan. Dipping her head, Regina captured Emma’s lips with her own, pressing her tongue forward, slipping the warm muscle in and out as if illustrating what her fingers were willing to do if merely asked.

Regina touched her forehead to Emma’s, looking up at her through her lashes, continuing her excruciating teasing of fingers.

“Tell me what you want so I can give you everything you need,” whispered Regina.

Emma locked her eyes with Regina and parted her lips to speak, but could offer nothing more than ragged breaths and pleading eyes.

“Perhaps you can show me instead? Don’t be shy, my love, not tonight,” murmured Regina soothingly.

Emma slipped a shaking hand down, feeling it calm only slightly as she covered Regina’s hand with her own. Together they explored, Emma gasping and moaning as delicate fingers teased and stroked; learning and teaching. Regina could feel the increased trembling in Emma’s fingers as her excitement was rising. Taking Emma’s shaking hand; Regina lifted it to her lips, placing a gentle kiss against it before resting it back upon the cushion beside her hip.

“Let me take care of you now, baby,” murmured Regina as she rubbed her thumb and finger together, rolling Emma’s clit between them. She could feel the bud swell and harden instantly. She continued rubbing in circles with her thumb as the length of two fingers slipped easily inside Emma’s aching entrance. Bowing her head, Regina’s lips trailed lightly upon the skin of Emma’s neck and collarbone causing it to rise into bumps, and she pressed herself back tightly against Emma’s thigh. Fingers moved slowly, extracted to their full length before being pressed back inside firmly, the pace only incrementally increasing with each stroke. Regina could feel Emma’s hips rocking down hard trying to encourage the speed and depth of the motions. Regina obliged, quickening the pace of her fingers as her own hips began to move in time against Emma’s thigh.

Closing her eyes, Regina began to lose herself in the rhythm of their love making as she murmured her thoughts softly, rolling her forehead against Emma’s gently,

“I need you Emma. I need you again and again and again. Please, God, I need you.”

Emma lay her leg down flat and Regina knelt over it, pressing her knees apart so that she had maximum contact. Emma could do nothing but watch the writhing movements before her, mesmerized by the slight sucking sounds of the wetness against her thigh. Regina gripped the arm of the couch tightly as she moved her hips back and forth, smearing her wetness generously until soft skin glided against a taut thigh effortlessly and quickly. Emma could feel the gentle nudge of Regina’s hardened clit and she flexed her thigh gently, tightening the muscle slightly on each
backwards stroke to provide additional friction. With each pass, she could hear the light gasps recognizing her efforts. Emma gripped Regina’s hip tightly with one hand while the fingers of the other massaged Regina’s breast, rolling a nipple between fingertips. Her own hips continued to grind and work against Regina’s fingers; their speed increasing quickly until they were rutting urgently and frantically against each other.

At first, their moans and whimpers were coming in short bursts, but soon, the sounds of their individual pleasure combined into a single, beautiful, sonorous moan that filled the room with a beauty and warmth all its own. Regina felt Emma's walls clench tightly against her fingers as her orgasm caught and surged and Emma's upper body lifted from the couch; her lips capturing Regina's in a fervent, deep kiss that muffled the wanton cry that began to spill from her lips. Her hips jerked and bucked hard against Regina's fingers, and she wrapped Regina in a tight hug, cheek resting against Regina’s chest, as she rode out a bit of her own pleasure. It was only for only a few moments, however, as she quickly turned her attention back to Regina and their continued ministrations.

“Don't stop. Don't stop. Don't stop.” was panted hard and Emma’s hand moved to catch Regina’s wrist to prevent her moving her fingers away. The perspiration from Emma’s forehead combined with the small beads of sweat that hung like light dew on Regina’s chest. Regina could feel Emma’s hot breath between her breasts as Emma's hand slipped between her own thigh and Regina's hot swollen center; offering the ridges of her stilled fingers as further stimulation. Regina continued to pump her fingers hard into Emma; thumb continually teasing her clit as she laid her cheek atop Emma's head; grinding her hips hard and moaning loudly, signifying the approach of her own orgasm.

“Oh God, baby, I'm going to come again,” stuttered out Emma as she felt the familiar tingle starting low in her abs.

Regina’s fingernails drew hard over the skin of Emma’s back and her fingers gripped tightly into Emma’s shoulder blade as Regina braced for the inevitable. Their eyes locked for only a moment before lips and tongues crashed together, consuming the carnal sounds as they exploded into their orgasms together.

Regina opened her eyes. Dim light was afforded by the nightlight in the bath and it bathed the room in a soft glow. She blinked slowly several times, trying to clear her eyes and then reached for the clock, squinting at the numbers on the face.

5 A.M., she noted before returning it to the bedside table. Thankfully, it would be another hour before Henry started to stir.

Through the haze of sleep, Regina felt extremely exhausted, but extremely sated, though her mind had yet to recall the source of either. The pull of sleep was simply too strong and she turned to her other side as her body and mind drowsed again. Her hand slid toward the middle of the bed and she opened her eyes startled as her hand was grasped gently by another. Confusion quickly gave way to complete contentedness as she looked into the emerald green eyes of her beautiful lover and the memories of the night came flooding back to her.

“Hi,” whispered Emma softly with a shy grin as she squeezed Regina’s hand, urging her body to the center of the bed where strong arms enveloped her completely.

Regina felt a soft kiss being placed on her forehead and she smiled and hummed contentedly; snuggling further into Emma’s warmth, before offering her own, mumbled ‘Good Morning’ which was met with a soft chuckle.
“Somebody’s tired this morning.”

“Wonder why?” teased Regina playfully as she stretched a bit before relaxing further into Emma’s embrace. “Maybe I just like sleeping in your arms….”

“I could get used to that,” sighed Emma happily.

Emma laid her chin atop Regina’s head, reveling in their closeness for several minutes before whispering dejectedly,

“I should go before Henry wakes up.”

Emma felt Regina shake her head against her chest.

“Please spend the day….the weekend….with me….with us…I’ll make breakfast,” said Regina hopefully.

“You don’t play fair,” groaned Emma with a smile before chuckling a bit and adding, “When does Henry usually get up? 6 A.M.?”

“Yes. Why?”

“Because that gives us just enough time to wake up….”

“What did you have in mind?” asked Regina with a sultry, cocked eyebrow.

Emma pulled Regina atop her in response, cupping her beautiful rear with her hands and capturing her lips in a deep, loving, sensual kiss. Breaking the kiss, Emma looked into Regina’s eyes and grinned,

“How’s that?”

“It’s a start,” laughed Regina sexily as she pulled the covers over their heads.
Emma had walked back in to the master bedroom to retrieve her keys as Regina heard a knock at the cabin door. It was after 8PM and only a few days before Thanksgiving, and they’d had a few visitors here and there in anticipation of the holidays. Kathryn had arrived to celebrate with them, but left earlier for a pre-Thanksgiving dinner with Fredrick and his family and she wasn’t expected back till much later, plus, she had a key to the cabin, so Regina couldn’t imagine who might be knocking at this late hour.

Regina opened the front door and saw Kathryn and Fredrick on the front porch with a visibly inebriated, thick-built man behind them. Both Fredrick and Kathryn looked perturbed at his presence, and Regina continued to flick her eyes between Kathryn, Fredrick and this man nervously. Without thinking, she grabbed the sides of her thin, navy blue cardigan and wrapped the sides tightly around herself before bringing a palm to her right shoulder and massaging it through the thin fabric of the sweater and oxford that was underneath. The actions weren’t lost to Kathryn’s eyes.

“I know it’s late Regina, so we didn’t just want to barge in, in case you were up to something,” said Kathryn with a mischievous smirk. Her tone was more serious and perturbed as she continued, “Oh, and I’m sorry for this guy,” thumbing her finger behind her. “He was at the restaurant and they needed someone to drive him home. Evidently, he is a good friend of Fredrick’s family and CAN’T SEEM TO FOLLOW DIRECTIONS VERY WELL…” finished Kathryn in an agitated and loud tone, hoping to get his attention. “We told him to sit in the car, and you see how well that worked,” she finished, rolling her eyes. “His name is Leroy.”

Fredrick leaned in and took Regina’s hand gently, placing a kiss on her cheek which she readily accepted with a smile.

“I’m very sorry Regina….” He said quietly as he pulled away.

“It’s OK, “said Regina softly, “why don’t you all come in?”
Regina knew that Emma was in the other room and Fredrick was nearby, so she felt a bit safer inviting this drunk man into her home, though she hoped his visit would be over quickly. She was beginning to feel that wash of anxiety from over two years ago starting again.

“I am going to stay over at Fredrick’s tonight, but I wanted you to be the first one to know….WE’RE GETTING MARRIED!!” said Kathryn as she waved her left hand excitedly in front of Regina.

“Oh Kathryn!” exclaimed Regina with a smile and a sigh as she held Kathryn’s hand to look at the very sizeable ring that Fredrick had given her. “I am so happy for you!”

Regina reached for Fredrick’s hand and squeezed it in hers as well, adding with a smile directed at him, “I am so happy for both of you!”

Regina embraced Kathryn warmly in the entrance of the cabin. She truly was happy for her friend and she knew that Kathryn was insanely happy with Fredrick. Originally, Regina had worried that their relationship was strictly physical, but over time, Regina could see that they had evolved into so much more. More than that, Fredrick treated Kathryn with kindness and respect, generosity and love. Fredrick treated Kathryn like Emma treated her, and, in the end, that was what mattered. Regina knew that Fredrick would make Kathryn happy, and she knew, from direct experience, that Kathryn would do everything in her power to take care of Fredrick.

During the brief moment of silence that surrounded their embrace and well-wishes, no one had really noticed that Leroy had become more awake and aware. Evidently, he had taken a keen interest in their conversation because he soon piped up.

“Hey, Fredrick, maybe you can get that dyke half-sister of yours to help you with the wedding,” said Leroy with a smirk. “I haven’t seen her around town a lot lately, so maybe she skipped, but I know she hangs out with that old fucker, Marco, doesn’t she? Always thought that was kind of weird. Maybe she makes exceptions and is giving him some? She’s so easy on the fucking eyes, even if she is nothing more than a handyman…”

About the time, Leroy started his speech, Emma walked around the corner of the bedroom. She heard everything that Leroy said and she stood stock still staring at Fredrick, Kathryn and Regina. She was beet red from embarrassment from her chest to the top of her head and she had a look of panic in her eyes that was undeniable.

“That’s ENOUGH, Leroy. KNOCK IT OFF!” demanded Fredrick with a dangerous glint in his eye. Fredrick hadn’t seen Emma, but he had heard enough from this bastard to last a lifetime and he just wanted him to shut up. Regina stared at Leroy in disbelief that he had just insulted Emma, the love of her life; in her own home. She glared at him dangerously and the vein in her forehead popped as she ground her teeth and worked her jaw in anger. Kathryn looked disgustedly at Leroy before turning her attention to Regina, who was looking dangerously pissed. When she looked beyond Regina, Kathryn gasped and her eyes went wide as she saw Emma in the doorway of the living room, by the door of the Master. Emma had heard everything and Kathryn could tell that she was on the cusp of bolting. Regina saw and heard Kathryn and looked back to see Emma in the doorway of the bedroom.

“Emma….” She said in desperation, knowing it was too late. Emma bolted for the back door, keys in hand, and ran around the side of the house into the darkness. Leroy, meanwhile, continued his tirade unabated.

“Come on, Fredrick, she’s just confused. What she needs is a guy like me to help straighten things out for her,” he chuckled as he massaged his crotch and punched Fredrick playfully in the shoulder.
before looking back over his shoulder and out the window where Emma was jumping in her Bug. Continuing to massage his crotch strongly, he added threateningly “Yeah, I’d tap that good.”

Fredrick turned to face Leroy. He was livid, but as he opened his mouth to start yelling, he heard a distinct crack and Leroy crumpled into a heap in the floor.

Turning around with wide eyes, both Kathryn and Fredrick looked at Regina. Her chest was heaving and her face was beet red. She stood shaking with her fist clenched, and she was hunched over slightly from the force of the blow that she had delivered.

“Holy shit, Mayweather,” was all that Kathryn could say before Regina was yanking open the front door and running into the driveway. She was too late. All she could see was the tail lights of the bug as Emma’s car disappeared down the driveway and into the tree line. Regina stood in the driveway, fists still clenched at her sides. Her right hand was starting to throb horribly, but that was the least of her worries right now.

She felt a presence behind her and turned around quickly, hands up, locked and loaded and ready for another confrontation.

“Regina! It’s OK. It’s me,” said Kathryn quickly pressing her palms out in front of her to show her that she was ‘unarmed’ and trying to stave off another attack.

Regina dropped her hands to her sides, but there was a fire that had been ignited in her eyes that was unmistakable.

“Please tell me I did not just lose Emma because of that asshole, Kathryn,” said Regina as she pointed her right index finger at the front door of the house where Fredrick was dragging out a completely dazed Leroy to be dumped in the bed of his truck. Regina’s jaw was clenched and her chest heaved with determination and anger. Regina had a protective fire in her eyes that Kathryn had never seen.

“No, sweetie, I don’t think you lost Emma, but,” Kathryn sighed as she took Regina’s right hand and held it up gently to inspect it in the moonlight, “I do think you broke your hand and we need to get you to the hospital.”

Regina threw up her hands with a guttural cry as she stomped back into the house to find an ice pack, get Henry ready and collect a few things to take with her to the ER.

A few moans could be heard coming from the truck bed as Fredrick walked up beside Kathryn.

“Is she going to be OK?” he asked with concern as they both stared intently at the, still open, front door. Regina abandoned her original goal of getting the ice pack. Instead, she paced decidedly inside the house, taking deep breaths and trying to get her wits about her. From time to time, she would throw up her hands and talk to herself, or she would stop, face the back windows, clench both hands at her sides, bounce on the balls of her feet and tilt her head back to release a loud groan of utter frustration, before resuming her pacing again. Fredrick and Kathryn watched in stunned amazement as Regina sought to dispel the nervous and angry energy that had built up and was finally releasing after many, many years. If Regina’s hand WAS broken, then she was owning this pain like a boss.

Kathryn looked at Fredrick with a decided smirk, “Oh yeah…. I think she’s gonna be just fine….”

Emma drove directly to Marco’s shop. It proved to be a good decision on her part, since the Bug sputtered and died just as she reached the storefront.
Emma extracted herself from the front seat; she was both angry and embarrassed. Regina knew that she was nothing more than a handyman, but she had never acted like it was a big deal. Yet, here was Leroy, dredging it up and reminding everyone again. If there was ever a doubt that Regina’s and her relationship was doomed to failure because of Emma’s position in life, it had been eradicated this evening thanks to that bastard.

Opening the engine compartment at the back of the car, Emma stared at the motor for a moment before kicking the toe of her work boot into the bumper multiple times. As she continued to kick the bumper, Marco walked from inside the store and stood beside Emma, watching her intently.

“Emma….Emma….it’s OK, “ said Marco gently, laying a hand on her arm to stop her from putting any more dents in the bumper than were already there.

“Dammit, Marco….I don’t need this right now,” said Emma with one last forceful kick to the bumper and an exasperated sigh. She continued to look at the smoking engine while holding up the engine compartment door, tinkering randomly with her other hand, testing the security of parts. Emma prayed that maybe one of these forceful jiggles might work a part back into place for a while and allow the car to come back to life. No dice. And….just her luck.

Marco looked at Emma’s face, her brow was filled with defeat and her eyes were starting to fill with tears. She swallowed hard and pursed her lips angrily trying not to let any of the tears fall. She failed as a single tear rolled down her cheek and then another. This car wasn’t the problem. Emma had fixed it plenty of times before with Fredrick’s help or by herself. It took time and money, but she always managed to get it working again. There was something else.

“Ahhhh, Emma. Don’t you worry. Michael, he owes me a favor. He’ll get it fixed up for you when the shop opens tomorrow, “Marco hoped his words were helping, even if just a little bit.

“Why don’t you come inside for a bit and we can talk, eh? I can make you some of that hot cocoa you always liked so much,” Marco dipped his head and caught Emma’s eyes. She gave him a pained smiled and nodded her head sadly. He took the engine compartment door from Emma’s hand and let it fall back into place before wrapping his arm around Emma’s shoulder, turning her gently and guiding her into the shop where he sat her on the stool at the front counter and retreated to the back to make some cocoa with whipped cream and cinnamon, just the way she always liked it.

Marco carried two large mugs with him when he returned from the back. They were probably filled with more whip than cocoa, but it made for the perfect combination of sweet cream and bitter chocolate as it melded together gradually. On top, he had sprinkled a dash of cinnamon. Setting the mug of steaming comfort in front of Emma, Marco pulled a stool over and sat beside her. He waited, allowing Emma to collect her thoughts as she took a few sips of hot cocoa.

“Fredrick’s asked Kathryn to marry him, “she said softly.

“I thought you liked Kathryn, “he responded confused.

“I do, and I think Kathryn and Fredrick will be very happy together,” Emma noticed the confusion in Marco’s face and heaved an exasperated sigh.

“I just….I just wanted the same for Regina and I, but how can something like ‘us’ even work? Fredrick can give Kathryn anything she will ever want or need. What can I give Regina that she doesn’t already have or can’t already get? I don’t have the money to buy her a decent ring. Hell, I can’t even scrape together enough money to fix my car. How could I ever take care of her and Henry?” Emma looked at Marco with pleading eyes. “I love her…I love her so much that it hurts to
be away from her for even a minute, but I’m just a handyman, Marco. That’s all I am and it’s all I’ll
ever be. She deserves better than me.”

“Oh, Emma. If I had a Lira for every time someone said that to me or I said it to myself….I would
be a very rich man,” sighed Marco with a gentle smile. “but don’t you think you should let Miss
Regina decide what she needs and what she deserves instead of you making the decision for her?”

Emma continued to sip her cocoa, her eyes looking over the rim of the mug and to the floor as she
pondered, half-heartedly, Marco’s question.

Reaching out, Marco patted the top of her other hand that sat upon the counter before continuing,

“Wait right here, Emma.”

Marco went to the back but returned after a moment. He held a frame in his hand which he handed
to Emma. Emma put on her glasses to look more closely. The frame contained the picture of a
young girl of only sixteen or seventeen. She wore a very simple, cap sleeved, button front, v-neck
dress that fit tightly on her torso before flaring into a skirt that extended to mid-calf. She wore
pumps and a large brimmed hat which she held with one hand while holding out the side of her skirt
with the other. She was looking to her right, smiling and laughing on a street that must have been a
part of Marco’s village in Italy. Emma had seen the picture a thousand times before in the workshop
or in the back room of the store. She always assumed it was Marco’s favorite sister that he was so
close to and always spoke so fondly of. The girl was beautiful and seemed so carefree and happy.
Emma had tried many times to imagine what it must feel like to feel that way, like the burdens of the
world had been lifted from your shoulders, even if only for the momentary click of the camera’s
shutter.

Marco settled himself again in the chair beside Emma and watched her look at the picture for a
moment before he spoke,

“Emma, have I ever told you about my wife?”

Emma looked up from the picture and stared, blank-faced, at Marco with her mouth slightly opened.
In twenty years, through countless talks and stories, Emma had never once heard Marco mention
anything about a wife; yet, here she was, evidently, holding a picture of the woman that had claimed
Marco’s heart, once upon a time.

“This….This is your wife?” said Emma in confusion and amazement.

“I-I didn’t know you had a wife….” Emma trailed off, looking back down at the picture.

“Emma, Emma, Emma, ” Marco chuckled softly, “I was quite the catch back in my village; I will
have you know,” he ended with a teasing wink. Emma grinned, still staring at the picture.

“This,” Marco tapped the picture frame a couple of times with his index finger, “is my Teresa. She
was sixteen in this picture and she was beautiful,” Marco said wistfully with a dreamy look in his
eyes. Emma smiled softly at him as she listened to his words.

“I was fifteen years old. I was walking to the toy shop one day and I see this beautiful girl. She’s
coming down the steps of the church, holding her hat, so the wind doesn’t take it and she looks at me
and smiles. I have never seen a smile so beautiful in all my life,” Emma watched Marco smile as he
recounted the beautiful face burned in his memory.
“Well, I was walking with my father and I said, ‘Papa, that is the girl that I want to marry…’” Marco pointed to an imaginary image at the center of the shop as Emma watched.

“Now, what I don’t realize, but my Papa does, is that this beautiful girl is the daughter of one of the richest men in the town, so he laughs a bit at my words and he tells me to ‘take my head out of the clouds’ and ‘stop wasting my time on foolish thoughts and dreams’, but I know that she had given that smile to me and I was young and fool-hardy, so Marco,” he said wagging his finger, “was not so easily persuaded,” he grinned proudly at Emma who was enraptured by his story and grinned back.

“So every day at the same time, I walked by this church on my way to the shop, hoping to see her again. Many days passed and I start to wonder if maybe I missed my chance, and maybe all I would have is the memory of that beautiful smile. I had almost given up, but then, one day, I’m late for work and as I passed by the church, there she is. She’s as beautiful as the first day I saw her, and I can’t help but stop. She looks at me and smiles; just like the first day, only this time, I smile back. I think that in that moment, we both knew that each other was the one.”

Marco took a deep breath before continuing the story.

“Well, don’t think for one minute that her family is happy about me. ‘He’s only a toy maker’. ‘He has no money’. ‘What can he give you?’. ‘You will never have anything’. ‘Is this the life you want to live?’ Every day, they tell her the same thing, but, every day, she comes back to the church steps to see me. She sees something in me that no one else sees…even I wonder what she sees in me. What do I have to offer such a beautiful woman like this? Eventually, I ask her to marry me. The ring is so simple; just a thin, white-gold band, but you would think that that I handed her the crown jewels. She was seventeen years old and I was sixteen when we married. Her family disapproved very much and we struggled, but we were on top of the world….because we had each other. Every day, she smiled. It didn’t matter how bad things were,” Marco’s eyes were brimmed with tears, “and, believe me, there were days when even I thought it couldn’t get worse, but still, she smiled at me and told me that everything was gonna be all right.”

Marco took the frame from Emma’s hands and opened the back. Behind the original picture lay a small stack of hidden photos that Marco withdrew from the frame. He turned them to look at each one before handing each to Emma.

“This is my wedding day.” Marco said as he handed her the picture.

Emma looked at the photo. It was a picture of a much younger, and very handsome, Marco. He was dressed in a grey, wool suit and smiled broadly as he lifted Teresa in his arms. She was in a simple white dress, almost exactly the same as the one in the other photograph. She laughed with her head thrown back as she held Marco’s hat on her head; her own hat held in the hand that was thrown around Marco’s shoulders. They looked so in love and so happy.

“And this was the day we moved into our apartment in Italy…..”

The picture had been taken from the door, and aside from the other door that led to the small bathroom, everything was contained in a small square that looked to hold no more than a few cupboards, a table for two, a full-sized bed, a chest and a small armoire. Marco and Teresa looked a few years older, perhaps in their early-twenties now, but they were still so young….and still so in love. Teresa sat on Marco’s lap as he sat on the bed. Her palm was on the side of his face and they smiled at each other as their foreheads touched.

“You may recognize this place…..”

Emma saw the front of Marco’s house in Storybrooke. It looked so new and everything was so
alive. Flowers lined the front walk and trimmed hedges spanned the windows and front of the porch. The paint was fresh and clean. At the top of the stairs, Marco stood, holding Teresa in his arms like a pair of newlyweds ready to enter the house. They might have been in their mid- or late-thirties, but you would have thought they were still the teenagers from their wedding day; brilliant smiles still graced their lips, reserved only for each other.

Marco’s hand came forward much slower with the next picture.

“This was the day before the doctor told us that she only had another month to live….” said Marco solemnly and haltingly.

He held the picture out for Emma and she looked at Marco before taking the photo from trembling fingers. Teresa kneeled by the walkway at the front of the house. She was tending the flowers, but had looked up momentarily. A huge smile played on her lips and she waved enthusiastically at the camera. Emma could only imagine that Marco had been behind the camera. She recognized the gentleness and love in the smile. Teresa looked to be in her late forties.

Marco held only one picture in his hand and he stared at it for a while, tears brimming in his eyes. He spoke almost in a whisper as he handed it to Emma with a badly shaking hand.

“This was taken a week before my Teresa died…..”

Emma watched Marco sadly before looking down at the picture. It broke her heart. Marco sat on a chair beside Teresa’s hospital bed. He had leaned far in to place his cheek against his wife’s as her head laid against the pillow. She had no hair, having lost it to chemotherapy treatments, and she looked tired. That youthful sparkle that had shone in her eyes in the previous pictures was now replaced by a dimmer light recognizing a life well-lived, but soon to pass. Regardless, her smile was there, just as beautiful as ever, and her eyes looked at Marco as he looked into the lens of the camera with a sad, struggling smile on his face.

Marco stuttered slightly as he continued the story.

“In a few more days, Teresa’s mouth would be filled with so many sores from the treatments that she could no longer speak, but before that day, we talked as much as she was able and I asked her why she chose me and why she stayed for all those years even though we had basically nothing. She tells me that, in 30 years, there was never a day that went by that I didn’t make her smile. She tells me that, no matter how bad things were or how little we had, she always knew that we would be OK, because we had each other. She said that I always loved her, just how she was, and in the end, nothing else really matters……”

Marco took a few deep breaths trying to calm himself before he continued,

“I was with her on the day that she died. I held her hand. It was peaceful when she slipped away and she still had that smile on her face,” Marco’s eyes were distant and filled with tears, “There is not a day that goes by that I don’t miss her, Emma, and I’m so glad that I didn’t give up. I am so glad that I didn’t convince myself that I wasn’t good enough. I am so glad that I didn’t stop walking by that church, because in the end, the money didn’t matter. The material things didn’t matter. What mattered was that we were together, side-by-side, through it all.”

Marco’s tears flowed freely now and his chest heaved as he took deep, ragged breaths. He held his hand over his eyes trying to keep Emma from seeing the tears, but the stains of them were on his cheeks and shirt. Laying the photos reverently on the counter, Emma stood and stepped over to where Marco sat on his stool. Wrapping one arm around his shoulders and one around his neck, she laid her cheek on top of his hair and rocked him gently, whispering,
“It’s OK, Papa…” As the words slipped from her lips; it felt like the most natural thing and the tears rolled freely from her eyes as she realized fully what this man meant to her too.

Emma stood comforting Marco for a long time before she felt him nod against her, signifying that he was feeling better and able to continue. She sat back on her stool, taking one of his hands in each of her own.

“We were never able to have children, even though we wanted to fill the house with them. It just wasn’t to be, so I think that she had a hand in bringing us together, “ Marco pointed his index finger towards the heavens, “I think she knew that we each still had a space in our hearts to fill; that we needed each other…..”

Emma huffed a quiet laugh and nodded, smiling softly at Marco.

“She would have loved you, Emma, so much,” said Marco tenderly as he tapped Emma gently on the cheek a couple of times. “I see so much of her in you. She was stubborn, beautiful, competitive, passionate, protective, generous, fierce…..” Emma looked at Marco with a hint of surprise at the last word.

“Don’t you think for one minute that my Teresa would step aside…..or just let something walk away. If she loved you, then you were worth fighting for,” Marco winked and grinned at Emma. She was glad that Teresa’s memory could calm his heart and bring back his smile.

Marco looked at Emma as he reached into his pocket,

“And that’s why she, and I, would be honored to have you take these for Miss Regina…..”

Marco held out his hand. In his palm were two rings, both white gold and each with a baroque, scrolling pattern. One ring was a simple, wide band. It was probably made for a male but delicate enough to compliment a woman’s engagement ring beautifully. The other ring was a bit more feminine, but still quite substantial, and held a very large, diamond solitaire. Emma guessed that they had belonged to Marco and Teresa, respectively, and, like them, the rings formed a single, beautiful whole.

“When I had saved enough money, I bought us both a little something better….she wore this,” Marco showed Emma the solitaire, “with her first ring. She asked me to lay her to rest with that one, so she would have me with her for all eternity…..”

Emma looked at the rings and then at Marco. Her eyes were full of tears and her mouth gaped open and closed several times as she tried to form words,

“I-I don’t know what to say…."

“Emma, I think you know exactly what to say and who you need to say it to…..” said Marco with a gentle smile.

Marco held his hand under Emma’s as he slid the rings from his hand into her palm and then closed her fingers around them, patting her fist lovingly.

“Now, I need to show you one more thing. Christmas is coming soon you know,” said Marco with a devious grin.

Rising from his stool, he led Emma to the back of the shop. There stood an antique, burled walnut, baby grand piano. The keys were in good condition, but the wood on the body of the piano left a lot to be desired. Gouge marks and scratches littered the surface; half of the music stand was missing.
and it stood lopsided because of a half-broken leg in front. Emma’s mind was already turning with possibilities and Marco knew it.

“The music conservatory in Portland; they sent me this piano because they don’t know what else to do with it. It’s in bad shape, but it plays. The guy that delivered it played it lopsided, but it sounded OK,” laughed Marco, “what do you think, Emma?”

“I think I have some ideas,” said Emma with a HUGE smile.

Regina, Kathryn and Fredrick had been waiting for over one and a half hours in an absolutely empty waiting room. They had finally gotten Regina and Henry into the car, and Kathryn drove Regina to the ER while Fredrick dumped Leroy somewhere to sleep it off, promising to join them in a bit. Regina had calmed considerably, but continued to tap her foot incessantly as she sat waiting to be called back. Kathryn wondered if Regina had now moved from anger to nervousness at being in the too familiar setting of the hospital, but Regina’s still-clenched jaw, pursed lips and darting eyes told Kathryn that it was probably some combination of both. What Kathryn knew for sure was that the rhythmic thumping of Regina’s foot was lulling her to sleep after an incredibly tiring, completely eventful, and totally unusual day. Kathryn had almost hit the cusp of deep sleep against Fredrick’s shoulder when she was startled awake by a voice.

“Regina Mills….” called the nurse from the double doors that led further into the Emergency Room.

“I’ll go with you…” said Kathryn groggily as Regina rose from her seat with Henry’s carrier.

“No, it's OK. You can go, if you would like. I’ve already been enough trouble for the two of you on what should have been a special day. Just leave me the keys to the car. I can drive myself home,” said Regina with a sigh as she held out her hand to take the keys. Regina had seen enough Emergency Rooms over the past several years that she could probably describe, to the minute, how this visit would go.

Kathryn hesitated as she looked at her friend. She had been to the ER with Regina too many times, and she knew that Regina was usually in no shape, emotionally or physically, to drive after they released her. Since she had moved to Maine, Regina had made huge strides in taking back control of her life, but finding full absolution was going to take a lot of time; time that had not yet passed. In fact, Kathryn wasn’t even certain that she should let Regina go back to the exam room by herself.

Finally, Kathryn partially conceded.

“Why don’t we get the diagnosis first and then take it from there? Go ahead and leave Henry with us and we’ll wait here till you come back out. Just let them know if you need me to come back. OK?”

Regina nodded and handed Henry’s carrier to Kathryn before following the nurse back to an exam room behind the double doors.

Regina looked around the room as she sat on the exam table. She had been waiting 30 minutes since the x-rays had been taken and the ice pack had started to warm. Wincing a bit, she removed the now-cool pack and surveyed the damage. The side of her right hand was swollen, making her knuckles almost indistinguishable from each other. The only prominent feature was the bump that had formed below the knuckle of her little finger on the back of her hand. She wondered briefly if Sarah’s hands had looked like this after she had put Regina in the hospital. Regina closed her eyes and took a few, deep, calming breaths trying to drive the thoughts and images from her mind.
Why...why did you have to go there, Regina?

Pianissimo, forte, fortissimo, sforzando, smorzando, morendo, perdendo..... she began as she rocked back and forth anxiously. Every damn one of these hospitals looked, smelled and felt exactly the same and, if she never saw another one of them, it would be too damn soon. Take control...take control and breathe...

God, she wished Emma was here with her. She would sit beside her, arm around her shoulders and tell Regina that everything was going to be OK. Emma would help draw her back from the edge of the panic attack that was threatening to overtake her right now. Instead, Emma was running. And why wouldn’t she? Regina would never forget the look of embarrassment and devastation on Emma’s face as Leroy made a mockery of her life in front of all of them; questioning her sexuality, accusing the only person that had truly taken care of her of impropriety, insinuating her lack of worth due to her job. How could she make Emma understand that nothing Leroy said made a damn bit of difference to her. She knew who Emma was, and, dammit, she wanted everything that Emma was, exactly as she was. Right now, the only thing that really mattered to Regina was Emma and Henry, and, instead of all of them being together, Emma was gone, Henry was in the lobby with Kathryn and Regina sat (once again) on an exam table in an Emergency Room; this time, nursing a broken hand. She needed to be out looking for Emma. Where the hell was the damn doctor.....?

Regina was startled by the sound of the curtain being drawn back beside the bed. She looked pointedly at the person who had interrupted her thoughts before realizing it was her doctor. He was a medium-built man of around 5’11”, probably in his late 60’s or early 70’s. His hair was thick and white as was his beard and moustache. He wore a set of reading glasses and carried a thick chart in his hand that Regina assumed had been sent to Storybrooke Hospital from her doctors in Boston. She always seemed to wind up in the Emergency Room for some reason, so it had seemed like the logical place to send it while she found permanent physicians.

“Hello there!” he said jovially to Regina.

“Hello,” responded Regina with a sigh, hoping her lack of words and enthusiasm would quell any desire for small talk that he might be entertaining.

“Regina Mills….now there’s a name that I don’t recognize. You must be new here. Welcome to Storybrooke.”

“Yes, I have lived here for about 6 months.”

“Ahhhh, I see. Well, eventually, everyone makes their way through Storybrooke ER for some reason or another. Looks like today was your lucky day…”

“I am not sure I would use lucky to describe the day or the evening that I am having right now,” stated Regina dryly.

“Well, perhaps not,” chuckled the doctor softly as he held out his hand for her to shake. “My name is Dr. Whale.”

Regina took the hand he offered with her left and engaged in an awkward handshake with him before he pulled a rolling stool over to the edge of the bed. There, he looked through the thick chart, and she could only imagine what he was thinking as he flipped through the pages. Multiple ER admissions, a plethora of physical exams and follow-up exams, surgeon’s reports, physical therapy updates, social services interviews, police reports; if it could be captured for medical posterity, then it was probably in there. Eventually, he finished his review and closed the file, placing it on the bed beside her.
“So, what do we have going on this evening then?” he asked as he took her right hand gently with his own and turned his head to survey it from all sides.

“Let’s me guess,” he said with a grin while looking over his glasses at her, “bar fight?”

“I-I’m sorry?”

“No, you’re dressed too impeccably for a Storybrooke bar….MMA fighter? Starting a Storybrooke Fight Club, perhaps?”

Regina looked at the doctor like he was off his rocker, but finally realized that he was trying to bring some levity to the entire, asinine situation. It would be easy to offer the typical words of sympathy that everyone else seemed to after seeing her records, but Dr. Whale wanted none of that evidently.

“I hit a drunk man that insulted my….uhhhh,” Regina paused, staring at her swollen hand, trying to think of what she should even call Emma…partner…girlfriend….significant other….every term just seemed too ordinary to describe the bond that they shared.

“Her fiancée,” came a soft, familiar voice from the exam room door.

Emma walked Marco home and hugged him goodbye. As she turned to walk down the steps from the house, Marco called after her and she stopped without turning around.

“Emma, there will always be people that will tell you that you can’t do something and that you aren’t good enough. Don’t give them any more help by saying it too, eh?”

Emma walked along the lamp-lit, main street of Storybrooke sorting through the events of the evening and trying to wrap her mind around it all. She shouldn’t have run. Emma realized, now, that the look in Regina’s eyes hadn’t been one of shame or disappointment, but one of fear and concern that Emma would do exactly what she had done. How could she have been so stupid as to plant the seed of doubt in Regina’s mind that, every time things would get uncomfortable or tough, she would bolt? Regina didn’t need that type of person for her or for Henry and that wasn’t who Emma wanted to be for them. She had to fix this. She had to find Regina and explain. And THAT was easier said than done when your car sat broken and abandoned in front of a shop down the street.

Emma was shaken from her thoughts by the sound of voices calling to her. Looking up, she saw several of the emergency and fire squad volunteers waving her over to where they sat playing cards in the warm glow of one of the empty, engine bays. Emma pretty much knew everyone in the town, having lived there almost all of her life, and these guys were no exception. Waving back, she jogged over to them to talk, and perhaps, convince them to let her hitch a ride to a spot closer to the cabin. Her wish was granted a few minutes later when the life squad was summoned to a minor accident at one of the intersections.

The hospital wasn’t the most ideal spot, but it was better than her current location and the cabin could be reached by foot from that point.

Emma turned to return a wave to the squad as she pushed through the double doors and into the waiting room of the ER. As she faced forward again, she caught sight of two, familiar figures huddled into a small bench in the corner of the lobby, and beside them was a baby carrier that she recognized immediately.

Emma’s heart started pounding like it was going to burst out of her chest as Fredrick and Kathryn
looked up at her. Each was startled by the other’s presence, and no one could seem to figure out how all of them had succeeded in winding up at the same place this evening. Emma had no idea why Kathryn, Fredrick and Henry were there, but she knew one thing: she didn’t see Regina.

“Emma?!?!” said Kathryn in disbelief.

Emma walked quickly towards Kathryn. Her brow was furrowed in concentration and she spoke in an authoritative way that Kathryn had never heard before. Emma pointed at the carrier as she moved,

“IS HENRY, OK??”

“Y-yes, he’s fine. He’s OK…” said Kathryn, still trying to wrap her mind around how the hell Emma was there with them.

“WHERE’S REGINA?!!?!”

Kathryn was so caught off guard by Emma’s presence and the commanding tone that she simply pointed, mouth open and eyes wide, at the double-doors that Regina had entered about 45 minutes prior.

Emma crashed through the doors at a sprint. She was about halfway down the hall when she heard two familiar voices coming from one of the rooms. Slowing to a brisk walk, she tried to pinpoint the exact door that the sound was coming from. Drawing close to one of them, she could see Dr. Whale sitting on the stool as he held one of Regina’s hands. It looked swollen and painful. Emma tuned into the conversation they were having.

“….bar fight?”

“I-I’m sorry?”

“No, you’re dressed too impeccably for a Storybrooke bar….MMA fighter? Starting a Storybrooke Fight Club, perhaps?”

“I hit a drunk man that insulted my….uhhhh….”

Emma heard Regina pause and she prayed that the next word wouldn't be ‘handyman’ or ‘friend’ or start with ‘ex-‘. There was one way to assure it didn't. Stepping into the room quietly, Emma finished the sentence, saying the one thing that sounded right and perfect and (hopefully) true,

“Her fiancée….”

“Emma…,” gasped Regina as she looked towards the doorway. Her face was awash in shock and relief and she closed her eyes for a moment to ground herself, praying that Emma’s presence was real and not just some wishful thinking or illusion brought on by her anxiety and nervousness. When she reopened her eyes, Emma still stood there in the doorway and she allowed herself to breath out the air that she had been holding in her lungs.

“Well, Emma Swan, “said Dr. Whale with a smile as he recognized the woman at the door, “I haven’t seen you around in a few months.”

“Hi, Victor,” said Emma with a shy grin and a quick wave. Standing up as Emma approached, he gathered her in his arms and gave her a huge hug that almost lifted her off the floor. For an older gentleman, he seemed to be quite strong. Releasing Emma from the hug, he stood with his arm
wrapped tightly around her shoulders, hugging her to him as he continued talking; this time addressing Regina.

“You know, Emma’s been our next door neighbor since she was a little girl. There wasn’t a day that went by that we didn’t see her working hard in that shop with Marco. Of course, she’d take a break whenever my wife would call her over for some fresh baked cookies,” he said with a laugh and a huge smile, “isn’t that right Emma?”

Emma grinned at the floor and blushed as Dr. Whale spilled her dietary secrets and vices. Wagging an index finger at Regina, he added,

“Oatmeal raisin. Works every time. Guaranteed.” He offered Regina a quick wink as he gave Emma a reassuring squeeze.

“Now, Emma, why don’t you hop up there next to your fiancée, so we can get this sorted out and get you two on your way?”

Dr. Whale continued to pull a few things together as Emma sat down on the bed beside Regina. Immediately, Emma felt Regina snug herself into her side as her left arm slipped under Emma’s right to entwine their fingers. Regina squeezed her hand tightly and Emma pressed her nose and lips into Regina’s hair, kissing her head softly.

“Are you OK?” whispered Emma into the silky strands of hair that were tickling her lips and nose. She could feel Regina nod.

“I am now.”

Emma extracted her right arm and wrapped it around Regina’s shoulders, replacing her left hand into Regina’s, so she had something to grip in case she needed to.

Dr. Whale continued to talk as he rifled through drawers and inspected the x-rays taken earlier.

“You know, Emma, my wife’s been asking me where you snuck off to. Of course, now that I have met your beautiful, fiancée here, I can imagine that you would want to spend every minute that you can with her. That being said,” he stated in a mock-serious tone while pointing a syringe at both of them, “Glenda is going to find out that I saw you and she will be really mad if I tell her that I didn't invite you both to dinner, so do an old man a favor; give her a call and keep me out of trouble, will ya?” Dr. Whale grinned as he looked at her over his glasses.

Dr. Whale rolled the stool up to the bed once more with a tray of supplies in tow. Taking Regina’s hand again gently, he pressed his thumb lightly into the swollen flesh below her little finger and Emma felt Regina squeeze her hand in anticipation of the pain. Emma could tell from Dr. Whale’s face and gaze that he was doing this by feel alone.

“There you are,” he said triumphantly as he felt what he was searching for beneath the skin.

“Well, Regina, you have a boxer’s fracture below your little finger. I suspected that was what it was. I can feel it and see it in the x-rays. It’s not bad. It will heal fast and well, but I need to pop it back into place. I can numb it if you want me to, but sometimes the stick is worse.”

Dr. Whale looked at Regina and flicked his eyes to Emma who was also watching for her decision.

“Just set it.”

Dr. Whale grinned.
“Damn, Emma, you got a tough one here.”

Dr. Whale took Regina’s hand and massaged his thumb into the spot where it had been earlier. It hurt, only a little, and Regina braced herself for the more considerable pain that she expected next, but hadn’t yet come, by squeezing Emma’s hand. Emma returned the squeeze and hugged Regina’s shoulders tightly. As he continued to prod her hand gently but firmly, Dr. Whale continued to engage Regina in conversation to keep her mind off the process.

“So….who did you land this right hook on?”

“Some guy named Leroy,” whispered Regina embarrassedly as she continued to wait for the real pain that always seemed to come with these visits.

Dr. Whale laughed heartily, “Are you KIDDING ME?!?!?! You hit Leroy?!?!?”

Regina was taken aback at the reaction she was getting from the admission and blushed heartily as she leaned into Emma.

“Some of the longest shifts of my life have started with Leroy coming through those doors. Believe me, you’re not the first person that has wanted to punch Leroy, but you are the first one of us that was actually brave enough to do it!”

Whale continued to massage Regina’s hand as he rolled back his stool a bit and looked out at the desk,

“Hey Eugenia! Come here!”

An elderly woman in a nurse’s uniform walked over to the door of the room where they sat. As soon as she arrived, Dr. Whale filled her in,

“This beautiful woman clocked Leroy! Can you believe that?”

“Good for you, sweetheart,” said the nurse with a satisfied smirk, “about time somebody did it. Whatever he did, I’m sure he deserved it.” Turning around and walking away, everyone in the room distinctly heard when she muttered her last sentence, “Leroy’s a twat waffle.”

Dr. Whale, Emma and Regina raised their eyebrows and then snickered at the elderly nurse’s colorful description as Dr. Whale gently replaced Regina’s hand back on her thigh.

“All set, but don’t move it. I need to get the splint on it.”

Regina was in shock that Dr. Whale had already set her hand without no more than a slight bit of discomfort.

“You set it?” said Regina in awe.

“Yes. And if you think that was easy; you should see how easily I can deliver a baby,” said Dr. Whale with a wink at Regina before he raised an eyebrow at Emma and smirked, “I hope you’re planning to have a boatload, because you know Marco wants a house full of grand kids,” he finished with a chuckle.

Regina’s face changed from one of awe to one of panic, and Emma’s eyes blew wide as her mouth fell open and she blushed a bright pink.

“I….uhhhh….ummmm,” stuttered Emma as she looked at the ground and rubbed the back of her
neck. She hadn't even officially asked Regina to marry her yet, let alone talk about something like children. The good news was that Regina hadn't bolted out of the room screaming during either one of the exchanges, so it might be a good sign.

Dr. Whale chuckled a bit at both of their reactions before adding,

“Look, why don’t you two take some time to enjoy each other’s company and talk about it. When you’re ready, give the office a call. I think we can help you.”

Regina looked at him confused.

Patting Regina’s knee he chuckled, “That’s the benefits of living in a small town. You pretty much get to see me for everything.”

Dr. Whale placed the splint on Regina’s hand. It kept her ring and small finger extended but allowed movement in her other fingers. It wasn't ideal, but it gave her more latitude than she was expecting and, at least she would still be able to cook Thanksgiving dinner.

“Regina,” said Dr. Whale with soft smile, “would you mind if I took a look at that shoulder, since you’re here?”

Regina gripped Emma’s hand strongly and looked at her with a mix of panic and confusion, not knowing how to respond to his request. Emma released her hand and cupped her cheek, brushing her thumb gently against the corner of her mouth.

“It’s up to you, baby. You don’t have to, if you don’t want to, but I think Dr. Whale might be able to suggest some things that could help. I’ll stay right here if you want me to.”

“Of course, Emma can stay, if that would make you feel more comfortable.”

Regina nodded at Dr. Whale timidly, not knowing what to expect, but knowing that some of the best doctors in the country had already told her that her range of motion would be limited and she would have pain for the remainder of her life. She was willing to let him look, but doubted that he would be able to give her any relief or assistance.

“Can you unbutton your shirt and sweater for me, please?”

Regina did as she was asked and sat, eyes filled with tears, staring at the ceiling. Once again, the shame that she had barely gotten over with Emma was on display for all to see. She laid her forehead in the crook of Emma’s neck as she sobbed; tears flowing down her cheeks and chest shaking softly. Dr. Whale watched Emma with sympathetic eyes as he used his hands to massage Regina’s shoulder.

“Regina, what do you wish you could do with this arm that you can’t do now?”

“I wish I could hold Henry for longer,” said Regina without hesitation.

“Who’s Henry?” asked Dr. Whale softly.

Regina kept her forehead pressed against Emma’s shoulder and neck as she answered,

“He’s our son….”

Emma gasped and her mouth fell open slightly as she looked down at Regina. A flood of warm emotion filled Emma’s heart and tears filled her eyes as she heard Regina’s words. Regina already
considered them a family….

Dr. Whale smiled as he saw the realization and love in Emma’s eyes. He had already seen the single-parent adoption request in Regina’s chart and he could tell that the admission was a surprise to Emma.

“Is that the only thing?”

“I wish I didn't have these scars as a constant reminder of a past that I just wish I could just forget,” said Regina, barely above a whisper. It was the most open and truthful things she had ever admitted to anyone.

“Well,” said Dr. Whale as he pulled her oxford and sweater back over her shoulder and indicated that she could rebutton everything, “I can’t tell you that I can get rid of the memories, but I think I can get rid of the reminders and help with stamina. Can you tell me just a little bit more about what happened?”

Dr. Whale listened as Regina recounted the details of the injuries she had suffered from that evening and everything that the doctors in Boston had told her. He shook his head at times, holding the bridge of his nose, amazed at what those doctors had led her to believe. Based on his exam, it all seemed so wrong and so much more complicated than was actually needed.

“Regina, would you be willing to undergo just one more surgery? I think I can help you, but it will require one more,” he paused only briefly before adding with a smile, “Emma can be with you every step of the way, even in the operating room, if that’s what you want.”

Regina looked between both of them, not knowing how to respond. She knew the pain of the surgeries and the after treatments, but she also knew the comfort and help that Emma would provide and the lure of being able to hold Henry for even five minutes longer in a day was too strong to deny.

Regina saw a smile on Emma that told her everything she needed to know.

“I can do it…one more time….” She said softly as she nodded her head.
There was an anticipatory tension between Regina and Emma as they drove back from the hospital. Before leaving, Emma had made arrangements for Kathryn and Fredrick to take Henry for the night. She and Regina needed to talk. There had been too many things left unsaid already this evening, starting with the reason for her abrupt departure, then there was her introduction of herself as Regina’s ‘fiancée’, followed by her spontaneous adoption of Henry via the words ‘our son’; never mind, the minor incident that happened when Dr. Whale had mentioned the possibility of a burgeoning family. She hadn’t handled that part well at all. She most definitely wanted more children. She wanted a house full, but she had no idea where Regina’s head was on the topic. Since they weren’t even confirmed ‘engaged’ yet, the discussion of more kids may be a moot point, but assuming all went better than expected and, considering it was going to be a night of uncomfortable discussions anyways, they may as well throw this one into the mix also.

If nothing else, Emma needed to make Regina understand that she could count on her to be there for both her and Henry, every minute of every day, as a friend or fiancée (hopefully) or wife (even better yet). They had already walked out of the hospital with a confirmed surgery date two days after Thanksgiving. The next few weeks would be rough, mentally and physically, and Emma wouldn’t let Regina down. Enough people had done that to her already.

Emma flicked her eyes towards Regina every so often during the ride home. Her elbow was settled on the lower frame of the window and she held her hand upright trying to limit the swelling. She had asked only for ibuprofen, since she wanted to be fully alert during the lead up to Thanksgiving Day as well as the big dinner that she had already planned. Even Dr. Whale and his wife had been invited at this point. Regina looked out the window with a soft smile on her face, oblivious to Emma’s glances. Regina looked so beautiful and peaceful, but there was something more tonight; Regina looked stronger.

God, I want to stay forever with you, if you and Henry will have me, thought Emma with a sigh.

“We’re home….” she whispered.

Regina stared out the window with a soft smile on her face as Emma drove. There was very little pain in her hand, but she kept it raised, just in case, to avoid any more swelling. She reveled in the events of the evening. She knew that Emma wanted to be a part of her and Henry’s lives. They weren’t going to be alone anymore. They would be safe and happy with the one person in the world that Regina felt truly loved them. And, no matter what Emma may believe, Regina knew that Emma could give them everything they would ever want and need. This sexy, incredible, beautiful handyman that had come to her door almost six months ago and turned her world upside down, now wanted to be her wife, and, oh god, she couldn’t be more excited. She wasn’t sure how Emma felt
about more kids though. She seemed hesitant. They would have to talk about that, because, if Emma was beside her, she wanted to fill the house with them. She couldn’t imagine them having a better mother, teacher and mentor than Emma.

Regina was happier than she had ever been and felt stronger than she had ever felt before. She had defended and protected her fiancée and future wife today. She found hope in Dr. Whale and trusted him implicitly, for some reason. This surgery might be the one that finally made her feel whole again; the surgery that would help her feel like she could be the best possible mother to Henry, mother to her future children and wife to Emma.

She needed Emma tonight. She needed to show Emma how much she loved her. Emma needed to see how much stronger she had helped her become. She wanted to give herself so completely to Emma tonight. She wanted to show Emma that she loved her and trusted her.

“We’re home…” she heard Emma whisper as the car came to a stop on the driveway.

Emma walked around the side of the car and opened the door for Regina, helping her stand from the seat before closing the door behind her.

“How is your hand feeling?” Emma asked quietly as she put on her glasses and then lifted Regina’s hand to look at the splint.

“Emma?”

Emma looked up at Regina with a furrowed brow and concerned eyes, unsure of whether she wanted to hear the question that was coming next.

“Do you really want me to be your wife?”

“God, Regina, more than anything,” breathed Emma into the cold night air. The words were still hanging as frost in the air when Regina wrapped her left hand tightly in the lapel of Emma’s coat and pulled them together in a searing kiss. Their lips had barely touched before Regina’s tongue was thrusting in and out of Emma’s mouth. Emma could tell that Regina intended to be in full control tonight, and god, she found that incredibly sexy. Emma braced her palms on the top frame of the car, to each side of Regina’s head, and pressed herself in closer as they continued to kiss. Regina released the lapel of Emma’s coat only to grasp the zipper and pull it down quickly; releasing the bottom clip and allowing the sides to fall open.

Emma gasped as cold air slipped under warm down and pressed against the thin fabric of her shirt. Her nipples strained against the lace of her bra. Regina’s left palm found Emma’s breast immediately and kneaded it strongly. Emma moaned softly into Regina’s mouth in time with her ministrations and a flood of wetness pooled in her core, dampening her panties and jeans. Feeling Emma’s rigid peak against her palm, Regina moved to take the bud between her forefinger and thumb. She pinched Emma’s nipple firmly before rolling it several times between her fingers. Emma moaned loudly into Regina’s mouth as her eyes rolled back slightly and her eyelids fluttered.

Regina broke their kiss and pressed her forehead to Emma’s, looking up at her through her lashes as she continued to tease Emma’s nipple. Emma’s lips were parted, her eyes were closed and she was panting heavily into the cold night air. She winced in pleasure and released a throaty groan each time Regina’s fingers pressed and released. Emma’s mind was spinning and she was having trouble making anything more than incoherent sounds.

“Is this what you like, baby?” Regina asked teasingly.
Emma nodded her head barely against Regina’s.

Regina slipped her hand under the bottom of Emma’s shirt and raked her fingernails over the taut skin of Emma’s stomach while she continued to watch Emma’s face. Emma drew a ragged breath and Regina felt Emma’s muscles twitch under her fingernails. Sliding her hand further up, Regina used her fingertips to push the cup of Emma’s bra up and over her right breast, exposing it fully to her fingers. Regina traced her fingertip around the circumference of Emma’s beautiful, pink nipple several times, barely touching the hardened peak, knowing that the brushes alone were drawing it further into an almost painful rigidity.

“P-p-please, Regina,” Emma breathed in agonized pleasure.

Emma could feel the hem of her shirt rise over her abs, exposing her stomach and breast to the night air and she felt the light press of Regina’s hand urging her to step back slightly. Emma looked into Regina’s eyes. They were blown wide and darkened with lust and desire. Emma’s chest heaved in anticipation and her hand moved to hold the hem of her shirt and her bra up, leaving Regina’s hand free to engage in whatever incredible pleasure was coming next. The night air was cold, but Emma didn’t even notice. Her skin felt like it was on fire and Regina was doing nothing more than fanning the flames.

Regina watched Emma as she opened her mouth slightly and ran the tip of her tongue along the bottom edge of her upper teeth. She gave a sensual smirk before looking down at Emma’s breast, watching her own fingertip brush down over Emma’s nipple lightly. Emma had followed her gaze and stood mesmerized as Regina repeated the motion again and again.

“Oh god,” breathed Emma quietly into the night air as her head fell back, her eyes closed and she gripped the edge of her shirt, wondering how she was even still standing.

“Do you want more, Emma?”

Emma could feel Regina’s hand supporting the weight of her breast. As she spoke, Emma could feel the caress of Regina’s hot breath on her nipple and the soft brush of her lips on the same. Emma swallowed hard and her mind frantically tried to arrange a coherent response to her lover’s question.

“I-I-….” was all she managed to pant out.

Sensing Emma’s struggle, Regina simply opened her mouth and wrapped her soft lips around sensitive flesh, sucking softly at first and then more fervently as she felt Emma’s fingers slide into her hair to hold her firmly to her breast; the increasing volume of Emma’s moans telling her that she was thoroughly enjoying the persistent and insistent tugging of Regina’s mouth. Regina swirled and flicked her tongue teasingly, before releasing with a pop. The alternating heat of Regina’s mouth and the blast of cold air upon release was creating a mind-blowing rush as Regina continued her incessant teasing.

Emma felt Regina’s hand on hers; pressing down to urge Emma to shield her exposed skin from the cold, night air. Emma followed Regina’s lead, lifting her head and looking at Regina with half-lidded eyes as her chest rose and fell slowly and heavily. Regina drew her face close to Emma’s placing quick licks and kisses on Emma’s parted lips.

“Take me inside, Emma,” Regina breathed sexily.

For as muddled as Emma’s brain felt from Regina’s prior teasing, it took her only an instant to snap back to the present and lift Regina, cradling her in her arms before kissing her deeply and walking them towards the door. Emma worked by feel alone, fumbling with the keys under Regina’s knees,
trying to get them into the locks, unwilling to break the passionate and heated kiss that they were currently engaged in. There were so many things that needed to be said tonight, but right now, words seemed to be secondary to the incredible, carnal desire that had overtaken both of them.

Once inside the foyer, Emma lowered Regina briefly to the ground, and they shrugged off their coats before securing the door. As Emma turned back around from placing the locks, she felt Regina’s palm in her sternum, and she stepped back until she felt the press of the door on her back. Regina’s body and face were so close that Emma could feel the brush of their lips at Regina’s next words, “I need you to fuck me, Emma,” whispered Regina in a sultry voice.

“Regina, we-we don’t….y-y-you don’t…. I-I can’t…..” stuttered Emma as she shook her head slightly and stepped away, turning her back to Regina, so she wouldn’t see the distress and confusion and conflict on her face. She had no idea how to respond to Regina’s request. She was certainly capable of doing what Regina asked, but she wondered if she should or even could. She would be devastated if she thought that she had hurt Regina, or, god forbid, if she accidentally did hurt her, so, up to this point, Emma’s lovemaking had been almost tentative. And now, tonight, the night when she thought she had hurt her most by running away, Regina was asking her to risk doing it again.

“Emma Swan,” said Regina with a slightly pleading and very frustrated edge to her voice.

Emma turned to face Regina with wide eyes. Regina had never used her full name or this tone in address. Regina’s eyes brimmed with tears.

Regina’s voice rose in pitch slightly and shook as she pointed to her chest with her next words, “You cannot continue to treat me like some fragile ornament that has to be touched gently and carefully. I need you to want me. I need you to crave me. I need you to see that I am not broken, and YOU need to see that you won’t break me.”

Regina stood in front of Emma, and she spoke the next words, slowly and firmly without blinking and without taking her eyes from Emma’s,

“And, right now, I need you to FUCK. ME.”

Regina’s chest heaved and there was an incredible fire in her eyes. Emma looked down at the floor, closing her eyes briefly and taking a deep breath, before raising her eyes again and looking at Regina through her lashes; the green had darkened considerably and, now, carried a fire all their own.

Emma took one quick step towards Regina before stooping and wrapping her arms around Regina’s thighs, hoisting her off the ground. Regina’s legs encircled Emma’s waist tightly and her arms wrapped around strong shoulders as Emma spun them and slammed Regina’s back against the wall. Regina’s head rocked back briefly with the impact and she gasped a bit, before looking straight into Emma’s eyes. The look was returned with a determined stare. Weaving her left hand into Emma’s locks, Regina pulled them together with a crash of lips and a click of teeth. Their tongues battled for dominance in a frenzied kiss of hearts, souls, relief and release. Regina’s was already grinding forcefully against Emma’s abs trying to find some much needed friction as she held tightly to her shoulders with her splinted arm and hand. Her hips jerked and twitched against Emma’s stomach as she sought to soothe, through too many layers of clothes, the incessant ache that had already started to build since she saw Emma standing at the exam room door referring to herself as her fiancée.

Emma’s strong hands kneaded Regina’s firm backside and she broke their kiss, laying her forehead on Regina’s collar bone with her eyes closed as she concentrated on bucking and rolling her hips strongly into Regina, trying to match her rhythm stroke for stroke. Regina’s back slammed lightly into the wall with every thrust, and Emma looked up to place her lips against Regina’s neck, causing
Regina to throw her head back so that Emma had full access. Emma opened her mouth and sucked Regina’s pulse point, feeling the strong, rapid beat of her heart. She continued placing fervent, open-mouthed kisses against Regina’s throat, brushing her tongue against skin at the end of each one. She could feel the cartilage of Regina’s neck move beneath her lips as she swallowed and panted, and it spurred Emma on with a renewed sense of urgency as she remembered that first shared kiss at the back door. She stopped kissing Regina only briefly to catch her breath and heard Regina groan quietly at the loss of contact. Replacing her lips on Regina’s neck, Emma scraped her teeth up the soft skin, whispering against the shell of her ear,

“Don’t worry, baby, we’re just getting started….” Emma’s voice had lowered an octave and she was panting heavily. Regina shuddered at the intensity and the message being delivered.

Emma heard a throaty, seductive hum as Regina gripped Emma’s hair harder and tugged her head back so that she would look in Regina’s eyes. Regina watched Emma’s eyes as the tip of her tongue traced Emma’s bottom lip; then again as she took the same in her teeth and bit down. Emma gasped and winced a bit at the pleasurable pain before pressing the tip of her tongue forward and tasting the bit of iron and copper that remained as her reward. Cradling her arms more securely under Regina’s backside, Emma carried her quickly to the bedroom where they fell onto the mattress. Emma immediately slipped her jean-clad thigh between Regina’s legs, pressing it tight against her dress pants and supply teasing friction to her core while her lips continued to seek purchase against Regina’s collarbone and exposed chest. She could feel Regina’s chest heaving beneath her lips and the insistent bucking against her thigh as Regina sought relief that Emma wasn’t willing to provide yet.

Sliding her arms under Regina’s upper and lower back, Emma lifted and turned them in one deft stroke so that Regina’s head lay securely on the pillows. Straightening, Emma knelt on the bed, watching Regina for a moment before gripping Regina’s hips firmly and pulling her further onto her thigh. She held Regina’s hips and watched her beautiful writhing motions for a moment, before grabbing one of Regina’s wrists in each of her hands, leaning forward again. Emma drew Regina’s hands up so they were outstretched above her head. She kissed her lips and jaw several times before placing her lips very close to Regina’s ear, whispering sternly but lovingly,

“If I remember correctly, the doctor told you to keep your hand raised higher than your heart and head…you should probably do as you’re told…”

Regina chewed her lower lip and nodded compliantly reaching to grip the iron bars at the top of the bedframe as Emma released her wrists. As Emma straightened, she cupped Regina’s cheek with her hand and drew her thumb across Regina’s lower lip, tugging it gently as Regina’s lips parted slightly. “So fucking beautiful…” Emma whispered as she looked into Regina’s eyes and swallowed hard still hesitant about what she was being asked to do.

“I don’t want to be your ornament, Emma. I want to be your wife….I want to be your everything,” breathed Regina as she closed her eyes and tipped her head back into the pillow, “please….”

Emma’s quickly hands found the buttons of Regina’s cardigan. As each was released, she pulled back the sides further until they lay open on the bed to either side of Regina. Sliding her hands back up Regina’s sides, Emma grasped the open material at the top of Regina’s oxford just above her breasts, pulling her hands apart firmly and quickly, scattering buttons over the bed and floor. Regina’s back arched and she drew a moaning breath as she realized that Emma fully intended to give what she asked of her this evening. Immediately, Emma released the front clasp of Regina’s bra and slipped the cups to the side. Regina’s chest, torso and breasts were now fully exposed to Emma’s touch and she took a moment to admire the sensuous curves of Regina’s body. Flawless,
light-olive skin was offset only by the dusky color of Regina’s nipples and surrounding skin. The skin of her breasts and stomach was raised in bumps of anticipation of Emma’s touch. Leaning forward, she wrapped her mouth around one of Regina’s perfect nipples, sucking and licking greedily as she felt it and the surrounding skin harden immediately in her mouth. Her hand found Regina’s other breast, kneading, almost roughly, before pinching and pulling her nipple in time with the draws of her mouth, teasing it into a stiff peak as well. She could hear Regina’s moans start increasing in volume as her jaw, tongue and fingers continued to work strongly, not willing to provide Regina any relief from the stimulation she was providing.

Releasing her hand from Regina’s breast, Emma slid her flat palm down Regina’s toned stomach, feeling the muscles contract strongly and then relax in reaction to her touch. Her fingers worked quickly to undo her belt and pop the button on Regina’s pants, pulling the zipper down quickly before slipping her hand beneath the loose waistband of her pants and the tighter band of her lace panties gripping her hip firmly with her palm as she pressed her fingertips steadily and strongly into the firm muscle of Regina’s backside. Slipping her hand further inside, Emma’s palm massaged Regina’s ass and she felt Regina’s thigh slip up the outside of her own to rest atop her hip. With each circular motion of her hand, Emma pressed further inside the fabric until her fingers began to brush through the abundant wetness which had spread over Regina’s swollen, smooth and heated lips. Emma felt her fingertips coat with Regina’s thick cream and she released a moan that vibrated the sensitive skin of Regina’s breast and nipple causing her to gasp hard and arch her back slightly.

Withdrawing her hand, she teased Regina’s nipple once more with slick fingers before moving her mouth to gather the tangy sweetness that had been deposited. Raising her fingers to Regina’s mouth, she brushed them lightly over her lips before feeling Regina pull them into her mouth, sucking and swirling her tongue to clean them thoroughly of her own arousal.

Returning her hand to Regina’s side, Emma slid it down to Regina’s waist, collecting the fabric of her pants and panties with her fingers and pushing them over the smooth curve of Regina’s left hip before releasing her nipple and rocking back to grab the waistbands with her hands. Regina’s hips rose slightly, allowing Emma to slip both quickly down her legs and onto the floor.

Falling forward over Regina, Emma propped herself on her left elbow, hooking her forearm and hand under Regina’s shoulders to give her purchase. She watched Regina’s eyes intently as she pressed her index and middle fingertips into Regina’s wet folds, rubbing up and down slowly with the flat of her fingers before steadily increasing the pace. She could feel Regina’s clit react to her touch instantly, hardening and swelling more with each stroke, and she started circling Regina’s clit firmly with the pads of fingers trying to tease her into an unbearable ache. Pressing down Emma circled her entrance with the pads of her fingers before sliding them back up to tease her clit again. Emma repeated the pattern over and over until she felt Regina’s hips rocking steadily with her, hands pushing hard against the headboard as she desperately tried to slip Emma’s fingers inside of her each time they teased her entrance, even if only slightly.

Emma nuzzled her nose into Regina’s cheek one last time,

“I love you so much, my Regina,” was whispered as Emma thrust two fingers inside of her, pressing them up to the knuckle in one stroke before pulling them out to the tips and thrusting them in again.

“FUCK YES, EMMA!” was screamed into the silence of the house and it spurred Emma on as she added a third digit on the next stroke. Regina’s hips continued to rock in time with Emma’s fingers, the pulsing of her walls drawing Emma’s fingers even deeper inside of her as she met Emma’s hand over and over. Emma’s movements were strong and smooth and her hand twisted slightly with each thrust giving Regina an even greater sense of fullness.
Regina bent her knee and placed her foot on the bed to give herself leverage while Emma buried her forehead into Regina’s neck. She rocked her entire body against Regina’s trying to give her what she asked and needed so badly. Emma panted with exertion and her arm ached, and she fought to keep some semblance of control between them as Regina’s hips twitched and bucked frantically and erratically. Regina’s moaning was at a fevered pitch and Emma was grunting loudly. Emma could feel Regina’s walls tightening around her fingers and she started to curl her fingers with every pull seeking the spot that would bring Regina the release that she sought. Emma’s thumb flicked several times against Regina’s sensitive bundle of nerves and with one last pull of her fingers, she sent Regina into an explosive orgasm. Emma closed her eyes and felt her heart soar as one word tumbled from Regina’s lips without thought, reservation or hesitation, “EMMA!”

Regina had barely tumbled over that edge when Emma moved to lie between Regina’s thighs. She stilled her fingers, allowing Regina to ride out only a few of the waves of pleasure on her own before supplying a renewed source of stimulation and pleasure. She wrapped strong arms around Regina’s thighs before pressing her tongue between swollen, tender lips. Emma found Regina’s incredibly sensitive clit, and alternated between flat licks and light flicks with the tip of her tongue. Pulling the hardened bud between her lips, Emma sucked eagerly, swirling and flicking her tongue over and over, relishing the taste of Regina’s essence that hinted of apples. Regina’s mind was on overload and she reached for Emma’s head with her hand, holding her close despite wanting to push her away. It was a beautiful, pleasurable torment to be teased so thoroughly and completely and she felt a second orgasm surfacing quickly. An incredible scream of pleasure broke from her lips as she surged again and she raised her upper body from the bed, grabbing Emma’s head with both hands to ensure she didn’t stop.

Emma looked up, watching as her fiancée came undone with fierce abandon, in awe of how wildly beautiful she was in this instant; parted lips, heaving chest, closed eyes. Regina was flawless perfection and Emma adored and revered everything that Regina was.

Regina twitched her hips and ground herself against Emma’s mouth riding out the initial aftershocks of her orgasm. As she lay back, Emma returned to hover her body over Regina’s, supporting herself with her left hand as her right hand rolled Regina’s clit intermittently, drawing a muted tremor of exhausted hips and thighs. Regina’s throaty moans had quieted to intermittent, tired whimpers. Bracing both hands to the side of Regina’s head, Emma lowered herself slightly, capturing Regina’s lips in a deep, sensual kiss, transferring the incredible taste that lingered on her tongue. Regina sighed deeply as she tasted herself on Emma’s mouth and lips. Breaking their kiss, Emma touched her forehead to Regina’s, watching over her once more to be sure she was OK.

Regina’s head lulled back against Emma’s shoulder; her face to the ceiling and eyes closed as she dragged lungs full of air through slightly parted lips. Her mind and body were spent. She had no idea how many times they had made love that evening. Frantic touching had been intermingled with short periods of fitful rest so many times that Regina had simply lost count.

They knelt on the mattress, Regina’s knees to the outside of Emma’s, her backside pressed firmly into the front of Emma’s hips. She could feel the length of Emma’s stomach and chest against the curve of her back and Emma’s damp forehead rested against her shoulder as, she too, breathed heavily from exhaustion and exertion.

Emma’s left arm was wrapped around Regina’s torso and covered by Regina’s own, their fingers entwined tightly as their hands rested on her side. The fingertips of Emma’s right hand strummed
and traced lightly on Regina’s clit bringing her down gently from the latest euphoria experienced at her lover’s skilled hands. A gloss of sweat covered both of their bodies creating a slight chill as the heat of their lovemaking dissipated from their skin.

“You are amazing and strong and beautiful…” conceded Emma when she could find her voice again

“Only because you make me this way,” whispered Regina as she turned her head toward Emma who lifted her own and captured Regina’s lips. Their tongues stroked gently as they slipped in and out of the warming comfort of each other’s mouths.

Breaking their kiss, Emma grinned playfully at Regina before wrapping both arms around her and turning them so that they crashed together onto the mattress in a spooning position. Regina squealed and laughed at the sudden change. She raised her outer leg, allowing Emma to slip hers between and she casually rubbed her foot up and down Emma’s calf, enjoying the simple feeling of being embraced and the light strokes of Emma’s fingers against her waist and stomach and hip.

Emma cradled Regina’s splinted hand in her own, raising herself to her elbow so that she could kiss each of the exposed fingers before returning the hand gently to the mattress. She kissed the back of Regina’s shoulder as her index finger traced the ridges and dips of the scars on the front.

“What if the surgery doesn’t work?” Regina asked quietly.

Emma urged Regina to turn so she was lying flat on her back. She turned Regina’s head toward her with a gentle nudge of the tip of her index finger. Emma remained on her side, facing Regina, still propped on her elbow so she could look down at Regina’s beautiful face and body. Her fingertips returned to trace the scars as she looked directly into brown eyes

“Don’t you understand, Regina?” asked Emma quizzically as if she was in awe of the fact that Regina didn’t understand something so blatantly obvious or simple, “It doesn’t matter. You’ll always be beautiful and perfect to me. And if I have to stand behind you and support your arms, so you can hold Henry for five more minutes or five more hours, then I will do it gladly,” Emma finished with a soft smile as she brushed a lock of hair from her face and tucked it behind her ear.

Emma’s eyes went wide for an instant as she remembered something.

“Be right back,” she said as she slipped out of bed to rifle through her clothing that lay scattered on the floor.

Regina furrowed her brow wondering what was so important that she had to leave the confines of their warm bed. Emma soon slipped back under the sheets and lay beside Regina as she was before.

“I guess we should make it official, huh?” Regina gasped and her eyes went wide as she saw the ring that Emma produced, pinched between shaking fingers.

“God, I hope I heard you right the first two times time,” she mumbled as she slipped the engagement ring that Marco had given her onto Regina’s finger. She breathed a sigh of relief as it passed over her knuckle and fit snugly on her ring finger.

Regina bit her lip to suppress a grin, seeing that Emma was visibly shaken by everything that had and was happening this evening.

“Regina Mills, will you be my wife?” Green eyes swirled with anticipation. Emma hoped she knew the answer but was scared that she had misheard.

Regina nodded eagerly and grinned before cupping Emma’s cheek and placing a loving kiss on her
lips. Emma held her hand as they looked at the ring on her finger.

“It was Teresa’s,” she saw the confusion in Regina’s eyes and finished softly, “Marco’s wife.”

Regina’s face softened and she drew breath as she realized the incredible gift that she had just been given.

“They were together for 30 years,” said Emma softly.

“And we get to continue your Mom and Dad’s beautiful legacy,” said Regina as she looked hopefully at Emma for a reaction. Emma smiled softly before nodding to show Regina that, indeed, that was exactly what she considered both Marco and Teresa to be to her now; even if she had never met Teresa except through Marco’s beautiful stories.

They lay for a few more moments before Regina broke the silence again.

“How many, Emma?”

Emma furrowed her brow and looked at Regina confused.

“I-I think he only had one wife. At least, he only told me about Teresa…”

Regina’s laugh filled the room as she realized that she had moved to a completely new topic but Emma had remained on the previous one. Emma was too cute when she was in utter confusion.

Regina cupped Emma’s cheek and smiled at her,

“Children, Emma. How many do you want?”

Emma’s heart was pounding out of her chest and her eyes darted about frantically. She had always wanted a large family but didn’t want to scare Regina with the number she had on the tip of her tongue, so she hesitated.

“Tell you what,” said Regina softly as she snuggled again into Emma’s arms; her back pressed tightly to Emma’s front, “Let’s try a different way. Put your left hand behind mine.”

Emma did as she was told and felt Regina curl her hand into a fist around which she wrapped her own fingers, laying each one atop Regina’s.

“You stop me when I get there?”

Regina grinned as she felt Emma nod, quietly serious, chin resting on Regina’s shoulders as she watched their hands intently.

Regina lifted an index finger; raising Emma’s along with it.

“That’s Henry,” she whispered, “Let’s keep going?”

Emma nodded quietly again.

Regina lifted her next finger with no resistance.

“Hmmmmm….” She hummed and smiled as she felt Emma’s relaxed hand around hers.

A third finger rose, again, without resistance; followed by a fourth.
“Daddy would have loved you,” grinned Regina as she recalled her father’s request for a houseful of grandkids.

Before she could say another word, she felt Emma’s thumb slip beneath hers, drawing it back so that their five fingers extended as a splayed hand.

“How about we start with that and then see where we go from there?” whispered Regina with a smile as she turned her hand and entwined their fingers.

“I’d like that a lot,” whispered Emma as she placed a soft kiss on the back of Regina’s shoulder and pulled their bodies close before succumbing to sleep.

“WAS IT SO FUCKING MUCH TO ASK FOR ONE NIGHT’S REST FROM THE GOD DAMNED NOISE OF THAT FUCKING PIANO, REGINA?!?! WAS IT?? ARE YOU DEAF OR JUST. FUCKING. STUPID?!?!” screamed Sarah as the fingers of her right hand tightened around Regina’s throat.

“Please….” begged Regina in a raspy voice. Her back was pressed against the door and her hands gripped Sarah’s wrist trying to get the fingers to loosen so that she take in air. Her left eye was wide in fear; her right having already closed tightly from the swelling in her face.

“I had…I had to practice for tomorrow….” whispered Regina, fingers scrabbling to help find the relief of a fully drawn breath. Sarah held Regina almost casually as she focused her attention on the liquor tumbler that she held in her left hand. She drained the overflowing contents almost as soon as it touched her lips.

Sarah’s grip eased, and then released, as she pondered the now-empty glass and the dried cubes of ice. Regina waited only a moment before she turned, both hands gripping the handle of the door. She sobbed and shook the door frantically as one of the locks remained jammed, and she briefly remembered the landlord’s commitment to fix it in two days’ time. She prayed it would release, just this once.

Breaking from her stupor and realizing Regina was attempting to leave, Sarah grabbed Regina’s right arm and twisted it behind her back. As her wrist was pulled up sharply, another hand slammed hard into the joint of her shoulder. Regina screamed as her face hit the door, and she felt the excruciating pain that accompanied the sound of cracking and the sensation of tearing. Regina’s arm fell uselessly to her side as Sarah released her wrist to grasp the collar of her silk night shirt, spinning her around and slamming her back against the door once more. The fabric ripped wide and the shirt hung open over her shoulder and breast where an angry purple and black bruise was already forming over badly deformed muscles and bones. Regina’s chest heaved and her eyes were blurry from the combination of tears and the agony now caused by the simple weight of her dangling arm. She detected a strong ringing sound in her ears and the blackness of unconsciousness was creeping into her peripheral vision.

“Oops,” said Sarah with a sadistic hatred in her eyes, “you sure can’t go out into the hallway looking like that now can you, Re…gi…na?”

As she drew out the syllables of Regina’s name, Sarah drew her face closer. Regina could smell the fetid stench of alcohol mixed with an unfamiliar perfume that told her that the majority of Sarah’s evening had already been spent in someone else’s company, and likely, their bed.

“Oh well….looks like you’re just gonna have to stay inside with me now…..” Sarah jutted out her lower lip in mock sympathy before huffing out a drunken chuckle. Regina’s eyes darted wildly.
between Sarah’s face and her hand as Sarah rolled the tumbler in her palm, bouncing it a few times as if testing its weight.

“You know,” said Sarah in a strangely calm voice as she looked up through her lashes with a newfound fury in her eyes, “next time, when I ask you for a night of peace and quiet, maybe this will help you remember…..”

As she slumped to the ground in front of the door, Regina heard her own, twisted lullaby play out; the soft tinkling of the crystal shards as they fell around her on the floor.

“Regina, are you ready?” asked Dr. Whale in a calming tone as he rolled his stool to the head of the bed. Most of his face had been covered in his mask and surgical cap, but she recognized the voice and could see the kind, familiar eyes watching her from behind his glasses; one eye more magnified than the other as he wore the familiar monocle needed for the delicate procedures that were about to be carried out. His eyes seemed so sure, so confident, and so hopeful. They were so unlike the ones that looked back at him; frantic eyes filled with fear and skepticism.

The orange and yellow hue of the betadine wash was visible on her shoulder and breast, and she felt vulnerable and exposed as she lay under the bright lights; open to the scrutiny and judgment of so many unfamiliar eyes. It felt like a mirror image of the night they found her; the only difference was the color that painted her shoulder. She was starting to hear Sarah’s voice in her head again. All the words screamed in anger as fists hit her face again and again and her head slammed against the door in time with the beating. The rhythmic beep of the monitor surged as her frenzied mind reconsidered why she was here at all.

Regina’s left arm bent up and back; her hand grasping frantically for another that was immediately offered. She gripped the hand tightly as she twisted her head to look over her left shoulder; scared, brown eyes meeting supportive green.

“Emma, it’s best not to administer the sedative until she’s calmed a bit. Perhaps, you can talk to her…..” said Dr. Whale as he laid a hand on Regina’s exposed shoulder in reassurance.

Regina felt soft lips on the small patch of skin on her forehead that had been left exposed by the surgical cap.

“Hey, you,” whispered a familiar, soothing voice, “we were doing so well up to a minute ago. What’s going on?”

Regina’s eyes darted about the room, and she tried to focus on Emma’s voice. She shook her head as a few frightened tears ran from the corners of her eyes into her hair.

“B-Bost…..”

Emma placed her index finger lightly against Regina’s lips, not allowing her to finish the word.

“Shhhhh… I understand.” And Emma did understand; too well. Horrible memories; the ones that demanded constant, exhausting care and feeding, just so they would remain tamped down and locked away; they always seemed to find a way of inviting themselves back in during the most vulnerable times. They crushed dreams. They cast shadows over even the brightest days. They controlled that thin line between true happiness and absolute despair; perfectly content to allow one to wallow forever in the turmoil of one side, but only briefly in the peace and respite of the other.

Emma leaned slightly on her stool and fished into her back pocket, extracting a piece of paper that was worn and creased from having been handled and refolded too many times. She held it up so
that they could both see it. It was a printed picture of Henry slumbering on Regina’s shoulder as she sat with him in the rocking chair under the painted canopy of the large tree in the nursery. Regina’s eyes were closed and her cheek rested against his head as a soft smile played on her lips. Her arm supported his bottom while another hand rubbed gentle circles on his back. She had no idea when the picture had been taken or that it had been taken at all, but it was a tender, candid glimpse of the peace and happiness that she found when she held Henry in her arms.

“It’s my favorite picture of you two,” whispered Emma.

Regina nodded her head and looked at Emma in fear and confusion, wondering where her words and this picture were leading.

“You see this little boy?” Emma tapped the photo.

Regina nodded again.

“He wants five more minutes in these arms, Regina. Five more minutes; that’s all. Can you do that…for him?”

Regina looked at the picture of the little boy and then at the woman beside her. The two people she loved; the two people that held her heart; the two people that had healed her broken soul. She nodded, not realizing that the monitor had calmed greatly over the course of their conversation.

Emma held up her finger to Dr. Whale, out of Regina’s view, requesting one more moment before they started.

“How can you do that…for him?”

Regina turned her eyes towards Emma waiting for her to continue.

“Remember how Dr. Hopper asked you to find one complementing beauty for every scar?”

Regina nodded. She remembered the session well, but had never completed the exercise. It was too hard for her.

“Well….I know you said you never made that list, so I made the list for you…want to hear it?”

Regina looked at Emma with a furrowed, skeptical brow. How could Emma have finished what she had never even been able to start? What beauty could Emma truly see in a broken body?

“Lay your head back and relax and I’ll tell you what I came up with.”

Regina laid her head back against the pillow and looked up at the bright lights of the ceiling. She felt Emma’s forehead pressed against her temple; her lips close to her ear. Emma started in a whisper,

“Your eyes….your hair….your smile….your laugh….your heart….your sass….your courage….your right hook….your intelligence…your elegance….your confidence….your ferocity….your passion….the way you love Henry…”

As she started to tick off the first few items, Emma twirled her finger a bit, indicating that they should push the sedative. It took a few moments for things to be put into motion as everyone in the room had stopped to stare at the two women; enraptured by the words of love and adoration being spoken by Emma, as if Regina and she were the only two people that existed in the world in that moment. Their hearts and souls were exposed in every way imaginable and it was beautiful to behold.
There was complete silence, aside from Emma’s soft words, as the plunger fell and Regina felt her lids grow heavy as the lights blurred and then extinguished.

Low hums and beeps revealed themselves in spurts as Regina slowly picked her way through the briars of unconsciousness.

*You’re doing great, baby… I’m right here beside you… they’re almost done… I love you with everything I am…. you are the bravest woman I know….*

They were soothing phrases offered by a comforting voice; words stuck in her memory though she couldn’t place where or when she had heard them. They were part of a wonderful, albeit confusing, dream that was retreating much too quickly; replaced by the murky haze of a slowly waking mind.

Heavy eyes remained closed as she assessed her surroundings. The sounds of the machines were familiar, but the underlying pace of the remaining environment was much less frantic than she was used to: the shouts, the pounding of feet, the barked orders, all replaced by a gurgling laugh and the soft humming of a song she had sung a thousand times before.

She pressed her tongue forward tentatively, searching for resistance that wasn’t met. Her limbs felt heavy, but she managed to lift her left arm enough to bend it. She hoped that her hand would find the comfort and support of another, but it fell back uselessly instead; hitting the bedside table, knocking several items onto the floor and dislodging the monitor from her finger which caused both the beeping and humming to fall silent.

Her heart fell as she considered that she was alone, but the dip in the bed and the voice, the one from her dreams, immediately quelled her fear.

“Hey, look who’s waking up,” was whispered and Regina could feel the slight bouncing as small hands were clapped excitedly against knees.

A strong, but gentle, hand lifted Regina’s carefully and another, equally gentle, hand was smoothed down her arm to relax it back to where it had been. Regina felt a brush of soft lips against each of her knuckles before the slight pressure of the monitor returned to her finger and the room was filled, once again, with the steady sound of her heart.

“I think somebody needs a kiss to make their boo-boos all better. What do you think?”

Regina felt the lightness of small hands on her cheeks; an uncoordinated, wet kiss bussed firmly against the edge of her mouth.

“Great job, buddy! Now me…”

It was only a moment before she felt the loving touch of a sure hand against her cheek; soft, familiar lips touching her own. She smiled, not knowing in her grogginess if it was being reflected on her face as it was in her heart, but the words assured her once more,

“And there’s that beautiful smile.”

Regina weakly squeezed the hand that held her own.

“Don’t worry. I’m not going anywhere. I’m right here beside you. Rest now. You did great, baby.”

Regina allowed herself to slip back into the arms of unconsciousness; knowing that her wonderful
dream would be there in both her waking and sleeping hours.
Chapter Notes

A kind reader has suggested that a TW or further clarification might be helpful for this chapter and I would like to provide that here:

Emma will be put in her trigger situation here by two men. The scene with them and Emma is not intended to imply that anything further happened beyond being locked in a closed room with them, being hit and being laughed at. One of the men will take a step towards her and she will flash back, but it goes no further than that.

I hope that helps. If you are unsure, you might skip the entire chapter because the scenes/perspectives change so rapidly that it would be hard to point out individual skips.

Regina stood across from Emma at the altar which was bathed in soft candlelight. She smiled as she watched the officiant attentively, not noticing the intensity with which Emma was staring at her. Regina held cascades of deep red and snow white orchids and calla lilies that draped down the front of her dress, and thanks to Dr. Whale, the scars on her shoulder were barely visible above the line of the strapless, black gown that she wore. They were nothing more than a quickly fading memory of her past; hazed now by time, a very skilled hand and a beautiful love. The scars would never go away completely, but Emma helped her see the remnants as a reminder of her strength versus her weakness. Emma always did have a way of seeing things differently and making her feel beautiful, and she couldn't help but smile. She was the luckiest woman in the world.

Regina felt Emma’s eyes on her and she turned slightly, but Emma was already looking away. She was concerned as she watched Emma roll her eyes to herself and sigh as she looked down at her own attire. Kathryn thought a “woman’s tuxedo” with a floppy bow tie would supply a feminine touch and help Emma fit in better as a groomsman, but Regina could tell that this selection was backfiring in all the wrong ways; making Emma feel even more like she stuck out like a sore thumb; one woman in a long line of men that Fredrick had selected to stand with him.

Regina had grown up being paraded about among Boston ‘society’ by her mother. She loathed every party, but she had learned how to mingle and make small talk with strangers when needed. Despite her abhorrence of the entire experience, she knew the gatherings had given her the confidence and the tools she needed to navigate the corporate world of music, formal business dealings and the social aspects that went along with them. So the experience had its upside, albeit a very small one, in her opinion. It was no secret that Regina preferred a more solitary life surrounded by a few close friends, but larger parties like this were not unknown to her. In addition, she had performed in front of large audiences all over the world, so the fact that a few eyes might be upon her now wasn't really concerning.

Emma’s life experience, on the other hand, was so very different. Her work with Marco required that she interact with strangers on occasion, but never in the numbers that she was being exposed to today. There had to be at least 500 people in attendance at this wedding, and it seemed that Fredrick’s family knew everyone in Maine as well as several surrounding states. Marco understood Emma’s almost debilitating shyness and had managed to shield her well from the discomfort of most interactions by allowing her to work in the wood shop or in the back room of the store. For her own,
personal safety, Marco always insisted that she be paired with Fredrick on remote jobs, and he would do the talking with the customers when the need arose. Emma had confided all of this to Regina after she had been asked by Fredrick to be in the wedding party. Emma had truly struggled with whether to accept, knowing too well what her limitations were, but Fredrick was a good friend and her participation seemed to have some significance to him, so she had finally conceded.

Now, Regina’s heart broke as she watched Emma, awash in a sea of discomfort and apprehension. She once again wore the uncomfortable façade that she had created long ago to appease everyone else and to ensure they felt comfortable. Her masque worn to survive in a world that was scrutinizing and cruel. Her eyes darted all over the place as she looked at the ground. This wasn’t her Emma, not the one she knew and loved. Regina knew this was going to be a very long night for both of them and she hoped that the more formal parts of the evening, the ones that were keeping them separated, would be over quickly. Emma needed her. Tonight, it was Regina’s turn to be the strong one.

Emma looked at Regina from across the altar of the seaside chapel. She was absolutely stunning and right now, the sight of her was the only thing keeping Emma from succumbing to the frenzy going on in her mind. She felt like a thousand eyes were on her; mocking and judging. Her skin itched with the discomfort of the material and their stares. Maybe, if Regina would glance her way she could find the strength to hold out a little longer, but her eyes were forward and remained in that direction for the few seconds that Emma thought she could keep her eyes up without revealing the dread and vulnerability that swirled in them. She swallowed thickly as she cast her eyes down at her attire dejectedly. Her head jerked and shook nervously and she wondered how many people were noticing that as well. Her hands clenched and released. She wanted to rub them on the fabric of her pants, but she knew the motion would draw even more attention. Her blinks were slow and each close of her eyes brought with it the snip of that repeated, comforting tune inside her head.

Just a few more minutes. Just breathe…

Of course, a few more minutes would just bring new and different discomforts. According to the schedule, there were several more ‘group’ activities to be carried out before Emma could melt into the shadows somewhere. She needed to disappear after this afternoon. She wasn’t sure what else the evening would hold for her, but something told her that she wanted to remain invisible.

She probably wouldn’t see or talk to Regina again until later. Regina’s role in this wedding was much more important than her own, and it would keep her occupied, alongside Kathryn, for much of the evening. Regardless, she longed for the comfort that Regina provided when she was in close, physical proximity. They had been separated for far too long already and Emma had dealt with more shit than she cared to today.

They pulled into the driveway of Fredrick’s enormous, family home around 11AM. Emma felt like they were arriving entirely too early for a ceremony that was supposed to start at 5PM, but Regina explained that Kathryn could be extremely high maintenance and the mere act of getting her in a dress and makeup was probably going to take a lot longer than anyone realized. As the ‘Maid of Honor’ and her best friend, the responsibility of dealing with Kathryn fell to Regina and she was going to need time to deal with all the expected (and unexpected) ‘Kathryn drama’ that would accompany this day.

Regina shut her door and walked around the Benz to where Emma stood, leaning against the closed passenger side door, eyes cast down, worrying her bottom lip. A garment bag was draped over the arms that she had wrapped around her stomach.

“You’ll be OK?” asked Regina as she placed her palm against Emma’s sternum and dipped her
eyes trying to catch Emma’s. She could feel Emma’s heart pounding hard against her hand. She knew Emma would respond ‘yes’, no matter what, but she also knew Emma’s eyes would tell her the truth.

“Yes,” said Emma quietly. She refused to look at Regina and that told her all that she needed to know.

“Why don’t we get inside,” asked Regina reluctantly with a sigh. She offered a small smile and led them up to the doors holding her own garment bag up to keep it scraping on the wood of the porch.

They were barely inside when Kathryn strode over to them, clearly frustrated.

“Jesus Christ, Regina. Please save me from that woman he calls ‘mother’. She is driving me batshit crazy today. Even his father got the hell out of dodge this morning because he thinks she’s off her fucking rocker.”

Regina knew that Kathryn adored her in-laws, but today just wasn’t a good day for Fredrick’s mother to be doing…well…whatever it was that she was doing. She had already put Kathryn in a disastrous state and Regina closed her eyes and shook her head as she tried to figure out how to calm the situation. Her thoughts were interrupted quickly by Kathryn’s insistent pulling on her arm.

“I need you upstairs NOW, Regina!” As they moved up the stairs, Regina stumbling behind her, Kathryn threw a wave over her shoulder and, in a 180-degree different voice exclaimed, “Hey, Emma!”

Regina could only cast a quick, concerned glance at Emma before she was pulled out of sight.

Emma now stood alone in the empty expanse of the foyer wondering where she should go next. She had only been in Fredrick’s house a couple of times. She was not comfortable enough to just invite herself in, but she was nervous enough that she compelled herself to move to a different location which was not quite as exposed. She stood, gripping her garment bag closely for what seemed like forever, when she finally heard a familiar, deep voice and saw a well-built older gentleman stepping from a dark-paneled library,

“Emma!” said Fredrick’s father jovially with his arms spread. He stopped suddenly and looked around with concern, like the volume of his voice was going to attract a flurry of drama that he was trying hard to avoid. Realizing the coast was clear, he continued over to Emma and wrapped her in a huge, warm hug. He was a strong guy and almost solid muscle. He had mentioned being in the Navy a few times, but didn’t talk extensively about it. From what she had pieced together during her conversations with Fredrick, he had been pretty hard core and part of the SEALs. It probably explained a lot about why he got into this outdoor business in the first place.

“Hello, sir,” said Emma quietly.

“Crazy day, huh?” he stated with a grin as he released her.

“Yes, sir,” she responded again, barely above a whisper.

He chuckled softly,

“Even after all these years, I still can’t get you to call me Phillip, huh?” he asked kindly as he brushed the crook of his index finger under her chin. He waited briefly for a response, which he didn't receive.
“You all right, Emma?” he asked with a bit of concern. He and his wife, Marian, had actually been somewhat surprised when Emma agreed to be in Fredrick’s wedding party. Having known both Marco and Emma for many years, they were well aware of her anxieties and limitations. That being said, after her surprise participation in the Water Fire festival, they supposed this might just be another positive influence that Regina was having and one more step in Emma trying to come out of her shell. He admired her courage and commitment to his son, and prayed that she would get through this day with relative ease. He doubted this would be easy for her.

“You know what? I am glad you’re here. I got some new equipment for the store. Perhaps, you can take a look with me, since we have a bit of time?”

“Yes, sir.”

Phillip took the garment bag from Emma’s hands and moved it to the game room where Fredrick’s party would assemble later. Placing an arm around her shoulders, he led her to his equipment shop where they could remain out of the fray for just a little longer.

It was almost 2PM when she and Phillip returned to the house and she retreated to the game room where most of Fredrick’s party had already assembled. There, she sat in the company of a bunch of boisterous, leering, immature, young men. They were all dressed impeccably in designer clothes and accessories and they all smelled like they had swum in a vat of Jameson and Johnnie Walker for the majority of the morning. Emma wondered how some of them were still standing. No one seemed interested in talking to her, in fact, the only person she knew or might have interacted with, Fredrick, was noticeably absent as he helped his family with some of the final arrangements and welcomed guests. Emma sat tapping her foot anxiously, watching three of the guys playing darts.

“Wanna play, sweetheart?” asked one of them with a smirk as he wagged a dart in her direction. The other two guys with him glanced at each other and laughed a bit at the poorly masked joke.

“No, thanks,” said Emma with a quick upward turn of one side of her mouth. Searching her recent memory, she vaguely recalled the guy’s name as Neal.

“Awwww, come on, baby, we don’t bite,” all three of them laughed this time.

“I’m good,” said Emma again; this time, without the accompanying attempt at a smile. These guys were growing tiresome quickly, but more than that, they were making her uneasy with their sexual references and innuendos. She looked around for the nearest exit, just in case she needed it.

Their attention quickly turned to other topics when they realized Emma wouldn’t be easily baited into their fun, and Neal (easily the most obnoxious and drunk of all of them), decided to loudly address the entire male population of the room.

“Tonight’s the night, gentlemen. I hope each of you checked out your ‘other half’ during rehearsal. I know I did,” he smirked as he looked for support and vindication from his friends that stood near to him. She noticed that several of the guys nodded eagerly and raised their glasses to toast their opportunity for after-wedding fun; including the ‘Best Man’. Emma looked up through her lashes with annoyance, but he didn’t even notice.

Emma had found out during rehearsal the previous evening that each of them would be paired with a member of the opposite party to walk down the aisle. She had briefly met the young woman in Kathryn’s bridal party that she was paired with and that woman looked about as thrilled to be walking down the aisle with a tuxedo-wearing lesbian as Emma was to be walking down at all. There was, evidently, an unwritten tradition of wedding party hookups with your ‘walking partner’
that this woman was not going to get to experience as easily as she had originally anticipated and that seemed to have made her quite annoyed with Emma.

Deciding to press further, Neal turned to address Emma directly,

“Sorry, honey, I don’t think Tamara’s into your kind of fun, so I’d keep your hands to yourself, if I were you.” He looked at her smugly before adding, “dyke.” A few of the guys huffed out a chuckle. Emma simply looked at the floor, trying to ignore the comment. Evidently pissed by her earlier rejection and not ready to abandon his fun at her expense, he continued,

“Nice clothes, by the way. Where’d you get them…Goodwill?” This time, there was more laughter from around the room and he nodded appreciatively at the continued encouragement. Emma kept her eyes down. She could only imagine the laughter and comments if they knew that everything she had ever owned was, indeed, hand-me-downs from the Salvation Army. They were all that she could afford or all that had ever been offered to her.

Emma was starting to reach the limit of her own tolerance, but was unable to do anything about the situation for fear of creating a scene or ruining the day for Kathryn and Fredrick. She was sure Fredrick’s family didn’t need the added aggravation of controlling discord among the wedding party before the ceremony and there were entirely too many guys in this room right now for Emma to feel safe doing much besides sitting quietly, looking at the floor and trying to simultaneously get her rising fear, discomfort and breathing under control. She felt dangerously vulnerable and wanted nothing more than to be out of this room.

Returning to address the guys again, he added one last statement,

“Oh, and a bottle of Bowmore 25 to every one of you that gets a piece of the Maid of Honor. Did you see that ass?” Several of them laughed aloud, cat-called and nodded in agreement, raising their glasses once again.

Emma felt the bile rise quickly to her throat as she realized that he was talking about Regina. He could be just taunting her, but she had no reason to believe that any of them were even aware of their relationship. Regardless, she wanted it to stop, and she wanted it to stop immediately. She got her wish.

“Two hours till show time,” announced Phillip loudly as he entered the room, “you all need to get dressed and be ready to get in the cars in one hour”. Phillip didn’t seem to notice the tension that had permeated the space, but Emma was thankful that his presence seemed to dissipate it quickly.

Turning, Phillip stepped over to Emma and addressed her kindly,

“Emma, why don’t I show you to my study, so you can get dressed?”

She nodded and gathered her garment bag before following him from the room. On her way out, she passed by Neal who leered at her and drug his tongue over the underside of his teeth before pursing his lips and offering a crude and sardonic kiss.

“I’m not done with you yet, sweetheart. We’ll talk more later…I promise,” he finished with a sneer.

The post-ceremony activities back at Fredrick’s home had Emma’s anxiety spiking, and she wiped her hands on her pants nervously trying to calm herself. She hadn’t felt this way in a long time, but, now, she was back to square one again. In her mind, she replayed the song from the music box over and over trying to keep herself grounded. Her eyes flitted around nervously and she clenched and relaxed her jaw as she looked for Regina (who was nowhere to be seen). Simultaneously, she tried
to keep track of where she needed to be and when.

A thousand people seemed to be talking to her, or at her, all at once and she was constantly being touched, nudged, prodded or pulled by photographers that wanted to get ‘the perfect shot’, caterers wanting to move them to assigned seating or wedding planners insistent on achieving the perfect line. She had managed to tolerate it up to this point, but now, the amount of unwanted contact and verbal interaction being required of her was becoming unbearable and exhausting. She needed to get out of there as soon as possible and find a place where she could collect her thoughts, calm her mind and find some silence. In all of the din, it was becoming harder and harder to find her calming song.

The dinner table for the wedding party sat on a stage in front of a large dance floor and a sea of round tables that each hosted anywhere from 10 to 15 people sat beyond. The enormous, on-property, outfitting store had been cleared and dedicated to the reception, and they needed every bit of the space.

Regina sat in the middle of the table, immediately to Kathryn’s right and Emma sat about 12 people away from her at the absolute end of the table. It was probably for the best, she was a bit more lost in the shadows here. For as much as Regina was talking to everyone around her, Emma was talking to no one. She looked up several times to see Marco sitting at one of the tables with Henry. Marco waved Henry’s hand at Emma and she responded with a sad smile and half-hearted wave. He did the same a few moments later to Regina, and Emma was certain that he had gotten a more enthusiastic response. She had stopped trying to lean back and forth to see Regina. There always seemed to be at least five people leaning forward or backwards at the same time to block her view. Eventually, she just resigned herself to sitting quietly and eating. She was never one for small talk anyways.

They had foregone the speeches of the Best Man and Maid of Honor. Likely that was for the best, considering Fredrick and Kathryn’s wild histories. There were probably WAY too many questionable stories that had been accumulated and, god only knew, which one of those stories Fredrick’s drunken friends would have chosen to share. Emma would have liked to have heard Regina, though. Her voice was calming and she would have had to stand, so that Emma could see her. She was lost in thought when they called for the wedding party to prepare for the first dance. The entire group moved into an alcove off to the side of the dance floor, each bridesmaid paired with their ‘escort’ from the procession; all except for Emma. Tamara had declared earlier, in no uncertain terms, that she refused to participate in any dance with Emma, and Phillip had agreed to step in to avoid drama with a whispered ‘I’m sorry’. As soon as everyone had made it to the floor and people were in rapt attention to the motion before them, Emma took her leave, ducking out through a side door; her eyes full of disheartened tears. In her haste to leave, she hadn't noticed that several of the groomsmen and bridesmaids had already departed for an evening of alternate fun.

Regina watched the side of the dance floor. She was being hung all over by the drunk, Best Man, and he seemed to have incredibly, roaming hands. She kept her eyes on Emma who had, so far, refused to look up. As Regina attempted to dance-wrestle with her partner, she saw Emma turn and leave. She wanted and needed to get to her as fast as possible, but she had to wait out this song. She looked briefly to Marco who closed his eyes and shook his head at her. He had come to the same conclusion as Regina; Emma was overwhelmed by the evening and she’d had enough. Regina looked at him with desperate eyes. He pointed to himself and Henry and pressed his palms down a few times to indicate that she shouldn't worry about them. She mouthed ‘thank you’, before turning her attention to the ‘Best Man’. Regina whispered close to his ear, still wearing a beautiful smile for the audience to see,
“If you don’t put your hands on my waist, right this instant, I will rip your nuts off one by one and hand them to you….”

That seemed to sober him up very quickly.

Emma reached in her pocket as she walked quickly to the equipment shop and pulled out the key that Phillip had given her ‘just in case she needed some quiet’. There was no mistaking the understanding in his eyes when he had handed it to her.

Testing the knob, she found the door to be already unlocked, which she thought was odd, but, in the excitement of the day, it was likely that Phillip and she had simply forgotten to secure it. She was already ten feet into the shop, when her mind registered the overpowering stench of weed, booze and a sickening, but familiar, cologne. Her stomach fell as she saw one shadow and then another pass through the light that was filtering in through the still open doorway behind her. Turning on her heel, she crashed directly into Neal who was now blocking her path. She jumped back almost immediately out of his reach.

“Well, well, well, Greg, looks who’s decided to join us for a little fun,” said Neal as he took a drag from his joint and swig from the bottle of Jack, wiping his mouth crudely on the back of his tuxedo sleeve. He swayed slightly on his feet and Emma guessed from the lack of coordination that they had both been there awhile now.

“Look, I don’t want any trouble,” said Emma nervously as she looked around him, towards the door.

“Oh, sweetheart, this isn’t about what you want. It’s about what I want and what he wants,” Neal pointed to himself before swinging the bottle of Jack in Greg’s direction.

Emma’s breathing quickened and shallowed as she considered her next move. Receiving no response, Neal continued,

“And you’ll be happy to know that we’ve reconsidered and decided to give you a second chance. You see, me and Greg, we talked it over, and a pretty girl like you; we think you may just be confused. How about we help get things straightened out a little bit for you?”

“I don’t need your help. I need to go,” stated Emma softly as she started towards the door. For as drunk and high as he was, Neal still had decently quick reflexes and he stepped immediately to block her path.

Uh, uh, uh,” he said while shaking his head, “you aren’t going anywhere, honey. Greg, close the door…”

Greg moved to close the door and lock it while Emma watched, panicked and helpless; her escape route diminished and then removed completely.

Following the first dance, Regina immediately tried to extract herself from the festivities so that she could try to find Emma. Strangers stopped her to pass along compliments, while old acquaintances from Boston longed to catch up. Politely declining each conversation with a promise to ‘catch up in a bit’, she stepped towards the side door that Emma had exited earlier. She was only a few steps towards her destination before a hand was laid on her arm.

“Regina?”

Regina sighed a bit, hoping she hadn’t missed her opportunity to seek out Emma. She looked up to
see who it was that addressed her. It was Phillip, accompanied by Fredrick, and they could tell she was worried.

“She may be in the equipment shop,” said Phillip, “Fredrick and I will show you where it is.”

Regina grasped his hand tightly.

“Thank you,” Regina breathed out before hurrying after them towards the shop.

Despite the door being closed, Emma decided to try to make a break for it. She’d had enough experience to know that their drug and liquor addled state might give her the time she needed to get the door opened. As she tried to side-step Neal, though, he reached immediately and grabbed her wrist roughly. Emma cried out, startling him enough that she could jerk her arm away. She was shaking uncontrollably and she pulled clenched fists up close to her face. Her eyes were squeezed shut and her head and neck were twisted as if an unheard sound was causing her pain.

“What the fuck is your problem, you crazy bitch,” demanded Neal.

“Please, please let me out. Please let me out…” whimpered Emma as she began to rock slightly.

“I already told you. You aren’t going anywhere until we’re done with you,” Neal sneered.

Grabbing her wrist again, he backhanded Emma across the face with enough force to throw her hard into the wall. She cried out as the searing pain exploded in her cheek and jaw and her head and shoulder made rough, full contact with the wall.

Emma opened her eyes and tried to focus her gaze. Her head and shoulder hurt from the impact and blood had already started to ooze from her eyebrow. She could vaguely see the peeling pink wallpaper that had been put up for show so that the case worker would think Emma was being housed in a ‘nurturing environment’. The blur of the one-armed stuffed bear was present on the torn comforter. He would be there to offer solace later. For now, he was simply relegated to spectator.

Turning slightly, she could see her foster father standing there, blocking the way to the closed and locked door, hands already reaching for his belt. She prayed for unconsciousness to just take her…

Emma’s fingernails scraped across the drywall and with pure force of will, she lifted her foot, kicking as hard as she could into the material. She felt it give. Drawing back, she kicked again, enlarging the hole. Soon, fists and elbows and feet began to pummel the gypsum and the wood behind as Emma screamed and cried. She would fucking claw her way out of this hell, if she had to; but this wasn’t happening again. Not again.

She could hear Neal laughing behind her.

“Where you gonna go, bitch? Hey Greg, check this shit out. This chick’s done lost her fucking mind,” he huffed a laugh as he gulped from the bottle greedily, eyes never leaving Emma.

“Yeah, she’s got a lot fight in her,” was the reply.

“Yeah? We’ll see about that…..,” said Neal as he stepped towards Emma; hands reaching for his own belt.
Phillip, Fredrick and Regina broken into a run as they heard the sounds of a scuffle, muffled male voices and Emma’s screams coming from behind the door.

Phillip jiggled the handle to the door only to find it locked. Regina banged on the side of the wall to let Emma know that they were there.

“WE’RE HERE, BABY, WE’RE COMING!!,” she screamed through the wall, hoping that her voice would give Emma some sense of assurance that they were close.

Emma continued to scream inside and they heard the frenzied banging and tearing at the walls.

“OPEN THE FUCKING DOOR, PHILLIP!!,” screamed Regina frantically and in tears as she watched him fumble with his key ring, trying to find the right key.

“Oh god, hang on, baby,” she whispered as her fingernails scratched against the wood of the outside wall.

Frustrated with the lack of progress, Regina ran to the door and rammed her shoulder into it, trying to get it to budge open. She felt Fredrick pull her back as Phillip slammed his foot hard onto the wood, breaking the jam and causing the door to swing inwards.

Neal and Greg were startled from their laughter as Phillip and then Fredrick burst through the door. In an instant, Phillip had slammed Neal against the wall; his hand grasping Neal’s collar, his forearm pressed tightly against his neck. Phillip’s face was beet red.

“Wh-what the hell…..,” choked out Neal as the bottle of Jack dropped from his fist and shattered on the floor. His sleeve was drenched with the majority of the caramel-colored contents of the bottle. Phillip’s face was so close that their noses almost touched.

Drawing back his arm, Phillip laid a solid fist into Neal’s ribs and a resounding crack was heard in the shop.

“FUCK!!” screamed Neal as he crumpled to the ground. Fredrick had Greg pressed, face first, into the ground, knee between his shoulder blades as he twisted his arm behind his back until he heard the sickening crunch of a breaking wrist.

“Get up you piece of shit,” growled Phillip as he lifted Neal by his collar and dragged him out the door, throwing him roughly onto the ground outside. Fredrick followed closely behind with Greg as they drug them off to ‘finish the conversation’ they had just started.

“Regina, what the fuck is –“ Kathryn stopped cold as she stepped into the shop to see Regina crouched near Emma. She had seen Phillip and Fredrick ‘escorting’ two of the wedding party to the nearby garage, and she quickly put two and two together.

Emma had already sunken to the floor exhausted; fingernails still scratching feebly at the wall as her cheek rested against the solid wood of an exposed stud. The floor around her was covered with pieces of drywall and her clothes were covered in white dust. Her chest heaved and her eyes held a wild but distant look.

“Emma?” asked Regina tentatively.

Regina reached out to touch her, but stopped mid-way. She knew that Emma wasn't fully lucid and 'with her’ right now, and she knew the repercussions of her touch could be severe, but the need to comfort her fiancée overcame her sense of personal safety and she extended her hand to brush some
hair away from Emma’s face.

“Regina, STOP,” warned Kathryn, but she was too late.

Regina saw Emma eyes flutter closed briefly and she breathed a sigh of relief. Their moment of calm was extremely short-lived, however, as Emma sprung at her. Knocking Regina backwards, Emma slammed the heel of her hand into Regina’s forehead, cutting it. Regina cried out in pain, and she saw a flash of horror and recognition in Emma’s eyes just before she scrambled to her feet and ran out the door into the night.

Regina blinked a few times to clear her vision. Bringing her fingertips to her forehead, she winced a bit before withdrawing her fingers and noting the blood on the tips. She breathed a ragged sigh before turning her eyes to Kathryn.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” said Kathryn sympathetically.

“I know. But I thought she might be different. I thought it might be different this time…."

“I wish I had a dollar for every stitch I got thinking the same thing about you. Come on; let’s get you cleaned up…"

Regina bounced Henry on her hip as she paced in front of the fireplace of the guest house. She had excused herself from the wedding soon after Dr. Whale had applied the butterflies and driven her home ‘just in case’. Despite the hour, Henry was still wide awake; feeding off the nervous energy that Regina was unable to control. Transferring Henry to rest against her shoulder, she felt him trying to soothe himself by petting and grasping at the short hair at the back of her head. His touch was light and she sighed as she found a shred of comfort in the action as well.

He must know, somehow, that her heart ached.

Emma stopped at the front door to take her work boots off. She had been with Marco all day and evening at the shop and she was happy to be home with Regina. It was already past 8PM and she hated the thought of Regina being in the house by herself when it was evening or night. Not that anything ever happened in Storybrooke, but she wanted to be on the safe side. Trying the handle, Emma found the front door locked.

Good girl, Emma thought to herself as she extracted her keys.

Emma had her glasses on and was holding her phone close to her face with a furrowed brow as she came in the door. She dropped her boots on the tile and continued to walk through the living room completely puzzled. She had no idea how half of the stuff on the screen worked and something had been making the phone beep all day long. She had NO idea what was causing THAT, but it was becoming kind of annoying. She had asked for a simple phone to use in case of emergencies, but instead, Regina had gotten her this.

This is going to take forever to figure out, sighed Emma to herself.

Her frustration was very, short-lived as she smelled the heavenly scent coming from the kitchen. Regina was cooking dinner, and she was pretty certain it was lasagna. Emma continued to look at her phone as she came into full view of the kitchen, and didn’t notice Regina watching her apprehensively.

“Sweetheart, this phone’s been beeping all day, and I can’t figure…..” Emma had started to look up
as she was finishing her sentence and stopped dead in her tracks. The only thing she could breathe out was, “WOW!”

Emma’s eyes went wide as she took in Regina standing in the kitchen; the surprised in her eyes magnified by the thickness of her lenses.

“You cut your hair... short” she said in awe.

Regina’s hair was parted on the left, and the sides and back were much shorter and blended into a thicker crown of hair. The hair on top of her head was slightly longer and she sported long, side-swept bangs that she could only barely tuck behind her right ear now. Several stray locks fell forward over her right eye which she blew out of the way occasionally. It had a casual, fun wave and Regina was running her hands through it nervously every so often, leaving it beautifully tousled.

She looked at Emma nervously, awaiting further reaction. Getting nothing, she asked dejectedly,

“You don’t like it...” As she wiped her palm over the hair in back.

Emma walked around Regina in the kitchen trying to take in everything. As she came around to face Regina, she placed her hands against the back of Regina’s neck, pushing her hands up to slip her fingers into the much shorter hair. It was such a different sensation from what she was used to and she LOVED it.

“I-I love it...” said Emma, still looking at her hair in astonishment, “but what’s the occasion?”

“Well, our lives are going to get a whole lot crazier once the baby comes and Henry starts walking and then there are more fertility treatments and more children...”

Regina was starting to overwhelm herself, so she stopped at that and finished her sentence, “Well... this is just easier and faster for me to take care of.”

“Once the baby comes? Is there something you haven’t told me?” grinned Emma, hoping it could be true that after one visit they would be starting their family.

“No, I mean, assuming everything goes well,” she wished she could share something more positive with Emma, but she had nothing additional to offer.

Emma nodded at Regina’s reasoning. As always, it was flawless.

“Speaking of babies, where’s Henry?”

“Already sleeping.”

“And how long till dinner?”

“Another thirty minutes, at least.”

“Good.”

Emma crouched down and hoisted Regina over her shoulder. She held the backs of her legs as Regina’s front draped down her back. She squealed and laughed as Emma carried her towards the bedroom.

“Put me down Emma Swan,” Said Regina, pounding playfully on her back.

“No way, I’m gonna show you how much I love your hair. And in less than two months, it will be
Emma Swan-Mills to you,” said Emma with a huge smile and laugh as she carried Regina to the bedroom.

As the door closed, Emma asked,

“By the way, why is my phone beeping so much?”

“I sent you a text.”

“Yeah, what did it say?”

“I cut my hair.”

“Evidently, the phone’s excited about it too…”

Emma sat hugging her knees to her chest; pressed tightly into the darkened corner of the wood shop; head in her hands. It had taken forever to convince one of the designated drivers (reserved for the departing guests) to take her to Marco’s shop in town. He had wanted, instead, to drop her at the Police Station or the hospital. It didn’t take a genius to figure out why. She was pretty damn certain that her appearance had all the makings of lunacy versus drunkenness.

She didn't consider the offer much at the time. She just wanted to get the hell away. Get to somewhere safe. And she wanted to do it quickly. Now, she wondered if the driver hadn't been right. Maybe the police station would have been the better option for her. She was dangerous and lacked control. She had hurt someone. Even more; she had hurt someone she loved. Again.

It was different when she was younger. Her small stature made her easier to control when physical restraint had been necessary to prevent her harming herself or others. Marco would simply hold her tightly as she pummeled her fists ineffectually against his body. Eventually, they learned her triggers and the need for and frequency of the interventions had abated. As she grew older, the outbursts still happened, but it was rare; and thankfully so. She had grown so much stronger and she had so little control during those times. A miss-timed or unexpected hug, an innocuous joke gone wrong, or an accidentally blocked path to a closed door was all that was needed for people to get injured. Badly. Innocent people paying the price for the transgressions of another. Fredrick had learned the hard way. Marco had learned it once, too. And, now…..Regina.

Oh god, what had she done? She had destroyed everything they had built together. Emma thought about the look of shock and devastated surprise on her fiancée’s face. In the blink of an eye, Regina realized that Emma was a danger to herself and Henry. She saw that Emma was no different than those that had come before her. She realized that she could no longer trust Emma and feel safe around her. How could she blame Regina? She couldn't even trust herself. What if it happened again? What if it was worse next time?

No, there wouldn't be a next time. Emma knew what she had to do.

Regina looked at the clock: 3:30AM. Henry had passed out a while ago and was now sleeping soundly, arms and legs drawn up beneath him as he lay on his tummy atop the quilt of the guest house bed. Regina couldn’t help but wonder if he found comfort in the remnants of Emma’s scent that still clung to the fibers. She loved him so much and he loved her. Regina tried to picture the brilliant smile that graced Emma’s lips each time she held him up above her, hands under his arms, body resting on her forearms. She would drop him down quickly, placing a kiss on his cheek before pressing him up again as he giggled and smiled down at her. The memory flashed, but was almost
immediately replaced by the image of Emma’s face as she sat on the floor, terrified, clawing at the wood and sheet rock of the equipment shop.

Regina sighed as she resigned herself to the fact that Emma may not be coming home this evening. Regina had no way to find her. Her car was at Fredrick’s home, and Dr. Whale had recommended against her driving. She prayed that Emma would come home eventually. It had been an accident. She had done this herself; lashed out, hurt others. Her father, Kathryn…..they had all been victims to her lack of control.

Settling in beside Henry, Regina snuggled in close; arm draped protectively over his small body, and succumbed to sleep.

Regina’s nose twitched as a few strands of hair brushed against her face. She smiled gently as she felt fingertips brush against her forehead, but the smile was lost quickly as the slight burn of her injury reminded her of why she was in an unfamiliar bed.

She opened her brown eyes slowly and found them locked with Emma’s green orbs. Emma lay far away from her and Henry, barely clinging to the edge of the mattress. She withdrew her hand quickly and fearfully when she noticed that Regina had awoken. Her eyes were heavy with melancholy and filled with tears.

Regina looked down to see Henry lying between them; as both a buffer and as a connection.

“I packed my things, but I didn’t want to leave without saying goodbye.”

Emma was barely able to choke out the words that she was saying. She didn't want to go, but she was afraid and she didn't know what else to do.

“Where will you go, my love? I thought your home was here…with us….”

Regina’s tone wasn't hurtful or judgmental, merely inquisitive and despondent.

“I hurt you, Regina,” whispered Emma in a small voice, “You deserve better than me. I'm just like the other people that have hurt you before.”

“Shhhhhhhhh,” comforted Regina as she placed her index finger gently against Emma’s trembling lips, “actions borne out of fear and actions driven by anger are two very different things. If you think I can’t tell the difference by now, well, then you don’t give me enough credit, nor do you give me enough blame. Do you think I haven’t done what you did, Emma? Like you; I am just as much a sinner as a saint.” Regina paused a moment before continuing, “I knew you were afraid, Emma. I shouldn't have tried to touch you. You weren't ready and I pushed.”

“I need help, Regina,” pleaded Emma quietly. Her chin quivered and her eyes were full of tears that were running down her cheeks, across her face and into her hairline.

“Well, we can’t help you if you run away from us, Emma, but I don’t want you to stay if we only make you afraid.”

“I am just scared that I’ll hurt you or Henry, if I lose control again.”

“Emma, whatever horrible things you've managed to convince yourself that you're capable of; I assure you that you are not. You are not the terrible person that you want to believe you are. I’m not afraid of you, Emma. I know who I fell in love with, and I know, in my heart, that you would never hurt us.”
Grinning a bit, Regina added, “Besides, I've got a pretty mean right hook myself, and I’m not afraid to use it. Or have you already forgotten?”

Emma offered a half-hearted grin in return.

“It’s not quite the beautiful smile that I love, but it’s a start,” whispered Regina as she pressed slender fingers into golden hair, rubbing her thumb in soothing circles against Emma’s temple. Emma closed her eyes, losing herself in Regina’s touch.

“Emma?”

“Hmmm?”

“I need you to promise to talk to me. I need you to tell me what you’re feeling. Tell me what I can and cannot do. Can you do that?” She felt Emma nod beneath her hand.

“He locked the door. He blocked my way. He wouldn't let me out,” she whispered barely above a breath.

“I understand, sweetheart.”

Regina reached to cup Emma’s cheek and encouraged her to move closer. They lay close; Henry nestled between them. Emma leaned down to kiss Henry’s forehead and then lifted herself to place a soft kiss on the cut on Regina’s forehead.

“Are you sure that you still want me, Regina?” asked Emma softly as she settled herself back against the pillow, facing Regina.

“Always,” replied Regina with a gentle smile as she entwined her fingers with Emma’s; their clasped hands laid against Henry, protecting him as he slept. “Henry and I love you so, so much. We’d be lost without you. Now, how about we sleep for a little while longer and then go back up to the house and get you unpacked?”

Emma barely nodded twice before falling into an exhausted sleep; Regina close behind.
“Oh fuck, baby. That’s so hot.” whispered Emma breathlessly as she looked down at Regina with wide eyes full of lust.

When Emma had dreamt about their honeymoon, she hadn’t envisioned this at all. She was kind of glad she hadn’t, though; because this was a mind-blowing and completely welcome surprise.

“Regina! Emma! Wait!” called Kathryn from the front door as they walked, hand in hand, through the light snow to get to the Mercedes in the driveway. As Kathryn approached, they noticed that she was carrying a small, black, overnight bag in her hand, “You forgot something,” she stated with a proud smirk as she held out the duffle.

“What’s in here?” asked Emma as she took the sack. She eyed it skeptically and held it out in front of her like it contained a wild animal.

“Just a little present,” said Kathryn with a smirk. “You can open it at the lighthouse. Right now, though, you better get moving. The weather is coming in.”

“I can’t believe how much spray is being blown off the ocean,” said Emma as she bobbed her head around nervously. The ice seemed to be thickening on the windows with each passing moment and she prayed that she would soon catch sight of the small access road that would lead them to the lighthouse. There had been a light snow all day, but it had really started to pick up since they had left the house. Emma didn’t mind being iced and snowed in with her new wife, but she would prefer it be in the comfort of the lighthouse; not in a car that had slid off the side of the road.

She turned to offer an encouraging smile to her passenger. Regina looked nervous and sick. She was definitely not used to the crazy weather of the great state of Maine. This was nothing compared to some of the nor’easters that Emma had seen before. Still, she didn’t want to be on the road any longer than necessary and she didn’t think that offering ‘it could be worse’ was going to do much to quell Regina’s trepidation at this point.

“Only a few more minutes, baby. I promise.”

Emma brushed the back of her gloved fingers down Regina’s cheek in reassurance. Her hand was grasped immediately and lowered into Regina’s lap where it was held tightly by two hands.

“There you are,” breathed Emma softly in relief when she spied the small drive to their right. Making the turn, she had them safely parked in the driveway of the lighthouse within a few more minutes. The spire already shone like a glass chess piece from the accumulation of ice. There was a soft glow from a few of the windows and she breathed a silent word of thanks to Fredrick and his father, Phillip, for getting the place ready for their arrival.

“Give me a few minutes to get the door opened and then I’ll come back to get you and unpack the car.”

Emma placed a tender, lingering kiss on Regina’s lips before situating her beanie over her ears, grabbing her claw hammer and stepping out into the bitter cold, snow and ice.

As Emma chipped at the thick ice that had accumulated on the locks, hinges and seams of the door,
she thought about how much of a disappointment this honeymoon must be to Regina. She wished she could have taken Regina somewhere different; somewhere sunny; somewhere warmer; somewhere better, but she just couldn’t afford it. Regina had offered to pay, but it wouldn’t have felt right. Regina already picked up most of the expenses at the house, and Emma wasn’t going to allow her to take on the financial burden of a honeymoon as well. When Phillip had offered the lighthouse for a few days, Emma jumped at the chance. Regina had enjoyed it the first time, maybe she would enjoy it as much this time as well. God, she hoped so.

If the swirling question of the whole honeymoon location wasn’t bad enough, Emma’s stomach was doing nervous backflips. It wasn’t like this was their first time together, but there was something different and amazing and special about knowing that she was going to be spending her first night with her wife. She just wanted to make sure everything was perfect for Regina. Over the months, they had become so much bolder in their lovemaking; nights of slow, thorough exploration of hands, fingers, mouths and tongues were punctuated by intense, wanton, carnal encounters that left them exhausted, sweating and trembling in each other’s arms. Regina was so responsive to Emma’s touch and Emma craved hearing and watching her beautiful lover’s release each time it happened. Their need for each other was growing so strong that only one or two days of abstinence could comfortably pass between passionate and fervent exchanges.

Emma wanted to help fulfill every one of Regina’s deepest desires. Regina just seemed so tentative and ashamed to ask for what she wanted or needed sometimes. Emma wanted that to change. She wanted to give Regina very reason to trust her with her dreams and fantasies and to know that Emma would do everything in her power to make the experience beautiful and secure and incredible.

In the almost twenty minutes it took for Emma to return to the passenger door, she had managed to work herself up into a good fluster. Now, as she stood just outside, hand on the door, she felt like the shy, scared handyman that had met Regina for the first time so many months ago. Taking a deep breath, she opened the door so that she could get Regina into the warmth of the ‘home’ that they would be sharing for the next four days.

“Ready?” Emma asked as she offered Regina a badly shaking hand to help her out of the car. Her heart was beating wildly and she looked at the ground and twisted her mouth nervously.

She looked up shyly to see Regina worrying her lip between her teeth like she always did when she was nervous and unsure. Maybe she wasn’t the only one with butterflies tonight…. 

It took only a minute or two before Regina lost sight of Emma at the door. The warmth of the car was no match for the amount of spray that was coming off the ocean and ice was building quickly on every glass surface. At least they had made it here safely. That was all that mattered.

She closed her eyes and leaned her head back against the headrest, recalling the last time they had been here. She was still a skeptical and tentative transplant to Storybrooke. She hadn’t expected to find any friends here when she moved from Boston. She would have laughed heartily if someone would have suggested then that she would find a casual lover or even a ‘friend with benefits’ to help her feel less alone. She had resigned herself to the fact that she was going to be alone; Henry and her against the world.

Her self-imposed cloistering had been going exactly as planned, at least for a few days. That was, of course, until this shy, beautiful handyman had shown up at her door. That was when everything flipped upside down; when the loneliness and seclusion and defeat that Regina had known for the past several years started to be replaced by an unexpected and beautiful confusion of new and reawakening emotions.
Emma had given her a second chance at life; a chance to see things with different eyes; a chance to do things right. And this time, she intended to be a full participant, not just some casual observer. She doubted Emma would let her get away with anything less anyways. Emma had given her new friends and a new family. More than that, Emma had shown and proven to her that love didn’t have to be complicated. Love didn’t come with conditions. It wasn’t something that should have to be earned. It wasn’t a treat or a reward to be given in exchange for constant fear, subservience and supplication. And it most certainly didn’t come with black eyes and bruising; torn clothes and tears. A stolen glance, kind words, a gentle touch, a simple smile weren’t something you should spend days thirsting for only to be denied those quenching waters time and time again.

Love was simple, unassuming and comfortable. It was reliable. It was like the broken in sweater you wore on a crisp fall day or the soft blanket you kept for years just to wrap around yourself when sick. It was the incredible warm rush you got from a hot drink on a cold day. It was the hand that brushed your cheek to wake you in the morning and the strong arms that held you and kept you safe when you slept. And for Regina, it had literally knocked on her door and presented itself with a shy smile, emerald green eyes and a rockin’, hot body; a body that Regina fully intended to partake of, in every way imaginable, tonight.

Not that tonight should be different, but it was special to her and she wanted Emma to know that. Tonight, she was going make love to her wife. and she wanted the act itself to be the very embodiment of every emotion that she was feeling at this moment. She wanted Emma to understand everything she could never find the words enough to say.

She snapped back to present as she heard the click of the door handle.

“Ready?” asked Emma as she held out her shaking hand.

Regina fretted her lip between her teeth as she grasped her wife’s hand tightly and stepped out into the snow to start the next chapter of their lives.

Emma watched Regina trying to figure out what to do. She wasn’t sure how to approach this at all. Should she drop the bags and scoop her up right before they got to the door? Probably not, then the bags would get wet and it would soak through onto their clothes. That meant laundry and who the hell does laundry on their honeymoon? Should she have already been carrying her? Again, probably not, she’d almost bit it on the walkway a few moments ago. Tonight was most definitely not the right night for a trip to Storybrooke Hospital to get fitted for a cast and checked for a concussion. Hell, she had no experience with this. All she knew was that her beanie was being pressed down over her eyes from the weight of the chunks of ices that had accumulated in the yarn, she had two bags clasped in her hands and they were approaching this door quickly.

“Uhhhhhh, Regina?” asked Emma tentatively as she lifted her chin and attempted to look out from under the edge of her knitted cap. She held her arms out to the side and Regina smiled as she jumped up, wrapping arms tightly around Emma’s broad shoulders and thighs around Emma’s hips. Reaching down, she twisted the knob and pushed open the door, before capturing Emma’s lips in a deep kiss and being carried through the door.

Regina and Emma stood at the edge of the bed looking down at the black duffle. Since the bag had come from Kathryn, there was a healthy amount of concern to go along with the curiosity about what could be inside. Just like everything else ‘Kathryn’; one never knew what they were going to get.

Breathing out a preparatory breath, Regina pulled the zipper and flipped back the cover of the bag.
It was Emma’s tool belt. Confused, Regina looked immediately to Emma hoping that she could help provide an explanation. All she saw was the crestfallen visage of her wife. Why Kathryn would see this as a present or a surprise was beyond Regina completely and, worse yet, having it here had upset Emma.

Reaching out, Emma rubbed some of the worn, soft suede between her thumb and forefinger. Her eyes glazed over slightly and she huffed out a small, defeated laugh.

“I-I’m sorry, Regina. When Phillip offered me the lighthouse for our honeymoon, I assumed it was a gift. I didn’t realize that it was in trade for work. I...well...I must have misunderstood,” Emma sighed. If the honeymoon destination wasn’t already laughable enough to Regina, she would also get the pleasure of watching her wife be a maintenance person so that she could pay off her debt to Fredrick’s family. It seemed to Emma that everything in life came with a price, even the gifts.

“I don’t think the work will take long, but he didn’t mention what he needed done when we talked originally. I’ll try to do it while you sleep, so we can spend time together. I’m really sorry. I honestly didn’t know,” Emma’s voice was starting to crack as she shrugged her shoulders dispiritedly.

“Maybe I can help, Emma, I’m a fast learner,” offered Regina with a caring smile.

“Absolutely not!” the words came out more harshly than Emma had intended. She stopped before she would allow herself to say anything else. This wasn’t Regina’s fault. Emma forced a smile and addressed Regina a bit more softly, “I don’t want you to get hurt, and it was my mistake. You shouldn’t have to pay for my screw up. I’ll make it right with Fredrick’s family. I just need to figure out what they need done.”

Regina nodded her head in understanding. She wasn’t going to push. She knew that Emma wanted so badly to provide for her and Henry. Emma wanted to feel like she contributed. Regina honestly didn’t give a damn about the money. She’d seen it ruin her mother’s relationship with her father. Eventually, it and power became more important to her mother than her father was. Still, this wasn’t about her or her family. This was about Emma and her pride and her need to care for and protect them. She had to allow her to try.

“I should probably go downstairs and call in case the lines go down from the storm. I won’t be long.”

“OK. I’ll go ahead and unpack a few things while you’re gone.”

Emma leaned over and placed a soft kiss on Regina’s cheek. Regina turned her head in an effort to capture Emma’s lips, but Emma quickly pulled away and headed down the stairs, leaving Regina frustrated.

Regina sat down hard beside the bag.

“How could you do this to her Phillip? You made her believe it was a gift....” sighed Regina irritably to the room as she rubbed her temple.

Reaching into the bag, Regina extracted the belt and laid it on her lap, running her fingertips over the worn leather. She’d watched Emma wear this thing so many times. She hadn’t realized the burden it was or the worry it created for her. For Emma, it was like a scarlet letter; a constant reminder for herself and others of her status in life.

As Regina shifted slightly on the mattress, some of the other items in the bag moved, catching her
eye. Laying the belt aside, she reached in and found a folded note with the name ‘Regina’ written on the outside. She easily recognized the writing as Kathryn’s and she unfolded it and started to read.

Sweetie,

You know what you need to do….

Love,

Me

PS – Talk Spanish. It’s hot….

Regina pulled each of the items out of the bag and placed them on the bed. They had both been WAY off base about the reason behind the tool belt, which was going to make for a very interesting and confusing conversation with Phillip to be sure. In fact, what Regina beheld was a completely different ball of wax altogether. Kathryn could sometimes surprise Regina with her listening and observational skills. This was exactly what she had been considering when they were in Portland. Regina had all but forgotten about this confession. She prayed that Emma wasn’t going to think she had lost her mind. Maybe she should have talked to her about this first. Or maybe she should take Kathryn’s advice for once, be bold and go for it.

“What the hell am I doing?” whispered Regina nervously to the room as she started pulling off her shoes.

“Sooolllllllllllllll, did you talk to Emma about it?” Kathryn asked with an excited wriggle of her eyebrows as she came around the side of the couch with two glasses of wine in her hands.

“Talk to her about what, Kathryn?” responded Regina nonchalantly as she took the glass of wine from her friend and curled her legs under her on the cushions of the couch.

“Oh please, sweetie, you know good and god damned well what I am referring to. Did you talk to her about what you were looking at in Portland last weekend?”

Kathryn sat on the opposite end of the couch facing her friend. She rolled her eyes in mock exasperation. She knew she was going to have to drag this whole conversation out of Regina. And, dammit, they were going to have this conversation.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, Kathryn.”

Regina looked down at the floor but a blush had already crept up her cheeks. She knew she was doing a terrible job at feigning ignorance.

“Regina, sweetie, you suck at doing things on the down low. I saw you looking at that thing in the shop. You had your hand on the box three times. I don’t understand why you didn’t just get it.”

“I just don’t know how Emma would feel about it….”

“Ok, sweetie, maybe it’s just me, but Emma looks like the kind of gal that has some serious hidden talent when it comes to this particular thing. I bet she’d be all. over. it! Well, technically, you’d be the one all over it,” finished Kathryn with a smirk.

Regina looked at Kathryn with an arched brow.
“Oh, COME ON, Regina. We both know it would be for you. Besides, I watch TV. I know how you lesbians operate.”

“Why are you watching TV shows about lesbians?” asked Regina with a confused, screwed up face.

“Research, sweetie. One of us has to do it, because you are obviously clueless,” stated Kathryn matter-of-factly. “Plus, I try to keep my options open. You are living proof that you never know when opportunity may come knocking at your door,” finished Kathryn with a goofy smile.

“Anyway, I think this is, like, right up Emma’s alley. I can tell from the way she looks at you that she wants a little bit more of that Latin heat. She’s just too damn nice to ask you to bring it.”

There was a slight pause before Kathryn spoke up again,

“What else have you been thinking about doing?” she asked quizzically.

“Well…..” said Regina as a shy smile started to grace her lips.

Regina heard Emma’s footsteps on the stairs and the knowledge that Emma was so close to the room caused her heart to race. There was no turning back now and no hiding. God, she hoped that Emma would be receptive to this whole thing.

“Baby, now I’m really confused,” stated Emma as she entered the room, scratching her head and looking at a piece of paper in her hand, “Phillip said the place was for us to use with no…..strings….a. a. a. a…..”

Emma stood before Regina, mouth opening and closing, completely unable to form the sounds needed to finish her sentence. It was like the air had been knocked from her lungs. Her eyes were wide and she was barely breathing.

Regina sat before her on the raised hearth in a pair of very short, low slung, cutoff jeans which were marked with strategically placed cuts and holes that revealed hints of tanned, slick and smooth skin. Her checkered shirt was unbuttoned but tied at the bottom, revealing her abs from below her navel to just below her breasts. She wore no bra and the sides of the shirt barely covered her nipples, a hint of the dark circles of her areolas showing teasingly. A slender, tapered, 4”, silver cylinder hung between her breasts from a silver chain. Her platform heels were planted far apart, spreading her thighs wide. Flexed calves and toned, smooth legs had an almost bronze glow as the light from the flames in the fireplace licked olive skin. Her elbows rested on her knees and a harness dangled from the fingertips of her right hand. Regina looked up through her lashes and Emma could see the mix of excitement and uncertainty.

Mustering every ounce of courage she had, Regina stood from the hearth and Emma saw clearly the suede pockets of the tool belt hanging from the front of Regina’s waist. The woven belt cocked loosely from the top of her right hip to the middle of her pants pocket on the left and Emma could only imagine that the belt was equivalently positioned across the taunt muscles of her wife’s ass as well.

Regina swung her hips teasingly as she stepped forward, closing the gap between she and Emma. The movement had caused one side of her shirt to fall back slightly, revealing an incredibly hard, dusky nipple and surrounding skin. The remaining skin of her breasts, stomach and chest had risen into bumps of anticipatory excitement.

Emma’s jaw stopped moving and simply fell slack and her mind was devoid of any logical or coherent thought as she took in the sight before her. Her body’s reaction had been instantaneous and
she could already feel the heat and abundant wetness that had flooded her core and was now continuing to accumulate, between and on her thighs. She shifted slightly as she felt it saturating the fabric of her boy shorts and jeans. Every inch of her skin was on fire, and she took a few deep breaths and blinked her eyes to make sure she wasn’t dreaming. No. This was real, and one thing was certain: Emma never loved that tool belt as much as she did in this very instant.

“Oh God,” breathed Emma as she watched Regina walk two fingers up the center of her chest before her index finger rose to trace Emma’s lips. Her lips parted slightly and her eyes fluttered shut momentarily as she felt the softness of Regina’s fingertip.

“Emma, baby,” whispered Regina sexily, “quiero sentirte adentro de mi esta noche.”

Emma looked at Regina in adorable confusion. Emma hadn’t paid much attention in High School Spanish class, but she was always a very quick study in the bedroom and she had quickly caught on to many of the words and phrases that Regina let slip in the heat of the moment, but these were new and different to her and, God, they were hinting at something pretty damn incredible, if Regina’s outfit was any indication.

Leaning in, Regina allowed her lips to brush Emma’s ear as he spoke in a breathy whisper,

“I want to feel you inside of me tonight….”

Emma nodded in stunned silence. At this point, she’d go chop wood naked in the driving snow if that’s what Regina asked; English or Spanish. Looking down, Emma couldn’t resist the temptation before her any longer. Untying the knot, she brushed the side of Regina’s shirt open and massaged the curve of a firm breast with her fingers before flicking her thumb quickly over Regina’s nipple several times. Her other hand repeated the same motions, teasing both nipples very quickly into almost painful peaks.

“Mmmmmmm, mas,” was moaned quietly and Emma raised her head to look into Regina’s eyes. Continuing to tease with one hand, Emma wrapped her other arm around Regina’s back and pulled her closer. She watched Regina’s eyes intently as she slid her palm down and over the toned globes of Regina’s firm ass before finding an opening in the fabric of the jeans just below the back pocket. Slipping her fingers inside, Emma massaged soft skin and toned muscle for only a moment before boldly pressing her hand deeper and lower into the worn fabric. Fingertips, and then fingers, immediately found soaked, swollen, hot lips and pressed between them, rubbing back and forth slowly and firmly to milk even more wetness from Regina’s core. Capturing Regina’s lips, Emma pressed her tongue inside Regina’s mouth strongly, the strokes of her tongue matching the strokes of her fingers.

Recovering a bit from her initial shock, Emma found her voice. She wanted Regina to know that she was ‘all in’ with whatever was about to go down. She brought kiss swollen lips close to Regina’s ear and husked,

“Does the beautiful foreman want to be fucked hard on the job site by one of the crew?”

Now it was Regina’s turn to be speechless, and Emma felt her nod slightly as an immediate gush of wetness coat Emma’s fingers and hand. Extracting her fingers from Regina’s shorts, Emma watched Regina’s eyes intently as she drew her hand to her lips licking her palm with the flat of her tongue before taking each digit into her mouth and swirling her tongue to clean them of Regina’s arousal.

“Que rico,” responded Emma with a sexy wink. Regina raised an eyebrow in slight shock as she realized how very aware Emma had become of her encouragements in the bedroom.
Stepping back, Emma crossed her arms over her torso and grasped the hem of her sweater and tank, pulling them over her head and tossing them to the floor along with her sports bra. Regina’s eyes were following her every move as she popped the button of her jeans, and Emma smirked sexily as her fingers pulled the zipper down excruciatingly slowly. Pressing hands inside her waistband, Emma pushed the fabric of her jeans and underwear over her hips and thighs, allowing it to pool at her feet.

Taking the harness from Regina’s hand, Emma stepped easily into the lattice of straps, buckling and tightening it firmly across her hips. Regina could tell from her deft movements that Emma was no novice. Regina felt the length of the cock pressed against her lower tummy, tip brushing against her navel, as Emma stepped forward and slipped her fingers into her hair, drawing their faces together to capture her lips in a searing kiss as she slipped the shirt from Regina’s shoulders. It took Emma no time to find the buckle of the belt and release the weight of the suede from Regina’s hips. Breaking their kiss and stepping back slightly, Emma looked down, chest heaving, taking a moment to admire the beautiful body of her wife in nothing more than a pair of skimpy cutoffs and heels. She looked up in time to see Regina watching the cock intently and licking her lips.

Dipping her head, Emma captured one of Regina’s nipples between her lips, flicking rapidly with the tip of her tongue before scraping teeth over the sensitive nub. She noticed Regina’s hand reach out to wrap around the dildo, stroking it slowly in anticipation and expectation of what was to come. Emma bit down gently and heard Regina gasp in surprise before swirling her tongue over and over to assuage the pleasurable pain. She moved to the other breast to provide it the same attention, reaching down to pop buttons and zippers to free Regina of the last, scant piece of fabric that remained on her body. Hooking her thumbs in the waistband, Emma pushed down while Regina wagged her hips sexily to work the fabric over the curves of her hips and ass, across taunt thighs and over toned calves.

Regina cradled Emma’s face in her hands, encouraging her to stand. Taking Emma’s lower lip, she sucked it firmly before releasing it with a pop. She stopped only long enough to whisper, “Soy tuya siempre, hazme lo que quieras…. “

Before Emma could respond with her obvious question, Regina started to make a trail of fervent, fiery kisses along Emma’s jawline, between her breasts and over her taunt stomach. By the time she had finished, Regina crouched back on her heels, platforms on, thighs spread wide in front of Emma. Brown eyes intently watched green as Regina grasped Emma’s hips and then traced the tip of her tongue over supple lips to wet them. Emma threaded her fingers through silky brown hair and trailed fingers down Regina’s cheek, smiling to reassure her. Her breath caught as Regina’s lips parted and her tongue languidly swirled around the tip of the thick, purple cock that was attached to the harness that Emma wore.

“Oh fuck, baby. That’s so hot.” whispered Emma breathlessly as she looked down at Regina with wide eyes full of lust.

Emma’s eyes widened and her lips parted hungrily as Regina proceeded to wrap soft, red lips around the tip, sucking softly several times before releasing the dildo to run the flat of her tongue slowly up and down the underneath of the shaft. Cradling the cock gently with one hand, she placed open mouthed kisses along the length before opening her lips one more time to slide the length into her mouth, withdrawing it to the tip before taking it in again. Her pace was slow and steady and she felt both of Emma’s hands threaded in her hair, gently encouraging her to continue.

As Regina watched, Emma’s head lulled back in complete ecstasy; eyes closed; face to the ceiling. Emma took ragged breaths through parted lips as the fingers of her left hand traced lightly over the
underside of her chin and over the ridges of her throat before pinching and pulling her own nipple into a rock hard peak. Heavy-lidded, she looked back down at Regina who smiled around the shaft of the cock as she continued her visual teasing. Pulling away the last time, she flicked her tongue quickly a few times before kneeling and patting the quilt that she had placed in front of the fireplace; encouraging Emma to lie down.

Emma settled back comfortably, hands gripping the material of the comforter, watching intently as Regina continued to take the lead. Regina removed her heels before turning to place one knee between Emma’s thighs and the other beside her hip; the smooth, tanned skin of her back and side facing Emma. She urged Emma’s knee up and she held it with one hand as her other reached down to slip the tip of the cock through her wetness several times before positioning it at her waiting entrance. Placing both hands back on Emma’s knee, she looked back over her shoulder and watched Emma’s face as she lowered herself slowly down the shaft, stopping only when she had taken the phallus to the base. She rested there only for a moment to allow herself to get used to the sensation of fullness and girth before rising to the tip and settling back down. Bowing her head and closing her eyes, she concentrated on working up to a steady but urgent pace.

Emma squeezed Regina’s hips; strong hands helping to guide and control Regina’s movements as she worked herself upon the dildo that was dripping and shimmering with her wetness. Emma could see the muscles of Regina’s toned thighs flexing strongly as she lifted herself up and lowered herself back down, taking the full, thick length of the cock over and over. Planting her other foot firmly on the ground as well, Emma met each stroke; thrusting up strongly as Regina lowered, driving every last millimeter of the strap-on into her lover. She was spurred on by the almost a constant drone of Regina’s loud moan which was punctuated with a jolt of volume and gasp each time their hips met.

“Yeah, that’s it. Ride that cock, baby. Fuck yeah,” encouraged Emma, panting heavily through parted lips as Regina’s fingers played skillfully between her hot, slick folds. Emma’s clit already throbbed and ached for release, but Regina kept her teetering on the edge without allowing her to fall. It was exquisite torture that Emma was more than happy to endure.

The entire sight was incredible to behold and Emma tried to remain focused enough to enjoy every second of the show that Regina was playing out especially for her. Regina’s head was now thrown back and her lips were parted as she drew ragged breaths, and her skin was covered with perspiration drawn out by the warmth of the fire and their exertions. Emma watched as a single drop extracted itself from her skin, sliding down her neck and over her shoulder before rolling slowly down the center of her back and over the firm muscle of her ass.

“Fuck, you’re beautiful,” whispered Emma as she stilled her hips and reached up to grasp Regina’s breast, roughly twisting and pulling a firm nipple between her fingers. Regina continued her movements almost lazily, circling her hips strongly before each rise, giving them both a moment’s respite from their strenuous workout. She removed her fingers from Emma’s wetness and turned her head to watch Emma’s eyes as she pressed the fingers of her opposite hand through her hair, pulling damp strands away from her face, so that Emma could watch her draw glistening fingers between her lips. She smiled as she swirled her tongue, allowing Emma to observe as she enjoyed the taste on her tongue. Withdrawing her fingers slowly from her mouth, Regina tugged her bottom lip down seductively before tracing the tip of her tongue slowly over each lip, groaning sexily as she gathered the remnants of Emma’s arousal and consumed them hungrily. Leaning forward slightly, Regina scraped her teeth on Emma’s propped knee in an open-mouthed kiss before turning her head to the side and resting her cheek atop Emma’s knee; brown eyes never leaving green.

“Anything, my love. Tell me what you want…” whispered Emma in awe of the sensual beauty before her.
Regina remained where she was for a few minutes, still lost in her own rhythm, continuing to grind and look pensively at Emma. Offering a shy smile, she lifted herself from the strap-on, moaning slightly at the loss of fullness as the length slipped from inside her. Emma watched as she resettled herself on all fours facing the fire, lowering her upper body slightly to accentuate her toned and rounded ass and pressing her knees out to open herself fully to Emma’s gaze and touch.

“Cógeme rico,” she purred sexily, before looking back over her shoulder to clarify, “Fuck me, Emma.”

Emma moved quickly to kneel behind Regina, leaning down to place one, lingering, open-mouthed kiss on each globe of her perfectly sculpted rear. Leaning over her back slightly, Emma whispered soft ‘I love you’ as she trailed her lips lightly down Regina’s spine drawing the salted skin into bumps. She grasped Regina’s left hip as she used her right to guide the tip of the already soaked cock to her waiting entrance, pressing just inside and holding absolutely still to maintain the tease.

“Tell me again what you want,” said Emma huskily from behind.

“I want you to fuck me hard and fast. I want you to make me come like this.”

Emma groaned and her eyes fluttered at Regina’s bold demand. Grasping Regina’s hips, she leaned back slightly while pressing her hips forward, so that she could watch Regina take every inch of the thick purple cock, burying it to the base. Withdrawing to the tip, Emma took a few, slow, teasing strokes and she heard her wife’s frustrated huff, watching and feeling her try to rock herself back in an attempt to quicken the pace. Emma held her hips firmly as she began to drive in a steady rhythm that seemed to suit Regina as she felt her lower her upper body further to the ground to rest on her elbows. Releasing one hip, Emma threaded her fingers through the back of Regina’s short, thick hair, tugging her head back gently and causing Regina to moan loudly through parted lips in show of her approval.

“You like that, baby? Do you want more, my love?”

Regina bit her lower lip between her teeth and hummed her consent.

Emma slammed into Regina, eliciting a gasp and a pleasurable yelp from Regina as she ground her hips back into Emma’s.

Emma fell forward, hands to each side, just behind Regina’s elbows, supporting her weight and providing her with the leverage to thrust harder and deeper into her incredible lover. The skin that touched slid easily from the perspiration that drenched their skin and Emma rested her damp forehead against Regina’s back. Regina could feel the heat of Emma’s breath against her spine and golden hair tickled softly as it cascaded over her sides and back, damp strands clinging to her skin as Emma continued to drive her hips strongly and frantically. Regina could hear the soft grunts from Emma’s exertions as she tried valiantly to please her wife; the muscles of her hips, thighs and back tensing and relaxing strongly as she pressed the strap-on firmly into the velvet confines of Regina’s tightening walls.

Supporting her weight with one hand, Emma reached up to cup Regina’s breast, pinching and pulling her sensitive nub.

“Does that feel good, baby?” Emma panted as she felt Regina squirm a bit beneath her.

“Claro, me gusta,” was the breathy response, “Tocame, mi vida.”

Emma slid her palm and splayed fingers over the toned muscles of Regina’s stomach which twitched
in anticipation of the ultimate destination of Emma’s fingers. Fingertips found a small patch of short hairs before pressing into silky, drenched folds. Regina moaned loudly as skilled fingers found her engorged clit which responded instantly to her touch, begging for some much needed attention. Immediately, Emma’s fingers began to play in tight, firm circles around an ever-hardening bud.

“Oh God, yes, Emma, right there. Don’t stop. God, don’t stop,” cried Regina wantonly. She her moans were loud and interspersed with staccato bursts of volume as Emma brought her closer to that beautiful edge. The sloppy and sensual sounds of their lovemaking and the perfumes of their colognes, arousal and perspiration created an enticing mixture that filled the space thickly. Regina didn’t care if she lost control anymore. She needed Emma to know the incredible need and want that she held for her.

“God, baby, I need to hear you tonight. Please, let go,” pleaded Emma.

Emma could sense the increasing resistance to her strokes and she wrapped her other arm around Regina’s waist to hold her firmly, resting her forehead once more against Regina’s back. A few deft strokes of her fingers synchronized perfectly with the strong thrust of hips provided Regina with the remaining motivation she needed.

A guttural scream and sob ripped from Regina’s lips as she exploded into orgasm, shattering the silence in every crevice of the lighthouse as their bodies, hearts and souls became irrevocably entwined. A single word issued from her lips in worship and reverence as it would be a ten-thousand times hence, “EMMA!”

Emma heard the sob and looked up, tightening her hold around Regina’s waist in comfort. She was so afraid that she had hurt her wife, but she saw in an instant that Regina had found the catharsis that she so desperately needed. She was crying tears of absolution from her past and tears of hope for a future that Emma fully intended to give her. Emma stilled her movements and allowed Regina’s hips to twitch and jerk against the strap-on as Regina rode out the waves of her release. Emma continued to play her fingers in tight firm patterns against Regina’s incredibly sensitive clit, while Regina continued to scream and moan loudly as wave upon wave of beautiful release washed over her body and mind. In between, Emma offered soft ‘I love you’s over and over in reassurance and comfort. The tears rolled freely down Regina’s cheeks and her sobs turned slowly to beautiful, sated breathy laugh that filled the room with a warmth of its own.

Movements slowed and then stilled, and Regina collapsed, completely spent, into strong arms. Settling back on her heels, Emma turned Regina so that they sat facing; Regina resting on her thighs, legs wrapped around her waist. Emma wrapped strong arms around Regina’s lower and upper back, holding her close. She placed light kisses on Regina’s shoulders, collar bone and chest; shushing intermittent, light whimpers with tender kisses until she felt Regina’s breathing slow and even out once more. Regina wrapped her arms around Emma’s broad shoulders, relishing the safety and warmth of her wife’s embrace.

“God, I love you so much,” whispered Emma as she looked into Regina’s eyes and trailed her fingertips over the skin of Regina’s back. “That was….I mean….You are….I mean….WOW,” sighed Emma in complete veneration.

“Mmmmmmm, and I love you with everything I am,” hummed Regina as she brushed the fingers of one hand through the soft hairs at Emma’s temple, adding with a grin as she touched her forehead to Emma’s, “And you are pretty ‘WOW’ yourself…..”

“Really?” asked Emma timidly. Regina smiled softly. The question was so sincere. There was no
“Always so modest and surprised by your own talents,” soothed Regina. After a moment, she teasingly added, “Speaking of which….I have a surprise for you too….“

Regina lifted herself from Emma lap and offered a hand to help her stand. Regina released a few buckles, sliding the strap-on from Emma’s hips and tossing it onto the bed. Taking Emma’s hand in her own, Regina led her to the side of the bed, patting the mattress for Emma to sit down. Emma perched on the edge and watched in nervous anticipation wondering what could be in store for her; especially after the mind-blowing encounter they had just shared.

Regina leaned in close; her eyes never left Emma’s and their lips brushed as she spoke, barely above a whisper,

“Lean back and enjoy, my love,”

Emma pressed her palms into the mattress behind her, resting back slightly as Regina traced a finger from the hollow of her throat, between her breasts and over her abs which were quivering and twitching with expectation. She watched as Regina knelt once again, this time, pressing Emma’s knees wide. Regina moaned slightly and toyed her lower lip between her teeth as she admired the copious amounts of wetness that coated the apex of Emma’s thighs; a darker pink, engorged clit was nestled like a jewel between plump, slick folds. Regina slid her palms up Emma’s thighs, using her thumbs to open Emma to her touch. Regina’s mouth pressed unabashedly between Emma’s swollen lips, greedily lapping up everything that Emma was willing to offer. She savored the tang and saltiness that coated her tongue and gripped hips tightly, pulling Emma against her as she continued her ravenous ministrations.

Emma began to moan as her hips ground slowly and purposefully; one hand lacing through silky, chocolate hair as she encouraged and guided Regina’s activities the other hand supporting her weight so that she could watch as Regina ravished her. She caught Regina’s eyes for a moment and saw a slight grin as Regina’s hand disappeared between them to toy with the cylinder around her neck. Emma gasped and her back arched strongly as the cold metal touched her entrance sending pulsing vibrations throughout her core. What Emma thought was a beautiful accoutrement to Regina’s outfit turned out to be a VERY unique and unexpected addition to their lovemaking.

“Surprise….,” murmured Regina with a sexy smirk as she continued to lave her tongue firmly against Emma’s clit, alternating between broad, flat swipes and quick flicks of the tip.

Regina wrapped soft lips around Emma’s clit and sucked softly as she easily slipped the cylinder past Emma’s entrance. Emma could feel the vibrations spreading from within and Regina held the end against her chin to transfer the vibrations through her lips.

“Wow,” breathed Emma as her eyes rolled back slightly and she tightened her grip in Regina’s hair slightly to note her approval.

Regina began placing open-mouthed kisses on Emma’s clit, sucking firmly at the end of each before releasing with a pop; each kiss drawing her lover closer to release. She could hear Emma’s moans increasing in volume and Regina began to move the small phallus in and out slowly.

“I want to hear you too, baby. Don’t hold back. Not tonight,” whispered Regina between kisses and licks.

Emma drew her feet up and placed them on the mattress, letting her knees fall open completely and bucking her hips strongly against Regina’s mouth, each breath accompanied by a drawn out
whimper and moan. Regina watched as the rigid muscles of Emma stomach tensed and relaxed strongly in response to every touch; the muscles of her arms and shoulders contracting and releasing as well as she grasped at the comforter. Emma’s body was like a work of art that had been sculpted from marble and Regina couldn’t get enough. Laying her finger against the side of the cylinder, Regina slipped both inside again and again affording her wife the fullness and warmth that the cylinder alone wasn’t able to provide. She could feel Emma’s walls tightening with each stroke.

“I need….I need…” was all that Emma could manage to say as her breaths were now coming in short gasps.

“What do you need, baby?” hummed Regina with a grin as she continued to tease.

“This?” asked Regina as she flicked her tongue quickly against Emma’s sensitive bundle of nerves. She pressed more firmly against the increased resistance to her fingers.

“Or this?” she inquired as she sucked softly on the hardened bud. She could feel the light pulsing of Emma’s walls signaling her impending release.

“Or perhaps both?” questioned Regina as she sucked more firmly, swirling her tongue several times in a tight circle.

A rush of heat flooded Emma’s core and her walls clenched tightly around Regina’s finger and the vibrator, drawing them further inside. Her entire body spasmed as she screamed Regina’s name. Her head fell back, blonde hair cascading over her shoulders and onto the bed. Her chest heaved and her back arched strongly, as an abundance of warm liquid coated Regina’s fingers and palm. Emma hips jerked erratically, feet pressing firmly into the mattress, as Regina continued to move her finger and the vibrator, replacing the teasing of her tongue with firm swipes of her thumb. She substituted a second finger as the movement of her body slipped the vibrator from Emma’s heat, and she slid her sweat-dampened body up Emma’s own, wrapping her lips around a hardened nipple to tease briefly before placing wet kisses against Emma’s exposed throat. Capturing Emma’s lips in a kiss, Regina stroked her tongue deeply into her wife’s mouth, muffling her moans and quieting her screams. She continued until she felt the motions of Emma’s hips slow and could feel the response of Emma’s tongue sliding against her own, only withdrawing her fingers when strong arms wrapped around her tightly, drawing their bodies down into the warm, soft mattress.

Regina and Emma lay atop the mattress, a tangle of bodies and sheets. A smile played on Emma’s lips as she traced her fingertips lightly over the tanned, smooth thigh that lay across her hips. She pressed gentle kisses into soft hair as Regina rested her cheek on Emma’s shoulder. As Emma’s hand made its gentle sweeps, Regina’s fingers mapped the ever-shifting striations of the muscles in her shoulder and bicep. Regina looked up occasionally, cupping Emma’s cheek and capturing her lips in a languid, passionate, deep kiss before resettling herself into the comfort of warm, strong arms.

“Regina?” asked Emma softly.

“Yes, my love?”

“You said something tonight….soy….ummmm…” Emma huffed frustratedly as she struggled to remember any more of what had been said.

“Soy tuya siempre, hazme lo que quieras…” finished Regina as she grinned against Emma’s shoulder. She knew Emma would ask eventually.

“That’s it. What does it mean?”
Regina pushed herself up on her elbow so that she could look down at Emma’s face. She traced a finger lightly over Emma’s slightly parted lips.

“It means… I am yours forever. Take me however you want…”

“Hmmmmmm” hummed Emma thoughtfully.

Regina smiled sexily, biting her lower lip. She could already see green eyes darkening as Emma considered Regina’s words carefully.

“Well… why didn’t you just say so,” chuckled Emma.

She rolled them off the edge of the bed and back onto the floor, fingers finding the harness buried in the sheets and bringing it with them as they made their clumsy exit from the mattress. Regina laughed as she touched the ground, cradled gently by loving arms. Their laughter was quickly muffled and then extinguished as kiss swollen lips found each other once more; replaced for the remainder of their stay by the libidinous sounds of their escalating passion.
This is the second to last chapter in our journey and I want to take a moment to thank each and every one of you for continuing to stick with me. I know that I have said this before, but for the sake of repeating myself (again), your beautiful comments, PS manips, kudos, support, Tumblr follows and mentions, reblogs....everything that you do....is so very much appreciated. For me, this is truly a dream come true to receive the amount of kindness and generosity that you have offered to me!

This particular chapter is very, very close to my heart and I offer it to you with my sincerest thanks.....

The Bug crunched slowly and carefully through the thick layer of new-fallen snow that lay on the drive. The light flurry that started when Emma and Marco had left the shop had picked up rapidly and occasional whiteout conditions were now making it very hard to see and navigate some of the lesser traveled roads outside of town. What should have been a thirty minute drive had turned into a one hour and fifteen minute adventure, but they had made it safely. Emma’s car wasn't much to look at, but it got the job done when needed.

Between the rapid swipe of wipers, Emma could see a large truck, signifying Fredrick and Kathryn’s arrival for dinner, but she was caught off guard by the presence of a second, parked car. It was a brand new, Jaguar XF that had to have set the owner back at least $100 grand considering the bells and whistles that Emma could make out through the thick hail of flakes.

“You were expecting someone else for dinner, Emma?”

Emma shrugged and twisted her mouth; furrowing her brow in confusion.

“Not that I know of…” she trailed off as she noted the Massachusetts plates.

"Maybe Kathryn and Fredrick invited a friend?"

Emma groaned to herself as she remembered the last time Kathryn and Fredrick had 'invited along a friend' to the house. That night had ended with her proposal to Regina and a commitment to extending their family, but it was also preceded by the complete shit-show of Emma running out of the house, a broken down car, Leroy’s assault and battery, Regina’s broken hand, and Marco’s heart-wrenching trip down memory lane. Regardless of how everything had turned out, Emma wasn’t sure she was ready to repeat one of those nights again anytime soon.

Her concerns regarding a 'friend' having come along were somewhat short-lived, as she noticed that significant snow had already accumulated on the car, indicating its arrival well before that of Kathryn and Fredrick's truck which held a much lighter dusting.

"I don't think so. Whoever it is; they've been here awhile...."
Emma was looking down, smiling and tamping her boots heavily on the mat to relieve them of their packed snow as she opened the door. She was happy to be home and looked forward to having dinner with her family, which now included Marco, Kathryn and Fredrick every Friday evening. The conversation was always lively, the wine flowed freely, hugs and affectionate squeezes were exchanged readily and there was a complete feeling of friendship and love among everyone. They played games after dinner; sometimes well into the evening or early morning hours. They all decided, early on, that strip poker was not the best game option, since Marco didn’t really understand the rules and tended to lose….a lot.

"I'm sorry we're late. That snow is really coming down ha---"

Emma stopped cold just a few steps in the door; slammed in the chest by an uncomfortable silence being held by the four people that currently occupied the room. Her abrupt stop caused Marco to bump into her back and look up in confusion, and he quickly saw the reason behind the pause.

Emma's face fell as she looked at Regina who threw her a strained smile. Regina most definitely was NOT her normal self. Her body was tense as she sat very straight on the edge of the chair, bouncing Henry gently as she held him propped on her knees. Her eyes had a distinct melancholy and submissiveness that Emma had never seen before; a look almost bordering on fear. Even Kathryn and Fredrick, who were normally prattling on like children and teasing each other (and Regina), sat tight-lipped. Kathryn's hand held an almost overflowing glass of red wine that she brought to her lips slowly, taking a huge swig as her eyes bounced between Emma, Regina and the current, and only, occupant of the couch.

Looking over, Emma saw a slight, prim woman perched on the edge of one of the cushions, hosiery-covered legs held tightly together, ankles crossed atop heel-covered feet. Her dress was impeccable, and obviously designer, and her hands lay calm and neatly folded in her lap. She wore some makeup which she used to help cover up the wrinkles that had naturally started to appear due to her age and the elapsed time between cosmetic surgeries. Her face was drawn and serious; her hair pulled back severely into a bun. She didn't even acknowledge Emma and Marco's entrance to the house, continuing instead, to stare directly at Regina with a critical and unwavering eye.

Regina wore a very uncomfortable smile as she addressed Emma directly. It was much more formal than Emma was used to hearing,

"Emma, I'm glad you made it home safely, "said Regina. Swallowing hard, she continued, “I'd like you to meet my mother...Cora...."

Emma had only heard stories from Regina about the woman’s coldness and indifference, but her initial impression was that the stories had been spot-on accurate. Emma had no real love for the woman, but it was Regina’s mother, so she would be cordial for Regina’s sake and follow her lead. Emma stepped over to the couch and stood beside Cora; her hand outstretched in greeting.

“Hello, Ma’am, it’s very nice to meet you.”

Cora’s eyes remained fixed on Regina. Her head was turned slightly away from Emma, as if refusing to recognize her presence. Emma stood, hand extended, for a few moments, before Cora turned her head to look at her. Cora’s hands remained firmly folded in her lap, and her eyes held nothing but malice as she scrutinized Emma slowly, starting from the top of her head and finishing with the soles of her worn shoes. Emma stood, self-conscious, under her gaze. Her jeans had smudges of dirt and her sweater still held a light dusting of wood from the shop. Cora sighed deeply, rolling her eyes and tutting softly as Emma finally lowered her hand, realizing that her gesture was not going to be returned. Stepping over to Regina, Emma saw her wife offer an apologetic look and Emma returned a consoling smile before whispering,
“I love you. I missed you today.”

She placed a soft kiss on Regina’s cheek before squatting down and addressing Henry more cheerfully,

“I missed you too, Little Man. Did you have a good day today?”

He gurgled a bit before grinning and reaching for Emma’s glasses, which she readily handed over, keeping a watchful eye that he didn’t break them or hurt himself as he chewed gently on the frames and ear pieces. She smiled at him as he played and ran her fingers through soft hair, trying to figure out her next move.

“I should probably shower and change before dinner, Regina,” Emma said in a low voice that was only meant for Regina’s ears. Perhaps with a little time to think and prepare, Emma could get a different strategy and engage Regina’s mother in a different or more effective way. As Regina started to nod her head, Cora’s voice came out of nowhere, causing everyone in the room to jump.

“Regina,” Emma looked at Cora and her gaze was returned coldly as Cora continued to address Regina, “I believe your guests have been more than patient in waiting for dinner. We should adjourn to the table now.”

Emma could almost see the mirth playing in her eyes as she realized that Cora intended to give her no respite; seeking, instead, to keep her uncomfortable and slightly off her game at all times. Emma saw Marco step forward slightly, taking off his hat as he did so.

“Miss Regina? Would you like me to hold Henry while you and Emma set the table?”

“Thank you, Marco,” said Regina with a slightly relieved voice as she stood from the chair. As Marco approached, Henry reached his arms towards him, clasping and releasing his hands strongly in anticipation, and he was easily transferred to his Grandfather’s, loving arms. Marco gave Henry a kiss on his chubby cheek before taking Regina’s place in the chair, bouncing Henry lightly in his lap.

“Ahhhh, Mister Henry, you’re getting to be a big boy. You’re gonna be strong like your Mommas, eh?”

Cora rolled her eyes at the casual reference to Regina’s relationship with Emma and it didn’t escape Emma’s notice.

“I’ll help you set the table and put out the food, Regina,” said Emma softly as she followed her wife towards the kitchen. It was going to be an incredibly long evening.

“Me too,” stated Kathryn with a bit too much enthusiasm as she sprang from her chair, glass in hand and hurried along after them.

Emma stood watching Regina as she moved about the kitchen silently. Regina pulled food from the ovens and then gathered plates from cabinets, utensils from drawers and linens from storage. She stopped occasionally to draw a ragged, deep, calming breath, but refused to look at Emma for fear of breaking down. Emma could tell that her wife was close to tears and she wanted to console her so badly. This woman scared Regina. Badly.

“Regina, I’m so sorry,” whispered Kathryn in a panic as she entered the kitchen, “she must have heard me tell the conductor about you getting married when I went into Boston to resign from the symphony last month. When I left his office, I saw her skulking around in the hallway. I didn’t know she was still on the Board. I would never have mentioned it if I thought for one minute she
was anywhere within ear shot.”

Regina grasped Kathryn’s forearm gently and smiled half-heartedly at her.

“It’s OK. She would have found out at some point or in some other way. I’m not upset with you.”

Looking up, Regina locked eyes with Emma. Regina had a pained expression and she spoke quietly.

“Emma…” she said pleadingly, not knowing what else to say.

“Don’t worry, Regina. I’ll be OK…” assured Emma. In one word and one look, Regina confirmed what Emma already knew; she was going to be the target of Cora’s ire tonight.

Regina nodded her head quickly and stiffly before turning from the kitchen to set the table for dinner.

Emma returned to the living room and took Henry from Marco. Even Emma had to marvel at how big Henry had gotten since she had held him for the first time almost nine months ago. Squatting down in front of the hearth, she planted his feet firmly on the ground between hers, supporting his back with her front and placed one of his hands on each of her knees, so that he could stand on his own.

"Good job, buddy!" said Emma encouragingly as she released his hands and he remained upright. She grinned as she realized she would have said the same had he just fallen over. She was proud of him no matter what he did or didn't do.

He grasped her digits tightly as she slipped her index and middle fingers under each of his hands, and holding him steady, she lifted his hands from her knees and urged him forward a bit.

He managed a few, unsure steps before gently collapsing straight down, supported by Emma's ready hands.

Henry laughed; bouncing, rocking and flapping his arms excitedly. Emma couldn't help but laugh as she scooted around to face him, setting him back on his feet so that he could walk a few steps toward her this time. He stumbled forward into the warmth of a loving hug as Emma placed a kiss firmly on his head through thick, rich, brown curls.

"You're son’s gonna be walking really soon, Emma," stated Marco with a proud smile at both of them.

Emma felt a rush of warmth at Marco's words and her returned smile was huge. She was bound to Henry, and Henry to her, in every possible way that they could be now. The adoption papers had been finalized only two days ago and her heart soared when, sitting in the lawyer's office, she read ‘Henry Edward Swan-Mills’ on the document. Her hand never wavered or hesitated for an instant as she placed the commitment of her signature, the commitment of her entire life, under her wife's on the form. With the sure stroke of a pen, Emma Swan-Mills became a mom.

Emma lay on her back, smiling gently and pondering Marco's words as Henry climbed atop her, crawled over her or used her to support himself in his attempts to stand. Emma 'oomph'ed and laughed each time he fell on her; wrapping him in her arms snugly before helping him up to try again.

The time right before dinner was usually reserved for their play and gave Emma and Henry a chance to reconnect after a long work day. Usually, it was Regina that sat on the couch laughing with them,
or, sometimes, joining them as they play on the floor in front of the fire. Those nights, spent as a family, experiencing some of Henry’s ‘firsts’ had been the best nights of Emma’s life and she couldn’t wait to experience more of them with Regina, with Henry, and with other little ones that she hoped, someday soon, she would be told were coming along.

Out of habit, Emma looked to the couch; smiling broadly as she normally would to encourage Regina to join in on their fun. Instead of the bright, twinkling eyes and beautiful smile that she was used to, her eyes were met with a scornful, pointed glare. Emma’s face fell immediately and she swallowed thickly as she wondered what was in store for her this evening. This woman was like a viper and she was looking for the appropriate time to strike.

“Come on, Henry. I think dinner’s almost ready,” Emma mumbled seriously into his hair as she extracted herself from the floor and carried him over to his high chair.

Cora approached the table, hesitating subtly, watching Emma carefully to see where she would seat herself. Once Emma laid her hand on the back of her chair, Cora shifted quickly to secure the seat directly opposite her.

The mood was subdued as the plates of food were moved quietly from hand to hand, around the table. Cora seemed to be put out that she had to touch or exchange a bowl or platter with another person; obviously preferring to be served instead. As she tolerated the perceived crassness, she kept constant vigil on the person that sat across from her. Emma knew Cora was watching her, but she kept her eyes on her plate. She was starting to understand completely why Regina was so uncomfortable around this woman.

There was an occasional clinking of silverware against plates and tinkling of glass as everyone started eating. Cora had only placed her napkin in her lap before looking pointedly at Emma with an evil smirk. She was ready to start her games now that her unwitting audience had arrived.

“I understand that you are the ‘hired help’.”

The words slid off her tongue with vehemence and disgust. Immediately, all motion at the table stopped and four pairs of eyes looked to the source of the words trying to figure out who was being addressed. Emma didn’t need to look up. She already knew.

“I am a handyman and a furniture maker and a wood worker,” replied Emma softly, subtly correcting the condescending reference.

“And, does the cost of your projects normally include sleeping with your employer?”

“MOTHER!!” Regina whispered harshly in shock at her mother’s words. Cora turned cold eyes to Regina, who immediately fell silent under her stern gaze. Plastering on an insincere smile, Cora responded with mock sweetness,

“She’s a grown woman, Regina. Certainly, she can answer a few simple questions on her own….” Cora returned her eyes to stare at the top of Emma’s head; her smile returned to a patronizing smirk.

“I’m waiting,” Cora stated, ensuring Emma knew that the question was yet to be answered sufficiently.

“N-no, ma’am,” answered Emma, barely above a whisper.

“Yes, well from the looks of you and your clothing, she must have paid very little for your…… services……” Cora’s eyebrow was arched and she took her time drawing out the last word. “Looks
like you simply give them away….”

After a brief pause, Cora added as a teasing afterthought,

“By the way, who IS your tailor, dear?”

Emma knew this game well. It was a game of humiliation and embarrassment played at her expense, and Cora had ensured, through impeccable timing, that a helpless crowd would be there to watch. Emma held her utensils tight in closed fists, not daring to look up. She couldn’t bear to see the embarrassment, devastation and humiliation that Regina’s countenance was going to hold as she answered each question or responded to each comment, but she wouldn’t lie, no matter how bad things got. She simply prayed that Cora would tire quickly.

“I buy my clothes at the Salvation Army. They provided me with clothes for free when I was a child.”

“How noble….” murmured Cora as she rolled her eyes with disinterest at the additional information that Emma was providing. There was a slight pause before Cora continued with feigned remembrance,

“Ah, yes, Regina told me earlier that you were a stray….”

“I was an orphan, not a stray. But I have a home now and a father that loves me.”

Regina’s heart was breaking for Emma as she watched her sitting and staring at her plate. Regina knew this game too. She had witnessed her mother play it many times before and she was always powerless to stop it. Her mother would simply squelch her protests, continuing unabated, as her victim would answer every embarrassing question, truthfully and fully; each answer providing more fodder for the next volley of shame that would be sent their way. Her mother would stop eventually. She would either tire of the game or break the person; usually the latter. In her mother’s mind, the latter was always the most satisfactory outcome; break the person and the relationship would crumble soon behind.

“Yes, well, Regina’s home must be quite an improvement from the sawdust-laden rat trap that I suspect you were living in.”

“Our home,” corrected Emma on a breath.

“No, dear, the first statement was quite correct. It is Regina’s home, not yours. You are simply lucky enough to live here by nature of the damnable union that you entered into with my daughter and her bastard child.”

Cora finished her sentence with an edge of agitation that was quickly calmed, so that she could continue,

“No matter. I am sure that this mistake will be rectified quickly when she realizes from this conversation that you have nothing to offer her and that you are merely a predator who is after her and her money…”

“W-What did you call me?” asked Emma confused, still not looking up.

“I called you a predator….a monster, if you prefer,” stated Cora as one side of her mouth curled into a satisfied smirk.

Emma shook her head and huffed a quiet laugh of amazement.
“It must be nice,” stated Emma quietly.

“Are you speaking to me, dear? If so, please speak up so that we can all hear the amazing and brilliant things that you have to say,” encouraged Cora in a haughty tone.

“It must be nice,” repeated Emma with a slightly raised voice as she laid her utensils to the side of her plate. “It must be nice to sit like a god, in judgment of others; throwing around words that your mind doesn’t even begin to comprehend.”

“How dare you….,” started Cora.

“No,” continued Emma in a slightly louder voice as she looked up from her plate through her lashes and locked eyes with Cora across the table, “how dare YOU? How dare you come into this house and call me those names when you couldn’t, more like WOULDN’T, even recognize the predators and monsters that clawed at your daughter’s door all of her life. You were supposed to love her and protect her; instead, you left her, time and time again, to be torn apart by the fucking wolves…..”

Cora’s smirk was immediately erased and she sat, eyes narrowed, seething at Emma’s insubordination. No one had ever dared talk to her like this. As everyone at the table watched, Emma rose from her seat and placed her palms on the table, leaning over to bring her face closer to Cora’s. Her body shook with anger and fear but her words were marked and clear.

“You convinced yourself that the monster under the bed and the boogeyman in the closet and the things that go bump in the night were nothing more than figments of your daughter’s imagination. But I assure you, the monster is very real; only, he doesn’t live under your bed. He lives in plain view; sleeping between your sheets; slipping hands under your clothes; doing things that you can’t even begin to imagine, even in your worst nightmares. The boogeyman…he exists too and he IS in that closet. He’s the one that’s reminding you that there is no place to hide when you’re hugging your knees to your chest in the dark, rocking with your eyes squeezed shut, trying to find some peace in those last minutes before the monster finds you….and, believe me, he always finds you. And that bump in the night? That’s the sound of the headboard thudding against the wall, again and again and again, until you can do nothing more than pray to God that it will all be over soon, so that your mind and body can finally rest. It’s the sounds of your body and head hitting the wall; your own bones breaking; a fist or a hand or a foot connecting somewhere where the bruises won’t be seen the next day….”

Emma swallowed thickly. She intended to finish saying what needed to be said. It no longer mattered to her who was listening. Her voice needed to be heard. Her silence had only served to protect these monsters all of her life, and she had carried this burden for too damn long.

“Monsters are the ones that, from beyond the grave, still wake you up in the middle of the night, because they broke you so fucking deeply that, no matter what you do, a part of you will never be the same. They are the first ones you think about when you hear that bang on the door in the middle of the night or the clap of someone’s hands. They make you shirk from someone’s touch and make you believe that you’ll never be worthy of being loved. They make you so afraid that, years later, you would still claw through a fucking wall with your bare hands just to get out of a closed or locked room. They make you believe that it was all your fault; that you brought it on yourself; that you somehow asked for it; that for some twisted reason, you wanted it to happen. They make you feel guilty and ugly and dirty and ashamed and worthless, even after they are long gone from your life. I assure you that the monsters you speak of are real, but you can’t seem to recognize their names and faces, so let me help you. It’s the piano teacher that raped your daughter at 17. It’s the woman that almost beat her to death. It’s my foster father that just couldn’t keep his hands off a twelve year-old girl in the middle of the night. It’s you; her mother, that turned a blind eye even after she told you
what was happening and begged you to help her. You hide behind words like ‘confused’ and ‘misunderstanding’, because they allow you to sleep better at night knowing that you did nothing. And I do hope you sleep well at night, Cora, because that’s all that really matters, right?”

Emma looked at the ceiling, trying to find the strength to continue. This time, her voice was more subdued, almost exasperated.

“Lady, you think I don’t know that I’m a nothing and a nobody? You think I don’t know that I am the joke that everyone laughs at? You think I don’t know that I’ll never be able to give your daughter everything that she deserves? That I don’t wonder every god damned day if I am good enough for her or if I should step aside to let someone else give her a better life?”

“Emma, stop. Please stop…” Regina was pleading in a whisper from the end of the table and the tears were falling from her eyes.

But Emma didn’t stop. She wanted to make sure Cora heard everything that she had come to hear.

“You think that I don’t know who and what I am? I know that I am poor and stupid, and most people probably won’t ever see me as anything more than the ‘hired help’. I know that no one would miss me if I was gone. I hear the names that people call me and I see the way that they look at me. I have to accept the charity that is offered to me sometimes, because I have no choice. But, I will never hurt Regina or Henry. They will NEVER have any reason to be afraid of me. So, if I am the person that you truly picture in your head when you say words like ‘predator’ and ‘monster’, then believe me, you have no fucking idea what the hell you’re talking about.”

Cora stood from her seat to match Emma’s height, before turning to Regina,

“Regina, I never….” Cora stated, aghast at the way that Emma was addressing her. Cora turned her head to look at Regina, but Emma kept her eyes focused directly on Cora and it was Emma that responded,

“No, Ma’am, I am quite sure that you have ‘never’, because everyone’s so god damned busy trying to kiss your ass, keep you happy and stay in your good graces that they wouldn’t dare…..”

“How dare you speak to me like this! I am Regina’s mother and you would do well to remember it!”

“And I am Regina’s wife and Henry’s mother. And this is OUR home and YOU would do well to remember THAT.”

Emma seemed oddly composed as she turned from the table. She looked at no one, but every other eye followed her as she walked to the front door where she calmly picked up her coat and boots, sitting down on the couch, only briefly, to put them on before walking back through the dining room. As she passed, Regina held out her hand hesitantly; wanting to stop Emma; wanting to say anything to try to make this right, but she withdrew her hand at the last minute; allowing Emma to pass the table and the stunned guests unabated as she exited the back door and disappeared into the heavily-falling snow.

“Well, I hope you see now what a mistake you have made, Regina,” stated Cora with a fuming tone. She turned her full attention to her daughter now that her original quarry had retreated.

“SHUT UP, Mother, and SIT DOWN!” was the controlled but clear response from Regina.

“You can’t talk to me….” continued Cora, but she was abruptly cut off by Regina’s upheld hand. Regina looked up from her plate with fiery and tearful eyes and she spoke through gritted teeth.
“Oh, I can. And I will. The only reason you are still sitting here right now is by the grace of fucking God and because the weather won’t permit you to leave safely. As much as I hate you and as much as I cannot stomach what you have just done, I do not wish you the potential harm of driving in this blizzard. But, at first light, you will pack your bags and leave this house, and you will not return, ever again,” Regina’s voice shook and the tears were starting to fill her eyes again, “I don’t want you to ever have to feel some misguided sense of obligation to me, or my bastard son or the bastard child that I am carrying,”

Regina laid a protective, open hand on the base of her stomach.

“Emma and Henry and this baby; they are my family.” Looking up and around the table, Regina ticked off the remaining occupants, “Marco and Kathryn and Fredrick are my family, and you have no place here anymore. Remember that when you are sitting miserable and alone, abandoned by the friends that you clung to so desperately and surrounded by the money that you love so dearly. Don’t look to me to be your source of comfort when, all my life, you’ve offered me none.”

Regina picked up her utensils from beside her plate and proceeded to take a few bites, effectively showing that the conversation was over for her. She wasn’t hungry, but there was nothing left to be said and she needed a few minutes to sort out what to do next. She was certain that Emma would need some time, before she would be ready to face everyone that had witnessed the conversation. She had just admitted things in front of Marco, Kathryn and Fredrick that she had only alluded to in her midnight conversations with Regina. Horrible acts, that Regina assumed had happened, were confirmed true. And, from what Regina could gather from the looks on faces around the table, the others knew very little, if anything, about the horrors of Emma’s past. Plus, she damn well couldn’t get up and leave everyone to their own devices with her mother still at the table. Luckily, Kathryn helped with that part pretty quickly.

As if sensing Regina’s conflict, Kathryn picked up the bowl of mashed potatoes in front of her and offered them to Cora with a satisfied smirk,

“You want potatoes with that, sweetie? Cause your ass just got served….” Taking a HUGE chug of wine, she added, “and it’s about fucking time….”

Cora huffed furiously as she stood; throwing her napkin atop her plate before storming off in the direction of the room that she had been afforded earlier. After several seconds, they all jumped slightly with the slamming of the bedroom door.

Emma reached in her pocket and pulled out the key to the guest house. Her gloved fingers fumbled a bit in the dark and cold, finally getting it inserted in the lock and opening the door. She slammed the door shut behind her and then crashed her back against it, banging her head hard against the wood several times before the tears started to roll freely down her face and a sob ripped from her throat. In one night, she had borne more insult than most people do in an entire lifetime; humiliated and disrespected in front of friends and family by a woman that she barely knew. In only a few moments, she had revealed more about her past than she had ever wanted to say; things that no one needed to know; things Emma didn’t want them to know; things Emma was ashamed of; things that no one should ever have to hear.

She had no idea how she would ever face any of them again. She had seen Marco out of the corner of her eye as she addressed Cora. His expression was a mix of shock and disgust, and he had scarcely breathed. He vacillated between pale and green in color. He had always suspected. He had asked her so many times when she was younger to trust him; begging her to tell him what was happening in that damn house, so that he could help her. She refused to say anything then. Well, now, he knew. Now, they all knew, and she could be a fucking disappointment to every last one of
Emma pulled off her jacket like it was on fire, tossing it onto the floor. She jerked roughly at her sweater, pulling it over her head as a fine dusting of shavings that had been trapped in the fibers fell onto the floor around her and caught in the tracks of the tears on her cheeks. A few of her soft, golden curls were caught in the zipper at the neck and she pulled them harshly from her scalp. She felt like she was strangling and her chest heaved from her rage, frustration, embarrassment and self-doubt. Her heart and soul hurt.

Her hands were trembling badly and she struggled to undo the buttons on her flannel shirt, electing finally to just grasp the sides and rip it open. Kicking off her boots and socks, she yanked her dirty jeans off as well, discarding everything on top of the jacket. She stood for a moment at the door in her boy shorts and tank wondering what the hell to do next when she looked up to see the mirror across the room.

It took only a few steps for Emma to cross the room, and there was no pause as her fist slammed into her reflection, shattering the mirror. As she continued to beat at her image, droplets of blood smeared on the glass and flung onto her clothes, exposed skin and the floor; her knuckles were raw and cut and scratched. Not content with the damage being inflicted, she grabbed the mirror on both sides and hoisted it from the wall, throwing it across the room with a guttural cry where it broke into a million pieces on the floor, just beside the burled walnut piano that she had carved for Regina. Turning her attention to the piano, Emma extracted a sledge hammer from a grouping of tools in the corner. Gripping the handle tightly with her bloodied hands, she drew it back to swing down on the bench. As the heavy tool arced over, at the last possible moment, Emma deflected the swing. She couldn’t do it. She couldn’t destroy her work. She couldn’t destroy her gift to Regina. She couldn’t destroy the original source of the music that had brought her peace for all of those years. The sledge landed upon the mirror on the floor instead.

“FUCK YOU! FUCK YOU! FUCK YOU! FUCK YOU!” she screamed with every swing; to herself; to Cora; to everyone; to no one. She beat and beat at the mirror until it was nothing but dust and she could no longer swing her arms.

Dropping the sledge to the floor with a resounding thud, Emma flicked the handle away from her exhausted arms before collapsing to her knees. She held her hands over her ears and rocked, doubled over, forehead pressed to the floor. Now, she needed silence. She needed to be alone. She didn’t even want Regina to be there. She didn’t want her wife to see her this way. Regina had already seen how Emma’s past could sometimes haunt her in the night. She didn’t need to see how it now haunted her in the day as well.

Emma sat bolt upright, drenched in sweat, eyes wide, chest heaving rapidly. It took her a moment to place herself. She was in her own bed and Regina was beside her asleep. Emma threw back the covers and twisted her legs over the edge of the mattress sitting, elbows on knees, rocking slightly and twisting her wedding band on her finger.

Fucking bastard. It was like he just couldn’t leave her alone, even after all these years. She had finally found happiness, and here he was, trying to take it away again, trying to break her down.

She reached to grab her pillow, so that she could move to the couch to sleep in case the nightmare came back. She didn’t want to disturb Regina. She looked so peaceful when she slept. Once the sun started to come up, she’d come back into bed. It would be safe then, because, just like when she was younger, the really horrible things only happen when it’s dark. Regina never stirred when she left or returned the previous times. It was for the best that she didn’t know she had gone. Emma didn’t really want to explain why. Sometimes her strength faltered. Like Regina, she had her
triggers and her flashbacks; those fucking demons that came to her in the night.

As she started to stand, she felt a hand lay gently on the soaked back of her tank.

“Please don’t leave,” whispered Regina, “Not again. Not anymore.”

Emma swallowed thickly. All she wanted to do was run away.

“Please,” Regina whispered again.

Emma slipped back beneath the covers and lay on her side, back to Regina. She couldn’t face her.

Regina slid in behind her, her body matching Emma’s every curve. She wrapped her arm around Emma’s waist and kissed her softly on the shoulder before laying her head on Emma’s pillow.

“You’re safe now….” Was all that Regina offered before they both fell back into a dreamless sleep.

Emma sat on the floor. Her back was resting against the foot of the carved wood bed. Her arms were outstretched and rested upon her bent knees. As she wiped her cheeks against her biceps to remove the tears, she could feel the crust of dried blood on her forearms and face, and she could see the drops and smears on her clothes. Unfocused, she pulled a large shard of glass from one of her knuckles and threw it onto the floor. She was sure that there was more to be removed, but she was too exhausted to care and she wished sleep would just take her into morning and out of this night.

Eventually, Emma would have to go back and face everyone, but not right now. Not right now.

Regina stood looking out the back windows. She could hear Kathryn and Fredrick talking quietly on the couch in front of the fire. They had a truck that was suitable to drive in this weather, but they asked if they could stay the night. Whether the request had been made in sympathy, solidarity or out of fear for Regina’s life (if left her alone with her mother) wasn’t clear.

Regina sighed as her arms wrapped Emma’s, heavy cardigan sweater more tightly around her torso. She could smell her wife’s familiar, comforting scent in the fibers, but it wasn’t the same as having her there. She seemed so far away, in every possible way, right now. Through the heavy snow, she could barely make out the lights of the guest cabin. She knew Emma would retreat there. Months of calling the guest house her ‘home’ had made it her safe space. At least she hadn’t run elsewhere. Regina would have been frantic, if Emma had taken off in the car in these conditions. It had been almost an hour, and Regina was still struggling with whether she should go to Emma or wait for her to return of her own volition when she heard the shuffling of feet. She turned her head slightly to see Marco standing demurely behind her. He had been so quiet for all of this time that she had almost forgotten that he was there.

Turning to face him, she could see that he looked devastated and lost. He rocked a little on his feet and worried his hands as if he was trying to figure out what to say or how to say it.

“Miss Regina, I swear, I didn’t know. She would never tell me,” he shook his head and his chin quivered. His eyes pleaded with her to understand, “I wanted to help her so much, but she wouldn’t let me in….”

“Oh, Marco,” breathed Regina with tear-filled eyes before pulling him into a hug and allowing him to cry into her shoulder, “how could you know what she wouldn’t say? You did nothing wrong.”

She felt him sobbing into her shoulder, and simply held him tighter. He was the collateral damage of
Emma’s past. Pulling back slightly, Marco looked into Regina’s eyes,

“She must hate me, Miss Regina. I should have done more,” Marco shook his head and rubbed his palm on his forehead. He looked down as if searching his brain for what else he could have done with the limited amount of information that he had.

“Marco, you took her in when no one else gave a damn. You saved her, in every way that you could, from that hell she lived in. You gave her a chance,” Regina looked at Marco with nothing but adoration, “She loves you so much, Marco. You have no idea the beautiful things that she says about you. She is so honored that you consider her your daughter and that you are Henry’s grandfather. And she couldn’t be happier to call you her father. And I feel the same way….,” Regina offered him a gentle smile and cupped his cheeks, pulling him to her so that she could place a kiss on his forehead.

“I love you too, Miss Regina. And Mister Henry. And my new granddaughter, or grandson,” Marco reached down with a sad smile and patted Regina’s tummy gently, causing her to release a breathy laugh and cover her smile shyly with a clenched fist. The reaction seemed so inappropriate to the situation, but felt so right considering how incredibly excited she had been to tell Emma just hours ago.

“You should go to her, Miss Regina. She needs you…..”

Regina sighed and nodded her head. When she had become the strong one in this mess was of an evening was completely lost on her, but she knew had waited long enough and, now, she needed to go and take care of Emma. Slipping on her boots and heavy coat, Regina opened the back door and headed towards the guest house, traces of her progress engulfed quickly by the falling snow.

Regina twisted the lever and found the door unlocked. Stepping inside, she let her eyes adjust to the dim light and looked around. Emma’s clothes were on the floor and the buttons of her shirt lay scattered at the door. A mirror laid shattered, frame twisted, beside the beautiful, carved piano that Regina had been given the previous Christmas. A heavy sledgehammer lay beside; a dark coloring on the handle. It didn’t seem to register to Emma that the door had opened. She sat on the floor in front of the bed in her tank and boy shorts; legs propped, arms wrapped tightly around, forehead resting on her knees. Regina padded softly over to where Emma rested and crouched on one knee in front of her.

“Oh God, Emma, what have you done?” she breathed out with wide eyes as she saw the now-crusting blood that covered Emma’s hands. It had run in thin streams down her arms and onto her legs. Small shards of glass, buried in her knuckles, twinkled in the soft light of the room. There were sticky drops of blood on the floor that had fallen from her fingertips. Her skin and hair was smeared with random strokes of crimson. It took Regina only a moment to put it together. Just like her; Emma couldn’t stand the person that looked back at her in the mirror. The only difference was that Emma had done what Regina had only imagined doing so many times in the past.

You have no idea how similar we are, Emma. We just wear our scars in different places.

Reaching out with a shaking hand, Regina pulled back a bit of the hair that covered Emma’s face and arm. Emma had fallen into a sound sleep.

“Emma…..,” she said in a whisper.

Emma startled awake. She looked quizzically at Regina, blinking slowly, wondering when Regina had gotten there and how long she had been asleep. She was so tired and really didn’t feel like
“Why are you here?” she sighed with an annoyed sadness.

“Because you’re my wife and I love you and I want to make sure you’re all right,” Regina moved to sit beside Emma at the foot of the bed. She wrapped her arms around Emma’s bicep and laid her head on Emma’s shoulder.

Emma crossed her arms atop her knees and turned her head to rest her cheek on top of her arms. Regina could see the tracks of the tears on Emma’s face. Her eyes were puffy and red.

“How can you still love me, Regina?” she asked defeatedly.

“Because, every day, you make me want to be a better person, ” whispered Regina before placing a soft kiss on the exposed skin of Emma’s shoulder.

“I’m nothing,” sighed Emma.

“You’re Henry’s and my everything.”

“I’m a freak.”

“You’re wonderfully unique.”

“I’m poor.”

“Affluence isn’t always about money. You have talent that most people would give anything to possess.”

“I’m a joke.”

“You make me laugh with the things you say and do.”

Emma wasn’t going to win this argument. Regina wouldn’t let her. There were so many beautiful things about Emma that Regina would be able to counter her protests all evening.

“I’m broken.”

“You’re a survivor….just like me…”

“I’m a nobody.”

“You’re a wife and a mother and a best friend and a sister and a daughter. And, despite what you may believe, I guarantee that there are four people up at that house and two people here with you that would miss you so, so much if you were gone.”

Regina watched Emma’s eyes for any sign of recognition that Emma understood what she had just subtly revealed. She saw only heavy-lidded eyes staring back at her as if Emma was still trying to take in and process what had been said several minutes ago. Her wife looked so tired. They would talk about it later, when the distraction of this evening wasn’t looming over their heads.

“Now, why don’t we get you cleaned up?” offered Regina. Emma barely shook her head in agreement and Regina extracted herself from the floor, helping Emma to stand and leading her into the bathroom where she patted the top of the toilet lid to encourage Emma to rest. Regina pulled the first aid kit from the cabinet before sitting down on a small step in front of Emma. Extracting her glasses from the pocket of the sweater, tweezers in hand, Regina began the task of picking broken
glass from gentle, worn hands and washing away the remnants of blood from Emma’s skin with a warm washcloth.

Regina finished wrapping Emma’s hands in gauze, threading the roll around her palm and between her fingers multiple times until she looked like a boxer ready to be sent into a ring. Sadly, she had already been in this fight her whole life.

“Regina,” asked Emma quietly, “do you think we’ll ever be right?”

Regina held one of Emma’s bandaged hands in both of her own and stroked her thumbs gently across the back of the gauze several times before looking up into those emerald green eyes that she loved. Regina took a deep breath. Emma deserved the truth, as painful as it might be and Regina needed to hear herself say it too.

“I am not even sure what ‘right’ or ‘normal’ is, Emma. If you are asking me if the memories of what happened will ever go away? No, I don’t think so. But I do think that in time they will fade some and be overshadowed by happier, more powerful memories with the people we love. Do I think the nightmares will ever stop coming? No. But I think they will become less frequent, and the ones we lose will be replaced by beautiful dreams of our future together. Do I think that I will ever stop jumping at the slamming of a door or that you will ever be able to sit comfortably in a closed or locked room? I don’t know the answer to that. Maybe not….Probably not. I think we will have a lot of good days, and we should cherish every one of them. I think we will have days, like today, where we will struggle through every minute; where we will rely on each other heavily just to get the day behind us so we can continue moving forward. In time, I think we will figure out the definition of ‘right’ and ‘normal’ that works for us.”

Pausing, Regina smiled softly at Emma before reaching up to press damp hair behind her ear.

“I do know that there is no one in this world that I would rather figure all of this out with than you.”

Emma nodded in agreement and understanding. She was bound forever to Regina through their pasts, through marriage, through family, through love, through simple understanding, through so many things that couldn’t be described.

“Me too.”

“Now, we should probably get you dressed and go back up to the house before we get snowed in here with nothing to eat. I would give you an hour, tops, of being able to last without some sort of snack,” Regina grinned at Emma who huffed out a small laugh and gave a twisted grin in return

“There’s my girl,” said Regina with a bit of playfulness in her eyes.

“I love you, Regina. You always make me smile”

“Te amo mucho también, mi amor, con todo mi corazón y mi alma. Tu sonrisa es como el sol.”

“I love it when you talk in Spanish…”

“I don’t know why…I just called you a hot mess,” smirked Regina with a wink.

“No, you didn’t.”

“Oh, yes, I did,” Regina stood her ground in mock defiance with a grin on her lips.
Emma stepped forward, pressing so close to Regina that their lips were brushing.

“Are you sure you still want this hot mess?” Emma whispered as she locked green eyes with brown.

“Absolutely,” was the immediate, breathy response. It was followed by an amazing, beautiful, relieved laugh as loving arms wrapped tightly around Emma’s neck and shoulders and Emma lifted Regina from the ground.

Every other word was spoken by the tender, lingering kiss they shared.

Emma and Regina stood in front of the door, ready to brave the cold and snow for the short journey back up to the house.

“What about your mother?” Emma asked with some hesitation.

“Oh, yes…Mother. I don’t think she’ll be coming out of her room again this evening. According to Kathryn, she got ‘served’, Swan-Mills-style.” Regina gave a satisfied smirk which was returned with an impressed nod and an arched eyebrow. Regaining her seriousness, Emma asked intrepidly,

“What should I say to Marco and Kathryn and Fredrick?”

“You’d be surprised, Emma. The people we love don’t always expect an explanation. They just accept us for who we are and help lug the baggage that we carry. What do you say we have a little faith in them?”

Stopping, Regina turned back around to Emma. With a glint in her eye and a smirk on her lips, she added,

“Plus, I got so much shit on Kathryn; she wouldn't dare start anything….”

“Thank god you’re back!” exclaimed Kathryn in a perturbed voice as Regina and Emma walked through the door, shaking wet, thick snow off their coats and boots, “Marco’s been cheating at cards…”

“Have not!” exclaimed Marco, completely caught off-guard.

“Have too!” returned Kathryn with a snarky look and a sarcastic, faux-Italian accent. She punctuated it with a stuck out tongue.

“Either way, someone needs to watch him, so pull up a seat and let’s get another game started…”

Emma walked over to the playpen and lifted Henry so that he could sit at the table and watch them play. As she did, they all looked expectantly to Regina who shook her head ‘no’ to let them know that Emma wasn’t aware of the only good news of the evening. She widened her eyes and pursed her lips in warning for them to keep it quiet. This one was hers to tell.

Settling in between Marco and Regina, Emma put Henry in her lap before placing heavily bandaged hands on the table in front of her. She looked to Marco with expectant and unsure eyes. Patting her hand gently, he curled his fingers around her palm loosely before raising slightly from his chair to place a kiss on her temple.

“I love you, my daughter;” was all he whispered before sitting back down, never letting go of her hand.
“There’s a card in his sleeve,” said Kathryn pointedly with a ‘caught ya’ look at Marco.

“BAH!” growled Marco as he pulled the Ace of Hearts from his sweater and flipped it back onto the table.

The house seemed unusually quiet after Kathryn, Fredrick and Marco had finally retired to their rooms for the evening. A fire still sparked on the hearth and cast a warm glow around the otherwise dark room. Emma sat on the floor, quilt wrapped around her shoulders waiting on Regina to return from the kitchen.

Emma couldn’t really concentrate on cards that evening, but she had remained at the table, entertaining Henry, watching Marco closely (he was actually a pretty good cheat and she let him get away with most of it) and folding pretty much every hand. As the others played cards, she had replayed the events of the evening in her mind several times, fast-forwarding over the parts that included Cora, preferring, instead, to concentrate on the conversation between Regina and her. There was something that her wife had said, in passing, which had started to pique her curiosity. Emma had been so tired and so overwhelmed at the guest house that it had taken until now for it to even register as out of place.

*Two people here with you.*

Emma was shaken from her thoughts by Regina’s return from the kitchen and she offered Regina a welcoming smile, opening the sides of the quilt and inviting her wife to sit on the floor between her legs. Regina didn’t need to be asked twice. She settled between Emma’s legs, sitting so that the side of her body nestled into Emma’s chest and her forehead rested in the crook of Emma’s shoulder and neck. Once she was settled, Regina felt the sides of the quilt wrap around her and she sighed as she snuggled into Emma’s strong arms and the warming comfort of her body.

After a while and somewhat awkwardly (given her first aid dressings), Emma’s hands found their way under the hem of Regina’s shirt, unbuttoning and unzipping her pants so that her fingertips could rub the lower part of Regina’s flat, smooth tummy. She heard Regina hum and sigh, relaxing further into her. After a bit, the rhythm of Regina’s breathing changed. It was deep and slow. Emma smiled and asked quietly,

“Do you hope it’s a boy or a girl?”

“It doesn’t matter as long as it’s healthy,” mumbled Regina dreamily. The trying events of the evening had left her exhausted and Emma’s gentle, repeated, feather-light touch had already drawn her to the cusp of sleep.

“Hmmmmmm,” hummed Emma with a soft grin, recognizing that her suspicions had been confirmed. “I feel the same way.”

Emma smiled as she pressed her lips into the crown of Regina’s head. She knew Regina was almost asleep and her responses were going to be unpredictable at best.

“We’re gonna be Moms again, Regina.”

“Best Moms ever,” grumbled Regina as she nuzzled her face into Emma’s chest, “we kick ass, baby.”

Emma raised an eyebrow and smirked in silent approval. Even in sleep, her wife was sassy.

“Aren’t you worried? According to you, I’m a hot mess,” Emma grinned a bit into Regina’s hair.
“I’m un desastre….”

_Spanglish-level of sleep, smiled Emma, that was fast…_

“…couldn’t hold a baby nueve meses atrás,” mumbled Regina as Emma felt a growing patch of drool on her tank.

“Good point,” said Emma with a chuckle. She understood only a portion of what Regina was saying now, but she couldn’t resist. For good measure, Emma added, “So, basically, we’re screwed?”

“Claro…” grumbled Regina as she fell into a sound sleep in her wife’s arms.
The Definition of Perfect

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Emma used her fingertips to pull the damp strands of hair from Regina’s forehead, before wiping the sweat from her face with a cool, damp cloth. Regina lay with her back against Emma’s chest and her hips nestled between Emma’s propped knees. The back of Emma’s left hand lay against the back of her left knee and she clasped Regina’s left hand there firmly.

“I-I can’t, Emma,” Regina panted, eyes closed and head resting back against Emma’s shoulder.

Emma brushed her cheek against Regina’s, feeling the dampness of her skin. Turning her head slightly, she nuzzled her nose into Regina’s cheek, and Regina could feel the gentle brush of Emma’s lips.

“I know you’re tired Regina. Just once more. That’s all it’s gonna take. Can you do it for me?” whispered Emma.

Regina swallowed thickly between gasps before nodding her head weakly. Emma slid her right hand down Regina’s forearm to let her know it was there and placed it, palm side up against the back of her right knee. Regina slid her hand into Emma’s and gripped her fingers tightly as her body rose from Emma’s chest. She screamed through gritted teeth and bore down as hard as she could, for as long as she could before finally releasing her scream. It was the first, real relief that she had felt in 8 hours. She collapsed back into Emma’s chest, completely depleted and drained. She laughed and sobbed as she heard the cries of their baby girl fill the room and felt Emma’s chest shaking and quivering beneath her as she too laughed and sobbed.

“You did it, baby. You did it. You did it,” was all that Emma could manage as she placed gentle kisses into Regina’s damp hair.

Emma’s eyes fluttered and rolled as she fought against the siren song of sleep. In brief spurts, she took in the starkness of the room where she was currently resting, trying to sort out why she was there. Her body felt like a train wreck and her muscles ached terribly, twitching occasionally from exhaustion. The comforting brush of fingertips was in the damp hair at her temple and an involuntary spasm of her fingers caused her hand to clasp another momentarily.

“There you are,” said Regina softly with a gentle kiss on her forehead.

Emma continued to look around lazily; her brain felt like it was lagging terribly. She tried to open her mouth to say something, but the odd combination of dryness and gumminess prevented any sounds from coming forward. She felt the brush of a straw against her lips, encouraging her to open.

“Drink this. It will help,” said Regina.

The small sip of cool water was a welcome relief and Emma felt slightly more alert.

“How long was I out?” asked Emma in a raspy voice with a furrowed and confused brow.

“Only about an hour. You were exhausted, baby;” whispered Regina, “14 hours of labor followed by a C-section and a bad reaction to the pain medicine will do that to you.”
“Are they OK?”

Regina could hear the panic of a new mother in the timbre of Emma’s voice and see it rising in her eyes as well. Cupping Emma’s cheek with her hand, she pressed her forehead to her wife’s and offered a huge smile.

“They’re both incredible.”

Regina watched Emma’s eyes close and she heard the sigh of relief issue from Emma’s lips.

“The nurse told me that they would be back in about an hour to help you feed them. Why don’t you rest till then?”

Emma nodded her head against Regina’s slowly and felt herself slipping back into the arms of sleep.

“Regina?” she mumbled feebly.

“Yes, Emma?”

“Will you be here when I wake?”

“I’ll be here always....”

I am going to kill you, Fredrick, thought Emma.

She groaned quietly and held her head in her hands as the next volley of snark and sass started to be hurled between the beds. The beds had been situated closely enough that Emma could sit between and coach the women by simply rolling her stool a bit. Her first preference, though, was to remain in the middle and just slightly out of reach of either one. She was playing more of a referee than a breathing coach anyways, and no one likes the referee....

It was an unusual hospital rooming arrangement, but this was an unusual circumstance, and, as far as Emma was concerned, what happened was a shit-show of epic proportions.

“Come on, Emma. Kathryn’s due in two weeks. I’ll only be gone for three days. What’s the chance of her going into labor?” said Fredrick casually.

“Fredrick, don’t you think maybe you should stay home? No one will be able to get ahold of you and the baby could come at any time. Regina delivered our first almost two weeks early and I had the twins three weeks before my due date. I think we’re playing with fire here,” replied Emma hesitantly with a very concerned look.

“Emma,” Fredrick added in a confidential whisper, “I love my wife, but she’s kind of driving me crazy right now. If I don’t get outta here for a few days, I am gonna lose my shit. Help me out, will ya?”

“Uhhhhhhhh,” Emma groaned hesitantly as she looked over at Regina. She sat on the couch rubbing her tummy, smiling and whispering to their unborn baby. Regina was due in another week, and Emma had hoped to use this time to get everything ready for their newest arrival. If she agreed to this, she was going to be babysitting two VERY pregnant women and seven children, “I better ask Regina.”

“He’s going on a wilderness adventure?!?!?” whispered Regina in an irritable tone as they stood in
the kitchen, “Kathryn’s two weeks from delivering. He realizes that due dates are approximate, right?”

“He said Kathryn’s driving him crazy…”

“Well, THAT I can believe. I’d probably go get lost somewhere too…”

Regina sighed and shook her head. Emma stood in front of her with an exasperated look. Both had been put in an awkward position. It wasn’t Emma’s fault, but Regina had hoped things would be a little more quiet leading up to the birth of their own child.

“OK fine. We’ll probably be OK, BUT, if we are going to do this….”

Regina stepped as close to Emma as she could with her protruding tummy and gave her wife a pouty look as she slipped her hand under the front of Emma’s shirt and raked her fingernails down her abs. They were as defined as the day they had met, but made even sexier by the ridges and dips of fading stretch marks that she had earned with the twins. Pressing further up, Regina teased one of Emma’s nipples through the fabric of her bra, causing Emma to gasp. She captured Emma’s bottom lip between her teeth and tugged gently until it released.

“…then I want to play wilderness adventure tonight too…..” teased Regina sexily.

“Unnnhhhh,” was all that Emma managed to articulate before turning and taking off from the kitchen. Regina grinned as she heard the ensuing commands,

“Kathryn, you can stay. Fredrick, get out. Kids, dinner’s at 4:30PM and then we’re all going to bed early….like 6:30PM kind of early. NO ARGUMENTS!!”

“I’m not going to bed at 6:30PM!”

“Yes, you are Kathryn.”

“But ‘Orange Is the New Black’ is on tonight….”

“Tough luck…you should’ve TiVo’d it!”

“You SUCK, Emma!”

No one should have a body that looks that good after having twins, grumbled Kathryn as she stood looking down at Emma’s naked, sleeping form.

“EMMA, WAKE UP!!” whispered Kathryn as she shook Emma’s shoulder hard.

Emma grumbled a bit before grinning at the disturbance. Without opening her eyes, she turned onto her back and mumbled,

“Hmmmmm, you wanna play park ranger and lost camper again baby?”

“Ugggghhh, you two are such freaks in bed. I swear to God,” huffed Kathryn to herself before stating loudly,

“No, Emma! Regina doesn’t want to fondle your pinecones right now! Get your ass up! I’m having contractions!”

Emma’s eyes snapped open to see Kathryn looking directly down at her. She kept Kathryn’s gaze,
not moving another muscle except to walk her fingers down the mattress. Finding the edge of the sheet, Emma pulled it up until it was tucked under her chin and she held it there with both hands, unsure what to do next. Despite the ruckus, Regina was still sleeping soundly. Four spectacular orgasms in thirty minutes had left her well satisfied and exhausted.

Realizing that Emma wasn’t moving but was continuing to simply watch her, Kathryn tried again, this time using visual aids as she spelled out the conversation one word at a time. How these two had managed to get to the hospital for the birth of their other children was beyond her.

“Baby...” She used her hands to form an arc from under her breasts to the top of her hips.

“Hospital...” She started with two hands together, bringing them apart and down to make a box before twirling a finger in the air and making a siren sound.

“Now!” she said as she tapped her wrist like a watch was there. Kathryn leaned down closer to Emma’s face for the next words.

“NOW, EMMA!!!”

Emma’s eyes went wide as the last command was delivered and she was startled into action; throwing the covers back, grabbing the phone and running for the closet to dress. The flurry of activity had started to awaken Regina and she was now turning toward the center of the bed with half-lidded eyes and a sexy smile.

“Excuse me, Ranger Emma? I can’t seem to find my tent.”

Kathryn groaned as she rolled her eyes.

“This is so wrong on so many fucking levels. I think I am going to need therapy by the time this night is over,” she whispered with a frustrated huff. Turning her attention to Regina, Kathryn narrowed her eyes as she took in her friend’s fully uncovered form. Kathryn was a mixture of impressed and slightly disturbed.

“What the fuck, Regina??!?”

Regina snapped awake and looked at Kathryn with wide eyes. Her blush was immediate and deep red.

“You’re buck naked...in bed...in a pair of hiking boots? And what’s with the backpack? You know what? Forget it. I don’t even want to know, but I also don’t want to hear another damn comment about my sex life. Ever. Because THIS,” Kathryn made a twirling motion with her finger to encircle the bed and its occupants, “is some of the kinkiest, weirdest shit I have EVER seen....”

“I...Uhhhhhh...”

Kathryn leaned in close to Regina and spoke, trying to put her words in a context that Regina would understand given the current situation. Her voice was sarcastically sweet,

“Sweetie, seriously, I need you to get a map and find your way back to your campsite, like right now. Ranger Emma’s busy getting dressed and this baby is coming. We need to get to the hospital. So, if you will be so kind as to roll that big ole pregnant backside of yours back into your fantasy tent and get dressed, we’ll all be on our way...” Kathryn used her arms in a scooping motion to indicate the direction that she would like everyone to be headed.

Regina narrowed her eyes in response and huffed before removing herself from bed and stomping
off towards the closet.

“And lose the backpack, Regina...” Kathryn called after her.

Satisfied that Emma and Regina were finally engaged in activities that were moving them towards the goal of getting to the hospital, Kathryn turned to get her things from her room.

“I swear kid,” murmured Kathryn, rubbing her belly, “it’s a damn good thing the house wasn’t on fire.”

Emma heard a knock at the door and was relieved to find Marco standing on the porch when it opened.

“Thanks for coming on short notice, Papa. Are you OK watching the kids?”

“Oh course, Emma.”

“Hey Marco. Baby’s coming,” stated Kathryn matter-of-factly as she pushed through the front door dragging a bag behind her. Regina was trying to keep up but was finding herself limping and struggling a bit due to dull, throbbing pain in her lower, right back. She probably overdid it with Emma this evening, but neither one could help themselves. She stopped long enough to peck Marco on the cheek,

“Th-th-thank you for coming, Papa. W-will you be OK? Th-th-there are s-s-seven of th-th-them here r-r-right now...” There was a mix of sympathy and apology in Regina’s tone as she attempted to press her message out through suddenly, chattering teeth.

“Don’t you worry about us. We’ll all be fine. I promise,” said Marco with a confident smile. He looked quizzically at Regina and placed a hand on her arm. “Are you feeling OK, Miss Regina? You’re shivering.”

Regina looked back at Marco with confused eyes.

“I’m f-fine. J-just a l-little t-tired.”

Marco looked to Emma who was watching Regina with concern.

“You should go, Emma.”

“Yeah, we should go.”

“Kathryn! You decided that tonight was the night, huh?” said Dr. Whale with a clap of his hands and a huge smile.

“Yeah, well, Emma wouldn’t let me watch ‘Orange Is the New Black’, so I figured ‘what the hell? Let’s have a kid instead’,” responded Kathryn sarcastically as she was pushed down the hall in her wheelchair.

Emma held Regina’s hand as they walked very slowly down the hall behind her.

“Regina, Marco was right, you really are shivering. Are you sure you’re OK? Do you want me to see if they can bring you a blanket?”

“I-I-I’m OK, Emma. I’m n-n-not even c-c-cold. M-my lower b-back hurts on the r-r-right. It’s n-
Hearing the conversation, Dr. Whale dropped back to walk beside Emma and Regina.

“Well hello ladies. How are we this evening?”

“G-g-good,” was Regina’s stuttered reply.

“Well, Regina, it looks like Kathryn may just beat you to it on this one. My money was on your little one arriving first.”

“S-s-sorry, you’re g-gonna l-lose that b-bet,” said Regina through the clicking of her teeth. She huffed at the continued annoyance. She wasn’t cold. She was actually incredibly warm and she reached up to wipe the beads of sweat from her forehead.

“I’m not so sure of that, actually.”

“Oh y-y-yeah? W-h-hy’s th-that?”

“Because I think you may be further along in labor than Kathryn is at this point.”

Emma and Regina stopped dead in the hallway and looked at Dr. Whale with wide eyes.

“Everyone,” Dr. Whale announced to the staff walking with them, “how about we show both of these beautiful ladies to a room?”

As Kathryn’s wheelchair turned into a room, she snarked over her shoulder,

“You see, Emma? This is what happens when you won’t let us watch ‘Orange Is the New Black’. We just find other shit to occupy our time. Serves you right!!”

“Shut the fuck up, Kathryn!” was pressed through gritted teeth.

“Cram it, Regina!” was the red faced reply. “I can say and do whatever I want! This is my fourth kid!”

“It’s our fifth!”

“Nice try! One’s adopted, and Emma helped with two. It’s only your second, you fucking amateur!”

“Well maybe SOMEONE should learn to keep their legs closed and then they wouldn’t be in this situation constantly!”

A gasp and glare was the initial response, but Kathryn recovered quickly.

“Suck it, Regina!”

“Why? When you so obviously already have…”

A smirk played on Regina’s lips, but her gloating was cut short by the onset of another contraction.

“If I could get out of this bed, I swear to god I would bitch slap you!”

“BRING IT!” gritted out Regina as she rode out her contraction.
Emma looked up, delivering a pleading look to Dr. Whale. This had been going on for four hours now. Something had to give. And it was about to.

“Ladies,” said Dr. Whale with an amused chuckle, “I hate to interrupt your conversation, but on the next contraction, I need you both to push.”

Emma looked at Regina who was looking past her. She glared instead at Kathryn with an arched brow, and her lips were curled into a smirk. Emma then turned her head to look at Kathryn who wore a similar expression. There was some serious, competitive fire behind the eyes of each one. As Emma’s eyes flicked between the monitors on each side, she saw the familiar uptick of the line. She held out one hand to each of the women and they were grasped quickly and tightly. As she felt the pressure increase, Emma lowered her head and closed her eyes tightly; groaning slightly and praying she would still have some use of her hands when this was all over.

The tinkling of the bells on the door found its way into the back room workshop announcing the arrival of a customer.

“Stay here,” Emma stated softly before standing and walking to the front.

She used an index finger to push her glasses further up onto the bridge of her nose and looked around the store. No one was there. She shook her head a bit, wondering if she was hearing things. It wouldn’t be surprising. She was tired. The number of orders and sheer volume of work was tremendous anymore, but she loved every minute of it and she was finally able to help take care of her family in the way that she had hoped.

Emma placed her hands on the small of her back and arched forward, trying to stretch muscles and get some relief from sitting too long in her hunched position. Her rounded, seven-month pregnant tummy protruded under her thermal shirt and Emma rubbed her palm over it in soothing circles as she smiled softly. She liked Fridays. The shop was closed and quiet, and she could concentrate on nothing but her work.

Her workbench was almost hidden away by a litany of pianos, violins, cellos, guitars and other stringed instruments that were in various states of repair, renewal or reinvention; items sent or brought in from all over the world, begging for her skilled touch and imagination.

Whether it was Rock, R&B, Blues, Country, Reggae, Alternative, Metal, Latin, Classical or some other form of music, it seemed that every musician wanted the same thing: the opportunity to be different and edgy; a chance to stand out in the crowd. Emma’s transformation of their instruments into works of art that played better than the day they bought them provided them with the uniqueness they sought.

Emma weaved her way through the equally, overflowing shop floor, making her way over to the corner where a small space had been cordoned off.

The burled walnut piano that had been dumped off by the School of Music a few, short years ago was almost unrecognizable. It had been restored beyond its former glory and was a work of art in every way imaginable. The broken legs had been replaced by massive carvings of wild, rearing, Shire horses. A rampant lion, Tudor rose and the name ‘Swan-Mills’ were combined intricately on the top board as a tribute to Regina and Emma’s English heritage. The sides were covered with a tangled, but beautiful, pattern of heraldic shields, traditional English flowers, leaves, ivy, swans, spinning wheels and helmets from suits of armor. The original, individual music stands that Regina had seen in the shop on her arrival in Storybrooke had been dismantled and re-purposed as the
music rack that folded up and down, and the repaired soundboard played with perfect resonance.

A jet-black, Steampunk cello sat beside; the sides wrapped with thin stainless steel. The back was overlaid with a delicate, white, wood applique shaped like an octopus, and its tentacles wrapped around the upper and lower bout in front; under the bridge and through the tailpiece. The scroll was carved to look like gears and cogs.

“You break it; you bought it,” Emma said with a tired grin as she unhooked and replaced the velvet rope that surrounded the two instruments to protect them from curious onlookers. They were relatively well-known among artists thanks to their turn on TV.

“My wife can fix anything; I’m not worried,” laughed Regina as she stopped playing for a moment, patting the bench in front of her, inviting Emma to sit down. Once Emma was situated, Regina reached around her to continue her play, placing a soft kiss on Emma’s cheek as her head rested back on Regina’s shoulder and she closed her eyes.

“You look exhausted,” said Regina with a bit of concern as she stopped playing.

“I’m good. I’m just trying to get ahead a little before I have to take off, and I am failing miserably,” sighed Emma as she turned her head to nestle her forehead into Regina’s neck.

“You have two beautiful children and two more on the way,” said Regina as she rubbed her hands over the sides of Emma’s tummy, “you have work queued up for the next two years, helped Marco to retire comfortably, paid off our home, and run a highly successful business that brings in $20k a month. Yeah, I can see where most would describe that as failing miserably,” smirked Regina playfully.

“You know what I mean, Regina… and the business wouldn’t be half as big if it hadn’t been for you and Kathryn insisting that the Academy let you play your own instruments during the broadcast,” sighed Emma.

“We simply preferred to play the music on two, beautiful instruments. It’s not my fault that 30 million people happened to be watching us do it,” teased Regina, “the rest was all you, my love. Never forget that….”

“Where are Henry and Kathryn?” asked Emma curiously.

“Spending the night at Kathryn and Fredrick’s…”

“How about we go now and make it a ‘Girls Night Out’?” asked Emma as she ran her fingers down Regina’s forearms and entwined their fingers.

“Actually, how about a ‘Girl’s Night In’?” whispered Regina as she captured Emma’s lips in a sensual kiss full of promise for the night to come.

“Even better….”

Emma was about to chalk it up to exhaustion and return to the back room when she heard a few notes of a familiar, Spanish lullaby a coming from small office towards the back of the store that they had turned into a nursing room before Regina’s first pregnancy. She would often come by the shop and it proved to be more than handy for both of them over the years. Emma’s smile was brilliant and instantaneous when she entered the room to find Regina sitting in a rocking chair in the corner nursing their 8-week old son, Fredrick. Regina’s eyes were closed and a soft smile played on her lips as she patted his bottom and rocked in time to the music that she hummed softly. A blanket
covered him and draped over her shoulder, but Emma could still see thick, dark brown curls on the baby’s head that were so indicative of Regina’s heritage. A small palm lay against the bare skin of her wife’s chest, tiny fingers grasping and relaxing as their baby grunted and sucked eagerly at Regina’s breast.

Emma closed the door softly and padded over to them.

“He’s hungry today,” said Emma as she pulled back the blanket a bit and kissed the top of his head. She took a seat on the small bench that was beside the rocking chair.

Regina kept her eyes closed and smiled.

“We got a little delayed at the grocery, so he had to wait a little longer than usual. He made it known that his patience was wearing a bit thin,” chuckling a bit, she added, “and, as you can see, my blouse is now very wet. You can imagine the look on the bag boy’s face.”

Emma cringed. She had experienced that little problem more than once, so she could imagine Regina’s embarrassment.

“I have something you can put on. No worries.”

A light tap sounded at the door before it opened a crack to reveal a small, smiling face and a tousled mop of blonde hair. A thick pair of glasses magnified emerald green eyes.

“Pssssssstt,” was the greeting delivered from the door.

“Psssssssstt back,” grinned Emma.

“Cans we come in?” was the loudly whispered reply.

“Cans they?” asked Emma with a chuckle as she looked to Regina. Regina grinned and nodded her approval as she snuggled the blanket around Fredrick.

The little boy bounded into the room before returning to the door to tug his three-year-old twin sister’s hand gently, urging her along behind him. When they approached, Emma picked the little boy up to sit on the bench beside her, pulling his sister onto her lap.

The little boy sat for a moment, swinging his feet, before slipping back off the bench and scooting close to the rocker. He put his hands on the arm of the chair and drew himself up on tip toes to look at the baby being held in Regina’s arms.

“Can Fredrick play with us today, Mommy?” he asked quietly as he watched his baby brother.

“Not today, Marco. He’s still too small, but someday he’ll be ready. It’s just going to take some time,” Regina responded softly with a smile.

“Oh, okay,” he sighed a bit as he continued to watch Fredrick pensively, “He looks like fun.”

Regina couldn’t help but smile at the enthusiasm that they had for their sibling to be a part of their activities.

“Hmmmmm, looks like somebody had a treat today,” said Regina with a playful grin as she brushed her thumb against the corner of Marco’s mouth to remove some stray crumbs. She arched her eyebrow teasingly at Emma who immediately looked to the ground, twisting her lips into a guilty grin. The same thumb found the corner of Emma’s mouth and it wiped away a few crumbs from
there as well. There was no doubt that Emma had given birth to the two children that had entered the room. The physical resemblance was uncanny and their mannerisms (and appetite) were ‘all Emma’. The only thing that was out of the ordinary was Marco’s outgoing nature. He was a natural socializer, and Emma swore he got that from Regina somehow.

“Did you get a cookie too, sweetheart?” asked Regina with a soft smile. She brushed the back of her fingers down her three-year old daughter’s cheek before slipping fingers into her blonde curls to adjust the hearing aid on her right ear.

“Emma! What brings you and Regina and Teresa in today?” asked Dr. Whale jovially. He immediately caught the look of concern in Emma’s eyes and flicked his eyes to Regina’s which reflected similar trepidation.

“Teresa seems…I don’t know…sluggish to sounds on the right. She seems hesitant to talk and when she does it’s slightly garbled and thick sounding. The other day, I dropped something beside her accidentally and she didn’t even turn her head.” Emma looked at Dr. Whale as she finished her explanation, pleading with him silently to allay her fears.

“Well, let’s take a look here, shall we?” Dr. Whale rolled his stool to the edge of the bed where Teresa sat perched on the edge. He snapped his fingers to the left side of her head first, watching her immediate reaction to the sound. He then switched to the right, repeating the process. He watched her eyes move about slightly and he continued to snap until she seemed to notice and then locate the source of the sound and turned her head. He stayed silent as he rolled to the cabinet to get the otoscope. Placing it gently in Teresa’s ear, he looked through the end, repositioning several times to examine more closely. Both Emma and Regina were watching carefully and expectantly from the bedside.

“You are such a good girl, Teresa. You deserve a cookie,” said Dr. Whale with a smile as he produced a homemade, oatmeal-raisin cookie from a jar on the counter which was immediately taken by small hands.

Dr. Whale looked up at Emma and Regina.

“You know that Teresa has struggled with ear infections quite frequently over the past 18 to 20 months. The last several infections, where she had blisters on her eardrum, have left pretty hefty scarring. Unfortunately, I believe that has led to some significant hearing loss and it is affecting her ability to realize and form sounds.”

Dr. Whale took a deep breath before continuing. The look in parents’ eyes when they received the news that he was about to deliver was always one of self-blame, and he knew, for certain, that the two mothers in front of him would be no different; especially Emma.

“Teresa is not deaf, but she needs the assistance of a hearing aid and we will need to get her speech therapy so that she can compensate. With small children it can be hard to determine the extent of damage since they can’t really tell us what they are experiencing, so we may not know the full nature of the loss for a while. For now, though, let’s do what we can to make sure she can catch her siblings trying to sneak up on her, eh?”

Dr. Whale offered Emma and Regina a sympathetic smile. Regina’s countenance had already changed to one of steely determination as she formulated a thousand questions and laid out a mental plan for getting Teresa the best possible care. Emma simply looked overwhelmed as she considered all the obstacles their daughter would now face.
Before they could say anything of comfort to Emma, Dr. Whale and Regina watched Teresa pull herself up to stand on the exam table. She must have sensed her mother’s sadness, because she reached out with small hands, placing her palms on Emma’s cheeks and pulling her face close to give her a soft, cookie crumb-laden buss on the lips. Putting her arms around Emma’s neck, she indicated that she wanted to be held and cuddled. Emma couldn’t help the tears that fell as she hugged her daughter tightly.

“Emma, children are resilient. You, of all people, know that,” offered Dr. Whale.

“I just wanted my children to have the best chance…”

“With you two as parents?” chuckled Dr. Whale, “I’d seriously doubt that they’d have anything less….”

Teresa looked at Regina through thick glasses and nodded her head to indicate that she too had enjoyed a cookie.

“We all had a busy day today.” stated Emma enthusiastically. She tweaked their son on the chin gently with her thumb and forefinger as she squeezed Teresa against her a bit more snugly and patted her leg lovingly.

“Marco worked with Grandpa on his music boxes, and helped him at the front of the store with the customers. Isn’t that right?”

Marco smiled and nodded eagerly as Emma rolled her eyes and Regina stifled a laugh. Marco would talk a person’s ear off, if they let him, and his infectious charm had actually helped sell more items than anyone could imagine. He was his Mom’s greatest fan.

“Teresa helped me carve.”

Again, Teresa nodded and Emma placed a kiss into her hair. Teresa was so intelligent, but painfully shy, as a result of her hearing and speech problems.

“How am I supposed to feel Regina? She’s my daughter,” said Emma angrily as they stood in the guest house.

Regina opened her mouth to respond, but was cut off by Emma’s continued ranting.

“I can’t do anything right, Regina. I did this to her. Thanks to me, she can’t hear,” Emma pointed towards the house for emphasis.

Regina realized quickly that being the voice of reason was going to be an almost impossible task tonight. Emma intended to take the brunt of the blame for this onto her own shoulders, just as she had done with most other things in her life. Regina found her own volume increasing and taking on an annoyed tone. She needed Emma to hear her. They had to work together or this would tear them apart.

“If I remember correctly, Emma, there was a donor involved here. Has it ever occurred to you that perhaps the propensity for ear infections came from there?”

Emma’s response was almost frantic and she continued to point towards the house as the tears were starting to fall from her eyes.
“Do you have any idea how people will make fun of her, Regina? How the kids will pick on her at school when they realize she’s different? The things she won’t be able to do? How am I supposed to keep her safe?”

“FUCK YOU, EMMA!!” was the response that Regina screamed at the top of her lungs as her own tears started to fall. This conversation needed to stop and Regina needed to get Emma’s attention. It worked on both counts.

“You refer to her as ‘your daughter’. You say that it is ‘your responsibility’ to keep her safe. No, Emma, it’s OUR responsibility. Teresa is OUR daughter. Do you think for one minute these same things don’t scare the hell out of me? Do you think my heart doesn’t break when I think about the things that people might say or when I consider the things that she may not be able to do? People are cruel, Emma, and life sucks sometimes, but we can’t help our daughter if we just break down and give up on her. She is an incredibly intelligent little girl and I suggest that you figure out a way to channel your anger and frustration into more productive and helpful activities that will help foster that beautiful and amazing mind that she has, because wasting your breath and blaming yourself isn’t doing a fucking thing to help anyone. And, god dammit, we need your help. Teresa and I can’t do this alone.”

Regina was out of breath when she finished and her chest heaved. She looked pleadingly at Emma praying that even one word had sunk in. Regina watched as Emma broke down in front of her, crying uncontrollably. Regina gathered her wife in her arms and ran fingers through her hair like she had a thousand times before. Today was one of those ‘struggling days’ that they tried so hard to avoid, but sometimes, it just wasn’t to be.

“I just want people to see beyond that fucking hearing aid. I want them to see HER, Regina,” whispered Emma softly.

“They will....”

“We worked on flashcards and read a book together,” Emma looked at Regina with proud tears brimming in her eyes, “and Teresa sang me a song in Spanish while I worked.”

Regina smiled at Emma. She knew that Emma still walked that fine line between pride and sadness; pride as Teresa continued to meet one of the biggest challenges of her life head on, but sadness, because Teresa had to work so much harder to be comfortable doing things that other children did naturally. Teresa knew she was different. She could hear it in the sound of her own voice; different from her twin brother, different from her other siblings, different from other children. Her differences made her timid and every one of Teresa’s beautiful, wonderful gifts had to be drawn out and encouraged and nurtured, because she didn’t offer them readily. Teresa was so much like her mother had been so many years ago.

Thankfully, Emma had learned to transform her self-blame and doubt into something incredibly positive, and she worked tirelessly alongside Regina to improve their daughter’s speech and give her the confidence to socialize. After almost a year, Teresa was interacting well with family and close friends and her speech had improved greatly, still, she had her ‘shy days’, and unfamiliar people were a true challenge. They would get there, though. They had to.

“I bet Fredrick would like it if we read him that story and sang him that song, Teresa. Would you stay and help me with that?” asked Regina with a smile.

Teresa nodded her head, “Yes, Mommy,” she said, barely above a whisper.
“The book’s in the back, sweetie,” said Emma as she placed her daughter’s feet on the floor and pressed a gentle kiss to her cheek.

Teresa scampered off, returning very quickly with a book, ‘The Giving Tree’ that she handed to Emma so that she could be lifted into Regina’s lap. Emma made sure that everyone was comfortable before placing a kiss in Teresa’s hair, onto Regina’s forehead and atop the crown of Fredrick’s head.

“And, I think I hear the bus arriving, Marco,” stated Emma excitedly. “How about we go out and see how Henry and Kathryn’s first day of school went?”

Marco was already off and running through the door; out of sight before Emma had even finished her sentence. She could hear his Grandpa Marco inviting him to walk to the bus stop; an offer he readily accepted. As Emma approached the door, she heard a quiet, small voice,

“Once der was a twee….”

And she cast one more glance back at them before stepping back out into the shop with a smile.

Emma and Regina padded softly down the hallway to indulge in what had become a nightly tradition. It was early evening and the faint orange tinge of the setting sun could still be seen on the horizon through the back windows of the cabin. Despite the hour, the kids were already fast asleep. The excitement of the day had exhausted little minds and bodies.

“I can’t believe he is already in first grade,” whispered Emma in awe as she took in Henry’s sleeping form. She wrapped an arm around Regina’s shoulder and drew her wife tightly against her, feeling the return squeeze of loving arms around her waist and Regina’s cheek nestled into her shoulder. A soft smile played on Emma’s lips as she watched the gentle rise and fall of his chest. He barely took up a quarter of his “big boy bed” as he lay sprawled out on his stomach in his green, Hulk pajamas. His thick, chestnut hair hung over closed, brown eyes and one hand grasped the strap of his Avengers backpack that lay propped against the side of the mattress.

“He must have had a good day at school,” remarked Regina with a soft chuckle as she noted his unwillingness to let go of the bag.

“It seems like only yesterday that we were standing out there in the living room trying to figure all this out,” whispered Emma with a nonchalant wave of her hand. “God, we could barely take care of ourselves back then; now look at us.”

Regina groaned quietly and shook her head as she recalled her own feelings of inadequacy, fear and sadness during the first few months of Henry’s life, then smiled into Emma’s chest as she recalled how the same strong arms that were wrapped around her now were wrapped around her then. It was a different time and a different circumstance, but it was done with the same love and protectiveness. Some things never really did change.

Looking up, Regina could see the hints of tears forming in Emma’s eyes. She knew today would be a sentimental day. She knew that from the morning when Emma broke down in her arms in the driveway after the bus rounded the corner out of view. Emma had lasted longer than Regina expected and much longer than Regina had managed. Emma could see the concern in Henry and Kathryn’s eyes when Regina had to excuse herself to sob out of sight, so she stayed strong for them; laughing, smiling, taking pictures and waving, but Regina knew that Emma was dying on the inside too. It was hard to watch their children grow up so fast. They wished that each of them could just live in these moments forever; free from care and worry; free from the burdens that would weigh them down much too quickly.
Emma crouched down beside the bed, freeing Henry’s hand gently from his bag and tucking his arm in beside him as Regina pulled the sheet and blanket up to his chest. He moved only a bit at the disturbance before sighing comfortably and snuggling further into his mattress. Emma pressed her fingers lightly into Henry’s soft curls, brushing them from his eyes before placing a soft kiss on his forehead. Stepping back, she smiled as Regina did the same, lingering her hand on his face long enough to trace the contour of his cheek with her thumb. They smiled, looking back at his sleeping form as they exited the room together; closing the door softly behind them.

Slipping quietly into the next room, Emma felt Regina’s hand grip her forearm strongly in panic as she noticed that Kathryn’s bed was unoccupied. She looked at Emma with terrified eyes and Emma, in return, patted her hand reassuringly and pointed to the space under the bed. A small, socked foot was quickly withdrawn into hiding. Emma held up her index finger indicating that Regina should wait before lying down on her stomach on the floor beside the bed.

“Hey, you,” whispered Emma with concerned eyes.

“Hi,” was the demure and dejected reply.

“Wanna tell me about it?” asked Emma softly as she looked into the tear-filled eyes of her daughter. Her inquiry was met with a sad shake of the head. Emma assessed the space available. It was going to be a tight squeeze, but she had to give it a try. Scooting over softly, she had barely slipped under the sideboard of the bed when she felt her daughter tucked into her tummy and chest. She was shaking and crying.

“Why all the tears, Katters?”

“I can’ts go to school tomorrow.”

“Why not?”

“Because I needs to stay home and takes care of Mommy. She was sad today. I saw her crying,” she replied, barely above a whisper.

“But you want to go to school right? You had fun?”

Kathryn nodded her head into Emma’s chest.

“Yeah. I hads lots of fun today. I mades a new friend and we playsed and my teacher is real nice….” She sighed as her sentence trailed off.

“But you’re worried about Mommy too, huh?”

“Uh huh,” was squeaked out feebly.

Standing in the center of the room, Regina clamped her hand over her mouth trying to suppress another round of tears. She was able to muffle the sound but her chest still quivered and the drops spilled out over her hand. She couldn’t believe the conversation that was taking place beneath the bed.

“I’ll tell you what,” said Emma as she slipped her hand between them, searching the floor for the object that had caught her attention previously. She scrunched her face up and twisted her mouth in mock concentration as Kathryn watched her intently. Eventually, Emma’s fingers felt the softness of a plush arm and she waggled her eyebrows and grinned as she released a triumphant,
“Ah ha!” and extracted the small, black, stuffed dragon from between them. Having found what she was searching for, and having her daughter’s full attention, she started again,

“You know how Toothless here makes you smile and laugh, Katters?”

The raven-haired little girl looked at her with soft, hazel eyes and nodded. The look on her face told Emma that she was hanging on her every word.

“Well, I happen to know for a fact that dragons don’t like to go to school. They think they’re too smart and all that,” teased Emma with an eye roll and a wink which caused Kathryn to giggle a bit.

“Plus, they make a mess of the classroom and don’t fit in the seats ‘cause they’re sooooooooo biiiiiiiiiiiiiiigggggg.”

As Emma drew out the words, she tickled Kathryn’s side before bussing a quick kiss on her cheek.

“What dragons REALLY like to do is stay home and take care of sad Mommies. They like to lie around all day on top of pianos, because then they can stretch out real far and wiggle their toes over the edge,” Emma stretched out and then wiggled her fingers to emphasize the point, causing Kathryn to grin.

“So how about this? Why don’t we let Toothless stay home tomorrow and take care of Mommy while you go to school? He gets to do what he likes, Mommy gets to smile and laugh at all his sillies and you get to have fun at school. As soon as you get home, you can tell Mommy all about your great day and she can tell you everything that she and lazy, old, too-smart-for-his-britches Toothless did. Whatcha think?”

Emma waited with baited breath, hoping this plan was going to work. She almost wanted to laugh, but she knew that this was a serious dilemma for their daughter. She truly was torn between her desire to go to pre-school and her fierce need to comfort Regina.

In the middle of the room, Regina barely breathed as she awaited their daughter’s answer.

“OK, Momma,” was the whispered reply.

“Well, it sounds like you and Toothless are both going to have a pretty busy day tomorrow. Think maybe you guys should try to get some sleep?”

Regina was wiping her eyes and cheeks with her palms as Emma and then Kathryn wiggled out from under the bed. She put on a smile hoping Kathryn wouldn’t notice the puffy eyes and tear tracks. Regina took a knee when she approached, smiling gently as she reached out to press strands of hair behind her daughter’s ear. Her actions were met with small arms thrown around her neck in a tight hug which Regina returned just as tightly.

“Thank you, baby, Mommy already feels so much better. And, I promise that Toothless and I will take good care of each other tomorrow,” whispered Regina as she placed a soft kiss on Kathryn’s cheek.

Lifting her up, Regina laid their daughter gently on the bed where Emma had already pulled back the covers in anticipation; snuggling them back around her once she was settled. Leaning in close, Emma bussed Kathryn’s cheek as well before leaning in close to whisper in her ear,

“Nice moves, Katters,” which was answered with a giggle.

“Would you like me to sing you a song?” asked Regina as she sat on the edge of the mattress,
fingertips brushing soft strands of hair away from tired eyes.

Kathryn nodded; her eyes already drooping.

“Arrórró, mi niña, arrrórró, mi sol, arrrórró, pedazo de mi corazón…”

“We really need to stop our shenanigans at the bus stop,” chuckled Emma as they stepped out into the hallway, “because I can barely fit under that bed anymore.” Regina offered a small chuckle before the tears started to fall again, and Emma opened her arms wide allowing her wife to step in her warm embrace.

“Hey, baby, no crying,” teased Emma as she lifted Regina’s chin with her finger, “You get to have a fun day with Toothless tomorrow. Not just anyone gets to spend their day with a dragon; especially not THAT dragon. You know how she loves that thing; she’ll barely let it out of her sight. She must be really worried about you…..”

Regina nodded her head into Emma’s chest before stepping back and using her palms to dry her eyes. Reaching out, Emma helped by brushing away a few of the tears with her thumbs. When she felt like Regina was ready, Emma tilted her head down the hallway as she offered a hand to hold,

“Come on let's go check on the other ones.”

The twins lay in separate beds within the same room. They had tried to give each a room of their own, but Marco’s overprotectiveness of Teresa and Teresa’s timidity of the dark meant this arrangement was going to stick, at least for a little while longer.

Emma fished about gently under Marco’s pillow, finding small glasses grasped by tiny fingers. Folding the earpieces closed, she placed them on the stand beside the bed before crouching down to look at his sleeping visage. She rubbed soft, blonde curls between her fingers and traced her index finger lightly down the bridge of his nose before leaning over to place a kiss on his temple, stepping aside to allow Regina to do the same, before crossing the room to Teresa’s bed. The little girl was sound asleep on her left side; mouth hung open slightly as she breathed soft breaths. Emma lifted her hair gently with the fingers of one hand as the fingers of her other hand found the switch on the hearing aid, silencing it for the night. She slipped it from the curve of Teresa’s ear and placed it in her pocket so that it could be charged and ready for a brand new day. She then removed thick glasses and placed them on the bedside table, before offering two kisses, one on her temple and the other on her right ear. She stood watching Teresa for several long moments.

“What are you thinking baby?” whispered Regina softly as she wrapped a slender arm around her wife’s waist. She had noticed Emma’s pensive, faraway look.

“They are the best works of art that I’ve ever created, Regina,” whispered Emma as she shook her head and wrapped an arm around Regina’s shoulders, placing a soft kiss in her hair.

“You did good, Emma Swan-Mills,” whispered Regina with a smile as she turned towards the door. She ran a hand down Emma’s strong bicep, giving her forearm a squeeze and tilting her head to encourage her to follow.

Side by side, Emma and Regina peered over the edge of the crib and smiled down at their newest arrival. Fredrick lay on his back, buttoned up in an onsie and wrapped warmly in a blanket. His knit cap was pulled down to the top of his dark brow and his lips pursed and relaxed around the small hand that had found its way into his mouth. He kicked his feet out with a grunt occasionally before
calming himself with a few strong, soothing sucks on his fist. He had already grown so much, but was still considered small comparatively. He had inherited Regina’s slight build and dark hair, and, by pure luck, sported the most beautiful set of emerald green eyes.

“You didn’t do so bad yourself, Regina Swan-Mills,” whispered Emma with a grin.

“Night, little man,” she whispered as she kissed her finger and then tapped his small hand.

As Emma turned towards the door, she felt Regina’s hand slip a bit in hers. She looked back quizzically.

“Give me a minute?” asked Regina softly as her eyes flitted around the room.

“You didn’t do so bad yourself, Regina Swan-Mills,” whispered Emma with a grin.

“Night, little man,” she whispered as she kissed her finger and then tapped his small hand.

As Emma turned towards the door, she felt Regina’s hand slip a bit in hers. She looked back quizzically.

“Give me a minute?” asked Regina softly as her eyes flitted around the room.

“As Emma turned towards the door, she felt Regina’s hand slip a bit in hers. She looked back quizzically.”

“Give me a minute?” asked Regina softly as her eyes flitted around the room.

“Of course,” replied Emma with a soft smile. Kissing Regina’s hand, she slipped out the door and down the hall.

Regina did a slow turn in the middle of the room, taking in each of the walls and wood panels. Even after all these years, she couldn’t help but be fascinated and amazed by the ethereal beauty of the space; the care and love poured into it so many years ago without expectation of return. The woodland creatures had seen four of their little ones grow into toddlers, pre-schoolers and school-aged children. Now, they kept a watchful eye over their fifth as they continued their work and play among the leaves, trees and bushes of the forest. Eventually, this would be covered over by new memories and new colors, but Regina wanted to hold onto this memory for at least a few more years; maybe longer.

Stepping to the corner, Regina looked into the trunk of the tree and found Mrs. Tittlemouse still sitting in her rocking chair, baby in her arms. The blanket now held five names and another mouse was entering the room, hanging up its tool belt after a long day of work. Four smaller mice danced and played in front of the large hearth. When she asked Emma why there was still so much space around the hearth, Emma simply whispered with a grin and a shrug, ‘Fredrick will need space to play and, well, let’s just see where we go from here’.

Regina found Emma standing in the living room looking intently at the mantel atop the dormant fireplace. Stepping in front of her wife, she allowed herself to be encased in strong arms which she drew tighter around her torso before relaxing back into Emma’s chest with a hum and a smile. Emma turned her face to nuzzle her nose softly into her wife’s cheek.

“I think we’re gonna need to make some more room,” said Emma quietly.

Regina looked at the rough-hewn ledge that was littered with framed pictures of their children, their family, their friends and themselves. Nestled among, and almost covered by, the personal items sat three golden statuettes; each of a non-descript, art deco man holding a crusader’s sword and standing upon a reel of film. Emma pointed a finger at each one, naming them off,

“Kathryn,” she stated as she pointed to the Best Original Score award.

“Marco,” she continued as her finger moved to the Best Original Song award.

“and Teresa,” finished Emma as she pointed to the last, Best Original Score, award.

“Every time we have another baby, it’s like you get inspired. Your music just comes from a place that is amazing and wonderful. And people see it, Regina. They hear it. They feel it. So…..not to jinx us or anything, but, I am thinking……I may need to make a space for Fredrick,” Emma grinned teasingly.
“The only thing missing is one for Henry,” sighed Emma.

“Oh, he got the best award of all, Emma. He got you, when we needed you the most…”

Turning in her wife’s arms, Regina gave Emma a tender, lingering kiss. She jumped slightly as their kiss was broken by a single, loud snore and she chuckled into Emma’s shoulder as she saw Marco lying on the couch behind Emma taking a cat nap.

“Despite appearances, he really is a good babysitter,” chuckled Emma, adding in a light whisper while pointing to her head, “ears like a hawk.”

“I heard that,” mumbled Marco as he turned his back to them and fell back into his snoring slumber.

“See,” said Emma, rolling her eyes.

“Give me just a minute,” whispered Regina as she stepped towards the bedroom door. Before entering the room, she waved her hand towards the back door, encouraging Emma to be on her way. Emma winked and smiled before heading quickly in that direction.

As she returned from the bedroom, Regina saw Emma motioning excitedly for her to hurry through the half-open back door.

Regina stepped through and watched Emma wince and twist her face, trying to shut the door as quietly as possible. Alone at last, Emma turned to Regina,

“Ready?” she asked excitedly. There was a twinkling mirth in green orbs as she waggled her eyebrows playfully at Regina, and Emma saw Regina bite her lip to suppress a HUGE smile as she nodded enthusiastically.

They couldn’t help but laugh aloud as they ran down through the back yard, side by side, hands clasped tightly.

They stopped only briefly on the dock to drop their towels and pull off clothes before jumping into the cooling waters of the inlet. They paddled around only for a few moments before the need to be closer became too great. Emma stood on the pebbly bottom, water chest high, and wrapped strong arms around Regina's back as she, in turn, wrapped her legs around Emma's waist and arms around broad shoulders. They shared a deep passionate kiss, tongues probing deeply and hungrily into the comforting, familiar warmth of each other’s mouth. As Regina's head fell back, Emma trailed open mouthed kisses down her neck and throat, stopping momentarily to suck on her pulse point, hands roaming freely over wet skin. The tingling and warmth in Regina’s breasts reminded her that their reprieve was to be short-lived.

“We’ll have to go back up soon, so I can feed Fredrick”, whispered Regina.

“And after that?” inquired Emma as her hot breath touched cool water on warm skin.

“Soy tuya siempre, hazme lo que quieras….”

She could feel Emma smile against her skin as she continued the gentle assault of lips and tongue on her collarbone and chest. Eventually, their kiss broke and they both looked towards the house, cheeks touching. The soft glow of the inside lights played on the yard and everything seemed so calm as the occupants slumbered inside in warm beds. Emma kept her eyes trained on the back of the house as she spoke softly,

“Do you think we figured out our definition of ‘right’, Regina?”
Regina pulled back to look at Emma’s profile. She had gained a maturity in the subtle lines of her face that Regina had seen, but never really appreciated. Emma truly did have an indescribable, rugged beauty and it was just getting better with age and time.

“No,” whispered Regina.

Emma turned and looked quizzically into Regina’s eyes. Smiling, Regina touched her forehead to Emma’s before leaning in for one more passionate kiss. Just before their lips touched, Emma heard the beautiful sound of her wife’s voice saying the words that she longed to hear,

“I think we figured out the definition of ‘perfect’.”

FIN

Chapter End Notes

I have struggled with whether or not to leave this final author’s note, but, over the course of this journey, Emma and Regina found both their voice and their courage, so perhaps it is time that I did the same.

Like both Emma and Regina, I am a survivor of child sexual abuse and domestic abuse and some of the scenes, as well as the feelings that Emma articulated to Cora and Regina in Chapter 14, are very much my own. I have kept my silence for many, many years as a means of protecting others, but it has been a very heavy burden to carry.

I fell in love with the characters of Emma and Regina when I wrote ‘Photos’ and realized that they could lend me the ‘protection’ I needed to safely break that silence. Being able to write down some of these words has gone a long way toward my own recovery, and I can’t thank each and every one of you enough for taking the time to ‘listen’ to my story.

While ‘life has sucked sometimes’ (to borrow a phrase from our beautiful Regina), I actually consider myself very, very fortunate…..because I have shared their love story as well, and I hope that it is the happiness, acceptance, strength, support and courage that you felt in that love story that will stick with you long after this story ends.

Please don’t spend any more moments feeling bad for Emma and Regina. I assure you that; throughout this journey, they have taken some very huge steps towards healing and recovery and they will, most definitely, continue to move forward, stronger than before. ;)

My only ask is that each of you strive, every day, to be someone’s Kathryn or Marco or Fredrick. You have no idea what that support can mean to someone that needs it. Remind them that things can get better and that life truly can take some very beautiful and very unexpected turns when you least expect it. I consider my life to be living proof of that!

In return, I hope that each of you finds your Regina or Emma; someone that lifts you up every day, gives you strength to do the impossible, helps pick up the pieces when they
fall apart and loves you unconditionally. Never allow yourself to settle for anything less.

A beautiful reader contacted me and I hope she will provide me the latitude to share with you what I shared with her…

Time is a very precious thing to give to someone. The fact that so many of you took that time from your lives to follow this story; leave beautiful, thoughtful and insightful comments; engage in conversations with me; create Tumblr manips; reblog covers; …well….it is a gift that I will never be able to repay, so I hope each of you will simply accept my sincere and humble ‘thank you’. I can’t even begin to express how much your support and encouragement has meant to me.

There are a lot of very talented writers posting on AO3 and I hope you’ll take the time to read, enjoy, comment and congratulate some of them on their works as well.

I have not yet lighted on the idea for my next story. When I do (and as I said in ‘Photos’), my general approach is to write the entire story before posting. I don’t work well under pressure and would hate to leave folks hanging if life/work/writer’s block gets in the way, so this works best for all of us (I think :) ).

I am keeping my fingers crossed that the spark of inspiration lights itself under me soon!! Please keep your fingers crossed as well! I do love the process of weaving together a story and I hope to be able to do that at least one more time for all of you!

All my thanks and love to Emma, Regina and all of you!! <3

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!