A Thief and a Queen

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Summary

A collection of my OQ one-shots, mostly from OQ Week on tumblr.
Masquerade

*Masquerade*

*Paper faces on parade*

*Masquerade*

*Hide your face so the world will never find you*

(“Masquerade,” *The Phantom of the Opera*)

Masquerade

King Leopold insisted on hosting a masquerade ball to celebrate their first anniversary. Regina didn’t feel like celebrating a marriage she felt trapped in, especially when it would be so close to the one year anniversary of Daniel’s death. But like most things in her life, she had no say. She had no choice but to smile, nod and thank her husband for his kindness.

Before she knew it, the night of the masquerade arrived. She had decided to wear a silver dress, a feminine color that also symbolized mysteriousness. Regina curled her dark red lips into a smirk at the thought. Everyone was going to expect the queen to be wearing gold. And she was going to be wearing a mask which covered her entire face, something queens didn’t do. She didn’t care. Her entire costume had been planned to give her a chance to slip into the crowd unnoticed for a little while.

Until her husband intervened, starting with her dress. It was an opulent ball gown with a tight bodice encrusted with diamonds and a large silk skirt which was covered by a gauzy layer with pearls sewn into it. Leopold also insisted she wear some of the royal jewels to the ball. A heavy, diamond encrusted chandelier necklace weighed down her neck. Matching earring pulled at her earlobes and her fingers were weighted down by several rings. Diamonds even encrusted her mask, which was now a Columbian mask—one that only covered her eyes and the bridge of her nose. Silver feathers rose from the ends to frame her face. It was more fitting for a queen, she was told.

Regina stared at herself in the mirror frowning. There was no missing her like this. So much for her dreams of escaping for at least one night.

“Is something wrong, Your Majesty?” Her handmaiden appeared in the mirror, worry over displeasing her mistress clear on her face.

“No, there isn’t. Thank you.” Regina waved her away. The handmaiden bowed and disappeared from sight.

Regina didn’t move right away. If Leopold wanted his young wife to be seen, then she was going to be the last one to enter. Then all eyes would really be on her.

A guard entered the room, bowing to her. Regina frowned. “I don’t need an escort down to the ballroom.”

“Sorry, Your Majesty, but it’s the King’s orders.”

“Why?”

“For your safety.” Leopold entered her room. He wore a silver and black velvet robe that matched his black mask. “We’ve received word that the Merry Men have been spotted near the palace.
You’ve heard of them, right?”

Everyone had heard of the Merry Men and their leader, Robin Hood. Court gossip said he was the son of a lesser lord who had gone rogue, leading a ragtag group of bandits on raids where he robbed the people he one associated with. Their base of operation was in Sherwood Forest, located at the very edge of her husband’s kingdom, but the forest was vast. No one had been able to locate it yet. Capturing Robin Hood would be a great coup for her husband.

Regina sighed. “Yes, I have. And I don’t think he’s going to steal me. The escort is unnecessary.”

“You may think so, Regina, but I must insist.” Leopold kissed her and she tried not to gag. “I shall see you in the ballroom. Do not tarry.”

The ballroom had no air. Between the torches lighting the room and the heat from the multitude of dancers, the room was hot. Regina sent a servant back to her room for a fan, but it did little to relieve her. She sighed as she snapped her fan shut.

This drew Leopold’s attention. “Is something wrong, Regina?”

“I am hot and need air. If you’ll excuse me, I think I will step outside for a bit.”

Leopold shook his head. “It’s too dangerous, my dear.”

“I’m growing faint. I need some air.”

The king beckoned someone to approach. Regina bit back a groan as two guards approached. They saluted their king and Leopold leaned forward. “Please escort the queen outside. She requires some air.”

Regina had to smile, pretending she was grateful for her husband’s concern. Deep down, she was seething. She just wanted a few moments to herself. Was that too much to ask?

She slid out of the ballroom, the two soldiers following her. Regina found a little corridor that had wide openings which looked out over the gardens. She leaned out of one, enjoying the cool night breeze on her face. It was refreshing. Almost freeing.

The soldiers remained close by, reminding her she wasn’t free. She glanced at them. “I’m fine out here. You can go back inside now.”

“No, Your Majesty. Our orders are to stay with you,” one soldier responded.

Regina sighed. She relished these final moments of freedom. The soldiers would soon usher her back into the hot and airless ballroom. She would be trapped again, forced to pretend she was happy being married to man still in love with his deceased wife. Happy to be living in this palace and that she didn’t consider it a very elegant prison.

A crash echoed down the hall, startling Regina and the soldiers. One dashed forward, looking about while the other hung back. Regina saw her chance and took it. “You should go investigate. It could be Robin Hood or one of his Merry Men.”

“What about you, Your Majesty? We’re not allowed to leave you. King’s orders,” a soldier said.

Regina had to think fast. “But if you let the Merry Men get away, he’ll be more cross. I’m right by
the ballroom anyway. I promise you that I'll run there right now.”

The soldiers continued to hesitate as another crash resounded through the hall. Regina nodded at the soldiers. “You best go now or you’ll miss him.”

Without another thought, the two ran down the hallway they believed the sound came from. Regina sagged against the wall, relieved to be free at last. She knew she would have to go inside soon as the guards couldn’t chase the noise forever. But she was going to take whatever she could.

Movement caught her eye and she turned her head. She didn’t see anyone but she knew better than that. Regina stood up straight, squaring her shoulders. In her best queen voice, she commanded: “Whoever is there, show yourself!”

A man stepped out of the shadows, white gloved hands raised in surrender. Everything else about his outfit was black and simple save for some velvet on his sleeves. He wore a black Volto mask, which covered everything except his brilliant blue eyes. Regina had to blink a few times to prevent herself from falling into their enchanting depths.

“My apologies, milady,” he said, voice muffled by his mask. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

He sounded sincere but Regina didn’t drop her cold, aloof queen persona. She knew better than that. “You should be careful. There might be bandits about.”

“Bandits?” He chuckled. “I’m afraid the noise that distracted your guards was me. Not bandits.”

“Why?”

“Because it looked like you needed a reason to get those soldiers away from you so you could have some alone time. I apologize for intruding on it.”

He began to walk away when Regina stopped him. She didn’t know why, but she suddenly felt the urge to hold on to him forever. “Don’t go. I don’t mind some company. Just as long as I can invite them.”

“Is that an invitation, milady?” He tilted his head, blue eyes shining with mirth.

Regina nodded. “Will you accept?”

“Of course.” He bowed low before her. “It would be an honor.”

He straightened up and stood next to her at the window, saying nothing. Regina guessed he was waiting for her to speak so as not to be a bother. She, though, found she had nothing to say but still longed to break the silence.

At last, she found something. “Do you come to court often?”

“No. This is my first time here. The palace is beautiful.”

Regina made a noncommittal noise in response. She knew to those who wanted to live there or didn’t, the palace could look like a beautiful oasis. No one would believe she saw it as a prison.

He leaned closer. “You don’t seem too impressed with it.”

“You can leave tonight. I can’t leave. Ever.” Regina ran her hands along the stone railing. “This is just a magnificent cage to me.”
“It is a shame then.”

“That I do not like living in such luxury?”

“That you are so unhappy.” His hand inched closer to hers. “A beautiful woman like you shouldn’t be so miserable.”

Regina blushed, something she hadn’t done in years. Turning her face so he didn’t see, she tried not to betray how affected she was in her voice. “You are a flatterer.”

“I speak the truth.”

She heard it in his voice and saw it in his eyes when she looked back. He thought her beautiful but most of all, she deserved to be happy. Only Daniel had ever told her that. Fighting back tears, Regina smiled. “Thank you. I wish I knew how to escape.”

“If I could, milady, I would steal you away from here.”

Regina let out a little laugh. “I wish you could as well.”

“One day I will.”

“Don’t go making promises you can’t keep,” she warned.

He took her hands, turning her to look at him. “I promise that one day you will be free and we’ll be together.”

“Who are you?” Regina was breathless from the intensity in his gaze.

He leaned down to whisper: “A thief.”

Good chills ran up and down her spine as she watched him push his mask up enough to reveal his lips. She licked her own, wetting them before his lips met hers. He wrapped his arms around her waist as clasped her hands behind his neck. We held on to each other as if we would both float away if we let go.

The kiss ended far too soon for Regina’s liking, though he kept her in his embrace. His lips ghosted her ear. “Looks like I stole a kiss.”

“Can’t steal something that’s been given to you,” she whispered back.

He chuckled before releasing her. Lowering his mask, his entire face was again covered. “I am afraid I must leave. May I escort you back to the ballroom?”

Regina nodded, laying her hand on top of his outstretched one. They walked toward the ballroom and two servants opened the doors to let her re-enter. She glanced back at the masked stranger, swearing he was smiling under the mask. It was something in his eyes. She watched him until the doors closed again.

The next morning, she learned that Robin Hood and his Merry Men had managed to make off with some jewels and money from the royal treasury. King Leopold was outraged, demanding to know how they evaded capture. Regina sat there, listening to some poor guard stammer out an explanation but really thinking of the masked man from the night before. She smiled as she realized who was behind the mask.
A thief indeed.
Caught

“It boggles me that my black knights were unable to catch you, Thief. It seems quite easy to do.”

“Well, the same could be said of the Evil Queen.”

Regina rolled her eyes as she shifted in the seat she was tied to. “If you had let me use my magic like I wanted…”

“We’d have been caught sooner. I told you this.” Robin glared at her. “If you had just done what I had told you…”

“You are not going to blame this on me!” Regina snapped.

It was Robin’s turn to roll his eyes. “Well, this isn’t my fault either.”

“Will you two be quiet? Lawd, I never heard two souls who argued more.” The old, blind black woman watched them from a corner of her shanty, a yellow boa constrictor wrapped around her neck. It seemed as amused as the woman.

Regina narrowed her eyes while Robin chose to reason with the woman. “Mama Odie, we’re sorry. We shouldn’t have broken in.”

“No, you shouldn’t have. You could’ve just knocked! Doors open when you’re polite, you know. And I could’ve had some of my famous gumbo ready for y’all.”

“Gumbo?” Robin’s nose scrunched in confusion.

Regina resisted the urge to roll her eyes. “While I would love to try some of your gumbo, now that we’ve been caught, we need your help.”

She felt Robin stare at her but she kept her focus on Mama Odie. “You’re a well-known Witch Doctor.”

“I don’t like that title any more than I reckon you like being called the Evil Queen.” Mama Odie pointed at Regina. Her golden bangles clanged as they hit each other. “But I can help. Tell Mama Odie what’s wrong.”

Regina shot a look at Robin, who did his best to shrug. She turned back to Mama Odie. “Are you familiar with voodoo?”

Mama Odie laughed. “You know the answer, child. That’s why you’re here.”

“I am not a child,” Regina said, teeth clenched together.

“Of course not. But when you as old as me, everyone is a child.” Mama Odie pushed her face closer to Regina’s. “Now, you gonna keep stalling or tell me what’s wrong?”

“It’s my sister. Well, my half-sister. She’s out to destroy me.”

Mama Odie rubbed her chin. “So’s you want a curse to place on her?”
“No, I can do that all on my own,” Regina snapped back.

Robin leaned forward. “Mama Odie, we don’t need a spell. We have reason to believe you are in possession of a jewel that will help us.”

“Oh? And what jewel is that?”

Robin and Regina glanced at each other. This was a waste a time, just as she told Snow and Charming. Her fingers itched with her magic. She could just magic her way out of here and back to the palace, leaving the outlaw to figure his own way out. But she had promised Roland she would bring his father back safe. She was not going to fail another little boy. They were going to have to get out of this together.

“Mama Odie, I believe you know what jewel we’re talking about,” Robin said. He had that aggravating grin he wore whenever he was certain of something. The one she always wanted to kiss off…

Where did that come from?

Mama Odie smiled. “You do? Well, I’m an old woman and my memory ain’t what it used to be. Describe it for me.”

“Why are we playing stupid games? We don’t have time to waste.” Regina didn’t hide her annoyance. She didn’t care at this point. All she wanted was to get out of there. Now.

Robin didn’t share her feelings. “It would look like a giant emerald. We have reason to believe someone left to you as payment a few months back.”

“I’m afraid someone gave you bad information. No one ever gave me such a jewel.” Mama Odie shook her head. “Sorry you came all this way for nothing.”

“Then could you at least let us go?” Regina asked. She struggled against her binding for emphasis.

Mama Odie laughed. “Oh, sorry. I forgot they was there.”

With a snap of her fingers, the ropes disappeared. Regina rubbed her upper arms as circulation returned in them. Jumping from his chair, Robin crouched in front of her. “Are you hurt, milady?”

“I’m fine. You don’t need to coddle me.” She pushed Robin away and stood up. As she walked away, she tried to ignore the feeling he was watching her.

Regina approached Mama Odie. “Well, I’d thank you but there isn’t much to thank you for. So we’ll be going.”

“Regina, don’t be so rude,” Robin chided. “Perhaps we could stay a little bit.”

“Doing what? And it’s Your Majesty. Good Lord, Thief, how many times do I have to say it?” Regina snapped. Robin didn’t seem phased.

Mama Odie laughed. “You may not have found what you was looking for, but you may finally find what you refuse to see.”

“What?” Regina shook her head. “Never mind. I have no time for your riddles. Come, Thief. We need to get going. You have a son to return to.”

Robin nodded before bowing to Mama Odie. “Thank you, ma’am, for your assistance.”
The two left and Mama Odie continued to listen as they bickered all the way out of the bayou. She chuckled to herself before addressing the snake wrapping around her body. “They in so deep but they can’t see it. Not yet. But they will. And it’s gonna be good!”
Forgotten

Robin was distraught, confused and angry all at once. He had spent weeks believing he would never return to Storybrooke until he had followed Rumpelstiltskin into the town. He set out to find Regina but when he found her, she didn’t recognize him. All he got was a cool brush off as Regina continued about her day.

So he tracked down someone who would know what happened—Mary Margaret. He found her in Granny’s, rocking baby Neal. Her eyes grew wide as he approached the booth. But before she could greet him, he blurted out about Regina giving him the cold shoulder.

Mary Margaret sighed. “It’s a long story, Robin.”

“I don’t care. For Regina, I have all the time in the world.” Robin leaned forward. “Please, Mary Margaret.”

She nodded, sadness overtaking her. “She’s the Evil Queen again, Robin. Those other villains, the Queens of Darkness…they took away her memories and made her evil again like them.”

His blood ran cold as his heart skipped a beat. Breathing was difficult as he processed the information. “Did she…did she agree?”

Mary Margaret nodded and Robin’s heart stopped. “No,” he breathed.

“But she was under duress. They had Henry,” Mary Margaret explained.

Robin closed his eyes and swallowed down the disgust and fear that rose up inside him. Those monsters. “Of course. She’d do anything to keep him safe.”

Mary Margaret nodded, watching as Robin leaned back to take stock of his situation. She saw something light up his eyes and he smiled. “True love’s kiss,” he said. “Regina and I are soul mates. It’ll have to work, right?”

“Not necessarily.” Mary Margaret paused before continuing. “Back in the Enchanted Forest, David was betrothed to Princess Abigail. When I heard they were getting married, I went to the Dark One to get a potion that would let me forget about him. It worked. But then he ended up breaking the engagement to Abigail and came looking for me. He tried kissing me and it didn’t work because I had forgotten our love.”

“What happened?”

Mary Margaret smiled. “He fought for our love and I fell for him all over again.”

“So there’s hope?” Robin asked.

“Oh, Robin.” She took his hand. “There’s always hope.”
Robin set his mind to wooing Regina all over again. Or rather, wooing the Evil Queen again. He recalled how difficult their relationship was in the Enchanted Forest during the so-called missing year. Now, it was ten-fold that. When he first met her, she was already changed from loving Henry. But the spell had reverted her to how she was before becoming a mother, when she was only driven by revenge.

He didn’t care though. She was still Regina to him. And he just had to convince the Evil Queen of that. That he wasn’t going anywhere, no matter how many vile words she spat in his direction.

That was why he didn’t struggle against her magic as she held him aloft, even as it grew difficult to breathe. She glared at him, brown eyes darker than he ever saw them. “Why don’t you just take the hint, Outlaw, and leave me alone?”

“Never, Regina. I am not leaving you again, no matter what you do.” Robin struggled to say every word but he hoped they reached the part of her he was certain still remembered.

She laughed. “So you are as big of a fool as I thought.”

The Evil Queen squeezed harder and dark spots began to dance in his eyes. He knew he was going to lose consciousness and there was a chance he could die. Thoughts of Roland crossed his mind. Mary Margaret had a letter she was to mail to Marian should the worst happen. There was a chance Roland would never understand his sacrifice, but Robin knew he would die having done everything he could to bring Regina back to Mary Margaret, Henry and of course, himself.

Darkness was starting to take over but he kept his eyes trained on her. Even dressed completely in black, her hair pinned up in an elaborate do and pure hatred in her countenance, he thought she was still beautiful. “I love you,” he gasped out.

The pressure was relieved and he fell to the ground, gasping for air. He felt the Evil Queen standing over him. She crouched down. “What did you say?”

“I love you.” He pushed himself into a sitting position, staring at her. “No matter what you do, I will always love you. I told you, you have a partner. Sorry I’ve been a lousy one but I still am your partner.”

“Partner? I’d never ask for a partner.”

“You didn’t. But you still have one in me.” Robin took a chance, reaching up to cup her cheek. She didn’t flinch. “We’re a great team.”

The Evil Queen plunged her hand into his chest, fingers enclosing around his heart. She gave a squeeze and he gasped. “I’m holding your heart, Thief.”

“I’ve held yours.”

Something flickered in her eyes but it was gone in a moment. The Evil Queen squeezed tighter, causing him to double over in pain. “I could kill you right now. But I’m feeling merciful today. You promise to leave me alone and I’ll let go.”

“I can’t. I won’t leave you, Regina, until I die. And if it’s by your hand, so be it.” He met her eyes to prove he was serious.

The Evil Queen faltered again. “Why?”

“I told you. I love you.”
“Liar. Nobody loves villains.”

Robin’s arm shook as he raised it to cup her cheek. “We know you aren’t a villain. You’re not the Evil Queen. You’re Regina, a woman with a heart that’s taken a beating over the years. Who was manipulated by her mother and her tutor until she thought revenge and hatred was the only thing she had. Then she adopted a beautiful baby boy. He showed her that she was capable of so much more to the point she began repairing relationships with the people she once hunted. A woman who realizes she loves with every fiber of her being. I’ve held your heart and it is a resilient one, Regina.”

Uncertainty filled her eyes as well what looked like hope. He believed he was getting through to her as she removed her hand. So he brought his other hand up to frame her face as he knelt before her. “I chose you, Regina, and I still choose you. Now I need you to choose me instead of evil.”

She searched his eyes, no doubt looking for any lies or manipulations on his part. It broke his heart since he knew why—she was back to the person who only saw the worst in people. He didn’t look away. Not until she saw the truth.

Her eyes softened and she leaned forward. He met her halfway, kissing her with every ounce of passion and love he possessed. Magic pulsed from their lips and he knew the spell was broken. Regina’s memories were back.

They pulled away from each other and Robin was relieved to find warm chocolate eyes looking back at him. The same eyes that had haunted him for weeks in New York City, radiating the same love they did now. She cupped his cheek. “Robin…”

“Hello, milady,” he said, smiling. “I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you too.” She kissed him again, tears landing on his cheeks.

They broke the kiss again. Robin brushed her tears away as she began to laugh. “I thought…” she trailed off.

“I know.” Robin placed a finger on her lips. “But I’m back and I’m here to stay.”

He stood, helping her up as well. “Now, I believe there are a few people who are eager to see you again. Let’s go.”

Wrapping their arms around each other, Robin and Regina walked out of the forest and knew whatever awaited them, they would deal together.
He waited, hidden in the trees. With his hood up, he blended right in. None of his victims ever saw him until it was too late. That was why he was the best assassin in the Enchanted Forest.

This though was probably his most dangerous assignment. He was to assassinate the queen as she rode through the forest, sent on a fake mission by her husband.

He had been surprised when he was summoned to appear before King Leopold, certain he would finally face the gallows. But the king spoke of a queen who was dabbling in the Dark Arts and who he feared would take his life. “So, I’ve decided to take hers first,” he said.

“And you wish me to do it?”

King Leopold smiled. “They saw you are the best. And given how hard it’s been for my guards to catch you, I’m inclined to believe them.”

“I come with a steep price. Are you willing to pay?”

“Of course. I’ve directed my treasurer to give you five thousand gold coins now and five thousand once the job is done.” The king studied the assassin. “Does that suit you?”

He rubbed his chin. “It’s a fair price, I admit. But I have one demand.”

“You do?” King Leopold leaned back, amazed someone was making demands of him. “And it is?”

“I wish the land you took from my family to be returned.”

The king looked him up and down before nodding. “Fine. You kill my wife, I shall return Locksley to you. Do we have a deal, Robin Hood?”

Robin nodded. “It shall be done.”

He heard the creak of the carriage wheels and thunder of the horses’ hooves against the ground. Nocking an arrow, he aimed it high so only to spook the horses and not injure them. They were not his intended target.

The sun glinted off the gold embellishments on the black carriage. It was getting closer. Soon, this would all be finished and he could go home to Locksley again.

Robin released his arrow and it flew over the horses. Like he thought, it spooked them and the driver enough for the carriage to come to a stop. Part one was completed. Now he had to wait for the queen
to emerge to complete part two.

“What is going on? Why have we stopped?” A woman’s voice snapped from inside the carriage. She sounded like she was a miserable woman.

The driver cowered though she remained inside. “I’m sorry, Your Majesty. Something has spooked the horses. I need to calm them down before we can move again.”

“The horses?” Her voice changed, almost softer. But Robin didn’t time to reflect on it. The carriage door was opening and soon his mission would be complete. He nocked his arrow, ready to strike the Evil Queen’s heart. It would only take one—he had never missed his mark and it wasn’t going to change now.

He hesitated though as the queen emerged from her carriage. She was a tall and lithe woman who carried herself with a regal air. Her dark hair was pinned up in an elaborate braided bun, which only served to enhance her facial features. Dark eyes scanned the woods as she sought out any threats, blood red lips frowning. She wore a skin tight traveling outfit—a ruby red riding jacket over a black leather bodice over black breeches. Black boots completed her look. If Robin wasn’t going to kill her, he’d probably have some fun flirting with her.

She approached the horses, running a hand over one. “They seem fine to me. But let’s give them a minute to rest before we continue on our way. Got it?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” The driver bowed low before her.

Now was his chance. She was heading back to the carriage and was wide open. He let his arrow fly, hurtling toward the beautiful queen.

The queen spun around, catching his arrow. A hard look came to her eyes, like a wolf stalking its prey. She looked up into the trees. “Show yourself now and I might let you live.”

Robin knew it was too dangerous to do that. He had to kill her to get his money and his land. So he fired several more arrows at her. With a wave of her hand, she froze them all in midair. King Leopold had mentioned the Dark Arts but not how strong she really was. This was going to be a challenge.

“All right, so you want to do this the hard way. Fine, suit yourself. I like to have some fun.” The queen smiled as she approached the woods.

Robin tensed up, bow at the ready. All he had to do was release the arrow and it would all be over. But something kept him from it. Was it her witchcraft?

She smirked as her dark eyes scanned the treetops. “Come out, come out wherever you are.”

After some time passed, she raised her hand. Robin felt something pull at him, like a million hands were trying to grab him and take him to the queen. He tried to fight it but the branch he was on cracked, plunging him to the ground. Closing his eyes, he waited for the impact.

It never came. He opened his eyes to see the ground only inches from him. She had caught him with her magic—but why? Robin righted himself and ended up standing in front of the queen.

“You must be the infamous Robin Hood. I’ve heard it said no one’s seen your face.” She pulled down his hood. “I guess I’m the first.”

“Congratulations, Your Majesty.” He put as much venom as possible in his voice as he said her title.
Her smirk returned. “If you weren’t trying to kill me, I’d think you were handsome.”

“If you weren’t evil, I wouldn’t be trying to kill you,” he countered.

“Evil?” She frowned. “So my husband hired you. I’m not surprised.”

She walked away and Robin seized his chance. He grabbed a nearby rock and clubbed her on the back of the head. The queen crumpled down to the ground and he checked for a pulse. She still had one, so she was only unconscious. He picked her up and ran with her into the woods, knowing the driver wasn’t going to chase after him.

Most people believed the legendary Robin Hood lived in the woods, sleeping in trees. He did live in the woods, but in an abandoned cabin he had found and had fixed up. It wasn’t much but he had everything he needed: a bed, a chest, a table and chairs as well as a fireplace to keep him warm and to cook over. The cabin was by a kill he used to wash his clothes and himself.

He had brought the queen here and tied her to his bed. Robin sat in a chair, watching her. He knew he should’ve killed her already. Slit her throat, suffocated her or even shot her with his arrow. She was out cold and unable to use her magic to thwart him.

But something stopped him. He was embarrassed to admit it was her beauty. People had talked about it but this was the first time he had ever seen her. Nothing said about her did her justice. It wasn’t a surprise the king had married her. He wondered why she had married the king. Was it for power?

She moaned and he knew consciousness was returning. He didn’t have a plan from this point on but he wasn’t going to let her know that.

Her eyes fluttered open before darting around the room in panic. As they settled on him, hard look settled in them. She tried to lunge at him, but his bindings held her down. Letting out a scream, she laid back down. “So you’ve captured me. Congratulations.”

“Thank you. And before you make some grand statement about your magic, you should know I got those bindings from a sorcerer I did a favor for. They are suppressing your magic.”

“Well, you’re a clever assassin.”

“It’s why I’m the best at what I do.”

“Yet you haven’t killed me. Why?”

Robin didn’t know how to answer. He couldn’t tell her the truth—that she intrigued him too much to land the fatal blow. Instead, he smirked. “I thought we’d have a little fun first.”

She sighed and leaned back, spreading apart her legs. “Fine. Just don’t ruin the clothing. It’s too fine to be ripped to shreds. I’m certain you will fetch a good price for it at the market after you kill me.”

“What?” Robin was confused but as he realized what she meant, he frowned. “That wasn’t what I meant. I may be an assassin, but I’m not a rapist.”

“Oh. I’m just used to…never mind.” The Queen looked away. Her lips curled into a cruel, cold smile. ”Well, then, you have more honor than men who don’t kill people for money.”

"Your husband," Robin started. It was sickening to consider and she didn't force him to finish.
"You can't be raped by your husband." It sounded like she was parroting back something she had been told over and over.

He imagined her younger—a lump formed in his throat as he realized she was close in age to him. She had to have been no more than twenty when she married the king, no doubt something she had no say in. Young and inexperienced but beautiful.

She was used. She was broken. She was angry. She was hard. She wasn't evil.

"Oh God, pity," she moaned. "I would rather you kill me than look at me like that."

He undid her bindings and sat back down. She rubbed her wrists as she glared at him. "Why did you do that?"

"Have a seat." He motioned to an empty chair.

She didn't move. "Why?"

"Because I think we can work something out where everyone involved wins."

The Queen was dead.

Her body had been found by guards searching for her when she failed to show up at the palace. It appeared to be the work of the infamous Robin Hood.

The king and his daughter wore black, giving her an elaborate funeral. Princess Snow White looked as grief-stricken as her father. One figure, though, hidden in the back knew it was just an act on His Majesty's part. He wondered how long it would be before the king married another young girl whose innocence he would steal.

After the Queen was laid in the crypt, the hooded figure snuck in. He took a vial from his pouch and tipped the contents into her mouth.

She took in an audible gasp of air as color returned to her skin. Her eyes fluttered open and she smiled. "It worked. I'm free."

Robin helped her sit up. "Yes, milady, it did work. But we need to leave before someone hears us."

He handed her his pouch, which contained new clothes for her to wear. Turning around to give her some privacy, he also kept vigil for guards. It would do them little good to be caught now—she would be in danger and he'd lose everything.

She tapped him on the shoulder. They stole away, using the cover of night. Neither paused nor spoke until they were deep in the woods.

They leaned against trees and she looked at him. "What now?"

Robin Hood disappeared after the Queen's death. Gossip said royal guards found him and killed him to avenge the queen. In time, King Leopold married again, a woman not much older than his own beloved daughter. Court gossip said no one in the royal family was happy.

While Robin Hood was never seen again, a new assassin lurked in the Enchanted Forest. This one
was a woman, or at least the rumors said so. No one who encountered her ever lived long enough to confirm her gender. The people called her “the Ghost” because one person who claimed to witness one of her kills swore she looked like the late queen. People believed her ghost now haunted the forest, seeking revenge and continuing her reign of evil.

The new lord of Locksley, though, knew the truth. It wasn’t the ghost of the former queen, but the queen herself. She had taken up his job as he became a respectable nobleman as his birthright had dictated. The people of Locksley welcomed him and he proved to be a fair lord to those who called his land home.

“The Ghost” visited Locksley, though no one but its lord knew. He would walk in and find her at his table, eating. Or lounging in his bath, dark hair pinned up as she soaked her tired body. But his favorite place to find her was naked in his bed. There, he wasn’t Lord Locksley and she wasn’t the Ghost. He was just Robin and she was only Regina.

Nothing more.
Hades

Of all the gods and goddesses in Olympia, Regina was an enigma. She did not cavort with the other gods and goddesses, eschewing their presence. Many whispered it was because the dark had taken her and she could not stand to be in the light for too long. Others believed she was jealous of how beloved the others. After all, who could love the goddess of death?

It was a question Regina herself pondered every day of her existence as Queen of the Underworld. The mortals who lived in Olympia would’ve been shocked to learn she chose this duty, a choice she had come to regret. She had made it when she was young and grief-stricken. Regina had fallen in love with a mortal, a young man who raised horses. He had found her offering an apple to one of his mares and offered to teach her to ride. She had accepted and as their lessons continued, they fell in love.

One day, they rode together as he worked to tame one of his new horses. His became spooked and threw him before Regina could help him reign the beast in. He had died in her arms. She made up her mind then and there to give up her dreams of becoming the goddess of agriculture and instead asked dominion over the land of the dead. Logos, the chief god who determined everyone’s roles in Olympia, begged her to reconsider. He had warned her that the Underworld was no place for her and that she belonged in sunlight and nature. “Love will come again,” he promised her.

Regina, though, was stubborn and foolish. She had insisted and he granted her wish. But she learned within hours of her new assignment that love between an immortal and a mortal still stood no chance in death. All she could do was watch Daniel’s spirit from afar and yearn for him. Over time, she sought him out less and less as the pain began to subside. It was replaced by an overwhelming sense of loneliness and she lost hope of ever falling in love or even having companionship.

That was the real reason she avoided the other gods and goddesses. Regina watched as they fell in and out of love, throwing it away as if it were nothing. They cheated, they lied, they took what they wanted and yet the people still adored them. Yet she was the one they cursed, even more than the God of Mischief and Discord. They called her evil and a witch because she took their loved ones away. None of the mortals knew she understood their pain better than the other gods they prayed to. And none of the gods understood her or why she wasn’t as happy or optimistic as they were. So, she stayed away.

She had been Queen of the Underworld for a few eons when she felt a familiar pull. It was the urge to nurture and so she planted a little garden near her large obsidian palace. She cared for the trees and they soon yielded fruit for her. Fruit only those who belonged to the world of the dead could eat and fruit that only satisfied the pull for a little bit. When it returned, she realized what she really wanted—a child. Regina often served as a proxy mother to the child spirits but they were not corporal. She couldn’t hold them, hug them or kiss them. They also were always reunited with their real mothers in the end and forgot her. She wanted someone who wouldn’t do that. But being who she was and what everyone thought of her, she doubted anyone—mortal or immortal—would lie with her.

Brooding over the subject yet again, Regina didn’t notice she was at the edge of her realm until the sunlight hit her eyes. She shielded them as they adjusted from the murkiness of the Underworld. The forest that bordered her lands came into view and she watched as wood nymphs danced amongst the
trees. She found them to be carefree creatures and envied them. Why couldn’t she dance like that?

As she turned to head back into her dark domain, the spirit of her river called for her help. Someone had fallen in, it told her, an immortal child who could not swim. It was a river of death potent enough to defeat immortality in a grown god, let alone a child. Heart racing, Regina ran along the shore until she saw the small figure struggling against the powerful current. She dipped her hand in the water, stilling the river before having it float the child over to her. He was breathing but unconscious. Regina searched for any sign of his parents but found no one. She had no choice but to take the child with her and wait for him to regain consciousness. Or perhaps she could contact one of the other gods, though she was loathe to do that.

By the time she returned to her palace, he was feverish. She recognized it as a sickness brought on by an immortal body being so close to death. Regina sponged him with cool water for hours, waiting for his fever to break. When it did and he fell into a peaceful slumber, Regina’s shoulders slumped in relief.

The boy was young though age was heard to guess for gods. He had dark curls Regina ran her hand through as he slept, dark eyelashes fluttering with his eye movement. His skin had a darker tone that indicated he spent a lot of time in the sun. Would he miss it once he awoke in this land of shadows and darkness?

When he did awake, he revealed dark brown eyes like she had. Regina hurried to his side, asking him for his name. The boy scrunched up his face before declaring he didn’t know. He then burst into tears. She gathered him in her arms, rocking him and rubbing his back in a soothing manner.

His memory loss was concerning. It was something only the mortal spirits experience after years of dwelling in the Underworld. Why did this immortal child forget? The best she could guess was the trauma of nearly drowning. All they were able to do was wait and see if his memory returned.

During his waking hours, the boy was the sweetest child Regina had ever encountered. He obeyed every rule she set for him—especially the one forbidding him to eat anything in her garden. Were he to eat even a single berry he would be forever tied to the Underworld.

Regina found the boy brightened her dreary existence. He was smart and quickly picked up whatever she taught him. He had a connection to the trees, which made sense to her as she found him near the woods. She enjoyed caring for him and wondered if Logos sent the boy to fulfill her desire for a child.

She knew she had to start looking for his father. But each time she went to contact another god or goddess, she hesitated. She was growing too attached.

It was too good to last. The same day the boy remembered his name (Roland), Regina found Snow’s frowning face in the mirror she used to communicate with the others. Snow, the goddess of children (amongst other titles). Regina sighed. “What?”

“You can’t keep him.”

“Who?”

“Regina, I know about the child you have. His father is going mad with worry. He’s been looking everywhere.”

“Not everywhere.” Regina walked away, back to the mirror.
She heard Snow sigh. “No one thinks to look for an immortal child in the Underworld, Regina.”

“True,” Regina admitted. She sighed and turned around as she said: “Fine. Tell me who his father is so I can return him.”

But Snow was gone.

The next day, Regina made her daily trip to the outside world to fetch food for Roland. She dug out some mushrooms she knew were safe, imagining the soup she could make him when she felt something sharp press into her head. “I believe you have my son,” a low voice said.

She closed her eyes; Roland’s father had found her. Regina swallowed. “Yes. Lower your weapon and I can take you to him.”

The sharp point was removed from her head and she stood to face him. All gods and goddesses were beautiful but none of the ones Regina had encountered had ever taken her breath away until now. He was taller than her with golden hair and bright blue eyes. Muscles bulged from under the short white chiton he wore. A golden glow lit his skin but it still didn’t compare to Roland’s skin. In fact, he and Roland didn’t have much of a resemblance…

“He is my son,” he said, as if reading her mind. “He favors his mother.”

So there was a mother. “Of course,” she said.

He raised his bow again. “Tell me why you took Roland.”

“I didn’t take him. I rescued him.” The story spilled from her lips and with each word he lowered his bow.

He sighed. “I’ve warned him several times about playing too close to the river.”

“He’s an obedient boy. I am certain it was an accident.”

“Why didn’t you return him?”

“He lost his memories. They still haven’t fully returned.”

“What did you do to him?” Once again, Regina found herself staring at the wrong end of an arrow.

She sighed. “Nothing. I don’t know why his memories haven’t returned.”

“Take me to him.”

“First, tell me your name. I’m not about to let a stranger into my domain.” Regina crossed her arms, staring him down. He glared at her. “My name is Robin. I’m the God of the Forest.”

“Regina, Goddess of…”

“Death. I am aware. Now take me to my son.”

“Follow me.”

When Roland saw Robin, he scampered behind Regina and refused to have anything to do with the
man. Robin frowned, pleading with his son to just look at him. The boy refused and started to cry. She scooped him up and carried him into the other room, placing him on the bed she had made for him.

He looked up at her with teary eyes. “Will you make the strange man go away?”

“Oh, Roland.” She crouched down. “He’s your father. You just don’t remember. So he’s going to stay until you do.”

“He won’t hurt me?”

“No, he won’t. And I wouldn’t let him.” She kissed his forehead.

Regina stepped out of the room to find Robin pacing her throne room. He stopped when he saw her, a wild look in his blue eyes. “What did you do to him?”

“Nothing.” Anger surged through her. “I’m getting tired of the accusations. He has memory loss. I don’t know why. But you’re going to have to deal with it if you want your son back.”

She turned, stalking away. Pausing, she glanced over his shoulder. “Would you like a room?”

“Fine. But it better be near my son,” he said, following her.

Robin tried to help his son recover his memories by spending time with him. But he refused to let Regina anywhere near Roland when he was with him. So each attempt ended with a frantic Roland running from the god and right to the Queen of the Underworld. Each time, she wrapped him in a tight embrace and assured him everything was all right.

“You should let me be with you. It’ll calm down Roland and maybe he’ll start to actually remember you,” she suggested over and over.

Each time, Robin frowned and shook his head. “What he needs is to spend more time with me and less with you.”

Regina through up her hands. “You do things your way. When you see I’m right, you know where to find me.”

As Robin kept coaxing Roland to trust him again, Regina distracted herself with her duties as the Goddess of Death. She ushered souls into their new homes, comforting those who grieved for their old lives. Souls petitioned her for favors or reincarnation and she determined whether to grant their requests or not. And she kept tending to her garden and fruit trees.

One day, she noticed Robin observing her with a strange look in his eyes. She didn’t know what it meant but experience told her it probably wasn’t a good thing. The day after, he told her he was taking Roland on a picnic to the outside world. “Maybe he’ll remember better in the woods,” he said.

She nodded. “It sounds like a plan.”

“Would you like to come with us?”

Regina blinked a few times. “Pardon?”

Robin sighed. “You’re right. Roland trusts you more than me. So if he sees you trusting me, maybe he’ll do the same.”
“I don’t trust you.”

“Understandable. But can you at least pretend?”

She nodded. “For Roland’s sake, I can.”

Robin set up their picnic at the edge of the woods, letting her stay close enough to the entrance to the Underworld should she be needed. They watched Roland frolic amongst the trees with the nymphs, his laughter echoing around them.

She put down her goblet of wine and looked at Robin, who lounged next to her. “Thank you, for letting me come.”

“It’s I who should be thanking you. You did save my son, after all.”

“Well. I’m glad you finally realized that.”

He nodded, sitting up to hold out his hand to her. “Let’s start again. My name is Robin.”

“Regina.” She took it and he raised her hand to his lips. Regina looked away, afraid she was blushing. It was a ridiculous thing to get so flustered over. Taking a deep breath, she decided to find a safe subject. “Tell me more about Roland.”

Robin was more than happy to talk about his son, telling her all about Roland’s childhood so far. From what she could tell, it was a happy one and that Robin really loved his son. But there was one thing missing from his stories. Well, more like one person. She took a gulp of her wine and gathered her courage to ask the question. “I hope this doesn’t ruin our new start, but I was just wondering…”

“Where Roland’s mother is?” Robin finished for her. She nodded and he sighed. “I lost her.”

“Was she mortal?”

He shook his head. “A goddess like you. Goddess of animals, in fact. I met her when she was tending to some woodland creatures and fell instantly in love. Thankfully the feeling was mutual and soon, we were expecting Roland.”

“What was her name?”

“Marian.” Robin smiled. “She was so beautiful. Unfortunately, I wasn’t the only god who thought so. The God of Justice pursued her and when she spurned his advances, choosing to remain loyal to me, he flew into a rage and turned her into stone. She fell, shattering into several pieces.”

Regina winced. As the Goddess of Death, she knew the ways gods could lose their immortality and perish. That was certainly one of them. She placed her hand over Robin’s. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

He nodded in thanks. “When I found out, anger overtook me. I turned him into a pincushion with my arrows before transforming him into a tree. Logos found me curled up by where Marian had fallen, an absolute wreck. He told me to be strong for Roland and promised me I’d find love again.”

The words triggered a memory of her own, of the same promise Logos made to him. “I’m sure you will,” she said.

“What about you? How did you come to be the Goddess of Death?”
Regina took another sip of wine and told her own tale of sorrow and loss. He cupped her cheek, causing her breath to hitch. “I’m sorry for your loss as well, milady.”

“Thank you,” she said, licking her lips before berating herself for such actions. “Anyway, I asked to become the Goddess of Death instead of agriculture so I could be closer to Daniel. But over time, he forgot me. All mortal spirits forget their lives. And I just stay on, in darkness and forever cast as a villain.”

“You ought to be revered,” Robin said.

She blushed again, this time excusing herself to return to her world.

After the picnic, things changed between Robin and Regina. They were friendlier and sometimes she swore they were even flirting with each other. Once their hostilities ceased, Roland was more willing to spend time with his father, sometimes away from Regina. She always made certain to be nearby, though, just in case.

If she was honest with herself, she believed she was falling for the God of the Forest. He was kind, intelligent, funny and honorable. His presence—along with Roland’s—brightened up her dreary existence in the Underworld. Some days, she even pretended they were a proper family.

But then the doubt would creep in again. Treacherous voices whispered that he was only playing her. Whispered that Robin was only being nice to her so Roland could regain his memories and then they would leave, never to think of her again. She was evil according to all the other gods. No doubt, the voice told her, Robin thought the same.

The voice was vanquished though one day when she overheard Robin talking with someone in the mirror in her throne room. She hid behind a tapestry, recognizing Charming’s face. He frowned. “Robin, you need to get out of there. She’s evil.”

“Regina is not evil. It’s just a lie we tell ourselves to make ourselves feel better about not talking to her. She’s a good person. Kind, beautiful, smart, and yes, sometimes she mistakes. But we all have right?” Robin crossed his arms. “I’m in no danger here. Stop worrying.”

“Robin, listen to me…”

“Goodbye, Charming. I’ll talk to you when you’re more sensible.”

“When I’m more sensible?” Charming’s indignant face disappeared with a wave of Robin’s hand.

He turned from the mirror, rubbing his face. Robin straightened up when he saw Regina step out from behind the tapestry. His eyes grew wide. “How much did you hear?”

“Enough.” She stepped closer and, throwing caution to the wind, crashed her lips against his.

Robin returned the kiss with as much passion as she had. He ran a hand through her hair as she wrapped her arms around his neck. They broke for air, foreheads resting together. Robin chuckled. “Who knew the Queen of the Dead was such a good kisser.”

“Flatterer.”

“Guilty as charged.” A wicked look crossed his face. “What are you going to do to punish me?”
Regina smiled, pulling him by the clasps on his chiton. “Oh, I think I can think of something.”

From that moment on, Robin shared Regina’s quarters and her bed. She knew they were playing a dangerous game. Every day, Roland regained more of his memories and started to recognize his father. Robin would need to go soon, back to his duties fulltime. Besides, he and Roland didn’t belong here in the Underworld. They belonged to the woods and sunshine.

These depressing thoughts haunted her even as she lay in his arms. He dozed next to her, spent but sated. She rolled over to face him, to memorize every line of his face. These were the best times she had experienced since Daniel and she wanted to remember every moment of them before they were gone.

“You’re staring. What’s wrong?” he muttered without opening his eyes.

She rested her head in the crook of his neck. “You need to go.”

Robin opened an eye. “Are you throwing me out of your bed, milady?”

“Of course not.” But there was no humor in her voice like in his. “But you and I both know you need to leave soon, to go back up there.”

“I could always refuse.”

Regina shook her head. “You know you can’t. Not without serious repercussions that I don’t want either you or Roland to pay on my account.”

“You’re worth it, Regina. I’d rather face the wrath of Logos than live apart from you.” He tilted her head up, peppering every inch of it with kisses. “I love you.”

“Robin…”

“And,” he continued, “I know you can’t look me in the eyes and say you don’t love me in return.”

She stared into his blue eyes, the love in them overwhelming. Looking away, she shook her head. “I can’t love you. I know I’m supposed to be alone.”

“You’re not. It’s just a defense you’ve built up over the years to prevent you from being hurt. But I’m not going to hurt you.”

Regina slipped away from him and out of her bed. She held her discarded chiton close to her body. “I know you mean that, Robin. But you are going to hurt me. You need to go back to your life. And I don’t think I’m part of that.”

He protested but she left the room, unable to be near him anymore. Not when tears were threatening to fall. She would not let him see her cry. It would only convince him to continue on his foolhardy plan to remain here.

The next day, Regina took Roland for one last walk in the Underworld to say her goodbyes. He was confused. “But I’ll be able to see you again, right?”

“I don’t know, darling.”
“Papa loves you, though. So you’ll be my new mother.” Roland stopped looking up at her with his beautiful brown eyes.

She wanted to kiss his brow and tell him that she would be his mother. But she wasn’t going to lie to this sweet child. “I don’t think so, Roland. I’m sorry.”

He hung his head, silent as they returned to her palace. As they drew closer, she spotted someone in her garden. Roland pointed. “Look! It’s Papa.”

Indeed, Robin was standing in her garden. Regina frowned, wondering what he was doing there. She watched as he raised his hand to pluck an apple from one of her trees. He cleaned it on his garment and a cold feeling swept over her. She had warned him that if he ate her fruit, he’d be trapped in the Underworld. He wouldn’t do anything so foolish, would he?

She picked up Roland in order to race to Robin, to stop him. But she wasn’t fast enough. His teeth sunk into the apple and she watched as he chewed then swallowed. He was able to take a few more bites before she managed to snatch the apple away from him. “What are you doing?” she snapped.

“Making sure I can’t leave you. I’m tied to this world now, just like you.” He cupped her face, rubbing his thumb across her cheek.

In her arms, Roland grew excited. “We can stay? And Regina can be my new mother?”

“No,” Regina said. “No, Logos will never stand for this. He’ll punish all of us.”

“I don’t punish people for falling in love and following their hearts, Regina.” Logos’ voice came from behind her. “Even if they do something stupid in the process.”

She turned as Robin’s arm snaked around her waist, drawing her closer. Logos had taken on the appearance of an older man, with white hair and a white beard. His light eyes though spoke of eternal youth as did his smile.

Behind her, Robin stood up straighter. “I don’t regret my actions, sir.”

Logos waved him off. “I didn’t think you would. But it does complicate things a bit.”

Regina’s heart hammered in her chest. “What happens now?”

“Well, my dear, you’ve been right in the fact that Robin needs to return to his duties as God of the Forest. And no,” he said as Robin opened his mouth. “I won’t let you abdicate your duties.”


“Yes, well, Regina stopped you before you could be completely bound here. So you’ll be able to spend six months as the God of the Forest. But as the sun sets on the autumnal equinox, you will feel the pull to return here. You will do so and take your place as King of the Underworld, next to Regina, for the other six months.”

Her heart stopped. She was able to stay with Robin. “Truly?” she whispered.

Logos nodded, stepping closer to her. He lowered his voice. “I told you that you would found love again. You decided to wait a bit longer than I intended, but you found each other.”

Regina smiled, kissing his cheek. “Thank you.”
So it was that for six months of the year, Robin and Roland lived in the Underworld with Regina. The spirits were glad to see their queen so happy and loved. Regina was happy not to be so alone any more. And as time went on, she found her greatest wish granted when she gave birth to her and Robin’s daughter.

During his time in the Underworld, the trees shed their leaves and were considered dead as the weather grew colder. When he returned at the vernal equinox, their leaves began to bud and then burst forth in their greenery. Life returned to the woods and Roland once again frolicked with the nymphs. He was sometimes joined by his sister, Rhea, when she came up to visit from the Underworld. She was a beautiful child who had her mother’s dark curls and personality but her father’s blue eyes and smile. Regina and Robin would lounge on the banks of her river, watching their children at play.

He pressed a kiss to the side of her head. “Well, my queen, I do believe we shall be happy forever.”

“I believe, my king, you are correct.” She smiled before kissing him again.
“Archery”

“I hope you don’t mind that Henry’s asked Robin to teach him archery rather than you,” Regina told Mary Margaret as they had breakfast in Granny’s.

It had somehow become a weekly tradition. Both women would meet and spend an hour just catching up. Regina didn’t want to admit it, but it felt nice. Like it was further proof she was no longer a villain if Snow White was willing to treat her like a friend.

Mary Margaret smiled as she tried to keep Neal from putting everything in his mouth. “No, of course not. I understand why he asked Robin.”

“You do?”

“Of course. He wants to spend some quality time with his future stepfather.”

Regina’s mouth fell open as she shook her head. “Robin and I haven’t discussed marriage yet.”

“I know, but we all know it’s where you are heading toward. It’s just a matter of time.”

“We all? Everyone is speculating on my love life?” Regina raised an eyebrow.

Mary Margaret shook her head. “That’s not what I meant and you know it. You’re just avoiding the topic.”

“For a reason,” Regina said, giving her stepdaughter a pointed look. Mary Margaret held up her arms in a placating manner. So Regina relaxed as she took a sip of her coffee. “So, is there anything besides my love life that you would like to discuss?”

“Actually, yes.” Mary Margaret reached into her bag and pulled out a stack of papers, dropping them on the table. “What are these and how do I fill them out?”

Regina thumbed through them, smiling as she recognized the forms. “Oh, these. These are fun.”

“And by fun you mean…?”

“Writing lots of tedious answers drawn from several different reports and taking several days, if you don’t pull any late nights.”

Mary Margaret groaned, pulling the fork from her toddler son’s hand. “Great. I hope David and Neal don’t mind being left alone for a while.”

“If you want, I can give you a hand. I’m sure between the two of us, we can eliminate the need for a few of those late nights.”

“Thank you, Regina.” Mary Margaret’s shoulders sagged in relief. “That’ll really help.”

The bells above Granny’s door tinkled and Regina heard Robin’s voice. “You’re really improving, Henry. Just keep practicing and you’ll be good enough to be a Merry Man.”

“Really? I could be a Merry Man? Cool,” Henry said as Mary Margaret shot an amused look at
For her part, Regina turned to her son with a frown. “You are too young to be a Merry Man.”

“Come on, Mom,” Henry said. “I’m a teenager now.”

“Don’t remind me.” Regina shuddered. “But that doesn’t mean you can just go up and live in the forest.”

Robin placed his hand on Henry’s shoulder. “While I think your son will be a great addition to my men, I do think it’s not yet time.”

Henry sulked as Regina smiled. “Good. Now, are you hungry, Henry?”

“No, I’m good.” His stomach rumbled, though, and he clutched it as he grew sheepish. “Okay, maybe I’m a little hungry.”

Regina pulled out some money. “Go order something. I don’t want your other mother to give me grief about sending you home hungry.”

Henry took the money, crumpling up the bills as she ran toward the counter. The three adults watched him, amused, before Regina turned to Robin. “He didn’t give you any trouble?”

“Henry? Of course not!” Robin scoffed. “You and Emma have raised a polite young man.”

“Thank you. Though he’s heading into those troublesome teen years.”

“Henry will be fine, Regina. He has a good head on his shoulders.” Mary Margaret smiled before adding: “As well as the heart of the truest believer.”

Regina scooted over to make room for Robin to sit next to her. He took her hand. “And David, Killian and I will make sure he stays on the right track.”

“David and you, yes. I’m not so sure about Hook,” Regina said.

Henry returned with his breakfast, sitting down next to his grandmother as he gave Regina back her change. She took it with a smile. “So, Henry, tell me about your lessons.”

“They’re amazing. But rather than tell you about them…” He got a sly look in his eyes that put his mother into a defensive mode. “Well don’t you come and take some with me?”

Regina shook her head. “I’m fine. I’ll leave the archery to Robin and Mary Margaret.”

“Come on. It’ll be a lot of fun. And you should know how to fight with something that isn’t your magic. You know, just in case.”

She crossed her arms. “I’ll have you know I’m an expert swordswoman. Ask your grandmother.”

“She is,” Mary Margaret confirmed. She then turned to Regina. “But maybe some archery lessons wouldn’t be too bad. At the very least, they could be a bonding experience.”

Regina glanced between her son and her boyfriend, sighing. “Fine. One lesson.”

One early morning, Regina rose with her son to join him down in the community center where
Robin had set up a target practice area since January in Maine was too cold for them do so outside. She looked around. “So there’s nothing breakable nearby?”

“No. Frederick and I moved everything before Henry’s first lesson in here.” Robin approached her, smiling. “The only thing you can hurt are the walls. Or the ceiling, like your son.”

She looked up at the tiled ceiling. “How did he do that?”

“No! Please, not the story,” Henry pleaded, coming to stand next to his mother.

“As you wish, Henry.” Robin nodded. But as Regina walked by, he whispered: “I’ll tell you later.”

She smiled as Henry handed her a bow. “So, what now?”

“Do you want to or shall I?” Robin asked Henry.

He thought about it before pointing to Robin with a sly smile. “I think you should do it.”

Robin nodded before looking back to Regina. “If that’s okay with you?”

“I thought I was taking a lesson with Henry, so I was expecting you to teach me.” Regina frowned. “So is Henry going to join me?”

“Not yet, Mom. I’m a bit more advanced than you,” Henry said.

“Not by much,” Regina muttered.

Robin chuckled as he started to help her assume the proper stance. She had to admit she enjoyed being so close to him. Even though his motions had nothing erotic to them, his mere touch made her grow hot. She swallowed, trying to remain composed.

“Okay, now keep both eyes open. You need to focus on your target.” Robin’s warm breath tickled the back of her neck.

The only thing she could focus on was him and his nearness. She calmed her breathing and followed his instructions to release her first arrow. It flew past the target and bounced off the padding on the wall. She frowned. “Damn.”

“Don’t worry. That’s why we have the padding.” Robin rubbed her shoulder. “Let’s just try again.”

“Or maybe we should call it quits now before I do some serious damage,” Regina said.

Robin and Henry shook their heads. “You can’t give up now, Mom. Just think of the example you’re setting,” Henry said.

She shot him a look. “Oh, you’re good.”

“So that means you’ll keep it up?” He beamed.

Regina sighed. “Yes, it does.”

“Excellent. Now let’s resume the posture I showed you…” Robin guided her again and she knew this was going to be a long session.
Several hours later, Regina had at least started hitting the targets. Hitting the center still seemed to be an impossible task, but she knew she was getting tired. “I give. I need a nap. And maybe some aspirin.”

“I think we need to let your mother rest,” Robin said to Henry. “Your turn.”

“Okay, I’ll go get my stuff.” Henry ran off, leaving Robin and Regina alone for a few minutes.

Robin stood behind her, rubbing her shoulders. She relaxed against him, everything going limp. “Oh, that feels good.”

“I can tell.” He leaned closer to whisper: “I can give you a more…thorough…one tonight.”

She tilted her head back to look him in the eyes as she smiled coyly. “Is that a promise?”

“Absolutely, milady.”

“Are you two going to flirt all day or am I going to get my instructor back?” Henry’s teasing tone broke into their moment.

Regina shot a look at her son. “Fine. I’ll just head back home and have a nice soak in the tub.”

“No!” Robin and Henry shouted, causing her to jump.

She narrowed her eyes, staring down her son and boyfriend. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” Henry said, too quickly for her liking. “I just want you to watch me. Please, Mom?”

Regina was still suspicious, but she couldn’t deny Henry this. She sighed. “Fine. I’ll go sit over on that bench.”

“Thanks, Mom.” Henry followed Robin over to the target area as she took a seat on the rather uncomfortable bench.

Despite the ache in her bones and the hardness of the bench, Regina found herself nodding off. She closed her eyes for only a few minutes. At least, that’s what she thought.

“Regina? You have to wake up now.” Robin’s voice was low in her ear. She was also being shaken.

Opening her eyes, Robin’s face came into focus. He smiled. “It’s time to go. We’ve inconvenienced Frederick long enough.”

“Oh. Right.” She looked up at Henry. “Sorry for dozing off. I did want to see you.”

“That’s okay, Mom. Maybe another time,” he said.

Robin held out his hand to her. “Come on. Let’s get you down to the showers.”

“I’d rather take a bath in my own tub.”

“You’ll feel better after just a blast under the showers. I promise.” He wiggled his fingers. “Come on.”

She sighed but took his hand, letting him help her stand up. Henry led the way down to the locker rooms, where they parted ways. “Only a few minutes,” she said.
They nodded and she slipped inside. It was a nice locker room, she decided. Clean and well-lit. She would have to compliment Frederick on its upkeep when she was done.

Regina shed her clothes and stepped into the shower, letting the lukewarm water wash over her. She sighed, feeling relieved to get the grime of the day off her. Soap and shampoo would’ve been better but she was still planning on a warm bubble bath later. Maybe with a glass of wine and Robin…

She shook her head of those thoughts. Now was not the time to go there. She needed to get out, get dressed and go home. Maybe stop to get something to eat on their way there because she certainly wasn’t cooking tonight.

Turning off the water, she stepped out of the shower and dried off with a towel the center kept nearby. Hurrying back to where she left her clothes, she stopped. Her jeans and shirt were gone. Instead, a black dress hung by the lockers.

Regina looked around but there was nobody else there. The dress was for her and it meant either Henry or Robin had dropped it off while she was in the shower. She knew she should’ve been mad at that idea but for now, she was too confused as to why she needed a nice black dress.


“I think so. But someone seems to have taken my clothes.”

He chuckled. “That dress is for you.”

“Do I want to know why?”

“Just put it on. Henry and I will be out here waiting.” The door creaked closed as Regina chuckled.

She slid into the black dress and located the stockings and shoes her boys had packed for her as well. They had forgotten her brush but she had one in her purse. It was a struggle with some knots in her hair but soon it was perfect.

Outside, Henry and Robin both waited for her. They were wearing suits and Regina was starting to get really suspicious. She narrowed her eyes at them. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“You’ll see.” Robin placed his hands on her arms, looking her in the eyes. “Do you trust me?”

“What a silly question. Of course.”

“Good. Henry, the blindfold, please.”

“Blindfold? What is going on?”

Robin covered her eyes, tying the blindfold tight. “Does that hurt?”

“No.”

“Good. Can you see out?”

“No.”

“Even better. Henry, you have the bags?”
“Yes. You going to lead Mom?”

“Lead me where? Off a cliff?”

“Regina, I thought you trusted me?”

“I do.”

“Would I walk you off a cliff?”

“No.”

“Good.” He took her hands. “Follow me.”

She took a few steps forward, letting Robin guide her. He told her everything they were doing, from climbing steps to getting in the car. “Wait, who is driving?”

Henry’s voice came from behind her. “Robin. He got his license the other day.”

“Surprise,” Robin said, his voice coming from next to her.

Regina pressed her lips together as she grabbed onto the door. “You couldn’t have told me sooner?”

“I like surprising you.”

She leaned back, admitting to herself that he was a good driver. He wasn’t speeding and he seemed to obey all the traffic laws. Of course, it was hard to gauge with her eyes covered.

The car came to a stop and she heard him put it in park. “Okay, Regina, we’re here. Just sit tight and I’ll help you out.”

“Where are we?” she asked as the car door opened.

He chuckled as he took her hands to help her. “That would ruin the surprise.”

“Of course it would,” she deadpanned. She followed him as he guided her up a few more steps and into someplace very quiet.

Too quiet…

No…

“SURPRISE!” The blindfold was removed and Regina saw Granny’s was full of people. A giant cake sat in front of her, lit up with several candles that illuminated the writing on the vanilla frosting: HAPPY BIRTHDAY REGINA

She blinked a few times before turning to a smiling Robin. “Did you do this?”

“I wish I could say yes, but the credit goes to Henry.” He motioned to the teenage boy now standing next to her.

Henry beamed as he engulfed her in a hug. “You hardly celebrate your birthday. I wanted to change that and so did Robin. Everyone helped.”

“Including me!” A young voice piped up and Regina pulled away to find Roland standing by his father. He held a present wrapped in red paper with a lot of scotch tape on it and had a large smile on
his face as he held it out to her. “I wrapped this myself.”

Regina looked up, making eye contact with Marian. She nodded and Regina smiled, crouching down to look Roland in the eyes. “You did an amazing job. Thank you.”

“Come on, Mom. Let’s go cut the cake,” Henry said.

Roland’s eyes lit up. “Cake!”

Taking his hand, Regina wrapped her hand around Henry’s shoulders. Robin rested his hand on the small of her back and she glanced up at him, smiling. “I love you.”

He leaned down, kissing her as everyone started to sing. This was her best birthday ever.
Hope

Regina sat in her vault, books scattered around her. None held the answers to unfreezing Marian. She buried her face in her hands, trying not to scream. It was hopeless. She was letting down Robin and Roland and it killed her.

She stood, trying to walk out her frustrations. As she glanced over the books she had yet to check, she found Henry’s storybook sitting on a shelf. Regina pulled it out, flipping through it. She stopped at page twenty-three, showing her the night she ran from Robin and the tavern. How would life have been different had she gone in?

It did little to muse on that now. She had more pressing matters to attend to. Like unfreezing her soulmate’s wife. Why must her life be so complicated?

Putting the book back, she pulled out a thin book next to it. It might have something that could help her. At least, she hoped it did as she flipped through the pages.

Regina stopped as she came upon something promising. A potion that could counteract dark spells. Perhaps it could work against the Snow Queen’s magic? Hope filled her; perhaps she wouldn’t let Robin and Roland down after all.

She pulled out the ingredients needed for the potion, setting up her equipment to brew it. Dicing, mixing, heating—these were things she could do to feel like she was making progress. Regina watched as the potion bubbled, anxious to test the results.

Looking in the cauldron, she frowned. She didn’t think it should be bubbling so much. Turning down the flame, Regina checked the book to make sure she had done everything right. She missed how the cauldron began to shake and liquid splash over, hitting the flames. They danced higher, scorching the pot. By the time Regina turned back, she realized there was nothing she could do but take cover. It was going to blow.

Regina miscalculated and didn’t find cover in time. The force of the explosion propelled her forward and a sharp pain exploded in her head as she landed on the stone floor. Spots danced before her eyes before the black swallowed her. Her last thoughts were of Robin…

Birds chirped above her and she felt the warm sunshine on her face. Regina squinted her eyes closed tighter, confused. Had the explosion blown a hole in her vault’s roof? She didn’t think it would’ve been that big.

Groaning, Regina decided it was best to open her eyes and determine how bad the situation was herself. She blinked a few times but every time, she saw nothing but trees. Turning her head, she realized she was in a forest, not a vault. Nothing felt broken, so she doubted she had been catapulted out of her vault. So what had happened?

She sat up and tried to take stock of where she was. The woods looked like every other forest she had ever been in: full of trees with green leaves that filtered the sunlight down on the grassy ground. But it told her she couldn’t be in Storybrooke, where the Snow Queen made sure it was even colder than the usual winters in Maine. So where was she?
Childish laughter echoed through the trees and she tried to figure out where it was coming from. Looking over her shoulders, she saw the tiny figures running amongst the trees. A young boy, about ten, led the back. He had dark hair that flopped into his brown eyes and his skin had a tan from being out in the sun.

On his heels was a young girl, not much older than Roland. She had dark blonde hair that was braided in two plaits. Brown eyes and similar facial features indicated that she was related to the boy she chased. She laughed as she closed the gap between herself and him.

Their clothes showed they were peasant children but with parents who made sure they were well-clothed. His shirt and breeches were not ratty and her linen dress was well made. Both were barefoot, but what child didn’t like running barefoot on such a beautiful day? She remembered Henry at their ages doing the same in the backyard.

“I’m going to catch you, Henry!” the girl shouted. Regina straightened up to hear his name. She believed she was back in the Enchanted Forest somehow and Henry was a common name there, but it seemed strange that she would see a boy with it.

The boy—Henry—glanced over his shoulder. “No, you’re not, Hope. I’m still bigger than you.”

“But I’m faster!” Hope burst forward, leaping in the air. She landed on her brother, pushing him to the ground. He ended with his back on the ground as she sat on his stomach, triumphant. “Ha! Got you!”

“No fair. You tackled me.” Henry was panting.

Hope laughed. “I still won.”

“Not yet. We have to get back to camp.” Another boy ran up to them. “You know the rules, Hope.”

The children circled around Henry and Hope, ignoring her. She reached out, trying to get one to talk with her. Her hand passed right through the young boy closest to her. They couldn’t see her. She was just a witness to whatever this was.

Everyone froze as hoof beats grew louder. Henry grabbed his sister’s hand as he told the others to hide. Children dived behind trees and bushes, silent. Henry first hid Hope behind a shrub, motioning her to be quiet, before he darted behind a tree. Just like that, Regina was the only one in the clearing. Not that anyone could see her though.

A black stallion broke through the trees and its hooded rider reined him in. Regina recognized him even though his face was obscured—this was Robin. She watched him dismount and lower his hood as blue eyes scanned the clearing. For a moment, she thought he would see her but his eyes darted right past her. He looked the same, though with a proper beard of the scruff he preferred.

Robin nodded before letting out a low whistle. Someone—she believed Henry—answered with a low one and Robin let out two quick whistles. It was an all-clear signal, she realized as the children emerged from their hiding places and swarmed Robin.

Hope popped up from behind the shrub and raced toward Robin, arms outstretched. She smiled as she called out: “Papa!”

Regina’s heart clenched as Robin swung the girl up toward the sky. Hope giggled as he let her fall a bit, catching her again. She wrapped her arms around his neck and rubbed noses with him. “I missed you, Papa.”
“I missed you too. Were you a good girl for Mama?” he asked. Hope nodded and Robin narrowed his eyes. “You did all your chores?”

“She did, Papa, as did I. That’s why Mama said we could play.” Henry stepped forward, looking at his father.

Robin nodded, shifting Hope to his hip so he could pull Henry in for a hug. “Good lad.”

“Robin, do you have any stories?” a young boy asked. The other children echoed the question.

Chuckling, he nodded. “But I’ll tell them back at camp.”

The children cheered before taking off, racing past Regina. Robin watched them go as Hope held onto him. She looked at him with her big brown eyes. “Can I ride with you?”

“Of course.” Robin turned to Henry. “How about you?”

Henry nodded. Robin motioned toward the horse. “Then you mount Rocinthe first. I’ll put Hope in front of you.”

Once his children were settled, Robin mounted behind them. He pressed the horse forward and the stallion trotted away. Regina was once again alone.

With the woods silent, she tried to make sense of what she had seen. The explosion had somehow sent her back to the Enchanted Forest, but to a time where Marian hadn’t died and had more children with Robin.

She frowned. That seemed wrong. While a common name, she didn’t know any reason why Robin and Marian would name their son Henry. Of course, she didn’t know much about Marian. Maybe the name held some significance for her as well. But then there was the fact his horse shared a name with Regina’s own beloved one…

The sounds of conversation startled Regina and she looked around to find she was now in the center of a tiny village. Tents surrounded a clearing which served as a town square, judging by the people gathered there. A well sat in the middle and several women stood around it, talking. When looked toward the sky, she found several houses built into the trees. Did Robin and his family live in one?

Robin entered as several Merry Men darted forward to greet him. Little John took charge of the horse as Friar Tuck helped Hope and Henry dismount. “Welcome home, Robin,” Little John said.

“Good to see you back in one piece,” Alan-a-Dale added.

“Your faith in me is astounding.” Laughing, Robin dismounted. He patted the saddlebags. “See these supplies are distributed amongst the people.”

Alan and Tuck saw to the saddlebags as Robin stepped forward, searching the crowd. He frowned. “Where is my wife?”

The crowd parted and Regina prepared herself to see Marian emerge. Instead, she saw herself step out of the crowd. This version of herself was wearing a beige shirt paired with brown breeches and a brown leather vest. Her hair was twisted up in a bun and she carried a baby girl—perhaps six months—on her hip. That Regina had the other hand on her free hip and she stared at Robin with an exasperate look. “I have a name.”

He cupped her cheek before kissing her. Her free hand went from her to grabbing his arm. The baby squirmed against her mother’s hold but Regina was not too lost in her passion and she tightened her grip on the girl.

Was this a dream? Or a nightmare, sent to her to torment her over not choosing Robin all those years ago? To show her that she could’ve been in love and very happy, with three beautiful children? Everything she ever wanted was right there in front of her. And she had been too afraid to take it.

They broke apart and Robin turned his attention to the baby, taking her from her mother’s arms. He kissed her forehead as he bounced her, eliciting a laugh from the baby. “You have a beautiful name too, Honor,” he told her.

Regina raised an eyebrow. In this—timeline? Universe? Life?—they gave their children all “H” names? She didn’t think they would be so gimmicky. But as she thought about it, the names all had special meaning to them—Henry, after her father; Hope, the very thing Tinkerbell promised her; and Honor, the thing Robin prided himself on. So they were special…but still gimmicky.

Everything became a blur and Regina closed her eyes to fight off the nausea crashing down on her. When her stomach calmed, she opened her eyes. She was now standing in one of the treehouses. Night had fallen and several lanterns lit up the house.

Robin sat in a large wooden chair, rocking Honor as the baby tried to fight off sleep. At his feet, Hope played with a doll. Henry dried off the dishes the other Regina washed. It was a sweet domestic scene that further added to the ache in her heart. Why was she being tormented like this?

Glancing down at Hope, Robin smiled. “Would my girls like to hear a story?”

“Yes, Papa!” Hope turned around to face her father, resting her doll on her lap to also face Robin.

“What story do you want to hear?”

“The one about the princess and the thief!” Hope exclaimed.

Robin laughed. “You’ve heard that one so many times, I believe you can tell it to me!”

“But I love it. Please, Papa.” Hope folded her hands and gave him puppy dog eyes.

“Whatever you want.” Robin cleared his throat. “Once upon a time, there was a beautiful princess. She was kind, smart and loved horses. While riding, she met a handsome young man and they fell in love. But her mother was a cruel woman who wanted her daughter to marry the widowed king. So she killed her daughter’s love, forcing the princess to accept the king’s offer of marriage.

“One night, before her wedding, the princess made a wish on a star. She wanted to be happy. Her wish was answered by a fairy, who offered to help her find her soul mate. The princess agreed and the next night, the fairy used pixie dust. It led the two to a tavern in a nearby town. The fairy left the princess outside the door, telling her that her soul mate was inside.”

Regina knew this story. There was some liberties taken, but it was her story. Up to the part where she had to make a choice—go inside or run away. She had chosen to run away. But what did this Regina do?
“The princess took a deep breath and opened the door,” Robin continued. “She was dressed in a simple but still elegant gown and everyone stopped to look at her. Including the thief who did not know he was glowing in pixie dust, telling the princess he was her soul mate. All he knew was that she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen and she was looking right at him.

“He walked over to her and asked her to dance, overjoyed when she accepted. They spent the night dancing, talking and laughing. As the sun began to rise, he gathered his courage and kissed her. With the tavern set to close, he asked her to come with him. The princess hesitated but remembering the unhappy life that awaited her at the castle, she first confessed her true identity to the thief. But he didn’t care, asking her again if she wanted to go with him. She agreed.

“When the servants failed to find the princess in her room, a search party was sent out. They were able to track her to the tavern, where people recalled her with the thief. But after that, no one was able to find them. The king and the princess’ mother did their best to try and find them, but after several weeks, the search was called off. The princess and the thief were nowhere to be found.”

Hope scooted closer to her father, eyes wide. “Where did they go, Papa?”

“The thief had long made his home in the woods and knew it well. He took the princess there and they moved about until they were certain the king was no longer looking for them. By this time, she was as accustomed to the woods as he. They made their home in the trees and they lived happily ever after.”

The other Regina stepped forward. “All right, Hope. You’ve had your story. Go wash up and get ready for bed.”

Hope nodded and ran up the wooden steps to the treehouse’s second level. Robin placed Hope in a crib by a large bed Regina assumed was their marital bed. Meanwhile, Henry watched his sister go up the stairs and shook his head. “She still hasn’t figure out that you two are the princess and the thief.”

“Says the boy who only figured it out last year.” Regina ruffled her son’s hair. “Now, you go clean up and get ready for bed. I’ll be up in a few minutes.”

“I want Papa!” Hope’s voice wafted down the stairs. Robin chuckled and began climbing the stairs, Henry on his heels.

Time sped up until Robin came back downstairs. He sat next to his Regina on the bed, running a hand through his hair. “We’re going to have to tell Henry the true story soon.”

“I know. He’s gotten so big.” She sighed, rubbing Robin’s back. “It seems like just yesterday he was a babe sleeping in that crib.”

She motioned to the crib where Honor slept on. Robin smiled. “How time flies when you’re busy being happy.”

He kissed her before pulling away. “But still, Henry is ten. In two years, he’ll be old enough to begin trading and soon be going out on missions. He needs to know how dangerous it is for us.”

“It’s been years, Robin. King Leopold certainly has moved on. And I banished my mother to another world before that. No one has any reason to look for us.”

Robin sighed. “You would think. But even on this mission, I saw the reward posters. They’ve upped it.”
“Why? I’m not that important.”

“I beg to differ.” Robin pulled her closer to him. “You’re very important to me. And to our friends and especially our children.”

She smiled, resting her head on his shoulder. “I missed you. I always worry when you go out on missions.”

“I know, but I have to. It wouldn’t be right to ask the others to go on them and never go out myself. You know that.”

“Of course, but still… I’m always afraid this mission is the one that they’ll find you and kill you for treason.”

He cupped her face. “But I would die knowing you and the children were safe. I’d never reveal your location.”

“I know, Robin. I just don’t know what I would do without you.” She laid her head against his shoulder. “I don’t know how I would go on.”

“You would. You’re a strong woman, Regina. And I know if something were to happen to me, you’d raise our children and lead our village.” He tilted her head up and kissed her, pulling her until they were reclining on the bed.

Everything dissolved into blackness once more. Regina felt as if she was falling as a beeping noise echoed through the emptiness. She tried to find the source but all she saw was nothing.

“Mom? Mom, are you waking up?” Henry’s—her Henry—voice echoed with the beeping noise. She fought her way toward the sound as a white light engulfed her.

She opened her eyes and closed them again. The white light was harsher. “It’s okay, Regina,” Whale’s voice said. “Try opening your eyes again. Blink a few times to try and adjust them, okay?”

Regina did as he instructed and his face come into focus. He smiled. “Welcome back, Regina.”

She was confused. Did they know she had gone to that other time? How long had she been gone then? “Where am I?”

“There was an accident, an explosion. You’re in the hospital,” Whale said. “You’ve been out for a couple days, Regina. I need to do some tests.”

Whale guided her through some basic tests and nodded. “You’re responding normally. I’m going to keep you here for one more night, just for observation. But I think I can send you home tomorrow.”

“Now, there are some people anxious to see you.” Whale stepped over to the door and opened it. Henry tumbled in, catching himself before he hit the floor. The doctor smiled. “I’ll leave you guys alone.”

Henry rushed to his mother’s side. “Mom, are you okay? I was so worried.”

“I’m fine. Just a little accident, that’s all.” She laid her hand on his cheek, ignoring all the tubes running around her. “Sorry to worry you.”

“I’m just glad you’re okay.” Henry glanced at the door. “The others want to say something. Are you
“up for it?”

Regina sat up a bit and sighed. “I guess so. I wish I had a hairbrush.”

“I’ll bring you some things from home tomorrow,” Henry said as he opened the door. He looked out. “She said you can come in.”

Mary Margaret led the group into her room, coming to stand by Regina’s bedside. She peppered her with different questions as David tries to convince his wife that Regina needed her rest. Emma just stood against the doorframe, one arm around Henry’s shoulders, watching until they saw how tired Regina was getting. At that point, Emma helped her father usher Mary Margaret out while Henry said his goodbyes.

Regina fell back asleep and awoke a few hours later when she felt as if she was being watched. She sighed and rolled over without opening her eyes. “Aren’t you supposed to be with Emma? I’ll see you in the morning, Henry.”

“I’m not Henry. To my knowledge, he is with Emma.”

She opened her eyes, finding Robin sitting next to her bed in the darkened room. His elbows rested on his knees as he was hunched over, watching her with a somber look. “I’m glad you’re finally awake,” he said.

“What are you doing here?”

“Checking on you.” Regina tried to sit up but he placed a hand on her shoulder, applying enough pleasure to only keep her from rising. He frowned. “You need your rest.”

“And you need to stay away from me so you can fall in love with your wife. We’ve discussed this.” Regina frowned.

“Nearly blowing yourself up can’t be ignored.”

She glared at him. “I didn’t do it on purpose.”

“I know, Regina.” He took her hand. “But it scared me nonetheless.”

“Robin…”

“I found you, Regina,” he continued, grabbing at his hair. “I heard the explosion and traced it to your vault. My heart stopped when I saw you unconscious on the ground and it didn’t start again until I found your pulse. I thought I had lost you.”

He cupped her cheek. “I know what you’ve told me and it does seem like the only option. But I don’t think I’ll ever stop loving you.”

Tears ran down her face as she remembered the—dream? Vision?—of her life had she chosen Robin. Now, he was choosing her. She tried to keep her voice steady as she asked: “What do we do about Marian? I can’t find any other way to cure. My last hope literally blew up in my face.”

“We’ll figure this out together.” He took her hand, careful of the tubes. “And if we have to defeat the Snow Queen to save her, we’ll do it together.”

She smiled and closed her eyes again, comforted by his presence next to her. As she drifted back off, she knew he would be there in the morning. Maybe she could have a happy ending after all.
Regina Mills prided herself on her accomplishments. She had graduated valedictorian from high school and had been Student Body President as well as a member of the homecoming court. She had won numerous awards at riding competitions throughout her life and still was hailed as an excellent horsewoman. She had made dean’s list every semester at her prestigious university, graduating magna cum laude, with an MBA. After graduation, she was hired at a well-respected, successful corporation and had risen in ranks in a short time to be its youngest CEO. She wined and dined many powerful players in business, politics and even entertainment. People knew her name...even if the press dubbed her the "Evil Queen" for her ruthless business dealings. It just came with the territory. She let it roll off her back.

Yet the one person who could bring her down and shatter her confidence was still her mother. Cora Mills demanded perfection from her only child and only focused on where Regina had failed. Yes, Regina had been valedictorian but her final grade in English should've been two points higher. Regina had failed to win homecoming queen and that's all Cora saw. Many of her failures, according to Cora, then boiled down to the same thing: she still didn't have a man. No man wanted a woman who competed rather than just sat on a horse and looked pretty. Men didn't want a woman in a power suit who orchestrated corporate takeovers. They wanted a woman who could make them feel powerful, who could stroke their ego, cook their food and warm their bed. That was the reason Regina was perpetually single, as far as Cora was concerned.

"You should give Leopold a call, darling. He still asks for you. Go out to dinner and maybe you'll realize that you've done everything in the board room. Now it's time to focus on hearth and home," Cora said during her weekly call to remind Regina that she wasn't doing what Cora wanted.

Regina rolled her eyes. "Mother, Leopold is almost Daddy's age. His daughter and I are only a few years apart, for goodness' sake."

"But he's very well off. You wouldn't have to work."

"I like working."

Cora continued as if she hadn't heard Regina, one of her favorite tactics. "Leopold will be at my birthday party this weekend, as well everyone who is everyone in this small town. You two can...talk...while you're there."

"Mother, I can't." She then blurted out the one thing that would change her life: "I already have a date for your birthday."

There was silence on the other end of the line as Cora processed this. "Oh. Is it someone I know?"

"No, no. He's someone I met here in New York. I'll introduce you at the party." Regina took a deep breath and rushed her mother off the phone before Cora could pepper her with questions. She tossed her phone onto the couch and groaned. Where was she going to find a date at the last minute?

Fate helped her the next day. Regina hurried from her brownstone, digging through her purse for her phone. She collided with someone, bouncing off them. "Watch where you're going!" she snapped.
"You were the one who was distracted, Ms. Mills. Maybe you should take your own advice," a British-accented voice shot back.

Regina bit back a groan. Of all the people to bump into, why did it have to be Robin, her insufferable neighbor? They had been bickering since he moved in six months ago about everything, from how loud he played his music to how he believed her little garden crept onto his property. She frowned. "Whatever you say. Just stay out of my way, Mr. Locksley."

"As her Majesty commands." He gave her a bow in a mocking manner.

She stormed off toward the car waiting to take her to work. As the driver pulled away, she did her best not look back at Robin.

By the time she returned, Regina was tired. And not just from a full day of work. She had spent most of the morning calling every man she knew but they were all busy the day of her mother's birthday. Graham, an old friend of hers from school, had tried to rearrange his schedule but it was not to be. Regina had even tried to reach her ex-boyfriend, Sidney Glass. He didn't pick up, not that she was expecting him to. But he had been her last hope. She was faced with the very possible scenario of having to eat crow in front of her mother and her friends. It made her stomach turn.

Regina climbed out of the car, thanking her faithful driver, and paused. Sitting on his stoop with an open bottle of beer and the New York Times was Robin Locksley, the last person she wanted to see. She took a deep breath, collected her mail and hurried down her walk, hoping he wouldn't say anything to her.

"Early night, Ms. Mills?" He didn't even look up from his paper.

She sighed, debating just ignoring him and going inside. Of course, she chose not to do that. "Are you stalking me, Mr. Locksley?"

"No. Just being neighborly."

"By keeping tabs of my comings and goings? Why?"

"So I can watch your house and make sure no one breaks in." He folded the paper and looked at her. She scowled. "I have an alarm system."

"I know. But aren't neighbors supposed to look out for each other?"

Regina sighed, ready to go inside when his words stopped her. She turned, smiling. "You want to look out for me? What are you doing on Saturday?"

"Nothing." He raised an eyebrow. "Why?"

"My mother is having a birthday party..."

"And you need a date."

"Just once," Regina said.

Robin smiled. "Fine. On one condition. I run a nonprofit that helps disadvantaged youth in the inner city."
"Name your price and I'll donate it," Regina said.

He shook his head. "Oh, no. I want you to actually volunteer with us once. Seeing a successful CEO like you will inspire the children."

"Fine. Just be ready by noon on Saturday. We have to drive to Connecticut." Regina opened the door at last and slid inside. What had she just gotten herself into?

Regina drove on Saturday as Robin sat in her passenger seat, dressed in a neat suit and tie. She had to admit—to herself, never out loud—that she was impressed when he asked her on Friday what she was wearing so he could coordinate appropriately. He wore a navy suit that matched her navy dress. It was something her mother would be sure to notice.

After the first half hour passed in silence, Robin turned his attention from the outside and to her. "So, should we talk? I'd like to go in knowing a little about you that doesn't come from magazine profiles."

"Fine," she sighed. "What do you want to know?"

They spent the next hour exchanging information that they felt was needed to at least pretend that Regina hadn't asked him as a last resort. She learned he had an ex-wife ("An amicable divorce. We're better friends than lovers," he said) and a young son who visited every other weekend. Regina frowned, not sure why she had never seen the boy before. Maybe Robin was on to something about watching one's neighbors.

Regina told him a bit about her childhood and family. Her father, Henry, had died a few years ago from a heart attack. Her mother had been a secretary until she had snagged the son of a family of "old money." Cora then prided herself on being the best in the room, most likely to overcompensate for her humble beginnings. "Don't expect to impress her. No one does," Regina warned him.

"Except you, I'm sure," he added. She didn't respond.

She pulled into the driveway of the mansion she had grown up in. She unbuckled her seatbelt and checked her hair in the rearview mirror. "We're early. Come on, I'll go introduce you to my mother."

Robin stepped out of the car, putting his suit jacket on and taking his sunglasses off before following Regina into the house. She called out: "Hello? Is anyone here?"

"Regina? Is that you?" A friendly female voice called out.

She smiled. "Yes, Granny. Where are you?"

"In your father's study, dear. Come on in."

Regina turned to Robin. "Granny's been our housekeeper since I was a baby. She's almost like a grandmother to me."

"Hence the name?"

"No, she makes everyone call her that. I'm not entirely sure why." Regina led him into her father's study, which Granny had managed to preserve as it was before he had died. Cora had wanted to
through everything away but Granny "lost" the key and so Cora had decided it was not worth getting it replaced.

"Regina! Good to see you." Granny engulfed her in a hug. She then pointed at Robin, who looked about the room, especially the wall Henry Mills had devoted to his daughter's achievements. "Who is this?"

"This is my neighbor, Robin Locksley. He's my date for today." Regina had never been able to lie to Granny.

Granny looked him over. "You're a lucky man. If just for today."

"Thank you, ma'am," he replied.

"So polite too." Granny checked her watch. "Excuse me. There are few more things I need to do to prepare for the party. I'll see you later, dear."

Once they were alone, Robin cleared his throat. "You are more accomplished than I thought. All those prizes as an equestrian..."

"I like horseback riding. It's relaxing," Regina said. She bit her lip before saying: "I still have a horse. Maybe I can talk to the owner of the stables where I keep him and we can arrange for your kids to come down. Learn about caring for horses, maybe ride one for a bit."

Robin's eyes lit up. "They would love that. Thank you, Regina."

"Regina? Are you here?" Cora's voice echoed down the hall.

Regina grabbed Robin's arm. "We need to get out of here. Now."

She pulled him out of the room, locking the door behind her before continuing down the hall. They found Cora waiting in the kitchens, where she was overseeing Granny. Cora turned and frowned. "Is this your date, Regina?"

"Yes. This is Robin Locksley," Regina held her breath as Cora looked Robin over.

When she finished her survey, Cora looked at Regina. "You couldn't find a date that owns a razor? Look at that scruff!"

Regina sighed as Robin rubbed his chin. "It's quite fashionable now, Mrs. Mills. A lot of people have scruff."

Cora hummed in response, glaring at him. She snapped her fingers. "Come, you two. The guests will have started arriving."

Looping her arm through Robin's, Regina mouthed "I'm sorry" as they followed Cora outside. She prayed Cora didn't send Robin running off, screaming.

Robin proved to be an excellent choice to bring. He was personable, charming and able to carry conversations with nearly everyone attending the party. He also wasn't afraid to let her shine and seemed to encourage conversations about topics he seemed to guess were special to her, like the one she had about horses with Dr. Archie Hopper, who was interested in purchasing one.

"Ahh, Regina! Lovely to see you again, dearie." Mr. Gold, her mother's longest acquaintance,
approached her. He leaned heavily on both his cane and his new wife, Belle.

Regina smiled. "It's good to see you two again as well. I hope you had a great honeymoon."

"We did. And thank you for letting us use your villa. It was more than generous," Belle said.

Regina waved her off. "It was a wedding present."

"And who is your date, dearie?" Gold pointed his cane at Robin.

Robin held out his hand. "Robin Locksley. Pleased to meet you."

As Gold shook Robin's hand, he studied the man. "Locksley, you say? Not Lord Robin Locksley, the young British noble who was caught a few years back stealing from the Earl of Nottingham?"

Regina's eyes widened as she looked at Robin, but he remained calm. "Yes, that would be me. It was a stupid decision made by a rebellious young man. I accepted my punishment and I'm working to be a better man."

"Of course," Gold replied.

She was still processing everything she had just learned. On the car ride up, Robin had neglected to tell her two very important things about himself. Not only was she on a date with a noble, she was on a date with a thief. Regina could only pray Cora focused more on the former rather than the latter.

"Regina! I need to have a word with you." Cora emerged from the crowd, frowning. Regina knew she had learned about Robin's true identity. She excused herself and headed over to her mother.

Cora crossed her arms. "You brought a thief to my party?"

"It was a long time ago, Mother. He accepted responsibility and is moving on. Everyone deserves a second chance, right?" Regina said.

Cora shook her head. "Oh, Regina. Just when I think you couldn't embarrass me anymore, you go ahead and prove me wrong. Can you not be an embarrassment for once?"

Regina hung her head as an angry "Excuse me?" came from behind her.

The two turned to find Robin standing there, glaring at Cora. "I fail to see how Regina is in any way disappointed to you. From what I've seen and heard--just from your friends alone--you have plenty to be proud about. My God, she's one of the youngest CEOs in the country--maybe even the world. If you can only use an antiquated belief that women need to be married and have children to gauge your daughter's success, then I feel sorry for you. Because you will never then see how amazing a woman Regina really is. And that's your loss."

Cora stalked up to Robin, slapping him. "Get off my property. Now!"

Robin turned to Regina. "Don't worry. I'll find my own way home."

As he walked away, Regina made her decision. She started to follow him until her mother's voice stopped her. "Regina, do not go after him. If you do, then I am finished with you."

"No, Mother," Regina said as she turned to face Cora. "I am finished with you. Goodbye."

She held her head as she walked away, noticing more than one adoring look. Gold and Belle smiled, nodding at her as she past them. With every step she took, Regina felt like a weight was lifted from
her shoulders.

Regina found Robin standing in the front of the house, cell phone in hand. He looked up as she approached, frowning. "You didn't have to follow me. I'm perfectly capable of..."

She grabbed his jacket and pulled him in, her lips crashing onto his. After a few seconds, he responded and cupped her head in his hand. She pulled away. "No one's ever stood up to my mother before."

"I can tell." He rubbed his cheek. "But it was worth it. I wasn't going to let her badmouth you, even if this is her party."

"And, I'd like to apologize. I had made up my mind about you from just magazine profiles and news pieces. And not necessarily the positive ones. I should've known better."

Regina shook her head. "Don't worry. I didn't do much to dispel that image as your neighbor, did I?"

"No, not exactly."

She nodded. "Besides, I made judgments about you without bothering to talk to you. There’s still so much I want to know."

"I feel the same about you.” He cupped her face, his thumb brushing her cheek. "Now what?"

"How about we get out of here? I know a good restaurant not far from here. I say we deserve a nice dinner.” She took his hand and led him back to her car.

As they drove away, Regina glanced at Robin. He had tossed his jacket and tie into her back seat and undid two buttons on his shirt. Robin met her eyes, smiling. Warmth spread throughout her as she realized this was not something that would happen just once.
"I can't believe you talked me into this," Regina hissed. She clutched her discarded dress closer to her naked, wet body. Beside her, Robin tried not to laugh.

David was also trying to bit back his laughter while Emma was doing a fine impression of a fish. She looked between Robin and Regina, shining her flashlight on them. "You were skinny dipping? In the lake?"

"Sheriff Swan, I'm sure we can overlook this...unfortunate...incident. Don't you?" Regina put on her Mayor Mills voice and smiled.

Emma shook her head. "We caught you skinny dipping in the lake! That's public indecency and trespassing since there is a 'no swimming' sign. You want me to overlook that?"

David placed a hand on his daughter's shoulder. "I think Regina's right. We can overlook this as long as they promise not to do this again. Right?"

At David's glance, Regina and Robin nodded. Emma sighed. "Fine. We'll leave you two in peace to get dressed. But I'm going to remember this moment."

Robin looked confused as Regina sighed in resignation. She nodded as David led his daughter away. Within minutes, the sheriffs' car drove off and the two were alone again.

"What did Emma mean?" he asked her.

"Just that there's going to be a time when I'm going to have to look past something she and the pirate do, I'm sure of it." Regina shook her dress out. "Come on, let's get dressed."

"Not just yet." Robin dropped his clothing, approaching her.

She backed up a bit. "No. We are not going back into that lake. We're adults, with children...I'm the mayor!"

"And all that means we can no longer have a little fun?" Robin asked, eyes sparkling with laughter.

"No. It means we need to have responsible fun."

Robin reached for her dress. "Come on. I wasn't even thinking about going back in the lake."

"Then why aren't you putting on your clothes?"

"Because I have another idea for us." He dropped their clothing and pulled her close to him. She wriggled in his grasp. "Robin, no. Not here."

"Why not? What's more natural than you, me and the night sky?"

"You may be used to fornicating in the woods, but I am not."
"Fornicating? Such a fancy word," he teased her, running a hand up and down her back. "You need to try new things, milady."

"Like this?"

"Like this," he agreed. Robin kissed her neck and she groaned, wrapping her hands in his hair.

He laid her down in the grass, the blades tickling her back. Using his hands to support himself, Robin hovered over her. "You look beautiful."

"Flattery isn't going to get me to do..." Regina's breath hitched as he sucked at a pulse point. She moaned. "You're...not...fair."

Robin chuckled as he pulled away. "I wasn't intending to play fair."

"This is another day you are not living by your honor code?"

"Exactly."

He trailed kisses between her breasts, down her body, going lower and lower until he was between her legs. She arched her back as his tongue worked his magic, no longer having the willpower to argue with him.

She clawed at the ground, pulling up blades of grass. Her breathing became fast and shallow as she felt pleasure pool at the very bottom of her belly. It was growing and she knew she was going to let go soon. Her moans and cries of pleasure pierced the night air. Only the stars and the moon witnessed her ecstasy.

Robin rested on her stomach as she ran a hand through his still damp hair. His eyes were closed and his breathing was still fast. Regina hummed and she felt him smile against her skin.

He lifted his head to look at her. "Now what do you think of fornicating in the woods?"

"It's growing on me."

"Good." He pulled himself up until his body covered hers. Lowering himself down, his lips touched hers. She wrapped her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist, pulling him closer until they were one.

Later that night, Storybrooke was dark and quiet as Regina drove them home. Robin sat in the passenger seat, rubbing her arm or reaching for her knee whenever she stopped. She glared at him. "Stop that or we'll never get home."

"You say that like it's a bad thing." Robin trailed his fingers up her thigh.

She shivered. "We are not having sex now in the car."

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to. Your hands are doing the talking."

"They could be doing more than that."

"They are going to have to wait until we get home." Regina gave him a coy look. "And then they
Robin's eyes grew wide as he gulped. He shifted in his seat. "Must you drive the speed limit?"

"I am not getting pulled over by the Charmings again. We are obeying the laws until we are safe in our house. Got it?"

"You're sexy when you're in Queen mode."

She smirked. "Good to know."

At last, they arrived home. Regina took off her heels so they wouldn't clink as she led Robin to their room. They didn't need to be busted by their children on top of the Charmings this night.

It seemed like forever, but they made it to their room without being spotted. Robin pulled Regina to him, kissing her as if he hadn't kissed her in years. She responded in kind, letting her shoes fall to the floor with two thuds. They managed to make it to the bed, clothes being strewn about the room.

The next day, Regina made up some excuse when Henry still found grass in her hair. And when Robin's pants had grass stains on them. He narrowed his eyes when things were awkward between his mothers when Emma came to pick him up, but still he said nothing. Regina closed the door, leaning against it as Robin came out of the kitchen with his coffee mug. He smirked as he observed her.

She pointed at him. "If you ever try to talk me into something like that again, I will not hesitate to turn you into a frog. You understand?"

Robin just kept smirking.
Retirement

The life of an assassin wasn’t an easy one. Especially when one was also a ghost. It was a lonely existence, unable to forge many last relationships. Being an assassin would put any friends and family in danger from those who sought justice, either on behalf of a victim or on behalf on his Majesty. And as a ghost, it was too chancy to let anyone know she wasn’t dead. It could cost more than her life.

Yet Regina also found the life of a ghostly assassin a free one. She came and went as she pleased. She wore the breeches and shirts she had preferred as a young girl rather than the elaborate dresses her station required her to wear. There were no guards and servants watching her every move, reporting back to her husband. She didn’t have to smile, laugh, flirt or impress anybody, pretending to be a happy queen, wife and stepmother when all she wanted was to burn the palace to the ground. Most of all, she was free from the fear of the old king coming to her and demanding she perform her wifely duties.

She did have some companions. There was Jerry, the beautiful stallion given to her by a peasant woman who had wanted her drunken, abusive husband dead. Regina had done with without expectation of payment but the woman insisted. Jerry helped her perform jobs faster and proved to be an excellent listener.

There was also a man who hunted in the woods near her cabin. While they had never spoken, he often left meat by her door. In return, she would leave him some gold coins. It was a business relationship but still it was some form of human contact. She didn’t know his name and only called him “Huntsman.”

Then there was Robin, the only person who knew her true identity. She didn't know what to call their relationship. He wasn't her benefactor--she never took money from him. While she often shared his bed, the term lover seemed inadequate for what else they had. So the best she could do was call him a friend, though even that seemed hollowed. He let her eat his food (and she noticed she always left Locksley with food hidden in her sack) and use his private bath.

Like now. She had just returned from a long mission--her latest target tended to move around a lot. It had taken her a month to track him down. But once she found him in a tavern, it had been easy to kill him. She gave the man who had hired her his proof of death, he paid her and she rode straight for Locksley. After six weeks of no contact, she knew Robin would be worried.

As the warm water soothed her body, she let her mind wander as she decided to take Robin to bed that night. It had been too long since she last felt his caresses and his lips on every inch of her body. Too long since she last raked her nails across his back drew her name like a prayer from his lips.

The thoughts stirred feelings deep within her, feelings better tended to in bed than the bath. She
pushed herself from the water, wrapping a towel around her body.

She smiled as she heard Robin's voice, glad she wouldn't have to wait much longer to give into the feelings growing stronger with each passing moment. Until another voice--a woman's--stilled the hand she had wrapped around the doorknob. She had only opened it a crack, letting her see into Robin's private parlor.

Robin escorted a beautiful woman into his rooms. She appeared to be about Regina's age--maybe younger--with blonde hair that was done up in an elaborate hairdo comprised of braids, curls and ribbons. Her fine silk gowns showed she was at least a noblewoman, like Robin, or at most royalty, like Regina had been. She had pale white skin and big blue eyes, which she batted as she laughed at something Robin said.

His eyes sparkled as he smiled, handing her a glass of wine. They tapped their glasses together before drinking. Regina watched as the noblewoman put her glass down to whisper something in Robin's ear.

Closing the door, Regina rushed to grab her clothes. She wasn't going to stay to see Robin court another woman. He deserved privacy for that.

Regina wasn't needed anymore.

She returned to her cabin in the middle of the woods--the one Robin had given her when she took up his title of assassin. It was simple place to live, having only one room that served as her bedroom, parlor and kitchen. It wasn't much but it was enough for her. She only slept and ate here when she wasn't at Robin's. Which was now going to be more often.

Regina pulled out a bottle of scotch she kept stored under a loose floorboard with other things she deemed valuable. She laid on her bed and drank straight from the bottle. There was no need for glasses--who was she trying to impress? The furniture? The squirrel sleeping in the corner of her house, acorn tops scattered about it? No, there was no one there to watch her unladylike behavior.

As she took another pull of the scotch, she chuckled at the image of her mother's horrified face should she see her drinking like this. But her mother was far away, which was a good thing. Regina didn't need to hear Cora's evaluation of her life, knowing full well what it had become. She was an assassin who was supposedly dead, preventing her from ever having a meaningful relationship again. She had exchanged a crown and a palace for a hood and a cabin. Exchanged a marriage to a king to warm the bed of a nobleman who had once been hired to kill her.

No, she mused after several more sips, she was more than a bed warmer to Robin. He had to consider her a friend. Why else would he put up with her comings and goings? Demand to know she made it back safe from missions? Clean up her wounds from the wounds that get messy? He could've killed her, like the king had wanted, but he hadn't. And it wasn't out of pity, like she had first told herself. It was out of respect. Robin realized she was just as broken as he was.

Or maybe she had been a fool all along, Regina thought as she stared at her half-drunk bottle of scotch. Maybe she wasn't as harden to love as she thought she had become after Daniel's death. Maybe she was still the soft girl her mother used to tie up--the girl who believed people could actually want to be with her because they liked her, not because they wanted something from her. Foolish girl, she heard Cora say. It was like she was in the cabin.

Cora was wrong. Robin did care for her, Regina decided after consuming more scotch. Deep down,
though, she knew this day would come. He was a nobleman again and he needed to have an heir to carry on the title. Meaning he would need to find a woman he could marry. Regina certainly couldn't be that woman.

Did it mean that their relationship had to end? Yes, they weren't going to sleep together anymore. But did it mean he wouldn't want to see her either? To talk to her? To let her visit? Or was it better to cut off all contact? For him, for his new wife...and for Regina's heart?

The scotch bottle was empty. Regina had somehow ended up on the floor, limbs akimbo as she stared at the ceiling, contemplating her life. Maybe it was time to make some changes. To find a way to start really living again.

One more mission, she decided. She usually gave away the money she earned for her kills to the people who needed it the most--just like Robin before her. But if she asked for enough and combined it with what she had gotten for her last kill...Regina's fuzzy mind did the math and she determined she'd have enough to book passage on a ship out of Misthaven. She knew the only way to live again was to go someplace where they didn't know what the late Queen Regina looked like. She could go, get a house and re-enter society.

Pounding woke her up the next day. And it wasn't just in her head.

She sat up as her door rattled off its hinges. Maybe she could just wait for whoever it was to go away. Then she could sink back into oblivion, where her so-called life wasn't falling apart.

But maybe it was Robin, coming to check on her. He was going to break her door (again) and demand to know if she was hurt in any way. Then he was going to lay into her for not checking in and letting him worry. Her lips curled at the thought.

Then the memory of the night before crashed over her. Robin wining and dining the pretty blonde. The two smiling at each other. It made her sick.

Or maybe that was the scotch.

Her door was knocked open, but not by Robin. Standing in front of her was the young huntsman who supplied her with meat. He swept the cabin before checking Regina. "Are you hurt?"

"No," Regina said. "Just drunk."

The Huntsman sighed. "I was worried. I hadn't seen you for a while and last night, it looked like you were stumbling."

"You were watching me? Why?"

"I don't know. I guess I consider you the closest thing to a friend." He shrugged. "I don't get out of the woods much. Not fond of human interaction."

Regina smirked. "I guess we're kindred spirits then."

"So is there anything I can do for you?"

"Yes. Can you get me some cold water from the kill? I think it might help sober me up some."

Regina rubbed her face.
The Huntsman stood. "Of course. I'll be right back."

Once he left, Regina magicked herself a clean set of clothes. She was glad she had managed to get a bath in at Robin's before discovering...No, she was not going there. She wasn't sober enough to control her emotions in front of the Huntsman. She still had her pride.

"Here you go." The Huntsman returned with a bucket of cold water. "Is there anything else I can do?"

"Yes. Hold my hair back," she said, kneeling in front of the bucket.

After a few seconds, she felt him take her long dark hair in his gloved hands. With a deep breath, she dunked her head into the bucket. The cold water stabbed at her face but she kept it there until her lungs burned for hair.

When she sat back up, the Huntsman released her hair. "Feel better?" he asked.

"A bit," she said, sitting on her heels.

The Huntsman shifted from foot to foot. "Anything else?"

"Hmm." Regina leaned back on the floor, studying him. "Have you ever considered a career as an assassin?"

She spent the next week training the Hunstman to take over for her. They went on her next mission together, Regina planning to hand over her job to him afterwards. She was also giving him her cabin as she would be heading straight to the docks to leave Misthaven for good.

Before she left, she stopped at the house belonging to the woman who had given her Jerry. She seemed surprised to see The Ghost standing on her doorstep unbidden, but let Regina in anyway. "Is...Is something wrong?" she asked, nervous.

Regina shook her head. "I just wanted to tell you I was leaving. There's a new assassin and he's promised to look after you for me."

"Oh. Thank you."

"I also wanted to ask if you'll do me a favor." Regina pulled out a sealed letter and held it out to the woman. "Can you post this for me? I can't risk sending it myself."

The woman took the letter and nodded. "I'll post it next time I'm in town. Promise. You stay safe."

"I promise. Thank you."

"Godspeed, Ghost."

Regina made it to the small harbor town before night fall the next day. She arranged for passage on the next ship leaving Misthaven but was dismayed to learn she'd have to wait a few days. "Powerful storm is moving in. It'd be too dangerous to launch a ship in that type of weather," the captain told her.

He pointed her to a nearby inn where she could find a room. "It's a reputable establishment and you
won't have to worry about any unwanted visitors other unaccompanied women might have," he said.

So she rented a room and waited out the storm. On her second night, she put on her breeches and cloak in order to go to the tavern. Dressed like that, she was mistaken for a man and was able to drink her ale in peace. As she stared into the amber liquid, she heard the door slam open and the howling wind the storm brought with it chilled the establishment. It was silenced just as quickly, though the chill remained. Regina didn't bother to look up--people were coming into the tavern all night to escape the storm. As long as they left her alone, she was fine.

The chair across from her scraped against the stone floor as it was pulled out from the table. Someone sat down there and before she could look up, a tattered letter was shoved into her line of sight. "Care to explain this?" Robin's familiar voice asked.

Regina looked up at him. His blond hair was wet from the rain and his blue eyes dark with anger. Before she could respond, he continued on. "You were gone for weeks and didn't bother to check in. Then I get this letter saying you're leaving? I don't even warrant a goodbye in person?"

"I thought this would be easier."

"Easier? Why?"

"A clean break. I could disappear and you could go on with your wife." She nearly choked on the last word.

Robin looked confused. "My what?"

"I saw you. Laughing over a glass of wine with that pretty little blonde thing. She'll be a perfect lady for your lands."

"I still don't..." Realization dawned on him. "Oh. Oh! You were there?"

Regina nodded. "I was going to surprise you in the bedroom when you surprised me instead."

"Regina..." Robin's voice was soft and she saw his fingers twitch, as if he wanted to reach out and hold her hand. She wanted the same thing but not now. It was too dangerous.

"You don't have to explain, Robin. I get it. You need a wife and an heir. I need to go start someplace where no one will know I'm supposed to be dead."

Robin shook his head. "No, Regina. I'm not married. I'm not even planning on getting married. We were just sealing a business deal, nothing more happened after supper."

"Really? You two looked pretty intimate to me."

"You're the only woman who has shared my bed since I returned to Locksley. Honest." He gave in and took her hand. "Can we talk about this? Please?"

Regina melted under his earnest gaze. She nodded. "Not here though. Too many people. I have a room at the inn across the street. We can talk there. You'll just have to sneak in. I don't think the innkeeper will be happy that I'm bringing in a man."

Robin was waiting in her room before she got there. He smiled at her surprised look. "I remind you I was the best assassin around. Scaling a building is nothing for me."
"Of course." Regina stared at him before rushing into his arms. She crashed her lips onto his and he responded in kind, holding her close. Pulling back a bit, she glanced up at him. "I think we should get out of these wet clothes. What do you say?"

"An excellent idea, milady." Robin undid her cloak before going for the laces on her vest. Her own fingers began to undo his clothing as they resumed kissing.

Their clothing was laid out by the fire, drying, as they lay entwined in bed. Regina rested her head against his chest as he toyed with her hair. He kissed her head. "Where are you going?"

"Arendelle. It had very little business with Leopold, so I don't think anyone will recognize me as his dead queen." Regina lifted her head to look at him. "Why?"

"How long did they say the voyage will take?"

"About a week." She frowned. "You still haven't told me why you want to know."

Robin kissed her forehead. "If I return to Locksley, I can have everything settled and a new lord named within a week. We could be reunited in under a month."

Clutching the blankets to her chest, Regina sat up. "What are you talking about? You've worked hard to get Locksley back."

He chuckled. "I pretended to kill you and technically extorted the king. That doesn't fit my definition of working hard."

"You know what I mean. I can't ask you to give all that up. I won't ask you."

"I know." Robin sat up, cupping her cheek. He rubbed his thumb across her skin. "I want to. I'm not going to lose you."

Tears pricked Regina's eyes. No one had ever sacrificed for her. She had always had to sacrifice for others--her mother, Leopold, Snow. Still, she shook her head. "That's too much."

"Maybe. But do we have any other choice?" Robin rested his forehead against hers.

Her lips curled into a smile. "You know, you once offered me a compromise that helped both of us. I think I can offer another one of those compromises now."

"Do tell, milady. I am all ears."

After his week away, the people of Locksley were surprised when their lord returned with a new bride. Her name was Marian and she hailed from distant shores--some island country whose name no one could pronounce. They all jockeyed for a good spot to see the lady as she rode next to Robin into her new home.

She had a darker complexion than people were used to and it enhanced her beauty. Her long black hair fell in curls to about her mid-back. The women were surprised she left it down despite being married but waved it off as a custom from her land. Dark brown eyes swept the crowd, smiling at those who came to see her. As Robin helped her from her mount, a cheer went up through the crowd. They were accepting her as their lady.
The servants threw together a proper supper to welcome her and people packed the Great Hall. Marian was a natural hostess and entertained her guests well. Everyone who saw her and Robin left speaking of the great love that filled their every gaze and every touch. "Makes me believe in love at first sight," one woman said to another.

As the night wore on, Robin excused himself and his bride. The guests who were still there applauded and some let out whoops and hollers. Robin gave them cheeky smiles while Marian lowered her eyes, a blush rising to her cheeks.

Once up in their rooms, Marian's dark skin gave way to olive skin. She shrank a few inches but her eyes and hair remained the same. Regina stood in front of her husband, smiling. "I think it worked."

"Of course it worked." Robin wrapped his arm around her waist, pulling her close. "It was your plan and you are brilliant."

"Flattery will get you everywhere, good sir."

"Like bed?" He wiggled his eyebrows in a suggestive manner.

Regina laughed. "I think that would be the perfect place."

He picked her up, carrying her to bed. As he hovered over her, he smiled. "Here's to the first of many nights together, Lady Locksley."

Almost ten months later, a midwife was sworn to secrecy as she was ushered into Lord Locksley's room. She was surprised to find a woman quite different than the one she had been seeing to the past few months lying in bed, gritting her teeth in the pain of labor. But it was not her place to ask questions, so she went to work.

Trying to get Robin to leave proved futile. He stayed by his wife's side, even as Regina's labor continued long into the night. She held Robin's hand, crushing it with every wave of pain that washed over her. He still managed to wipe her brow with a cool rag at the same time while whispering reassuring sentiments to her.

The sun began to rise as the first cries echoed through the chambers. "It's a boy!" the midwife shouted.

Robin beamed, kissing Regina's forehead. "You hear that? We have a son, milady."

"I'd celebrate but it still hurts." She glanced over at the midwife. "Is it supposed to hurt even after the baby is out?"

The midwife checked, frowning. "There's another one. You're going to have to push again, Your Ladyship."

"Another?" Regina gasped out. "I don't think I can."

Robin kissed her forehead again. "You can do it. Just a few more pushes."

"Easy for you to say. You're not the one pushing." But Regina did as she was instructed, pushing as hard as she could until another set of cries were heard.

"It's another boy!" The midwife held the mewling infant up for his parents to see. "Congratulations."
Once the two boys were cleaned up, they were presented to their parents. Robin took one while Regina held the other close. She laughed, looking up at her husband. “You don’t do anything half-assed, do you?”

He chuckled. “I think you played some part in this as well, milady.”

Regina beamed, rocking the baby in her arms. “We do need to name them, Robin.”

“I know,” he said. “Any ideas?”

“What if we named them after our fathers?”

Robin frowned. “Do you think that’s wise? That it won’t tip anyone off?”

“Robin, my father had a very common name. No one is going to think twice about it.” She shook her head. “I’m supposed to be the paranoid one in this relationship, remember?”

He chuckled before glancing down at the sleeping baby boy in his arms. “Hello, Roland,” he whispered.

Robin then gazed down at the boy in Regina’s arms, whose bright blue eyes were taking everything in. Regina knew his eyes, like his brother’s, would darken to take after hers but she found herself wishing this boy’s eyes would stay blue, for him to have his father’s eyes. She watched Robin crouch down to be eye level with his other son. “And hello, Henry.”

Henry yawned in response as his father slid Roland into Regina’s arms. She held both her boys close, smiling so hard she thought her face was going to shatter. Robin kissed her forehead as she whispered: “Everything is perfect.”
Snowball Fight (Missing Year Trilogy #1)

Chapter Notes

8: outlaw queen missing year xxx: “You did not just throw that at me!”

Snowball Fight (Missing Year Trilogy #1)

Regina missed the days when it was just her and her father living in this palace. Of course there were the servants, but they knew their place and stayed out of the way. Everything was calm and quiet. She could actually think back then. While the thoughts were usually destructive and filled with anger, she could at least hear them.

Now, though, she had half the Enchanted Forest living within the palace gates. She didn’t know how she had been able to accommodate them all, but Snow had managed. The Charmings were in their element, surrounded by everyone. By all the noise—laughter, arguments, shouting, whispers. Regina heard it all.

She cursed that wretched outlaw for preventing her from taking the sleeping curse. At least then she would have some peace and quiet.

All Regina wanted was a place to herself. Her room should’ve been her sanctuary but Snow had taken to barging in unannounced, no doubt afraid of leaving Regina alone too long in her grief. So for a while, Regina had sought solace once again in her orchard. But they had arrived in late autumn and winter had approached fast. The leaves fell only a few weeks after she had returned, all the apples picked. It didn’t provide her with any cover—she was visible amongst the trees now.

The worst part was that the outlaw and his men had set up camp not far from the orchard. She had found a way to go around them to get there but now they could see her. Especially him. Regina had noticed the way he watched her, bright blue eyes following her every movement. And not just when she was in the orchard. He watched her at council meetings (though why he was allowed to be involved with those, she didn’t know), at meals and whenever they were in the same room together. It annoyed her. (It exhilarated her).

This day, though, Regina needed to get out of the palace. She needed to get away from Snow White, her growing baby bump and her pregnancy glow. To get away from talk of babies, of children. Of anything that reminded her of Henry yet again.

It had snowed the night before and most people were keeping inside. She was alone and it was quiet. Regina settled on a stone bench, wrapping her fur-lined cloak closer to her body. She saw her breath with each exhale. It was the closest thing to tranquility she had ever experienced.

Until something cold and hard hit her back. She jumped up, spinning around to see who had attacked her. A fireball crackled in her palm, ready to incinerate whoever was there. Every fiber of her being was on edge.

“Apologies, milady!” The outlaw appeared before her, holding a snowball in his hand.

Regina frowned, letting her fireball disappear. “You did not just throw that at me!”
“I didn’t intend to. I’m afraid I was aiming for someone else,” he admitted.

She raised an eyebrow. “I thought you never missed.”

“That’s with my bow. Not with snowballs.”

“Well, be more careful. Next time I may not be so merciful,” Regina snapped.

He held up his hands in a placating manner but he had started to smirk. The expression infuriated Regina more. She bent down and gathered snow into a ball of her own. As Robin walked away, she hurled it at his back. It broke apart, scattering white pieces down his cloak.

Robin stopped, turning to face her again. “You realize, milady, that you have just declared war? I am giving you this chance to rescind it.”

She threw another snowball instead. He sighed. “Have it your way.”

He threw one of his snowballs at her. Regina was able to sidestep it as she made her own to throw back. They continued their silly little fight, moving from the orchard to the open courtyard where they had more space to move around.

Both opponents landed blows, had misses and close calls. Neither side was ready to surrender, though their noses were red and their clothing soaked. Regina’s teeth chattered as Robin shivered when he wasn’t dodging her snowballs. He realized there was only one way to end this fight. All he could do was pray it didn’t cost him his head.

Robin charged at the queen, catching her off guard. His arm encircled her waist as the two fell toward the powdery snow. They landed in a pile, him half on top of her. She wrapped her arms around his neck in an automatic response to the fall.

They lay there, brown eyes meeting blue. Both were breathing heavily and their faces were only inches apart. Regina realized all she had to do was crane her neck and they would be…

“Get off me, Thief!” She gave him a shove, sending him into a snow bank. “You’re lucky I don’t skin you for that stunt.”

Robin stayed in the snow, smiling. “Of course, milady.”

“I suggest you find some dry clothing. It’ll do your son no good if you catch your death out here,” she said, her voice soft. “Good day, thief.”

“Good day, milady.”

Regina walked away from him, head held high. Yet she still felt his eyes on her as well as his smile. She felt her own lips twitch but she schooled her features to remain expressionless. Snow would have too many questions as it was.
On the Balcony (Missing Year Trilogy #2)

There was no air in the council room, not with the fire roaring in the hearth while several candles illuminated the room. It seemed the flames sucked all the oxygen as they put forth more and more heat into the room.

It seemed though that Regina was the only one effected by the heat. Probably because she was the only one in heavy clothing, wearing a dress with a black leather corset and black velvet skirts as well as sleeves. It only made her more uncomfortable. She wished Charming would hurry up so she could escape to her rooms and lighter clothing.

“We need allies in this fight against Zelena.” Charming looked at Regina. “Certainly there were kingdoms not affected by your curse?”

Regina rolled her eyes. “The Dark Curse only effected Misthaven. Everyone else is fine.”

“They may not want to help us. Not after what happened to Phillip and Aurora.” Snow’s eyes showed the horror of watching the two turn into flying monkeys still haunted her.

“Someone must be willing to stand up to the Witch,” Robin said. “Or else their lands will be next.”

Regina shook her head. “She just wants to destroy me. For some reason she blames me for whatever happened in her life.”

“I guess it runs in the family,” Grumpy said.

She glared at him as Snow gasped. “Grumpy!” the princess scolded.

“What?” Grumpy feigned innocence. “It’s the truth.”

Regina stood, slamming her hands on the table. “I can tell when I’m not wanted. If you’ll excuse me.”

She strode from the council room, ignoring Snow’s calls for her to come back. Pushing the door open, Regina stepped into the much cooler hallway. It still wasn’t good enough, though, so she kept walking until she ended up outside on a balcony.

Leaning against the stone railing, Regina surveyed the palace grounds. It was dark though and the only thing she could make out was the Merry Men’s camp thanks to their fire. She couldn’t see the men but she knew they were sitting around the fire, exchanging stories and jokes. Perhaps they were even singing. What did it feel to be a welcomed part of a group?

“Milady? Are you well?”
She closed her eyes as Robin’s voice came from behind her. He shouldn’t have been able to sneak up on her, master thief or not. But there was something about him that eluded her usual defenses. She had to be careful around him.

“You didn’t have to follow me, Thief.”

He chuckled. “You can call me Robin.”

“I can,” she agreed. “But I won’t.”

“Of course not. That might actually make me human, right?”

She shot him a glare. “Did you come out here to argue with me?”

“No. I did come out here to check on you. It got a bit tense in there.”

“Grumpy only spoke the truth.” Regina sighed. “I did spend a long time focused only on destroying Snow White. I guess this what you would call karma.”

Robin stepped up to the banister, his shoulder brushing hers. “I don’t care what you call. We’re not going to let the Wicked Witch win.”

“Of course not. But I’m not going to pretend for a moment that it’s because you all want to protect me. I know what everyone thinks of me in there.”

“You don’t know that.”

She let out a wry laugh. “Don’t even try to pretend that anyone in there cares if the Wicked Witch gets me or not. They are just trying to save Snow’s baby.”

“That’s not true. At least, for Snow. She seems to genuinely care for you. I think you care for her as well.”

“I’m sorry. Are you a thief or a psychologist?”

Robin frowned. “Milady?”

“Never mind. It’s something from my world.” Regina walked down the balcony, hoping he would leave her alone.

He didn’t; she heard his footsteps behind her. “So you don’t think of this as your world?”

“No. The other one was more of a home than this one could ever be. But I can never go back there.”

Robin was silent and she thought for a moment that he had left, going back inside. But when she turned around, she found herself nose-to-nose with the outlaw. She was drawn into his bright blue eyes, his warm breath tickling her skin. Regina was reminded of the time in the snow a few weeks prior, where they were so close they could…

“Do you like invading my personal space?” She sidestepped him and walked away.

He laughed. “I can assure you it’s not on purpose.”

“Really? Because it seems every time I turn around, you’re right there. Watching me, taunting me. And you’re telling me that every time is just coincidence? That it’s all an accident?” Regina stepped closer, her Evil Queen façade at full power. “Do you think I’m an idiot?”
Robin didn’t say anything right away and Regina snarled a bit as she spun on her heels. “Your silence says it all. Best you leave than stay in the company of someone you don’t believe to be intelligent.”

“I didn’t say that.” Robin’s voice was firm, authoritative. For a moment, Regina recognized him as someone who led others.

It was fleeting though. She crossed her arms. “You didn’t have to. Good night.”

“Regina, wait.”

She glanced back over at him. “What?”

“I don’t think you’re stupid. Far from it.” He stepped closer. “You’ve proven yourself to be one of the most intelligent women I have ever met.”

Regina didn’t know how to respond. She could handle banter and taunts. Genuine sentiments threw her for a loop.

He closed the gap between him. “You’re also right that it’s no coincidence or accident that I’m constantly around you.”

“So you admit to stalking me?”

“I’m not stalking you.”

“Then what would you call it?”

His eyes were unguarded and Regina felt she was staring into his soul. “A connection. I don’t know why, Regina, but I feel drawn to you. No matter how often you snipe at me, belittle me, push me away or hurl me into snow banks…”

“I didn’t hurl you into that snow bank!”

“I still feel the need to watch over you. To see if I can chase away some of the grief you don’t think I can see in your eyes. Your desire to destroy the witch isn’t enough to keep you from missing Henry. So I try to help.”

“I don’t need your help.”

“Yes, you do,” Robin said. “Everyone needs help sometimes, Regina. That doesn’t make us weak. It makes us stronger. If we help each other, I can make you stronger and you can make me stronger. What do you say?”

For a moment, Regina wanted to believe him. For a moment, she wanted to let down her walls and let him. For a moment, she wanted to tell him they could be stronger together. For a moment, she wanted to fall into his arms and let him hold her.

For a moment.

“Oh, look. I almost cared.” Regina’s walls were firm and she pushed Robin away. “I’m going to my room. Do not dare follow me.”

“As her majesty commands.”

Regina stalked away, facing him one more time to close the doors to the balcony. He kept watching
her, his end of the conversation not yet concluded: “You can’t keep everyone out forever, Regina.”

She wished she could say she felt some satisfaction in slamming the door on him.
Fever (Missing Year Trilogy #3)

Chapter Summary

Outlaw queen 5 missing year: “Please don’t leave me.

Fever

The attack had been unexpected and savage. Robin and his men had barely managed to fend off the waves of flying monkeys coming at the palace. In the aftermath, he walked through those who fought. “Is anyone injured?” he called to his men.

“Robin!” Little John called from where he stood over a body. “You better come over here. And hurry.”

Robin ran over to comrade’s position, unsure what he would find. His heart stopped and his blood froze when he saw who lied at Little John’s feet. It was the Queen.

Her clothes were ripped in several spots and he could see claw marks marring her pale skin. Blood oozed from an injury on her leg while one of her arms seemed to be at a painful angle. A gash on her head also bleed, dripping onto her long, dark eyelashes. She seemed paler than usual.

He ran his hand over her hair and checked her for signs of life. His heart took residency in his throat during his scan but didn’t leave after he confirmed she was alive. The Queen’s pulse was weak and she felt clammy to his touch.

Robin looked up at Little John. “Send ahead and tell them we need a healer. I’ll carry her to the palace.”

Little John nodded, taking off toward the palace. Robin was careful as he took the Queen in his arms. She was limp, unresponsive. It scared him, if he was honest. This was the woman who infuriated him on a daily basis, almost took pleasure in it, but who he felt the need to protect. He couldn’t imagine a life without her now that she had entered his life.

“Please don’t leave me,” he whispered to her.

Snow met him at the doors, her hand flying to her mouth as she took in the sight of her stepmother. “Regina! What happened?”

“I don’t know,” Robin said. “I didn’t even know she was out there.”

“Bring her to her room. I’ll send Doc to her. Hopefully he’ll know what to do.” Snow picked up her skirts and hurried away.

It struck Robin odd that she didn’t tell him where Regina’s rooms were, like she knew he knew. How close an eye did the princess keep on the Queen? Robin didn’t think it was out of suspicion. No doubt she was just as worried about the woman as he was. Was that why she hadn’t called him
out on his nightly patrols that just so happened to bring him past the Queen’s bedroom?

Robin laid her on her bed, her dark clothing blending in with the dark covers. It made her pale skin stand out all the more. He tried to ignore the dread still building as he removed her boots.

Snow and Charming came into the room. Robin stepped away from the bed. “Perhaps you should finish undressing her?”

“Yes, it would be best. You and Charming should turn your backs. I’ll let you know when it’s safe to look.” Snow approached the bed.

“It’s probably best if you two step out,” Doc said, entering the room.

Charming grabbed Robin’s shoulder and guided him out into the hall. He watched the outlaw. “You okay?”

“The Queen is the one lying unconscious and wounded yet you’re asking me how I am?” Robin let out a wry laugh.

“Robin, everyone is aware of your feelings for her. I believe even she is.”

“She is,” Robin said softly. “She wants nothing to do with me.”

“Did she say that?”

Robin shook his head. “Not in so many words. I could read between the lines though.”

The door opened and the two men straightened up. Doc led Snow from the bedroom, though the princess was frowning. “I want to stay in there with her.”

“I do not advise that, Your Highness. Not when she’s running a fever. We can’t risk you getting sick in your condition.” Doc cast his gaze down on Snow’s rounded stomach. Robin’s heart sped up. A fever meant infection. An infection here meant danger. “I’ll stay with her,” he offered.

Charming and Snow exchanged looks but Doc nodded. “Let me know if you need anything for her.”

“I will. Thank you.” Robin slipped inside the Queen’s chambers again before the Prince and Princess could protest.

Robin sat by her bedside, sponging her down with a wet rag. The Queen tossed and turned in her sleep, unable to get comfortable. Her face twisted in pain and Robin found he wanted to take it all away from her.

“Damn it, Regina,” he said, running a hand through his hair. “Why didn’t you tell me you were out there?”

She didn’t respond. Not even when he used her name rather than her title. Instead, she remain trapped in her feverish nightmares.

Robin continued, starting to rant. “You are the most stubborn woman I have ever met, Regina. And the most suicidal. You can’t keep doing this. Not to Snow, not to Roland and not to me.”

The Queen squirmed in her bed and for a moment, Robin thought she had heard him. But her eyes never opened and she soon settled back down. He dabbed her forehead but it seemed to do very little
to relieve her.

“You will pull through this,” he said. “I’m not giving you an option. Roland’s starting to open up to you as a second mother. He’s not going to lose you like he lost Marian.”

Robin stopped, finding he was getting choked up. He cleared his throat. “I don’t know why I keep doing this. Maybe I’m a glutton for punishment. Maybe I like being torn down by you every chance we get.

“Or maybe I’m in love.” He let out a wry laugh. “If my men could hear me…If only you could hear me.”

He glanced down at her. “Or maybe this is for the best. If you could hear me, you’d take great delight in skinning me alive.

“Then again, I’d die for you.” The truth of his statement struck him. His heart sped up as he wondered when he started to feel that way.

Robin took her hand in his. “Don’t worry, Regina. That surprised me as much as it would’ve surprised you had you heard it.”

He raised her hand to his lips before laying it back down on the bed. Picking up the rag, he wrung it out and started to sponge her off again.

He wasn’t sure when he dozed off but when he woke, the first pale sunbeams of the day started to peak through the curtain. Robin sat up in his chair, checking on the still sleeping Regina. He was relieved to find her fever had broken. She was on the road to recovery.

Robin put down the rag and ran his hand over his face. He decided to check on Roland and maybe get a change of clothes. It might help him feel refreshed. Glancing down at Regina, he saw she was still asleep. She wasn’t going to miss him.

As he stepped away from the bed, he felt her grab his hand. Looking down, he was surprised to see her brown eyes staring back at him.

He crouched down next to her. “Is something wrong?”

“Please, don’t leave me,” she begged.

“Regina…” Robin sunk back down in his chair. He took her hand. “Don’t worry. I’m not going anywhere.”

She smiled, closing her eyes again. He watched as her breathing evened out and she fell back asleep.

Robin’s eyes grew heavy as everything caught up with him. He let go of her hand and watched as she frowned, starting to wake up. “It’s all right,” he assured her. “I’m just getting more comfortable, milady.”

She moved over on the bed, as if making room for him. Robin hesitated for a moment before deciding it was an invitation. He laid down next to her, his chest against her back. Wrapping an arm around her waist, he fell asleep.

When she awoke later that day, Regina would throw him out of bed. She would insist that she never
meant for him to join her and she’s a queen, she doesn’t beg. Robin would take it with a grain of salt, knowing that he saw the true Regina. One day, he vowed, she’d show it to him again willingly. He’d wait until then.

Good thing he was a patient man.
Bath Time

Regina was tired. Everything that could go wrong had since before the sun had come up. Power had gone down some time during the night and so she had woken up to a call from Emma asking for her help in fixing it. After they managed to get the power back on, David called to report a water main break on Main Street. Emma and Regina raced over there to find a river had formed. Regina half expected Ariel or Ursula to pop up from all the water gathering there.

It had taken most of the morning to get everything straightened out. When she left, there was a small group working to drain the street. Most of them, she had noticed, were Merry Men. Robin led them and he had approached her before she had left to return to her office. “You’ve been up for a long time. Go home and catch a nap,” he suggested.

“That sounds tempting,” Regina sighed. “But I can’t. There’s too much to do. I’ll see you back at the house?”

He nodded, kissing her. “Don’t work too hard. Okay?”

She wished she could keep her promise, but everything that had happened so far that day had required paperwork. Mary Margaret had managed to get her to choke down some lunch but soon she was chasing down some monster that was terrorizing town. Regina and Emma dispatched it easily, leaving her time to survey the damage.

Now she dragged herself into her house, wanting nothing more than a bath and to fall asleep wrapped in Robin’s arms. But there was still paperwork to do and she had to play with the budget to help pay for some of the damage inflicted by the day.

Regina kicked off her shoes and shuffled to the kitchen. She planned to grab a quick dinner before settling into her study for a long night of work. But as she stood at the counter, she felt a strong pair of arms wrap around her waist. Robin pressed a kiss to her neck. “Welcome home, milady.”

“Mhmm. Quite the homecoming.” She leaned against him, letting him continue peppering her neck with kisses.

He smiled against her skin. “I still have more planned.”

“As tempting as that sounds, no. I have too much work to do.”

She felt his smile turn into a frown. “You need to rest. You look ready to fall asleep standing.”

“I’ll rest later. Right now, I need to finish this work.”

“Regina.” He turned her so she faced him. “You need to take care of yourself. Please.”
“I know. And I will. Just not today.” She turned back to her meal. “Did you eat?”

“Yes, I did.”

“And Roland?”

Robin shook his head. “He’s spending the night with Henry at the loft. He adores him, you know.”

She nodded, smiling. “I’m glad for that. They’re already like brothers.”

“So we have the house to ourselves tonight.”

“No.” Regina held up her hand. “I have work. You will not convince me otherwise.”

She took her sandwich and moved to leave the kitchen. “I’m going to go to my study. I hope you can entertain yourself for tonight. Because I’m going to work.”

As she left, Robin crossed his arms. She was stubborn and he loved her for it. But, he realized with a smirk, he could be just as stubborn.

Regina had an hour of uninterrupted work but she felt she hadn’t made a dent in her paperwork. She was starting to doubt she was ever going to see the end and ruled out sleep for that night. A nap on the couch later would do fine.

“Regina? How are you?” Robin’s voice carried from the doorway. “You ready to go to bed?”

“No. Go ahead without me.” She spun in her chair, finding him wearing only his bathrobe. Regina sucked in some air, knowing he had left the robe loose on purpose to give her a wonderful view of his chest. He wasn’t playing fair.

Judging by his smirk, she knew he knew that. He ambled toward her, holding out his hand. “I’m about to take a bath. Care to join me?”

It was a dangerous proposition. She narrowed her eyes at him. “On one condition—when we’re done, you go to bed and leave me alone to work.”

“If you want to do that, then I’ll let you do that.” He wiggled his fingers. “You coming?”

She took his hand. “Fine. A bath. That’s it. And not for too long.”

Entering the bathroom, Regina stopped short. Robin had gone all out for this bath. Candles lined the tub and he had scattered rose petals in the water.

He wrapped his arms around her waist. “What do you think?”

“I think you’ve been just as busy as me.”

Robin hummed in response, unzipping her dress. It slid down her body, pooling at her feet. Next to go was her bra and then her panties. She smiled. “I think that’s the fastest you’ve ever undressed me.”

“Well, I believe my lady has told me I am on limited time.” He smirked as he took off his bathrobe.
“Shall we?”

They settled into the warm water, Regina nestled between his legs and leaning against his chest. He entwined their fingers together before wrapping their arms around her. She closed her eyes and let the bath soothe her aches and weariness.

He nuzzled her hair. “Feel better?”

“Much.”

“Good. Now, why don’t we soak for a bit?”

She hummed in response. “Just don’t let it be too long.”

“Whatever you say, milady.”

After a little while, Robin lathered up and washed her hair, eliciting pleased moans from Regina. He then washed her body, making every movement as sensual as possible. She writhed under his ministrations, her body arching out of the water. He pulled her back down to keep her pressed firmly against him.

“Robin!” Her cry of pleasure echoed around the bathroom.

She sank back into the cooling water, limbs feeling like jelly. “Oh, I needed that.”

“I figured.” He chuckled before kissing her hair. “Now, you have a choice to make.”

“Oh? And what’s that?”

“You can go back to your study and finish work. Or you can come to bed with me and we can go for round two. What do you say?”

Regina sat up, turning to face him. She glared at him as he smirked. “That’s not fair. You already know my answer.”

“Of course I do.” He sounded so smug, she didn’t know whether to slap him or kiss him. Robin leaned forward. “Admit it, I’m irresistible.”

As she joined him in bed, Regina had to admit—to herself—that there was a lot of truth in that statement.
Happy Ending

Chapter Summary

OQ 9 - this is why I don't

Happy Ending

Regina burst out of Granny’s diner, fighting back tears. She should’ve known. Villains never get happy endings. Everyone had warned her about that—including Maleficent when she had stolen the Dark Curse from the only person she had been able to call a friend in the Enchanted Forest.

She and Robin had been tempting fate. They had been too happy. She had been too hopeful. Regina stared down the sidewalk she had walked only minutes earlier, Roland’s tiny hand clutched in hers. For a brief moment, she imagined she could be a family with Robin, his son and Henry.

She had been a fool.

“Regina? Regina, wait!” Emma’s voice called after her.

Regina stopped, but didn’t look back. “Go back inside, Ms. Swan. I have nothing to say to you.”

“Come on, Regina. Let’s just have it out. Do whatever you want to me. I can take it.”

She turned to find Emma standing behind her, arms opened wide. It would be easy to incinerate her, making Regina’s life so much easier. But she had told Zelena she was a hero and she was going to stay one…for Henry’s sake.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” she said. “You don’t have to worry about me holding a grudge for thirty years and doing something drastic. I just…can’t see you right now, you understand?”

Emma nodded. “Of course. I’d probably feel the same way if…”

“Don’t.” Regina held up a gloved hand. “Don’t pretend you understand what I’m going through. Please.”

The so-called Savior looked lost, unable to fix someone’s problems. Instead, she watched Regina with a puppy dog expression as she asked, “Is there anything I can do now? Besides staying out of your way?”

“Can you take Henry tonight? I don’t want him to see me like this.”

Emma sighed. “Okay. But he’s going to want to see you first thing in the morning.”

“Do you think you can hold him off until the afternoon?” Given how she planned to spend the night, she was going to need the time to chase away her hangover and make it look like she hadn’t been crying for several hours.

She straightened her coat. “Good night, Ms. Swan. I’ll see you and Henry tomorrow.”
Her house was quiet. Too quiet. It left her alone with her thoughts, which was always dangerous. So she pulled out the bottle of whiskey she had bought to share with Robin and began drinking straight from it. There was no one there to see her unladylike behavior.

She had downed half the whiskey when knocking came to her door. Regina lay on her couch in the dark, wondering who it could be. Emma had promised to stay away and keep Henry with her. Mary Margaret had a new baby to care for and there was no way David was going to leave his wife and child to check on a brokenhearted queen. Hook didn’t give a damn and Gold was on his honeymoon. Whoever was on the other side of the door could just go away.

The knocking died down and Regina closed her eyes. She took another pull of whiskey when the bottle was pulled from her mouth. Her eyes snapped open in annoyance, a withering comment on the tip of her tongue for the fool who had disturbed her.

Everything died away when she made out Robin’s form in the darkness. He looked down at her with sadness, guilt and what appeared to be a touch of anger. “So does this magical brew now offer companionship?”

“Go back to your wife.” She tried to grab the bottle from him but he held it out of her grasp.

Robin placed the bottle across the room before sitting down next to her. “We need to talk.”

“Do we?” She sighed, her anger dissipating back into sadness. “Marian is alive, Robin. Your greatest wish. So go home and be with her. Forget me.”

“Regina…”

“No, there is nothing to discuss. We had something good and I tempted fate with it. Fate’s dealt me a harsh reminder. This is why I don’t…I don’t get happiness, get love.”

Robin grabbed her, gently but firmly. “Regina, listen to me. You deserve happiness and love and everything else.”

“Just not with you.”

He closed his eyes, sighing. “Regina…”

“Please, Robin. Just go home.”

Robin stayed put, crossing his arms. “If you want me to leave, you’re going to have to remove me yourself.”

“Why did I have to pick a man as stubborn as me?” Regina threw up her hands, storming past him.

He grabbed her arm, stopping her. “Because we go well together, Regina.”

“Do we?”

“Yes. Pixie dust doesn’t lie.”

“Its timing sucks.” Regina pulled away. She crossed her arms, using them as a shield. “You said earlier it was about timing. Maybe we missed ours. Maybe I blew it completely when I slammed the door and ran from the tavern.”
Robin shook his head. “I refuse to believe that.”

“Well now’s clearly not our time either.” Regina let out a humorless laugh.

“Who says it isn’t?”

She was certain he had lost his mind and let her disbelief show on her face. “Are you mad? Marian, your wife, is back. How can it be our time?”

“Yes, Marian is back and that complicates things. There are many issues we need to work out, but I can’t go back to her. It wouldn’t be fair to her when I love another.”

It took a few moments for his statement to sink in and when it did, Regina didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. She stared at him before choking out: “You do?”

He nodded, starting to walk toward her. She remained still, holding her breath as her heart threatened to beat right out of her chest. Was this really happening?

Robin’s fingers grazed her hips. “I love you, Regina. I have since I rescued you from that flying monkey.”

“Back in the Enchanted Forest? When I was sniping at you?”

He nodded. “Common sense told me to just stay away from you, to not subject myself to everything you hurled at me. Yet I couldn’t. And I felt the same pull when I met you by the Witch’s farm house.”

“I felt it too,” Regina whispered. She then sighed. “And about how I treated you in the Enchanted Forest, I’m sorry. It wasn’t my best but I was scared.”

“I know.”

Her eyes widened. “You do?”

“Yes,” he confirmed. “I’ve known since the Enchanted Forest. I was just waiting for you to come around and take a chance.”

Regina felt tears come to her eyes. “You were very patient.”

“You have been worth the wait.”

“But what about Marian?”

He sighed, blue eyes turning sad. “It’s complicated, I admit. She and I have a lot to work out.”

“Does she know that? Does she know about us?”

“Yes, she does. I told her after you left the diner.” Robin led her over to the couch. Even once they were sitting, he never let go of her hand. “She wasn’t happy. In fact, she asked if I was under a spell.”

Regina made a little motion with her head, understanding where Marian was coming from. “What happened next?”

“I told her I wasn’t. That I had moved on and fallen in love with you. She then threw me out of camp.”
“She threw you out of your own camp?” Regina raised an eyebrow. “And the Merry Men just let her?”

He shrugged. “I was fine with it. She needs her space and time to process everything. And I wanted to talk to you. I didn’t want too much time to pass before assuring you that I still want you.”

Her defenses were finally broken and Regina leaned into him. Robin wrapped his arms around her and held her close. There was still a lot for them to work out, between themselves and between Robin and Marian. But that was for later. Now she just relished being in his embrace.

They eventually fell asleep on the couch, wrapped in each other’s arms. In the morning, Regina made breakfast while Robin grabbed a quick shower. As they ate at the table together, both snuck looks at each other and smiled whenever their eyes met.

Robin offered to leave before Emma dropped Henry off but she insisted that she didn’t want him to go. Emma didn’t press for more information when she found Robin sitting on Regina’s couch though Henry did, acting cool toward the man he had once admired. Robin asked her to leave them alone so he could have a man-to-man talk with Henry and, though hesitant, Regina obliged.

When she returned, she found Henry teaching Robin how to play one of his video games. The two laughed and teased each other. She leaned against the doorframe, crossing her arms. “Can I get you two anything?”

“No, thank you,” Robin said. He glanced at her long enough to flash her a reassuring smile.

Henry, though, looked up with pleading eyes. “Chips and a soda, please?”

“You can have a soda. But maybe some popcorn instead?” Regina suggested. Henry sighed but agreed.

She returned with a bowl of popcorn and Henry’s soda, placing them on the table in front of them. Taking a seat by them, Regina pulled out some paperwork to do while the two played their video games. She kept sneaking glances at them and as Robin beat Henry, causing the boy to declare he had clearly cheated, she realized this was her new normal. Robin, Henry and, once custody was worked out with Marian, Roland filling her days with laughter, arguments and happiness.

Villains didn’t get happy endings. But maybe—maybe—she wasn’t a villain anymore.
Pain Management

Chapter Notes

Robin on painkillers trying to cuddle with Regina. Pre-OQ

Pain Management

Regina made up one of her spare rooms just as David and Emma arrived with him. They supported Robin on either side, though he seemed unable to walk at this point. He seemed incapable of a lot, if Regina was honest. “Is he okay?” she asked, pointing at the outlaw.

Emma grunted under Robin’s dead weight. “As okay as someone can be after being shot by his own friend’s arrow. Zelena played quite the mind game on the Merry Men.”

Robin roused, lifting his head. She saw his blue eyes were unfocused as he looked her. A loopy smile formed on his face. “Milady. A pleasure,” he said, words slurred.

“What did the hospital give him?” Regina asked Emma.

“Good old fashion Vicodin.” Emma said as she and David shifted him again. “Can we continue the interrogation after we put him in bed?”

“Right. Sorry. Follow me.” Regina led them back upstairs, watching as the father-daughter duo laid Robin on the bed.

Emma straightened up. “You didn’t have to volunteer to watch him, Regina.”

Regina nodded. “I did. This is my fault.”

“This is Zelena’s fault.”

“But I’m the reason Zelena targeted him.” Regina sighed. “Thank you, Ms. Swan. I’ve got it from here. You and your father can go.”

Emma hesitated. “Are you sure? I can stay and help.”

“I assure you I can take care of him. Thank you anyway.”

David pulled his daughter from the room as Regina covered him with the blanket. Robin slept on, his head rolling to the side and his lips slightly parted. Emboldened by the fact he was medicated, Regina lifted his arm and rolled the sleeve up until his lion tattoo was uncovered. Her heart beat faster at the physical proof that she was caring for her soul mate.

Sighing, she put his arm down and decided to do something else while he slept. Regina tried to walk away but found her arm weighed down. When she glanced down, she saw that Robin had latched onto her arm. She tried to tug it away but he only tightened his hold.

Regina leaned down. “Robin,” she said softly. “I need you to let go of me.”
“No. S'comfortable.” He tugged on her arm and she lost her balance, landing on the bed.

Heart racing, Regina held her breath as she looked at Robin’s face. His eyes remained closed, though, and his breathing even. She hadn’t hurt him or woke him up. It appeared Whale had him on the really, really good stuff.

She prayed it would keep him asleep as she tried to free herself from his grasp. He kept pulling her closer, until he was wrapped around her.

Regina gave up the fight, realizing she was stuck like this for some time. The best thing she could do was wait for him to loosen his hold so she could slip away.

He rested his head against hers, sighing contently. Her ear was pressed against his chest, allowing her to hear his heart beat. The intimacy of their position washed over her.

She closed her eyes and let herself pretend. Pretend that this could be real. That she could spend a lazy afternoon curled up with Robin in bed, just napping. That she could wake up wrapped in Robin’s arms. That she could fall asleep the same way. The perfect bookends to her days.

“Regina? I’m sorry but I forgot to…” Emma pushed open the door and stopped. Her lips curled into a smirk. “Comfortable?”

Regina raised her head, glaring at Emma. “What is it, Miss Swan?”

“I forgot to leave the medicine Whale prescribed for Robin.” Emma placed the pill bottle on the night stand. “I’ll leave you two alone.”

As Emma closed the door, Regina could hear her laughter. Groaning, she tried to go after the blonde but the other one in her life tightened his grip on her waist. Robin still wasn’t letting her go anywhere.

Giving into the situation, Regina settled back down next to him. She laid her head on his shoulder and closed her eyes. Perhaps a nap was in order.

Robin felt like his head was filled with mud. He could barely lift it and his thoughts felt trapped. Digging through the mud, he tried to remember what had happened.

He recalled sitting around the fire in his camp, laughing with his men. Then a cold wind had cut through them, a strange wind. Everyone sprang into action, weapons at the ready. Robin grabbed his bow and waited for the Witch to make her presence known.

They didn’t have to wait long. She stepped from behind a tree, cackling. None of his men gave her the chance to speak. Arrows flew at her from every direction while a few rushed her with their swords. Yet it seemed she was able to evade their every movement.

Robin recalled a distant memory, of something he long tried to forget. Of a mission for the Dark One to Oz, to steal something from this witch. This witch who could be anywhere and anyone…

“Wait! Hold fire! That’s an order–hold fire!” Robin yelled into the chaos.

It was too late. Alan let loose an arrow that flew straight into Robin’s gut. He doubled over as the witch’s laughter dissipated from their clearing. The men gathered around him, trying to figure out how to help him.
That’s when it got blurry for him. He recalled being carried and he recalled running into Emma and her father. They took him to the hospital, he remembered, where the doctor gave him stitches. He also gave him something for the pain which made everything fuzzy. Struggling, Robin recalled people arguing over where he was to recuperate before someone insisted that she was going to take him to her house.

Regina, the Queen. She had been adamant about him staying with her.

He opened his eyes, glad for the dim lighting in the room. The curtains were drawn but judging from the little light they kept out, Robin guessed it was late afternoon or early evening. He frowned, thinking of Roland. No doubt his Merry Men were caring for him, but what would they tell him? He didn’t want his son to worry.

A dull pounding in his side reminded him why he couldn’t just stroll back into his camp. He was loathe to admit it, but he needed the rest. The bed he was lying on was really comfortable. And warm…

Robin shifted and heard someone sigh next to him. He glanced down, surprised to find he was not alone in bed. His eyes widened as he saw who was in bed with him.

Regina was curled against his side, her head resting against his chest. One hand clutched his shirt. Her dark hair was fanned out over his arms. She seemed younger in sleep, freer.

His heart sped up. There was something about her that fascinated him since their first meeting at the Witch’s house. Something, though, told him that they had met before but had forgotten due to the curse. He wished he could recall the missing year. Perhaps they had had something during it?

Or maybe it was just wishful thinking. Just something he wanted to tie himself to her more—more than just protecting her heart. And now sharing a bed with her. How had that happened?

As he thought about it, few hazy memories came back to him. He heard Regina asking him to let her go, heard himself refuse. Biting back a groan, he realized he had pulled her next to him. Robin recalled Marian once telling him that he liked to cuddle when under the influence of painkillers. He must’ve reached out for Regina.

Yet she hadn’t done anything to extract herself. Instead, she was asleep next to him. Smiling, he pried her hand from his shirt and held it. This felt nice, he had to admit, sleeping next to someone again. He raised her hand to his lips, kissing it.

She shifted again her sleep but still didn’t wake. Robin grew bolder, now kissing the top of her head. He took a deep breath, smelling apples and vanilla. It suited her. He placed another kiss there.

Regina let out a little hum and her eyelids fluttered a bit. He held his breath, wondering if she waking up. She rubbed her cheek against his shirt but didn’t wake. He let out that breath.

The pounding in his side though became sharper. He was going to need another one of those painkillers. But he didn’t want to wake Regina. Who knew how good her nights were, knowing the Wicked Witch was after her?

He grimaced as the pain intensified, a groan escaping from his lips. Regina shot up, looking at him with wide eyes. “Did I hurt you?” she asked.

It pained him to think her first thought was that she had done something wrong. “No, milady. I believe whatever the doctor gave me has worn off,” he said.
Regina glanced at the clock and her eyes widened. “I didn’t realize it had gotten so late.”

She hopped off the bed and Robin found he missed her presence immediate. He watched as she picked up two small orange cylinders with white lids, reading the writing on the bottles. “Okay, you have an antibiotic and a painkiller. You’re probably going to want to eat before you take either. Is soup okay?”

“Soup is fine.” He tried to sit up, ignoring the pain in his side.

Regina was by his side before he could blink, pushing him back down. “You need to rest. Can’t chance popping those stitches.”

“As milady commands,” he said, settling back into the pillows.

“As the doctor commands. Now stay put.” She disappeared out of the room and Robin wondered if he had said something wrong.

Regina returned with his soup on a tray. She set him up and headed for the door again.

“Wait!” he called out. When she paused, he continued: “You want to stay? I could use some company.”

“I have a few things to do. I’ll be back in a little bit.” He noticed she never met his eyes. Then she was gone.

Robin settled back against the pillows. She was avoiding him and he knew why.

Later, Regina came back to take away his empty dishes. She then turned back to his medicine. “I’ll give you the antibiotic first and then the Vicodin.”

“The Vicodin was the one for pain?” She nodded and Robin frowned. “Maybe then I shouldn’t take it.”

“Are you in pain?”

“No.” But he was unable to keep the grimace from his face when pain shot through him as he shifted in bed.

She shook her head. “That settles it. You’re taking the Vicodin.”

“No, milady. I don’t need it.”

“Why are you being so stubborn about this? You’re in pain, the medication will take it away. What’s so bad about that?”

“The cuddling,” he muttered, hopefully too low for her to hear.

Regina stopped, frowning. “Pardon?”

“Nothing.”

“No, you said something. What was it?”
He sighed, realizing she wasn’t going to back down. “The cuddling,” he repeated, louder. “I tend to cuddle on such medicine, as you’ve learned.”

“Oh.”

“And I know it made things awkward so I won’t take the medicine. Then I won’t have the urge to cuddle.”

Regina stepped closer. “You’re taking the Vicodin. I will not have you writhing in pain. And if you’re worried, I’ll leave before it kicks in. How’s that?”

“Fine.” Robin leaned back against his pillows, resigned. “As long you’re comfortable, milady. I am but a guest in your home. I will not make you uncomfortable.”

Something softened in her gaze. “Robin…Don’t worry about me. You just rest up and get better. Okay?”

He nodded and took the medicine from her. She watched him take it and then helped him get more comfortable. “Sleep well. We’ll get you back on your feet in no time.”

Robin woke sometime during the night. The pain had returned, though not as sharp as it had been the day before. Whatever Whale had given him was working, he realized.

He tried to roll over but found one side was weighted down. Was this a new complication? Robin glanced over and his heart sped up.

Once again curled against his side was the queen. Her arm was thrown across his chest and her face buried against his shoulder. Robin searched his mind, trying to recall when he had pulled her into bed again. Nothing came up.

Robin smiled as he got more comfortable next to her. He didn’t know what would happen in the morning, but perhaps it wouldn’t be as awkward as he feared.
Comfort Food

Chapter Notes

“This has been a very bad week and you just grabbed the last box of my favorite comfort food at the supermarket” AU

Comfort Food

Regina Mills barely waited for the automatic doors to slide open before she charged into the grocery store. She was a woman on a mission and no one was going to stop her. If her life had been animated—and there were times she wondered if perhaps her life was some show people watched for amusement—there would’ve been a dark storm cloud floating over her head. Because she had had a day.

Her alarm clock had decided to go on strike and not go off at all. Regina’s internal clock had kicked in, but not until 8:50 AM…when she had to start work at 9:00 AM. She had fired off a text to tell her assistant she was going to be late and to hold her calls when Mary Margaret had reminded her that she had a meeting at nine. And he was waiting for her in her office. Cursing, Regina hopped around her room as she tried to find something to wear that day.

Putting together an outfit ended up being the only good thing about her day. Her car wouldn’t start so she had to call a car service to take her to work. At this point, she was almost a half hour late for her meeting and she was cursing the fact she had made such an early appointment. When she got out of the car, she glanced down to find a giant run in her stockings. Horrified, Regina ducked into the nearest ladies’ room and pulled the garment off. She was going to have to do this meeting sans stockings while she sent Mary Margaret to get her a new pair.

The meeting did not go as well as she had thought it would. She had anticipated an easy sell to get this company to let them handle their next ad campaign. Regina had spent the days prior compiling all the necessary data she had needed to wow them and thought Ruby had made a brilliant mock up for her to display. Yet the potential clients didn’t blink an eye and left her with promises to think about their pitch.

Mary Margaret returned back with her new stockings in time for Regina to wear them as her boss, Mr. Gold, chewed her out for possibly blowing the deal. “I should’ve had Zelena do it,” he spat. “She at least would’ve been here on time and would’ve had them eating out of her hand.”

He knew Regina had disliked the woman since she had arrived at the firm and the feeling was mutual. Gold had chosen to use Zelena to light a fire under her and it worked. She stormed back to her office and buckled down, focusing on the campaign for Gepetto’s Toys. Yet even that went to hell in a handbasket and she had to call all-hands on deck to finish it on time.

Now it was nine o’clock at night and Regina hadn’t eaten since Mary Margaret brought her a salad around lunch time. Her stomach rumbled but she only needed one thing after a day like this. Everyone had a comfort food, even high-powered ad executives.

She guided her cart down the pasta aisle, which was looking a bit bare. The employees were falling
down on their jobs, not restocking the shelves. But then again, if she was honest, there weren’t that many people in here. They probably weren’t expecting someone to be grabbing spaghetti and the like at this time of the night.

Which meant there was only one box of macaroni and cheese left. She saw the lone blue box sitting on the shelf as she put her cart to the side. Hurrying up, she reached for it…only for the box to be yanked away before her fingers could grab it.

Regina turned to see who dared to steal the last box of her ultimate comfort food from her. It was a tall blond man with eyes as blue as the box. He wore a green button down shirt under a leather jacket, paired with dark pants and shoes. If she hadn’t been so angry and tired, she might have noticed that he had dark circles under his eyes like hers. Or that they didn’t detract from his handsomeness.

Instead, she only saw red. “Excuse me,” she said, putting all her bite in her words. “I was going to take that box.”

“Sorry, milady, but I got it first.” He dropped it into his cart and began to walk away. “Good night.”

Regina jumped in front of his cart. “Oh no. You don’t understand. I need that box.”

“Why? It’s just macaroni and cheese.” The man crossed his arms.

“No, it’s not. It’s the ultimate comfort food and I need it because I’ve had the worst day ever. No, scratch that. I’ve had the worst week ever. So all I want to do is go home, make some mac and cheese, curl up on my couch in my pajamas and watch some mindless reality show while eating the ooey, gooey cheesy goodness.”

He moved from behind the cart, coming nose-to-nose with her. “Look, lady, I get it. But I got it first. You can just go to another store. Good night.”

Regina had nothing to stay, mostly because for the first time she realized how handsome her foe was. He was taller than her, forcing her to look up into his bright blue eyes. She felt her heart speed up and she fought down the butterflies taking flight in her stomach. This was not the time to get infatuated.

By the time she recovered her senses, he had walked away. Regina’s shoulders slumped and she wondered if there was anything else that could provide the same comfort as macaroni and cheese. Maybe there was a Girl Scout somewhere selling cookies…

“Robin.” His accented voice interrupted her musing. She was so lost in thought, she hadn’t noticed when he doubled back to her.

She glanced at his outstretched hand before looking up at him again. “What?”

“My name is Robin,” he repeated. At her confused look, he let out a little laugh. “I figured if I introduced myself, I wouldn’t be a complete stranger asking another complete stranger over to his flat.”

“To his…Why?”

He sighed. “I feel bad. So I’m taking a chance and asking you to come share the mac and cheese with me. I’m also a really good listener, I swear.”

The rational part of Regina’s brain told her to say no. That it was a bad idea, the start of a murder
mystery. It told her to go to another store or to just get drunk instead. Sure she would have a
hangover in the morning, but at least she’d still be alive.

Yet there was the part of her that was tired. The part fried from the week she had had, the part that
was craving mac and cheese, told her to go with him. At least she’d get her comfort food and maybe
get a chance to vent about everything.

“Regina.” She shook his hand. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“Same. Now, why don’t you go grab some ice cream and we’ll make this a proper pity party?” He
smiled, revealing dimples that stopped her heart.

She smiled as well. “Sounds like a good plan. Meet you at checkout?”

Robin’s place wasn’t far from hers. It wasn’t as luxurious as hers, but it was a decent apartment. “My
roommate’s on a business trip, so we’re on our own,” he said, carrying the grocery bags into the
kitchen.

“Is there anything I can do?” Regina wandered after him.

He motioned to the cabinets behind her. “Care to set the table?”

Within a half hour, they were sitting at the table with bowls of steaming macaroni and cheese. Robin
had also offered her a beer and Regina had taken it. She was already this far, might as well go all the
way. Soon, they were sharing the reasons they both had had horrible, no good, very bad weeks.

“So you didn’t get the grant? Even after all that work?” Regina put another forkful in her mouth.

Robin shook his head. “Turns out we didn’t stand a chance. I learned the other guy was sleeping
with someone high up in the parks department.”

“Ouch.” She winced. “Well, it looks like I might have blown a big contract and that means my rival
at work is going to walk around like a queen for weeks, gloating and holding it over me.”

“Well, she sounds lovely.” Sarcasm laced his words.

Regina laughed. “She can be a real witch sometimes. Then again, sometimes I’m no better.”

They lapsed into silence and Regina put her fork down. She sighed before looking at Robin. “I’m
sorry about earlier. I shouldn’t have snapped and I shouldn’t have demanded that you give me the
mac and cheese.”

“Thank you,” he said. “And I guess it turned out for the best in the end, huh?”

She smiled, taking another swig of beer. When she put down the bottle, she glanced around the
apartment. There didn’t seem to be a woman’s touch reflected anywhere but that didn’t mean
anything. “So, do I have to worry about a jealous significant other misconstruing this dinner?” she
asked.

Robin laughed, his dimples returning. “No, no. I’m currently single.”

“You? I find that hard to believe.” Regina was surprised by the sincerity in her words, but she found
they were true. So far, Robin had proved himself to be a kind man who was bright and funny. This
night was proving to be the best she had in a long time.
And the fact she was finding him to be more and more attractive with every passing moment didn’t hurt either.

“Yes, well, it’s the truth.” He took a swig of his beer. As he toyed with the fraying label, he grew serious. “I was in a relationship for a long time. But well…Let’s put it this way—I got the invite to her wedding the other day.”

Regina grimaced. “Well, you’re not the only one unlucky in love. I was dumped a few days ago because my ex thought I worked too much. He also had a few choice names for me that I’d rather not dwell on.”

“He’s an idiot.” Robin frowned. “You’re better off without him.”

She smiled. “Thanks, but I’m sure there was some truth in his statements.”

“Don’t let him get to you.” He reached across, taking her hand in his. “He’s not worth it. Trust me.”

After doing the dishes, they ended up on his couch with new bottles of beer. They had moved on from their horrible weeks to more pleasant, if embarrassing, stories. “So there I was, stark naked and staring down my professor,” Robin said, blues sparkling.

Regina covered her mouth with her hand, trying not to laugh. She moved it down a bit to ask: “What did you do?”

“Turned on the famous Locksley charm. It’s yet to fail the men in my family.” He winked at her. “She let me off with a warning.”

“You were lucky.”

He shrugged, taking a swig of his beer. “Your turn.”

“I guess it’s only fair.” Regina sighed. “Okay, when I was fourteen, I decided one day that I was old enough to shave. After all, all my friends had already started—or so they claimed. So I stormed downstairs and demanded my mother teach me how to shave my legs. I just didn’t know she had invited some of my father’s colleagues over.”

“That doesn’t sound too bad.”

“Yeah,” she agreed. “Except that I was only in my training bra and pink frilly panties, standing in front of a room of middle-aged men.”

Robin grimaced. “Okay. That’s bad.”

“Mother reamed me out for that. And I think that’s why she refused to let me shave for two more years.”

He propped his head up with his hand, a weird look Regina couldn’t identify in his eyes. “You know what? I think this is the best risk I’ve taken in years.”

“Me too,” she agreed, putting down her empty beer bottle. “Though I’m still not sure you aren’t a serial killer.”

Robin let out a bark of laughter, setting his own empty beer bottle next to hers. “You have a point, milady. I guess you just have to trust me.”
She let out a little hum, sliding closer to him on the couch. With her heart hammering in her chest, Regina Mills threw caution to the wind and kissed the man she had only met hours before at a grocery store. A man who had invited a perfect stranger into his home because she had had as bad a week as he had.

A man who was a great kisser.

He cradled her head as he deepened the kiss, tongue exploring her mouth. Both tasted of beer and the cheese from their macaroni earlier. Not exactly her definition of romantic but it was something Regina found herself hoping to keep in her life.

She wanted to keep him in her life.

They broke their kiss but Robin pulled her close for a hug. “Well, I wasn’t expecting that.”

“Are you complaining?”

“Nope,” he replied. “Though I would like to do it again.”

Regina sat up. “Me too. But I’m afraid I need to go home. I need to get up early if I hope to salvage what today ruined.”

“Will I see you again?”

She smiled, pleased that he was going to miss her and wanted more as well. Pulling out her business card, she jotted down something on the back and handed it to him. “That’s my cell. Give me a call and we’ll set up another date.”

“I’ll call you tomorrow night,” he promised, standing as she did. “Until then.”

Regina nodded, kissing him again. “Until then.”
A Purrfect Beginning

Chapter Summary

We’re neighbors who don’t really talk but your cat might have gotten my cat pregnant??
We must raise this little kitty family together” AU

A Purrfect Beginning

Marian had never understood why he fed the stray cats in the neighborhood, especially once their son arrived. “You know what they carry, Robin. You’re a vet, for God’s sake,” she told him once, rocking a fussy Roland.

Robin straightened up after leaving a bowl of food outside their kitchen door. He smiled, taking his wife in his arms. “I know we’re fine. I’m only feeding them, not letting them crawl over the house.”

“Yet.” She sighed. “Look, I love you and your crazy love for animals. But please, can you a humor a neurotic first time mother?”

He kissed her forehead and then their son’s. “Okay. I’ll stop feeding them here.”

Robin was true to his word. For the first few days, the stray cats congregated in their yard until they realized there was no more food. All drifted off, except for one orange tabby. He kept coming around day after day, the sight of his emaciated form tugging on Robin’s heartstrings as he watched the creature from the kitchen table.

Marian placed her hand on his shoulder. “Go ahead,” she said. “Take him in. Just keep him away from Roland until you’ve thoroughly examined him.”

“Thank you.” He jumped up, kissing her cheek. “And don’t worry. He’ll be fine soon enough.”

The cat grew stronger under Robin’s care. It took a bit longer to convince Marian that the cat was free of diseases but soon she let him bring the cat into the house. “So, have you named him yet?” she asked, watching Robin pet him.

He frowned. “I’ve just been calling him Tom.”

“You are the most uninventive man I’ve ever met. Good thing I handled naming our son.” Marian smiled, reaching out to run a hand through the cat’s soft fur. “How about Thomas O’Malley?”

Robin raised an eyebrow. “You want to name the cat after the pub where we met?”

“It’s better than just calling him Tom.”

And so Thomas O’Malley stayed with the Locksley family, soon just being called O’Malley. He was both an indoor and outdoor cat, sometimes disappearing for a few days before returning to curl up inside the house for several more. Robin and Marian just got used to it.
Then Robin’s life was turned upside down, thanks to a drunk driver. Marian was taken from him and Roland, leaving their house feeling emptier. As he sat on the couch, still in the suit he wore to his wife’s funeral, he stared down a glass of whiskey as O’Malley climbed into his lap. The cat purred and Robin felt the animal was trying to offer him comfort. Holding Thomas close, Robin finally allowed himself to break down crying.

A year later, Robin felt like his life was starting to stabilize again. He and Roland had fallen into a new routine without Marian. In the morning, he dropped the boy off at preschool before heading to his animal clinic. Then he would return home to relieve Belle of her babysitting duties and have dinner with his son before putting the boy to bed. Robin would then sit on the couch and watch some TV. If it was a day O’Malley decided to stay in, the tabby would curl up next to him and then fall asleep with Robin, lying on Marian’s empty side.

That was when the house next to them was finally bought after years of sitting vacant. One day, a crew came in to fix up the house and make repairs needed. Robin watched them as he played with Roland and O’Malley lounged in the sun. He wondered who had bought the old house and Roland bounced with excitement. “Maybe they’ll have a kid I can play with!” he said.

Robin chuckled, knowing how much Roland wished to have a neighbor to play with. Most of the children on their block were older than him, either already in middle school or high school. “Perhaps, my boy,” he said. “Perhaps.”

A few days after the cleaning crew and repairmen stormed the neighborhood, the moving van showed up. Robin watched them from his window, sipping his coffee as they brought the furniture into the house. From what he could see, it was of a fine quality. He was impressed.

He was at work when the new neighbors moved in. Roland told him all about it over dinner. “There’s a boy but he’s older than me,” he said, disappointment in his voice.

“Sorry, Roland. Maybe next time.” Robin ruffled his boy’s dark curls. “Now, go wash up for dinner.”

It was Belle who filled him in more on his new neighbors. “Her name is Regina and she’s taken up a position in the district attorney’s office.”

“A lawyer?” Robin raised an eyebrow.

Belle nodded. “She’s interested in a career in politics, according to her son, Henry.”

“Roland says he’s older.”

“Yes, ten.” Belle hesitated. “Regina’s asked me to babysit him until she can find a fulltime one for Henry. Do you mind if I watch him and Roland?”

“No, of course not. Whatever you have to do.”

Belle smiled. “And is it okay if I have to take Roland to their house or bring Henry here?”

“As long as it’s okay with Regina, it’s fine with me.” Robin smiled, hugging her. “You’re the best, you know that?”

“You keep telling me that.” Belle picked up her purse. “Good night, Robin.”
It took another month before Robin met his neighbors. He had heard all about Henry from Roland, who seemed to idolize the older boy. Henry could read big boy books, he had a telescope in his bedroom, he knew everything there was to know…Robin chuckled, glad that his son had found a friend though a little jealous of this ten-years-old genius.

Roland also revealed that Henry and his mother owned a cat named Duchess. “She’s all white and likes to cuddle,” he said. “Maybe she and O’Malley can be friends.”

“I don’t think Duchess and O’Malley run in the same circles,” Robin said. He frowned as he realized he hadn’t seen the cat in a while. But he shook it off; O’Malley would return when he was ready.

He did expect to meet his neighbor over her cat. No doubt Duchess would need a vet, so any day now he expected Regina Mills to enter his clinic.

What he didn’t expect was her to show up, irate, on his doorstep early one Saturday morning. It took him a few moments to realize she was in a foul mood as he first noticed she was a very beautiful woman. Her dark hair was pulled back into a simple bun and she wore only a loose shirt with dark blue jeans. But it was her brown eyes that drew him in. Robin had always been a sucker for brown eyes.

It was then he noticed she was angry. She held out O’Malley. “I believe this alley cat is yours?”

“He is not an alley cat.” Robin took the cat from her arms. “Is there a problem?”

“Yes. I found that mangy cat defiling mine. Thankfully my son was still asleep or I’d have to go home to have a really awkward conversation with him.” Regina crossed her arms.

Robin glanced down at O’Malley, swearing the cat looked smug. He looked back up at Regina and sighed. “I’m sorry. Look, I’m a vet so I’ll examine your cat for you and if anything comes from this little tryst…”

“You’re a vet and your cat isn’t neutered?”

“I take it your cat isn’t spayed?” Robin raised an eyebrow.

She glared at him before huffing. “Okay, you win this time. I’ll bring Duchess to your clinic this week for a checkup.”

Before Robin could say anything, she turning on her heels and stalked back down his walkway. He followed her until she was back in her house. Closing his own door, Robin glanced down at his cat. “What did you do now?”

Regina was true to her word and showed up at his clinic so he could examine Duchess, a snow white purebred cat with a regal bearing befitting her name. When he was finished, he frowned. “I have to run a few tests, but I think Duchess might be pregnant.”

“What now?” She crossed her arms.

“I guess I keep monitoring Duchess until she has the kittens and we go from there.” He sighed, running a hand through his hair. “Does that sound agreeable to you?”
She dropped her arms and sighed as well. “I guess so.”

Henry and Roland were the only ones excited about Duchess’ kittens. Well, once Robin assured Roland that O’Malley didn’t have to move in with Regina and Henry. “He can stay here and visit them,” he told his son.

Robin began checking up on Duchess weekly at Regina’s house. He would go over with Roland, who would run up to Henry’s room and play with the older boy while their parents stayed in the living room. Tension filled the room each time. It was as if he had impregnated her cat.

She was always friendly to Roland though. Not that Robin expected her to take it out on a young boy either—he had a far better opinion of Regina Mills than she did of him—but it still made him happy. She would offer him food and drink whenever they came over, listening to whatever stories he wanted to tell her that day as she prepared his food with a bright smile.

For his part, Robin tried to get to know Henry. The boy was on the shy side and tended to keep himself, better able to connect with Roland. He kept trying, probing for something—*anything*—that would allow him to establish a repartee with Henry.

He found it a few weeks into tending to Duchess. One warm afternoon, he played catch with Roland in their yard. Regina had yet to erect a fence between their properties (he had no doubt she was going to do so) and he could see Henry sitting on the back steps, reading. He kept an eye on the boy while tossing a ball to his own. Roland missed a toss, the ball sailing into the next yard. Henry’s head perked up as he stared at the ball.

“Why don’t you toss it here, Henry?” Robin held up his glove, smiling at the boy.

Henry stared at the ball before looking back at Robin. “I can’t throw.”

“Just give it a try,” he encouraged the boy. “See what you can do.”

Still looking unsure, Henry set his book aside and approached the ball as if it would bite him. He picked it up and gave it a toss. The ball landed not even a foot away, though it rolled a bit. Henry looked dejected. “See?”

“I can work with that. Wait right there.” Robin ran inside and found a spare glove he had lying around. A friend had given it to him for Roland but it was still too large for the preschooler’s hand. Now, he believed it would fit Henry just fine.

Robin returned outside and handed the glove to Henry. “Here, you can use that for now. We’re going to have a good old-fashioned game of catch.”

Henry stared at the glove as if he had never seen one before. Maybe he hadn’t, Robin realized. The boy glanced up at him. “Are you sure?”

“Absolutely. Go ahead.”

Taking the glove, Henry put it on his hand. It was still a bit big but it would do for now. Robin smiled and picked up the ball. “Okay, let’s go into my yard so we don’t accidentally break a window and cause your mother to hate me more than she already does.”

Henry tilted his head. “I don’t think Mom hates you. She’s always polite to you.”

“Yeah, well, you’ll learn as an adult you can be polite but not like someone.” Robin positioned himself a good distance from Henry. “Okay, I’m going to toss the ball to you. Try and catch it.”
The ball sailed in a nice arc but only tapped the edge of Henry’s glove before landing at his feet. He sighed as Robin hurried to reassure the boy. “That was good first attempt. Let’s work on your stance.”

Robin spent a good part of the afternoon helping Henry, playing with him and Roland. After a few hours, Henry had improved a great deal. Robin clapped him on the back. “Keep practicing and you might be able to make the local little league team.”

“Really?” Henry’s eyes lit up. “You think so?”

When Robin nodded again, he smiled. Henry pulled off the glove and tried to give it back to the man. Robin pushed it toward Henry. “No, you keep it. It’s just collecting dust in my house.”

“Thank you.” Henry clutched it toward his chest.

“Who wants lemonade?”

Robin turned to find Regina standing in her yard, holding a tray with four cups filled with the summertime drink. The boys ran forward and each took a cup, thanking her. She handed one to Robin and gave him a genuine smile. He nearly fell over. “Thank you,” he said, returning the smile.

He drank his lemonade and sat on Regina’s back porch as they watched their sons chase each other around the yard. Robin didn’t know what had changed, but he wasn’t going to question it.

Regina set a cup of coffee down in front of Robin as he sat at her kitchen table following one of Duchess’ checkups. “Everything’s progressing nicely. I don’t anticipate any problems when she gives birth,” he said.

“Thank you,” Regina said, sitting down across from him. “And I don’t just mean for stepping up when others would dismiss it because it’s just a cat. Thank you for playing catch with Henry.”

“It was my pleasure. He’s a good kid.”

Regina smiled. “He is. But he hasn’t had much experience with sports. My mother…Well, she had clear definitions on what girls did and what boys did. Girls didn’t go outside and toss a ball around in the yard. So I’m no good when it comes to playing catch with him. And there’s never really been a constant male presence in Henry’s life to do all that sporty stuff with him.”

“I see.” Robin stared at his coffee, debating whether or not to ask the question dancing around his head. It could ruin this truce he and Regina seemed to have but curiosity won out. “You can tell me to shove it, but may I ask what happened to Henry’s father?”

She shrugged and then held up her hands. “Before you think the worst of me…Henry’s adopted.”

“Oh.” He hadn’t thought anything of her. She didn’t have to tell him that. “Does he know?”

Regina shook her head. “I plan to tell him in a few years, when he’s older. Anyway, it was a closed adoption so I know next to nothing about his birth parents, except for the fact that his mother was young and in prison.”

“I see.” He placed his mug down. “You didn’t have to tell me that, you know.”

“I know, but I wanted to. I thought, well, that you should know a bit more about Henry if you’re
going to spend more time around him.”

Robin smiled. “You’ll let me?”

“Yes.” Regina sighed. “I admit we got off on the wrong foot. And most of that was my fault.”

“Well, my cat did play a part in that.”

“So did mine. It takes two to tango, right?” She raised an eyebrow.

He nodded. “It does.”

They cleaned up their dishes and Regina peeked in on Duchess. She frowned. “Robin, come here. You have to see this.”

“Is something wrong?” Robin walked into the living room and stopped. O’Malley had somehow gotten into the house and was lying next to Duchess. It was like something out of a cartoon. “Well, look at that.”

“Cats aren’t monogamous.”

“No, they aren’t. I guess we got two special cats.” Robin rubbed the back of his neck. “I hope you don’t mind.”

She toyed with her bottom lip using her teeth. “I guess if I’m giving his owner a second chance, I should give O’Malley one as well.”

School let out as Duchess entered her second and final month of pregnancy. O’Malley spent more and more time at Regina’s, much to the adults’ surprise. Their boys, on the other hand, thought it was romantic and just how things were done. Neither parent was going to shatter their illusion.

The line between Robin’s yard and Regina’s disappeared as well. Both boys took to running across both expanses of grass and Robin practiced baseball with Henry there. The boy improved greatly and Robin convinced Regina to sign him up for a sports summer camp. He signed Roland up too, much to the boy’s pleasure.

On the Fourth of July, they hosted a joined barbeque. Regina and Henry only knew a few people still in Storybrooke and Robin used the opportunity to expand her social circle. His receptionist, Mary Margaret, took to Regina immediately. She offered to show Regina around town and to help her with anything she needed.

By the end of the evening, everyone settled into seats or on blankets as fireworks lit up the sky. Roland had chosen to settle on Regina’s lap and Henry sat at Robin’s feet. He met Regina’s eyes and she smiled, sending a strange feeling running through him. A feeling he hadn’t had since meeting Marian at O’Malley’s all those years ago…

The fireworks ended and people began to leave. A few people stayed to help Robin and Regina clean up, Mary Margaret and her fiancé David included. She helped Robin dump out the unfinished drinks, giving him a thoughtful look. “Things seem to be going well between you and Regina.”

“We’ve called a truce.”

“Robin, it looks like more than a truce. You looked like a little family.” She crossed her arms. “So
what’s going on?”

He shrugged. “We’re friends. I think.”

“Would you like to be more?”

“Mary Margaret,” Robin said, warning in his voice. He sighed. “Let’s not rush anything. Regina and I are in a good place. That’s all that matters.”

She nodded and said her goodbyes, leaving with David. Robin returned inside Regina’s house to pick up Roland. He found everyone gathered around Duchess’ bed and frowned. “Is something wrong?”

Regina looked up. “I think she’s having her kittens.”

“Okay, step back and let me look.” Robin knelt down next to the cat as Regina pulled their boys back a bit. He sighed. “Yes, she is. We’re in for a night.”

Duchess’ two kittens arrived several hours later and the four of them plopped on the couch, exhausted. When Robin came to as the first few pale rays of sunshine drifted across his face, he found Duchess and O’Malley curled around their kittens. He chuckled, once again marveling at how odd their cats were.

Looking down, he found Roland sprawled out on his lap. One of his legs dangled over the side of the couch. Henry rested his head on Regina’s lap, curled up next to her. She was using Robin’s shoulder as a pillow. A soft smile played on her lips and he thought she never looked more beautiful. He pressed a kiss to her forehead. She scrunched up her nose in response but slept on.

Mary Margaret was right. He did want to be more than friends with her. Looking around at their little tableau, it just felt… right. All he could do now was ask Regina out for dinner and pray she felt the same.

They ended up giving the kittens away once they were weaned. Roland and Henry protested, insisting that they could each care for one. But Robin and Regina felt adding more cats to their families just wasn’t right at that time. The boys agreed only when Belle and Mary Margaret said they would take the kittens. At least they knew the kittens were going to good homes.

A little over two years later, Robin found himself tending to another one of Duchess’ litter. Once again, it was late at night and everyone was still awake to watch the three new kittens enter the world. Both boys, now seven and twelve, knelt next to him—awed.

Roland frowned. “Dad, one of the kittens is orange like O’Malley and the other is white like Duchess. But what about the black one?”

He didn’t know what to say. Duchess and O’Malley had proven to be loyal to each other, something that still mystified their owners. So he didn’t know how to explain the little black kitten suckling with his brother and sister.

Henry saved him. “Duchess and O’Malley probably both had genes for black fur. That kitten got both of them.”

“Oh.” Roland nodded, satisfied with Henry’s answer. He believed the older boy knew everything and almost hero-worshipped him. For now, Robin was glad for Henry’s burgeoning interesting in
genetics. He knew it worried Regina, who feared Henry would start asking about his own and she’d have to tell him about being adopted. She wasn’t quite ready for that yet.

Frowning, Robin searched for Regina. “Henry, can you check on your mother? She’s taking a long time with those drinks.”

Henry nodded, taking off toward the kitchen. Roland moved closer to his father and Robin was about to put his son to bed when Henry’s panicked cry pierced the air: “Dad!”

Robin took off running toward the kitchen. He skidded to a halt when he saw his wife hunched over, clutching the countertop with one hand and her rounded stomach with the other. Pain distorted her features and she struggled to catch her breath. A puddle of water surrounded her feet.

He turned to Henry, placing his hands on the boy’s shoulders. “I need you to call Belle and ask her to come over. You think you can mind Roland until she gets here?”

“Of course. Whatever I can do to help.” Henry grabbed the phone and disappeared into the living room.

Robin placed his hand on Regina’s back and helped her over to a chair. “Looks like Duchess isn’t the only one having a kitten tonight.”

“If you refer to our daughter as a kitten again, I will not be responsible for my actions, Robin Locksley.” Regina gritted her teeth as another contraction hit her. She squeezed his hand hard.

He talked her through the contraction and when it was done, he stood. “I’m going to change and grab a change of clothes for you. I’ll be right back.”

Regina nodded, eyes closed. He kissed her forehead before racing toward the stairs. Roland and Henry watched him from the couch. “Is Mom going to be okay?” Roland asked.

Pausing, Robin knelt down in front of his sons. “She’s going to be fine. I have to take her to the hospital now, though. So you be good for Henry and both of you be good for Belle. And in the morning, you’ll have a new sister.”

Catherine Regina Locksley decided not to come until that afternoon. Her parents were overjoyed if tired. Roland and Henry came to visit them with Belle, falling in love with their little sister upon first sight.

Mother and daughter were released two days after Catherine’s birth. Once home, it soon became clear that the little girl had the men in her life already wrapped around her tiny fingers. All she had to do was let out one whimper and they came running to tend to her. It brought a smile to Regina even as she rolled her eyes.

About a week after Catherine’s birth, the family sat together on the couch. Henry fed his sister as Roland watched from Regina’s lap. Robin sat next to Henry, arm resting on the back of the couch. He tilted his head. “You know, while Catherine is a beautiful name, it’s awfully big for her. I think we need to come up with a nickname for her.”

“You’re right,” Regina agreed. “But I don’t think she’s a Cate.”

“Or Katie,” Henry said.
Robin nodded. “She’s not a Cathy either.”

“Cat,” Roland piped up. “She’s Cat.”

Glancing at each other over their children, Robin and Regina nodded. “Cat it is, then,” Robin agreed.

Henry finished feeding Cat and Robin took her, patting her back to burp her. The boys ran off to play video games before bed and Regina took their absence to cuddle next to her husband, the little white kitten—named Marie—in her hands. “You realize we can’t give this litter away, right?”

“Really? And why’s that?”

“Because there are three kittens, two boys and a girl. We have three children, two boys and a girl. It’s a sign,” Regina said, petting Marie.

Robin studied the other two kittens—Pierre and Toussaint—and sighed. “I guess you’re right. I guess three more cats aren’t going to hurt us.”

He handed his baby girl back to her mother, standing to stretch out his legs. O’Malley wound himself around Robin’s legs, purring. Ever since Robin had married Regina and they had combined their households, O’Malley had turned into a fulltime house cat.

Robin picked up the cat, rubbing him under his head. O’Malley closed his eyes and continued to purr as Robin leaned against the wall, watching his wife rock Cat to sleep. He glanced down at the cat. “I owe you big time, don’t I?”

For the rest of his life, Robin would swear the cat smiled.
True Love

Chapter Summary

July 20 - Outlaw Bandit AU; your take on Bandit!Regina and Outlaw!Robin.

True Love

He had heard about Regina Mills. Anyone who lived in Misthaven knew about her. How she had been abandoned as a baby by an unwed mother and taken in by Queen Eva. She was raised alongside Princess Snow White, becoming her confidant. But as the princess began a secret relationship with Prince James, Regina had told Queen Eva and King Leopold about it. The royals confronted the prince and in the ensuing fight, Eva and James ended up dying. Leopold went mad with grief and Snow vowed revenge on the person she had once considered her friend.

Since then, Regina had been on the run and hiding out in the woods. She had turned to banditry…or at least tried to. Robin was a competitive man and he wasn’t going to let her muscle in on his territory. It took a lot of work (she was very good, he hated to admit) but he managed to stay one step ahead of her at all times.

Robin first saw her after he thwarted one of her many attempts to relieve some noble or another of their gold. He had seen drawings of her for their shared wanted posters. She was shorter than he expected, with long wavy black hair she kept tied back and out of her face. That was all he had been able to see but it was enough that he was able to recognize her whenever he saw her around the forest.

That was how he spotted her squaring off against the queen. One of his men had informed him that the royal had gotten in the tax carriage instead. He realized she must’ve known Regina was going to raid it and wanted to seize the chance to capture her once and for all. Robin mounted his horse and raced toward the most logical place for her to intercept the carriage, praying he wasn’t too late.

When he got there, the Queen had her hand in Regina’s chest. No doubt her hand was squeezing the woman’s heart. Robin froze, unsure what to do. If he rode out now, he might make things worse for Regina. But if he stayed put, she could have her heart crushed.

Relief coursed through him when the Queen pulled her hand out of Regina’s chest. It was short lived once he saw the fireball in her gloved hand. Robin froze, unsure what to do. If he rode out now, he might make things worse for Regina. But if he stayed put, she could have her heart crushed.

“I had the situation under control,” she yelled at him.

Safe and exasperating. “A simple thank you would suffice,” he shot back.

Regina didn’t respond and he urged the horse faster. He wanted to get her back to the relative safety of Sherwood Forest. To where his men lurked around every corner and would lay down their lives for him. And whoever had his protection.
She led the way into the tavern, pulling off her gloves with her teeth. It gave him pause—he did the same. But he shook it off as Regina kept aggravating him. “Believe me, I’m already doubting my decision to help the competition.”

“The competition?” She started laughing and at first, Robin was insulted. How dare she thought he wasn’t competition to her? He was always one step ahead of her. How could she not know…Anger turned to disappointment when he realized she wasn’t mocking him. She didn’t know who he was.

Realization crossed her brown eyes. “Robin Hood?” she asked, incredulous.

“Well, I’m not Friar Tuck,” he teased. He held out his hand. “Let me look at that wound.”

She held her hand close to her chest. “I’m fine. It’s only a scratch.”

“Liar. Now give me your hand and sit down before you pass out.”

“I’m not going to pass out.”

She was stubborn, that was clear. It was probably the reason she had survived all these years on the run. But he was just as stubborn and he gave her a look that told her she was fighting a losing battle. Regina rolled her eyes but sat down.

Once her hand was bandaged, Regina slammed down a gold coin. “There. That’s your cut.”

“Are you physically incapable of saying thank you?” Robin asked her. She glared at him so he decided to change tactics. “I’m glad I found you, Regina. There was something I wanted to discuss with you.”

“If you’re worried about me invading your territory, you won’t have to worry for much longer. I’m getting out.”

“Getting out…of the business?” Robin frowned.

She shook her head. “Getting out of the Enchanted Forest. Going somewhere far away, where Snow White can’t get me.”

“I see. That’s a shame. Because I’m getting out of the business and I was hoping you would take over as leader of the Merry Men,” he said.


He smiled. “I may always be one step ahead of you, but it’s always been a struggle. You are very skilled, Regina. There’s no one else I could imagine leading my men.”

“I’m flattered but I still can’t accept. These woods aren’t my home.”

They could be, he wanted to say. He found he wanted to keep her in these woods and he didn’t know why. But that wasn’t fair, so he nodded. “Then I’m sorry to see you go.”

“So why are you getting out the business?” She took a sip of her ale, watching him.

He smiled. “Have you ever met someone you would change everything about your world for?”

She paused, her eyes growing wide. “Uh…no. I can’t say I have. You?”

“Yes, and so this afternoon, I am going to set aside my life as a thief and pledge to start a new one
“Sounds nice.” Regina’s voice took on a dreamy quality, as did her eyes. He found it made her even more beautiful. Especially when she smiled. “So, who is the lucky woman?”

“That would be me.” Zelena, his betrothed, approached the table with a smile. Robin stood to greet her, giving her a quick kiss. She turned to Regina. “And you are?”

“Zelena, this is Regina. Regina, this is my fiancée, Zelena.”
Zelena’s blue eyes lit up and her mouth fell forward. “Regina? Like the Regina, who shares Wanted posters with my soon-to-be husband?”

“Well, I would say Robin shares them with me.” Regina gave him a smirk and he found himself laughing.

Zelena looked between the two and let out a little laugh of her own. He knew she was only playing along, not wanting to be left out of the loop. She smiled at Regina. “Well, he’ll soon be coming off those posters so you can have them all to yourself.”

“Yes, he told me.” Regina’s smile lost some of its genuine quality. “Congratulations. I’m sure you two will be very happy.”

Wrapping her arms around Robin’s neck and sliding onto his lap, Zelena nodded. “We will be. Forever.”

She kissed him and for the first time, he felt uncomfortable doing so in front of someone. He made the kiss quick as Regina cleared her throat. His heart stopped as she stood, already inching toward the door. “Well, I wish you both the best. I better get going if I want to outrun Snow White.”

“Of course. Good luck to you,” Zelena said, a bit curt for his liking. He tended to overlook how rude she could be and how possessive as well. Now, he was wondering if he could handle a lifetime of it.

As Regina approached the door, panic seized Robin. He found he didn’t want her to leave. “Wait!” he called out.

She stopped, looking at him. He realized he had to say something, especially with Zelena glaring at him. “Godspeed, Regina. I hope you find your happiness.”

Her eyes softened and she slipped out of the tavern…and his life…for good.

“What was going on?” Zelena crossed her arms, staring him down.

Robin shrugged. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Please. I come in and you’re sitting here, looking mighty cozy with another woman,” she snapped.

“I wasn’t cozy with her. We weren’t even sitting next to each other.”

“You didn’t have to. I saw how you were looking at her,” Zelena hissed. She leaned closer. “What were you talking about?”

Robin sighed. “I was asking her to take over as leader of the Merry Men. And then I was telling her about you.”
“Oh.” Zelena looked properly chastened.

“Yes, oh.” Robin sighed, rubbing his face. “Is this how it’s always going to be, Zelena?”

“What do you mean?”

“Are you going to be suspicious every time I talk to another woman? Always jealous? Always possessive?”

Zelena grew upset, contrite. “No, of course not, Robin. It’ll all change when we’re married. I love you.”

He didn’t respond. It used to be an automatic response. But for the first time, Robin wondered if he had ever really meant it. There was part of him that felt something for Zelena but the moment he had looked into Regina’s soulful brown eyes…his world changed and he didn’t want to go back.

“Robin? Robin, say something.” Zelena was growing hysterical. “You love me, too. Say it.”

Robin felt bad but he also couldn’t bring himself to say the phrase. Instead, he glanced down to where he still held the coin Regina had given him. Part of him knew the honorable thing was to keep his promise and marry Zelena. Yet another part told him that it wasn’t honorable to let her live a lie. Not until he knew what laid between him and Regina.

“I’m sorry, Zelena,” he said, looking up to meet her eyes. “I wish you the best.”

“No!” Her cry caused several patrons to look up. “You don’t mean that. This is just cold feet.”

Feeling eyes on them, Robin guided Zelena outside. “It’s not just cold feet. Look, Zelena, once upon a time I did love you but…I don’t think a marriage between us will work.”

“No, you don’t mean that!”

Robin’s heart hurt over what he was doing, but he knew it was the right thing. “I do, Zelena. I’m not your happy ending. It’s out there though. You’ll find it.”

“So, that’s it? One meeting with the Bandit Regina and you’re ready to chase after her?” Zelena stomped her foot. “It’s not fair! This is supposed to be MY wedding day!”

She glanced down at her hand and something there scared her. Robin tried to see what it was, but she covered the appendage and ran off. He watched as she disappeared into the village before taking off himself.

He had a bandit to stop.

Robin had heard rumors about where to find Regina’s hideaway. He prayed they were right as he trekked through the woods. When he found a pit covered with leaves, he knew he was on the right path. He dodged the spiked log and found the hollow it was said she called home.

Once he stepped inside, he found himself staring at the wrong end of an arrow. Robin raised his hands. “I come in peace, milady.”

“How did you find this place?”

“I am not an idiot like the Queen’s black knights. I can follow directions.” He frowned. “Of course, I
had to choose the right legends to follow."

She lowered her bow, sighing. "Well, it doesn’t matter. I’m getting out of here anyway. Shouldn’t
you be getting married?"

"I’m not," he said. "I broke it off with Zelena."

Regina paused before shouldering her bag. "Was it because of me?"

"Yes."

"Wait, really?" She let out a little snort of laughter. "You mean to tell me that you rescue me from
Snow White, tend to my wounds and decided I was worth calling off your wedding all in the span of
an afternoon?"

"Yes."

Her bag fell off her shoulder. "You’re serious?"

"I am." Robin stepped forward. She didn’t move and his fingers ghosted her hips. "I can’t explain it,
Regina, but I feel drawn to you."

He could see something flicker in her eyes. Something that seemed like hope. When she spoke, her
voice was soft yet sounded like she was younger than her years. "You do?"

"The first time I looked into Zelena’s eyes, I thought I had wanted to look into them for the rest of
my life," he said. "But when I looked into yours, I lost myself and never wanted to be found again. I
realized I wanted the honor to grow old by your side, to love you every day of our lives."

As he had spoken, Robin had leaned in closer…and so had she. Their lips were so close. All he had
to do was lean down…

She stepped away and he frowned. "What’s wrong?"

"You just ran from your wedding. How do I not know that this is just a case of cold feet? That you
think I’m the great love of your life but in a couple weeks, you realize you made a mistake and go
back to Zelena." Regina stared him down.

Robin knew she had a point. But he also knew he couldn’t live without her now that she had entered
his life. He took her hands and pulled her close again.

"I’m not going to say your fears aren’t founded. They are reasonable ones to have." He rubbed her
hands. "But this feels real. This feels true."

"What about what you felt for Zelena? Was that not real and true?"

He shook his head. "It felt like I was in story. That someone had dictated I was to love Zelena, that I
didn’t really feel it."

Regina’s eyes widened and she stepped away again. He tried to grab her, to pull her back. "I know it
sounds crazy and that you don’t have to believe me…"

"I do," she said softly. She turned back to him. "There was this…boy. He said we’re stuck in some
book. Even showed it to me. It knew I was going to rob the carriage."

"Where’s the book now?"
“I threw it in the fire…It seemed like dark magic,” she admitted.

Robin nodded. “Did the boy say anything else?”

“He said that we lived in another world and he was convinced that the only way for us to go back there was for me to…well…” She trailed off, a red tint coming to her cheeks.

He reached out, cupping her cheek. “What do you have to do?”

She stepped closer, their faces inches apart again. Robin was starting to understand but he wanted her to say it. To give him permission to close the gap between them.

“Mom!” A boy’s voice called out.

Regina closed her eyes, groaning. “Did I mention he thinks I’m his mother?”

“No.” Robin glanced at the hollow’s opening.

A teenaged boy entered, wearing strange clothing. He had brown hair and hazel eyes, smiling as he took in the couple. “You found Robin!”

“Well, I would say it’s more like I found her.” Robin pulled her in close before holding out his hand. “Though you seem to know this, I’m Robin Hood.”

“Henry.” The boy shook his hand. “But you know that already. You just don’t remember.”

Robin shot Regina a look and she shrugged. She then turned back to Henry. “Weren’t you looking for your other mother? Emma?”

“He found me.” A blonde woman entered the hollow. She smiled at seeing them together. “I take it you haven’t kissed yet?”

“That’s none of your business,” Regina shot back.

Emma approached her. “Regina, please, listen to me. We’re friends…of sorts…and I want you to have your happy ending. I want you to reach out and grasp love again.”

“Why?”

The blonde woman took a deep breath and Robin believed she was trying not to cry. Her eyes did look red and there was a quiver in her voice. “Because I know what it’s like to let love slip out of your hands. I just watched the man I love die and I never told him how I felt.”

Regina turned to face him, her eyes full with a question he was more than happy to answer. He held out his hand to her and she slipped her smaller one in it. Drawing her close, Robin leaned down to finally kiss her.

She gasped, sagging in Robin’s arms as Henry gasped. Robin felt something warm and wet on his hand. Pulling it away, his palm was covered in blood. When he looked down, an arrow was protruding from her back. His stomach turned at the sight and he sunk to the ground, cradling Regina.

“It is done.” He glanced up to find the Ogreslayer standing in the doorway, holding Robin’s bow. He dropped it and used his magic to disappear.

Robin was confused. The Ogreslayer was a force for good. Why would he want to harm Regina?
He must’ve asked it out loud because Emma responded. “This story is his happy ending. He doesn’t want it to end.”

“Mom.” Henry knelt next to Regina, tears streaming down his face. “Don’t leave me.”

“I’m sorry,” she whispered in between shuddering breaths. “But I told you. I don’t get a happy ending.”

Robin shook his head. “No, it can’t end like this. I can’t lose you after just finding you.”

“It’s okay.” Regina tried to smile. “You’ll be fine.”

He glanced up at Henry, was inconsolable. Emma knelt down next to her son and held him close. She looked at Robin with red-rimmed eyes. “You have to kiss her. It’s the only way.”

Robin stared into her eyes, watching as they grew duller. If it was the only way to save her, then he’d do it. Leaning down, he pressed his lips to hers.

A pulse of energy blew past him and he held Regina close as she took her last breath. He closed his eyes as memories began assaulting him, replacing the ones he thought were real. Memories of Marian and their boy Roland returned to him as did how he lost her. The Zelena he thought he knew was replaced by the one he really knew—the woman determined to destroy her sister, not caring who she used in the process.

Then came the memories of Regina. Of both their first meetings—saving her from a flying monkey, her catching his arrow outside the farmhouse. He saw her entrust her heart to him, relived their first kiss, and their night in her vault. Everything came back to him, both good and bad. It was no wonder he was unable to stay away from her once she entered his life. His soul had recognized its mate.

Robin knew they were back in Storybrooke without opening his eyes. His clothing had changed from his familiar breeches, white shirt and brown jerkin back to his even more familiar jeans and sweatshirt. The ground beneath his knees grew harder and he recognized the feel of the paved streets.

Yet he couldn’t open his eyes. He couldn’t bear to see if he had failed Regina yet again and she was lying dead in his arms. He couldn’t lose her. Again.

“Robin…” She sounded breathless. “I can’t breathe. You need to loosen your grip.”

He did so, finally opening his eyes. Regina’s beautiful brown ones—once again full of life and love—stared back at him. She smiled. “You did it.”

Relieved, Robin kissed her. Henry knelt down next to them and Robin pulled him in for a hug with Regina. “No,” he said.

“We did it,” Henry added, smiling.

The three of them sat in the middle of the road, holding onto each other. All offered silent prayers that they were free from the alternate world.

(Though Robin made a mental note to ask Regina to conjure up that bandit’s outfit again. She looked quite fetching in it).
Family Matters

Chapter Summary

July 21 - Fake Relationship; Regina and Robin pretend to be a couple for a purpose (e.g: family reunion, wedding, etc.).

Family Matters

“So have you found a date to our dear mother’s vow renewal yet, sis?”

Regina Mills rubbed her forehead. She should’ve just let it go to voicemail when she saw Zelena’s number pop up. There was no way her sister was calling for just a friendly chat. It wasn’t in Zelena’s nature.

Taking a deep breath, Regina raised the phone back to her mouth. “I don’t think I’m going to make it, Z. Things are crazy for me with Gold’s re-election campaign. I don’t think I can take a weekend off.”

“You know Mother and Gold are close. I’m sure she can give him a call and get you some time off. Henry would love it.”

“Henry is busy that weekend.” Regina sighed. “Do we really want to celebrate their dysfunctional relationship? Mom just wanted his money and Leopold didn’t want to be alone. They aren’t exactly happy.”

“Oh, Regina. Still clinging to that fanciful notion that marriage is about happiness. You sound like dear Mary Margaret.”

“Don’t mock our stepsister. She’s not that bad,” Regina said.

“You’ve always had a soft spot for her,” Zelena said. “You two belong together though. Believing in true love.”

“Just because you’ve never experienced it, Z, doesn’t mean it’s not real.”

“Yet I’m married and you’re not.”

“I was married.”

“Past tense. You’re not in a relationship now.” Zelena gasped. “That’s the real reason why you’re trying to weasel your way out of this. You don’t have a date!”

“I do too have a date.”

“Oh.” Zelena sounded stunned. It wasn’t often Regina was able to surprise her. “You do? What’s his name?”

She took a deep breath. “Robin. We’ve known each other for a while but just started seeing each other”
“Well, then I can’t wait to meet him. See you then, sis. Ta!” Zelena ended the call.

Regina closed her eyes as she let the phone fall onto the couch. She had always had a problem with her mouth working faster than her brain. When her mind had caught up with what she had said, at least it supplied her with the name of someone she trusted. Robin Locksley had been her friend for a long time and she loved spending time with him.

The door clicked open and she popped up. “Mom! I’m home,” Henry called out.

“How was your day, sweetie?” Regina stood, hugging her son. “Did you have a good day at school?”

“Tell your mother your good news, Henry.” Robin leaned against the wall with his arms crossed as he smiled at the boy.

Henry grinned. “Ms. French told me today that thanks to Robin’s tutoring, I’m already averaging a B plus in math but if I ace the next test, I could get an A minus for the quarter.”

Regina let out a little shriek of joy as she embraced her son. Over his head, she mouthed “thank you” to Robin. He shrugged in return, motioning to Henry as if to say it was all her son.

“Good job, Henry. We’ll have a celebratory dinner. Go to your room and get ready.” She kissed his forehead.

Once Henry was in his room, Regina smiled at Robin. “Really, thank you. You’ve done wonders with him.”

“Henry’s a smart kid. He just needed someone to make it a little less confusing.” Robin leaned against the island in the kitchen. “So, do you need anything else?”

Regina hesitated before leaning forward as well. “Funny you should ask that. My mother and stepfather are renewing their vows in a lavish ceremony in a few weeks.”

“And you need a date.” There was a twinkle in his blue eyes.

“Shut up.” She rubbed her face. “Look, as I said, you don’t have to do it.”

“Regina, I’ll be okay pretending to be your boyfriend. It might be fun.” He winked at her before leaving.

She pressed her hand to her stomach, trying to calm the butterflies fluttering around it. This was
Robin; he had no interest in her past friendship—of that she was certain.

“Mom? You okay?” Henry walked into the kitchen, frowning.

Regina took a deep breath, letting her hand fall away as she smiled. “Yes, of course. Now, where do you want to go to eat?”

Henry’s favorite babysitter, Emma, was able to watch him for the entire weekend. “Please don’t let him have too much sugar or stay up too late. Or watch scary movies. We don’t want a repeat of the last time I left him with you for the weekend.” Regina gave the blonde woman a look.

Emma nodded. “Yeah, probably wouldn’t be a good thing. And don’t worry, I won’t let the kid go nuts. Again.”

“Good.” Regina turned to her son, hugging him. “Be good for Emma. I’ll see you Sunday night.”

Henry hugged her back. “Okay, Mom. I love you.”

As Regina picked up her bags, Henry looked at her with a smirk. “Have fun with Robin.”

“Whatever you’re thinking, stop.” Regina pointed at her son with a stern look. “Got it?”

Henry nodded but the smirk didn’t go away. Once she was gone, Henry looked at Emma. “Think they’ll realize they’re madly in love this weekend?”

“God, I hope so. I’m sick of the stolen glances and yearning looks. If it doesn’t happen now, I’m locking them in a closet.” Emma ruffled his hair. “Come on, let’s go order pizza.”

Robin let out a low whistle as they pulled up to the Blanchard mansion. “You grew up here?” he asked.

She shook her head. “I only spent a few years here, after Mother married Leopold when I was fifteen. Before that, the four of us lived in a nice house across town. It wasn’t a mansion but it was big enough. But more importantly, it felt like home. This was just a house.”

“I get it.” Robin squeezed her hand. “So, shall we go put on the performance of our lives?”

“You still can back out. My family can be a handful.”

Robin laughed. “I look forward to the challenge.”

“You may come to regret those words.” Regina opened the door and smiled at the older man who stood next to the door. “Hello, Marco.”

“Miss Regina, so good to see you. Did you bring Master Henry around with you this time?” Marco helped her out of the vehicle.

She shook her head. “You know I like to keep him far away from this place. I’d like to stay far away from this place.”

“Well, I am glad you’re here.” Marco winked at her before hurrying over to Robin, who had started to take their bags out of the trunk. “Oh no, sir. The staff will see to your bags.”
Robin stepped away from the car, taking Regina’s hand in his. “So what is there for us to day?”

“You and Miss Regina can head inside,” Marco suggested. “Your bags will be up shortly.”

Regina tugged Robin toward the house. He patted her hand. “Slow down, there’s no need to rush.”

“I want to get inside before…” Her voice died away as the door swung open. Cora Mills-Blanchard, a tall woman with a regal bearing, walked out of the house. Robin could tell Regina took after her mother in looks, but that seemed to be where the similarities ended. Regina’s smile was always warm, once he had gotten her to smile again. Cora’s smile, on the other hand, chilled him even on this warm spring day.

“Regina, darling. It’s been too long. You shouldn’t stay in that dreadful city all the time. It does nothing for your complexion.” Cora reached out, pinching Regina’s cheeks. “Look at that. It’s all from the city’s awful air.”

“I think she looks beautiful,” Robin said. He wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her closer.

Something flashed in Cora’s eyes but she kept her smile up as she took in Robin. “And you are…?”

“This must be Robin, the new boyfriend.” A tall woman with long red curls bounded out of the house, stopping next to Cora. She held out her hand to him. “I’m Zelena, Regina’s sister.”

“Ahh, yes. She’s mentioned you a few times. Nice to meet you.” Robin shook her hand.

She smiled. “And you.”

“Well, Robin, welcome to our home,” Cora said. She then turned to Regina. “Why don’t you and Robin go get freshened up? Robin already has a five o’clock shadow.”

“This is more than a five o’clock shadow. And no, I will not shave it as you are quite passive-aggressively telling me to do.” Robin smiled but his eyes were hardened, proving he wasn’t going to back down.

Cora’s smile faltered a bit and she turned her attention back to her daughter. “Well, Regina, haven’t you found yourself a charmer. Then again, you’ve always had questionable taste in men.”

She turned back to the house, Zelena following like a faithful puppy, as Regina ducked her head. Robin frowned, noticing she brushed at her eyes. When she raised her head again, she had a fake smile on her face. “Let’s go to the room, okay?”

Once they were in the room, Robin rested his hands on her hips and pulled her close. “Regina, we don’t have to stay. Just say the word and I can fake an emergency.”

“Thank you, Robin, but Mother will see through it. We just have to get through tonight and tomorrow. Think you can handle that?”

“Can you?”

She looked over at him, finding nothing but concern in his eyes. Regina shrugged. “It’s only a couple days.”

“A couple days of your mother unfairly tearing you down.” He stepped closer and she could feel anger radiating off him. It was anger for her, for how her mother treated her.
Regina didn’t look at him, instead focusing on unpacking. “Mother is very exacting. She expects everybody to live up to her standards.”

“She’s cruel, merely a bully.” He tucked his fingers under her chin, gently guiding her face to look at her. “We’re friends, right?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Then let me be your friend. This is a toxic environment for you. Let me fake an emergency and take you far away from here.”

For a moment, she considered taking him up on his offer. To run away and never see these people again. But at the same time, she knew she had to stay. So she put on a smile and shook her head. “This is my family. They’re all I have, so I have to do this. Thank you anyway.

“Now, get dressed. Mother does not tolerate people being late.” Regina moved over to his bag. “You don’t have to wear anything too fancy. I think a polo shirt and a pair of dress slacks will do.”

Robin tucked her hair behind her ear. “Before I do that, I want you to understand one thing. If I’m going to be your boyfriend for this weekend, I am going to act like it. That means defending you against even your mother. Are you okay with that?”

“Just don’t push too many buttons. Mother is more dangerous than she seems,” Regina warned. She gathered her clothing. “I’ll go get dressed in the bathroom.”

Once the door closed behind her, Robin sat down on the bed. He rested his head in his hands. When he first agreed to this weekend, he thought his only problem would be hiding the true extent of his feelings for Regina from her. Now, he had to make sure he didn’t kill her family before the weekend ended.

Piece of cake.

Regina wore a simple sleeveless black dress paired with pumps and her pearls. She left her hair down and kept her makeup simple. Not that it mattered to Robin. He would’ve thought her beautiful in a burlap sack. But his opinion didn’t matter this weekend. They had to pass Cora’s inspection.

She met them at the doorway, looking over her daughter first before examining him. Robin bit his tongue, not wanting to ruin the dinner before it started. He hoped his light blue polo and navy blue pants passed muster with her.

Cora sniffed but nodded. “It’ll do. Why don’t you have a seat and Regina can introduce you to everyone?”

“Yes, Mother.” Regina wrapped her arm around his and led him toward the table. She threw a lot of names at him and he struggled to keep up.

First was her stepsister Mary Margaret and her husband David Nolan. Mary Margaret gave Regina a big hug and did the same to Robin. “So nice to meet you. I’m glad you were able to come with Regina this weekend,” she said, voice bright and warm.

“So am I,” he replied as he shook David’s hand.

Regina then moved on to introduce him to Zelena’s husband, Walsh. Unlike his wife, he seemed as
pleasant as the Nolans. He wondered how he had ever ended up married to someone like Zelena, who proved to be more like her mother in temperament though not in appearance like Regina.

Leopold Blanchard was a graying man who seemed to have kind eyes and smile. Robin wondered why a man like him stayed with a woman like Cora. The only thing he could think of two things: a fear of being alone or blackmail. He strongly suspected the latter.

For the first half of dinner, Zelena, dominated the conversation. She was eager to talk about her job as a corporate raider as well as Walsh’s very successful furniture company. “They’re about to become bigger than Ikea,” she said, resting a hand on his arm.

“Now, Zelena, I wouldn’t say that,” Walsh said, trying to be modest. “But it would be nice.”

She laughed. “Now darling, don’t be afraid to brag. You’re doing so well.”

“What about you, Regina? How goes your latest campaign?” Cora fixed her other daughter with a cold stare.

Regina shrank back. “It’s going well. We started the next round of TV commercials and the feedback so far has been very positive.”

“I talked to Gold recently and his numbers have gone down in the polls,” Cora pointed out. “Now if Zelena was running the campaign…”

“She’s not,” Robin said. “Regina is and I think she’s doing an admirable job. So does Gold since he has kept her as his campaign manager for a few elections now. I’m sure he told you that.”

Cora pressed her lips together, cold eyes focused on him. “And what do you do?”

“I’m a teacher.”

Mary Margaret’s eyes lit up. “You are? So am I. Which grade?”

“Seventh grade,” Robin replied, smiling. “You?”

“First. I love working with the little children.”

“My son is in first grade.”

Now Cora’s eyes lit up, but in a way that reminded him of a hunter who spotted his prey. “You have a son?”

“Yes,” Robin said. “His name is Roland.”

“So are you divorced?”

Regina put her hand on his thigh. “Mother!” she rebuked.

“What?” Cora was the picture of innocence. “I’m just trying to get to know your new beau.”

He patted her hand before fixing Cora with a cold glare. “I’m widowed, just like Regina. That’s how we met, actually. We were in the same bereavement group.”

Cora snorted as she turned to Regina. “You went to one of those? Did I go to one when I lost your father? No. I mourned and moved on. That’s what you have to do. Not talk about your feelings with others.”
“Sometimes talking can be very beneficial,” Mary Margaret said. “And Regina lost Daniel suddenly.”

Zelena rolled her eyes. “Please, Mary Margaret. Mother’s right. Regina shouldn’t have displayed her weakness in front of others.”

“Grief isn’t weakness,” Robin snapped. “And it takes strength to lean on others instead of hiding away. To admit you need help.”

Regina grabbed his hand, brown eyes pleading. “Robin, you don’t have to…”

“I told you I was going to defend you. I don’t care who they are, they do not have the right to talk to you this way.”

Clapping startled to him and he looked up to find both Cora and Zelena applauding. “Bravo,” Zelena said. “You are a very good actor.”

Robin frowned. “Pardon?”

“Tell me,” Cora said, “how much is my daughter paying you to pretend to be her boyfriend?”

Everyone froze, waiting for their response. Robin let out a strangled: “Pardon?”

Zelena laughed. “Please. My sister just so happened to find a man to bring after I realized she didn’t have a date? I wasn’t born yesterday. Are you really widowed? Do you even have a son?”

“Yes,” Robin said, “and yes. I haven’t lied to you.”

“So you’re really dating my daughter?”

“Mother, the truth is…” Regina started.

“The truth is we’re not dating yet,” he said before smiling at her. “But I would really like that to change.”

Regina let out a small gasp as she smiled, eyes searching Robin’s. He knew she was looking for any lie but she wouldn’t find any, having meant every word. Under the table, their fingers laced together.

Zelena made a gagging noise. “I think I’m going to be sick.”

“Zelena, be nice. She’s your sister,” Walsh said. “And I think she deserves happiness.”

“I don’t care what you think.”

Cora put down her wine glass. “Well, I think we’ve had enough excitement for tonight. Why don’t we turn in for the night?”

In her room, Regina leaned against the door as Robin plopped down on the bed. He watched her with tired eyes. “I’m sorry. I’m afraid I lost it when they accused me of being an actor.”

“That did hurt.” She took a few steps closer. “Did you mean it? That you want to have a romantic relationship with me?”

He paused for a moment before whispering: “Yes.”
She sat down next to him but the only parts of them that touched were their knees. Both kept their hands flat on the bed as she considered everything.

In many ways, Regina didn’t think she would’ve made it through Daniel’s death without Robin, who sat down next to her in their bereavement group and had broken down her wall one lame joke at a time. He had understood her pain—the only other person in their group who had lost their spouse at a young age due to tragedy, not old age or sickness like the others. They had had many conversations over coffee outside of their group and over time, Robin and Roland became part of her family like Emma had.

She knew her feelings for him had changed when he offered to take Henry to a father-son event for scouts. As one of the den mothers, Regina had watched Robin interact with her son and found herself wishing that Robin could be Henry’s stepfather. However, she convinced herself that he didn’t feel anything more than friendship for her.

Had she just missed the signs?

“How long?” she asked.

Robin shrugged. “Couple years, I guess? And I have Marian’s parents to thank.”

“What?”

“Yeah,” he laughed. “Apparently Roland kept raving about you to them and they asked if you were my new girlfriend. When I told them you were just a friend, her mother said it sounded like we had a lot more. And I realized she was right.”

Regina tilted her head. “Yet you did nothing until now?”

“I didn’t know how you felt and I didn’t want to ruin what we had. You’re now the most stable maternal figure Roland has, aside from his grandmother. I didn’t want to take that away from him.”

She rested her head on his shoulder. “Well, aren’t we a pair? I’ve probably wanted more for almost as long.”

“We definitely deserve each other.”

Lifting her head, she met his eyes and the two of them dissolved into laughter. They fell back onto the bed, Robin’s arms wrapping around her as they laid on their side. He rubbed her back as he smiled. “Can I kiss you?”

“Yes,” she breathed, eyes already fluttering closed. His lips were warm against hers and ignited a fire inside her. She rolled them over, deepening their kisses as she heard him switch off the light.

“She’s not your daughter! You don’t get a say in how I talk to her.”

“When you married me, she became my stepdaughter. I think that gives me a say.”

“And now you want it? Please. Just go back to keeping your head in the sand, Leopold. You’re good at that.”

Regina frowned as she burrowed herself deeper into Robin’s warm embrace. He kissed her forehead. “Are they always like this?”
“Not really,” she whispered back, afraid to speak in anything louder. “Leopold usually avoids confrontation like the plague and just lets my mother do whatever she wants.”

A door slammed somewhere in the house and she flinched. His arms tightened around her, pressing her closer to his bare chest. “Should we just stay here?”

“I wish we could.” She opened her eyes, looking up into his hypnotizing blue ones. They shared a good morning kiss before she slid out of bed, holding the top sheet against her body.

Robin propped himself up on his arm, watching her with a hunger that brought a blush to her cheeks even as excitement grew in her core. “You don’t have to cover yourself, lovely. Not after last night.”

“I know. But the locks don’t really work. Mother made sure of that so she could barge in on the three of us whenever she wanted,” Regina said. “So you may want to cover up yourself…”

Her eyes trailed down to where the blankets draped over hip and covered the lower half of his body. She licked her lips, something that didn’t escape his notice. Robin smiled and patted her side of the bed again. “We have time before the ceremony.”

“And I need to shower,” Regina said, walking into the bathroom. She then leaned out of the door. “You do too, you know.”

He launched himself out of bed and raced into the bathroom with her.

A small group of people had gathered on the lawn of the Blanchard mansion as the May sun beat down on them. Regina was glad she had gone with a pale pink silk sleeveless dress and paired it with a white hat. Robin, though, was stuck in a suit and fanned himself with the program. “Where are they?”

“I don’t know.” Regina turned to Mary Margaret, who sat behind her. She wore a flower short-sleeved dress though she fanned herself as well. Unlike Robin, David had already shed his suit jacket. The two leaned forward as Regina asked: “Were they ready when you left?”

Mary Margaret sighed. “To be honest, they were still arguing. Zelena stayed behind to try and smooth things over.”

“Or make things worse,” David muttered.

Robin glanced toward the house and straightened up. “Well, speak of the devil.”

Zelena hurried down the aisle, her gold dress whipping around her legs until she arrived at the front. She cleared her throat and everyone gave her their attention. “My family and I thank you all for coming today,” she started. “But I’m afraid the ceremony won’t take place today. We apologize for any inconvenience this may cause.”

As the other guests began to murmur, Zelena approached Regina and Mary Margaret. “Up to the house. Now.”

The two women followed her, David and Robin trailing after them. Regina was glad because her gut told her this wasn’t going to go well. Not with her mother’s explosive temper.

Zelena led them into Leopold’s study, where he sat behind his desk with his arms crossed. Cora sat across from him in her white cocktail dress. She stood as Regina entered, standing nose to nose with
her daughter. “This is all your fault,” she hissed.

Regina staggered back into Robin’s protective embrace. Mary Margaret’s eyes widened at the scene and she turned to her father. “What’s going on?”

“Cora and I are getting a divorce,” he said.

“Over my dead body!” Cora snapped her fingers and Zelena followed her out of the room.

Robin turned Regina in his arms. “Are you okay?”

“Just confused,” she said, looking at Leopold. “What’s going on?”

“I’m old and I’m tired. I no longer have the energy to tiptoe around that woman, trying to keep her from exploding at every little thing. I should’ve done it a long time ago, but I guess part of me thought I could change her.” He shook his head. “I was old enough to know that would never happen.”

Mary Margaret approached him, hugging him. “Oh, Daddy.”

“But how is it Regina’s fault?” David asked.

Robin shrugged. “Her mother is looking for a scapegoat?”

“Yes and no.” Leopold sighed as he looked at Regina. “After how she treated you last night, I could stay silent no longer. I apologize for not speaking up sooner.”

Regina paused. “I forgive you. It’s hard to stand up to her.”

“Even though I’m ending my relationship with your mother, I hope you don’t end your relationship with us.” Leopold hugged Mary Margaret closer.

“Of course,” Regina said. “I think Mary Margaret is more of a sister to me than Zelena.”

“Really? Because I’ve always thought of you as a sister.” Mary Margaret rushed forward to hug Regina, who returned it. “No matter what you decide, you will always be part of my family.”

David stepped forward, wrapping his arm around his wife. “I know you wanted to wait until after the ceremony, but since it’s not happening and I think we could all use some good news…”

“What’s going on?” Regina looked between the two.

“I’m pregnant.” Mary Margaret beamed. Regina and Leopold rushed forward together, hugging her as Robin shook David’s hand.

David smiled at Robin. “I hope we see more of you in the future.”

“I think you will,” Robin replied, sharing a smile with Regina.

Marco had Regina’s car pulled around as Mary Margaret stood with her. “You can stay here until tomorrow,” she said. “Daddy won’t mind.”

Regina squeezed her hands. “I know. But I don’t think Mother is going anywhere anytime soon and it’s best if I got out of here.”
“Okay. Call me though so we can have lunch soon.” She hugged Regina, who returned it as she promised to do that.

Sliding into the car next to Robin, Regina took a deep breath. “So, ready to go back to the city and tell our sons the good news?”

“Yes, though I do recall seeing a bed and breakfast on our drive up here yesterday.” He gave her a flirtatious smile. “Maybe we can spend the night? After all, I said I would pick up Roland tomorrow evening and you did pay Emma for the entire weekend.”

“I like the way you think.” She leaned forward, kissing him.

Sunday night, Robin and an excited Roland escorted Regina up to her apartment so they could pick up Henry for a family dinner. Regina paused outside the door, key still in the lock. “Do you think he’ll be happy that we’re dating?” she asked Robin.

“You’re dating?” Henry threw the door open, his smile bright. “Really?”

Robin gave her a look before turning back to her son. “Yes, if you’re okay with it.”

“I am,” Roland said, taking Regina’s hand.

Henry nodded. “So am I.”

“Good,” Regina said, kissing her son’s cheek. “Now why don’t you go grab your coat and we’ll grab something to eat?”

He raced back into the apartment as Emma appeared in the doorway, shrugging on her coat. She smiled at the two. “About time. You two deserve to be happy together.”

As she sauntered down the hallway, Robin cupped Regina’s cheek. “That we do,” he said, kissing her.

Once Henry came out of the apartment, teasing his mother the entire time, the four made their way out for the first night of their lives as a family.
Lost Souls

Chapter Summary

July 22 - Lost Together; Regina and Robin get lost. Where, how, why, it’s up to you.

Chapter Notes

This an alternate scene to the bar one from "Mother." Features a cameo from a blonde bombshell from "Smash."

Lost Souls

“She’s pregnant.”

Robin’s words echoed around Regina’s head. The already small apartment seemed to get smaller and she found it difficult to breath. Clutching her stomach, she rushed into the hall and leaned against the hallway wall.

“Regina?” Emma’s voice sounded distant even though Regina knew the woman was standing next to her. “Do you want to talk about it?”

She shook her head. “I need to get some air.”

“Okay. We’ll go downstairs for a bit and then come back up to figure out what to do next.”

Emma stepped forward but Regina jumped back. She shook her head. “I need to be alone. Just…let me have that.”

“But Regina…”

She hurried away from the apartment, away from Emma, away from Robin and away from her pregnant sister. Regina raced down the stairs and out of the door, letting the cold night air hit her. It felt refreshing and she took several gulps of it.

Her body wanted to keep moving and her feet took her away from the building. When she came to a red light, she turned the corner. If the light was green, she crossed the street. But Regina didn’t register much else. Not with everything on her mind.

She had been too late. Zelena had managed to hurt Robin, though not in the way she had feared. Regina had had nightmares of her sister holding his heart or Roland’s heart, threatening to crush it. What she had really done to him seemed so much worse. Making him believe his wife was alive, forcing him to agonize over honoring his marriage vows or following his heart, tricking him into leaving town and then doing god-knows-what to get him into bed…

No, she knew how Zelena got Robin into bed. She looked like Marian. He had believed she was
Marian. And he moved on, making love to his wife. To the woman he thought was his true love.

Regina stopped, feeling sick to her stomach again. A tall black garbage can stood nearby and she leaned near it, taking deep breaths to keep everything down. She didn’t need this now but her body betrayed her. She retched into the can as someone held her hair back until she was finished.

When she stopped, her hair fell back against her neck as a wet nap appeared in her line of sight. “I also have a mint if you want,” a soft feminine voice said.

Regina turned around to find a rather beautiful blonde woman standing behind her, wrapped in a black coat. She smiled as Regina took the wet nap and then dug through for the mint. “I’ve learned to always have one on me. Especially once I learned morning sickness is a misnomer.”

“You’re…you’re pregnant?” Was there something in the water in this city? Or was she now doomed to run into only pregnant women to torment her?

The woman nodded then laughed. “I find it easier to tell a complete stranger than the father of my child. What does that say about me?”

“I don’t know. What’s he like?” Regina tossed the wet nap before taking the mint.

The other woman shrugged. “He’s usually really great if sometimes really intense. But he makes me smile and makes me feel like I’m the only one in the room. You know?”

“Yes, I do,” Regina admitted softly. It was the same way Robin made her feel.

Had made her feel.

“But the thing is, he has the same effect on other women.”

Regina grimaced. “Cheated on you?”

“No, though I’m not sure if that’s better or worse.” She sighed. “He just has a tendency to screw over women in bed and out of it.”

“Yet you still care for him.”

The woman nodded. “Crazy, huh?”

“No, I understand,” Regina whispered. Because despite everything, she still loved Robin. “I guess that’s just how love works.”

“You probably have a point.” She gave Regina a glance over. “Hurt by love as well?”

Regina paused before answering. “I think someone else got hurt by loving me more than I did by loving him.”

“You want to talk about it?”

“It’s…complicated.” Regina grimaced.

The other woman nodded. “I get it. Well, I find a walk helps me think. Just be careful. You don’t want to get lost in the park at night.”

“Thank you,” Regina said. “I hope you figure things out. And good luck with the baby. You’ll be a great mother. I can tell.”
She smiled. “Thank you. That means a lot. I hope you figure things out too.”

The two parted, walking in opposite directions. Regina wandered around, avoiding the paths that led deeper into the park. Even though the trees didn’t have leaves yet, they weren’t as well lit and she took the woman’s words to heart.

All the walking she had done caught up with her and Regina sat down on a nearby bench. The lights of New York City twinkled in front of her and she could hear the sounds of the city in the distance. Henry had told her about living here for a year and he seemed to enjoy it. Had Robin liked it? Or had he missed the forest?

Had he missed her?

Regina closed her eyes. It boiled down to that question. Yes, he had said he had missed her back at the apartment. The emotion was in his voice. But actions spoke louder than words. He hadn’t called, not even to assure her that they had arrived in New York safely. Not even to warn her that Gold was in the city and he was dangerous.

Then there was the whole Marian situation. She knew she had told him to move on with his wife, wanting him to be happy. Marian had made him happy once before and Regina hoped she could do it again. Was she angry about the situation now that she knew Marian had been Zelena the whole time? Had that changed her mind?

Yes, partially, she admitted. But there was also the fact that she had seen proof that Robin had moved on. That he had also moved on so quickly after choosing her in the park. How easy had it been for him to start sleeping with his wife again? To seemingly forget about her?

Regina sighed. Those were things she’d have to deal with later. Now, she needed to deal with her sister and get Maleficent’s daughter back to her. She stood and her stomach sank as she realized she had no idea how to get back to the apartment.

She pulled out her phone and called Emma. “Regina?” The blonde sounded relieved. “Where are you?”

“I don’t know. I’m in a park. Maybe Central Park? Are there any other parks in New York?”

“There are a lot more parks in Manhattan,” Emma said. “Look, I still have the app that lets me track your phone. Just hang tight.”

Regina rolled her eyes. “I don’t have much of a choice, do I?”

She hung up and sat back down on the bench. The night was growing colder and Regina pulled her coat closer. She hoped she hadn’t walked too far away, not liking the idea of Robin and Zelena being alone again. Who knew what her sister would do now that the truth was out in the open? Now that she didn’t need Robin anymore?

“Regina?” She glanced up to find Robin standing nearby, holding his cell phone. Emma must’ve called him.

Taking a steady breath, Regina stood to face him. “That was quick.”

“I was already out looking for you,” Robin admitted. “I was in the park when Emma called to tell me where you were.”

“You going to tell me your heart led you here?” She knew she sounded crueler than she intended but
part of her didn’t care.

Robin grimaced. “No. I knew you like to go to the woods to think and this is the closest thing to the woods so…”

“So you came out looking for me?”

“I thought I was right behind you but you managed to go a good distance in the time it took me to get my jacket.”

“I didn’t expect to be followed. Least of all by you.”

“We need to talk.”

“Do we?” Regina crossed her arms. “About what? About how you moved on so quickly? How long was it, Robin? One day? Two?”

Anger flashed in his eyes and he frowned. “That’s not at all what happened.”

“Really? Because it’s only been a couple months and she’s already pregnant!”

“I know!” he shouted. His shoulders slumped as he repeated softer: “I know.”

Regina was still angry but seeing him so defeated also made her concerned. “Were you happy about the baby? When you still thought she was Marian?”

“Yes and no.” Robin sat down, eyes haunted. “I wasn’t happy about having a baby when our marriage was still rocky but Marian convinced me it would make everything better. She convinced me of a lot.”

Things started to make more sense to Regina or she started to see things more clearly and she sat down, still not touching Robin though. “She manipulated you.”

“Did she?” Robin’s voice was thick with emotion. “Or did I want it? I don’t know what it is.”

“It was you dealing with a difficult situation that just turned into a nightmare.” Regina swallowed, looking away. “I’m sorry, Robin. This is all my fault.”

“I think I’m the one with all the blame here.”

“She’s my sister and she targeted you to destroy my happiness. You’re only feeling this hurt and guilt because of me. Because I dared to love you.”

He took her hand. “This isn’t your fault.”

“And it’s not yours either,” Regina said, certain of that fact. “This is all Zelena’s fault.”

Robin glanced down at their clasped hands. “I understand if you can’t get past this but I hope we can at least be friends against one day.”

“Oh, Robin.” Regina sighed. “I’m not going to pretend it’s going to be easy. But we’ll find our way through this.”

He nodded and they stood together, hands still clasped. Regina let out a deep sigh. “We need to go back and you need to pack. We’ll head back to Storybrooke tonight. And we can talk on our way there.”
Robin led her out of the park, guiding her back to the apartment. There would be a lot more discussions, some shouting matches and a few tears as they sorted out Zelena’s lies from the truth. But they would find their way.

Together.
The Nanny

Chapter Summary

July 23 - The Nanny AU; one becomes the nanny for the other’s child.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Nanny

“Are you sure you can’t come to Chicago with us?” Little Grace Hatter looked up at her beloved nanny with pleading eyes.

Regina Mills smiled as she shook her head. “I would love to come with you, but I need to stay here in New York with my daddy.”

“Can’t he come too?”

“He’s too sick,” Regina told her. She lifted the girl onto her lap. “But I met the woman who will be your new nanny. Her name is Belle and she’s really nice. You’ll love her as much as you love me.”

Grace threw her arms around Regina’s neck. “I’m going to miss you.”

“And I’m going to miss you.” She hugged the girl back. “So very, very much.”

“Okay, Grace, why don’t you go play? Regina and I need to talk.” Jefferson, Grace’s father, leaned against the doorway.

Grace nodded, hopping off Regina’s lap and running to her playroom. Regina straightened up as Jefferson sat down next to her. “You’re going to be missed. By both of us.”

“I’m going to miss you too.” She squeezed the hand of the man who was more friend than employer. “You have done more for me than I ever could imagine. Thank you.”

Jefferson smiled. “And I’m not done yet.”

“What do you mean?” Regina frowned.

“I’ve secured another position for you,” he explained. “One of my colleagues, Robin Locksley, needed a nanny for his son. So I talked to him. He’s agreed to hire you.”

Her mouth fell open before she recovered her manners. “You didn’t have to do that!”

“Nonsense. He needed a nanny and you needed a job. It was a match made in heaven.”

She hugged him. “Thank you. For everything you’ve done for me and my father.”

“You’ve done a lot for Grace and me.” He let Regina go. “Now go do the same for Robin.”
Regina set down the bowl of soup in front of her father. “Eat up!”

Henry Mills pushed the bowl away, shaking his head. “No appetite.”

“Daddy.” She pushed the bowl back. “You need to eat something.”

“I just can’t, Regina.” He sank further into the couch cushions, looking small and frail. His skin was sallow, eyes sunken in and hair thin. But Regina still saw the strong man who had held her when she was scared and who had raised her alone after her eighth birthday.

That man would return, she vowed. No matter how difficult the fight was.

But she had learned to pick her battles. So she took the soup back, leaning over the sink as her friend and her father’s live-in caretaker, Emma Swan, watched with sympathy. “The chemo was bad today,” she said. “I’m sure he’ll eat later.”

Regina nodded before returning to her own dinner. Emma perked up. “Tell me about your new job.”

“There’s not much to tell.” She shrugged. “His name is Robin Locksley and he has a son who needs a nanny. I haven’t had much time to do any research.”

“Let’s do it now.” Emma jumped up and retrieved her laptop. She powered it up and ran a search.

Regina scooted closer. “Well?”

“Let’s see…Robin Locksley, President and CEO of Sherwood Corporations. Seems to make green products. So he’s eco-conscious.”

“Well, I guess he gets brownie points for that.” Regina chewed her lip. “What else?”

Emma grimaced. “He’s a widower. His wife Marian died in a plane crash earlier this year.”

“That was them?” Regina almost shared Emma’s seat as she craned her neck to look at the screen. “How awful.”

“There’s a picture.” Emma clicked on a picture and Regina saw her new employer for the first time.

It was a shot taken from a distance, perhaps across the street from the cemetery. He wore a long black coat and held a small child in black who she assumed was his son, her new charge. The boy had his face buried in his father’s shoulder so all she saw was his dark curls. They were a contrast to his father’s blond hair.

“He’s handsome,” Emma said. “I mean, he’s not my type but he is good looking in a rugged way.”

Regina frowned. “Emma, stop.”

“What? I was just making an observation.”

“You were hinting that he is my type.”

Emma shrugged. “He is kinda like Daniel.”

“Don’t go there.”

“Go where?”
Regina stood, getting her father’s medications ready. “The fantasies. That he and I will meet and fall madly in love.”

Emma scoffed. “Who do you think you’re talking to? I don’t harbor those romantic notions.”

“Good.” Regina sighed. “Dating the boss only ends in heartbreak.”

Standing, Emma hugged her. “I know Leo hurt you. But in the end it was for the best. You got to move on to a career you love.”
Regina nodded before waking her father to take his medicines. As she and Emma got him ready for bed, Regina let her mind wander. She didn’t give in often to the romantic notion Emma scoffed at. But sometimes they were too strong to ignore.

She wanted love. And the thought of a handsome man sweeping her off her feet was tempting. But the man was not going to be one of her employers. No, she believed her happily ever after lied elsewhere.

Regina just didn’t know where.

Regina hurried to finish packing. She didn’t know how she had accumulated so much in the few days since she had left the Hatters’, especially as she had never really unpacked. Where did it all come from?

Knocking made her panic more. She had been told Mr. Locksley would send someone for her today. And now she was running late.

“Emma? Can you get that for me?” she yelled into the apartment.

“Yeah! Don’t worry!” Emma called back. A few seconds later, Regina heard the door open and her friend greet the person on the other side.

“Tell her not to rush,” a male voice with a strong British accent said. “We have all the time in the world.”

Regina raised an eyebrow but slowed down as she finished packing. She pulled it out of her room and into the living room.

“Let me get that.” The man took her bag with one hand and held out the other. “Will Scarlet. I’m Robin’s right hand man.”

“He means butler,” Emma said with a smile.

He rolled his eyes. “I detest the word.”

“It’s nice to meet you. I’m almost ready.” Regina put on her coat, hugging her father. “I’ll call tonight, Daddy, and I’ll be home soon to visit. I love you.”

“I love you too,” Henry rasped. “Good luck.”

With one last hug to Emma, Regina followed Will down to his waiting limo. She stopped short.

“Isn’t that a bit much for a nanny?”

“You’ll learn Robin’s not your normal rich guy.” Will opened the door and bowed. “After you.”
He pulled up in front of a beautiful brownstone, opening the door for Regina. “You head on in and I’ll go grab your bags.”

Regina stepped into her new home. A tall staircase stood in front of her and a young boy with dark curls and sad brown eyes sat on a top step. He hugged his knees as he watched her.

“Hello.” She smiled as she climbed up toward him. “My name is Regina. What’s yours?”

“Roland,” he replied. “Are you my new nanny?”

“I am. Is that okay?”

He shrugged. “I guess. Not like I get a say.”

“I’m sure if you hate me, your father will replace me.” She leaned closer. “But I really hope you like me. Can you give me a chance?”

Roland tilted his head before nodding. “Okay. As long as you don’t make me eat peas. Yuck!”

Regina laughed. “Okay, no peas. But I won’t be so lenient about broccoli.”

“Deal.” Roland stuck out his hand she shook it. He then leaned forward. “I like broccoli anyway.”

“Good to know. What else do you like?”

“Why don’t you go write a list for your new nanny? I’m sure she’ll appreciate it.” Another male British voice entered the picture, this one more refined than Will’s.

Regina looked up into the bright blue eyes of her new employer. He smiled down at her and Roland, revealing dimples that made her heart skip a beat. His blond hair was combed back but he had scruff rather than being clean shaven like other businessmen she had encountered. He wore only a button down shirt and gray slacks, choosing to walk around in his socked feet.

He held out his hand, helping her up before shaking her hand. “Robin Locksley. If you follow me to my office, I just want to discuss a few things.”

Robin knelt down and hugged Roland. “Why don’t you go to your room and work on that list for Regina?”

Roland nodded, running off down the carpeted hallway. She and Robin followed at a slower pace, letting Regina take in the crème walls and wood floors. Pictures hung on the wall, showing Robin, Roland and a beautiful woman with black hair, brown eyes and dark skin who Regina believed to be Robin’s late wife and Roland’s mother.

He stopped in front of one door. “This is my study. Usually I leave the door open, but if I close it, knock once before entering.”

She nodded as he let her into the room, which was decorated much like the hallway. He sat behind the desk, motioning for her to sit in one of the chairs in front of it. “Water?” he offered.

“No, thank you.” She settled into the seat. “Your son is sweet.”

“Thank you. He’s my everything,” Robin said with a smile. It fell as he leaned forward. “I will be honest with you. Roland has not taken my wife’s death well.”
“I can’t imagine any child handling such a loss well,” Regina said, thinking of the nights she cried herself to sleep.

Robin studied her before continuing. “I’m afraid he refuses to leave the house. I’ve tried everything but he still believes something bad will happen if he leaves. When Will or I go out, he’s a nervous wreck until we return.”

“Oh,” Regina said, unsure what else to say.

“Dr. Hopper comes in twice a week to help him and for now, Mary Margaret tutors him. You’ll meet them soon. But I wanted you know what to expect.”

She nodded. “Of course. Thank you.”

“Robin? Regina’s things are in her room,” Will said, leaning against the door.

Robin stood. “Then I’ll let you get settled. I’m sure we’ll have plenty to talk about once you get to know Roland.”

“Thank you, Mr. Locksley.”

“Oh no. Please call me Robin.” He smiled. “I insist.”

She nodded, not trusting her voice, and it hoped it didn’t look like she had fled the room after Will. He led her a few doors down, pointing out the bathroom and Roland’s bedroom.

“And this one is yours.” He stopped in front of the door next to Roland’s. “Let me know if you need anything.”

Regina thanked him and entered her new bedroom. It was the size of her room back at the apartment combined with her father’s. A queen-sized bed sat by the door next to a nightstand. She also had a desk, a chest and a vanity. It was perfect as far as she was concerned.

She found a piece of paper on her desk and wondered if it was the list Roland was to write her. But when she picked it up, it was a drawing instead. A tall stick figure with black hair and wearing a dress held the hand of a little stick figure with curly black hair who was wearing a blue shirt and shorts. She didn’t need the names written in childish writing to know they were her and Roland.

Touched, she vowed to find some place to hang it up as she continued unpacking. As she put her clothes away, she heard the door connecting her room with Roland’s creak open. She turned to find the boy watching her. “Is something wrong?” she asked.

“Yes, I did. Thank you so much for it.”

Roland scrambled into her room and onto her bed. “Do you have a dad, Regina?”

“I do.” She pulled out a framed picture of her and her father, handing it to him. “This is him.”

He studied the picture before looking back at her. “Where’s your mama?”

“She…uh…she left.” Regina sat next to him, unsure if there would be any follow up questions.

There were. “Is she in heave like my mama?”
“No.” Regina didn’t say anymore and she hoped he didn’t press the issue.

Roland looked down at the picture. “Do you miss your dad?”

“I do,” she said. “But I’m going to talk to him every night and visit twice a week.”

“Are you bothering Regina?” Robin leaned against the door, arms crossed.

Roland looked at her and she shook her head. “We were just getting to know each other.”

“Regina doesn’t have a mama either but she’s not in heaven.” Roland hopped into his father’s arms.

Robin raised an eyebrow, mouthing “sorry” to her. He shifted Roland in his arms. “Well, dinner is ready. Shall we ask Regina to join us?”

“Regina, do you want to have dinner with us?” Robin whispered something in his son’s ear and Roland added: “Please?”

She smiled and agreed, walking with father and son to the kitchen. All of them, including Will, ate around the small table. It was clear from their interactions that Will and Robin were more than master and servant. Then again, even on her first day, Robin already treated her as more of an equal than an employer.

Roland brightened up with everyone gathered together and he started chattering away. She did her best to follow his conversation as well as Robin and Will’s. It wasn’t easy but she found she enjoyed being around this family already. Calm washed over her as she realized this job was going to work out.

Just as soon as she stopped getting butterflies in her stomach every time Robin looked at her.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: This was the prompt I submitted for OQ Week. And it was a good excuse to start a story I had kicking around my head. So yes, this is more Chapter 1 than one shot.
July 24 - Adoption Day; the day where Regina and Robin welcome a new addition to
t heir family.

This is set in the same verse as my story “Comfort Food.”

Welcome Home

The office wasn’t very welcoming. It was a small room with gray walls devoid of any decorations. The only furniture aside from the uncomfortable metal chairs they sat on was a desk with several folders scattered around the ancient computer and phone sitting on top. Nothing in this room seemed calm and nurturing, things she’d want in the room where she was to meet her child.

If she was even doing that. The social worker had been gone far too long in her opinion. She glanced at the clock in the room, swearing it had stopped.

“A watched pot never boils.”

She frowned. “I’m sorry, I was not aware I married a fortune cookie.”

Her husband chuckled, gently turning her head so she could see his bright blue eyes and reassuring smile. “Everything is going to be fine.”

“How can you be so sure? What if the mother has changed her mind? What if the father has? What if something is wrong with the baby? What if we failed the background check?”

“We passed that weeks ago. I doubt something came up since then.”

“I don’t know.” She narrowed her eyes. “And you swear you’re not a serial killer?”

He let out a belly laugh as she relaxed in her chair. Wiping the tears from his eyes, he took her hands in his and played with her engagement and wedding rings. “No matter what happens, I still have you. And that’s reassuring in and of itself.”

“You’re a sentimental fool.” There was warmth and love in her voice and she knew he would take it as a compliment.

He nodded. “And either way, we’re having mac and cheese, right?”

She laughed before resting her head on his shoulder. He was right—no matter what, she was leaving with him. And that was more than enough.

“Mr. and Mrs. Locksley?” A tall, balding man in a well-pressed suit stepped into the room cradling a bundle of blue blankets. “I’d like you to meet your son.”

Regina stood, arms outstretched, in seconds. The social worker slid the bay into her arms. He slept on as she rocked him, taking in everything about him—his pink lips, button nose, tiny fingers and the
soft wisps of brown fuzz that peeked out from under his blue cap. “He’s perfect,” she breathed.

“Everything went well with the birth, he had a good Apgar score and the doctor at the hospital gave him a clean bill of health.” The man looked at a file on his desk. “So the only thing left to know is his name.”

Robin stooped to kiss his son’s forehead, leaving Regina to answer. “Henry Robin Locksley,” she said, voice watery from her unshed tears of joy.

“How? That’s not a name you hear much anymore,” the social worker said.

“It was my father’s name.” Regina swallowed past the lump in her throat that formed at the thought of her late father.

“Okay. I’ll submit the paperwork.” He smiled at the two. “Let me just make sure you have the car seat set up right and then I’ll let you be on your way.”

Regina settled Henry into the carrier they had brought, kissing his forehead as she snapped him in. She picked up the diaper bag as Robin took the carrier, both following the social worker out to the car. He watched as Robin snapped the carrier into the base and gave the set up the seal of approval. After wishing them well, he went back into the office as they got into the car, Regina sitting next to Henry in the back.

Her eyes were glued to the sleeping baby boy, afraid if she looked away he would disappear. “Regina? Is something wrong?” Robin asked from the driver’s seat.

“I just never thought I’d have this,” she admitted. She thought back to that awful day when the specialist confirmed what two other doctors had told her: she would not be able to have children naturally. Regina had gone back to her parents’ house and cried as her father rocked her and her mother made her mac and cheese. She had thought she’d never have a family, never have those dreams come true.

She looked up, meeting Robin’s eyes in the rearview mirror. Robin, the man who had stayed with her even after she had told him about her infertility early enough for him to bow out gracefully. The man who only cared about her desire for children rather than her ability to have them. The man who had married her and revived her dreams of having a family. The man who had researched all their options and held her hand the entire way to this moment.

The man who was going to make a great father to Henry.

“I love you,” she said.

He smiled. “I love you, too.”

Pulling into the driveway, Robin hopped out to undo Henry from his car seat. As the door opened, the baby opened his eyes for the first time and took everything in. Regina and Robin froze, watching him. Henry’s eyes settled on Robin, who smiled. “Welcome home, buddy,” he said.

By the time they got in the house, he had fallen back asleep. Regina didn’t care, realizing there would be plenty more moments like the one in the car. She squeezed Robin’s hands after he set the carrier down. “We’re parents,” she said.

“Yes, we are,” he replied with a laugh.
“Regina? Robin? Is that you?” Cora Mills, Regina’s mother, came out of their kitchen and smiled at the baby. “I see everything went well with the agency.”

Regina recovered herself first. “Mother? I thought you were coming to stay next week?”

“I couldn’t wait. After we hung up, I drove down here.” She held out her arms. “May I hold my grandchild?”

Unclasping Henry after Regina’s nod, she lifted him from his carrier. “Hello, there. I’m your grandmother.”

“His name is Henry,” Regina said.

Cora paused before smiling. “A very good name. Congrats, you two.”

She kissed Regina’s cheek before kissing Robin’s as well. He rubbed the back of his head. “I’m sorry the guest room isn’t set up. I can go get it ready if you want.”

“No need. I’ve booked a room at a nearby hotel. We didn’t want to be more of an imposition.”

Regina frowned. “We?”

A tall woman with graying blonde hair stepped out from the kitchen, looking nervous. Robin froze when he saw her, eyes wide. “Mum?”

Susan Locksley nodded. “Your father may care about blood and genes but…well, this is my first grandchild. I wanted to be here.”

Robin threw his arms around his mother and the two hugged. When they pulled apart, Susan walked over to Regina and took her hands. “I know I haven’t been the best mother-in-law and I’m sorry. Perhaps we can have a fresh start?”

“I’d like that,” Regina said, smiling. “Do you want to hold Henry?”

“May I?” Susan sounded like she hadn’t expected them to allow her. Cora placed Henry into her arms and his other grandmother melted. “Hello there, little one.”

Robin wrapped his arms around Regina, holding her close. She leaned back into him and closed her eyes. “This is perfect.”

“Well, I hope it’s about to get better,” Cora said. “Why don’t we all go into the backyard?”

Regina opened her eyes, frowning. “Why? What’s out in the backyard?”

“Come and see,” Cora said, heading toward their sliding doors. Susan followed with the baby.

“I don’t have a good feeling about this,” Robin whispered. “In fact, I feel we’re walking into a surprise party.”

“Me too. Who do you think is to blame? Mary Margaret or Will?”

“Both. I think they worked together.”

Cora stuck her head back into the living room. “Are you two coming or not?”

Robin took her hand and they followed Cora outside, where a small group of their friends were
gathered around Susan and the baby.

That night, after everyone had left, Robin and Regina sat at their kitchen table with bowls of macaroni and cheese. Henry sat in his carrier between them and both kept sneaking glances at him. Robin smiled. “We’re parents.”

She laughed. “Yes we are.”

“I can’t believe this day has finally come.” He shook his head. “I feel like I’m about to wake up and learn it’s all a dream.”

“I know. I really didn’t want anyone holding him because I was afraid they’d walk off with him because he wasn’t really ours,” Regina admitted.

He reached over, taking her hand and flashing his reassuring smile, dimples on full display. “I understand.”

Regina smiled, but there was some uncertainty in her. Many people had held Henry so far that day, but she had never seen him in Robin’s arms. She didn’t doubt he loved the boy; he had often stopped to kiss Henry’s forehead or rub some part of the baby’s body. And she saw the love in his eyes every time he looked at Henry. So why wouldn’t he hold him?

Maybe she was making something out of nothing. It was only their first day with Henry. She would watch him in the coming days and see what happened.

“Regina? Is something wrong?” Robin asked, disturbing her thoughts.

She shook her head. “Just thinking about Henry.”

“Of course.” Robin looked down at his bowl. “One day, he’ll be eating this with us.”

“Unless he doesn’t like mac and cheese.”

Robin let out a horrified gasp and he covered their son’s ears. “Don’t you dare suggest such a thing around him! He’s still very impressionable, you know.”

She laughed and soon he joined in. He held out a forkful toward her and she opened her mouth, enjoying the dish that had brought them together.

Regina woke up that night to find Robin’s side of the bed empty. Frowning, she sat up and checked the white bassinet. Henry was gone too. Where had her men gone?

She leaned out of the bedroom to scan the hallway and spotted light coming from the next room over, the one they had turned into Henry’s nursery. Regina headed over there and leaned against the doorframe, taking in the sight before her.

Robin sat in the rocking chair they had bought as he fed Henry. The baby suckled loudly from the bottle, clearly hungry. Robin chuckled as he watched their son eat. “Well, someone certainly has a big appetite.”

“Takes after his father.” She walked into the room and sat down on the toy chest Will had given them.
He smiled at her. “Did I wake you?”

“No.” She glanced down at Henry. “I didn’t hear him cry.”

“He didn’t. I was coming back from the bathroom when I heard him whimpering. So I picked him up and figured it was time for his feeding.”

“You figured right.” She paused before looking at him. “I was a little worried that you hadn’t held him all day.”

“Worried? About what?”

Regina shrugged. “That you were scared to hold him. Or nervous. I don’t know.”

“Oh,” he replied, smiling. “No, I was just letting everyone else hold him. Especially you.”

She smiled before asking: “You were willing to wait?”

He nodded before looking back at Henry. “I knew I’d have these moments, where it was just me and him.”

“And I intruded,” she said. “I can leave.”

Robin looked up and shook his head. “Henry and I love having you here.”

She leaned her head against his shoulder, watching the baby nestled in the crook of his other arm. Henry’s eyes were open again and this time they fixed on her.

Robin kissed the top of her head. “He’s as transfixed by you as I am.”

“Like father, like son,” she said with a chuckle.

Henry spit out the bottle once he was done and Regina took it from her husband. “I’ll go clean this out and leave you two to have some father-son bonding time.”

When she came back upstairs, the nursery light was off and she found Henry back in his bassinet. Robin was sitting up in bed, watching as she climbed under the covers again. They slid down together and he wrapped his arms around her. As their breathing evened out, the small family fell back asleep together.
Teach Me

Chapter Summary

July 25 - Teach me; up to your interpretations.

Teach Me

When Regina casted the first curse, she erased everyone’s memories of their lives in the Enchanted Forest and gave them new ones of rather ordinary lives in the Land Without Magic. These memories came with the knowledge needed to survive and navigate in the new world they were inhabiting. In retrospect, Regina realized she had been quite benevolent when it came to the people she had once terrorized.

The second curse did not intend to give everyone new lives. It was meant to get them back to the Land Without Magic to find Emma but Zelena had wiped their memories to give herself a chance to win. So those who came over for the first time with that curse didn’t have the knowledge the others did.

However, Regina often forgot that Robin was in that group. He was able to pick things up rather quickly, though she imagined being forced to survive in New York City for almost three months had forced him to adapt even quicker.

But there were still moments where he said something that reminded her that this world was still new to him. Like when she took him up to the attic to search for Henry’s baby things, to see if they were still usable for his child with Zelena. Robin frowned as he picked up the baby monitor and looked over the car seat. “I’ve seen what David and Mary Margaret have for Neal, but this seems to be so much more,” he said.

“Babies require a lot,” Regina replied.

“Roland didn’t seem to need much. Just a place to sleep and some milk.”

“Things are different here.”

When Baby Hope came to live with Regina and Robin full time, with Zelena having very limited supervised visits. As time went on, Robin declared that caring for an infant in this world was a lot easier than in the Enchanted Forest. “Even if I’m pretty sure that they don’t need all of this stuff,” he said, nose scrunched as he looked around the nursery.

So once again, Regina forgot more often than not that Robin didn’t have a lot of the skills she and the others had. Until she got a frantic call from him when Hope was about three months old. “She’s running a fever. I used that device you showed me and it said one hundred point two.”

“That is high.” Regina frowned. “You need to take her to the doctor. Can you do that?”

“How? I’m not going to walk with her.”

Regina felt like hitting herself. How could she forget that Robin didn’t know how to drive? She
drove them everywhere. But she couldn’t just leave right now, not when she had already excused herself from an important planning meeting to take the call. “Call David and see if he can take you. I’ll meet you at the doctor’s as soon as I can get out of this meeting.”

She rushed into the hospital almost an hour later. Robin sat in the waiting room, rocking a fussy Hope. He looked up, relief in his eyes as she approached. “Whale said it was an ear infection,” he explained. “I’m just waiting for the medicine he prescribed to be filled.”

“I’ll go check on it and if it’s ready, we can go.” Regina took off toward the pharmacy, relieved Hope’s condition wasn’t severe.

Their ride home was quiet and Regina sensed some tension. She got Robin and Hope into the house and administered Hope’s medication with a dropper. Once the baby was asleep, Regina found Robin sitting on the couch as he stared into the fire.

“Is something wrong?” Regina asked.

He shifted as he sighed. “I was just thinking about today. About Hope and how I couldn’t get her to the doctor right away.”

“I know.” Regina swallowed. “I’m sorry. I tried to get out of the meeting as soon as I could. In the future, I will leave…”

“Teach me to drive.”

Regina blinked a few times. “What?”

He smiled, moving closer to her on the couch. “Sorry. Let me back up. One, don’t blame yourself. This is not your fault. Two, can you teach me to drive? I think it would be easier for both of us if I could operate a car as well.”

“Oh.” Regina couldn’t see a downside to his idea. In fact, she was a bit surprised that she hadn’t thought about it first. “Of course. We can start this weekend.”

Regina was able to convince the impound lot to give her an old car to use rather than her own. It wasn’t that she didn’t have faith in Robin, it was just…her car. If anything was going to happen to it, she was going to cause it first.

She took him to an empty lot and spent the first half hour getting him acquainted with everything. “So I don’t use my left leg at all?” he asked.

“Nope. It’s just your right.”

Robin frowned. “That doesn’t seem to make sense. If there are two pedals, why not use both feet?”

“It’s easier to use one.” Regina took a calming breath. “You’ll find it’ll become second nature soon enough. Now put your right foot on the brake and shift the car into drive.”

He did as she said before releasing the brake. As the car rolled forward, he slammed his foot back on the pedal and Regina was thrown against the seatbelt. “Regina! Are you okay?” he asked.

“Yes,” she groaned. “That’s what the seatbelt is for.”

“I’m so sorry.”
She waved him off. “What happened?”

“I panicked,” he admitted, sheepish. “It’s different when the car starts rolling and you’re the one who is in control.”

“It is. Do you want to try again?”

Robin shifted the car back into park as he shook his head. “Maybe this was a bad idea.”

“No, it’s not.” She took his hand and laced their fingers together. “You can do this.”

He looked at the road, uncertainty in his eyes. “You really think so?”

She sighed, leaning back in her seat. There had to be a way to boost Robin’s confidence in order to get him to do this. Because it was a good idea and it would be helpful if he could drive like the rest of them. But what would entice him?

It dawned on her and she smiled at him, lowering her eyes and her voice. “If you try again, I may be able to conjure up a certain bandit’s outfit again. We could try a little role playing.”

Robin straightened up, looking at her with wide eyes. “You mean it?”

When she nodded, he put the car back into drive and followed her instructions. By the end of the hour, he had managed to get a hang of steering and using the pedals. Regina was right, that it was easier for him to use only one leg to work them. They switched places and she drove them back to the mansion to relieve Henry and Paige of babysitting duties.

(Though it was still odd to think of her baby boy as dating. Where had the time gone?)

That night, Regina and Robin laid in bed as their flushed bodies cooled in the night air. He tangled in hands in her hair, nuzzling her. “Do you ever want your hair this long again?”

“I don’t think so,” she said, eyes closed. “The length I have it at normally is good enough. Why?”

“Just wondering.”

“Do you like it?”

“I like your hair no matter the length.” He tickled her nose with the ends of her own hair. “But this length is a bit more fun.”

She batted his hand away. “Enjoy it now. It’s going to be gone in the morning.”

He chuckled before falling silent. Regina felt sleep pulling at her when he spoke again: “What are we going to do next week?”

“You’re going to master turning and how to use the turn signal.”

“Sounds good, but what about my reward?”

Regina pushed herself up to look at him through the darkness. “Reward?”

He hummed in response, cupping her cheek and rubbing it with his thumb. “I once saw you riding through the woods in this beautiful red riding jacket and tight black leather pants…”
“I see.” She let out a dramatic sigh. “Well, if it’ll get you to master the left turn, I guess I can pull it out of storage…”

“Storage? You have those outfits in storage?” His voice came out a bit strangled and she swear his eyes bulged a bit.

Well, this was an interesting development. Regina smiled as she placed kisses up his chest. “Oh, yes. In a secret room in my vault. All my favorite outfits from the Enchanted Forest.”

He gulped and she kissed his bobbing Adam’s apple. “Could I…Could I see it one day?”

“I didn’t know you had such an interest in my wardrobe.”

“Well, I would say my interest is more in getting you out of your wardrobe.” He flipped them, their fingers entwining over her head. “But I do have appreciation of how you look in the outfits I peel off you.”

Regina kissed him as she thought that maybe Robin could help her change the connotations she associated with her old wardrobe.

As the weeks went by, Robin grew better at driving. Regina let him start practicing on the roads, to get him used to other cars as well as pedestrians. He picked up the rules of the road quickly and gained confidence behind the wheel.

Of course, his incentives helped. Each Saturday night, after putting their children to bed, Regina would soundproof their bedroom and change into whatever outfit Robin requested for that night. It felt odd wearing her old Evil Queen wardrobe, but with every kiss and caress, they ceased to be armor to keep out anything that might make her weak. They now made her feel powerful in a whole new way, a way she believed only Robin could’v showed her. Henry had taught her that love wasn’t weakness while Robin had taught her that sex didn’t have to be a weapon.

(She enjoyed the night he asked her to dress up in his Enchanted Forest outfit the best, though. It seemed no matter the realm, men liked to see women in their clothing).

Lying on his chest, Regina traced patterns on his skin. “I think you’re ready to take your road test.”

“You think so?”

She nodded, looking up at him. “You can schedule it for next week.”

“I guess.” He kissed her forehead. “I’ll miss these nights though.”

“Well, who said they had to end?”

Robin smiled, kissing her as she waved her hand to plunge the room into darkness.

Storybrooke had a Department of Motor Vehicles office. Regina hadn’t understood why until she decided to visit one day early in her career as “Mayor Mills.” It was a fine example of bureaucratic headaches, with disinterested employees doing their best to make the residents of Storybrooke miserable for several hours a day. She relished it then.

Now was a different story, when she had had to wait three hours with Robin just for him to take the
written test required to get his learner’s permit. The only thing she had to be grateful for was the fact that the workers knew how to fudge some of the documentation requirements, given things were very different in Storybrooke. Especially for anyone who came with the second curse and didn’t have magically prepared documents like birth certificates and social security numbers.

Despite the fact that people weren’t lining up to get licenses, Robin still had to wait two weeks to take his road test. It didn’t bother him as much as it annoyed Regina. “Just another week to practice with you,” he said, driving around town.

“Eyes on the road,” she reminded him. “You almost blew a stop sign.”

“Sorry.” Robin’s eyes snapped back forward as he gripped the wheel a bit tighter.

Regina smiled. “Just be more careful. I don’t need you terrorizing the poor people of Storybrooke in addition to the monster du jour.”

“Very funny.”

“I try.” She motioned to a nearby curb. “Try to do a parallel park there.”

He nodded, following every step she had taught him as he guided the car into the spot. When he put into park, he turned to her. “Well?”

“Very good. You’re going to pass with flying colors.”

“Only because I had a great teacher.” He smiled at her, cupping her cheek. “Really, Regina, thank you.”

She leaned forward, kissing him. They exchanged several kisses, each growing more heated with every passing moment.

Tapping on the window broke them apart and Regina turned to glare at whoever disturbed them. Emma’s smirking face appeared before her and she sighed as she rolled down the window. “Yes, Miss Swan?”

“Well, Madame Mayor, I just thought I’d warn you before I had to arrest the two of you for public indecency.” Emma couldn’t keep the laughter out of her voice.

Regina rolled her eyes. “Thank you. Now leave us alone.”

As Emma walked away laughing, Regina rolled up the window and leaned back in her seat. “Well, that was embarrassing.”

“I guess,” Robin said, tapping his fingers on the wheel. “Shall I drive us home, milady?”

Regina smiled, lowering her eyelids and her voice. “Or I could teach you how to drive to a secluded spot overlooking town that offers some privacy.”

The day of Robin’s road test, she drove him to the testing site and waited outside the car with him. “You remember everything I taught you?”

“I think so.” He wiped his hands on his pants. “But what if I blank on the test?”

“All they want to see is that you can handle the car and remain calm under pressure. I know you can
already do that. After all, you did evade my guards for years.”

Robin hummed. “Maybe we can call Mary Margaret for a proper hope speech.”

“Why you…” She grabbed his shirt and pulled him in for a good and proper kiss. When she let him go, he looked a little dazed. “What were you saying?”

“Nothing. I’m good.”

The official from the DMV strolled out of the building, clipboard in hand. He did seem to shrink back when he saw Regina standing next to Robin. “Well, uh, Mr. Hood, if you’ll just get in the car, we can begin.”

Robin gave her one last look and she smiled, mouthing “Good luck” to him before he got in the car. The instructor watched as he adjusted his mirrors and started the car. With a nod, Robin turned on his signal and pulled away from the curb.

She sat down on the bench, trying to pretend she wasn’t nervous for him. _He knows what he’s doing. He’ll be fine. Don’t worry._

“Coffee?” A Styrofoam cup appeared in her line of vision and she looked up to see Emma standing there. “And some company?”

Regina took the cup and nodded toward the bench. Emma sat down and sighed. “Just think, we’re going to be doing this in a couple years for Henry.”

“Please. He’s growing up so much. I can’t believe he already has a girlfriend.”

Emma shuddered. “I know. It seems like just yesterday he was a fresh-faced pipsqueak telling me I was his mother and I had to defeat his other mother, the Evil Queen.”

Regina shot her a look and Emma held up her hands. “You’re not the Evil Queen anymore, but you have to admit when I first came to town…”

“I know, I know.” Regina sighed, taking a sip of her coffee. “When Henry starts his lessons, can we agree on one thing? David goes nowhere near him?”

“Agreed.” Emma nodded, no doubt recalling the destruction her father and son had done when David wanted to prove to Henry he was cool.

Regina tensed up as the car returned, pulling up to the curb. She and Emma watched as Robin and the official spoke for a bit. The official got out of the car, shot a glance at Regina and hurried away. She frowned as she watched him. “Was that a good sign?”

“It doesn’t mean anything,” Emma said. “A lot of people are still a bit wary of you. Me too, even though I’m no longer the Dark One.”

The car door opened and Regina watched Robin get out. His eyes met hers and he beamed at her. She relaxed, knowing the results even before he announced: “I passed.”


“Emma!” Regina glared at the sheriff as she walked away, laughing.

Robin pulled her close, wrapping his arms around her waist. “So, how are we going to celebrate?”
“Do you have an outfit in mind?”

“I wouldn’t have been able to do this without you.” He kissed her cheek. “So it should be teacher’s choice.”

Before Robin and Regina could have their own private celebration, the boys had insisted they go out to eat to celebrate as a family. So the Hood-Mills family sat in a booth, Hope asleep in her carrier between her parents while Henry and Roland sat across the way. Henry helped the younger boy with one of the puzzles on the place mat as they awaited their food.

Regina excused herself to the bathroom and when she returned, she stopped short. Zelena had taken her spot, holding Hope awkwardly. Robin’s jaw was clenched and Roland had shrunk into Henry.

She stormed over to her sister. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“Oh, hello, sis.” Zelena’s voice had an overly sweet tone to it. “I was a bit disappointed not to be invited to the family dinner.”

“That’s because you’re not family.”

Zelena held out Hope. “This says otherwise, sister dear.”

“For goodness sake, if you’re not going to hold her properly, give her to me.” Regina held out her arms.

But Zelena held Hope closer, bouncing the baby. “I’m her mother and I’ll hold her if I want.”

“You only want to be a mother when it suits your purpose of terrorizing us,” Regina snapped back.

Whatever Zelena was going to say in response was replaced with a shriek of horror as Hope spit up on her. She thrust the baby back into Robin’s arms before hopping out of the booth. Zelena glared at Regina. “Have fun, for now.”

“Oh, don’t worry, sis, we will.” Regina followed Zelena’s form until she left the diner and someone finally brought them their meal.

She slid back into her seat as Robin rocked Hope. “That’s a good girl,” he cooed to her. “Getting rid of that awful witch.”

“She is Hope’s mother, Robin.”

He looked her right in her eyes as he shook his head. “She only gave birth to her. You’re her mother.”

Melting under the intensity of his gaze, Regina leaned forward and kissed him. She heard Henry groan. “Please, you two, can you not? We’re trying to eat.”

They broke apart, Regina settling Hope back in her carrier as Robin leaned closer to Henry. “I’d like to remind you that you now have a girlfriend,” he said. “And I have no problem doing the same thing to you and Paige.”

Henry glanced over at his mother, who only raised her eyebrows in response, before sighing. He mumbled something and turned to his meal. Regina and Robin exchanged looks, smiling.
“Hope is asleep at last, Roland is dead to the world and Henry has his headphones on. We are good
to…”

The words died in Robin’s throat as he took in Regina. She stood in the middle of their bedroom,
once again in his old Enchanted Forest gear. This time, though, she held his bow in her hands. “I
was thinking,” she said, batting her eyes at him, “that maybe it’s time for the student to become the
teacher.”

Robin gulped. “What do you mean?”

They closed the gap between them, as if drawn to each other. She tapped his chest with the bow. “I
mean, I would like you to teach me how to use this.”

“I’d be honored, milady. On one condition.” Robin leaned closer, forehead touching hers. “Marry
me.”

Her eyes widened as she looked into his, seeing nothing there but sincerity and love. She let the bow
fall to the floor as she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed them. They fell back onto the
bed, Regina straddling him as she smiled.

“Yes.”
The Tattoo

Chapter Summary

July 26 - Late Night Confessions; heart-to-heart conversations due boldness/drunkenness.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Tattoo

Snow and Charming announced their pregnancy at dinner, allowing for ample amounts of ale to be brought in for a celebration. Everyone cramped into the Winter Palace (her palace) grabbed a tankard and raised a toast to the happy couple.

Regina sat in an alcove, watching as everyone ate, drank and was merry. It seemed foolish with the Wicked Witch still lurking about, threatening them (threatening her). But she had to stay long enough to support Snow and Charming. Then she could flee to the solitude of her room.

“Will you not drink to the new prince or princess?”

She closed her eyes at the sound of the familiar accent and bit back a groan when Robin Hood sat down next to her. Opening her eyes, she saw he was holding a tankard out to her. Regina tilted her wine goblet toward him. “I’ve raised my glass and drank to the baby. You can be on your way, Thief.”

“You will not enjoy the ale?”

She shook her head. “I’m more refined than that.”

“Refined?” He smiled, leaning closer. “So the Queen cannot hold her alcohol.”

“That is now what I said.” Anger boiled inside her and she knew her eyes had to flash a warning. He ignored it. “You didn’t have to. Don’t worry, milady, your secret is safe with me.”

“I can hold my alcohol!”

Robin raised an eyebrow. “Prove it,” he challenged.

Glaring at him, she poofed them to an empty table and motioned for someone to bring them some ale. He kept his eyes fixed on her, smirking as he picked up his tankard. “Shall we make a toast?”

“To what?”

“Not to what, to whom.” He raised his cup. “To you, milady.”

They clinked their cups before downing their ale and calling for refills. Regina raised her tankard. “A toast to your ego, Thief. May it come out only bruised.”
“I do not know what that is but thank you.” He gulped his ale as she downed hers.

They stayed there for several hours. Other revelers drifted to their rooms and Snow had returned to her chambers after Charming assured her Regina could take care of herself. Little John decided the same of Robin once the other Merry Men turned in for the night.

By this point, they had finally run out of things to toast but were far too inebriated to care. Robin hoisted his tankard, arm swaying a bit. “A toast to our toasts. May we remember them in the morning.”

Regina giggled before tossing back her ale. She swayed on the bench but remained upright. “Is there more?” she asked, words slurred.

He nodded, pouring more ale into her mug. Granny, concerned, had started to water down the pitchers sent to their table but it was too little, too late. Both queen and outlaw were far too gone.

“Your turn,” he told her.

She nodded, leaning forward. “To your infuriating sexy dimples.”

Robin smiled, flashing her those dimples as she gulped down her beverage before he held out his mug. “To your luscious, kissable lips.”

She leaned closer, as did he, their drinks forgotten. Regina’s eyes fluttered closed as she waited for the moment his lips met hers.

They met the table instead. Regina opened her eyes to see the wood grains as she began to register the edge of the table as it dug into her gut.

“Oh, I think you’ve had enough.” Robin’s strong hands lifted her back into an upright position. “Allow me to escort you to your rooms.”

“No, I’m fine. We haven’t finished our competition.” But as she spoke, the room began to spin and she swayed on her feet.

He chuckled. “We are finished, milady.”

“Who won?”

“I guess you. You kept up with me and proved you are no lightweight.”

“Good.” They stumbled out of the Great Hall as Regina giggled. She stopped enjoying the feel of the night air against her face.

She glanced over at Robin, who was smiling at her. “What?” she asked.

“The moonlight makes you look like a goddess.”

“I think you’ve had too much ale,” she scoffed.

Robin shook his head. “You are beautiful. I’ve thought so since I first saw you.”

“Even once you realized I was the Evil Queen?”
“I always knew. Even before I shot that arrow at the flying monkey.”

“To save Snow White.”

“To save you both.” He placed his hands on her hips. “A decision I have never regretted, no matter how infuriating you can be.”

She didn’t know who kissed who first. All she knew was his lips on hers, her back against the courtyard wall and her fingers tugging at his hair. His scruff tickled her with every kiss but she didn’t care. While his kisses couldn’t fill the void left by Henry’s loss, they lessened the pain somewhat.

They broke apart, foreheads resting together. She watched his face—eyes closed and a content smile on it—before asking, “What do you see in me?”

“A strong woman who goes on despite the pain she lives with every day,” he whispered back. “A pain I understand all too well. I know I can’t take it away but I want to share it, to help you bear it. I want to be your second chance…because I think you’re mine.

“And you can hold your own with me when it comes to drinking,” he added, eyes twinkling. “Very impressive for someone who probably has never been in a pub before.”

“Shows what you know. I’ve been to a tavern.”

He raised an eyebrow. “You? Where?”

“I don’t know.” She laughed at the confused look on his face. “Tinkerbell flew me there. She had stolen some pixie dust and used it to help me find my soul mate.”

“And did you?”

“Yes,” Regina said.

Robin frowned. “So where is he? Who is he?”

She shrugged. “I never met him. I only made it to the door and got scared. So I ran.”

“Did you see him?”

“No, his back was to me. All I saw was his tattoo.” She tapped his arm. “It was right there, a lion against a black shield.”

His eyes widened and he released her to roll up his right sleeve. Robin held out the arm to her. “Like this?”

Regina glanced down to see the same tattoo on him. It felt like someone had tossed a bucket of ice water on her and she sobered up quickly. The thought that there might be another man with the same tattoo crossed her mind before she dismissed it. She had lived in the Enchanted Forest and dealt with its magic long enough to know there were no coincidences in this realm.

Her soul mate was Robin Hood.

“Regina? Is something wrong?” He tried to cup her cheek but she sidestepped him. Frowning, he turned to her. “Is it the same tattoo?”

For a moment, she considered lying. Saying that the one on her soul mate looked different. But her filter was obliterated still by the alcohol. “Yes,” she breathed.
“It was me?” He smiled, wrapping his arms around her again.

Regina kissed him, raising her arm once he closed his eyes. He sagged as her sleeping spell took over and she used her magic to lay him down on the floor. She set about erasing his memory, making sure he didn’t recall anything about the tattoo, being her soul mate or their passionate kisses.

He wasn’t lying about wanting to share her pain. She saw it in his eyes. But he didn’t understand the true extent of her pain. He didn’t understand the true extent of her darkness, of her past. She was a villain and villains didn’t get happy endings.

It was better for both of them if they didn’t recall this evening. She would leave him here, making everyone believe he had only made it to the courtyard before deciding to sleep off their drinking game. Then she would go to her room and wipe her own memories. All she would recall in the morning was that she had stumbled from the Great Hall and managed to return to her room.

She unrolled his sleeve, covering the tattoo again, and ran a hand through his hair. “I’m sorry,” she whispered. “But this is for the best.”

Over a year later, her memory spell was undone by True Love’s Kiss. It hadn’t been the purpose for the kiss—saving Robin had been—but as the pulse hit her, so did the memory. She sat now on her couch, arms around her knees. Regina didn’t know if the spell on Robin had been broken as well and she was ashamed to admit she was too scared to check.

“Regina? Why are you sitting in the dark?” Robin shuffled into the room, still sore from their battle earlier. “Why don’t you come to bed?”

She shook her head. “Can’t sleep.”

He eased himself down onto the couch and held out his hand to her. The lion tattoo was on full display and Regina looked away. She heard him sigh and whisper, “I thought so.”

“So you remember?” she asked.

“About what really happened after our little drinking game? Yes.”

“Are you upset?”

Robin sighed, placing his hand on her arms. “A little, yes. But I think I also understand.”

“You do?” She looked at him, blinking a few times.

“I’ve long ago realized that you were in no place to open yourself to love. You were hurting and it was still too fresh for you to chance experiencing that pain again.” He let out a soft chuckle. “In some ways, the second curse was a blessing. It brought Henry back to you and allowed you to let me in.”

She leaned into his embrace, resting against his shoulder. “Seeing your tattoo…it just…”

“I know. You ran when you saw it here too. At least that time you came back.”

“I resisted for a long time.”

He kissed her head. “It doesn’t matter. The past is in the past. We have now and we have tomorrow. Let’s focus on that.”
“I love you,” she said, smiling.

“I love you too.” He lifted her chin up so she could look him in the eyes. “You ready for bed now?”

She nodded, helping him back to their bedroom. He laid back with a groan, closing his eyes. “You wouldn’t have something for the pain, would you?”

“Magical or not?”

“I love you, magic and all, but I think I’ll take whatever this world can offer.”

Regina disappeared into the bathroom and returned with some aspirin as well as a glass of water. Once Robin took them, she turned out the lights and climbed in next to him. He wrapped his arms around her and she lifted his right one to kiss his tattoo.

He had been right those months ago—it really was about timing.

Chapter End Notes

This is based on my own head canon that Regina saw Robin’s tattoo sometime during the Missing Year, which was why she was downright hostile to him during the flashbacks in “A Curious Thing.” I hope we see more of the Missing Year, hopefully this season.

I want to apologize for the delay in posting both this chapter and the last. They had gone up in time for OQ Week on tumblr so I’m sorry it took me two weeks to post them here. Mostly it was because I was focused on finishing “All That Was Me” but I was also hesitant after receiving a comment or two about “Teach Me” on tumblr. I decided to put them aside as the reaction to it has been more positive than not, the same now that I’ve posted it. So thank you to you all.

Anyway, I’m leaving for vacation tomorrow, so I wanted to get this up before then. I have another chapter I’m going to post either later today or early tomorrow, before I head out. So it might be a week before I answer your reviews and questions, but just know it’s not because I’m ignoring you all. It’s just because I’m having fun with my family.

--Mac
Chapter Summary

Based on the following prompt from trueoutlawqueenlove1 on Wattpad: Do u know the film mamma mia?? Well i was thinking if u could do a one shot about that u know Regina is Donna the mother of Sophie and Robin could be Sam. But there if u do the chapter could Regina know who Sophie's father is.

Chapter Notes

This is morphing into more than a one-shot. So I’m going to put this first part out now and then the second part later. Not sure when as I haven’t started writing it yet.

I’ve also adjusted a few things. I’ve decided to make Sophie younger and forego the whole marriage aspect. Hope you all enjoy!

Dad Quest

“School’s out!” Henry Swan let out a whoop as they exited the school yard. “Two whole months of freedom!”

Lily Draco shook her head. “Not completely. Mom’s insisting I be productive and so I’m going to be doing odd jobs around her office.”

“Your mom is a lawyer. That’s going to be cool,” Henry said. “And I did manage to convince my mom to go to a basketball camp this summer. What about you, Soph?”

They turned to the third member of their group, Sophie Mills. She sighed, tugging on her braided black hair. “I’m going to be helping Ms. Belle at the library. But there is more…”

She glanced around and then motioned for her friends to get closer. Henry and Lily leaned in as Sophie dropped her voice to a whisper. “I am going on Dad Quest this summer.”

“Dad what?” Lily asked.

Sophie sighed. “I’m going to find my dad this summer.”

“Why?” Lily stopped walking, facing her best friend. She crossed her arms. “You haven’t needed him for ten years. Why bring him into your life now?”

Henry glanced around. “Why don’t we continue this at our clubhouse?”

“Good idea, Henry.” Sophie started walking ahead. She glanced over her shoulder at her friends. “Coming?”
After picking up snacks, the three friends settled into their clubhouse in the woods near the Mills’ house. Lily settled in a worn beanbag chair, staring at Sophie. “So, why do you want to find your father?”

“We’re all friends because we’re children of single mothers,” Sophie began.

Henry interrupted. “I think we’re friends because our mothers are friends.”

“Because they’re single mothers,” Sophie reiterated. “Now, I’m not saying our mothers aren’t amazing because they are. But haven’t you ever wondered about your father?”

“No,” Lily said.

“Yes,” Henry admitted before shrugging. “But with Mom getting closer to Killian, I’ve been fine with not knowing.”

Sophie smiled. “Glad things are working out with him. But I wonder about my dad and I want to know who he is. I feel if I meet him, I’ll understand myself a bit more.”

“We’re ten, Soph. That’s a bit young to be having an identity crisis,” Lily said.

Henry nudged her. “If Sophie wants to find her father, we should support her. That’s what friends do.”

“You’re right,” Lily sighed. She turned to Sophie. “Sorry. So, how are you going to find your father?”

“I’m glad you asked.” Sophie smiled, reaching into her backpack. “Mom’s been cleaning out the attic and I found this while we were up there.”

She held up a picture, taken on a beach. Her mother, Regina, stood in the middle of a group of people as they smiled at the camera. “This was taken the summer before I was born. Specifically, a little over nine months before then. Meaning it’s highly likely that one of the guys in this picture is my dad.”

“But which one?” Henry asked.

Lily leaned closer, pointing to a curly haired man standing next to Regina. “Isn’t that your Uncle Graham?”

“Yes,” Sophie said. “I don’t think he’s my dad. Mom always gets quiet and tense when I ask about my dad. Why would she be like that if he’s been in my life the entire time?”

“Good point. Besides, I don’t see any of him in you,” Henry said.

Lily rolled her eyes. “She’s the spitting image of Aunt Regina, Henry. I doubt we’ll see any of her father in her.”

“You never know,” Henry shot back.

“GUYS!” Sophie waited until her friends looked at her. “Look, Uncle Graham is coming over tonight. Since I’m pretty sure he’s not my dad, maybe he can help me identify these men. It’ll be a start and I’m going to need your support. Can you do that?”

Lily and Henry looked at each other before nodding. “We’ll always support you, Soph. No matter what happens,” she said.
Henry put his hand in the middle. Sophie and Lily placed theirs on top of his. “Here’s to Dad Quest,” he said.

“Uncle Graham!” Sophie threw herself at the man, who caught her easily. She wrapped her arms and legs around him. “I’m so glad to see you!”

“I can tell,” he laughed. He set her down on her feet. “You’re getting a little too big for that, I’m afraid.”

Sophie pouted. “Never.”

“Sophie? Is that you?” Her mother, Regina, walked into the room. She still wore her tan skirt and cream silk top from her day as the town’s mayor. But she had her fuzzy slippers on, promising a quiet evening at home. Sophie loved those.

She kissed her mother’s cheek. “Hi, Mom. How was your day?”

“Busy, what with the festival coming up.” Regina smiled. “But I’ll tell you about that over dinner. You go wash up and then meet Uncle Graham and me in the dining room.”

“Yes, Mom.” Sophie hurried to the bathroom and washed her hands as fast as she could. The smell of her mother’s lasagna hung in the air and her stomach rumbled in anticipation.

She slid into her seat at the table, across from her mother and now next to her uncle. “It smells great, Mom.”

“It does, Regina. You didn’t have to make anything special for me,” Graham said.

Regina waved him off. “Nonsense. Lord knows what you eat out there in the woods, all alone.”

“I eat fine,” Graham stressed. He worked in the state’s gaming commission and preferred to live out in the woods rather than even a small town like Storybrooke. While Sophie herself often preferred to spend time in the woods, she enjoyed civilization a bit more.

Regina served both of them large servings of lasagna. Conversation flowed between them and there was plenty of laughter. When they had eaten their fill of lasagna, she excused herself to fetch the dessert.

Sophie seized her chance, pulling out the picture and showing it to Graham. “I need to ask you about this.”

“Where did you get this?” Graham took the picture from her, frowning.

“I found it in the attic.”

“What do you want to know?” he asked, suspicion coloring his words.

She dropped her voice, afraid her mother would overhear. “Which one is my father?”

Graham was saved from answering as Regina returned with her apple cobbler. He hid the picture, stuffing it in his pocket to Sophie’s dismay. But she said nothing as her mother dished out their dessert, only saying she wanted ice cream instead of whipped cream on hers. As she spooned the delicious cobbler into her mouth, she plotted to get the picture back from her uncle.
That night, after Sophie had gone to bed, Regina stood at the sink washing the dishes. Graham sat at her kitchen table, an open bottle of beer in front of him. “I wish you would let me help,” he said.

“You’re a guest. Guests don’t help.”

Graham sighed. “I’m more than a guest, Regina. I’m a friend. And friends do help.”

“I’m fine.” She glanced over her shoulder at him. “I’m almost done.”

He gave up, recognizing a losing fight. After all, he and Regina had been friends for over ten years now. They were almost like brother and sister at this point. He knew when to push her and when to back off. Now was one of those moments to back off, especially with what he had to discuss with her when she was done. Graham took a swig of beer, hoping for a little liquid confidence.

“Graham? Is something wrong?” Regina slid into the seat next to him, frowning. “You’re awfully quiet.”

Graham pulled out the picture Sophie had given him, sliding it across the table to her. “Your daughter found this.”

Regina picked up the picture and her mouth dropped open. “I forgot this was in the attic. This definitely brings back memories.”

“It was one hell of a summer.”

“You can certainly say that again.” Regina smiled as she laid the picture down.

Graham took another sip before his next comment. “She knows.”

“Knows what?”

“That her father is in the picture.”

Regina frowned. “You told her?”

“No. She did the math, Regina, and figured out that she was born nine months after that summer. She asked me who it is.”

“What did you tell her?” She was panicking, breathing fast and eyes going glassy.

He took her hand. “Nothing.”

She let out a relieved breath. “Good.”

“I think you should tell her.”

“No.”

“She deserves to know.”

“Know what?” Regina stood, pacing the kitchen. “That I fell for a pair of bright blue eyes, an accent and flowery declarations of love? That I believed his promises of forever? That forever turned out to only be until the leaves changed colors? That he never contacted me again, even after I told him I was pregnant? That he abandoned both of us?”
Graham stood, pulling her into an embrace. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to dredge up this old pain. But I do believe Sophie deserves the truth. She’s growing up.”

“I know,” Regina said into his shirt. “But how do I look my little girl in the eyes and tell her that her father didn’t want her?”

“I still can’t believe it. It just doesn’t seem like the man we befriended then.”

Regina pulled away, wiping her face. “Yeah, well, he fooled us all.”

“Maybe he’s changed his mind. Maybe if you and Sophie reach out, he’ll want to be her father now.”

“And what if he doesn’t?” Regina ran a hand through her hair. “She’s at an impressionable age. Who knows what that type of rejection will do to her?”

“She deserves to know.”

Regina nodded. “I’ll tell her in a few years. When she’s old enough to handle the possible rejection.”

Graham didn’t say anything. He just sat back down to finish his beer. Regina though took his hand in hers. “Please, Graham, I need you to promise me that you won’t tell Sophie who her father is.”

“I promise, Regina.”

She kissed his cheek. “I’m going to turn in. Will you be okay?”

“Yes.” He smiled at her. “Good night, Regina.”

Once she was gone, he picked up the photograph again. An idea came to him—he wouldn’t tell Sophie who her father was. But it didn’t mean that he couldn’t leave her a few clues to help her figure it out on her own.

Uncle Graham’s visits were always too short in Sophie’s opinion. She sat on the front stoop, watching as he packed his beat up car. He walked over to her, sitting down. “Come on, Soph, it’s summer. Smile.”

“I wish you could stay longer,” she said.

“Me too.” He nudged her. “Hey, maybe later this summer I could take you, Henry and Lily camping?”

She smiled at last. “I’d like that.”

Graham nodded and she grew serious again. “Did you think about what I asked you?”

“Yes. And I spoke with your mother.”

“You didn’t!” Sophie’s eyes grew wide and she stood. “She’d never approve.”

Graham nodded. “She didn’t. Forbade me from telling you who your father is.”

“Of course she did. She never wants me to find out.” Sophie sat down, slumping over. “It’s not fair.”
“That’s not true. She just wants you to be a bit older.”

“That means never, Uncle Graham.”

“Well, it doesn’t mean I can’t tell you who your father isn’t.” He sighed. “I’m not your father, Sophie. I would’ve been honored, though, had I been.”

Sophie sighed. “Well, I guess that’s a start.”

“Well, there may be something to help you in your clubhouse.” He winked before hugging her. “I’ll see you soon, Soph. I promise.”

Sophie raced toward the clubhouse with Henry and Lily on her heels. They called for her to slow down, but she wanted to discover what Uncle Graham had left for her there. Especially if it could help with Dad Quest.

Bursting into the wooden structure, Sophie found the picture resting on the table. She picked it up as Henry entered behind her. He panted, hands on his knees. “What is it?”

“Uncle Graham promised Mom he wouldn’t tell me who my father was.” Sophie turned to face her friends, the picture in her hand. She was smiling. “But he didn’t promise her he wouldn’t tell me who was in the picture.”

She flipped the picture over to reveal little Post-It notes covering it. Each had a name and was placed under everyone in the shot—male and female. Lily nodded, impressed. “Your Uncle Graham is pretty clever.”

“Yep. So that means my father is either Will Scarlet, Keith Nott or Robin Locksley,” Sophie announced.

Lily frowned. “So how are you going to figure out who is the lucky winner?”

“I think I need to go to the library,” Sophie said. “Anyone want to come with me?”

Both shook their heads, saying they had their own activities to go to. “But why don’t we meet up at the ice cream shop this afternoon?” Lily suggested.

“Agreed,” Henry and Sophie said.

Sarah Walker, the owner of the ice cream shop, smiled as the three friends entered her establishment. “If it isn’t the Three Musketeers. I was wondering when I would see you this summer.”

“School only let out yesterday, Ms. Walker,” Lily said, leaning up against the glass display case.

Sarah laughed. “And I expected you five minutes after school let out.”

“Sorry, Ms. Walker, but we decided to do something else,” Sophie said. “But we’ll more than make up for it now.”

“I’m sure you will. Now, I hope your orders haven’t changed. Chocolate chip mint for Henry.” She handed him the cone and he thanked her.
Lily leaned forward, challenging Sarah. “What do you think I want today?”

“Hmm.” Sarah also leaned forward, scrutinizing the girl. She then turned to her stock and put together a cone. “One scoop cookie dough, one scoop chocolate.”

“You’re good. One day, though, I’ll trip you up.” Lily took the cone and thanked her, moving aside so Sophie could have her turn.

Sarah handed her a cone. “Ever faithful to rocky road.”


“You’re welcome. See you three tomorrow?”

Lily shrugged. “Probably. This is the best ice cream in town.”

The three took their ice creams and left the store. “Want to go walk along the promenade?” Henry suggested.

Sophie and Lily looked at each other and nodded. “Sounds good,” Sophie said, licking her ice cream.

The promenade ran along the beach, giving people a great view of the ocean that bordered Storybrooke. During the summer it was packed with people and this day was no different. The three friends weaved through runners, dog walkers and parents with strollers as they walked along.

“So I did some research in the library today,” Sophie said. “And I found the addresses for my three possible fathers.”

Lily looked impressed. “Nice work. But now what are you going to do?”

“You can’t just send them a letter saying they might be your father,” Henry added. “They won’t believe you and think it’s just a scam.”

“I’ve thought of that and hit upon the perfect solution. The Summer Festival.”

Her two friends stopped and stared at her. Lily sighed. “I’ll ask it. How is that the perfect solution?”

“Because of the ball,” Sophie answered as if it was the most obvious answer in the world. When she realized it wasn’t, she explained: “Mom always invites some of the local business owners to it, you know, to try and convince them to invest in Storybrooke. All three of my potential fathers have businesses in the area.”

“So you sneak their business names on your mother’s list and hope that her name lures them here,” Henry concluded.

Lily nodded. “Never mind. That is the perfect solution.”

“Of course it is,” Sophie said. “Now I just have to sneak their names onto the list without Mom noticing.”

The Summer Festival was the busiest time of year for Storybrooke. Regina hated that she had to spend two weeks of her daughter’s summer vacation constantly on the run, but Sophie was always an understanding girl. “You always make it up to me later in the summer,” she said over dinner. “By
the way, where are we going for vacation this year?"

“It’s a surprise,” Regina lied. She hadn’t had time to plan one yet. Just another way she was failing her daughter this year. Perhaps Ruby could start looking into that for her.

Regina tucked some of her hair behind her ear and smiled at her daughter. “So, how are you enjoying volunteering at the library?”

“It’s good. Miss Belle is really knowledgeable and it’s kinda fun to look at some of the old records.” Sophie leaned closer. “Today, she showed me something called microfiche. Have you ever heard of that?”

“Yes, I have. I had to use it for quite a few college presentations.”

Sophie smiled, leaning closer. “What was college like for you?”

“I enjoyed it a lot,” Regina replied. “It was my first taste of freedom and I enjoyed being able to make my own decisions. I also made some great friends, like your Aunt Kathryn, who made the experience all the better. But I also learned a lot, which is important.”

“Of course.” Sophie rolled her eyes.

Regina let it slide as she sipped her wine. “Why do you want to know?”

“Because you don’t really talk about when you were younger,” Sophie said. “Grandma was the only one who told me any stories and now she’s gone.”

Regina paused, her mother’s death still fresh. She and Cora hadn’t had the greatest of relationships, but it had improved after Sophie’s birth. It was as if something had switched in Cora when she became a grandmother. She was loving and generous toward Sophie and helped Regina whenever she could. It had come as a shock when her heart had given out, leaving Regina and Sophie reeling.

Putting down her wine glass, Regina took her daughter’s hand. “Well, that’s going to change. I may not be able to tell you everything, but I will try to tell you more.”

“Except who my father is.”

“Yes,” Regina said. “You do understand I have my reasons, right?”

Sophie nodded, though she frowned. “Are you going to tell me them?”

“When you’re older.”

“Figures.” Sophie crossed her arms.

Regina sighed, praying her daughter would understand when she was older. Until now, there was only one thing to do. “How about some pie?” she offered. “A la mode?”

“You’re trying to bribe me?”

“Are you really going to turn down pie and ice cream?” Regina raised an eyebrow.

Sophie shook her head. “You know my weaknesses too well. I don’t know yours.”

“Yes, you do.” Regina tilted her daughter’s head up, kissing her forehead. “I love you, Sophie. You are the best thing that has ever happened to me.”
Throwing her arms around her mother’s neck, Sophie hugged her. “I love you too, Mom.”

Regina hoped her daughter understood her reasons to keep the truth about her father a secret for now. Maybe she would even stop asking, at least for a little bit.

“Mayor Mills? Are you busy?” Ruby knocked on her office door. “Do you have time for some questions about the festival?”

Regina glanced up. “All my time right now is devoted to the festival. Come on in.”

“Great. There are a few invoices I need you to review and sign. And the catering hall sent over the menu for the ball for you to finalize.” Ruby handed her the menu.

She glanced over it. “When do they want this back?”

“They said tomorrow, but I’m sure they’ll give you a day or two.”

“Well, look at this. Regina Mills, Mayor.” A tall, lanky man with dark hair cut short and a smirk on his face leaned against her door. “Who’d have thunk?”

Regina’s mouth fell open as she took him in. “Will Scarlet? Is that you?”

“Absolutely.” He held out his arms, doing a little spin as he approached her desk. “It’s been too long.”

“It has.” Regina stood, hugging him. Ruby made her excuses and hurried from the room, closing the door behind her.

Will took a seat in front of Regina’s desk as she continued to smile at him. “What brings you to Storybrooke?” she asked.

“This.” He pulled out the invitation to the Summer Festival. “I got it the other day, saw your name and figured I should come and catch up.”

Regina took the invitation and looked it over. “You own the White Rabbit animal shelter?”

“Yeah. Finally got off my arse and did something good, right?”

“I’m so proud of you,” Regina said, putting the invite down. “And if I had known you owned it… well, this invite might’ve come a few years earlier.”

“If I knew you were the mayor, I would’ve visited sooner.” Will leaned back. “You see anyone else? You know, from the old gang?”

“Kathryn and I still keep in touch and visit each other when we can. And Graham’s with the gaming commission, so I see him periodically here in Storybrooke. Cru and Ursula send e-mails or postcards every so often, but nothing consistent. As for the others, no. You?”

“Not as many as you,” Will said with a chuckle. He grew serious, regarding Regina with a calculated look. “I’m still close to one person. He didn’t go back to England either, Regina.”

She fell silent and Will pressed further. “I don’t get it. What happened between you two?”

“What does he say?”
“Won’t talk about it,” Will said. “And I’m getting the sense you’re not going to either.”

Regina shrugged. “Not much to say. It ended.”

“I don’t believe it. Not the way you two were. There has to be more to the story.” Will frowned.

Her door banged open as Sophie charged into the room. “Mom, can I sleep over at Aunt Mal’s? Please?”

“Sophie Cora Mills, what have I told you about knocking?” Regina glared at her daughter.

Sophie bowed her head. “Sorry, but it was kinda an emergency.”

“A sleepover with Lily is not an emergency.”

“Aunt Mal needs an answer like now and Ruby’s not putting any of your calls through.”

“That’s because I’m meeting with someone.” Regina motioned to Will.

Sophie turned to him and grew sheepish. “Oh, sorry.”

“That’s okay. Name’s Will Scarlet.” He held out his hand. “Your mum and I go way back.”

“Cool. Welcome to Storybrooke,” Sophie said before turning back to her mother. She clasped her hands together. “So can I sleep over at Aunt Mal’s? Please?”

Regina sighed. “Okay, you can sleep over at Aunt Mal’s. I’ll let her know it’s okay.”

“Thank you, Mom! You’re the greatest.” Sophie hugged Regina, beaming. She then turned to Will. “Nice to meet you, Mr. Scarlet.”

“You too, Sophie. I hope I see you around more.” He watched as she left, closing the door behind her. Will swiveled back in his seat. “She has his smile, complete with his dimples.”

“I know,” Regina replied, softly. “She has his heart too, the desire to help those who can’t help themselves.”

Will nodded. “I’m glad you didn’t try to deny who her father was though I doubt she knows. He certainly doesn’t or he’d have told me.”

“I sent him a letter. He never responded. That told me everything I needed to know.”

“But that doesn’t make sense. He adored you and I really thought if anyone could be together forever, it was you two. And he’s a great father to Roland…”

“He has a son?” Regina didn’t know why that thought sent her spiraling into sadness. “And a wife, I assume?”

Will fell silent. “I think you should talk to him. Tell him about Sophie. He has a right to know.”

“He forfeited that right ten years ago,” Regina stood. “If that’s all, Mr. Scarlet, I have a phone call to make.”

He sighed, standing as well. “Please, Regina. It’s been too long and I would love to be your friend again.”

“Sounds great.”

“There’s just one thing. You can’t tell Sophie about her dad.”

Will nodded. “I get it. You should be the one to tell her. And I can only promise that I won’t tell him while I’m Storybrooke since this is something I shouldn’t do over the phone. But once I leave…”

“I understand,” Regina said softly. There was a chance she would have to tell Sophie sooner about her father but reminded herself that there was a greater chance that she wouldn’t. That he wouldn’t want some summer time fling ruining the perfect family he seemed to have now.

Sophie dropped her overnight bag and sleeping bag in Lily’s room before crowing, “Dad Quest is off to great start.”

“What do you mean?” Lily raised an eyebrow as she laid on her bed. She rested her chin on a pillow.

“One of my candidates is sitting in Mom’s office.”

Lily sat up. “Really? Which one?”

“Will Scarlet.” Sophie jumped on her friend’s bed. “He seems pretty nice and he’s British.”

“So you could be British?”

Sophie nodded. “I could be related to the royal family!”

“Woah there. I think you’re getting ahead of yourself. He might not be your dad after all.”

“I know. But he might be able to tell me more about who is.”

“If Aunt Regina doesn’t convince him otherwise,” Lily pointed out.

Sophie sighed. “True. But I have a really good feeling about this. I think Dad Quest may yield the desired results.”

“I hope so.” Lily scooted closer to her friend. “I know I gave you a hard time before about this, but I really want you to find your dad too. I just hope you’re happy when all is said and done.”

“Me too,” Sophie whispered. “Me too.”

Chapter End Notes

Like I said in my author’s note for “The Tattoo,” I’m heading out on vacation. So you’re getting two updates before I go to make up for the radio silence I’m probably going to be on while I’m off having fun.

Part two is forthcoming…soon.

--Mac
Sophie was thrilled the next day when Regina told her that Will would be joining them for dinner. “Great. I can get stories about you out of him,” she said, teasing her mother.

Regina smiled before frowning. “I’ve already spoken to Will about your father.”

“I figured,” Sophie sighed. “He’s not going to tell me, is he?”

“No. I’ve asked him not to.”

She parked the car by the promenade, but didn’t move to get out. First, she turned to Sophie. “I’m trying not to be the bad guy.”

“I don’t think you’re the bad guy. I just want to understand why you don’t want me to know who my father is.”

Regina sighed. “Maybe it is time for us to have this talk. Just…after the Summer Festival, okay? When we have all the time in the world together.”

“Okay. I’m going to hold you to it though,” Sophie said, glad that her mother was softening up. Maybe she would tell her the name of her father before she had to track down her other two candidates.

They got out of the car to find Will waiting for them on the promenade. He held two bouquets. “Flowers for two pretty women,” he said, giving them to mother and daughter.

“You’re still the charmer, aren’t you?” Regina teased him, smiling.

Will laughed. “I am only telling the truth though, Regina.”

“Thank you,” Sophie said, clutching her yellow roses closer. “These are great. How did you know they were my favorite?”

“They were your mother’s,” Will replied.

Regina smiled. “Still are.”

Sophie smiled as well, putting another checkmark into the mental columns she kept in her head. Will moved up as her potential father. After all, why else would he know her mother’s favorite flowers?

Regina urged them forward, reminding them that they had reservations and a fifteen minute walk ahead of them. Sophie walked between the two, holding her mother’s hand while Will kept one of his on her back. As they strolled along the promenade, she wondered if this was what it felt like to have a proper family.

“Regina Mills? Why you haven’t aged a day,” a deep male voice said from behind them.

Sophie felt both her mother and Will tense up as they turned around to look at the voice’s owner. He
was taller than her mother, with brown hair brushed into a fancy hairstyle. Though he smiled, there was something about that seemed off to her. She shrunk into her mother’s side and Regina wrapped her arm around her.

“Keith Nott. What brings you to Storybrooke?” she asked.

He held up one of the invites Sophie now wished she hadn’t sent him. There was no way he was her father. That her mother did that mysterious thing adults were always vague about to create her with him.

Regina frowned as she took it from him. “Nott’s Bounty Hunting?”

“Yes,” Keith said, puffing out his chest. “And I must say I’m one of the best in the business.”

Will rolled his eyes. “It seems to suit you.”

“Will Scarlet.” Keith looked him up and down with a cold, calculating look that sent shivers down Sophie’s spine. “I’m surprised I haven’t had to track you down yet. Been able to keep dodging the law?”

“I’ve gone legit, not that it’s any of your business.” Will stared the man down, arms crossed.

Sophie felt her mother push her toward Will. “Can you take Sophie to the restaurant, Will? I’ll join you in a little bit.”

“Of course. But if you’re not there in ten minutes, I’m sending someone after you, yeah?” He glared at Keith as he took the girl’s hand in his.

She clutched onto his hand though she didn’t want to leave her mother. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw her mother stand rigid and with her arms crossed. She was uncomfortable around Keith as well.

“Maybe we should go back,” she told Will. “Keep Mom safe.”

Will stopped, hugging her. “Don’t worry. Your mom can protect herself. And we set up a check in time, yeah? I’m sure she’ll make it, but if she doesn’t…”

“We send Aunt Emma after her? She’s the sheriff,” Sophie said.

He nodded. “We send your aunt after her. Now, tell me about yourself. What’s your favorite subject in school?”

With one last glance over her shoulder, Sophie couldn’t see her mother anymore. So she focused on Will’s distraction. “Well, I really like math. My friends think I’m nuts but I understand it better than they do.”

Will laughed. “Well, aren’t you a little genius? Then again, your mother was always good at math. She just liked political science a bit more.”

“She still uses math when she has to put together the budget,” Sophie said. “This year, she let me watch and I almost understood it.”

“Maybe you’ll be a mayor like her, then?”

Sophie paused, before shaking her head. “I don’t know what I want to be yet, but I know that’s not it.”
“Well, if you’re good at math and you like it, then you have a lot of options in front of you.” Will winked at her. “Dream big, little one.”

They arrived at the restaurant and were seated at a table by a window, giving them a view of the setting sun as it sunk below the ocean. Sophie sighed. “I wish I could draw. This would make a beautiful painting.”

“You ever take a class?” Will asked after ordering drinks for them.

“We have art class in school—Mom’s really great about making sure the budget supports the arts—and she let me take a few classes last summer. And I was okay, but nothing amazing. Not like my friend Henry.”

“He a good artist then?”

Sophie nodded. “And a good writer. Our teacher submitted one of his short stories this year and it got published in a magazine.”

“You sound proud of him,” Will said.

“Of course. He’s my friend.”

Their drinks arrived as Regina walked up to the table. Relief filled Sophie and she smiled at her mother. “You made it!”

“Oh course. Keith Nott isn’t much a threat.” Regina sat down, tucking her daughter’s hair behind her ear. “Sorry to worry you, sweetie.”

Will leaned closer, handing her a glass of wine. “You sure you okay?”

She nodded. “I just need to figure out how he got an invite, but otherwise, everything’s fine.”

Sophie slumped down, focusing on her soda as she prayed no one noticed how guilty she looked. She regretted sending that invite and prayed her mother had Keith Nott escorted out of Storybrooke. Right now, she’d be fine just getting to know Will and not even meeting Robin Locksley. What if he was worse than Keith?

As dinner wore on, Sophie decided she liked Will more and more. He was funny and seemed like a good person. And he showed interest in both her and her mother, caring about them. She started to really hope he was her father.

“Sophie, can you put these books back on the shelf for me? I have to organize the reading circle.” Belle handed her a small pile of books.

She nodded. “Do you need any other help?”

“No, but keep your eye out for any little kids who might need it. Okay?” Belle smiled at Sophie.

The girl balanced the books as she walked over to a bookcase. She spied a small group of boys who were in the grade ahead of her at Storybrooke Academy, standing in a circle. One held a stuffed monkey in the air as the others laughed. As she watched, a small boy—maybe a first grader at best—jumped up, trying to grab the monkey.

“Come on, baby. What’s the matter? Too small?” the bully sneered.
“Give it back!” The smaller boy jumped more, his dark curls bouncing with every attempt to retrieve his toy. “It’s mine.”

“Only babies have stuffed animals. Don’t you think it’s time to grow up?”

“Maybe you should grow up first,” Sophie said, putting the books down and charging over to the group. “Picking on a small kid isn’t very mature.”

The boys turned on her. “Keep out of this. This doesn’t concern you, Princess.”

“I’m helping Miss Belle in the library and I have to help the little kids. He looks like he needs help so yes, this does concern me.” Sophie crossed her arms, staring him down. “So back off, Trevor.”

Trevor advanced on her, glowering. “You think you’re all that because you’re the mayor’s kid. You’re just a spoiled little princess.”

“Give me the monkey, Trevor,” Sophie repeated as their victim darted behind her legs.

He rolled his eyes, shoving the toy at her. “Fine. I’m bored of this anyway.”

“Good, because I can use three strong boys like you in the storage room.” Belle appeared, almost out of nowhere. She smiled at the three. “Why don’t you follow me?”

They groaned but filed after Belle as Sophie glared at them. Once they were gone, she turned to the little boy and held out his monkey. “Here you go.”

“Thank you.” He hugged the toy close. “I’m Roland and this is Mr. Bananas.”

Sophie smiled, introducing herself. “If you or Mr. Bananas need anything, let me know.”

Roland turned into her little shadow for the next couple of hours. Wherever she went, he followed. He didn’t bother her, asking only a few questions and help once. Most times he just sat down by her, reading a few books she had chosen for him.

He was a sweet kid and she liked having him around, even if it meant helping with an odd word here or there. Every time she was rewarded with a bright smile and an adoring gaze. She wondered if that was what it was like to have a sibling.

“Roland?” He looked up at her voice, excited and she smiled. “Do you want to go to the arts and crafts table?”

Roland nodded. “Will you help me with it? If it’s hard?”

“Of course. But I have a feeling you’re an arts and crafts champ.”

He giggled, taking her hand and letting her lead him to the table where the other little kids sat making whatever craft Belle had decided on for the day. They sat on the carpet next to each other and Sophie spent the next hour helping him.

“So did you discover who invited that bounty hunter?” Mal took a sip of her pinot noir as she sat at lunch with Emma and Regina.

Regina sighed. “I don’t have definitive proof, but I have a strong suspicion it was my daughter.”
“Sophie?” Emma frowned as she leaned forward. “Why?”

“I’ve told you she’s asking about her father more and more. A few weeks ago, she discovered an old picture and realized it was taken around the time she was conceived. It was a group shot, though, not one of just me and her father.” Those were locked away in a metal box buried so deep in Regina’s closet, Sophie would’ve needed mining equipment to find it.

Emma tilted her head. “So you think she identified her potential fathers, got their business addresses and snuck them onto the invite list?”

“She always has been clever,” Mal said, impressed. She reached across the table, taking Regina’s hand. “Are you okay with him possibly coming to Storybrooke?”

Mal and Emma knew her story, Emma’s being somewhat similar. Neal, though, had left her with not just a child and a broken heart, but with stolen goods as well. Mal had taken on her case as a young idealistic public defender and managed to get Emma off with probation. When Mal discovered she was pregnant after a one night stand, she felt a kinship with the pregnant blonde teen. She took Emma to the same ob-gyn Regina used and an unlikely but beautiful friendship was born in the doctor’s waiting room.

As Emma took her other hand, Regina once again wondered how she would’ve survived motherhood without them. They had always been there for her, just as she was for them. And they would be with her for this.

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “It’s a great unknown. It could be like reuniting with Keith, loud and full of hatred. Or it could be like reuniting with Will—easy though not without tension.”

“Well, maybe he won’t come,” Emma said.

A hearty chuckle floated past their table and Regina found herself transported back eleven years to a beach, gazing into a pair of eyes blue enough to rival the ocean. Eyes she met now across the dining room as they widened in recognition. His smile softened from amused to fond as he excused himself from the table he had been sitting at.

The years had been kind to him. He had been fit back then but he had clearly kept up his routine, judging by his biceps. His face had lost its boyish charm but now held more of a rugged appeal. Scruff covered his face she found herself wondering what it would’ve been like to feel it scratching against her skin as he kissed his way down her naked body...

Stop. You should not be lusting after the man who abandoned you when you were pregnant. Keep it together.

“Regina,” he greeted, British accent still intact despite living in the states for over a decade.

She gave him a polite smile. “Robin. I see you accepted the invitation.”

“Well, I couldn’t resist when I saw your name.” His voice softened, the flirting tone replaced by sincerity. “You look good, Regina.”

“You too,” she said before introducing Mal and Emma. The two women shook his hand though their smiles remained cool and polite.

He cleared his throat and she knew he was nervous, though she wasn’t sure if it was because of her or the dislike radiating off her friends. Regina frowned. “Is there anything you need help with?”
“I was hoping we could have lunch,” he said. “We have a lot to discuss.”

Regina nodded. “I’ll go back to my office and check my schedule. My assistant Ruby will call you.”

“Of course. I’ll leave you ladies to you meal.” He nodded, returning to his table.

Emma followed him with her eyes until he sat down. She then turned back to Regina. “Wow, Regina, you certainly know how to pick them. He’s downright sexy.”

“I know,” Regina sighed. “Do you know how hard it’s going to be to stay mad at him when he looks and acts like that? I’m afraid I’ll fall for him all over again. Maybe I shouldn’t go to lunch with him.”

“No, you should,” Emma insisted.

Mal nodded. “I agree. You deserve answers and this is the best way to get them.”

“And who knows? He may show his true colors and any lingering feelings will vanish,” Emma said.

Regina nodded but frowned. “But what if it backfires and I end up more in love with him? Especially now that he’s married.”

“I didn’t see a wedding ring,” Emma replied softly.

Mal kicked Emma, judging by the younger blonde’s wince. “You’re not helping,” Mal hissed.

As Emma shrank back, Mal turned to Regina. “Whatever happens, I know you will always act in Sophie’s best interest. And we will always have you back.”

Regina smiled, nodding. “You two are the best friends anyone could ask for.”

“Thank you, but can we stop this before we all start crying in public?” Emma asked.

Laughing, the friends turned back to their meal and lighter conversations.

Sophie met up with Henry and Lily outside the ice cream parlor. Lily crossed her arms. “You’re late.”

“Sorry. I had a run in with Trevor and his crew earlier. I had to wait until they were gone.”

Henry frowned. “How did you get messed up with them?”

“Let’s get ice cream and I’ll tell you everything.” Sophie reached for the door when a familiar little voice called out her name.

She glanced down the street to see Roland racing toward her. He pulled a tall man with him and her heart skipped a beat. The blond hair was shorter, the face no longer clean-shaven, and he was older, but she recognized Robin Locksley nonetheless. Her new little buddy had a connection to Potential Dad #3. What were the odds?

Roland skidded to a halt in front of her, smiling. “Hi, Sophie!”

“Hey, Roland,” she said. “Nice to see you again.”

“This is my Papa,” he replied, tugging on the man’s hand. “Papa, this is Sophie. She saved Mr.
Bananas from the big kids and is my friend.”

His father smiled, holding out his hand to her. “Nice to meet you, Sophie.”

“You too, Mr…?” She knew who he was but she wanted to hear it from him.

“Call me Robin,” he insisted, enough confirmation for her. He glanced at Henry and Lily. “Are these your friends?”

Lily and Henry introduced themselves before she leaned closer to Sophie. “This is why you got tangled up with Trevor? Because you were playing Superwoman again?”

“Sophie’s more of a Wonder Woman,” Henry interjected.

Robin laughed. “Well, can I buy the heroine and her sidekicks some ice cream as a thank you?”

“Cool! Thank you,” Henry said.

Lily frowned though. “Listen here, I am not her sidekick. I am her handler. Got it?”

“Of course. My apologies.” Robin gave a little bow.

Roland groaned. “Can we get ice cream now?”

“Where are your manners, young man?” Robin frowned.

“Can we get ice cream now, please?” Roland stressed the last word.

Lily smiled, wrapping her arm around the boy. “You’re okay, kid.”

They walked into Any Given Sundae and Sophie saw Sarah’s eyes narrow despite her smile. “The three Musketeers…and some friends?”

Roland frowned, looking up at Sophie. “What’s a Musketeer?”

“I’ll tell you later, okay?” Sophie told him. She looked up at Sarah. “It’s okay, Ms. Walker.”

Sarah nodded but still regarded Robin with some suspicion as she served them. She handed Henry his chocolate chip mint and correctly guessed that Lily wanted Dulce de leche that day. “Are you sure you’re not a witch?” Lily asked as she took the cone.

“No,” Sarah said with a laugh. “Just perceptive.”

As Lily moved away, Sarah turned to the remaining three. “I know Sophie loves Rocky Road, so what will you two have?”

“I love Rocky Road too!” Roland exclaimed, standing on his tiptoes to see over the counter. “So does Papa!”

“Talk about coincidences, yeah?” Robin smiled at Sophie, who wondered if it was really a coincidence after all.

Sarah handed Roland and Sophie their cones and Robin sent them to sit while he paid for their ice cream. Lily and Henry had already claimed a table and Roland hopped into a seat next to Sophie. His little legs swung happily as he licked his cone. “It’s cool we like the same flavor,” he told her.
“Yeah,” Lily said, staring at her friend. “Imagine that.”

“Here you go,” Robin said, placing some napkins on the table. He took one to wipe his son’s face.

Robin seemed to be a good father and she wondered if he would’ve been the same had he been her father. Would they have shared Rocky Road cones on nights when her mother had to work late? Would he had held her hand when they went somewhere and smiled at her like she was his everything, just like he did with Roland?

He sat down next to Roland, studying Sophie. She tried to act nonchalant but her stomach was doing flip-flops. Did he think she looked familiar? Or did he see her mother in her? Was he figuring out that he could be her father? Or was Will her father and he now knew it?

“Well, Sophie, I must thank you for stepping in when those bullies picked on Roland,” Robin said, running a hand through his son’s curls.

Lily rolled her eyes. “We told you. She’s Wonder Woman. If she thinks there’s an injustice going on, she’s going to do everything she can to right it.”

“Really?” Robin smiled, seeming impressed. “Sounds like me when I was younger.”

Sophie’s eyes widened. “Really?”

“Yes,” he replied. “I once protested an exam because the professor put question on it that were from a unit we hadn’t yet covered.”

“Sophie did that this year,” Henry said. “Almost got detention but Aunt Regina and Aunt Mal went in and had a discussion with the principal.”

Lily nodded. “Mom and Aunt Regina got the principal to throw the test out and we got to take a new one with only the things we had learned. Everyone passed that one.”

An odd look came over Robin’s eyes as he glanced at Sophie. But it passed before she could think more of it and he smiled. “Well, that turned out better for you than it did for me. My hand still hurts from all the lines I had to write.”

They laughed as Robin flexed his hands a few times, wincing dramatically. Under the table, both Lily and Henry kicked her and she knew why. Robin was rising very high on her list and she believed there was a strong possibility that he was her father.

And despite really liking Will, she found she was really glad it could be Robin.

Regina heard the front door open and close. Taking a deep breath, she called out: “Sophie? Can you come in here?”

Her daughter entered the dining room and frowned. “What’s going on?”

“We need to talk.”

Fear flashed in Sophie’s brown eyes as she sat next to her mother. “Is this about me messing with the invitation list?”

Regina’s eyebrow went up at her daughter’s confession. It appeared her suspicions were right. “Not now but we will talk about that, young lady.”
“Yes, ma’am.” Sophie sank back in her seat.

“But this does have to do with your father. It’s time for me to tell you about him.”

Sophie sat up. “Because he’s here?”

Regina nodded. “And because it’s time.”

She put down a picture, a group shot of everyone from that fateful summer gathered outside the villas they had rented. “This was taken shortly after I graduated college.”

“You spent the entire summer at the beach? Cool.”

Regina laughed. “I spent it on the Cape, doing an internship with the mayor of a small town. All of us in that picture were working in that town in some way or another and we all rented places at the same complex.”

“And that’s how you met my dad?” At Regina’s nod, Sophie pressed on. “What was he doing?”

Regina smiled. “He was working as a counselor at a local day camp. He’s an expert archer.”

“Cool.”

“I thought the same,” Regina admitted. “I liked that he cared so much about the campers. And that he was funny, sweet and friendly. The accent didn’t hurt either.”

“So he’s British?” Sophie looked over the picture. “Will or Robin, then?”

“Robin,” Regina replied, softly. She watched as something that looked like happiness crossed Sophie’s face.

Filing that away for later, she moved on with her story. “I never believed in love at first sight until I met him. I looked into those blue eyes and never wanted to look away again.”

“Sounds romantic,” Sophie sighed.

“It was,” Regina agreed. “We spent as much time together as possible. He made me feel special and cherished. We spoke about having a future beyond the summer and I really thought it would be forever.”

Silence fell as she tried to keep her feelings under control. Crying now wouldn’t help. She had to finish the story for Sophie’s sake…and her own.

“Mom?” Sophie asked. “Do you need a break?”

Regina let out a laugh. Her sweet daughter was trying to take care of her. She took Sophie’s hand. “No, I’m fine.

“Summer ended and we all needed to face the real world. I got a job here in Storybrooke and moved back with your grandmother until I could afford a place of my own. Robin had to deal with his visa and didn’t know where he would end up.”

“So you had no way to keep in touch with him?”

“Well, we did,” Regina said. “He had my address and phone number. He gave me the address of a friend of his, saying I could mail my letters there until he had something more permanent.”
“Did you send him letters?”

Regina nodded. “A month passed with no word from him and I told myself he was still getting everything settled. That he would write soon enough. But after the second month went by without any word, I started to realize that maybe it hadn’t been forever after all.”

“What happened then?” Sophie pressed.

“I got sick,” Regina replied. “I thought it was a stomach bug I couldn’t shake so I went to the doctor. And he told me it wasn’t a stomach bug but you.”

Sophie smiled. “Did you tell Robin?”

“I tried to by writing him one last letter, asking him to come to Storybrooke so we could be a family like we wanted.”

“And he never responded,” Sophie said.

Regina sighed. “I thought he had rejected me…and you.”

“Is that why you wouldn’t tell me about him?”

“Yes,” she said, taking her daughter’s chin in her hand. “I couldn’t tell you that your father didn’t want you.”

Sophie nodded, before sighing. “I met him today.”

“Robin?” Regina frowned. “Where?”

She told her mother about everything that had happened that day. Regina’s heart beat faster at the thought of Robin already suspecting that Sophie was his. But she still smiled, proud of her daughter. “Good for you, for standing up for Roland,” she said.

“Thank you,” Sophie said, beaming. Her smile faltered. “I’m sorry, Mom, about sneaking those named onto your list.”

Regina nodded. “I will be doling out a punishment after the festival. I’m thinking extra chores are in order.”

“What about community service?”

“It’s supposed to be a punishment. You like helping others.”

Sophie shrugged. “I get that from both my parents.”

“More so your father.” Regina brushed some stray hairs away from Sophie’s face. “I do have to thank you, though. By bringing your father here, I finally had to face my past. And doing so helped me learn the truth.”

“The truth?” Sophie asked, scrunching up her face.

Regina nodded, taking her daughter’s hand. “There’s a lot I’ve shielded you from, not just about your father but about your grandmother as well.”

“What about Grandmother?” Sophie asked with a frown.
“I want you to remember that she loved you. And that she was a good person.” Regina took a deep breath. “But she wasn’t always a great mother. She did want what was best for me but she went about it in the wrong way.”

“There’s a wrong way?”

“Yes,” Regina replied with a nod. “Grandmother had a clear plan about what she wanted my life to be, whether I wanted it or not.”

“But what does that have to do with Robin?” Sophie asked.

“I guess he didn’t fit her plan.” Regina pulled out an envelope. It had the address Robin had given her written in her cursive as well as her mother’s address in the corner. A stamp was still stuck to it and it was unopened. The only thing missing was the post mark.

“Your father didn’t abandon you, Sophie,” she explained. “He never knew you existed.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay, this is taking on a life of its own. I’ve posted this here but starting with the third part, I’m going to separate it into its own story. So keep an eye out for that!

--Mac
The Ball

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Chocapic31 for the prompt to write a one shot based on the picture Ginnifer Goodwin posted last week of Josh Dallas and Lana Parrilla dancing in full Camelot costumes. So here we go!

The Ball

This wasn’t his world.

Robin stood on the edge of the dance floor, watching the couples twirl by in elaborate outfits made from silks, velvets and furs. Jewels twinkled in the candlelight, still irresistible to him. With all the motion, it would be easy to lift them without anyone noticing or missing them until the next ball. They could be pawned and bring in enough gold coins to feed an entire village for months.

Even the clothes given to him for this ball could achieve the same, he thought as he tugged on the collar of his satin tunic. It was a bright blue Regina had said went well with his eyes as she teased him, saying it was nice to see him in something other than green. She was the reason he was still in this room and still in these clothes, pretending to be something he wasn’t.

This was her world.

She had been born to this. To great palaces, fine clothing, beautiful jewels, succulent meals, and elaborate dances. He didn’t think he could even attempt half the dances he watched the others perform expertly and so others had swept her away, twirling her about the dance floor in his place.

He never lost sight of her, though, despite the number of couples on it. She wore pink, a color he hardly ever saw her in but suited her well, with an elaborate pattern printed on the silk material. Silver embroidery lined the edges of her long bell sleeves and the collar that rested off her shoulders, providing quite the view of her breasts that had had Robin biting back a groan when he first saw her. Her dark hair was pinned up and away from her neck while the maids Guinevere had sent to help the women prepare had used softer colors than Regina preferred with her makeup. It suited her though he would’ve thought her beautiful no matter what.

“She looks younger, doesn’t she?” Snow sidled up next to him, smiling as she offered him a goblet of wine.

Robin gave her a nod of thanks as he took it. “I guess so. She looks beautiful.”

“She looks like she did when I first met her,” Snow continued. “When she was loved and free.”

“She’s back in her natural environment, in her world.”

He expected to hear Snow agree with him. Instead, she smacked his arm. Holding it away from her, he looked at her in surprise. “What was that for?”

“This isn’t her world,” Snow said, frowning. “She hates this world. This was her cage for years, first
imposed by Cora and then by my father. She doesn’t belong here. And you know that. I know you know that.”

Robin hung his head and looked away, sipping his wine. Yet he could feel her sympathetic gaze and hear her smile in her voice. “This isn’t about her. It’s about you.”

“Everyone knows this isn’t my world.”

“Of course we know that,” Snow replied. “But we need to play along with King Arthur and Queen Guinevere if we want to find Merlin.”

“And that means pretending I’m a royal? Because they’ve associated me with all of you?”

Snow tilted her head. “You are one of us.”

“I’m not royal or noble.”

“Hook’s not either,” she replied, motioning to the pirate that had to be as uncomfortable as him. But Hook had his arm wrapped around Emma and was smiling.

“They invited him for Emma,” Robin said.

Snow nodded. “And you’re here because Regina wanted you to be. Because you would make it more bearable for her.”

“Why do I have a feeling you’re trying to tell me something?”

“You’re going to make me spell it out, aren’t you?”

Robin tilted his head. “I’m afraid yes. I don’t know what you’re getting at.”

“Why are you hugging the wall rather than dancing with Regina?” Snow pointed to the queen, who was now in the arms of Prince Charming. Regina looked comfortable as he spun her around, though Robin noted she wasn’t smiling.

He frowned and glanced down into his wine. “I can’t dance. Not like this.”

“They’re not as complicated as they look. And I’m sure Regina will help you.” Snow took his goblet and placed it along with hers on the tray of a passing servant. She held out her arm. “Let’s go cut in.”

Snow guided Robin across the floor, weaving in between the other couples dancing around them. Charming smiled as they approached and slowed his steps. “What’s wrong?” Robin heard Regina ask.

He motioned with his head and she turned around, smiling when she saw Robin. Snow smiled as well as she asked, “May we cut in?”

“Of course,” Charming responded, exchanging Regina’s hand for Snow’s. He pulled his wife close and resumed the dance, gliding away from Robin and Regina.

Robin panicked. Regina seemed to understand as she placed his hand on her waist and took the other in hers. “Don’t worry. Just do as I say, okay? Now, led with your left and follow my count.”

She muttered the count under her breath as Robin tried to keep up while not making a fool of himself. He stepped on Regina’s skirts a few times and he had to tighten his hold on her to keep her from falling. “I’m sorry, milady,” he said. “Maybe I should sit the dancing out.”
“You’re doing fine. Just don’t worry so much. It’s just a dance,” Regina told him, raising his chin so their eyes could meet. “And I’d rather stumble around with you than glide with anyone else.”

“You’re just saying that.”

“Would I?” Regina tilted her head, sincerity and truth in her deep brown eyes. The ones he was always able to read, even when she tried to close herself off.

He smiled, shaking his head. “No, I guess not.”

“I have an idea. Follow my lead,” she instructed.

Robin leaned close to her ear. “Always, milady.”

“Good.” Regina guided him toward the edge of the dance floor and for the first time, he didn’t feel like he had been born with two left feet.

Regina led him into an empty corridor before stepping away, holding his hand. “Come on. I think this leads to the courtyard.”

“Shouldn’t we stay at the ball?” Robin glanced back to the crowded room, finding it the last place he wanted to be. But they were trying to make a good impression in order to find Merlin for Emma’s sake. “Won’t we be missed?”

“I highly doubt it. Arthur and Guinevere are more focused on Snow and Charming rather than us. And for once, I’m willing to let them handle it if it means I just get to spend time with you.” She wrapped her arms around his waist and rested her head against his chest.

He wrapped one arm around her, resting his hand against her back, while using the other one to let her dark hair free from the pins holding it up. The curls fell around his fingers and he kissed the top of her head. “Do you think we can sneak away and spend the rest of the night with Henry and Roland?” he asked.

“While that sounds tempting, I’m afraid not. If this goes well, we could end up having a private audience with King Arthur and Queen Guinevere. I promised Snow and Emma I’d be there. And I hope you’d be by my side.”

Robin bit his lip as he smiled, nodding. “For you, anything.”

They stayed in the dark and empty corridor longer, just wrapped around each other. For a few moments, he wondered if Regina had fallen asleep on him. She hadn’t been sleeping well, he knew. Every night he’d wake up to find her tossing and turning beside him. Regina would tell him the bed was too uncomfortable, that she had gotten used to mattresses in the Land Without Magic. But he knew the truth—she was having nightmares. He just didn’t know if they were about Emma becoming the Dark One or if she was reliving her death in that other world, like he did on a nightly basis. But he never pressed her, knowing she would tell him the truth on her own time. Instead, he just held her until she fell asleep and the evenness of her breathing lulled him back as well.

“Regina?” he asked, softly. “Are you sure you don’t want to go back to our rooms for a little bit? Maybe take a nap? The ball shows no sign of winding down.”

Music still wafted down from the ballroom as did the undercurrent of chatter and laughter. They could get a good rest and he could ask Hook to come fetch them should they be needed.

She lifted her head and shook it. “I’m fine right here.”
“Are you sure you don’t want to sit? You’ve been on your feet all night.”

“I’m fine, Robin.” She wrapped her arms around his neck, rising up to press her forehead to his.
“Let’s just dance here.”

He chuckled. “I think I can do that.”

They swayed in time to music that only existed in their heads, Robin’s strong hands resting on her waist. She closed her eyes again, a soft smile on her pink lips. Giving in, Robin gave her a quick peck on them.

Regina’s eyes fluttered open as her smile widened. She pressed her lips against his again, deepening the kiss as he tangled his hand in her hair. They staggered around a bit before Regina ended up pressed between Robin and the wall as she smiled against his lips.

She was about to pull away to suggest that maybe she did need some rest and that no one would probably miss them for, say, an hour when someone cleared their throat a few feet from them. Robin pulled away as Regina turned to find Emma standing there, smirking though her cheeks were painted pink.

“If you two are done, Arthur and Guinevere are ready to retire. We’ve been instructed to wait a dance and then retire as well. Got it?” Emma asked.

Regina nodded. “We’ll be right behind you and your parents when you leave.”

“Thank you, Regina.” Emma glanced over at Robin. “I’m sure you’d rather be someplace else.”

“I assure you the only thing we want to do is help you,” Robin said, pulling Regina closer. “The both of us.”

Emma smiled, nodding. “I’ll see you in a bit.”

Robin turned to Regina. “You ready, milady?”

“I just need to do one more thing.” She rose up again, kissing him one more time as she tugged on his collar. When she pulled away, she ran her hand down his tunic as she smoothed out any wrinkles. “You belong there with us, remember that.”

He smiled holding out his arm to her. “Shall we, milady?”

“We shall,” she replied, taking his arm with a smile of her own.

They headed back toward the ballroom as Robin hoped the meeting with Arthur and Guinevere was quick so he could take Regina back to their rooms. He wasn’t finished…dancing…with her just yet.
Snow was up to something.

Even as an adult, her stepdaughter still was incapable of hiding something. The whispers with the serving staff that ended when Regina approached, the overly wide smile and shifty eyes all made Regina suspicious. So tracked the princess down, glaring at Snow. "What is going on?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Snow said, not meeting Regina's eyes.

"You're still a horrible liar, Snow. It's all that heroic blood running through your veins." Regina leaned closer. "Just tell me and I'm sure you'll feel better."

Snow let out a dramatic sigh. "Fine. You'll probably find anyway. I'm setting up a special dinner."

"A special dinner? What for? And will I be required to attend?" The thought of an evening spent trying to pretend to tolerate half the idiots living in her palace already made Regina already feel fatigued.

"Oh no," Snow said, shaking her head. "It's a private dinner."

Regina's eyebrow went up but she smiled. "Are you trying to surprise Charming?"

"It's not for me and Charming. It's for...someone else."

"You're planning a private dinner for...For who? Why?"

Snow glanced around before leaning closer, forcing Regina to do the same. "You have to promise you won't tell anyone, but Roland asked me to plan this dinner for his father."

"For Robin?" Regina frowned, though not sure if she was upset over the fact Roland hadn't asked her...or that there was someone for Robin to have dinner with here at court. "Did Roland say with whom?"

"No, he didn't. He just said he wanted to set up a special dinner for his Papa and a lady his father is interested in. I agreed to help."

Regina's heart sped up. "Robin is courting a lady?"

"I don't know. I think he's a bit nervous about making the first step, which is why Roland wants to set up this dinner." Snow sighed. "But I think I've said too much. I need to go and finish making these arrangements for Roland. I'll see you later?"

"Yes, yes." Regina wasn't really paying attention as she tried to figure out who Robin was having dinner with.

Snow smiled as she walked away. After a few paces, she stopped and looked back at her stepmother. "The dinner is going to be in the courtyard, by the way. Just so you know it's occupied."
Regina paced in her chambers. This shouldn't be annoying her. Why should she care that the blasted thief was courting someone? He had been a widower for a long time--even longer than he remembered thanks to her mother's protection spell against her curse. It was enough time for him to move on.

And why shouldn't he? He was still young and had a long life ahead of him, as long as he didn't do something stupid on a mission. But given how he had managed to evade capture all those years, she doubted he would do that. He was determined each time to get home to his son and if he had a wife to go home to as well...Well, she imagined he'd have double the incentive to stay alive.

Who would be attracted to him? Yes, he was good looking--she wasn't blind. He had silky dark blond hair that matched the scruff that seemed to compliment his look rather than make him look a mess. And she found herself getting lost in those blue eyes a few times. She also spotted him shooting at targets, shirtless, and had spent far longer than she would ever admit watching his muscles as he shot arrow after arrow.

But it didn't outweigh the fact he smelled like the forest he lived in. Or that he was cocky and infuriating, unable to follow even the most basic rules of court etiquette. He was also a thief, albeit an honorable one who sought only to improve the lives of the people around him. He was a good and caring father as well as a loyal friend. And he was incredibly easy to talk to as she felt he was never judging her...

Regina stopped, closing her eyes. She had feelings for Robin Hood.

Now that she was being honest with herself, she had been fighting them since she met him. Snow had seen it then—how she was intrigued by him and had silently agreed with Snow that he was pretty cute. So was his son, who she soon saw he adored. Anyone who was that devoted a parent earned her respect.

The way he had of getting under skin was also because she cared for him more than she had wanted to admit. She was trying to keep him away but he insisted on getting closer to her, trying to get to know her. In some ways, she wondered if he had feelings for her that weren’t the usual ones she experienced in others—disgust, fear, hatred.

But it had been in her head. He had feelings for another woman.

Anger and jealousy coursed through her. She had to see who had stolen the thief's heart. Not to hurt her but just...just to make sure she was worthy. (Regina had no doubt though that the woman was more worthy than her). Snow had told her where the dinner was going to take place, so she could stop by on the way to her own meal and just catch a glimpse of her. The fact she decided to wear her best form-fitting red velvet dress and leave her dark hair down had nothing to do with trying to lure Robin away.

Not at all.

She hid behind a column in the courtyard, watching the servants as they set up a table under Snow's watchful eyes. Two candles were added and lit, though it was still light out. Food was carried out and laid out on the square table as were two wine glasses. From what Regina could tell, her stepdaughter had tapped into the royal wine cellar and chosen one of Regina's best wines for Robin's dinner with his ladylove. She vowed to get Snow back for that.

"This looks good," Snow said, nodding. "Let's go and get ready for the regular dinner."
The servants bowed or bobbed curtsies before hurrying ahead of the princess. Snow looked around, nodded once more and then followed them. Regina resisted the urge to ruin the meal and stayed behind the column, waiting to see who showed up next—Robin or his dining companion.

"Come on, Papa!" Roland's voice echoed around her. "It's this way!"

Robin's familiar, deep chuckle reached Regina's ears, sending her heart fluttering. "Slow down, my boy. There's no need to rush."

"We don't want to keep her waiting!"

"Who?"

"Your date!" Roland announced, coming into view. He stopped short, frowning as his brown eyes took in the courtyard. "She's not here."

Robin chuckled again, picking up his son and setting him on his hip. "Maybe we're early, Roland. You did rush me here."

"This is when the princess told me to be here!" Roland crossed his arms. "She's supposed to be here."

"Who? Princess Snow?"

Roland shook his head. "Your dinner date."

"And who is that?" Robin asked. Regina wondered that too, noting that there was no one else within the vicinity of the courtyard. Certainly whoever had snagged Robin's affections would've been here, ready to begin what was no doubt going to be a beautiful relationship she was going to have to watch develop from the sidelines, knowing it could've been her but that she had once again been too afraid, too angry, to seize her chance.

"It's a surprise," Roland replied.

Robin raised an eyebrow. "I don't even get to know who I'm supposed to be dining with tonight?"

As Roland shook his head, Regina's brows knitted in confusion. How did Robin not know who his dinner companion was? How did he not guess? Unless this was a blind date, setting Robin up with someone Roland and Snow assumed he had feelings for and who they assumed had feelings for him. But who was it?

Her eyes widened as the realization hit her.

She was his dinner guest.

Robin was interested in her.

And she had played right into her stepdaughter's hands. Sometimes Regina forgot how clever Snow could be when she wanted to be.

Smoothing out her skirts, Regina stepped from behind the column and walked into the courtyard. Roland's face lit up and he wriggled out of his father's arms to run to her. She crouched down and gathered him into a tight hug. "What took you so long?" he whispered.

"So sorry," she whispered back. Releasing him, she stood and approached Robin. He had a soft smile and his eyes twinkled, so she didn’t think he was disappointed that she was having dinner with
him. "Hello, Thief."

"Milady." Robin bowed to her though his eyes remained on hers. "I take it you are joining us for dinner?"

"Yes," Regina replied, "though I don't think Roland is."

At his father's questioning look, Roland shook his head. "You and Her Majesty are on a date!" he exclaimed.

He wriggled out of Regina's grasp. As his little feet hit the courtyard ground, he told them to enjoy and ran off back inside the palace. Robin and Regina watched him before turning to each other.

Robin cleared his throat, breaking the silence first. "I do believe we got set up by a five years old."

"He had some help," Regina replied. "Snow is behind this as well."

He nodded before glancing over at the table. "So, what do you want to do now?"

"Well, I guess it would be a shame to let the food go to waste." She let her eyes rake over him before shrugging. "And I guess you aren't the worst dinner companion."

"I'll take that as a compliment," Robin replied wryly as he followed her to the table. He reached around her and pulled out her chair. "Milady?"

She sat down and waited for him to take his seat. As she did, she berated herself for being her usual cold self to him. Regina had come to terms with the extent of her feelings for the man but she guessed she wasn't ready yet to act on them. Hopefully she could get through this meal without either making a fool of herself or damaging her chances with Robin once she could gather her courage to pursue something with him.

Robin took his seat and held up his goblet. "A toast," he said.

Impressed, Regina raised her goblet as well. "To what?"

"To us, I guess?"

"That seems a bit narcissistic."

Robin laughed. "I guess so. Will it seem less so if I toast to you and you toast to me?"

"What makes you think I want to toast you?" At his raised eyebrow, she chuckled. "Fine. To you, Thief."

"And you, milady." They took sips, neither breaking eye contact until they turned their attention to the meal laid out before them.

As they ate, they found light topics of conversation and Regina found herself relaxing. Now that she had admitted her feelings for him (at least to herself), she could enjoy the qualities she had pretended hadn't existed in a bid to justify her continued dislike of the man. Robin was kind-hearted and intelligent, able to hold a conversation even better than half the courtiers she had had to suffer as Queen. His smile was contagious and Regina found herself returning it more often than not. She also noticed that though Roland was a big part of his life, Robin avoided talking about him or children in general. It was clear to her he didn't want to bring up the painful memories of Henry and she was grateful for that.
"So, milady, I've told you quite a bit of my adventures," Robin said, leaning forward. "Any you care to share?"

Her smile faltered. "I'm afraid most of my adventures end in mass murder. Not very good dinner conversation."

"I see." His own smile fell a bit. "Then what about your childhood? Any stories from your carefree days?"

Regina let out a snort. "If you met my mother, you'd understand I had no carefree days."

He fell silent and she looked away, not wanting to see the pity in his eyes. The thief knew too much now--about the son lost to her, her evil ways and now her less-than-stellar childhood at the hands of Cora Mills. And the evening had been going so well...

"You look beautiful tonight," Robin said suddenly. She looked up to meet his eyes, which were twinkling with mirth rather than brimming with pity. "Was it for me? Did you know you were my dinner date?"

"Don't flatter yourself, Thief. I was duped just like you."

He raised an eyebrow. "So you just chose to wear a nicer dress than usual? And walk by this courtyard?"

"I'll admit I was curious."

"Curious? Is that all?"

It was her turn to raise an eyebrow. "What are you trying to imply?"

"Maybe you were jealous," he said. "Maybe you wanted to lure me away from whatever woman Snow and Roland had set me up with."

Regina didn't want him to know how close to the truth he was, so she kept her mask in place. "You have quite the imagination, Robin Hood."

"Perhaps," he agreed, smirking. He stood then, walking over to her and holding out his hand. "Shall we dance?"

"There's no music," Regina replied, surprised by his gesture.

"No matter," he said. "We don't really need music to dance."

She tilted her head and slid her hand into his, curious to see where he was going with this. Robin led her away from the table, toward one of the openings that looked out at the gardens. He pulled her close, resting one hand on her waist while his other still clutched the hand she had given him. She placed her free hand on his shoulder and let him lead.

For a man who lived in the forest, Robin was able to dance. And courtly dances, at that, not the dances she believed the peasantry danced to around their fires. He executed each step for the waltz perfectly as if there was music filling the courtyard. Every so often, he would spin her out and twirl her back toward him. And at one point, he even dipped her, which drew a smile from her.

As the sun set and twilight fell, Robin continued dancing with her. Their waltzes gave way to what
she considered Land Without Magic dancing—the two of them swaying together in each other's arms. She even let herself lean against his shoulder, enjoying the feel of him.

"I lied," she confessed, not looking him in the eyes. "I was jealous."

He paused, leaning back and smiling. "You were?"

"Yes. So I came to see the woman who had stolen your heart. But I guess your heart is safe."

Robin's eyes softened and he shook his head. "Hardly. Someone did run off with it."

"She did?" Regina's heart beat faster. "Who?"

"Regina..." He tucked his fingers under her chin and tilted her head up. Robin brushed his lips against hers as her heart stopped.

It was a quick, chaste peck but it fueled a fire that had been smoldering for weeks. Regina grabbed his tunic and pulled him in for a deeper, more passionate kiss. He didn't respond at first but after the shock wore away, she felt his arms wrap back around her and pull her closer to him. His tongue sought entrance and she let it, moaning softly as one of his hands tangled up in her hair.

They broke apart and he licked his lips. "That was...Well, who knew the Evil Queen was such a good kisser?"

"I detest that name," she said.

"Then I shall never call you it again," he vowed. "You shall just be my Queen."

Warmth spread through her chest at his words and she fought the smile trying to blossom from it. "Why me?"

"Because you are the most complex, infuriating, amazing woman I have ever known," he said. "One minute you can be lashing at everyone with sharp words, the next soft and sweet while telling Roland a bedtime story. And you get the most exquisite smile when you do. It makes me want to do whatever it takes to see it all the time."

She rewarded him with one of those smiles before studying him. "Are you real? Or did I manage to put myself under the sleeping curse and this is just an elaborate dream?"

"Does this feel like a dream?" Robin kissed her again, harder and with more passion. She clutched at his tunic again, enjoying the feel of his warmth next to her.

They pulled apart and Regina licked her lips. "Definitely not a dream. That was definitely real."

"Oh yes," he said, tightening his hold on her. "And now it's your turn. Why me?"

She shrugged. "I haven't figure it out yet, to be honest. I just came to terms with my own feelings."

"Fair enough," he said. "I shall ask you another day. When you've had time to figure it out."

"What if I never do?"

He smiled. "Then I guess I'll never leave."

"Would you leave me if I do?"
"No, Regina." He frowned, shaking his head. "That's not what I meant."

"Everyone leaves me in the end, though. Why wouldn't you be any different?" She stepped away from him, walking back to the table.

Robin followed though, staying close to her. "I'm not going to leave. I'm not like the others."

"You say that now," Regina said. "But it will get too much for you. I always chase people away. I chased Henry away."

"You had to send him away. To save him," Robin clarified.

She sighed. "After just getting him back. I had chased him away before that."

"How so?" Robin sat down again. He held one of her hands.

After taking another sip of wine, she told Robin everything. How Henry had discovered he had been adopted by accident and how she hadn't handled it well. She talked about how she got scared when he started to realize how odd everything in Storybrooke was--that no one aged and that nothing ever changed. How she tried to wipe out his imagination, how she made him think he was crazy. Then when he got the book and learned about her past, how she did everything possible to stop him from seeing her as the Evil Queen...by acting exactly like the Evil Queen she had been. "I chased him into Emma's arms and I blamed her for the longest time," she said.

"But he came back," Robin said. "You managed to change yourself and become the mother you once were to him."

"And now he's gone. Lost to me forever." Regina crumpled forward as sobs wracked her body.

Robin gathered her in his arms, cradling her as they sunk to the courtyard floor. He stroked her hair as he murmured something nonsensical to her. It didn't matter; his voice alone was soothing.

When her tears dried up and she collected herself, Regina took Robin's proffered handkerchief.

"Thank you," she said, voice scratchy.

"You're welcome. I have a feeling that was a long time coming," he said. "Do you feel better?"

She nodded, resting against his chest. In the past, she never would've broken down in front of anyone like that. Nor would she have deigned to let herself be held while doing so. But Robin's arms felt safe. She felt like he would support her and let her express her emotions without any judgments, without thinking she was weak.

"I'm sorry I ruined our evening," she said.

"You haven't ruined anything," he replied. "And if you ever need to talk, come to me. I'll always listen."

Regina leaned back, studying his face. She saw sincerity, compassion and something else in his eyes. Something she was not ready to identify and admit to herself. Leaning forward again, she pressed a chaste kiss to his lips. "Thank you," she whispered.

"You're welcome." He helped her up, holding her hand. "As much as I'm loathed to end this evening, I fear we must. I have a son to wrestle into bed."

She nodded. "Of course. Roland comes first, I understand."
"That's another reason I'm drawn to you," he said. "You're also a parent and understand things like this. And you're very good with Roland."

"He's a sweet kid," Regina said with a smile. "Who I hope doesn't pick up Snow's devious side from this little stunt."

Robin chuckled before holding out his arm. "Well, before I go find my son, may I escort you back to your rooms?"

"Yes, you may." She looped her arm through his. "But don't think the fact I'm showing you where my rooms are means you're allowed to drop in for unexpected visits."

"Of course, milady. I do have an honor code."

Regina rolled her eyes. "Okay, it's just past this hallway and then..."

"A left toward the staircase at the end of the hall. Your room is right at top," Robin finished. "Your room is on my nightly patrols."

"Why do I have a feeling Snow is behind that?" Regina muttered.

He chuckled. "I'm not sure about that but I wouldn't be too surprised. Charming gave me the route."

"I wonder how long she's been trying to set us up."

"Probably since we got to the palace," Robin mused. "My patrols started to go past your chambers shortly after that."

Regina bit back a groan. "Snow is too meddlesome for her own good."

"What about our good?" Robin paused outside her door, taking her hands.

She watched as he rubbed his thumbs over her hands and shrugged. "I guess it worked out in our favor. So, are you going to give me a good night kiss?"

"If milady wishes," he replied with a cheeky smile. His warm lips covered her still tingling ones for another chaste but satisfying kiss. Pulling back, he rested his forehead against hers. "Until the morning."

"Until then." Regina pulled away, slipping into her rooms. She leaned against the door, a smile playing on her lips.

Things had just taken a very interesting turn. And she didn't mind one bit.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to C_OUAT for the prompt about Snow and Roland setting Regina and Robin up on a blind date. I'm sorry it took me a few months to fill it!
Once upon a time, there was a beautiful queen named Regina who appeared to have it all. She had a natural beauty other women at court envied her for: long dark hair that fell down to her mid-back when not up in elaborate styles, deep brown eyes and a beautiful figure enhanced by the magnificent gowns she was able to afford as queen. Like all the women in her family, she possessed magic and had been trained to use it. Many considered her the most powerful sorceress in all the lands.

She was a good leader, fair but shrewd. Despite living in a male-dominated world, Regina was able to negotiate and form strong allegiances with the neighboring kingdoms. She appointed knowledgeable overseers, who made certain their trade, agriculture and goods were of the finest quality and worth a pretty coin. In turn, her land was prosperous and her people happy.

Yet Regina was not happy and hadn’t been for some time. Her mother, Queen Cora, had been a cold and exacting woman who demanded nothing less than perfection from her only daughter and heir. And so she had crushed Regina’s first love, squashing those feelings underfoot as she told her daughter that love was weakness. "When you marry, you're going to do so for the security of the kingdom and to produce an heir to secure the throne," she had told Regina.

Regina vowed to never marry.

After Queen Cora died and Regina ascended the throne, she realized she had advanced her country just fine without a king. But she still needed an heir, to assure the continuation of her bloodline and kingdom. Her advisers and the nobles grew more and more concerned about the line of succession with each passing year until they confronted her about it.

"I am not just a baby maker!" she yelled at them, letting loose a fireball.

They ducked just in time and one brave soul ventured forward. "Of course not, Your Majesty. But you are an intelligent, capable ruler and have to know this is something that's important.

Regina growled as she stalked over to the window. Taking a few deep breaths, she composed herself in her mirror before turning back to him. "Fine. If I decide to marry and have a child, it will happen on my terms. Understand?"

They all nodded before Regina left the room, her long and voluminous black gown trailing after her.

She returned to her room where her beloved father Henry greeted her, sighing as she threw the glass of wine he offered her at the wall. "Your meeting didn't go well, my dear?" he asked.
"No. They're still on about me having an heir," she said, teeth gritted. "As if that's all I should have a child for."

Henry softened. "You do want a child, don't you?"

"Of course, I do," she admitted, her voice soft. "But I want a child for the right reasons and with someone I love. We both know the only man I'll ever love is dead."

Nodding, Henry grew pensive. "What about your magic?"

"Useless." She pushed a mountain of books off her desk, letting them topple to the floor. "I've scoured every one of these. Nothing. I have no choice but to do it the old-fashioned way."

"Then would it be so horrible to love again?"

"Who would love me?" she asked, allowing her mask to slip. "And how will I know they love me and not my throne?"

Henry rubbed his chin. "You test them. Find who is worthy of your heart. I know you think the only man who deserved it is dead, but I believe there is another one out there for you. And you will find him."

"Thank you for your hope, Daddy, but I doubt it." Regina sighed as she settled in her chair. With a wave of her hand, she dismissed her father and set about to her new task: trying not to find a husband.

The word was spread throughout the lands: Queen Regina was looking for a king. Only princes of marrying age could attempt to court her and they would be tested to see if they were worthy of her hand.

Princes came from all over to try and win Regina's hand. Each was interviewed by her councilors as well as her father, though none knew who Henry truly was. She would then watch the prince at the grand dinner she would throw in his honor. If the princes were given to flirt with other ladies of the court, she would send them packing before administering her final test. If they made it to the test, she was certain to make sure they failed.

"You can't keep rigging the tests. How will anyone pass?" Henry asked her one day.

"When I finally find someone worthy of passing, then I'll stop rigging the tests," she said. "I haven't found him yet."

She kissed her father's cheek before heading down for a good ride. Her horse was tacked and ready for her, allowing her to avoid the stables and the memories they conjured. Mounting her horse, Regina took off for the open fields.

The time she spent with her horse was the most liberating she had as queen. Flying across the grassy plains, the wind whipping her hair back. She could forget she was a queen and pretend she was a bird, free to fly away and explore as she pleased.

As she reached the edge of the palace grounds, she slowed her horse. People were on the road leading from the village in what appeared to be a small procession. Regina bit back a groan as she realized another prince was coming for her hand. She urged her horse forward, deciding to meet this one now and see his reaction to her in breeches as she rode her horse. Most of the princes she had
encountered had looked upon her “manly” attire in disgust, worried she would emasculate them.

Black banners fluttered in the breeze, making the golden lions emblazoned on them appear to dance. A man dressed in a green tunic broke free from the group and Regina believed him to be the herald, come to announce his master's arrival. She waited as he approached, bringing his horse to a stop in front of her. "Queen Regina, I presume?" he asked.

She nodded. "And who are you announcing?"

"Myself," he said, smiling. He held out his hand. "I am Prince Robin of Sherwood."

Regina didn't know how to respond, not used to a prince announcing himself. She took his hand and he brought hers up to his lips. "It's a pleasure, milady."

"It's Your Majesty," she snapped back, pulling her hand away. "And I'm still debating if I have the pleasure."

He didn't scowl like any of the other princes or make a remark about women with smart mouths. Instead, he smiled and his eyes seemed to twinkle. "Well, then, it seems I have to make sure you find it one."

"We'll see," she said, turning her horse back toward the palace. She glanced over her shoulder at him. "Coming?"

Prince Robin bowed his head to her. "Lead the way, milady."

"Your Majesty," she corrected, scowling. "Do they not have manners in Sherwood?"

"Of course they do. I could call you 'Your Majesty' but I came here with every intention of marrying you. So that makes you my lady, hence the honorific I've bestowed on you." He pulled his horse so that he rode alongside her. "In Sherwood, most women love to hear themselves called 'milady' by their husbands."

"You'll find I'm not like other women, Your Highness."

"I think I already do," he replied.

She glanced over at him but saw only interest, rather than the detest and annoyance she usually tended to invoke in her suitors by this point. He was tougher to break, but she knew he would. They all did in the end.

"So another suitor?" Henry asked his daughter as she entered her chambers.

She stopped, frowning. "Gossip travels fast around this castle, doesn't it?"

"You rode in with him, dear. It was hard not to notice." Henry chuckled. "So, who is he? Where is he from?"

"Prince Robin of Sherwood. That's all I know."

Henry tilted his head. "You rode all the way back to the palace together and all you learned was his name?"

"We didn't go very far, Daddy," she shot back. "And I learned that he's cocky and seems to be a flirt."
He's going to fail the first test without a doubt."

"Maybe he won't."

She shook her head. "I can already tell. He will and so I'll make sure he fails the final test as well. Then he can go back to Sherwood and I can continue on in peace."

Henry sighed. "I'll go have the servants set up for dinner tonight. Shall I fetch the musicians?"

"Yes, I do think this calls for dancing." Regina's eyes lit up as she smiled. "Thank you, Daddy."

Regina would watch this Prince Robin, to see how he behaved around other women at dinner tonight. No doubt he would flirt with them just like he did with her.

Giddy, she decided to invite him in person. She swept down the hall to the rooms she had assigned his company and knocked on the door. A man with short black hair and a sour expression answered the door. "What?"

"You really don't have manners in Sherwood do you?" she asked with a frown. "Do you know who you are talking to?"

He straightened up, bowing. "My apologies, Your Majesty."

"That's better." Regina looked over his shoulder. "Is your master here?"

"No. He's with your councilors."

She frowned, unaware that they were questioning him without her. Thanking the servant, Regina hurried down the hall to her council room. She threw open the doors, striding into the room with a cold look that sent the older men shrinking back in their seats. Only Prince Robin remained unmoved, though he stood to greet her.

"You can sit. I just wish I had been told about this sooner," she said, glaring at her advisors. One dared to answer. "We just thought it would be easy to question Prince Robin first."

"Who gave you permission to think?" Regina snapped back.

Robin let out a small chuckle and she gave him a surprised look. It only lasted a few seconds before her mask slipped back on. She turned her cold glare back to her advisors. "Proceed."

"Right. Yes. Prince Robin, what would happen to Sherwood should you marry Queen Regina?" an advisor asked.

Prince Robin frowned. "What are you really asking? Will Sherwood be absorbed into Misthaven? No, I don't think so."

"So Misthaven will become a part of Sherwood?" Regina stared him down. It didn't make any sense and she knew Robin had to know that. That he had to know Misthaven was bigger and richer than Sherwood. It seemed more likely that his kingdom would become a part of hers.

"I don't see either kingdom as having to lose their identities."

"Joint kingdoms," Regina realized, leaning back. "It would take a lot of compromises but it might work."
He nodded. "I'm glad you agree, milady."

"Your Majesty," she snapped again. All he did was smile that infuriating smug smile of his, dimples forming as he did so. Rather cute dimples, she thought.

Where did that thought come from?

After a few more questions, her councilors ended their interview. Robin stood, holding out his arm to her. "May I escort you back to your rooms, milady?"

"What do you I need to do to get you to address me properly? Tattoo it to your forehead?" But she took his arm, letting him help her from her chair.

He chuckled, tucking her hand into the crook of his elbow and holding her arm close to his warm body. "That would certainly be a sight for visiting dignitaries to see, wouldn't it?"

"At least they would know they are dealing with an idiot," she shot back.

Robin didn't say anything, just turning her toward her gardens. Her eyes widened and she planted her heels in the ground. "Where are you taking me?"

"I thought we'd go for a walk. Just to talk, only the two of us."

"Why? I clearly have a low opinion of you."

"Then I can only go up, can't I?"

She raised an eyebrow. "I wouldn't be too sure about that."

"You are definitely a glass-half-empty person aren't you?"

"And you see it as half-full?" She paused then shook her head. "No, you'd say something idiotic like 'I see room for more in the glass' or something like that."

He tilted his head. "Well, you seem to have me at a disadvantage. You have read me like a book and I've yet gotten past page one with you."

"Do you really want to?"

"Yes," he breathed. "You fascinate me, Regina."

She held her breath as her heart fluttered. "I do?"

He nodded, reaching a tentative hand toward her. When she didn't move away, he wrapped a dark curl around his finger. "I am fascinated by how you command people's attention and have earned their respect. I admire your intelligence and your wit, no matter how biting, and respect your ability to rule. And I hope I am privileged enough to see what lies beyond your mask, to see the real you."

"To see me weak?"

"Of course not." He tilted his head. "Why would you think you are weak?"

Regina shook her head. "I'm not weak."
"I don't think that, Regina."

"Don't you?" She stepped closer, eyes cold again. "You're trying to find my weakness, to use it against me. Well you won't succeed."

He frowned. "No, I promise you that. I am here to marry you."

"We'll see about that." She brushed some imaginary lint off her dress. "But first, I am holding a dinner in your honor. I hope you like dancing."

She stalked away before he could respond.

Regina watched him carefully at dinner that night. He entered wearing a green velvet tunic paired with black leather pants. She admired how they clung to the muscles in his legs before snapping her eyes back to his face. Robin approached her, taking her hand as he bowed. "Milady," he murmured.

"Now you're just mocking me," she said, smile frozen on her face.

"Never," he assured her, sincere. She watched as he took the seat next to her, looking over the meal spread out ahead of them. "Do you eat like this every night? I doubt the kitchens would've had enough notice after my arrival to prepare all of this."

"I wouldn't let my cooks know you doubt their abilities to throw together an amazing meal in a short amount of time," Regina replied. "But no, I don't always eat like this. Usually it's a small meal in my rooms."

"Going over papers about the kingdom, no doubt."

Regina frowned, still unnerved over how easily he could read her--though he didn't think so. "So I like to keep on top of my kingdom. Is there anything wrong with that?"

"No, of course not. I just hope you take some time for yourself."

"Why do you think I like to ride?" she responded.

He nodded. "Good. You deserve time for yourself."

As they ate, Regina watched him and his interactions. He engaged many of her courtiers in conversations, both male and female. Regardless of who he was talking to, his tone and demeanor always remained the same--polite, warm and engaging. He didn't flirt with anyone...except for a few attempts with her. She didn't reciprocate and he stopped after a while. But he did take her hand in his, lacing their fingers together.

She didn't pull away.

When the musicians arrived, Robin's eyes lit up. He leaned closer to her. "Shall we dance, milady?"

"It would be proper," she replied, letting him help her up.

"It's also fun." He spun her to face him, placing a hand on her waist while he tightened his grip on her other hand. "Let me show you."

The musicians began to play and Robin moved in time to the music, well-trained in courtly dances. He led with ease and confidence, making Regina feel like she was gliding across the dance floor. No
one joined them, watching as Prince Robin spun and dipped the queen. Her skirts flew out around her and a pink tinge rose to her cheeks. She smiled and let out a little laugh when Robin lifted her, holding on tighter.

From his spot against the wall, Henry caught a glimpse of the girl his daughter once had been and smiled.

The music ended as Robin dipped Regina one last time. He pulled her up as she laughed, smirking. "See? I told you it was fun."

She curtsied as a duke approached her to ask for the next dance. Regina danced with a few more dance partners, none who made her feel the same as Robin. As she danced, she watched Robin as he danced with a few ladies from her court. Regina hadn't had to instruct her trusted women to flirt with him; Robin's good looks and charm attracted female attention on their own. But he remained polite and didn't appear to respond to their advances. Even though several women tried to partner with him for the more intimate dances, he saved them for Regina, holding her closer and closer as the night went on.

As the clock struck midnight, her dinner guests began to drift from the hall. Robin bowed to her, holding out his hand. "May I escort you back to your rooms?"

"Yes, you may," she said, still smiling.

He tucked her hand between his elbow and his body before escorting her from the Great Hall. They walked in silence but for the first time, Regina didn't find it awkward. It was comfortable, just walking with him.

She was disappointed when they turned into the corridors that led to her chambers. Robin paused, turning to her. "I'm afraid this is where I must leave you. Good night, milady."

"Good night," she whispered as he kissed her hand. "I'll see you in the morning?"

He nodded. "Of course...Your Majesty."

Regina slipped into her room, but she peeked around the door to watch him as he strode back toward the rooms she had ordered prepared for him and his men. Smiling, she closed the door and let out a deep sigh.
The Marriage Test (Part II)

Chapter Notes

Here is part two! Thank you so much for all your kind words about the first part. I’m sorry this is late, but I wasn’t feeling so great when I got back from work and bowling last night. And I got a new idea for the story, so major rewrites were needed. I hope you enjoy it!

Part III will be up in the next couple days!

Over the next few days, Regina spent more time with Robin. At first, it was because he was nothing but persistent, appearing wherever she was to invite her to spend private time together. Most times, they walked about her gardens, talking about various topics. Robin often shared stories of his childhood and life in Sherwood. It was an idyllic kingdom full of people who found joy in the simple things, something he was starting to teach Regina. She wished she could respond with stories of her own, but her childhood had not been as happy as his and for the first time, Regina found she didn’t want to scare someone off.

She also found herself seeking him out more and more as well. He had been fascinated about her magic and so she had offered to give him a demonstration. It had gone from simple transformations and a few fireballs to the two of them hunched over her workbench as she taught him how to make the simplest potion in her book—a basic sleeping draught. He had followed every one of her instructions and was proud of himself when it was completed. Regina thought his smile and giddiness adorable.

The following day, Robin handed her a bow and brought her out to an open space where his man, Will, had set up targets for them. He taught her how to shoot, though his proximity was distracting her. She thus nearly took out Will, who took shelter behind a far tree until her arrows started to at least land on the target. “Keep practicing and you’ll be quite formidable,” he told her as he collected the arrows.

“Perhaps,” she replied. “But I think I prefer a sword. Allow me to show you.”

So her councilors found her clashing swords with the prince, locked in what appeared to be mortal combat. They were horrified, apologizing to Robin. He tilted his head, frowning. “We were sparring. I agreed to this. You should be proud to have a queen so skilled as Regina.”

They stuttered out their apologies as Regina busied herself elsewhere to hide her blush and silly smile. Robin had been passing all the little tests she had put to him, even though he didn’t realize it. He didn’t seem put off by her tongue or her preference for pants over dresses. For the most part, he was content to watch her daily routine as he wanted to know everything about Misthaven. But when arguing dukes had interrupted one of their private interludes in the garden, Regina had let him handle it to see what kind of leader he was. He listened to both sides before rendering his decision, showing knowledge of Misthaven law and being as fair as it allowed. Regina had been impressed.

In the privacy of her own mind and the secrecy of her heart, Regina believed she might have found love again. Robin was proving himself to be loyal, kind, just and understanding. She enjoyed being with him and even started like being addressed as “milady.” Their hands often found their way to
each other as if drawn by some powerful force. With his hand in hers, she didn’t feel quite so alone.

But that still left his final test. Regina had been wracking her mind to come up with a test, knowing he had to go through it just like everyone else. His honor code would’ve demanded it, even if she confessed the true purpose of the tests. Perhaps she could bring back the feats of strength test. That had been a popular one at court and Robin had proven he could handle all the feats she would throw at him—both mental and physical. Decided, Regina climbed into bed, vowing to tell Robin in the morning.

The next morning, Regina woke feeling giddier than she had in a long time. It reminded her of the thrill she used to get when she knew she would be able to go to the stables and see Daniel, to know they would get a chance to spend even an hour together. But now it was all because of Robin of Sherwood.

She dressed in her riding habit, pulling out a light blue jacket she hadn't worn in years. Once dressed, she strode toward Robin's chambers, ready to invite him for a morning ride before her duties as queen started. She could tell him about the test then.

As she approached Robin's chambers, she heard his and Will's voice drift down the corridor. "So you think you can break her in such a short amount of time?" Will asked.

"Of course," Robin replied. "I've done it before."

"I don't know. This one seems like she's more difficult."

"Please. I guarantee I'll have her eating out of my hand by the end of the week."

Regina turned on her heels and stalked back down the corridor, rubbing at the angry tears spilling down her face. Her mother’s words came back to haunt her and Regina knew she was right. She was a fool to think Robin wanted her for her. He wanted a docile wife, someone he could control. Probably so he could control her crown.

Had he received training on how to woo her? Was that the reason why her council had spoken to him without her present? So they could train him and groom into being the one who would finally be able to win Regina’s hand, giving them the heir they cared about so damn much.

"Daddy!" She stormed into her rooms, changing her outfit into one of her more familiar black dresses with a flick of her wrist.

Henry appeared, concerned as he took in his daughter's emotional state. "Yes, Your Majesty?"

"It's time we test Prince Robin of Sherwood," she announced with a cruel smile. She picked up the vial of potion she and Robin had made earlier, an idea for a new test forming in her mind. "Send for my Huntsman. I have need of him."

"Yes, Your Majesty." Henry bowed, wondering what had changed overnight. Regina seemed so happy the past few days. Now, she was the cold Queen her mother had turned her into again and Henry didn’t know how to defrost her.

Her advisors had invited him to another council meeting, forcing her to sit by him for the entire morning. Regina made a point to ignore him and resisted his attempts to hold her hand like before.
She knew Robin was confused about the change in her demeanor and she didn't care. He could be two-faced but she wasn't. And she wasn't going to be nice to him just because he was pretending to be.

"Regina! Milady!" Robin jogged to catch up with her as they left the room. "Your Majesty, please."
Regina stopped, tapping her foot. "What is it, Your Highness? I am busy trying to run a country."
"I understand that, but I was hoping I could persuade you to come with me for a ride. Perhaps you could show me more of Misthaven? I would like to get to know the kingdom I hope to help rule."
"You seem confident that I will marry you."
"Only hopeful, milady."
"A fool's hope," she muttered. Louder, she said: "I can arrange a tour for you, but I must go. Excuse me."
She started to walk away but heard his boots behind her. "Milady, have I done something to offend you?"
"Done something? No." It was the truth. He hadn't done anything. It was his words that had betrayed him.
"Are you certain? For you seem quite eager to be rid of me." Robin matched her stride, staying by her side.
She scowled at him. "I'm busy and can't entertain you every day. Certainly you can find some way to keep yourself busy?"
"I can, but I'd rather spend my time with you. I came here to get to know you, Regina."
"Your Majesty," she snapped, stopping short. Robin almost collided with her but caught himself at the last moment. She still backed up anyway, putting distance between the two of them. "And there's not much to know, at least by now. I am not some cheerful queen who spreads sunshine and rides unicorns. If you think you're going to find anyone else if you spend more time with me, you're greatly mistaken and you should just go back to Sherwood now."
"I'm don't want a fairy tale princess," he shot back.
Her scowl deepened into a frown as she narrowed her eyes. "What do you want, Your Highness? Power? Money?"
"A wife," he insisted.
"Good luck with that," Regina replied. "Good day, Your Highness."
She turned on her heels and stalked away before Robin could say more. This time, he didn't pursue her and she ignored the pang of regret that filled her.

Henry brushed his daughter's hair as she smirked at her reflection. "Good news, my dear?" he asked her.
"Prince Robin of Sherwood will be out of our hair come the morning." Regina smiled.
"Have you rigged his test?" Henry asked.

"Of course I have. He's going to fail, I'll throw him out and we can go on with our lives."

Henry sighed. "I thought things were going well. What changed?"

"Robin showed his true colors. He's just like the other princes who've come to court me." She stood, taking off her robe. "And so he's going to be tested like them, fail like them and go home empty-handed like them. Good night."

Henry didn't move. "Can you at least tell me the test?"

She shook her head. "You'll find out in the morning, like everyone else."

"Of course." Henry bowed. "Good night, my dear."

As he left the room, Regina climbed into bed and wrapped herself in her warm blankets. Everything was going to be better in the morning. She would be able to dismiss Prince Robin from her court. Then everything could go back to normal.

Regina's sleep was uneasy. She tossed and turned, waking every so often with a frown. It puzzled her why sleep eluded her this night. She had slept through other trials before, so why was Robin's different?

*Because he managed to worm his way into your heart before breaking it. You still care. For now.*

A crash outside her door had her shooting up, the voice in her head silenced. Her heart sped up as she slipped from her bed, her door rattling. She conjured a fireball as she approached it, the sounds of a skirmish clear. With a flick of her wrist, her door opened and Robin came tumbling in. He held her Huntsman in an arm lock.

The fireball died out as Robin glanced up at her. "Apologies for disturbing your sleep, Your Majesty, but I found this shady character lurking about your rooms. I caught him before he could do something to you."

"He's my man. Let him go," Regina ordered, confused.

Robin did as she instructed and the Huntsman straightened up. He stepped closer to Regina. "I apologize, Your Majesty, but he was not in his rooms. When I came back here to tell you, he popped up and started fighting me."

"I understand. We will discuss this later," Regina told him, voice low. "You can go."

The Huntsman bowed and slipped from her room. Robin remained where he was, watching her with confusion and anger in his eyes. "Would you mind telling me what is going on?"

"Me? What about you? Why were you lurking outside my room?" Regina crossed her arms.

He frowned. "I noticed that man creeping about and didn't like it. When I came to warn your guards, I found none. So I've been keeping watch. Why don't you have guards?"

"No one has been foolish enough to try and hurt me," Regina replied. "And if they did, I can defend myself."
“You should still have guards, Regina.” He then shook his head, the anger returning. “And what about what your man said? About going to my rooms?”

She slipped her emotionless mask on. "I test every suitor. He was part of your test."

"Which was what? Not bleeding to death when he slit my throat?” Robin’s nostrils flared in anger and Regina found herself backing up a bit.

"He wasn't going to harm you. He was supposed to cut a piece of fabric from your shirt to show that you had slept through it and that you’d be useless in an attack."

Robin frowned, stepping closer. "And what if I had killed him?"

"That wasn't going to happen."

"I'm an expert archer, Regina, and an experienced hunter. When put into such a spot, I can defend myself. And I can assure you, I would've heard him no matter how quiet he was."

Regina shook her head. "You were supposed to be asleep. You're supposed to be asleep now. I don't understand."

"I don't understand either," Robin said. "Would you care to elaborate?"

"The wine I sent you at dinner. Did you drink it?"

Robin frowned. "No, a countess or duchess or whatever she is had some food go down the wrong pipe and she was coughing something fierce. I gave it to her to drink."

She bit back a groan at his chivalrous nature. "Well, I guess she’s sleeping like the dead now."

His eyes lit up in realization. "The sleeping draught. You put it in the wine, so I would sleep through your man sneaking into my room. So I wasn't supposed to pass the test."

When she shook her head, his face got redder. "Do you interfere with all the tests? Or was I just special?"

"I've rigged all final tests. No one’s passed my other ones."

“So you’ve been testing me the entire time I’ve been here?” Robin crossed his arms. “And how did I fail?”

"You're just as two-faced as the rest of them,” she snapped. “You say the right words to my face, but when you think I'm not listening...oh then it is another story."

He shook his head. "I assure you that I have never said anything behind your back that I wouldn't say to your face."

"Truly? So you would tell me that you can break me? That you would have me eating out of your hand within a week?"

"What?" His eyes widened in surprise. "Never."

"But you would tell your man that."

Robin closed his eyes, body sagging a bit. "You overheard us this morning."
"Yes."

"And that was why you suddenly got cold to me. Because you thought I was talking about you."

"Weren't you?"

"No." His eyes snapped open and a fire burned in them, his body tensing up again. "I would never discuss a woman, let alone a queen, like that. I was planning on gifting you a horse but the mare sent to me is a wild one. Will and I were talking about whether or not I could tame her before I had to leave."

Her anger evaporated and she collapsed into a nearby chair. A horse. She had heard Daniel use those same terms when talking about training horses and even she had used them. So why hadn't she thought of a horse first?

*You know why.*

Robin leaned over her table, fury radiating off him. “I demand another test.”

“What?” Her eyes snapped up to his. “Why?”

“I want a chance to prove myself honorably. Can you do that?”

Regina swallowed. “I’ve never administered a second final test.”

“Because the other princes didn’t know they needed a second one,” Robin responded. “They didn’t know what I do.”

She stood. “I’ll think about it, Prince Robin. Good night.”

He made no move to leave, instead grabbing her hand. “I thought we were bonding, Regina. That we had a connection. Why couldn’t you just talk to me? Why did you think the worst?”

“There’s still a lot you don’t know about me,” she replied, voice low. “And once you do, you’ll realize I’m not worth it.”

“Regina,” he pleaded, squeezing her hand. “Please…”

She shook her head. “Just go. It’s late and we all need sleep. I’ll tell you about your new test in the morning.”

Robin nodded, letting his hand slip from hers. He walked out the door and she closed it behind him. After a few moments, she slid down it until she was crumpled on the floor. Tears streamed down her face as she sobbed for the first time in a long time. Her second chance at love was destroyed and this time, she only had herself to blame.

After what seemed like hours, Regina picked herself up off the floor. She took in her splotchy and tear stained face, her mother’s voice echoing in her head. *You look a mess. No one would want to be married to a wife who looks like that. Clean yourself up.*

Regina conjured a handkerchief, wiping her face. She scoured her vanity for some soap. Instead, she found a tiny vial she had been keeping for years. A powerful sorceress had given it to her in exchange for a favor, pressing the glass item into the queen’s palm. “For your worst enemy,” Maleficent had whispered.

She was her worst enemy. The potion was her way out of this pain and could provide a good test for
Prince Robin. She couldn’t rig this one—he’d either succeed or not. And if he did, she would get happiness. If he didn’t, she wouldn’t be around to bother anyone anymore. Everyone else would get their happiness.

Resolved, she sat down on her desk and wrote two letters. One was addressed to her father and the other to Robin. She left them on her vanity where Henry was sure to see them. Uncapping the vial, she sat down on her bed and downed the contents. She laid down, clasping her hands over her chest and closed her eyes.

And Regina slept.

Robin sat in the chambers Regina had given him and Will upon their arrival in Misthaven, hunched over the table in the room. He hadn’t gotten a lot of sleep after leaving Regina’s rooms, too angry at first. She had been freezing him out over a misunderstanding that had taken two minutes to clear up. All she had to do was talk to him.

He stared at a letter he had opened on the table, well-worn and crinkled from being folded several times. Will sighed, sliding into a chair across from him. “You tried your best,” he told his master. “You can go back to Sherwood with your head held high.”

“We’re not leaving, Will. Not until the final test. Regina is going to give me another chance.”

“Yeah, but do you want it? I mean, you came here on a whim because she was kind to our kingdom in a time of need. Not exactly the basis for a strong marriage,” Will said.

Robin sighed, his eyes drawn to letter written in Regina’s now familiar cursive again. It had arrived with medicines Sherwood had desperately needed and had included a plea from Misthaven’s queen: that it be administered to the children first, so none of their lives were cut short. The ink on those lines seemed blurred and he realized the queen had cried when she wrote them. He grew intrigued over the mysterious woman who would cry over children she had never met and when his parents’ council started to press him on his marriage plans, he had said he would try to court Queen Regina of Misthaven.

“She was the only one who sent medicines when I asked for them,” Robin replied, low. “It drew me to meet her, to see if I could form a relationship with her. I thought we were doing that but something…there’s something holding her back.”

“She’s not yours to fix,” Will said.

Robin banged his fist on the table. “She’s not broken! She’s been hurt and someone made her think she’s not worth loving. But she is. I just wish I could show her that.”

Will leaned back, studying his master and friend. “You love her.”

“I think I’m starting to,” Robin responded. “And I think she’s starting to love me, which scares her.”

A knock came to the door and Will rose to answer it. “That’s probably that old manservant of hers, coming to tell you what she’s going to make you do now,” he said, opening the door. “Ahh, Henry. I figured.”

Robin tensed up as the older man entered the room, realizing something was wrong. Henry’s eyes were red-rimmed and he was more solemn than usual. He hurried to the prince, holding out a note. “You need to save my daughter.”
“Your daughter? Who is…” Robin trailed off as he realized the answer to his question. “The Queen. You’re her father?”

Henry nodded, holding out a letter. “She’s done something rash. It’s all in this, I’m sure.”

Robin took the letter, opening it to find Regina’s handwriting there.

Dear Robin,

I don’t know what Daddy will tell you when he hands you this letter…and yes, my manservant is my father. I have no excuse for how I’ve treated him other than that he’s the only person I’ve ever trusted. Somehow he transformed into my servant and I was too awful a daughter to stop it.

You deserve an explanation. My mother was not an affectionate woman. I spent every day until she died trying to get even a morsel of her approval and love but was denied at every turn. Nothing I did seemed to please her. If I cried, she would tell me that queens don’t show weakness like that. Daddy was the one who comforted me after nightmares, always making sure he got to me before Mother knew I was in distress so I wasn’t punished by her. Even though he loved me and was always there for me, I ignored him in favor of trying to get my Mother’s love.

When I was sixteen, I fell in love for the first time. His name was Daniel and he worked in the stables here at the palace. I’m certain you already know we were doomed—a princess does not marry the help. But I was young and starry-eyed. Daniel gave me everything my mother had denied me—attention, praise, understanding and love. When I was with him, I didn’t feel I needed to be perfect. I could just be me.

We used to meet under one particular apple tree in the gardens. I thought we were being so discreet, so secret. But Mother had spies everywhere and she learned about us. One day, she was waiting for us. She forbade Daniel from seeing me every again but he stood up to her, saying that he loved me and wanted to be with me. Mother responded by crushing his heart, leaving him to die in my arms. As I sobbed over his body, she told me that love was weakness and that queens married to better their kingdoms. I didn’t want that. I wanted a husband, a lover, a partner. So I vowed to never marry.

But I also want a child. I don’t want the child to be born for the same reason I was—to just secure a throne. I want a child to love and cherish, born of love I feel for someone else. So I created a list of qualities the father of my child had to have and started to test my suitors. Just as I suspected, all failed and so I rigged the tests to justify sending them away.

Then you came along. And you do have all the qualities I was looking for. To be honest, I wasn’t going to rig your final test. I had chosen something I knew you would easily pass. But then I overheard your conversation and well…I’m sure you can understand why I would assume the worst. I had years of being told no one would love me for me. So why would you be any different?

So here’s your final test—I’ve taken a special potion, one that has put me into a deep sleep. And I will sleep forever until wakened by true love’s kiss. I can’t rig this one—you either succeed or you don’t. If you don’t—or I’ve completely screwed up and you have no desire to try—don’t feel guilty. After Daniel’s death, I’ve just been going through the motions of living. This is much better than the existence I was having. Everyone will be better off—I have some distant cousin that can take the throne and who will probably be glad to give the advisors the heir they want. You go back to Sherwood and find a woman worthy of you, who can love you without all the issues I have.

Yours,
Robin reread the letter a few more times before rubbing his face. His fingers brushed against something wet and he pulled his hand away, realizing he was crying. Looking up, he met Henry’s tormented eyes. “I failed her over and over,” the older man croaked. “Please, save her this time.”

Standing, Robin folded both letters and placed them in an inner pocket sewn into his vest. They would stay close to his heart there. He squared his shoulders and looked at Henry. “Lead me to her. I will do my best.”
Word of Regina’s condition had clearly spread throughout the palace for when Robin entered her room, all her advisors were gathered at the foot of her bed. They argued amongst themselves before turning on Henry the moment he stepped in, accusing him of not doing enough to stop his daughter from doing something so rash. None seemed concerned about Regina herself except for two of her ladies in waiting—Lady Mary Margaret and Lady Kathryn—who stood at her bedside, crying.

Robin ignored the advisors, approaching Regina’s bed. She lay there, hands clasped on her chest and dark curls spilling over her shoulders. Her chest rose and fell, though the movements were so slight they would be easy to miss. But Regina was definitely asleep, though she didn’t look as peaceful as she probably had thought she would be when she took the potion. He brushed his fingers against her cheek, wondering what she was dreaming about in this cursed sleep.

“You’re going to save her, right?” Lady Mary Margaret asked him, eyes as red as Prince Henry’s. “Please.”

He nodded as the advisors started to yell about succession and the audacity of the queen to leave them in such a position. Tightening his fists, Robin whirled on them. “GET OUT!” he bellowed.

They fell silent, staring at him. He glared at them. “I mean it, get out. You’re part of the reason why she did this. Somewhere along the way, you forgot your queen is also a person. Maybe you need to start treating her like one.”

Chastened, the councilors left the queen’s room. Robin turned back to Regina and took a deep breath. This was his final test—they either loved each other or they didn’t. And if they didn’t, she would sleep forever.

He bent over her, face hovering over hers. Closing his eyes, he closed the gap and pressed his lips to hers. A pulse blew past him, his hair blowing in a breeze. The others in the room gasped at it and he pulled back, hoping it meant there was a change in Regina.

Regina’s eyes opened as she took in a big gulp of air. She shot up and he caught her, holding her close. Regina clutched onto him, gasping for air and he felt her heart race against his chest. He rubbed her back, rocking her gently.

“You did it,” she whispered. “You passed.”

“Honorably,” he whispered back.

She leaned back, cupping his cheek with her hand. “I’m sorry. I should’ve talked to you rather than assuming the worst about you.”

“You’re forgiven.” He kissed the underside of her wrist. “Just promise me you won’t do something like this again.”

Regina nodded, her eyes haunted. “I never want to go back there.”

“Where?” he asked, concerned. It had to be an awful place and he wondered what she had experienced while asleep.
She shook her head. “Never mind. Help me stand, please.”

Robin did as she asked, helping her out of bed. He wrapped his arm around her waist, holding her close though she seemed strong enough to stand on her own. Regina didn’t pull away. Instead, she leaned closer to him as she smiled at her father. “Daddy.”

“Oh, Regina.” He rushed forward and the two embraced, each apologizing to the other.

Robin stood back, watching the tender father-daughter moment, when Lady Mary Margaret embraced him. “Thank you so much,” she sobbed.

He patted her back awkwardly, keeping his eyes fixed on Regina as her father rocked her. Robin hoped she finally saw how many people really did care for her and that it would help her start healing.

As Lady Kathryn pulled Mary Margaret off him, Regina let go of her father and returned to Robin’s embrace. He held her close, a hand tangling in her soft black hair as he held her head against his chest. Robin dropped a kiss to the top of her head. “Does this mean I get to marry you now?”

“If you want a wife with all my issues,” she replied, letting out a soft chuckle.

“I see you more as a mystery I’m willing to spend the rest of my life solving.”

Will groaned. “This is going to be my life now. Why don’t you just leave me in Sherwood?”

“I do want to see it,” Regina said, looking up at Robin. “Before we get married. I want to get to know your kingdom and your people the way you’ve gotten to know mine.”

Happiness and pride filled Robin and he smiled, nodding. “Then we shall go to Sherwood.”

The carriage bounced around on the uneven dirt road and Regina bit back another groan. "I hate traveling like this. Everything would be so much easier if I could ride my own horse. Or better yet, use my magic."

Across from her, Henry chuckled. "I know, my dear. But this makes the council feel much better about your safety."

"My magic would be the safest," Regina replied. “And faster.”

Henry chuckled again. “Eager to see Robin again?”

Regina nodded, glancing out the window. Robin had returned to Sherwood a few weeks prior to prepare for her visit. She missed him and his bright smile daily, but she missed him most of all at night. Maleficent had been right about saving that curse for her worst enemy. Regina hadn’t slipped into a peaceful sleep but had gone to a room filled with fire. She felt its heat, trapped and unable to move for fear of being burnt. Now every night, she returned to that room and would toss and turn until she would awaken.

After a few nights of that torment, Regina had lain in bed and wished she could find some way to chase off the nightmares. Her bed had dipped as a weight had landed on it and she sat up to find a surprised Robin in her bed. His suggestive smile fell as he grew concerned, sitting up to cup her cheek. “What’s wrong, love?”
Everything about her nightmares spilled out and he held her close, promising to stay with her the night. They fell asleep in each other's arms and for the first time, Regina did not dream about the room.

After that, Robin spent his remaining nights in Misthaven sleeping in her bed. Regina cherished the feeling of being in his arms and the knowledge of how much he cared for her. But once he had gone, her nightmares had returned and she longed for the safety his arms once more.

The carriage stopped and she frowned. "What's going on?"

"I don't know but I hope it's not bandits," Henry replied as Regina conjured a fireball as the door opened, ready to attack whoever dared mess with her.

Robin's smiling face appeared, blue eyes lit up as they laid eyes on her. "Peace, milady, we're not bandits."

"Robin!" Her fireball died down as she smiled at him. "What are you doing here?"

"I couldn't wait to see you, so I rode out to meet you." He held out his arms and she slid into them as he lifted her from the carriage. She wrapped her arms around his neck as he held her aloft, running her fingers through his hair as she pressed her forehead to his. "You're more beautiful than I remember."

She smiled as she rolled her eyes. "I forgot how much of a flatterer you are."

"You love it," he replied, setting her on her feet as he leaned down to kiss her. She melted into it, having forgotten the fire he could ignite within her.

Behind them, Henry cleared his throat and the two broke apart. Robin smiled at the older man, holding out his hand. "Your Highness," he greeted.

"It is good to see you, Robin," Henry replied, shaking the prince's hand. "Though you did startle us."

Robin bowed his head. "My apologies. I hope you will permit me to spirit your daughter away, to ride with me instead of the carriage."

She had curled herself into Robin's embrace, her head resting on his shoulder as she believed she could fall asleep standing up. Regina lifted it, alert though confused. "What do you mean?"

"Come with me and I'll show you." He took her hand and led her toward the front of his company, where a large man with dark hair tied back and wearing a green tunic paired with black breeches held a white stallion she recognized as Robin's steed. Beside him stood a beautiful gray mare whose coat also had a few white splotches. Will held her, smiling at Regina.

"Yes, is she...Is she mine?"

"Yes, she is," Robin replied. "It took a bit longer than I expected, but she will now take a saddle and rider. But she still has some fire. I thought you'd like that."

"I do." She let go of his hand, approaching the horse. The mare let her pet her and Regina glanced back at Robin. "Does she have a name?"

"Not yet. I left you that honor." Robin stood next to her, hand on his back.

She turned back to the horse, considering her choices before she said, "There's a spell I use where
the word for fire is Azar. I think I'll call her that."

"A good choice," Robin said before tilting her head toward him. He kissed her and she threw her arms around his neck, deepening it.

Someone cleared their throat and the royal couple broke apart. Will had an eyebrow raised and a smirk on his face. "Sorry to break that up, but we need to get going. Your Highness. Your parents and the people are waiting."

"People?" Regina asked. "What do you mean?"

Robin laced their fingers together. "Everyone is eager to meet the queen who saved them during the great sickness. They have lined the roads of Sherwood to see you. That's one of the reasons why we're riding the rest of the way."

"They are?" Regina was touched and nervous at the same time.

"They already love you as much as..." Robin trailed off as if realizing what he was about to say. Her heart sped up knowing what he was going to say. It had been too long since someone had loved her like that and the thought Robin did made her as giddy as a little girl.

He patted Azar's neck. "Let's get you on your steed, milady. Your admirers await."

Regina rode next to Robin, listening as he told her more about Sherwood and his people. His eyes lit up and pride filled his voice as he talked. She found herself watching him more than listening and believed she was falling harder for the man. Harder than she ever had for Daniel. And her heart skipped a beat knowing he was falling as hard for her.

Cheering reached her ears and she turned her eyes from Robin back to the road. People--mostly farmers, she gathered from their clothes made from homespun wool and dyed darker colors, no doubt made from organic ingredients they could find in the woods—lined the dirt road. They cheered and waved at the royal procession. A few held up wildflowers as she passed. "For the Merciful Queen," one said.

The title touched her. She smiled at the woman, thanking her for the flowers as she took the bouquet.

It was the same as she continued down the road. More people appeared to get a glimpse of her, handing her flowers and shouting kind words at her as she passed. She had amassed a large bouquet before she had even arrived at the city and she turned to Robin, smiling. "What should I do with these?"

"Will can take them," Robin said, motioning for his man to come forward. "We'll figure out what to do with them once we get to the palace."

"Thank you," she said, handing the flowers to Will. "I think there's just going to be one room just full of flowers."

Robin chuckled. "I think you're right."

Trumpets blared as they entered the main city, people lining the street and others hanging from windows of the houses that lined the road. Children sat on their parents' shoulders and a few bigger boys had climbed trees to see her and Prince Robin as they processed through.
More flowers were thrust up at her. She tried to take as many as she could but Will and Little John had to help her. Robin also took some of the flowers, promising his people the Queen would get them. They exchanged smiles as Regina caught sight of a group of girls ahead, who were jumping up and down as she approached.

She brought Azar to a halt and dismounted, passing the reins to Will. Approaching the children, she knelt down to be eye-level with them. "Hello there," she said, smiling.

"Are you the Queen who gave us the medicine?" one of the little girls asked.

Regina nodded. "Did it help you get better?"

"Yes it did!" the girl exclaimed. She threw her arms around Regina. "Thank you so much."

She hugged the girl back before opening her arms to hug more of the children. They squeezed into her embrace, everyone laughing as she tried to hug them all. One little girl placed a flower crown on her head. "Every queen deserves a crown," she said.

"Thank you. It's my favorite crown yet," Regina said, kissing the girl's cheek.

Robin knelt next to her. "Mine as well."

The girls giggled as one produced another flower crown. "This one is for you, Your Highness."

"Well, thank you," he said, bowing his head so the girl could place it on his hair. He looked up, smiling. "How do I look?"

"Very handsome," they chorused.

Regina smiled as she met Robin's eyes. "I have to agree."

The girls giggled before one patted her shoulder. Regina leaned down as the girl asked: "Are you going to marry the prince?"

"I am," Regina replied, giving Robin a coy look. He gave her a half-smile in return as the girls burst into excited chatter over the thought of a royal wedding.

Robin leaned closer, resting his forehead against hers. "Shall we continue, milady?"

"Do we have to?" she asked as the girls cuddled closer to her. "I'm enjoying myself."

"I can see that. But my parents are waiting," he said. "I'm afraid we have to go."

Regina hugged the disappointed girls before allowing Robin to help her up. He pulled her close, whispering: "You have the touch of a mother, Regina. You are destined to be one, I know it."

She smiled, locking her fingers with his as they continued greeting people as they walked down the road to the palace.

Robin and Regina rode side by side through the palace gate. Every member of the Sherwood royal court lined the courtyard, watching as the two royals approached the many stone steps that led into the small palace Robin and his family called home.

Even had King Roland and Queen Isabelle not been wearing their finery and best jewels, Regina
would've recognized them. Robin was a perfect blend of them—his father's blonde hair and strong jaw matched with his mother's bright blue eyes and smile. They watched as their son helped her dismount and, hand-in-hand, they approached the Sherwood monarchs.

"Mother, Father, may I introduce Regina, Queen of Misthaven," he said, stepping back so Regina was front and center.

She bobbed a curtsy, though it was a bit awkward in her breeches and riding coat. King Roland took her hands and helped her up. "There is no need to bow to us. We are equals, Your Majesty."

Queen Isabelle stepped forward and wrapped the younger monarch in a warm hug. "We are so pleased to finally meet the woman who has stolen our Robin's heart."

Regina's own heart skipped a beat to hear that. She pulled away from the other queen, smiling. "I am so happy to be here in Robin's beloved Sherwood."

"Let's get you and your father inside so you can rest from your long journey. Then we'll have a banquet in your honor," Isabelle declared.

Robin took Regina's hand again, helping her inside the palace as Henry followed them ahead of the court. She wrapped her hand around his arm instead, leaning against him to murmur: "I feel like I'm coming home."

"Good," he whispered, kissing the side of her head. "Because I want this to be your home as well."

Regina snuck into Robin’s room her first night in Sherwood, using her magic to appear in his bed. He was still up and waiting for her, though he frowned when she appeared. “You’re still having the nightmares?”

“Yes,” she said, curling close to him. “You’re the only thing that keeps them away.”

He kissed her forehead before blowing out the candles. Wrapping his arms around her, they fell asleep. And for the first time in a month, Regina had a peaceful sleep.

Will and Henry knew where Regina spent her nights. If anyone else at court did, they didn’t say anything. When she brought it up to Robin, he chuckled. “We’re betrothed. It is acceptable in Sherwood for a betrothed couple to share a bed before the wedding,” he explained. “Many a bride has gone down the aisle already with child.”

“Is that your plan for me?” she asked.

He smiled. “Something tells me your advisors would be thrilled if it were.”

“ Forget them,” she replied, wrapping her arms around his neck. “I would be thrilled.”

Robin’s smile grew. “Well, then, milady, I suggest we get started on making that wish come true.”

She nuzzled him as he pulled off her shift, letting it drop to the floor. A few seconds later, his own nightshirt joined it as they consummated their betrothal.

Regina enjoyed her time in Sherwood. Everything seemed so much simpler in Robin's rural kingdom and she felt freer. She suspected it was because she wasn't the ruler and didn't have to make complex
decisions each day, though Robin did include her in many of his meetings.

"You said you wanted to just be my consort," Regina said early on, curled up next to Robin as he went over a legal document for some trade agreement. "I'm happy just being yours."

He kissed her forehead. "I know, but you said that should anything happen to you before our children are old enough to take the throne, you want me to govern Misthaven. I feel the same about you and Sherwood."

She kissed him before nuzzling their noses together. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For trusting me," she whispered.

He brushed her cheek with his thumb. "I love you."

"Look at them," King Roland teased as he escorted Queen Isabelle into the room. "Warms my heart to see two people in love."

Regina smirked as she turned to Robin. "I see where you get from."

"It’s only going to get worse, my dear," Queen Isabelle replied with a chuckle.

"I guess it’s something to look forward to." Regina took Robin’s hand, lacing their fingers together as he smiled at her.

"We are so pleased that you are joining our family, Regina," the queen said. "Especially after seeing how happy Robin is around you. That's all we've ever wanted for him."

King Roland smiled at his queen, placing his hand on hers. "We were a love match and had hoped Robin would experience the same."

"I wanted love as well," Regina admitted. "And I found it in your son."

Robin pulled her close, kissing her head. Queen Isabelle smiled, leaning forward. "So, I guess the only question that remains is: When is the wedding?"

It was decided that Robin and Regina would marry one month after she left Sherwood. She returned to Misthaven, ready to plan her wedding while Robin attended to his duties in his own kingdom. Preparations though were not enough to distract her from how much she missed Robin, especially at night as the images of a room engulfed in flames haunted her again. Regina slept in fits, counting the days until she was back in Robin’s arms.

Soon, she stood on the steps of her own palace in a beautiful gold gown and with her dark hair pulled up into a bun, her crown of diamonds encircling it. They caught the morning sun as she watched the party from Sherwood ride into her court. Robin once again rode his white stallion, halting the animal before her stairs. He dismounted and she smiled to see he had worn a golden tunic, as if he had read her mind and known to match her.

"Your Majesty," he said, bowing low before her.

She took his hands, pulling him back up. "No need to bow to me anymore, Robin," she whispered. "We're equals."
He smiled and tried to raise her hand to his lips. Instead, she pulled him down until their lips met. A
cheer rose from the crowd and the two smiled as their kiss continued.

They were married the next day in front of her entire court. She wore a white gown with gold
embroidery in the bodice. Her handmaidens had twisted her hair into an elaborate hairstyle of curls
and gems, once again containing it inside her diamond-encrusted tiara. Will had shown up at her
door with a necklace for her, Robin's wedding present to her. It was a beautiful gold necklace with
his family's crest—a roaring lion—hanging from the edge of the chain. He placed it around her neck as
she admired it in the mirror. "Tell him that I love it," she told Will.

"If you say it a little louder, he'll be able to hear you where he's lurking in the hallway," Will said,
motioning outside her room with his thumb. Robin's indignant bark of his friend's name proved his
presence.

Regina laughed as she pulled out a gold crown, handing it to Will. "Can you give this to him? It's
tradition for new kings to wear this at their wedding here in Misthaven."

"Of course, Your Majesty. I'm certain he'll be happy to wear it," Will said. Then louder: "Right,
Robin?"

"Honored, my love," Robin yelled back.

She smiled, shaking her head. "Will, what would he ever do without you?"

"Let's hope we never find out," Will replied, bowing to Regina. "My queen."

She curtsied in response before Henry appeared, looking amused. "I see Robin was lurking around.
Will is chasing him down to ride out to the cathedral now."

"He couldn't stay away for too long. But don't worry, we didn't see each other," Regina assured him.
"We don't want to jinx this."

Henry took her hands. "I think this marriage is blessed, Regina. You two will be happy, no matter
what the outside world throws at you."

"Thank you, Daddy," she said, hugging him. She then whispered something into his ear and his
smile grew brighter.

He patted her hands. "Come on, my girl. Let's go get you married."

When she spotted Robin waiting for her in front of the archbishop, Regina wanted nothing more than
to sprint down the aisle to him. But Henry kept a good grip on her arm, guiding her down the aisle
while she looked as poised as possible. Cora would've been proud…if Regina believed her mother
capable of actually feeling anything but contempt. Robin bowed to Henry when they reached him
before taking Regina's hand to lead her the rest of the way.

The ceremony itself was a blur. She focused on Robin's warm hand wrapped around hers, the
tinkle in his eyes and how the golden crown went well with his hair. He slid a large diamond ring
onto her finger as he promised to spend the rest of his life by her side. She promised the same,
regretting tradition did not call for her to give him a ring as well. As the Archbishop proclaimed them
husband and wife, Robin drew her close and kissed her. Cheers erupted from the crowd and Regina
smiled against his lips.
Robin led her back down the aisle to the waiting carriage. People lined the streets back to the palace, eager to catch a glimpse of their new king. The two waved as flowers were tossed up and their subjects shouted best wishes for a long and happy marriage.

An older woman emerged from the crowd and Regina felt pulled to her. She leaned forward, asking the driver to stop the carriage. Robin frowned. “Is something wrong?”

“No,” she replied. “There’s just someone I think I need to talk to.”

Will helped her out of the carriage and she approached the woman. A film covered both her eyes and Regina realized she was blind. But something in the air around her told the queen that this woman was not some helpless crone who needed help.

She held out a rose to the queen. “A gift for the beautiful bride.”

“Thank you,” Regina said, taking the flower. “This may be simple but I can tell it is given with love. I am honored by your presence.”

“Such a sweet young woman. Your mother did you wrong to try and harden your heart. It is your greatest strength.”

Regina smiled, tears filling her eyes. “May I have your blessing?”

“Of course, but you don’t need it. You’ve got him.” The woman motioned to a confused Robin, who was still sitting in the carriage. “As long as you two stay true to each other, you can weather any storm.”

Robin met her eyes and smiled at her. She nodded. “Thank you. Is there anything we can do for you?”

“Oh, no. I’m quite content with my lot in life. I just wanted to wish you luck.” The woman released Regina’s hand, giving her a knowing look. “And to tell you that your king is a very virile man. I see many children in your future.”

Flushing, Regina returned to the carriage. Robin helped her in, wrapping his arm around her as she settled back in the red plush seat. He leaned close, whispering: “Is everything all right?”

“Everything is perfect,” she replied, resting her head on his shoulder.

That night, Robin and Regina laid entwined in their bed with her head resting against his chest. She traced lazy patterns against his skin while he carded his fingers through her hair. "I wish my ring wasn't so big," she said, glancing to where she had left it on her vanity. "It's too burdensome to wear."

"It is, isn't?" Robin reached over, picking up his tunic where it had been discarded. He pulled out a small black box and held it out to her. "Good thing I had these made then."

Regina opened the box to reveal two silver rings. The smaller one had several diamonds encrusted in it and Robin took it out. "Give me your hand, please," he said.

Smiling, she obliged and watched as he slid the ring on her finger. He kissed her hand before laying it over his heart. "In Sherwood, rings don't represent ownership. They represent the vow to be faithful and to cherish one's partner."
"I like that," Regina said, pulling out the other ring. "So this one is for you?"

He nodded, holding out his hand. She slid the ring on his finger, smiling. "There. We match."

"Glad you approve." Robin wrapped his arm around her and pulled her against his chest, kissing the top of her head. "Almost a Sherwood bride."

“Oh, I am a true Sherwood bride,” she said, smiling.

He had resumed carding his fingers through her hair and they stilled as her meaning sunk in. "Regina?"

"Yes, love?"

"Are you...?" It seemed like the words died in Robin's throat. He swallowed and tried again. “Are you with child?”

She propped herself up, looking into his eyes. Hope and love swirled in their blue depths and she smiled. "Yes, love."

Robin let out a soft chuckle, rolling them over so he could hover over her. "How long have you known?"

"Only a couple days," Regina said, running her hands up and down his arms. "I noticed my courses hadn't come so I asked for the test. The midwife cautioned me not to get my hopes up but my feeling had been right. I left Sherwood with a little piece of you inside me."

"Does anyone else know?" Robin asked. "Besides the midwife?"

"I told my father this morning, before the wedding. That's all."

He bit his lip before lowering himself down to kiss her. "I love you," he whispered.

"I love you too," she said, pressing her forehead to his. "I may not be a fairy tale princess, but I do believe we got a fairy tale ending."

Robin chuckled, holding her closer as they fell asleep, ready to start the rest of their lives together.

Chapter End Notes

And there’s the conclusion! I hope everyone enjoyed it.

I know there were some requests for me to expand this a bit. And I would love to—give you guys the M-rated version of Regina and Robin’s nights together—but I’m already swamped with five ongoing Outlaw Queen fics. Maybe one day I’ll revisit this story.

For those reading “The Land Without Magic” and wondering where Chapter 8 is…I wasn’t happy with it. So I’ve delayed it to Sunday so I could make it better.

Thanks for your support!

--Mac
Hazel's cries woke Regina. She rolled over, groaning when she saw her clock reading 3:30 AM. Beside her, Robin shifted. "I'll get her," he said, voice thick with sleep.

"No," she croaked, patting his arm. "You've taken this feeding all week."

"Because you were up early and home late. You needed the rest."

She smiled, sitting up. "And I can sleep in in the morning. So let me go and you get some rest. Got it?"

"Yes, Your Majesty," he sassed, giving her a bright smile. He closed his eyes as Regina wrapped herself in her robe. Before she even reached the bedroom door, his soft snores filled the room.

Regina padded down the hall to the nursery, walking into the room they had hastily thrown together when Emma had accelerated little Hazel's entrance into the world. Over the past couple months, though, the family began to properly decorate the room for her. The walls were painted a light pink and an apple tree had been added by Robin when she wasn't home. Henry had written parts of everyone's stories in fancy gold wording around the tree, which had touched Regina when she saw it. Roland's contribution was the little plaster sign with "Hazel" painted on it in childish lettering that hung over the girl's crib. She herself had added a roaring lion on the headboard as a tribute to Robin.

Hazel's cries died down to whimpers when she saw Regina, who picked her up. "I know, baby girl, you're hungry. Let's go downstairs and I'll fix that, okay?" Regina soothed.

Once the bottle was made, Regina carried Hazel into the living room. She clicked on the Christmas tree and let its multicolored lights illuminate the darkened room. Regina positioned herself on the couch so that Hazel could watch the lights, which they learned since putting up the tree fascinated the young girl.

As Hazel watched the tree, Regina watched her. She was three months old and starting to settle into her looks. Her eyes had stayed blue, clearly her father's rather than her mother's. Both Regina and Robin had been relieved about that, though guilty that they had doubted if they could love her if she had Zelena's eyes. There were a few more things that they could trace to Robin but not much they recognized from Zelena. And Mary Margaret swore Hazel had Regina's smile and nose. "It's possible," she had said. "You're her aunt so she could have some traits from you."

But her hair puzzled everyone. When they had left the hospital with her, Hazel had brown hair that had seemed closer to Robin's color than Zelena's. When they returned from the Underworld, they had been surprised to find it had darkened drastically. Henry had held her and said, "It almost looks like your color, Mom."

It did seem to be closer to Regina's color out of all of them. She and Robin had watched the girl sleep that first night back and tried to figure it out. "Maybe there was a gene somewhere between either you or Zelena for black hair and it became prominent," Regina suggested.
Robin had frowned. "What does any of that mean?"

"It just means..." Regina sighed. "I don't know. It just makes the most sense."

There was one other theory but Robin didn't want to entertain. Emma had voiced it though, ever blunt: "Robin, are you sure you're Hazel's father?"

"Yes," he replied, terse.

Emma dropped it but Regina could feel Robin's anger continue throughout the day. That night, he had vented to her. "She is mine. There are too many similarities."

"I know," she said.

But Robin wasn't done. "I feel horrible to admit that some part of me would like to think she isn't mine because then we could get that witch out of our lives for good. But then I remind myself that I can't let that sweet girl fall into her clutches. She's not fit to be a mother."

"Of course not." Regina stood, wrapping her arms around him. "We both know that Hazel is yours. And we're going to keep her far away from my sister. Together."

He sagged in her arms. "I am so lucky to have you in my life."

"That's debatable," she replied. "I'm still the reason Zelena targeted you like she did."

"Stop beating yourself up over that." He kissed her and that ended the conversation.

Still every so often, the thought popped into her mind. Like now, as she rocked Hazel. The girl had finished her bottle but was still fighting sleep. Regina smiled as she watched the girl's eyes flutter closed and then open again. "It's okay, baby girl. Go to sleep and have pleasant dreams. Dream about the Christmas tree and sugar plums and everything good. Because you deserve it."

Regina began to sing a Christmas carol softly, one she knew Henry had liked when he was a child. Hazel's eyes fluttered closed and stay that way as she drifted off to sleep. Smiling, Regina kissed her forehead. "Sweet dreams. In a few weeks, you'll have your first Christmas as well as your daddy and your brother. I promise you, it will be magical."

Mary Margaret called her one day to invite Hazel over for a playdate with Neal. Regina rolled her eyes even though she knew Mary Margaret couldn't see her. "They're babies. Not much playing going on."

"It'll be fun. Come on. You can bring Robin. He and David can go hang out together."

"Fine," Regina said with a sigh. "We'll be there in a half hour."

When they entered the loft, Mary Margaret spirited Hazel and Roland away. Emma sat at the table and she beckoned Regina and Robin closer. They approached as dread filled Regina. Something seemed off with her blonde friend and she wasn't sure she was going to like why.

"I have something for you," she said once they sat down. "And don't be mad."

"Well that's a guarantee you did something I didn't want you to do. What was it?" Regina asked.

Emma pushed a manila envelope toward them. "I ran a DNA test on Hazel."
"I'm her father," Robin insisted.

"You are," Emma said. "The tests reveal a ninety-nine point ninety-eight chance that Robin is Hazel's father."

Regina slid the envelope back. "Then why tell us this? We knew Robin was the father."

"But you need to look at the results. I didn't just test Hazel against Robin. I tested her against Zelena as well."

"Why?" Robin asked.

Emma shrugged. "Call it a hunch. And guess what? The tests reveal less than a twenty-five percent chance that Zelena is her mother. I had an old colleague of mine look it over and he said that if he had to guess just from the results, the person was a relative of Hazel's parent. But not full-blooded."

Regina furrowed her brow. "Emma, what are you saying?"

"Regina, you and Zelena are only half-sisters," she replied. "I don't know how, but she isn't Hazel’s mother and I think you are."

Silence stretched on for several minutes before Regina let out a strangled: "Have you taken leave of your senses?"

"Regina!" Mary Margaret chided, coming in from the other room.

"No, Regina is right this time." Robin fixed Emma with a glare. "This is just cruel."

Emma frowned. "How is this cruel? Zelena's not the mother and Regina is. We can run another test to prove it and you'll see I'm right."

"Emma, I can't have children. I cursed myself years ago," Regina said, tears streaming down her face. "And even if I had conceived despite that, how would Zelena have taken the child from my womb? When would she had done that?"

"I don't know. Belle is looking into it..."

"Belle?" Regina's eyes flashed dangerously. "You told her about this?"

Emma shrank back a bit. "Not exactly. I didn't mention who it was for. I told her I just needed to do some research into it since babies tend to be a hot commodity around here."

Robin placed his hand on Regina's back, rubbing soothing circles into it. "I think we need to go home. Give ourselves time to process this."

"Process what?" Regina hissed. "This is ridiculous. There is no way Hazel is my child biologically. And I'm okay with that, even if some people aren't."

At her withering glare, Emma excused herself. Mary Margaret stepped forward again, arms crossed. "Look, I know it was wrong for Emma to run this test behind your back..."

"Good. Stop there."

"But what if the tests are right? What if Hazel is really yours? Are you going to go through life without knowing?"
"It doesn’t matter. I’m raising Hazel with Robin, so she is mine in every way that matters,” Regina said, picking up her bag. "Now, I’m going to get my daughter and go."

Mary Margaret sighed. "I know you're not about vengeance anymore, but if Zelena did take Hazel from you, don't you think she should be punished?"

Regina paused before picking up Hazel. She called for Roland, who came running down the stairs. He looked up at her. "Are we leaving already?"

"I'm afraid we are. Come on, baby. I'll make us all hot chocolate at home." Regina smiled as Roland cheered, urging him to take his father's hand. The family left the loft without another word.

"Here you go." Robin handed her a glass of whiskey.

Regina took it, giving him a tight smile. They curled up on the couch, watching the lights on the Christmas tree twinkling in the dark of night. A fire roared in the fireplace, where five stockings hung. Regina stared at Hazel's, her thoughts all jumbled up. Was she really the girl's mother? Had she and Robin somehow broken the curse she had placed on herself? If so, then how did Zelena steal her baby from her?

"Are you thinking about what Emma said?" he asked.

She nodded. "Are you?"

"Yes," he admitted with a sigh. "I am still upset that she ran the test without our permission but..."

"You're wondering if what Emma said might be true."

He sighed again. "I studied Hazel when I fed her tonight, looking for any traces of you."

"Did you find any?"

"I found some, besides your hair." He toyed with one of her dark locks. "Mary Margaret is right. Hazel does have your smile and nose."

"But I am her aunt. While Zelena and I aren't full sisters, as Emma pointed out, we share a mother. A mother who I have often heard I look like."

Robin pulled her close. "Do you think, though, that it's possible? That Hazel is ours, truly, and Zelena stole her?"

"I don't know. I've gone over it time and time again. There doesn't seem to be much time since we unfroze fake Marian and when she had to leave town. Not enough for her to steal an unborn baby."

"She gave me a day to think things over, to make my choice," Robin said. "A whole twenty-four hours. Which included a night I didn't spend with her. In fact, Marian...Zelena...insisted on getting a room at Granny's."

Regina frowned. "So there are a lot of hours we won't be able to account for Zelena's whereabouts."

"A lot of hours for her to do something underhanded," Robin said. "Like stealing our child."

She groaned, leaning against him. "Are we really entertaining Emma's ridiculous notion?"
"It appears so." He kissed her head. "It couldn't hurt to hear whatever Belle discovers, right?"

"It might," Regina whispered.

She could feel Robin's frown. "How so?"

Regina shook her head. "This is something good. Good things generally don't last in my life."

"I've lasted. Roland's lasted. Henry's lasted. Hell, even Snow's lasted." He tilted her head up so her eyes met his. "Once upon a time, good things didn't last in your life. But now the good things are fighting to stay in your life. So start believing in us a bit more, yeah?"

Letting out a soft chuckled, she pulled his head down so their lips met. "I believe in all of you."

"Then it's time to believe in yourself, love." He nuzzled her hair. "It's time to believe that miracles can happen to you."

There ended up being quite a few spells that could transfer a baby from one womb to another, any one of which Zelena could've used. "This is actually very alarming," Mary Margaret said, looking over Belle's research. "Who knew people were stealing babies from wombs?"

"It seems it was commonly used to blackmail wealthy men," Belle said. "They would take the child of someone else and show up pregnant, forcing the men to pay or they would tell their wives."

"And now Zelena may have used one to steal Regina's baby in order to hurt her," Emma interjected. Robin frowned. "But which one, if any, did she use?"

David shrugged. "Should we ask her?"

"Like Zelena is just going to tell the truth now?" Regina asked, shooting him a look. "She's not going to give up Hazel when she can still use her to hurt me. If she ever did tell the truth, it'll be at a time that will hurt me the most."

Robin took her hand as Mary Margaret held up the DNA test. "But can she continue to deny it in the face of such proof?"

"Like a piece of paper is going to matter with my sister. We saw her give birth. That's all she is going to hold on to."

Squeezing her hand, Robin intervened. "It's almost Christmas. Why don't we get through the holidays and figure out what to do next after the New Year?"

Everyone nodded as Regina leaned against him, watching their little girl sleep in her carrier.

Regina tried to focus on everything Christmas. She made a gingerbread house with Roland, baked about a pound of cookies for Henry's class, and introduced Robin to coquito. She bought them Christmas outfits to wear—red sweaters, white shirts and gray slacks for her boys and red dresses for her and Hazel—and they took their first official Hood-Mills family photo in front of the Christmas tree. Robin held Hazel in the crook of one arm while he wrapped the other around Regina's waist. She placed her hand on Henry's back as he stood on her other side while Roland stood between Robin and Regina. The tree twinkled in the background as the camera's flash went off. Regina
checked the shot and beamed as she declared it "picture perfect."

On Christmas Eve, they joined everyone at Granny's for "Cookies, Carols and Cheer." Regina brought a tray of her gingersnaps as well as some of her coquito for the Cookies and Cheers. Roland eagerly joined the other children for the "Carols" part, singing along to several Christmas songs as the adults stood around with silly smiles on their faces. When the children then were led to their own table to decorate cookies, the adults broke off into small groups as they enjoyed the cheer. Regina and Robin stood with the Charmings, Hook and Belle as Robin rocked Hazel. She was content to watch the activity going on around her.

A sticky little hand tugged at Regina's skirt and she looked down to find Roland beaming up at her. "Come see my cookie, Gina," he said.

"I'd love to," she said, letting him lead her back to the table. She oohed and ahhed over the Santa with a very thick frosting beard and about three eyes. "It looks too good to eat."

Roland giggled as a hush fell over the diner. He looked around her before burying his head in her skirts. She knew without looking herself that Zelena had just entered the establishment.

"Don't stop the party on my account," her voice said, sounding happy at the thought she was ruining the party. "I'm here for some holiday revelry as well."

Everyone looked to Regina for guidance. She could turn, say Zelena was not welcomed and watch as the others rallied to toss her sister back out onto the street. It touched her how far she had come with the people of Storybrooke and she finally felt like their leader.

But it was Christmas--time for peace and goodwill. Regina could offer that to Zelena for now. Even if she didn't deserve any of that.

"Come in," she said. "But you have to be on your best behavior or I won't stop the mob."

"Of course," Zelena replied, smile tight. She approached Robin and held out her arms. "I'd like to hold my daughter."

Robin tightened his hold on Hazel but handed the baby over to Zelena. This was not the time and place to start slinging accusations. So Regina had to watch her sister bounce the little girl, her usual sick feeling magnified tenfold with the growing proof Hazel was hers rather than Zelena's.

Sending Roland back to decorate another cookie, Regina made her way to Robin's side. She grabbed onto the back of his sweater and he rubbed her back, looking as sick over this as she felt. They supported each other as Zelena rocked the girl.

"Hello, my little munchkin," Zelena cooed. "Did you miss Mommy?"

Hazel turned her head, eyes locking onto Regina. She waved her arm toward the dark-haired woman, wriggling in Zelena's grasp.

"Don't you want to be with Mommy?" Zelena asked, growing frustrated. "Why do you want to leave me?"

Her tone upset Hazel, who cried and kicked her feet harder. Regina swooped in and took her from Zelena, rocking her. Hazel calmed down with seconds until she was only sniffling and hiccupping.

"You've turned her against me!" Zelena lunged at Regina but Robin held her back.
"We've done nothing," he insisting, struggling with the witch. "I think you should leave."

Zelena stopped her fighting. "Not yet. I have a present for her and I want to watch her open it."

"She's a baby, Zelena," Regina replied with a sigh. "She won't be able to open it anyway. Leave the present with us and we'll open it in the morning."

"I will not be kept from my daughter!" Zelena yelled.

Hazel started to cry hard again and Regina turned, rocking and soothing the girl. Behind her, she heard David and Hook wrestle Zelena out of the diner as Robin returned to Regina's side with Hazel's favorite apple pacifier. The girl started to suck and her whimpers died down, tears still filling her blue eyes. Regina kissed her forehead. "It's okay, sweet princess. She's gone."

"I think she knows," Mary Margaret said, coming up next to the couple. 

Regina frowned. "You think Zelena knows we know about her deception?"

"No. I was talking about Hazel. I think she knows you're her mother."

Robin wrapped his arm around Regina. "She's always been Hazel's mother. She feeds her, changes her, bathes her, soothes her, sings to her. The only thing finding out the truth of Hazel's parentage could change is Zelena's involvement in her life."

Touched, Regina leaned against him as Hazel's eyes closed. She fell asleep, rolling closer to Regina as a little fist closed on her shirt. Robin and Mary Margaret were both right--she was Hazel's mother, no matter what any test said, and Hazel knew that.

And that's all that mattered.

Christmas morning came fast. Robin took Hazel's midnight feeding so Regina felt it was only right for her to get up when the little girl started to whimper at almost seven in the morning. She wrapped herself in her robe, covering up the Christmas themed pajamas she had worn to bed. Her pajama pants were red with little reindeer on them and Hazel seemed fascinated by the reindeer on her pajama shirt, which peeked out through her robe. Hazel reached out a little hand, trying to grab Rudolph's red nose as Regina turned on the tree. She chuckled and handed the girl a plush reindeer. "There, you can play with this reindeer," she told her daughter.

Hazel began gumming the reindeer's antler as Regina heard little feet bounding down the stairs. Roland darted into the room, stopping when he saw the pile of presents under the present. His eyes widened as he turned to Regina. "Is one of those for me?" he asked.

"There's more than one," Regina assured him. "But we have to wait for everyone else to wake up, okay?"

Roland nodded before following Regina to the couch. He climbed up and sat next to her, watching Hazel. "Will she remember this Christmas?"

"Probably not," Regina replied. "But we will. And there will always be pictures."

"I guess." Roland tickled his sister's stomach and she laughed, kicking at him playfully.

She heard the snap of a camera and looked up to find Robin taking a picture with his phone. He
smiled at her. "Sorry, I couldn't resist."

"Papa! It's Christmas!" Roland stood up on the couch, arms outstretched toward Robin.

He picked up his son, chuckling. "Yes, it is, my boy. And I see Santa came last night."

Roland nodded. "Regina says we have to wait for everyone to wake up to open their presents."

"She's right," Robin agreed. "It's only fair."

"Well, there's nothing saying we can't wake anyone up. After all, the rest of us are up and if we leave Henry to his own devices, he'll sleep Christmas away," Regina said.

Not needing to be told twice, Roland wriggled out of his father's grasp and ran upstairs once his socked feet hit the floor. Robin leaned down to first kiss Hazel and then Regina. "Merry Christmas, my lovely ladies."

"Merry Christmas, Robin," she replied softly. She handed Hazel to him and he cuddled with his daughter, who cooed happily at him.

Roland returned to the living room, dragging a bleary-eyed Henry behind him. "Can we open the presents now?" he asked.

"Are you up for it, Henry?" Robin teased the older boy, who let out a groan in response.

Chuckling, Regina stood and hugged her oldest. "Merry Christmas, Henry."

"Merry Christmas, Mom," he whispered back. Pulling away, he sat crossed-legged by the tree as he turned to Roland. "So, which present do you want to open first?"

Soon the living room was covered in torn pieces of brightly colored paper and gifts strewn about the floor. Roland immediately opened his new bow and arrow, wanting to use it right then. Robin and Regina managed to convince him to wait and open up more of his presents. He was soon distracted by his new video games from Henry and the older boy promised to teach him how to play them. Regina was proud of him, knowing he would rather curl up on the couch with his new comic books.

Robin put on the watch Regina got him, smiling. "Thank you, love."

"You're welcome," she said. "Perhaps now you'll be on time."

He gave her a look before kissing her. Robin handed her a square package. "Your turn, my dear."

She pulled off the wrapping paper to reveal a black velvet box. When she opened it, a gold apple with an arrow through it rested inside. She gasped and looked at Robin. "This is beautiful but how did you...?"

"I've been doing some odd jobs at the jewelers for it," he replied, nuzzling her. "It's much better than the one you got in Camelot, if you ask me."

"Oh, it definitely is." She took out the necklace and handed it to him, turning so he could put it on her.

Once the necklace was on, he handed her a thin package. "I think you'll like this present even better."

Raising an eyebrow, she opened her present to find a pen inside a wooden case. "It's lovely, Robin,
but I don't think it quite tops the necklace."

"Well, there's a part two." He handed her a manila envelope.

She opened it and pulled out what appeared to be legal documents. Frowning, she looked up at him. "Robin?"

"Emma helped me find someone to draw these up," he said. "They'll let you legally adopt Roland."

"You...You mean it?"

Robin nodded. "If you want it."

She glanced at Roland, who was busy playing with his toy car and had no clue what was going on beside him. But Henry did and when she met his eyes, he gave a slight nod to her. Regina took a deep breath, removed the pen and signed the papers. "Merry Christmas," she said.

"Merry Christmas," he echoed again, kissing her.

Robin and Regina hosted Christmas dinner. There had been a bit of a fight between Mary Margaret and Regina over it but in the end, everyone had agreed that there was just more room at the mansion. So once the presents were opened and breakfast eaten, Regina set her boys to cleaning the house while she started the turkey and Hazel napped.

As she slid the bird into her oven, Robin wandered in holding a present wrapped in bright green paper. "Zelena's gift to Hazel," he said. "What do you want to do with it?"

"Burn it," she replied before sighing. "But I guess we should open it. See what she got her."

Robin nodded as he tore open the paper to reveal a black box. He lifted the lid to reveal a tiny broomstick inside. Nothing too sinister but deemed inappropriate for Hazel's age. Robin closed the box and went to go put it away, offering to wrangle up the boys so they could get ready.

Henry carried down Hazel, who was dressed in her red Christmas dress again. Robin had brushed her black curls and held them back with the matching headband. Her apple pacifier was in her mouth and her blue eyes focused on Henry's tie, fascinated by it. Regina chuckled as she opened the door to greet their guests arrived for dinner.

They all sat down at Regina's dining room table, Hazel now strapped into the carrier resting on a chair between her and Robin. Neal was old enough for a high chair and he banged his hands on the tray as David tried to calm him down. Henry took the seat on the other side of his mother so Emma claimed the next two for her and Hook. Everyone was falling into place as Regina stared at the one thing she'd never expected to have--a large family gathered around for dinner. Yes, they were a ragtag group but they were held together by more than blood. Their bonds had been forged through conflict and cooperation, making them stronger than anything else.

She raised her glass and the others followed suit. "To family," she said.

"Family," they echoed, taking sips of their drinks.

Regina sat down and turned her attention to her dinner. Conversations echoed around her but she was content to sit back and let them wash over her. Robin leaned past a now sleeping Hazel and took her hand. "Are you happy, milady?"
"Very much so," she replied, squeezing his hand. "Maybe one day I'll get used to it."

After dinner, they exchanged presents. Most went to the children. Hazel and Neal were happy just tossing about wrapping paper as the adults gave each other small presents. Regina set aside her new gloves from the Charmings to go get dessert ready.

"Regina, wait." Emma followed her into the kitchen, holding a wrapped present. "I wanted to give you mine in private."

"You did? Why?" Regina took the package but made no move to open it.

Emma sighed. "You'll understand when you open it."

Curious, Regina tore open the wrapping and opened the box. A dreamcatcher sat inside and she frowned. "Emma, what did you do?"

"I went to Zelena and got the memory of how she got pregnant," Emma replied. "It'll answer your questions."

"But this is dark magic, Emma."

She nodded. "That's why I wanted you to open it in private. I didn't want to concern my parents. You know they'd take it the wrong way."

"And I won't?"

"I knew you'd understand it better," Emma explained. "That sometimes dark magic can be used for good."

Regina sighed. "I do. I hope this was worth it."

"You can let me know after you watch it. Merry Christmas, Regina."

"Merry Christmas, Emma," she replied, smiling at her.

Henry went home with the Charmings that night so Robin and Regina just had to tuck in Roland and Hazel. Once that was done, they curled up together as Regina showed him the dreamcatcher Emma gave her. He kissed her forehead. "Do you want to watch it?"

"I don't know," Regina replied. "What if we don't like what we see?"

"It involves Zelena, love. That's pretty much a guarantee."

She sighed, getting comfortable in his arms before raising the dreamcatcher. As it glowed gold, she said: "Here goes nothing..."

Regina puttered around her kitchen, trying to keep her mind off the fact that Robin was making a big decision that night. Marian had given him an ultimatum: her or Regina. He had to choose between love and his honor code. She didn’t know which would be victorious in the end.
Knocking interrupted her musing and she hurried to the door, wondering what could've happened now. She opened it and said: "Please don't tell me a monster is raging through town."

"No, it's nothing of the sort." Marian stood on her stoop, holding a container. "I wanted to talk with you. May I come in?"

Regina stood aside, letting the woman in. Closing the door, she turned to Marian. "Can I take your cloak?"

"No, I'm good."

"I'm a bit confused. Why are you here?" Regina asked.

Marian smiled. "Robin's off pondering his decision but I think we both know he's going to choose you. And I've accepted that. So, I thought I'd come and bring you a gift. Something to show that there's no ill will between us and I hope we can at least be civil to each other for Roland's sake."


"I'm good. Thank you. Why don't we try that pastry I bought? The baker assured me it was very good," Marian said.

Regina nodded and pulled out two forks. She opened the box to reveal a piece of key lime pie. "Guests first," she offered, pushing it toward Marian.

"Oh no. I bought it for you. It's only right that you should have the first bite." Marian pushed it back toward her.

Nodding, Regina scooped up a bit with her fork and took a bite. As soon as she swallowed, her eyes rolled to the back of her head and she passed out on the floor. Marian came around the island, twisting the necklace she wore to become Zelena. The redhead smirked as she took in her unconscious sister. "Oh, Regina. One would think you of all people would be warier of eating food you didn't make."

Zelena crouched down, looking over Regina. "I guess this is the part where I tell you my diabolical plan. Especially since I have time before the second part of my magical pie kicks in.

"I don't know how Rumpelstiltskin covered it up, but he tried to kill me. But you didn't think to crush my necklace. Stupid move on your part but a great one for me. My spirit was able to get my magic to open my portal but only back to the point it had been when you had closed it. Which wasn't far enough back to erase your existence.

"I haunted the woods and tried to figure out my next move when I spotted the Savior and her one-handed pirate. They were arguing about taking this woman back with them and I thought--what luck! I could use her to regain my body and take on her form to get back to Storybrooke. Once here, I could find a new way to destroy your life I figured. And the chance just dropped itself in my lap when your forest-dwelling boyfriend stood, calling me Marian. What better way to destroy your happiness than to take your soulmate? Putting up with him and his brat for a little bit seemed like a small price to pay until you let your own destructive habits destroy everything.

"Of course, I didn't count on getting frozen, on you really committing to this hero thing, and on Robin's love for you being stronger than I ever thought. Even strong enough to undo your fertility potion." Zelena placed a hand on Regina's abdomen and smiled. "Almost ready."
She sat back, her smile taking on a crazy quality. "You probably don't know. Actually, judging by the alcohol I found you guzzling this afternoon, you definitely don't know. I hope that doesn't affect the baby. Tsk, tsk, Regina. Well, you can have all the alcohol you want soon enough. Because I'm going to take your baby...now."

Regina's body began to glow a soft gold color and Zelena held her open palm over her abdomen again. She closed her blue eyes, concentrating as a tiny bubble rose up from inside Regina. The bubble floated into Zelena as she opened her eyes. "There we go. Now I'm pregnant and you can go on as many benders as you want.

"Here's my grand plan. Robin is going to choose you, that's quite obvious. So I'm going to fake that the ice has returned. You and Robin won't let poor, defenseless Marian go over the town line by herself. So your new little family? Say goodbye to them. I'm taking Robin and Roland with me. You'll probably be able to figure out a way to get them back, but by the time you do, Robin will know I'm pregnant. He won't leave his child so I'll get to watch your face as he chooses me and breaks your heart. And then I can raise your child to hate you. That will be worth the wait, for that reveal right before this little tyke does you in."

Zelena stood up and waved her hand over Regina, sending her to bed. She waved her hand again and the pie disappeared, leaving no evidence of her visit. With a twist of the necklace, she became Marian again and he let herself out of the house.

Regina was shaking by the time the memory finished. "She...She stole my baby. She stole Hazel from me."

"I know." He kissed the side of her head. "I saw it too."

"Hazel's ours. We made her in the vault and then she...Oh god." Regina bolted from the bed and darted into their bathroom. Her knees hit the tiled floor as she retched into the toilet.

Robin knelt next to her, rubbing her back. When she finished, he handed her a wet facecloth and regarded her with concerned but determined eyes. "So, what do you want to do now?"

"I want to kill my sister."

"Okay."

Surprised, Regina turned to Robin with wide-eyes. He was usually the one to talk her down from her violent tendencies. "You mean it?"

"I do. She stole our baby just to hurt you. Hazel was the only thing keeping us from hurting her. Now that she's no longer her mother...We can be rid of her," he said.

He was right, Regina realized. They had agreed that Hazel should know her mother out of the hope that motherhood would change Zelena the way it had changed Regina. The revelation that Zelena wasn't even Hazel's real mother threw that out the window. They could finally rid themselves of Zelena. All it would take was a flick of the wrist--Regina could snap her neck or Robin could pierce her heart with his arrow. Either would work.

And yet...

"No. Heroes don't kill for vengeance," she said, taking Robin's hand. "We'll figure out something else."
Robin smiled, kissing her. "I trust you, love. Now let's go to bed."

Regina sat at her desk in the mayor's office, Robin standing behind her, as Zelena entered. She smiled as her sister approached. "Thank you for coming, Zelena."

"Well, I must say I was quite intrigued to get your message, sister. What do you wish to discuss?" Zelena asked.

"Hazel," Regina replied, "and our agreement."

Zelena's smile grew. "Have I been a good enough girl? Will you let me spend more time with my daughter?"

Robin glanced down at Regina before looking back to her sister with a smirk. "We've decided that you will no longer be able to see Hazel, starting immediately."

"What?" Zelena strode closer to the desk, her face almost as red as her hair as fire burned in her blue eyes. "You can't do that. I'm her mother."

"Except you're not," Regina replied. "I am."

Zelena was breathing heavier now. "Is this that 'You're the one raising her so you're her real mother' bullshit again? I'd be doing that but YOU WON'T LET ME."

Robin leaned forward, growing just as red as she. "With good reason."

"Robin," Regina warned, motioning for him to stand back. "Don't let her get to you."

"You heard her, Robbie. Besides, I have a feeling this is between me and my sister." Zelena leveled Regina with a hard glance. "This reeks of your doing."

Regina stood to meet her sister's eyes, smiling. "This is all your doing, Zelena. It's time to own up to your crimes."

"Which crimes are we talking about now? There are just so many..."

"The crimes against me," Regina replied, tossing down the manila envelope containing the DNA results. "This is a paternity test Emma ran on Hazel."

Zelena rolled her eyes. "As much as it pains you to think that your soulmate moved on so quickly, he is Hazel's father."

"Yes, he is. The test proves that. But Robin wasn't the only one tested. Emma had your DNA compared to Hazel's. And guess what it discovered? That you're not a match to be her mother. According to the results, you're at best a distant relative." Regina pushed the envelope closer to Zelena.

The witch ignored it. "You're going to believe some test that can be faked? Robin saw me give birth. Didn't you?"

"I did," he confirmed.

"See? I carried her and I gave birth to her. I'm her mother." Zelena leaned closer to Regina. "So you will not deny me the chance to see her."
"You carried her. And you did give birth to her. But here's the thing...You didn't conceive her."

Zelena laughed. "Because a piece of paper told you so?"

"No." Regina held up the dreamcatcher. "Because this did."

She watched as the color drained from Zelena's face and her sister recoiled as if burned. "Where did you get that?"

"It was a Christmas gift. From Emma."

"Looks like she still has some Dark One in her." Zelena's sass though lacked its usual confidence and Regina saw beads of sweat form at her hairline.

Regina's smile grew more triumphant. "Seem nervous, sis. Afraid of the memory inside?"

"Of course not," Zelena replied. "You might be disappointed though. Are you sure you can stomach watching Forest Boy over there making love to me?"

Robin frowned. "It wasn't making love. It wasn't much of anything."

Regina cleared her throat. "Do you think we would've called you in here, making grand pronouncements if we hadn't already watched the memory? If we hadn't watched you knock me out and steal my growing embryo, the child Robin and I created in the vault?"

"Of course. You're getting everything. Again," Zelena spat. "Just let me have this one thing."

Robin frowned. "Hazel is not a 'thing,' Zelena. She's a baby girl. Our baby girl--my daughter with Regina. And you stole her, made me think I fathered a child with you. I will have to live the rest of my life with knowing I slept with you--not by choice--but I no longer have to share my darling princess with you."

Zelena smirked. "Well, you'll always have the memory of our night together."

"Not really," he admitted, frowning. "It's always been a bit of a blur."

"Anyway, it's time to make sure you can't hurt anyone I care about again. Make sure you can't get anywhere near any of my children," Regina said.

Her sister crossed her arms. "How? You going to lock me up again?"

"No. I was thinking of something more permanent." She pulled out the wand the Apprentice gave them so long ago.

Zelena paled but remained defiant. "You can work that, remember? You weren't strong enough."

"I wasn't dark enough," Regina clarified. "But last night, after watching this memory, I wanted to kill you. I may be more hero than villain now, but I am still both. If I harness what powers my darkness, in this case my absolute hatred of you, I believe..."

She held up the wand, which now glowed with her purple magic. "Well, look at that."

"I'll see you at home then?" Robin asked her, eyes shining with pride and love. He kissed her before leaving, glaring at Zelena as he passed.

Zelena stared at her sister and Regina noticed the fear behind them. "What now?"
"Well, we're going to go someplace I don't mind a twister damaging." She flicked her wrist, bringing them to Ingrid's abandoned ice cream truck. "Look. You can even have a snack on your way back to Oz."

Straightening her shoulders, Zelena glared at her sister. "Well, what are you waiting for? Do it!"

Regina shook her head. "Not yet. You've nothing, Zelena. We know the truth about Hazel and you're about to go back to Oz. So I want you to tell me the truth. Did you really sleep with Robin?"

"Fine," Zelena snapped. "No, I didn't. Happy?"

"Only if you're telling me the truth."

"I am. Your precious outlaw never cheated on you. Even disguised as the wife he was trying to start over with, I couldn't get him to do that. Not in the short amount of time I had before I couldn't hide my pregnancy symptoms. I had sent Walsh to New York with some potions. I retrieved one that knocked Robin out and made it easy to plant false memories in his mind. So he really wasn't much in bed with me."

Regina's heart skipped a beat and warm relief spread through her. "Thank you for that, Zelena. Enjoy Oz."

She raised the wand and gave it a few waves before flicking it. The ground began to shake and Zelena grasped onto the driver's seat. Regina smiled. "Goodbye. Sis."

With a flick of her wrist, Regina transported herself to a safe spot. She watched the green twister cut through a swath of trees before picking up the ice cream truck. It rose up into the sky, disappearing with a crack.

Zelena was finally gone.

Regina returned home to find Robin waiting for her, pacing the foyer with Hazel in his arms. He stopped when he saw her, eyes wide. "Well?"

"She's gone," Regina confirmed. "Out of our lives for good."

He breathed out in relief, tension leaving his body. "Thank the gods."

She rushed forward, letting him engulf her in a one-armed hug. Hazel was caught between them, sandwiched by her parents as she slept on. As Robin rocked her, Regina told him of Zelena's last confession.

"I knew it," he whispered. "Somewhere, deep down, I always knew I didn't betray you like that. That I knew something was off and didn't want to rush things."

"Hush. It's over now. It's all over." She stroked his cheek.

Robin kissed her. "I love you. And our family."

"I love you too." She ran a hand over Hazel's back. "Can I...Can I hold her?"

"Of course. You're her mother." Robin handed her the baby girl, who wriggled a bit before getting comfortable against her shoulder.
Regina smiled. "I am, aren't I?"

"Shall we go throw out everything Zelena ever gave Hazel?" Robin suggested.

"I have a better idea. Let's bring it into the backyard and I can burn it." She felt giddy, like a young girl. "I'll enjoy watching it all go up in flames."

Robin laughed. "Let's make it a party. I'll go get the boys and we can roast marshmallows over it."

"Then we can have some hot chocolate and have a family movie night." She lifted Hazel up and kissed the baby's cheek. "A perfect celebration of everything."

He kissed her again before smiling. "I was just wondering...If we were able to make Hazel, does that mean we could have more children?"

"I don't know. But that would be a very good theory to test out. Once Hazel's older," Regina replied.

Laughing, Robin nodded before calling for their sons. They stood in the snow, watching the fire burn away all reminders of Zelena as Henry helped Roland roast a marshmallow over the open flame. Robin wrapped his arm around Regina and kissed her cheek.

"Happy New Year, Love."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I wrote this for the OUAT Secret Santa gift exchange on tumblr. While talking with my giftee, I asked if she was okay with including Baby Hood and she was though she wouldn't mind a fic where the little girl was an Outlaw Queen baby. So this was born! It was fun coming up with a plausible way for Zelena to steal Regina's unborn child, which would probably only work in Once. I hope everyone had a great holiday season! Happy 2016! --Mac
Everyone in Storybrooke was suddenly very, very busy.

It had started that morning when Regina had woken up to find Robin's side of the bed empty. She padded down to the kitchen, finding a coffee cup in her Keurig and her mug out, meaning Robin had been there. A note stuck to the fridge with a magnet said he had things to do with the Merry Men and he was taking Roland with him while dropping Nellie off at Ashley’s day care. She would see them later for dinner, according to his note.

She let out a little groan, having hoped to have a nice quiet lunch with him that afternoon. Biting her lip, she picked up her phone and called Emma. It went to voicemail and Regina rolled her eyes. "Hey, Emma, it's me...Regina. I was just wondering if you wanted to maybe have some lunch today? Just...you know...to catch up or talk about Henry or town...stuff. Let me know. Bye."

Emma got back to her a few hours later, though by text. Sorry. Busy with a case. Maybe another day?

What case could Emma possibly be working on in Storybrooke that she didn’t know about? Regina sighed though and typed back that that would be okay. Next she dialed Mary Margaret's number. It rang a few times before the brunette answered with a breathless "Hello?"

"Is everything okay?" Regina asked, concerned.

"Yes, yes," Mary Margaret assured her. "I decided today was the day I finally moved my dresser and forgot how heavy it was. That's all."

"Okay...Anyway, can you take a break from moving furniture? I thought we could grab some lunch or do some shopping?"

"Oh, Regina, I would love to but I'm in the middle of spring cleaning."

Regina raised an eyebrow. "It's February, Mary Margaret. That's still winter last I checked."

"I know. But given this is Storybrooke, I've learned spring cleaning is whenever I get the chance."

"Good point." Regina sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. "So, a raincheck, then?"

"I'm afraid so." Mary Margaret sounded contrite.
Regina thanked her before hanging up again. The one day she didn't want to be left alone, her family was off being busy. Maybe she could swing by and sign Henry out of school for a mother-son lunch and some ice cream. But that thought was quickly struck down—Henry had been worrying about a big math test all week and she was pretty sure it was today.

Picking up her office phone, Regina dialed the library number and waited for Belle's familiar accent to come over the speaker. "Belle, I was wondering if you had time to finally go over the budget?" she asked.

"Oh, Regina, I can't. I'm not feeling well and I'm just about to leave for the doctor's. Maybe tomorrow?" Belle asked.

"Sure. I'll have my assistant set something with you. Give her a call when you're done with the doctor's. Though if you need to rest, rest. Feel better."

She disconnected the call with Belle and slumped over in her chair. Who else was there for her to call that she would tolerate? Maleficent was off teaching Lily how to be a scary dragon bitch and she certainly wasn't going to tolerate any of the dwarfs. That did leave Dr. Hopper, but he would easily slip into therapist mode and she wasn't sure she could handle that.

Regina stood, grabbing her coat and purse. She stormed past her assistant, barking: "I'm going out for lunch."

Granny's was closed.

Granny's was never closed.

Regina stood outside the darkened diner, staring at the red and white "We're closed" sign with an incredulous look. In fact, she was pretty sure her mouth was hanging open in a way Mother would've scolded her for. But Storybrooke had been around for thirty years and except for their little trip to Camelot, Granny's had always open. She used to drive around with Henry when he was teething, ending up here for a cup of coffee to get her through the long and sleepless nights.

Closing her mouth, her eyes narrowed. Something was wrong. And she was going to get to the bottom of it.

Even if it took her all day.

At least she would have something to do.

She went around to the bed and breakfast check in, surprised to see Aurora working there. The princess looked up and shrank back a bit. "Is something wrong?"

"Is Granny in?" Regina asked.

Aurora shook her head. "Is there anything I can help you with?"

"Do you know why the diner is closed?"

"Granny mentioned something about fum...fumi..." Aurora frowned, struggling with the word.

Regina took pity on her. "Fumigation?"

"Yes! What is that?" Aurora asked, confused.
"It's just to make sure bugs don't invest the place. It has to be done every so often." Regina sighed, the mystery solved quickly and rather disappointingly. "So Granny is out?"

Aurora nodded, pulling out a pad and pencil. "Do you want to leave her a message?"

"No, thank you anyway," Regina said, stepping toward the door. "Have a good day."

Her head was spinning.

Regina sat down on the bench by the lake in the park, which was iced over. She knew it wasn't thick enough to support a skater and wondered if she could use her magic to make it so. Skating would at least give her something to do, something to keep her mind off one important fact:

No one had any time to spend with her on her birthday.

In some ways, it was her own fault. She never really marked the day in any special way. The first time she had celebrated since childhood was when Henry was five and it dawned on him that while he had a birthday, his mother didn't. So he asked her and asked her and asked her until she broke down and told him it was February 1st. He then made her burnt toast, soggy cereal and orange juice and gave her breakfast in bed for her birthday. Regina hugged him and shared it with him. That night they made a cake together and Henry sang her happy birthday.

After that, she and Henry celebrated her birthday low-key until he was ten and the whole storybook mess came along. Since then, there had been no time to celebrate. In fact, it now seemed a bit selfish to expect them to want to celebrate her birthday. So she would go home, make dinner, spend time with her family and then go to bed with Robin like it was another ordinary day.

She was used to ignoring the pain.

Regina spent the rest of the afternoon working and trying to numb the pain with endless paperwork. She ignored the passing hours or how dark it got outside her window, waiting for the day to be over.

Her assistant knocked and when she looked up, Regina found the woman standing there with a red dress and heels in hand. Susan looked sheepish. "I'm sorry to disturb you, but you have the fundraiser for the hospital tonight."

"The what?" She frowned. Would she really agree to attend a fundraiser on her birthday? "I don't recall it."

"I know. You've been really busy. But I got your dress and your shoes. You can change in here," Susan said, handing her the items. "The fundraiser is at Town Hall."

Regina sighed. "Is it too late to beg off it?"

"I'm afraid so." She did look apologetic.

"Thought so," Regina took the dress from her. "Thank you. You can go home, I can lock up when I leave."

Susan nodded. "Thank you, Madame Mayor. Enjoy the fundraiser."

"I doubt it," Regina muttered, unzipping her dress.
"Oh, and Madame Mayor?" When Regina looked up, Susan smiled. "Happy birthday."

Regina gave her a soft smile. "Thank you. I'll see you tomorrow."

Regina parked her car and hurried into town hall. The night had turned colder and she believed there was a chance for snow hanging in the air. So she was going to pop in, stay long enough to make an impression and then hurry home.

Her heels echoed against the tile floor and she frowned. According to Susan, the fundraiser should've already started. So why didn't she hear music or the sound of other people?

She opened the doors to a darkened room. Before she could question it further, the lights turned on and several voices shouted: "Surprise!"

Regina blinked her eyes to both adjust to the change in lighting and to make sure she wasn't seeing things. Most of Storybrooke filled the room, which was set up for a party. A buffet dinner sat over sternos against one wall and drinks were lined up on one against the other. Streamers hung from the ceiling, surrounding one large banner: Happy Birthday!

"What...What's going on?" she asked.

"A party," Robin said, approaching her. He was dressed in gray slacks and a dark green sweater, a white buttoned-down shirt peeking out over the sweater's collar. A red rose was between his fingers and he held it out to her. "To celebrate your birthday."

Henry popped up behind him, smiling. "I know we usually do something small but when we started talking about your birthday, more and more people wanted to help celebrate it. So we needed a big place to hold everybody."

"REGINA!" Roland crashed into her, arms wrapped around her middle.

She cupped the back of his head and gazed around, amazed. "You...You all did this for me?"

"Of course, Mom," Henry replied. "We love you."

"Come on. You hafta see your cake," Roland told her, tugging her toward a table near the food.

She laughed, following him to where a long sheet cake sat. It was covered in a white frosting and the words "Happy Birthday, Regina!" were written in red icing. There was also an apple and a crown decorated on it.

"It's red velvet," Henry told her. "Your favorite."

Tears pricked Regina's eyes as Robin rested a hand against her back. She looked up to meet his blue eyes. "You've all been doing this all day?"

"Yeah, it was difficult for all of us to try and avoid you," Emma replied, stepping from the crowd. "I thought my mother was going to cry when she hung up with you."

Mary Margaret emerged from the crowd. "I was not! I mean, I felt bad for lying to Regina and blowing her off on her birthday but I wasn't going to cry."

"It's okay," Regina replied, hugging her. "I forgive all of you for lying to me and ignoring me on my birthday."
"She's going to kill us all in our sleep," David deadpanned, coming to stand next to his daughter. He held a cup of punch in each hand.

Regina glared at him. "Of course I am. Starting with you."

The other party guests held their breath until the small group of heroes started to laugh. Robin turned to everyone with a big smile. "Well, the birthday girl is here. Let the party begin!"

Regina and Robin returned to their house, leaning against the door. She turned to him. "Are you okay with Nellie staying with the Charmings?"

"Yes," he replied. "I know she'll be safe and well cared for with them."

"I know that too. But this is our first night apart from her since returning from the Underworld."

He nodded. "I know. Are you okay with it?"

"I miss her," Regina admitted. "I know I'm not her mother..."

Robin pressed his finger to her lips. "Hush. You are her mother. Everyone knows that. Except you, it seems."

Her shoulders sagged. "It's just all so..."

"Unconventional?" Robin supplied.

"That's one word for it," she sighed. "I just worry about everything. That Nellie will never see me as her mother, that I'll screw up because of who her mother really is or because of how my mother was."

Robin took her face in his hands, making sure she made eye contact with him and kept it. "You are not your mother. You are capable of more love than she could ever dream to possess. And you love Nellie, no matter what. I can see it in the way you hold her, the way you talk to her, and just the way you look at her. I know your fears have a valid basis and whenever you feel them creeping up on you, come to me. I'll kiss them away."

"You are too good to me." She leaned in, kissing him.

He deepened the kiss, nibbling at her lower lip until she gave him entrance. She moaned as his tongue swept her mouth, her own meeting it. One of his hands tangled in her dark locks while the other toyed with the zipper on her dress.

Breaking the kiss, he nipped at her ear. "Are you ready for your birthday present?"

"If it's what I think it is, then yes." She kissed his neck, biting and sucking to mark him.

Robin scooped her into his arms, holding her close. He nuzzled her hair as he climbed the stairs. "Ever been carried to bed before, milady?"


He stopped briefly. "How many injuries have you gotten over the years?"

"More than I want to go into now." She nipped his ear. "Don't ruin the mood."
"Sorry, love. I just worry about you."

Robin entered their bedroom and laid her down on the bed. He kissed her before straightening up. "Wait, there's just a few more things I want to get."

"What?" Regina sat up, confused. "What else could you need?"

He disappeared into the bathroom, confusing her even more. "Robin?" she called out.

"One moment, love." He emerged wearing only a pair of red satin boxers, carrying a bottle of champagne and two flutes in his hands. "I had this chilling in ice in the sink."

"You are going all out."

"You're worth it." He knelt on the bed and handed her one of the flutes. Robin poured them both some champagne and placed the bottle on their nightstand. "To another glorious year with you."

Regina smiled, clinking her glass with his. After taking a few sips, she said: "While I love all this, you were about to ravage me. Let's go back to that."

"You're the birthday girl," he replied with a chuckle. He took her flute and set the glasses down next to the bottle.

His fingers found her zipper again, pulling it down slowly before sliding the red dress off her. Robin trailed kisses over every inch of exposed skin, his fingers caressing her curves. Coming to her bra, he undid the clasps and flung the lacy garment aside as his hot mouth closed on one of her nipples.

She moaned as he sucked, her fingers burying in his golden strands. Her eyes fluttered closed and she enjoyed the jolts running down her body to her core, her panties growing wetter with each one. "More," she breathed.

Robin released that nipple, kissing the valley between her breasts before taking the other nipple in his mouth. He repeated his ministrations and she began to writhe against his body, building friction between her legs as the soaked material of her panties rubbed against her clit.

His fingers ghosted down her stomach, toying with the band of her panties before slipping inside. Her hips bucked as they found her clit, rubbing her already sensitive nub in circles. As he released her nipple, he whispered: "So wet...Gods, Regina."

"You do that to me," she panted.

Robin kissed his way down her body, pulling off her panties. His warm and calloused hands gripped her hips as he began to lap at her, his tongue against her clit.

Her toes curled as every fiber of her body tingled. She loved this part of their lovemaking, though it did sound a bit selfish to her (no matter how often Robin insisted it wasn't). None of her other lovers ever focused on her pleasure like this, worshipped her like Robin did. It heightened the feelings he sent coursing through her.

Breaths coming in pants, lights began to pulse behind her closed eyes. As Robin entered her with one of his fingers, she knew she was close. "Another," she instructed.

When he complied, brushing the right spot inside her, the lights overtook her. She took in a sharp intake of air as her orgasm crashed on her.
Robin pulled her into his arms as she came down from that high. He pressed kisses against her neck and shoulders, murmuring about how beautiful she was and how much he loved her. When she regained her voice, she replied: "I love you so much."

She slid her hand between their bodies until she found his cock, already hard. Yet she still gave it a few lazy pulls, her thumb brushing over his tip. He groaned, burying his face in her hair. "You torture me, milady."

"You can end it," she purred. "You know how."

He chuckled, pushing her down as he nipped at her neck now. Robin rubbed her clit again, inciting the pleasure once more before sliding his cock into her. She gasped as he filled her, her head lolling back against the pillows. Robin thrusted into her, finding a good rhythm.

Regina ran her fingers through his slick hair as she wrapped her legs around his waist, drawing him deeper inside. The only thing she heard was a buzzing noise and her own breathing. It came in faster and out with sounds close to moans. "Robin, so close," she gasped out.

"I know," he replied. Changing his angle slightly, it took only a few more thrusts before she was shouting his name as fireworks exploded around her mind. He followed a few seconds later, spilling into her with a groan of her name.

They laid together, bodies entwined and cooling, as they waited for their hearts and breathing to slow back to normal. Robin peppered her body with kisses and she dropped her own kisses into his hair. "Best birthday ever," she told him. "How are you going to top yourself next year?"

"I think I have an idea." He sat up, reaching into his nightstand for something. When he withdrew his hand, he held a small black velvet box.

Regina sat up, her heart speeding up again as her eyes widened. "Robin...?"

"Regina," he teased before turning serious. "I love you. Our love hasn't had the smoothest course, but no matter what's happened, we've found our way back to each other. We've stood side by side through many difficult situations and I want to support you for the rest of our lives. Will you marry me?"

She smiled, tears streaming down her face. "Yes, of course I will."

He slid the platinum band holding one diamond onto her left ring finger, kissing the back of her hand. "I will do everything in my power to make you happy for the rest of my life."

"And I will do the same," she promised him. "How about we toast our impending nuptials?"

"As my fiancée wishes." Robin slid from bed, pouring them two more glasses of champagne. He held out one out for her and she took it with a smile.

Once he was back in bed, she clinked her glass against his. "To us."

"To us," he agreed, kissing her.

As they sipped their champagne, she curled against him as she found she was looking forward to her next birthday and every one after that.

But first, she had to figure out how to top this in time for Robin's birthday.
An Education in Love (Part I)

Chapter Summary

Based on the following prompt: Both are teachers, however, Person A is a new teacher and the new heartthrob of both other teachers and students. Their rooms are right across the hall, but they get off on the wrong foot and don’t like each other at first. But they develop feelings and eventually start dating in secret. However, when Person B gets hit on, Person A gets jealous and it ends up with a cute make up kiss!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was no secret around Storybrooke Academy that Regina Mills and Robin Locksley barely tolerated each other. Their feud had begun before they even knew they were coworkers when it was said he wasn’t watching where he was going, spilling his coffee all over her dress. School legend said that she had torn into him but he had bit back, making for a very heated scene in Granny’s diner. It only ended when she had to go home and change, arriving at the first faculty meeting late and without coffee. It was then she learned he was replacing old Mrs. Hubbard, who decided to give up the cold Maine winters and move down to Florida with her yappy dog. Which meant that he was teaching fifth grade—the same as Regina.

The two continued to clash as their teaching styles conflicted. He was too free-wheeling and loose for her (“Children need boundaries!”) and she was too uptight and by-the-book for him (“Children need space to find out who they are!”). She hated how he would sit on the desk (“What kind of example are you setting for the children?”) and he would blast her for being too formal (“You need to connect with them.”). He was too friendly with the students (“You’re the adult!”) while she was too distant (“You don’t have to scare them. At least be approachable.”). The list went on and on, kept by Emma Swan and Killian Jones, who both taught eighth grade at the Academy. (They were also running a pool for faculty and staff to place bets on how long it would take before Robin Locksley and Regina Mills were tearing each other’s clothes off and having hot, passionate hate sex).

Robin became one of the most popular teachers at the Academy, much to Regina’s annoyance. Their fellow teachers loved him, thinking him charming and talented. (“He’s just new, Wait until that wears off. Then you’ll see the truth.”) And the parents thought he was the best thing to happen to their children. (“It’s the accent. Makes them think he’s more intelligent and cultured than he is.”) Robin’s students adored him, crowding around him whenever they could and vying for his attention. (“He’s far too friendly with them. They need boundaries.”)

The worst part though was that her son, Henry, absolutely adored the man. Henry was in fifth grade this year and to avoid claims of favoritism, was assigned to Robin Locksley’s class. After the first day, Henry came bounding into her classroom with nothing but praise for him. It hadn’t stopped and by the end of September, Regina was even sicker of Robin’s name. She always wanted Henry to have a father figure since his own was taken before he was out of diapers. Regina and Daniel had been young parents but they had been navigating the world together. It wasn’t fair that the drunk driver had walked away from the accident but Daniel hadn’t. Not when she and Henry needed him.

As Henry grew up, she knew there was a void in his life that no one outside of Daniel could completely fill. But there had to be one man who could at least partially fill it. She had had a few boyfriends after Daniel but only Graham had come close to being worthy enough to being a part of
Henry’s life. But he thought she was too controlling and she wanted more of a commitment, so that flamed out after a few years. While there was Henry’s third grade teacher, David Nolan, and the school counselor, Archie Hopper, she still worried he lacked a true father figure.

Now he seemed to have found one and it was Robin Locksley of all people. Someone up there was laughing at her.

And it was most likely her own late mother.

Every day, Regina was subjected to another reason why Mr. Locksley was the best. It ranged from his accent (“He’s like a professor from Hogwarts!”) to his lessons (“He’s going to let us build our own volcanoes for science. How cool is that?”) to his other skills (“Mr. Locksley is a champion archer. Do you think he would teach me?”). Regina had to just sit there, smiling as her blood continued to boil.

September turned into October and she continued to be annoyed by Robin Locksley’s very presence in her life. Everyone else on staff tried to get her to give him a chance. “So he has a different teaching style than you,” Mary Margaret, the kindergarten teacher, said. “There is no one way to teach.”

“But there is a wrong way,” Regina replied.

“And you think Robin’s methods are wrong?”

Regina shrugged. “We’ll see in a few weeks when Henry’s first report card comes.”

Mary Margaret sighed, looking over at where Robin sat with Emma and Killian. “You two are more alike than you realize,” she told Regina.

“I doubt it,” Regina muttered, ending that conversation. “Now can we talk about more pleasant things or are you going to keep crawling up his ass?”

Mary Margaret sighed and changed the subject.

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Halloween was a weekday and so the school administration allowed the students to wear costumes to school (provided they were appropriate, the middle and high schoolers were told). The teachers were allowed to dress up in some ways as well, though they still had to look professional. Henry convinced his mother to go as a queen. “All you have to do is wear a nice dress and a crown,” he said.

“I guess I can do that,” she said with a smile. Henry cheered as best he could while holding still so she could draw a lightning bolt to complete his Harry Potter costume.

When they got to school, Henry was overjoyed to see that Mr. Locksley had dressed up as Dumbledore. “This is cool!” he exclaimed.

“Great minds think alike.” Mr. Locksley high-fived him. He then gave Regina a polite smile and a bow. “Your Majesty.”

She rolled her eyes. “You look ridiculous.”

“I’m impressed you deigned to join in this common frivolity,” he muttered when Henry was out of earshot.

“I can have fun. Reasonable fun.” She glared at him, stepping away. “Excuse me, Mr. Locksley.”

She heard him mutter as she walked away, but she ignored him. Let him be a child. No wonder his students got along so well with him.

*****

That afternoon, Regina went to retrieve Henry so he could go trick-or-treating. He was getting older and she knew the year he would consider himself too old to go door to door was fast approaching. She wanted to cherish these moments for as long as they would have them.

Henry was waiting in the classroom the aftercare program met in, talking with his friends Ava, Nicholas and Paige. There was also a younger boy with them, who had raven curls and deep brown eyes. He was dressed in a green outfit and carried a bow, which was held in his clasped hands.

“Please can I go trick or treating with you?” he pleaded with the older kids.

“Come on, guys, Roland’s cool,” Henry told his friends.

Ava frowned. “He’s five. He’s only going to slow us down. And doesn’t he have friends his own age to hang out with?”
“He’s shy and hasn’t made many yet.” Henry looked down at the boy and then back up at Ava. “Besides, I’m his friend.”

Pride filled Regina and she was once again assured that she was raising a gentleman. She stepped forward, revealing herself to the children. “Besides, Ava, as fifth graders, you’re now the big kids. You have to set a good example for the younger students. Wouldn’t this be a good way to do that?”

The others looked down and muttered that it was. Roland bounced up and down, realizing he was going trick or treating with the big kids. She smiled at him, crouching down to look him in the eyes. “We just need to get permission from your parents. Are they here yet?”

“My papa is right there.” Roland pointed past her and she turned, her heart stopping as Robin Locksley approached their group.

He smiled at Roland. “You ready to go trick-or-treating?”

“Henry and his friends said I can go with them. You just have to tell Henry’s mama it’s okay,” Roland bounced up and down.

Robin laid a hand on Regina’s arm. “This is Ms. Mills, she’s a teacher here like me. You remember what I said about being respectful to the other teachers, right?”

“Yes, Papa.” Roland looked up at her. “Nice to meet you, Ms. Mills.”

She held out her hand, letting him shake it. “It’s nice to meet you, Roland. So, are you coming trick or treating with us?”

He looked up at his father, who nodded. Roland cheered, taking Henry’s hand. “When do we leave?”

“Just let me clock out and I’ll be right back,” Regina said. She then looked at Robin. “Do you need to clock out, Mr. Locksley?”

Robin nodded, following her to the office. As they punched their time cards, she asked in a low voice: “Do you need to let your wife know?”

“I’m a widower,” he replied. “It’s just me and Roland.”

She swallowed, recalling Mary Margaret’s words: *You two are more alike than you realize.* “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. We’re getting on with our lives. That’s why I brought Roland here, for a fresh start.

Storybrooke Academy had excellent reviews and it seemed more peaceful here than the big city.” Regina floundered, unsure what to say next as her world shifted. So she smiled. “We should head back. Our boys aren’t going to be so patient for much longer.”

He nodded, walking back with her. They ushered the children out and Regina led them to a street she knew was both safe and a candy goldmine. As the small group went from door to door, she and Robin stood in awkward silence.

As they rounded the next corner, he broke it first. “Henry has a different last name than you.”

“It’s his father’s name. I kept my maiden name when we married.”

“Will I get a chance to meet Mr. Colter then? Maybe at parent-teacher conferences in a few weeks?” Regina bit her lip before replying: “I’m a widow.”

“Oh.” He took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. “Shit, I’m sorry if I’m bringing up any pain. I would definitely know.”

She shook her head. “Daniel’s been gone for several years now. It’s only a dull ache when I talk about him.”

“So it gets easier?”

“I wouldn’t say easier or better. I guess…I guess you just learn to live with it,” she replied.

He nodded as Roland ran up to him. “Look at all the candy I got!” he said, proudly.

“That is a lot,” Robin agreed. “Is your bag getting heavy?”

“I can fix that.” Regina pulled out a plastic bag and had Roland dump his candy into it. She handed it to Robin for safekeeping as Henry ran up to her to dump out his bag as well.

They continued to go around the neighborhood until it grew dark. Robin was still learning his way around town and Regina was happy to show him some important spots. It was a safe, neutral conversation and one she needed as her head was spinning from the revelation about Robin Locksley. She had made snap judgments about him, never bothering to get to know the real him.
Never thinking that maybe he was hiding the same pain she felt behind his happy-go-lucky manner. As the streetlamps began to flicker on, Robin called Roland over. “It’s getting late. We need to be heading home.”

“Can’t I stay out a little while longer? Please?” Roland looked up at his father with pleading eyes. Robin held firm, shaking his head. “You need a bath and to go to bed. It’s still a school night. So thank Ms. Mills and say goodnight to everyone.”

“Thank you, Ms. Mills,” Roland chirped. He then turned to the group of fifth graders. “And thanks for letting me trick or treat with you. I had lots of fun!”

Henry smiled at him. “You’re welcome, Roland. We had fun trick or treating with you.”

As Robin and Roland walked off, Regina wrapped her arms around her son. “I’m so very proud of you, Henry.”

“Thanks, Mom,” he said.

Ava approached them. “Can we now go a few more blocks now we don’t have that little kid tailing us?”

“I’m afraid not,” Regina replied. “Mr. Locksley was right. It is getting late and it is a school night. Time for everyone to go home.”

*****

“Roland Locksley’s in your kindergarten class, isn’t he?” Regina confronted Mary Margaret the day after Halloween.

The petite woman nodded. “He’s a sweet kid.”

“He is,” Regina agreed. “But why be all cryptic and not just come out to tell me that Robin was a single parent to a son?”

“Because would you have really believed me? Or would you have thought I was just trying to make you feel a connection to Robin to get the hostilities to cease?”

Regina frowned. “I don’t think so. I wouldn’t expect you to use my past against me in such a way.”

“Oh,” Mary Margaret replied.

“But,” Regina continued, “I guess it was better I discovered it on my own. Actually saw him as a dad.”

After that, there was a noticeable thaw between Regina and Robin. No one else on the Storybrooke Academy staff would call them friends, but they started to classify their relationship as civil. Robin started to sit at Regina’s table, allowing Emma and Killian to return as well.

He and Regina kept conversations to their sons, who were getting closer.

Before they knew it, parent-teacher conferences were upon them. Regina stopped Robin at the coffee machine a few days before. “I always get a babysitter for Henry for the conferences because that would be a long time to keep him in school. Would you like to send Roland with Henry? Ashley won’t mind,” Regina said.

Robin sighed, running a hand through his hair. “I didn’t even think of that. Thank you, Regina. I’m sure Roland would love to spend the afternoon with Henry.”

The boy was ecstatic, hugging his father quickly before taking Henry’s hand to go home with Ashley. Roland rattled off all the things he wanted to do with the older boy as their parents watched them leave.

Once they were gone, Robin turned to Regina. “I’m going to go see Mary Margaret for my parent-teacher conference. When I get back, do you want to have ours about Henry?”

“That would be great. Thank you,” Regina replied, heading back toward her classroom.

Not much later, Robin knocked on her door. “I’m all done if you want to come over.”

She followed him to his classroom, all decorated in bright colors and various projects the kids had done so far that school year. One of Henry’s was right by the door, his diorama of a scene from Harry Potter (Harry facing the Basilisk) that he had made with Regina’s help.

Robin motioned to the chair he had set up in front of his desk and she took it. He passed her Henry’s report card. “I’ll give you a minute to look it over. But it’s very good. Henry’s a smart kid.”

“Yes, he is. I’m proud of him.” She pulled out his report card from the envelope and swept it. Robin was right, it was very good. A line of A’s met her gaze until she got to one line. Her eyes widened.
“He got a B plus in math?”
He nodded. “He does struggle with math but we’re working on it. B plus is still a good grade.”
“It’s his best grade in math since the first grade,” Regina said, meeting Robin’s eyes. “Thank you.”
“Well, the credit is Henry’s. He’s been working really hard.”
Regina smiled. “I know. But he always works really hard and I work with him. Yet you had to do something to get him to achieve something higher than a C plus.”
“Well, then, thank you.” Robin paused before continuing: “Henry can grasp the concepts well enough. He just needs a little more time practicing their application. I think if I work with him afterschool, he’ll be able to get an A on the next report card. And since he’s already here, no one will know he’s getting tutoring.”
She nodded, fighting back her tears. “That would be great. Thank you so much.”
“Well, I have some more suggestions. Henry is reading at an eighth grade level and I think the books we’re reading are too easy for him. So I’d like to create a separate reading list for him, with the principal’s approval. Belle can help me put it together and you can have final say.”
Regina blinked few times. “I…I think I owe you an apology.”
His brow furrowed. “I don’t understand.”
“I didn’t think you would be a good teacher,” she admitted. “But I was clearly wrong. You’re one of the good ones.”
Robin smiled. “So are you. I’ve heard some of the older students talking and they said they wouldn’t be in advanced classes if it weren’t for you.”
Heat flooded Regina’s cheeks, though she wasn’t sure why hearing such praise embarrassed her. She tucked her hair behind her ear. “So, when would you like to start working with Henry?”
“I just need to get the principal’s approval for his new reading list, but I can start on the math tomorrow.” Robin stood, holding out his hand. “Thank you for coming in, Ms. Mills.”
“Thank you for all the work you’re doing, Mr. Locksley.” Regina shook his hand, playing along with him.
She headed back to her classroom, pausing at the door. Looking back, she took a deep breath. “Henry and I don’t really have much by way of family, so we have other faculty with nowhere else to go over for Thanksgiving. I don’t know what your plans are, but you and Roland are more than welcome to join us.”
Robin smiled. “Thank you, Regina. We look forward to celebrating with you.”
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On Thanksgiving morning, Henry was too excited to sit still enough to help her with dinner. “Mr. Locksley is really coming over? This is going to be awesome,” he said, washing potatoes at the sink. Or at least that’s what he was supposed to be doing. Regina smiled. “I don’t know how awesome it’ll be without potatoes though.”
“Sorry, Mom. But Mr. Locksley is coming here. To my house.”
“So are Mr. Nolan, Ms. Blanchard, Mr. Jones and Ms. Swan.”
“Yeah, but they always come,” Henry said in a matter-of-fact tone. “Mr. Locksley’s never been here before. Do you think I can call him by his first name while he’s here like I do the others?”
Regina shrugged. “You’ll have to ask him. And respect what he says.”
“Of course, mom,” Henry sighed. He turned back to his potatoes, focused now on his task.
*****
Mary Margaret and David were the first ones to show. Henry greeted them warmly, viewing the married teachers like an aunt and uncle as they had been in his life the longest. David gave the boy a playful punch. “You ready for the big game today?” he asked.
“Yeah,” Henry replied, though half-heartedly.
David tilted his head. “Is something wrong?”
“You’re not Mr. Locksley,” Regina explained, wrapping her arm around her son’s shoulders. “He’s Henry’s new hero.”
“He’s the entire school’s hero,” David replied with a sigh. “I’m yesterday’s news.”
Henry perked up. “You’re still cool, Uncle David. It’s just…Mr. Locksley is just…”
Mary Margaret held up a hand. “I’d stop there, Henry, before you dig yourself a hole you can’t get out of again.”

Taking her advice, Henry lowered his head. David clapped his shoulder, giving him a smile. “Don’t worry. I think Mr. Locksley is cool too.”

Regina laughed as she took the dish Mary Margaret had brought. The younger teacher followed her into the kitchen still. “So Henry is still fascinated by Robin, huh?”

“Yeah, but I can understand why. Robin is really a mentor to him.” Regina finished placing the dish in the fridge and straightened up, frowning when she saw the smile on Mary Margaret’s face.

“What?”

“Someone’s had a change of heart. Funny what happens when you get to know someone.”

Regina gave her a look. “You know, I can still disinvite you from dinner. David can stay though.”

“You wouldn’t do that. You need me as a buffer between you and Emma when you two inevitably start to get on each other’s nerves.”

There was truth to Mary Margaret’s words. Emma was a good friend and Regina would do anything for the blonde (and vice versa) but they could easily annoy each other. Mary Margaret insisted it was because they were more alike than they wanted to admit and sometimes, Regina felt that maybe she was right.

She sighed. “Fine, you can stay. Consider yourself lucky.”

The doorbell echoed through the house and she heard Henry race toward the door. She found him peeking through the front window and knew from his smile who was on the other side. “It’s Mr. Locksley and Roland!”

“Well, then, you can open the door,” Regina said. She only let him open the door for people they knew and Henry loved to be able to do so.

He beamed as he let the Locksleys into the house. Roland threw his arms around the older boy’s waist. “Hi, Henry! I get to spend all day with you!”

“I know, Roland,” Henry replied. “What do you want to do first?”

“Roland, I think you should thank Ms. Mills first,” Robin suggested.

The boy approached her, smiling as bright as Henry, and held up a turkey made from wood and construction paper. She recognized it as there was another one made by Henry tucked away in her attic. But she smiled at Roland’s as if it was the first time she had ever seen the project. “Did you make this?”

“Yes, I did. It’s supposed to be the centerpiece for our table. Can we use it here?” he asked.

Regina smiled. “Of course we can. Thank you.”

“Thank you for inviting Papa and me,” Roland replied. He then gave her a quick hug before returning back to Henry.

With the children running off to another part of the house, Regina took their coats and hung them up. Robin followed her. “Is there anything I can do? I’m afraid I’m not much of a cook so I picked up some dessert.”

“Thank you.” Regina took the bag he was carrying. “I’ll go put these in the kitchen. You can go join the others in the living room.”

Robin though remained on her heels, though. “Are you sure you don’t need any help? I really wouldn’t want you to do everything.”

“Most of the food is cooking already. And we have a few hours before we have to set the table. So go and enjoy yourself. I’ll be there in a few minutes,” she said.

He looked unsure but nodded. “Alright. But if you need anything…”

“I’ll call,” she replied, giving him a gentle push.

Once Robin left, Regina leaned against the counter and took a deep breath. She missed the days when she and Robin only sniped at each other. That was familiar territory Regina could navigate with easy sass. But him being so considerate threw her off. She didn’t know how to respond nor did she know how it made her feel.

She pushed that aside, deciding to deal with another day. For now, she would go out into the living room and play the perfect hostess.
Emma and Killian came late, trying to pretend that the dish they brought took longer than they thought. But Emma hadn’t done a very good job of covering up the purple mark on her neck, so they were busted pretty quickly. They were saved from merciless teasing by Roland, who had never met the teachers before and was fascinated by them. He dragged them off to play a game, leaving Henry free to spend more time with his idol, Robin, who was dragged off to the bookcase Regina had surrendered to her son recently. Robin looked over Henry’s growing collection of books…and comics. “You certainly have a lot,” he said.

Henry nodded. “They’re my thing with Mom. We read them together.”
“Your mother reads comic books?” Incredulity laced his words. She crossed her arms. “What’s so bad about comic books?”
“Nothing,” he said. “I thought you would’ve considered yourself too highbrow for them.”
This was the familiar territory. She relaxed a bit. “Well, you clearly have a poor opinion of comic books then.”
“Care to change my mind then?” he challenged.
“Gladly,” she replied.
They settled on the couch, arguing about comic books as David and Henry settled in for the football game. Mary Margaret frowned, looking around. “I guess I’ll go play with Roland and them,” she announced.
No one responded.

Regina’s world kept spinning throughout the rest of the evening. She had had an intellectual conversation with Robin about comic books of all things and it had somehow morphed into a debate over the purpose of ghosts in Shakespeare’s plays. Mary Margaret had to pull her away in order to finish preparing dinner or else she would’ve spent the rest of the night on the couch with Robin.

Emma was in the kitchen, getting a beer. She smiled as Regina walked in. “So, Regina, what’s going on with you and Mr. Locksley?”

“Careful, Emma,” Mary Margaret cautioned. “She might throw you out.”
“I’d like to see her try,” Emma scoffed. She then turned to Regina. “Well?”
Regina sighed. “I don’t know. Everything feels topsy turvy.”
“Sounds like love,” Mary Margaret said.
“You I can throw out,” Regina replied, pointing at her. “Very easily in fact.”
Mary Margaret rolled her eyes. “You keep threatening that but you never actually follow through. Admit it, you like me.”
“I tolerate you.” She handed Mary Margaret some plates. “Go make yourself useful and start setting the table.”
Mary Margaret rolled her eyes but headed toward the dining room as Robin entered. He leaned against the fridge, arms crossed. “Is there anything I can do?”
“Kiss Regina senseless,” Emma replied, taking another sip of beer.
Regina took the bottle from her and handed her the silverware. “You can make yourself useful as well.”
Emma rolled her eyes but left the room, leaving Regina and Robin alone. He smiled. “So, aside from kissing you, what can I do?”

“I’m sorry about Emma.”

He chuckled. “I’ve spent enough time with her and Killian to understand her sense of humor, Regina. Don’t worry.”

“Thanks,” she said. “Now, how are you at carving a turkey? David is okay and Killian…well, we all agreed it was best to keep him from the big knife at all costs.”

“I think I can understand why. Marian used to say my carving skills were passable, so I guess I can give it a try.”

Regina handed him the knife and pointed him toward the turkey. “Good luck, Locksley.”

Robin proved to be more adept at carving the turkey then either David or Killian. He placed the slices of meat on the platter, carrying it out as Mary Margaret herded everyone to the table. They all took their places, Henry positioning himself between his mother and his teacher. Roland sat on the other side of Robin and beamed when he saw his turkey in the middle of the table. He pointed to it. “Look, Ms. Blanchard, just like you said!”

“Yes, indeed, Roland.” Mary Margaret had on what Regina called her teacher’s voice. “It’s the perfect decoration for our table.”

Roland bounced in his seat as Emma served him some meat. Dishes were passed between everyone and Regina leaned back, proud of herself. This was her little dysfunctional family. And the Locksleys were worming their way into it.

Temperatures plunged as December began but people didn’t mind as Storybrooke’s Christmas traditions started up again. Regina and Henry took Robin and Roland to the annual tree lighting. They stood close together and it didn’t escape her notice that they could pass as a real family. After the tree was lit, Henry and Roland scrambled to sit on Santa’s lap and get their wishes in as early as possible. Robin and Regina stood off to the side, sipping spiced cider as they held cups of hot chocolate for their boys.

“So, any plans for the holidays?” Robin asked.

She shrugged. “Pretty much the same as Thanksgiving. Everyone comes over for Christmas Eve and then Henry and I spend Christmas by ourselves. You?”

“Roland and I are going to fly out the day after school ends to go visit my parents in England,” he said. “We’ll come back right before the New Year.”

“Sounds nice.” Regina took a sip of her spiced cider, trying to swallow down her disappointment as well. She realized part of her had expected to celebrate Christmas with Robin and Roland. The other part of her wondered what that meant.

“But we can work out a time to do a gift exchange,” Robin said. “Roland would be upset if we didn’t celebrate with you.”

Regina smiled. “I believe Henry would feel the same. How about next weekend since you’ll be gone
right before Christmas?”

“Sounds perfect,” he agreed, distracted as the boys ran back to them. He swung Roland onto his hip. “Did you tell Santa everything you want for Christmas?”

Roland nodded, glancing at Henry who winked. It didn’t escape Regina’s notice but she figured the boys could keep their secret for now. What could they have gotten up to anyway?

She handed her son his hot chocolate. “Why don’t we go get you boys some cookies to go with those drinks?”

The boys cheered as she and Robin guided them toward the nearby bakery to continue their Christmas fun.

Henry was bouncing off the wall before Robin and Roland showed up for Christmas. He had made sure every ornament looked perfect on the tree and all the decorations were in place. “Do you think it’s Christmassy enough?” he asked her.

“I think it’s fine,” Regina said. “And I think Roland will be too focused on the presents to care if Frosty is leaning slightly to the left.”

“He is?” Henry turned to the snowman, frowning as he studied the decoration.

Regina sighed, gently turning her son back to her. “You sound like an adult. You’re a ten years old boy, Henry. No need to worry about the decorations. Robin and Roland like us for us.”

“You think so?”

She nodded, smiling. “Robin means a lot to you, doesn’t he?”

“He does. You’re great, Mom, but I really miss having a dad,” Henry admitted.

“I know, baby.” She held him close. “It’s why I’ve always been so glad you’re close to David.”

“David’s great and so is Dr. Hopper. But Robin’s different. He’s always taken the time to get to know me and I feel like he really listens, not just pretends to like some adults do. I feel like he could be a real dad.”

“He is a real dad,” Regina replied before she could stop himself. “And maybe that’s why he’s such a natural with you.”

“Roland told me he likes being with you. I think he misses his mom less when you’re around,” Henry said.

Regina smiled, the sentiment warming her heart. “Well, I like having him around. He reminds me of you when you were his age.”

Smiling, Henry tilted his head. “Do you like Robin?”

“Yes, I do. I know I didn’t at first, but I was wrong. I judged him and didn’t give my choice to get to know him,” she said. “That was wrong of me.”

Rolling his eyes, Henry said: “I wasn’t asking for a lesson, Mom.”
“Oh? Then why were you asking?” Regina’s tone warned her son he was skating on thin ice.

He rolled back his attitude. “I was wondering…if you and Robin were considering dating.”

“I…I…” Regina was at a loss for words. She generally kept Henry separate from her love life, not wanting to introduce him to a boyfriend unless it was serious. So she wasn’t used to talking to her son about this sort of thing.

She cleared her throat and tried again. “We haven’t talked about anything besides friendship. I don’t think he wants more, Henry. It hasn’t been long since he lost his wife. So you don’t have to worry about me dating your teacher.”

“But I want you to,” Henry blurted out. “I like Robin and I think he’d be good for you.”

Her son was full of surprises today. “You do?”

“Yes. You smile more when you’re around him. And he has this smile that reminds me of David and Mary Margaret when he looks at you.”

“He does?” Regina didn’t know why that made her feel so happy. Or rather, she did…she just didn’t know if she wanted to admit to herself yet.

Henry rolled his eyes. “Come on, Mom. Don’t be so obtuse.”

“What did you call me?”

“Obtuse. It means…”

“I know what it means.” Regina crossed her arms. “Do you think that’s wise to say to your mother? So close to Christmas?”

Henry’s mouth snapped shut and he seemed to reconsider his line of thought. Regina relaxed…until he opened his mouth again. “If Robin asked you on a date, would you say yes?”

“Yes, I would,” she admitted, deciding honesty was the best policy. When she saw Henry’s eyes light up and the gears working behind them, she frowned. “But don’t go pressuring him into something. If he’s going to ask, he’ll ask when he’s ready. Got it?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Henry mumbled, sounding dejected.

The doorbell rang and Regina smiled. “That’s most likely them. Why don’t you go get it?”

Henry perked up and he raced for the door. Regina picked up the plate of cookies she had prepared, bringing them out to the living room. She heard Henry greet Robin and Roland, offering to take their coats. It put a smile on her own face.

“Regina!” Roland threw his arms around her, hugging her tightly. “Merry Christmas!”

She laughed, hugging him back. “Merry Christmas to you, Roland.”

“Can we open presents first? I really want you to see what I got you! I made it all by myself…well, Papa helped a little, but it was mostly me.” He was bouncing at this point.

“If no one else has any objections to opening presents first…” She looked up, eyes meeting Henry’s. He nodded, excited, as Robin wrapped his arms around the boy. Regina glanced back down at Roland. “We can open presents first.”
Roland cheered and raced toward his father. “Where are the presents, Papa? I want to give Regina hers.”

“What do you say, Roland?” Robin prompted.

The boy sighed. “Please?”

Smiling, Robin handed his son the bag Regina guessed was filled with presents. “Here you go. Make sure to hand them out carefully.”

“Yes, Papa.” Roland opened the bag and started sorting through them.

Henry darted past her. “I’ll get our presents to them, Mom.”

“Well, since the children have everything under control, shall we have a seat, milady?” Robin bowed, arm extended toward her couch.

She smiled, taking a seat next to him. He rested his arm along the back, his hand brushing against her neck. “Thank you for letting him open the presents. He’s been excited all day.”

“Well, I am curious as to what he got me,” she replied, smiling as Roland approached her with a lumpy present. “Is this for me?”

Roland nodded, beaming. “I wrapped it myself as well.”

“He did,” Robin confirmed. “Even used his safety scissors so he didn’t need my help at all.”

The thought touched Regina and she cupped the boy’s cheek. “You’re the sweetest,” she told him.

He bounced as she undid the mess of tape holding it together then ripped away some of the paper until she found her gift—a picture frame that was painted white. Names were written on each side—“Papa” in green, “Roland” in blue, “Henry” in red, and “Regina” in purple. Inside was a picture of the four of them from the tree lighting, smiling at the camera as the tree lights twinkled behind them.

“This is great,” she said, pulling Roland in for a hug. “And I know just where to put it.”

She stood, taking his hand, and walked over the end table already overflowing with pictures. Moving aside one of her and Henry from their summer vacation as well as Henry’s school picture, she set the frame right in the middle. “There we go.”

Roland wrapped his arm around her leg as he took in his gift’s new home. “Perfect,” he said. “Now we’re a family.”

Her heart skipped a beat at his statement and warmth spread throughout her. She ran a hand through his curls. “Why don’t you go open your presents?”

“Yeah, I have one for you,” Henry said, holding out a box to Roland. The boy cheered as he took it, sitting next to Henry to open it.

Regina grabbed a present and returned to the couch, holding it out to Robin. “This is for you from me. Merry Christmas.”

He didn’t take it, though, instead watching her with a strange expression in his eyes. “You didn’t have to do that. You can move the picture frame when we leave. I don’t think he’ll notice.”

“Do I seem like the person who would do that?” she asked, frowning. “The picture frame is staying.”
Robin smiled, taking her hand. “Thank you, Regina. It means a lot to him. Especially with Marian gone…”

“Is this your first Christmas without her?”

He shook his head. “Second.”

“It’s still hard,” she said, squeezing his hand. “This will be my eighth Christmas without Daniel and there’s still a part of me that hurts over that fact.”

“But it hurts less every year?”

She nodded. “And you have Roland. Henry got me through those first few Christmases.”

They looked at where their children were playing with their gifts—identical lightsabers. Robin chuckled. “It seems we had to the same idea.”

“Great minds,” she replied before handing him his present again. “Now will you open this?”

Robin nodded, ripping off the paper to reveal the book inside. His smile grew as he looked up. “Our Gods Wear Spandex?”

“It’s a book about comics, superheroes and a new mythology,” she explained. “I thought you would appreciate it.”

He laughed. “I think I will. At least I’ll have something to read on the plane going to England.”

“Now, it’s your turn.” He pulled out a small square box from his bag and handed it to her. “Happy Christmas, Regina.”

She tore open the paper to find a blue box underneath. It sent her heart racing and she struggled to keep her breathing under control. This was not what she thought it was—he no doubt earned the same she did and it would not be enough to buy anything from Tiffany’s in only a few months of employment. Lifting the lid, she found an engraved crystal disc inside.

_A teacher takes a HAND, opens a MIND, and touches a HEART._

“Robin,” she said, softly. “It’s beautiful.”

“Thank you. I know it’s a bit cliché to give a teacher something about teaching…trust me, I know… but I saw this and well…I thought it would look lovely on your desk.”

She leaned over and kissed his cheek. “It will. Thank you so much.”

“Mom, can Roland and me go play in my room?” Henry asked.

Regina sighed, resisting the urge to correct his grammar. “Yes, you may. Dinner will be ready in an hour.”

They raced from the room, lightsabers in hand, as Regina put her present down. “I should go check on dinner, actually.”


She shrugged. “I guess you could help set the table.”
He followed her into the kitchen and she motioned to where the dishes were kept. Robin made no
move to grab them though, staring at her. She frowned. “Is something wrong?”

“Just that I hope that I’m not reading this wrong,” he replied.

Before she could question what he meant, his lips were on hers. Her eyes remained open but his
were screwed shut as he poured more fire into the kiss than she had experienced in any kiss she had
gotten since Daniel’s death.

As her eyes fluttered closed and she was about to return the kiss, he pulled away. He blinked a few
times, panic filling his blue eyes. “Regina, I’m sorry if I misinterpreted…”

Oh, hell no. He was not going to think he had to apologize for that. She fist his sweater and pulled
him closer, crashing her lips against hers. Regina poured the same amount of fire and passion and
want into it as Robin had his, trying to show him that his feelings were returned.

They parted, breathing heavily. Robin kept his eyes closed a bit longer and she kept a firm hold on
his sweater. “Wow,” he breathed.

“I know,” she replied. “You’re a really good kisser.”

He grinned. “I was going to say the same about you.”

“Now what?” she asked, leaning closer to him.

“A date? After New Year’s, once I’m back from England and everything’s calmed down from the
holiday?”

She nodded. “That sounds lovely.”

“Then we’ll have dinner together soon,” he said, kissing her again.

Chapter End Notes

Continued in Part II...
An Education in Love (Part II)

Henry was thrilled that Regina was going on a date with his teacher. The night of their dinner, he sat at the window and waited for Robin to show up while she got ready.

Ashley smiled as Regina entered the living room, dressed in her best red dress and her black heels. "You look beautiful, Regina," she told her. "Though I think Henry's more excited about this date than you."

"I think he is too," Regina replied with a smile.

As they heard a car pull up, Henry hopped off the window seat and raced for the door. "They're here!"

Regina beat her son to the door, blocking him. "Let them ring the doorbell. Okay?"

"Why?" Henry asked, frowning.

Ashley laughed as she watched from the living room. "There are complicated rules about dating, Henry. One of them is that you never look too eager, even if you are."

"That seems silly."

"It is," Regina replied, "but it's what we do. So please, just wait until Robin and Roland ring the doorbell. Okay?"

They didn't have to wait much longer as the chimes of their doorbell echoed through the front hall. Henry darted forward, throwing open the door with a smile. "Hi!"

"Hello, Henry," Robin said, smiling at her son. He stood in a black coat and dark pants, holding Roland's hand. "Is your mother here?"

Roland glanced around Henry, his eyes growing wide when he saw her. "You look beautiful, Regina."

"Why, thank you, Roland," she replied, smiling. "Are you ready to have fun with Henry and Ashley?"

"Ashley's here? Cool!" Roland ran into the house, throwing his arms around Ashley.

"Roland, don't run!" Robin sighed. "I swear he has better manners than that."

Regina chuckled. "I know, Robin. I've spent enough time around Roland to know you're raising a very well-behaved and polite boy."

He ducked his head, a slight blush coming to his cheeks. Clearing his throat, he took her hand. "He was right. You do look beautiful."

"Thank you," she replied, leaning closer to him. Her eyes began to close when someone cleared their throat, preventing their kiss.

They looked over to find Henry standing there still, arms crossed. Robin leaned back and smiled at the boy. "Is something wrong?"
"I have a few questions before you take my mother out." Henry held his chin up and tried to look older than he was.

Embarrassed, Regina wanted to send her son into the living room with a stern warning. Robin, though, looked serious and nodded. "Of course. Ask away."

"Where are you taking her?"

"Tony's," Robin replied. "I'm told it's the best restaurant in town."

Henry nodded. "And you'll drive safely with her in the car?"

"Of course. I have a great driving record."

"Will you kiss her?"

"Only if she wants me to," Robin said. "I hope she does as I like it."

"Eww." Henry scrunched up his nose.

Regina fought the urge to smile as she crossed her arms. "Are you happy? Can Robin and I go on our date now?"

Henry looked between the two of them before nodding. "Okay. But don't stay out too late. Got it?"

"Of course. I'll have her home by ten."

"Nine," Henry said.

Regina frowned, leaning down to look him in the eyes. "You're my son, not my father."

"I'm named after him."

"That doesn't mean you have to take his place." She cupped his chin. "Robin and I won't stay out late, I promise."

Henry hesitated. "You'll be home to tuck me in, right?"

Suddenly, he was a little boy—the little boy he still was, despite his yearning to be older. A little boy whose mother was always there, who always tucked him in, despite his insistence he didn't need it, because she didn't usually go on dates. Regina's heart hurt and she almost wanted to cancel.

"I'll have her home in time for you to go to bed," Robin promised. "After all, I have a son to tuck in as well. Bed time is sacred."

Henry smiled at him. "Thank you, Robin."

Robin pulled him for a hug, holding him close. "I'm not going to compete with you for your mother's time and attention, Henry. You're her top priority and I understand that."

"Henry? We're going to play some games. Are you coming?" Roland asked, emerging from the living room.

"Yeah, I'll be right there," Henry replied, hugging Regina. "Have fun tonight."

She watched as he disappeared into the living room before turning to Robin. "You didn't have to do
"Of course I did," he said as he reached for her coat. "I'm a father."

He held up her coat for her and she slipped her arms into the sleeves, letting him guide it onto her shoulders. She buttoned it before turning to him. "Shall we?"

"One minute." He turned to the living room. "Roland? I'm leaving, son."

She heard little feet pounding on the floor as the boy burst from the room, ploughing into his father. "Have fun!"

"I will." Robin picked up Roland, kissing his cheek. "And you be a good boy for Ashley. I'll be home soon."

Roland nodded before twisting his father's arms, reaching for Regina. She stepped closer and he kissed her cheek. "Have fun with Papa, Regina."

She nodded as Robin set his son down. After Roland had run back into the living room, he opened the door for her. "Shall we, milady?" he asked.

"We shall," she replied, stepping out of her house. Robin's hand came to rest on her lower back as he guided her toward his car. Excitement built in her and she knew this was going to be a great night.

"So, shall we set some rules for this evening?" Robin asked once they were seated at their table.

Regina raised her eyebrows. "Rules? You can take the teacher out of the classroom…"

"Very funny," he replied, before realizing he had his hands clasped on the table. Placing them on his lap, he cleared his throat. "So…no shop talk?"

"No shop talk," Regina agreed. "And we'll limit talk about our kids, too? I want to get to know Robin besides being a father and a teacher."

He nodded. "Sounds good. Where do you want to start?"

"Drinks," she replied, watching as the waitress approached. "And then maybe childhoods?"

They ordered their drinks before Robin took her hand. "So, how long have you lived in Storybrooke?"

"My whole life," she replied. "I even attended Storybrooke Academy myself. So did Daniel, that's where we met. Henry's a legacy."

"So you and Daniel were childhood sweethearts?"

"Yeah, I guess you can say that. What about you and Marian?"

He shook his head. "She was American and I was raised in Nottingham."

"Wait," Regina said, leaning back. "Your name is Robin Locksley and you're from Nottingham?"

Robin sighed. "Yes, yes. I have heard every Robin Hood joke possible since I was a child."

"You also married a woman named Marian."
"I know," he said, eyes growing distant. "She used to joke that it was fate."

Regina squeezed his hand. "That sounds very romantic."

He laughed before shaking his head. "So, why teaching?"

"Because it pissed off my mother," she replied.

Robin laughed again until he realized she was serious. He raised an eyebrow. "That's really why you choose it?"

"It's why I did a lot of things," Regina confessed. "My mother had my life planned out for me—Storybrooke Academy, loads of extracurricular activities, acceptance to one of the Ivies, a law degree, marriage to a man on track to be president, children, First Lady and then maybe a political career of my own."

He let out a low whistle. "That's one hell of a life plan. Clearly, you disagreed."

"I did. So I went to the local college and became a teacher, just to spite her. I married Daniel because I loved him but she thought that was out of spite too. Maybe in some ways, it was. She didn't come to the wedding."

"Her loss," Robin replied. "What would she think of me?"

"If she were still alive, she'd probably hate you too. Still not a politician and that's all she would've cared about."

Robin's smile fell. "Your parents are deceased?"

"They are. I miss my father more than my mother. We were very close," she replied. "It's why when the doctor said I had a son, I knew there was only one name for him."

"Do you have any other family? What about Daniel's?"

She shook her head. "I was an only child and we weren't very close to my father's extended family. As for Daniel's family, his parents died a few years ago. They lived in Florida but would come up a few times to visit us and we went down a couple times to visit them each year. He had a brother but we're not close to him either."

"But Henry and I have formed our own family," she assured him. "We're fine. What about yours?"

He shrugged. "Typical. Mum, dad and just me. They weren't too thrilled when I decided to come study in America and I know it pains them that I decided to stay in America. But they loved Marian and understood."

"What about Marian's parents? Are they alive? Involved in Roland's life?"

"They were," he said. "Her father died before her and her mother just passed away. That's why I felt comfortable moving away from New York."

"So it's just the two of you here?"

He nodded. "Well, not anymore. Everyone at Storybrooke Academy has been very welcoming. And there's you and Henry."

She smiled, lacing her fingers with his. "I'm glad we now have you and Roland. I always worried
about Henry having a father figure and I'll admit, I wasn't thrilled when he chose you to fill that role. But now... I can't imagine him choosing anyone else."

"And I'm honored. Henry is a good boy and well on his way to growing into a good man. You should be proud, Regina. Of him and yourself."

"Thank you. And you should be proud of yourself and Roland."

He ducked his head, blushing. "Thanks, but to be honest my strategy is to figure out what I think Marian would've done and do that."

"I think you should give yourself a bit more credit than that," she told him.

Robin raised his head, meeting her eyes, before shaking it. "Anyway, we said a limit on talk about our children. I think we're approaching it."

She nodded, sitting back. "So... Beatles or Stones?"

"Beatles," he answered. "You?"

"Stones."

He smirked. "I thought so. Red or white wine?"

"You know that answer. Red."

"Same here," he replied. "Though I prefer beer."

"Guinness." She had noticed which beer he had brought to social functions and had made note of it.

Robin leaned forward, narrowing his eyes. "Have you been spying on me?"

She laughed. "Always."

They continued on, eating their meal, as they got to know each other better. As the night wore on, Regina believed she was falling more and more in love with him. She hoped he felt the same.

After dinner, Robin drove her home. "After all, I can't break my promise to Henry. You need to be home for bedtime."

"He and Roland are probably passed out on the couch," she replied, smiling.


"I know," she replied. "It's one of the things I admire about you."

"I wish I could go back in time and tell myself back in September not to get on your bad side. Maybe we could've been doing this earlier."

She shrugged. "Someone would've had to convince me as well. I wasn't fond of you for several reasons."

"True," he agreed, parking the car. "Well, as much as I hate to say it, you're home."

"It's not over yet. You are coming in to pick up your son."
Robin nodded, getting out of the car. She waited until he opened her door and held out his hand to
her. "Milady?"

Taking her hand, they walked toward her door. Robin stopped outside and her heart beat faster,
knowing what was coming next. No matter how many kisses they exchanged, she still grew excited
and nervous for each one.

He cupped her cheek, warming it, before kissing her. She returned it, knowing it wouldn't go any
further than a chaste peck. Not with their sons on the other side of the door and a chance they were
watching from the window.

Breaking the kiss, Regina licked her lips as Robin kissed her forehead. "So, do I get a second date?"
he asked.

"I think so," she replied. "If you want one, that is."

Laughing, he took her hands in his. "Well, then, Regina Mills, will you go out with me again?"

"I'd love to, Robin Locksley," she replied. She kissed him again and he wrapped his arms around
her, holding her close.

They heard the door open and she heard her son clear his throat. Ending the kiss, they glanced at
him. He stood there, arms crossed. "You've been kissing for a long time."

"Henry Daniel Mills," she hissed through her teeth while Robin chuckled beside her.

He placed his hand on Henry's shoulder. "Sorry. I just didn't want to say goodbye to your mother
just yet."

"Let's go in before you freeze the house," Regina said, tugging on Robin's hand as she wrapped her
free arm around her son.

Once inside, Robin helped her out of her coat before she went to pay Ashley for the night. There
was a brief disagreement over how much Robin owed but it was settled by Regina agreeing to let
him pay Ashley for their next date night. Ashley bid them goodnight as the four settled around
Regina's kitchen table for some apple pie and a little family time before Robin carried a sleeping
Roland out to his car.

Regina and Henry watched from the door. As Robin drove off, Henry looked up at his mother. "Did
you have fun with Robin?"

"I did," she replied, closing the door. "We're going out again soon."

Henry nodded. "I'm glad you're happy, Mom. Robin's a great guy."

"I'm happy you approve. You know you're the most important person in my life, right?" Regina
pulled him in for a hug.

"Mom…" He whined but still hugged her back. "I love you too."

Robin and Regina didn't purposefully hide their relationship. They just didn't announce it to the
entire staff. Only a select few knew, starting with the headmaster, Mr. Gold, as per school policy. He
had studied them with the unnerving way he had before nodding. "I trust you two to be adults about
this and keep your affair out of the classroom," he said before waving them off. "Now go. Teach."
They next told Mary Margaret since she was Roland's teacher. While they had told the boy he had to call Regina "Miss Mills" while in the school, they also figured he would still talk about his papa's new girlfriend. Robin had also added Regina to the list of approved people who the school could release Roland to just as she added him to her list for Henry. Telling Mary Margaret meant that David would also know but that's where they drew the line for now.

As the winter started to thaw into spring, Regina believed she and Robin were getting serious. They were seeing each other outside of school several times a week. For weeknights, their dates included their boys and were often at one of their houses. Robin proved to be just as good a cook as she and she had to admit she loved eating at the little cottage he and Roland called home.

Weekend dates though were just for them. Ashley would come over and babysit for them while they went out. Dinners, movies, walks in the park—whatever they felt like doing that day. All Robin had to do was hold her hand and she felt like she was floating wherever they went. It was a feeling she hadn't felt in long time, not since Daniel.

Part of her wondered if she should be nervous with how fast things were progressing with Robin. But when she laid in his arms on the couch or when she watched him with Henry while she played with Roland, she knew she was right not to be. If she believed in fate, she would say they were meant to be.

"Penny for your thoughts," he asked one night, twisting her hair around his finger.

She smiled. "I'm just really happy."

"Me too." He kissed her cheek. "I'm the happiest I've been since I lost Marian. And I owe that to you and Henry."

"I've loved having Roland around as well," she said, glancing to where their sons were lying on their stomachs as they watched TV.

Robin tucked some of her hair back. "I was wondering if you and Henry would like to come with me and Roland to England when we visit my parents this summer."

She sat up, eyes wide. "You mean it? You want me to meet your parents?"

"I do," he said, sitting up as well.

"This is a big step."

He nodded. "That's why I'm asking now. I don't want to push you if you're not ready."

Regina bit her lip. "Can I think about it? Talk it over with Henry?"

"Of course," he said, kissing her. "Whatever you feel is best for the two of you, I'll support it."

She pressed her hand against his cheek. "You are a sweet, dear man and I am so lucky to have you in my life."

He laid her back down, holding her close again as the movie played on in the background. She closed her eyes and enjoyed the feeling of security and love.

Regina sat down with Henry after a week of debating whether to go to England with Robin and Roland or not. She asked him, expecting him to be for it. Instead, he frowned and shook his head. "I
don't think that's a good idea."

"What?" Regina was surprised. Henry was Robin's biggest fan. She thought he'd jump at the chance to spend more time with him. "Why?"

Henry grew quiet but began to fidget in his chair. "I don't know if Mr. Locksley is the right man for you."

She raised an eyebrow, alarmed that "Robin" had gone back to "Mr. Locksley" and Henry was concerned. "And why do you think that?"

"It's just...He's been letting me spend time in the classroom after school, so I can work on my independent reading projects. Justin's mom has been coming in a lot to discuss the spring show," Henry said.

Regina frowned. Justin Sampson had been in Henry's class since kindergarten and the two were friendly, if not friends. She knew Justin's mother, Evelyn, who was a single mother like Regina. They talked sometimes, commiserating and sharing notes.

"Ms. Sampson is the class mom, Henry, of course she has been. I've been spending a lot of time with Mrs. Olsen regarding the spring show."

"Yeah, but you aren't flirting with Mrs. Olsen."

That surprised her. "Robin is flirting with Ms. Sampson?"

"Well, she's flirting with him," he replied. "She stands really close to him and speaks in a low voice. And she flutters her eyes at him, smiles and lays her hand on her arm. He does nothing to shake her off."

Regina's heart pounded but she swallowed, trying not to panic. "Maybe you're just making a big deal about this? I doubt Robin is going to leave me for Ms. Sampson."

"I don't want this to be like Mr. Glass," Henry said. "I know you tried to hide it and be okay around me but you were hurt and you were sad."

She swallowed, remembering the pain of her last boyfriend's betrayal. But Robin wasn't Sidney Glass. He wasn't going to be led astray by some blonde, she was certain. So she took Henry's hand. "Thank you for caring. I promise you I'll talk with Robin about this, okay? And if it turns out to be nothing, do you want to go to England this summer?"

"Yeah, it'll be cool," Henry said with a smile. "Maybe we can go even if Robin isn't serious about us? Please?"

Regina nodded. "I'll look into it and if we can swing it, we'll get to England no matter what happens between me and Robin."

Despite Henry's suspicions, Regina really didn't suspect that Robin was already interested in another woman. It just didn't seem like him. She just chalked it up to Henry's imagination and would get Robin to clear everything up with him.

That was what she was going to ask him when she walked into his classroom the following Monday after school. Evelyn Sampson was there, standing very close to Robin as he sat at his desk, just like Henry reported. They were hunched over something, too deep in discussion to notice her there. She
remained frozen in the doorway, studying them.

Evelyn had her brown hair down, letting it fall in waves around her face and showing off the red highlights she must've recently gotten. She wore a figure-hugging sleeveless black dress and her makeup was impeccable. It was a bit fancy for just a meeting about the spring show, Regina felt.

She glanced over, finding Henry in his seat as he worked on his math homework. He met her eyes, motioning to his teacher and Evelyn with his head. Regina nodded, crossing her arms as she cleared her throat. "Mr. Locksley? Can I talk with you?" she asked, voice sweet.

"In a few minutes, Ms. Mills," he replied, smiling. "We'll be done in a bit. I can meet you in your classroom."

"That's okay. I can wait here." Regina sauntered to a nearby desk, swinging her hips just a little bit more than usual. She slowly lowered herself into the seat and made a show of crossing her legs, smirking at him.

Robin swallowed but turned his attention back to Evelyn, answering a few more questions. His eyes, though, kept wandering to Regina as she watched their interactions closely. While he kept his hands to himself and spoke in an even tone, Evelyn tended to touch him a bit more—a hand on his shoulder, a pat on the hand—and spoke in a low, sultry tone. Regina wondered how he couldn't realize the woman was flirting with him.

Then the thought that he did flashed in her mind and her blood boiled. She clamped down on her anger as Robin wrapped up his meeting with Evelyn.

Clutching her clipboard closer, Evelyn bit her lower lip before speaking. "I know there are probably rules against this, but the school year is almost over so you won't be Justin's teacher for much longer. Would you like to have dinner with me?"

"He's taken," Regina snapped, unable to stop herself.

Evelyn glared at her. "And how would you know that?"

Regina stood and walked up to Robin's desk, her eyes fixed on him. His widened in realization of what she was about to do, but he did nothing to stop her as she grabbed his tie. With a good tug, she pulled him from his seat and pressed a passionate kiss to his lips.

His response was immediate, returning her passion with his own. Robin brushed some of her hair off her shoulder before cupping her cheek. As they broke away, he rubbed his thumb across her cheek.

Evelyn's cough reminded them that they weren't alone. "I see. Well…uh…congrats, you two. Have a good afternoon."

She fled the classroom before Henry started clapping. "Way to go, Mom!" he said.

Heat flooded her. She had forgotten her son had been there to witness that. What kind of mother was she?

"Henry, can you go to the aftercare room? Please?" Robin asked, his voice somewhat high-pitched.

Gathering his books, Henry smirked as he hurried out into the hallway. Robin followed him, closing the door behind him. He then turned to face Regina. "Well, that was unexpected."

"I'm sorry," she said. "When she asked you out, I saw green. And I got possessive and I just…"
Robin pulled her close and kissed her. "I said it was unexpected, not unpleasant."

"Oh."

"I feel like a fool, not realizing she was flirting with me," he confessed, sheepish.

She raised an eyebrow. "Really? You didn't realize it? Henry did."

"He did?" Robin's brows furrowed. "Is that why he was giving me the cold shoulder lately?"

"Probably. My last boyfriend cheated on me and Henry wanted to protect me from experiencing that pain again."

He rubbed her arms. "I would never cheat on you, Regina. Nor do I want to leave you. I thought I would never feel this way for anyone else after I lost Marian but you've changed that. I know we've only been dating a few months, but I love you, Regina Mills."

"I love you too," she replied, pressing her forehead to his.

"And I promise to be more aware when I'm being flirted with so I can make sure you and Henry have nothing to worry about."

Regina cupped his cheek. "I trust you. And once we talk to Henry, I'm sure he'll come to trust you too."

"Thank you but I promise you that I won't give you a reason to even suspect…"

She placed her fingers on his lips. "Shut up and kiss me."

He laughed before kissing her. She buried her fingers in his thick hair as he slid his hands over her ass. Robin lifted her, setting her down on his desk as he deepened their kiss. With him pressed between her legs and his tongue in her mouth, she forgot where exactly she was. All that mattered was him and the fire ignited deep inside her.

As his lips moved down to her neck, she arched her back with a groan. "Right there," she said.

Robin tried to pull her closer but it still wasn't close enough. She undid his belt and slid her hand into his pants, grabbing his hard cock. He groaned as she began pumping, toying with his tip. "Minx," he said.

"Hmm, you love it," she purred.

He nodded, kissing her again. She gasped, her eyes barely able to make out the bright and colorful posters Robin decorated his classroom with.

Classroom.

They were almost having sex in his classroom.

Gold would kill them.

She gave him a little push, revealing his bared chest and mussed hair. No doubt her skirt was rucked up and shirt disheveled while her lips were swollen from his kisses. She was breathing hard as she said: "We can't do this here."

"Right," he said, voice hoarse. "Right, of course. We need to pretend we're being proper. And we
have children to go collect from aftercare."

"Saturday night. Ashley takes the kids and we go straight to your house and just spend it in your bed. Deal?"

He nodded, swallowing. "Sounds wonderful, my love. Now, shall we get our children?"

"After we button you back up," Regina replied, tugging on his shirt. "And make sure we look like we weren't about to screw each other on your desk."

"One day," he muttered and she blushed. It had to be under the right circumstances but she wouldn't mind him taking her on his desk. Maybe on hers as well.

But there would be plenty of time for that. Now, she wanted to collect their children and have dinner all together.

Robin had a long talk with Henry, explaining what had happened and promising that he was devoted to Regina. That he loved her and no one else, wanting to only be with her. Henry came back happy and hugged his mother. "So, are we going to England with Robin and Roland?"

"Yes, we are," she said. "We're going to have to get started on a few things, but I think we'll be able to make it."

As summer began and school ended, Regina and Robin looked forward to having more time with each other and their boys. While they still made no announcements about their relationship, they still made no pains to hide it in public and were seen out more and more. It soon became common knowledge that they were together, often seen out on outings with their sons.

The new little family flew to England for two weeks in the middle of the summer. Robin's parents welcomed Regina and Robin into their home and their hearts. By the end of their visit, Henry was calling them "Nana" and "Gramps," just like Roland. He and Regina were practically Locksleys themselves.

When they were back in America, Regina invited Robin and Roland to cabin she had inherited from her father. As he taught the boys about nature and surviving in the wilderness, she fell more in love with him. So when he asked her to marry him one night after the boys had gone to bed and they remained around the fire they had lit earlier, her answer was a resounding "yes."

At Storybrooke Academy, it became well-known that Regina Mills and Robin Locksley were absolutely head-over-heels in love with each other. While they were still careful to be professional around the students and parents, they were more open about their feelings around their colleagues. Hand holds, adoring looks and soft smiles replaced the arguments and cold glares from the year before. And everyone knew both were off the market, avoiding any more awkward moments (especially on Robin's part).

Robin and Roland moved into Regina's house around Thanksgiving. One night after the boys went to bed, Robin laid with Regina on the couch as they watched TV together. She let out a contented sigh. "I never thought I would have this again."

"Have what?" he asked.

"Someone to love and who loves me," she replied. "And a house full of love and laughter. Henry and I came close but there was something missing—you and Roland."
He smiled. "I love you."

"I love you too," she replied, kissing him. She snuggled closer to him and closed her eyes as his warmth lulled her to sleep.

What a difference a school year made.
Promposal

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Imagine_OQ on twitter for the prompt!

Imagine fangirl Regina is obsessed with pop star Robin. She collects all his merchandise & finally gets to meet him.

**Promposal**

Regina Mills was bent over her cell phone at lunch, the outside eating area the one place students were allowed to use them. She frowned as she scrolled through her Twitter feed, confused by all the activity her account was suddenly experiencing. People she had never heard of were filling her notifications, retweeting some link that was also tagged with global popstar Robin Locksley's twitter handle.

"What's so interesting?" Mary Margaret Blanchard, one of her best friends, asked as she sat down with her boyfriend David Nolan.

"I seem to be trending," Regina replied, holding up her phone. "And I have no idea why anyone would care about me. Or keep tagging Robin Locksley."

Mary Margaret began to squirm as their other friends, Emma Swan and Ruby Lucas, bounded up to the table. Emma's boyfriend Killian Jones followed behind them, chatting with Ruby's girlfriend Dorothy Gale. They all took their seats as Mary Margaret gave them wide-eyed looks which did not escape Regina's notice. Annoyed, she asked: "What do you know about this?"

"Don't get mad," Mary Margaret started.

Regina frowned. "That's not a promising start."

Emma leaned forward, her voice in a placating tone. "We know things have been rough for you this past year losing Daniel. I know it was different for you, but we do understand your pain. He was our friend. And we know he wouldn't want you to miss the prom just because he can't be here to take you."

"I'm not going to the prom alone," she replied. "I won't be the girl whose boyfriend died so she had to go the prom alone."

"What if you went with someone though?" Emma pressed. "Like Robin Locksley?"

Regina's heart stopped at that. She idolized Robin. He and his band, the Merry Men, had been burning up the charts and Robin's face was on every magazine. Regina had his posters hanging on her bedroom walls and she followed him everywhere he had a social media account. His music had gotten her through the difficult months following Daniel's death and she had once tweeted that to Robin.

It was ignored.
Which made her wonder one thing: "And why would Robin Locksley even consider taking me to prom?"

All her friends exchanged looks and Dorothy sighed. "You need to show it to her, you guys."

"Show what to me?" Regina asked, voice hard.

Emma pulled something up on her phone and slid it over to Regina to watch. It was a YouTube video starring Mary Margaret, Ruby and Emma entitled "Promposal to Robin Locksley." Regina hit the play button and it began.

"Hi, my name is Mary Margaret and these are my friends Ruby and Emma," Mary Margaret started as the other two waved at the camera. Regina recognized the pastel pink walls of Mary Margaret's room. "This video is a message to Robin Locksley on behalf of our friend, Regina Mills."

Ruby spoke next. "She doesn't know we're making this video. And we hope she doesn't kill us when she finds out."

She was.

"This is Regina," Emma said as Regina's senior picture popped up. "And this is Regina with her boyfriend Daniel."

Regina's heart constricted as a picture of her wrapped around her boyfriend, Daniel, popped up. She remembered when they took that picture—it was at Emma's birthday party right before Daniel died. Everyone had been hanging around Killian's house, laughing and playing games. Mary Margaret had insisted all the couples pose for pictures and Regina was happy to oblige. She rested her cheek against his hair and they both smiled at the camera, looking so happy.

It wasn't fair.

Emma continued speaking on the video. "Daniel died last year, killed by a drunk driver. Regina was devastated and she withdrew from us for a bit. But she's been coming back slowly, coming out with us more and more as well as resuming her extracurricular activities, like the debate team."

"But she has decided not to come to prom because she doesn't have a date," Ruby said.

Mary Margaret took over. "She's your biggest fan. She knows every word to every song, has read and seen every interview you've ever given, has all your posters...We were hoping that since Daniel can't be here to escort her to prom, she would still come if escorted by her idol...you."

"So please, Robin, please take our friend to prom," Emma pleaded. "She deserves to have some fun after the year she's had."

"We're now asking the internet to help us make sure he sees this. Tweet it, share it, whatever you have to do, please. Let's get Robin Locksley to take our friend to prom!" Ruby exclaimed.

The video ended and Regina wanted to ream her friends out, but something caught her attention. "There's a reply video," she said, eyes widening when she saw Robin's smiling face in the thumbnail.

"Click it!" Emma said, bouncing in her seat. "Let's see what it says!"

Her heart pounding, Regina clicked the link as her friends gathered around her. Even before the video played, she could see Robin Locksley's handsome face on the screen. His blond hair was
gelled to perfection, though one lock still fell across his forehead, and his blue eyes sparkled.

"Hello, Regina's friends. I hope she doesn't kill you but rather realizes how amazing you lot are," he said, British accent washing over her. "She must be someone special for you to do all of this for her.

"So I would be honored to escort your friend to your prom. Let her know so it's not also a surprise when I show up on her doorstep, yeah? And my management team will contact one of you to get more details. Until then, Regina." He winked as he created a heart with his hands, like he did at the end of all his public appearances.

She struggled to catch her breath as it sunk in.

Robin Locksley was taking her to prom.

She was going to meet Robin.

"I need to find a dress!" she exclaimed, dropping the phone onto the table. Robin's face stared up her, frozen in a wide smile with his hands still making a heart.

Regina smoothed down her red satin strapless fit and flare prom dress as her mother clasped a ruby necklace around her neck. "I still can't believe you're going to prom with a pop star, of all people, Regina. Why not that nice Sidney from down the block? He's back from college."

"Sidney's a creep," she replied, sitting down to do her makeup. "Emma caught him peeking in her window while she was undressing a few times."

"Well, Emma should've closed her blinds." Cora moved away as Regina rolled her eyes.

She turned to face her mother. "You just like Sidney because his family has money."

"We have money, Regina. Birds of a feather." Her mother handed her her matching red clutch.

Regina stared at her mother. "Robin has money. He's a pop star."

"That type of money is temporary. His career tanks, he makes a bad investment, and it's gone like that." Cora snapped her fingers.

Henry, her father, had often explained that all money was like that but Cora seemed to be a firm believer in "old money" earned through business. But there was one other important thing Regina focused on now: "I don't know why we're talking about this. Robin is taking me to prom, not marrying me."

"Thankfully," Cora muttered.

The doorbell echoed around the house and Regina's heart sped up. "He's here!"

"Don't rush down there," Cora instructed her. "You don't want to appear to be too eager."

Regina rolled her eyes again, counting the days until she moved to NYU in the fall and got far away from Cora Mills. "How long should I wait, Mother?"

"I'll let you know when you should go down." Cora patted her hand. "Besides, you still need to put on your lipstick. But not that ungodly red color. Something understated."

Regina put on the bright red lipstick anyway. It went best with her dress and spited her mother at the
same time.

After what seemed like an eternity, Cora let Regina go downstairs to finally come face to face with Robin Locksley, the man who gave her butterflies every time he sang, spoke or smiled. Her heart felt like it was going to beat out of her chest and her stomach was twisted up in knots with each step. She took a deep breath as she hit the landing, looking around for Robin.

"There's my princess." Her father, Henry, emerged from the living room. He held out his hands to her, tears in his eyes. "You look beautiful."

"Daddy." She grinned, hugging him.

He pulled away. "Well, I've thoroughly vetted your date for this evening and feel confident sending you with him."

"You what?" She grew nervous. "Is Robin in there?"

Henry stepped aside, revealing Robin Locksley standing in the entrance to her living room. His dark blond hair was gelled back and he looked drop dead gorgeous in his tuxedo with a red vest to match her dress. One of his assistants had requested a picture of Regina's dress in order to dress him accordingly, Ruby had explained a few weeks ago when she snapped the picture.

With blue eyes fixed on her, Robin stepped forward with a dazzling smile and one arm behind his back. "It's so nice to meet you at last, Regina."

She knew she should say something but her tongue felt like cotton and her mind was unable to work hearing that British accent in person. Cora sighed and rolled her eyes. "Don't stand there like an idiot, Regina. Thank him for doing this. He's a very busy man."

"Oh, no. Don't guilt her," he replied, glaring at her mother before looking back to her. "I want to do this. You deserve to have fun, Regina."

"Thank you," she whispered, still amazed she was only feet away from Robin Locksley.

He smiled before biting his lip, sending the familiar butterflies aloft in her stomach, and holding out a beautiful red rose corsage. "For you, milady."

She held out her arm and he slid it on her arm. Regina smiled at it. "It's beautiful."

"You're beautiful," he said. "No one is going to notice me."

"I doubt it. You're Robin Locksley," she said, feeling her cheeks heat up as she lowered her eyes.

"I hate to break this up, but we don't have much time. I want to get some pictures and you don't want to be late meeting everyone," Henry said, holding up his camera.

A petite woman sped out of the kitchen, coming to a stop next to Regina's father. She had blonde hair pulled into a bun atop her head and wore a green shirt over jeans and boots.

"Sorry," she said, holding up her camera. "I'm all ready to take pictures."

Her accent was different than Robin's but Regina wasn't able to place it. She also knew Robin had no siblings, so who was this person? Why was she taking pictures?

"This is my assistant, who goes by Tink," Robin explained, motioning to the woman.
She waved. "I'm just here to take the pictures. Then I'll be out of your hair. Promise. By the way, you look absolutely gorgeous."

"Thank you," Regina said, smoothing down her skirt.

Cora nodded as she tilted her head, taking the two in. "They do make a beautiful couple. The media is going to eat them up."

As Regina marveled at her mother's change in tone, Robin frowned. "I didn't do this as some publicity stunt. I really wanted to take Regina to the prom so she could have a good time with her friends."

His words and sincerity touched Regina and she felt her stomach flip again as her heart fluttered. She was certainly a lucky girl, even if just for this night.

"But you are going to release some pictures," Cora said. Regina could see the wheels spinning in her mother's mind and feared whatever it was she planning.

Tink stepped in. "We'll probably release one with a press release tomorrow. Regina was trending and a lot of people shared her video. Naturally they want to know how the prom went."

"We can focus on that later," Henry said. "For now, let's get some pictures and then take these two to meet the limo."

Henry drove them all to Mary Margaret's house, where they had agreed to assemble and meet the limo that would take them to prom. Regina sat next to Robin, unable to say anything to him. For his part, he just sat there with his arm around her shoulders while he watched her town pass them by.

"You have a lovely little town here," he said. "It seems like something out of an old TV show."

"Where did you grow up, Robin?" Henry asked.

"Nottingham," Regina answered absentmindedly, "with his mother and father. He's an only child."

There was a pregnant pause and when she saw Robin's amused smile, she realized what she had said. Her cheeks burned and she cleared her throat. "Sorry. You must think I'm a stalker or something."

"Of course not. All that information is out there. I'd expect any fan to know it," he replied. He crinkled his nose. "It just still astonishes me that anyone would care to know that about me."

"You're amazing," she told him. "Your music and your lyrics...I know you write them and the emotion you put into them...You're a genius."

Tink groaned from the backseat. "Please. His head is big enough."

"Don't listen to her," Robin replied, smiling as he leaned closer to Regina. "Go on."

She chuckled until her mother spoke up. "I think my daughter's hero worship may have blinded her. I doubt pop songs are considered genius."

"Cora," Henry warned.

As her mother rolled her eyes, Regina frowned. "The songs are beautiful and the lyrics really speak to me. Especially Beautiful Soul. I listened to that a lot after losing Daniel."

She grew quiet and was surprised when Robin took her hand. "I'm sorry for your loss," he whispered.

"I tweeted you," she whispered, unable to hold it back. "I told you how much that song meant to me after his death. You probably never saw it."

He frowned, glancing back at Tink. She leaned forward. "I generally manage Robin's social media. And there are a lot of things tweeted to him on a daily basis. We also don't see everything."

"That's okay," she replied, looking away.

"No, it's not," he replied, squeezing her hand. "I wish I had seen that tweet. It sounds like you needed some support."

"She had plenty of support," Cora snapped.

Regina frowned. In some ways, her mother was right. Her father and her friends rallied around her to help her with her grief. Cora, though, had thought a few days was long enough for Regina's "carrying on" and that she should stop it after that.

"We're here," Henry said, parking the car as the air grew thick with tension.

Unbuckling, Regina went to open the door but Robin stopped her. "Wait. I'll help you out," he said with a smile.

He opened his door and hopped out. Tink leaned forward. "He really is a gentleman. And is really excited about this."

"Why?" Regina asked. "I'm sure he has better things to do than escort me to the prom."

"There are a few things about Robin we've been able to keep out of the press," Tink replied, cryptically.

Before Regina could ask her for more information, the door slid open and Robin was holding out his hand to her. "Milady?"

She took his hand, enjoying how strong and warm it was, and let him help her out of the van. People had gathered by the Blanchard residence and the girls started to scream as Robin walked her to the front door. He gave them a quick wave but didn't go over to speak to them, remaining by her side.

"You can go say hi, if you want," she said, knowing how Robin loved his fans.

He shook his head, lacing their fingers together. "I'm here to be your date, so you will be my main focus."

Regina's heart skipped a few beats and she smiled as Eva Blanchard opened the door. "Oh, Regina, you look beautiful."

"Thank you, Mrs. Blanchard," she said. "Is everyone else here?"

"Yes, they are in the living room. We've just been waiting on you and Robin."

Everyone stood when Regina and Robin entered, still hand-in-hand. She surveyed her friends, admiring everyone's dresses. Mary Margaret looked like a princess in a pink ball gown with a floral pattern on the bodice. It had cap sleeves made of lace and a sweetheart neckline. She wore a
diamond necklace and matching earrings, as well as a jewel encrusted Alice band in her brown hair. It fell in soft curls around her face.

Beside Mary Margaret, Emma wore a strapless white sheath gown. Her blonde hair was pulled into a high ponytail and curled. Across the room, Ruby wore a red and black high-low gown with a corset bodice while Dorothy wore a strapless blue satin gown. Both had pinned their dark hair up, though Ruby had added some red streaks to her hair.

"The administration is going to kill you when they see your hair," Regina told her. Ruby shrugged. "They've let others dye their hair for prom. Just as long as it's gone by Monday."

Mary Margaret was bouncing, eyes shining. "I can't believe it worked! Robin Locksley is here escorting you to prom!"

"It's so nice to meet you," Robin said, releasing Regina's hand. She missed the warmth immediately.

"Us? Really?" Mary Margaret seemed flustered.

He nodded. "I value true friendship. And it's clear Regina has it in all of you."

"He's going to make Mary Margaret cry and then we'll have to do her makeup all over again," Ruby grumbled.

Mary Margaret glared at her. "Shut up."

Robin chuckled, heading over to meet David and Killian while the girls crowded around Regina. Emma smiled, eyes bright as she asked: "So? What's he like?"

"We haven't really spent much time alone," Regina admitted. "But he seems nice. A true gentleman."

"Nice? That's all?" Mary Margaret sounded disappointed. Regina wondered what she had expected to happen.

Eva came in. "Time for pictures! You don't want to be late to the prom."

Robin took Regina's hand again, smiling. "You ready for your close up?"

"Did you really just say that?" She raised an eyebrow.

He chuckled and Tink rolled her eyes. "Get used to it. He's a walking cliché and proud of it. Now come on! I want to get pictures of you two!"

They trooped outside to take pictures on the Blanchard's massive lawn. At first, they decided to get creative as they posed in the gazebo. Regina sat on the bench, crossing her legs with Emma as Killian and Robin stood outside the gazebo with David.

After a few more silly pictures, they then posed for the standard prom shots. Everyone lined up in pairs and Robin wrapped his arms around Regina, holding her close. "Is this okay?" he asked in a whisper.

"Yes," she said, growing a bit dizzy as he got closer. He smelled of pine and other woody scents, which seemed fitting for him. Regina liked it.

As the adults took their pictures, Regina grew more comfortable in Robin's strong arms. For a few minutes, she allowed herself to believe they were more than pop star and fan and their relationship
would last past this one night.

Soon, though, the pictures were done. Hugs were exchanged before the teens climbed into the limo. Robin sat right next to Regina, his leg brushing against her as he rested his arm behind her.

The limo pulled away and Emma held up her arms. "Prom, here we come!" she yelled. Everyone cheered.

Naturally, her classmates wanted pictures with Robin. He agreed to do a half-hour only. "I'm here with Regina and I plan to be a proper date," he told them over their disappointed sighs.

It touched Regina.

While Robin posed, Regina spent time with her friends from the debate team. Kathryn Midas gave her a big hug when she saw her. "I'm so glad you decided to come. Prom wouldn't be the same without you."

"I'm glad I came too," she said, taking in the whole room.

Prom was held in the ballroom of the fanciest hotel in Storybrooke and the decorating committee, headed by Mary Margaret, had done a great job. Their theme was "Dreams Come True" and somehow that had translated into a gold and white color scheme. Balloons floated overhead and Regina was pretty sure those were going to shower down on them by the end of the night.

Several round tables were set up around the dance floor and were covered in gold and white tablecloths. "Are the plates and silverware gold?" Regina asked, scrunching her nose.

"Painted," Kathryn replied. "Imagine eating off real gold plates?"

Regina laughed but it died as the football team approached her, led by Kathryn's boyfriend, Frederick. He had also been Daniel's best friend. They had played together since the Pee-Wee league and had been just as hard by Daniel's death as she had been.

"Hello, Regina," he said as he took Kathryn's hand. His eyes flickered over to Robin, who still had a line of people waiting to take a picture with him. "Your date is quite the hit."

"He's a big pop star, of course he's a hit," she replied, stomach in knots. She was getting the feeling he wasn't thrilled she came with someone else, especially someone like Robin.

Kathryn felt it too since she frowned as she hooked her arm with Regina's. "I think it's great that Regina is here at all. Who cares who she came with?"

"I guess," Frederick mumbled, averting his eyes.

But his girlfriend wasn't done. She poked his chest. "And you know Daniel would want her to be here and to be happy. She's allowed to see other people. She's not a widow."

"I miss Daniel," Regina assured him. "I miss him every day. And I'll probably always miss him. But I can't stop my life because he's gone."

For the first time since the accident, she finally believed those words. She believed she deserved to keep living and that it would be what Daniel wanted. It gave her confidence and she held her head high.

"Look," she continued, "I don't expect anything to happen between me and Robin tonight. He's just
being my date because he feels bad and wants me to have a good time. And this is positive publicity for him. I'm just going to have fun with my classmates before we graduate. And that includes you."

Frederick nodded. "You're right. I'm sorry, Regina. I hope you have a good time."

"You too," Regina said before excusing herself with a hug from Kathryn.

She approached her table just as Robin finished his pictures. He smiled at her. "Sorry about that, lovely. But I'm all yours now."

"It's okay," she said as her face flushed again. She wished her hair wasn't pulled up into a curly bun so she could use it to shield her face. "I get it."

"I'm here for you," he stressed, gently gripping her arms and slouching to look her in the eyes. They were even bluer in person.

Her heart skipped a beat as she smiled. "Thank you. But you might not be saying that when you see me dance."

"You've seen my music videos," he replied. "Dancing is definitely not my strong suit. Trust me, you have nothing to worry about."

By the time the prom was in full swing, Regina was having the time of her life. Robin had been right that he wasn't some professional dancer. In fact, their talent levels were about the same. So she relaxed and just let the music move her, dancing with her pop star date.

Her favorite moments, though, were when they slowed dance. Robin held her close and she rested her head on his shoulder, enjoying his woodsy scent and just being with him. They swayed in time to the music and a few times, she thought he had dropped kisses into her hair.

Of course, it was probably all in her imagination.

The music died down as the DJ took the mic. "All right, party people, I need you to take your seats for a bit. We have some presentations to do!"

Robin's hand found hers again as they returned to their table. Emma fanned herself with the program. "I needed this break."

"My feet are killing me," Ruby said, groaning. "I'm taking my shoes off when the dancing resumes. I don't care what the teachers say."

Dorothy shook her head. "I told you to get comfortable shoes. You refused to listen."

Ruby's retort died away as Dr. Hopper, the principal, took the mic. "Can I have silence please?"

As the low hum was replaced by shushes and then silence, he nodded, the glare from the spotlight bouncing off his glasses. "Thank you. Now, this is a celebration of you as a class before the craziness of finals and preparation for graduate. So enjoy these moments. Cherish them and each other. You are a great group of kids and Storybrooke Academy is proud to call you ours."

"He's getting sentimental again," Killian muttered. "Who wants to place bets on when he'll start crying?"

"We put together a video montage. My bets are during it," Dorothy whispered.
Dr. Hopper started talking again as he opened an envelope: "It's my pleasure to crown your prom king and queen. You all cast your votes and your winners are...David Nolan and Mary Margaret Blanchard!"

They gasped as everyone at their table began clapping and cheered, even Robin. Emma and Killian hauled their friends to their feet. "Go and get your crowns!" Killian told them, pushing them forward.

David led Mary Margaret up to where Dr. Hopper and Vice Principal Blue stood waiting to crown them. Everyone continued to root for them as the DJ started up the music again. "Time for a royal dance," he said. "Storybrooke Academy Class of 2016, your Prom King and Queen!"

Regina watched her friends share their dance, both grinning the entire time. "I'm so happy for them," she said.

"They deserve it," Dorothy agreed. "They're the best couple in school."

The song ended and David returned to the table with Mary Margaret. Both were smiling wide as they sat down again, crowns still in place.

Dr. Hopper stepped up again. "Okay, okay. Now, the prom committee has put together a little video to celebrate all of you. Please enjoy!"

As the lights in the ballroom dimmed, the giant screen behind the DJ flickered to life. Pictures from their time at Storybrooke Academy flashed on the screen as the DJ played the set requested by the committee. Some of the pictures went back to their elementary school days and a picture of little Regina, Mary Margaret and Emma as flowers in the school play made the trio chuckle.

Pictures of Daniel were mixed in and she found herself tearing up, but they were happy tears. These were good memories and didn't hurt as much. She was healing.

The montage ended but the lights remained dimmed. Dr. Hopper's voice echoed through the ballroom. "We have one more video—a tribute to a lost friend."

Regina froze as Daniel's handsome face—light brown hair, blue eyes, warm smile—filled the screen. The song they had played at his funeral and memorial service played, bringing all the grief back.

"Oh god," Dorothy breathed. She turned to Regina, wide-eyed. "I didn't know about this. I swear to God, Regina. I would've warned you."

It felt like all the air had left the room and the temperature had risen several degrees. She lifted her skirt as she stood, running from the ballroom and to the terrace that over looked the Storybrooke forest.

Lights were strung up around the trees on the terrace and a soft light from lamps illuminated the area. The cool evening air felt refreshing against her heated skin and she took a deep breath of it. She wandered over to one of the iron tables and sat down, staring at nothing as she waited for the tears to come.

Every time she thought she was finally moving on, when she thought it didn't hurt as much, something would happen to bring it all back. Was this how she was going to spend the rest of her life? Would she ever be allowed to move on?

"I've brought you some water," Robin said, approaching her. He held up a rectangular packet. "And some tissues."
"Thank you," she said, taking the tissues. "I'm sorry. I'm sure you didn't sign up to escort a mess of a teenage girl."

"No, I signed up to escort you." He sat down, thinking about something. "I've never told anyone this in any interview, but I wrote 'Beautiful Soul' for someone."

She dabbed her eyes. "Really? Who?"

"My girlfriend, Marian," he replied.

Girlfriend. Of course he had a girlfriend. He was attractive, kind, funny, talented and so many more things anyone would want. Regina hadn't expected him to fall for her while at the prom (though maybe a part of her had hoped it) but it still hurt to know he had a girlfriend.

"And she's okay with you escorting some strange teenage fan to her prom?" Regina asked.

"She died," he said softly. "She got sick and faded before my eyes. There was nothing I could do but write her a song. I even sang it at her funeral. Or tried to. My bandmate Will had to finish it for me."

A lump formed in Regina's throat as she took in the pain in his eyes. He certainly knew what she was going through, she realized as she laid her hand on his arm. "I'm sorry."

He nodded. "Thank you."

"Is...Is that why you really wanted to take me to the prom?" she asked. "Because you also lost someone you loved?"

"Yes," he replied. "I thought you were a kindred spirit. I was right."

She smiled. "Really? I didn't think you got to know me tonight."

"I've started to." He pulled something out of a pocket and handed it to her. "That's my personal cell phone number. I'm trusting you with it."

"You're okay with me calling you?" she asked, surprised. She had expected a hug and maybe a kiss on the cheek at the end of the night and then nothing else.

He nodded. "I've enjoyed my time with you so far, Regina, and I want to get to know you better. And I know what you're going through. So don't hesitate to call me."

Regina leaned over, kissing his cheek. "Thank you. For everything. You've been the best prom date ever."

"Glad to hear it." He bit his lip before standing, holding out his hand to her. "You ready to rejoin the party?"

She took his hand, nodding. He laced their fingers together and led her back inside, where a ballad was playing. They didn't stop until they reached the dancefloor and he pulled her close. Regina rested her head on his shoulder as they swayed to the music.

As the song played on, she wasn't sure what she had expected to happen that night. But her burgeoning friendship with Robin Locksley was a pleasant surprise. She couldn't wait to see where it led.
"Happy birthday, Mom!" Henry entered her bedroom, carrying a tray loaded with pancakes and coffee.

Regina sat up, smiling at her son. "Henry. You didn't have to do this."

He gave her a look as he set the tray down over her legs. "It's your birthday. Of course, I want to celebrate. And breakfast in bed is tradition. Eat up!"

She chuckled and cut into the pancakes, a sign her little prince was growing up. When he was younger, her breakfast was usually cereal and orange juice. He eventually graduated to toast and learned to make coffee. Now, he was making pancakes. What would he be doing next?

"Thank you, Henry," she said. "This was so thoughtful."

He grinned, folding his legs underneath him to look at her. "What else do you want to do? It's your special day."

She chewed her pancake for a bit, carefully wording her answer. "I think I just want to have a normal day, Henry. That's all. No fuss, no distractions. Just go on like it's any other day."

"But it's not another normal day," Henry insisted. "It's your birthday and we should celebrate, Mom."

"We are celebrating. You've made me breakfast and then we'll have some cake tonight, just you and me. Okay?" Regina tucked two fingers underneath his chin, smiling at him as she prayed he would back down.

He sighed, his shoulders sagging. "Is this about Robin?"

"No," she said, meaning it. "You know I've never been big about celebrating my birthday. I'd rather celebrate yours."

"Because I'm worth celebrating," Henry replied. When she nodded, he then countered: "I think you're worth celebrating."

Her heart melted and she put the tray aside so she could hug him. "If it means so much to you, then I guess we can go to dinner at Granny's and you can invite the Charmings. How's that?"

His smile lit up the room. "That sounds great, Mom. I know everyone will appreciate it."

"Yeah, yeah," she replied before holding up a finger. "I draw the line at Granny's wait staff singing to me. Do we understand?"
"Don't worry, Mom. It'll be a quiet affair. I promise." He hopped off the bed. "I need to go call Grandma. You enjoy your breakfast."

Once Henry was gone, she pulled the tray back and dug into her cooling breakfast. It was just one dinner with the Charmings. She figured the worst that would happen was an off-key rendition of "Happy Birthday" over the cake while the entire restaurant tried not to stare. It seemed tolerable.

She hoped.

Regina took a deep breath before opening the door to Granny's diner that night. She had spent the afternoon pampering herself in anticipation (and at Henry's insistence she relax), soaking in a bubble bath and then using a facial mask as well as other products for her skin. Dressed in red, her power color, Regina definitely felt confident.

It still didn't mean she was prepared to spend an entire evening with the Charmings and their annoying optimistic tendencies.

She stepped inside and spotted Henry waving at her from one of the booths. Regina waved back and started to head toward the booth. The other patrons nodded in acknowledgment of her, a change from just a few years prior when most wouldn't have made eye contact with her. As she approached the booth, one waitress smiled as she passed. "Happy birthday, Madam Mayor."

"Thank you," she forced herself to say. She then turned on her son. "What was my one condition?"

He grinned. "Relax, Mom. We had to give Granny the cake, so everyone found out. But I made it clear that there is to be no singing."

"Don't worry, Regina," Emma piped up. "I think it's a bit embarrassing to have the staff sing to you as well."

Snow beamed up at Regina. "Thank you so much for letting us come to your birthday dinner. It means a lot."

"I guess it does," she agreed, sliding in next to Henry. It felt both strange yet right to be celebrating with her stepdaughter and her family.

Hook cleared his throat, picking up the menu. "So, Your Majesty, what will it be for your special day?"

"And don't think of ordering something super healthy," Emma added. "Calories don't count on your birthday."

Regina gave her a look over the menu but couldn't help her amused smile as she perused the options. Granny's menu hadn't changed much over the past thirty years but she still looked every time, just in case something new had snuck its way onto the list of offerings.

In the end, she decided to have a grilled chicken sandwich and French fries. It was enough to keep Emma from teasing her and they all soon fell into an easy conversation as their food arrived.

By the time their dishes were cleared away, Regina felt quite relaxed. Though she wouldn't admit it out loud, the dinner had been exactly what she needed for her birthday. She rubbed Henry's back, smiling at him in gratitude. He must've picked it up because the smile he gave her back seemed a bit smug.
Granny approached the table, carrying a red velvet cake with lit candles. She placed it down in front of Regina. "Now, I know you don't want my staff to sing, but can a few friends sing for you?" she asked.

Regina bit her lip before sighing. "I guess. Just as long as it doesn't turn out to be the entire diner."

"Fair enough," she replied. "But it's just everyone at this booth. Is that fine?"

"Yes," Regina conceded. "Just...not so loud."

Granny rolled her eyes. "Okay. On three. One...two...three…"

The singing wasn't too bad and Regina found herself cringing only once. It was blissfully short and then Granny was saying: "Make a wish and blow out the candle."

Surrounded by her smiling family, Regina realized she had no choice. Yet she didn't know what she was going to wish for. Maybe she could just blow out the candle without making a wish…

*You know what you want. What's the harm in wishing for it?* asked a traitorous voice in her head that sounded suspiciously like Tink.

*It won't come true. It can't come true. I'll just end up with a broken heart,* she argued with herself.

*Come on, Regina. You've seen the power of wishes. Just believe.*

"Regina?. The candle is starting to drip wax over the frosting," Emma said. "Make a wish and blow."

Regina glared at her but took a deep breath. She blew out the candle as her wish echoed around her mind:

*I wish Robin and Roland would come back to me.*

Everyone clapped and Granny picked up the cake. "I'll go get this cut up and be right back."

She walked off as Snow pulled something from her bag. It was a small wrapped box with a purple bow on top. "I know you probably didn't want any gifts, but I found this and knew it was for you."

Curious, Regina unwrapped it and lifted the lid. Sitting on a bed of cotton was a beautiful tan father with dark brown tips. Her heart beat faster as she picked it up, rolling the feather between her fingers. "Is this…?"

"I think so," Snow said. "It looks like a feather from an arrow and both David and Hook said it looked like the ones they saw on Robin's arrows."

"It must've been floating around Storybrooke since Zelena lost it," Henry said, smiling at her. "And now it's come back to you."

Regina smiled, holding the feather to her heart as she looked at Snow. "Thank you. This means a lot to me."

Granny returned with a tray laden with slices of cake. "Okay, who wants a piece?" she asked.

As the others reached for their slices, Regina tucked the feather inside her purse. Perhaps her wish had come true after all, even if not in the exact way she had meant.
Zelena showed up on her doorstep a few days later, rocking a fussy Peanut in her arms. She had dark circles under her eyes and looked paler than usual. Regina frowned. "Are you okay?" she asked.

"Robyn has been crying all the time," Zelena said. "I think she's teething and I'm the one feeling the pain."

"Trust me, Zelena, your pain is nothing to what she's experienced. Do you have a teething ring or teething biscuits for her?" Regina asked, taking her niece into her arms.

Zelena frowned, digging through her diaper bag. "I think I have something in here. But I don't get how a plastic ring is supposed to help her."

"You're supposed to put it in the freezer. The cold will soothe her sore gums and give her something to bite on."

"Oh," Zelena replied. "They don't tell you that."

Regina sighed. "You can always ask for help. No one can parent without it. Trust me."

"Even an expert like you?" Zelena snapped.

"Trust me, I was no expert when I first adopted Henry," she replied, bouncing the girl. "I made plenty of mistakes with him."

"Like not revealing your true self to him?"

That surprised Regina and she gaped at her sister. "What do you mean by that?"

Zelena smirked as she approached. "Your other, better half said she regretted hiding herself from Henry, which was why he pushed her...you...away. She warned me about doing the same thing with Robyn."

"Is that why you were housing her? Turned Archie into a cricket again?" Regina asked, concerned. "So you could show your daughter how wicked you are?"

"Yes," Zelena replied, grinning with happiness. "Can you imagine what a pair we would be?"

Fear and disgust filled Regina. And then anger burned inside her. "This is what Robin feared you would do. This is why he didn't want you to raise her."

Zelena's smile dimmed. "Well, he isn't here, is he?"

"And whose fault is that?" Regina snapped back.

"You can't keep blaming me for that," Zelena argued. "Hades threatened you and Robin took the blast. May I remind you I kept Hades from finishing the job?"

"We shouldn't have been in that position in the first place, Zelena! We warned you that Hades had ulterior motives, that he wasn't too be trusted. You barricaded yourself and Robyn with him in my office. You didn't give us much of a choice."

"You could've chosen to trust me," Zelena yelled back. "You could've let me handle Hades."

Regina shook her head. "The entire town would be in the Underworld if we let you do that."

"Don't be dramatic," her sister said, sneering.
"I don't think I am," Regina replied. She looked down at her niece, realizing she had been chasing a
damn feather when her last remaining connection to Robin was his sweet daughter. A sweet
daughter who was now in danger. "I don't think I can let you keep her, Zelena."

The air crackled with tension as the temperature seemed to drop several degrees. "You can't do that.
I'm her mother," Zelena said.

"I have to consider Robyn's best interests. Especially since Robin isn't here to do that," Regina
replied.

Zelena let out a humorless laugh. "Like you actually give a damn. You certainly haven't since he
died."

"I've been busy," Regina protested weakly, though she knew Zelena was right. She hadn't paid
much attention to Robyn and it almost cost the girl so much.

"Well, I think that's been enough," Zelena said, trying to take Robyn from her aunt's arms. "It's time
for us to go."

Regina took a step back, holding Robyn closer to her chest. "You can leave. Robyn is staying here.
With me."

"On what grounds?"

"Where should I begin?" Regina countered. "You're sharing a house with my evil half, plotting with
her and have admitted to me that you hope to make Robyn as wicked and evil as you two."

She swore steam came out of her sister's ears. "You can't just take her from me! I'm the only parent
she has ever known!"

"That's a lie and you know it. Robin did everything in his power to take care of this little girl and
keep her safe."

"Which is why he foisted her off on the fairies and followed Emma down to the Underworld,"
Zelena said.

Regina wanted to pull her sister's hair out. "We went over that. And at least we made arrangements
for her. You just leave her in the cabin while off helping the Queen."

"I have that farmhouse charmed and warded to kingdom come. I can hear Robyn cry anywhere in
this town and can be by her side with a wave of my hand," Zelena argued.

"That's not good enough, Zelena. Babies need constant attention. She'll be crawling soon-and then
walking. If she's teething, she's probably already trying to put things in her mouth. What if she puts
the wrong thing in there and you're not around?" Regina asked.

Zelena scoffed. "Like you would be any better? You're always running around with those so-called
heroes. What would you do with Robyn?"

It was a valid question. Regina looked down at her niece, who had fallen asleep despite the argument
going on around her, and knew what her answer was in her heart. "I'd limit my help to whatever I
could do while keeping an eye on Robyn. And if need be, then I would get her adequate care. I
would put her first."

"We'll see," Zelena snarled. "We're not done yet, little sister. Not by a long shot."
She dropped the diaper bag to the floor and then flicked her wrist, disappearing in a cloud of green smoke. Regina sagged into the nearest chair, still rocking Robyn. She smiled at the baby girl before kissing her forehead. "Don't worry, Peanut. I'll keep you safe. Just like your daddy did."

Regina adjusted to having a baby in the house again. It was easier with her magic, able to conjure up a nursery and all the supplies she would need. Baby Robyn didn't seem to notice the change in her caregivers, making Regina feel guilty that she had too many changes in her short life so far. However, she knew it was best that Zelena not keep the baby girl with her. Not if she was reverting to her wicked ways and determined to raise Robyn to be the same.

She owed it to Robin.

It was difficult not to rush off with the others when something came up now. Regina often had to hold back, remaining with Peanut while she did research. The baby didn't seem to mind, enjoying bouncing in her carrier while Regina played with one of her tiny feet. And if Regina was needed, Henry or Belle often stepped in to watch Peanut for a few hours.

Peanut was also too young to notice that her aunt couldn't bring herself to call the baby "Robyn" and had resorted to the nickname she had given her hours after her birth. No matter what Regina called her, Peanut lit up at the sound of her voice and would try to reach out for her, wanting a cuddle. Regina always obliged.

"You look happy, Mom," Henry said one night. They were sitting on the couch together, him watching a movie while she fed a sleepy Peanut.

"Hmm?" She looked up, noticing her son watching her with a smile on his face. "What?"

"It's just since Peanut came, you've been happier. Even when you're frustrated that you can help like you once did," he explained, moving closer to her.

Regina paused, thinking it over. "I guess I am. I've been so focused on what I lost, I neglected what Robin left behind."

He nodded. "I always wondered why you didn't try to keep her. I couldn't tell if it was because you were giving Zelena a chance or because she reminded you too much of Robin."

"I guess it was both," Regina admitted. "And then I was so focused on my evil half, I didn't stop to think about the most innocent person involved in this."

"I don't think the Evil Queen would ever hurt her," Henry offered. "She may have some questionable parenting beliefs, but she's a mother at heart. Just like you."

She melted at that and kissed her son's cheek. "Thank you. But the Evil Queen is focused on tearing this family apart and Zelena is borderline neglectful, not fully understanding what a baby needs. I should've fought harder for her."

Tears sprang to her eyes as she thought of an adorable young boy with an unruly mop of dark curls, sparkling brown eyes and irresistible dimples. "I should've fought harder for Roland too."

"You didn't have much of a choice," Henry assured her. "The Merry Men chose to go back and you had agreed it was best for Roland to stay with those who knew him and Robin best."

"I know, but he once asked me if I was his new mommy. Robin and I told him that he could consider
me that if he wanted. Because I saw him as another son. And then I allowed him to go away. What kind of mother does that?” She bit back a sob.

Henry stood and got the tissue box, handing it to her. Regina pulled out a tissue and dabbed at her eyes. "Thank you. And I'm sorry. You're the kid, I'm the parent. You should be unloading on me, not the other way around."

"It's okay," he replied. "Besides, I'll keep that in mind for my next round of teenage angst."

She chuckled as someone rang the doorbell. Henry jumped up. "I'll get it. You focus on Peanut."

He left the room and she eased the bottle from between the baby girl's lips. She brought Peanut to her shoulder, patting her back. A soft burp came from the girl followed by a big one. Peanut then settled down, her little face buried in the crook of Regina's neck as she hummed softly to the baby.

"Where's Regina?" For a moment, she thought she was hallucinating Roland's sweet voice. Then he appeared in her living room, beaming at her. "Regina!"

"Roland!" she replied, letting out a little laugh. "My little knight is back."

He nodded, climbing onto the couch and hugging her. She wrapped her free arm around him, enjoying the feeling of having both of Robin's children in her arms.

It felt perfect.

"Regina," Little John said, appearing in her living room. He clutched his hat in his hands as he watched her.

She smiled at him. "Hello, Little John. I'm surprised to see you here."

"I'm sure," he replied, looking nervous. "We've been trying to get back here almost from the moment we got back to the Enchanted Forest. It took some time to find a way back, though."

"Why?" she asked, confused. Were things so bad in the Enchanted Forest that they were forced to come back?

"Because I missed you," Roland replied, leaning against her shoulder. "I wanted to come back to you."

She bit back a sob as she kissed his forehead. "I'm very glad to have you back."

"I'm sorry," Little John said. "I shouldn't have taken him from you."

"You had every right to. I'm sure Robin would've wanted him with you. You've known him since he was a baby," Regina replied. "Though I do wish you had stayed here in Storybrooke at least."

He nodded. "A few us have come back. We're staying at Granny's so we're close to Roland."

"You mean…” Her question died on her tongue.

Little John knew what she wanted to ask. "Yes, Roland is going to live with you. It's what he wants."

"Can I, Regina?" he asked, still leaning against her.

She kissed his head. "Of course you can, sweetheart."
Little John said good night to Roland and assured him that he was just at Granny's. Roland, though, was happy being back with Regina and he played with his little sister as Henry showed the older man out.

Henry returned, sitting down next to his mother. "Looks like we have a full house again," he said with a smile.

"We do," she replied, feeling her cheeks start to hurt from how big she was smiling. It fell a little as she grew concerned. "Are you okay with that?"

"Of course. This house has always been too big for just the two of us," he replied, grinning. He laid his head on her shoulder now that Peanut was resting against her breasts. Regina just sat there, enjoying having all her children home safe and sound.

Perhaps the feather wasn't her wish being answered, but this—having Robin's children with her, having that bit of his soul always by her side once again.

As always, Valentine's Day snuck up on her. She didn't realize what day it was until she woke to find Peanut was not in her crib. Fighting her rising panic, Regina rushed downstairs to make sure Henry had taken the baby and not Zelena, despite all the wards and charms placed around the house to prevent that. Relief flooded through her when she saw Peanut sitting in her carrier, kicking her feet as Henry and Roland placed some pancakes on a plate.

"What is going on here?" she asked, hands on her hips.

Roland ran up to her, holding out a red paper heart. "Happy Valentine's Day!"

"Oh," she said, taking the heart with a smile. "Thank you so much."

"Henry and I made breakfast while Peanut watched. Since she can't do much as baby," he continued, taking Regina's hand and leading her over to the table.

They ate their pancakes as Roland chatted about his upcoming day at school. He loved going there and interacting with the other kids. And he loved that he was learning how to read, just like Henry.

When they were done, Henry helped clean up as Roland entertained his sister. Regina kissed her eldest son's cheek. "This was sweet. Thank you."

"You're welcome," he said. "I'm taking Violet out tonight and so I knew I wouldn't be home for dinner. I wanted to do something special for you."

Though it pained her to think of her little prince all grown up and going on dates, Regina hugged him. "I love you, Henry."

"I love you too, Mom." He then stepped away and held out his hand to Roland. "You ready for school?"

Roland nodded before hurrying over to her. He threw his arms around her waist, hugging her tightly. "I love you, Mom."

Her heart skipped a beat and she crouched down to hug him tighter. She ran her fingers through his curls. "I love you, too. Have a good day at school."

"I will." He kissed her cheek before running after Henry so he could get his coat and backpack.
Once she saw her two boys onto the bus, Regina turned to Peanut as she closed the door. The baby girl gnawed on a teething biscuit and she kissed her forehead, smelling the baby shampoo she used during the girl's bath the night before. Regina had never been one to celebrate Valentine's Day, usually just getting handmade Valentines and then a small dinner with Henry. Even when she had Robin, there was always some crisis that had prevented them from celebrating. She had always thought there would be another year, which seemed so foolish in hindsight. Now, though, with her two boys and the sweetest baby ever, Regina felt a bit more festive than usual.

"What do you say to an Auntie and Me day?" she asked the baby, holding her phone. "You and me going to the park, maybe that parent and me swimming class…?"

Peanut clapped and Regina called her assistant, telling her to hold all her calls and to inform everyone she was taking a personal day. "Spending Valentine's day with a special someone?" her assistant asked.

"I am," Regina replied, bouncing Peanut. She let out a happy gurgle. "You go spend it with someone special too."

"Thank you, Madame Mayor. Have Valentine's Day," the woman said before hanging up.

Regina set down the phone and started to head to Peanut's nursery. "Let's go get ready for our special day, hmm?"

The baby laughed in response.

Peanut took to the water like a fish. When the session ended, Regina had difficulty getting her out of the pool. She kept screaming and trying to squirm out of her arms to get back in. Regina had to hold her tight, trying to soothe her. "We'll come back, baby girl," she whispered. "I promise."

Her words did little to calm Peanut, who fought her as Regina took off her little bathing suit and put her in regular clothes again. She fussed all the way to the car and let out little cries of indignation until Regina pulled into the park. Once she saw the trees, the girl brightened and she kicked her legs as Regina took her out of the car seat. Chuckling, Regina held Peanut close. "You really are your father's daughter, aren't you?"

She put Peanut in the stroller and they went for a walk through the woods. By the time they got back to the car, Peanut was sound asleep and it was time to pick up Roland from school.

Once back at the mansion, Regina unclicked the carrier from the base in order not to wake Peanut. She let Roland in and he stopped short, pointing to the floor. "Mom, what's that?"

"What's what?" she asked before following his finger. A red rose petal lay on the floor and as she scanned the area, she saw a trail of them leading to her dining room. Her brow furrowed in confusion, unsure who would do this and coming up with only one solution:

Queenie wanted to mess with her.

She pressed her finger to her lips and motioned for Roland to follow her to the living room. Regina put down Peanut and then had him sit next to the carrier on the couch. "I need you to stay with your sister, okay?" she asked in a whisper.

"Okay," he whispered back, placing a hand on Peanut's leg. "I'll keep her safe, Mom."

Regina kissed his forehead before following the rose petals, conjuring up a fireball as she entered the dining room. It died out, though, as she took in the man laying out her fine china: Tall, with thick
blond hair that was graying at the temples, and matching blond scruff that felt wonderful against her skin. Bright blue eyes that always seemed to be able to look right into her heart and soul. Dark green sweater over a white shirt paired with black pants.

It was impossible. He couldn't be there, in her house. Which meant only one thing…

"How dare you?" Anger and grief bubbled up and she almost screamed in a primal rage.

He looked up, blue eyes wide in surprise. "Regina! I didn't hear you come in…"

She lunged at him, gripping his sweater in her fists and giving him a shake. "How dare you! This is too far, even for you."

"Regina, I don't understand…" He sounded so confused and somewhat scared but she didn't care. Queenie was an excellent actress.

"Drop the act, lose the glamor spell," she snarled. "Now is not the time for your games. Not this one, not today."

Strong arms gripped her shoulders and he pushed her back a bit, blue eyes looking into hers. "Regina, I don't know who you think I am, but I can assure you it's me. Robin."

"Robin's dead," she sobbed. "Don't play with my head and my heart. Please."

"I was dead. I know that. I remember that. But I'm not anymore. Something brought me back, Regina," he said. "I'm here now and this is true."

Even those familiar words, so reassuring before the Curse of Shattered Sight, now only brought more pain. She couldn't trust them. Queenie had all her memories and would know everything Robin had ever said to her. Tears streamed down her cheeks harder.

Perhaps Queenie finally found the way to break her.

"Is this because I took Robyn from Zelena?" she asked between sobs. "Are you trying to punish me on her behalf?"

He raised a hand to cup her cheek. "I know a way to prove I am who I say I am. Okay?"

Before she could protest, he pressed his lips to hers. Her heart skipped a beat and the familiar fire ignited low inside her. Queenie could take on his appearance, mimic his mannerisms, recreate his voice and parrot back his words, but she could never kiss like him. Nor would she smell of forest, of pine and fresh air.

This was real.

This was true.

Robin was alive.

She broke the kiss, still crying but for a whole new reason. Cupping his cheek, she smiled. "You're back."

"I am," he said before furrowing his brow in confusion. "Who did you think I was? And why would that person be avenging Zelena?"
"It's a long story," she replied with a chuckle before kissing him again. "I still can't believe you're here. How?"

He shrugged. "I honestly don't know. The last thing I remember is your face right after taking the hit from the crystal. And then I was standing in the middle of the woods. It was clear seasons had passed and I rushed back to where I thought my Merry Men had made camp."

"They went back to the Enchanted Forest. A few have come back…"

"I know," he said. "I found Little John. He told me about what had happened and how much time had passed."

She nodded before frowning. "How long have you been back?"

"Not long," he assured her. "Maybe a few days. When I realized Valentine's Day was so close, I plotted the perfect way to reveal myself to you. Apparently, there are other circumstances I probably should've been aware of."

"Yes," she agreed. "And I'll tell you all about it later. First, I think there are two other people who will be happy to see you."

Robin grinned, nodding. "Roland and Carina."

"Carina?" Regina tilted her head. "You had a name for her?"

"Yes. I thought of it while in the Underworld. I was staring up at the sky, wishing there were stars. And then I thought of the constellations, recalling one called Carina. I know it's part of a ship but I remembered hearing that as a name, it meant 'beloved,'" he explained. "And I thought about the awful circumstances that resulted in my daughter, that she would have that and who her mother was hanging over her. I wanted her to always know that she is loved and wanted."

Fresh tears streamed down Regina's cheeks. "Zelena named her Robyn after you...but I could never call her that. I nicknamed her Peanut."

He chuckled. "While that's a cute nickname and I'm honored my name was passed down to her, I think she should have her own identity. And I'm biased toward Carina."

"Me too," she agreed, taking his hand. "Come on. Let's go share her new name with her."

They entered the living room together. Roland looked up from where he was entertaining Peanut with a rattle, eyes widening when he saw who was with Regina. He jumped up and raced into Robin's arms with a joyful shout of "Papa!"

Robin held him close, tears now streaming down his face as he assured his son he was alive and wasn't going anywhere. As he did that, Regina took Peanut from her carrier and brought her over to her father. She was quickly rechristened Carina and nestled in his arm as he leaned forward to kiss Regina.

Though Henry was missing, out with Violet, Regina still felt like her family was whole again.

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That night, Regina put Roland and Carina to bed after a Valentine's dinner of lasagna and wine. As she stepped out of Roland's room, she heard soft music coming from her bedroom and headed down there. The lights were dimmed and Robin had placed several candles around her room, little flames flickering to cast an alluring glow.
She closed the door as he held out his hand, looking a bit sheepish. "Granny found Red's old iPod and let me borrow it, so the music may not be our tastes, but I thought it appropriate…"

Listening, she heard Christina Perri's voice singing about loving someone for a thousand years and she smiled, nodding. "I've heard this song," she said. "I guess it is appropriate."

Taking his hand, she let him pull her close and sway her in time to the music. She rested her forehead to his with a small smile. "I'm so glad you came back to me."

"Me too," he whispered. "Though I really am not sure how."

She chuckled. "I made a wish. On my birthday. I wanted you and Roland to come back to me. And now you have."

Robin tucked her hair behind her ear. "I have. And I think after everything we've been through, you'll understand why I can't promise you that I'll never go away again. Because if I had to do it all over again, Regina, I would step in front of that beam for you without a second thought."

"I know," she said, the same dread and sorrow building in her as she thought of Robin's lifeless body on the floor of her office.

He tilted her chin up so her eyes met his, shining with love through the dim candlelight. "But I also like to think that the universe keeps trying to make sure we end up together. So I promise to stay by your side for as long as the universe allows me the privilege to stay there."

"I promise to do the same," she said, wrapping her arms around his neck. "And before the universe decides to fuck me over again, I just want to say I love you. I realized I never said it…"

Robin pressed his finger to her lips. "You may have never said it, but I knew it. Actions speak louder than words. So do your eyes."

She kissed him, nibbling his lower lip to get him to open his mouth to her. He did so easily and her tongue swept his mouth as she started to unbutton his shirt. Robin tugged at her shirt as well, sensing where she was heading with this.

They broke the kiss so he could pull the shirt over her head, depositing it on the floor with his own. Robin kissed her neck as he removed her bra, warm hands cupping her breasts once they were free. She busied herself with undoing his pants before she lost all conscious thought and just surrendered to the fire building inside her as Robin sucked at a pressure point.

Regina kicked away her skirt as he stepped out of his pants, trying to keep his hands on her at the same time. They fell onto her bed together, now both in their underwear. He pushed himself up on his elbow, eyes looking over her body as his hands roamed it. "As beautiful as I remember," he breathed.

"You're just as I remembered," she replied, taking in his toned chest and the muscles built up after years of shooting arrows. "And you're all mine."

"Absolutely." He rolled over, hovering over her as he grinned down at her. "Always."

She swallowed, pulling him down by his neck to crash their lips together again. He was already hard against her and she could feel her panties growing wetter despite no attention paid lower than her breasts yet. Heat coiled low inside her, waiting for a release.

Robin kissed his way down her neck and then in the valley between her breasts. As he went lower,
she writhed in anticipation, enjoying the feel of his scruff dragging across her skin again. She moaned as his tongue dipped into her navel, sending a teasing jolt to her core.

He peeled her panties away, tongue flicking out to taste and tease her before he removed the garment completely. Robin slid his hands up her legs, urging them further apart as he slid between them. She bent her knees as she drew up her legs and he gave a broad lick to her sex, making her whine out his name. It made him chuckle before he continued to suck and lap at her clit.

Regina's toes curled and she grabbed at her blanket, her hips rising up to meet Robin's tongue. Sweat began to trickle down her face and she closed her eyes as she felt the coil tighten as she continued to moan, babbling nonsense.

A finger slowly entered her and she almost shouted in frustration. Robin was teasing her, tormenting her, making her feel everything and forcing her to wait for the release her body was now trembling for. Her back arched as he curled the finger, brushing against her g-spot before it pulled out again.

His lips left her clit and she opened her eyes, meeting his as he raised his head. "Are you close, lovely?" he asked, voice husky. She could only nod, not trusting her own voice to work. He chuckled. "Good."

She watched as he ducked his head down again, his tongue flicking at her clit as he inserted two fingers this time. Regina cried out, feeling her walls tighten around them. He pumped them slowly, lips closing around her overly sensitive nub again. Rational thought fled her mind and she careened over, yelling his name as she came.

Robin let her ride out her orgasm on his fingers, bringing her down. She lay there, trying to catch her breath as he shucked his own boxers. He then lay beside her, kissing her damp hair. "I'm so glad I can hear those sounds again," he said.

She hummed, wrapping her fingers around his cock and she began to pump lazily. He was already rock hard in her grasp and her thumb brushed the precum already leaking from his tip. But neither was rushed to do much about it, enjoying kissing each other as she tasted herself on his tongue.

He nuzzled her as she tried not to cry again. "I'm so scared this is just a really, really good dream," she admitted. "And that if we fall asleep, I'll wake up and you'll be gone."

"Understandable. I felt the same way the first few nights after we came back from New York," he murmured.

"One day, maybe we'll be able to fall asleep and trust that the other will be there when we wake up."

He kissed her forehead.

She let out humorless chuckle. "We have such fucked up lives."

"Well," he said, smiling, "no one can accuse us of being boring."

This time, her laugh was sincere as she curled closer to Robin. He wrapped his arm around her and hoisted her on top of him as she let out a little squeak. "What are you doing?"
"I want to see you," he replied. "All of you."

She smiled, rising up to straddle him. Her fingers toyed with his nipples as his eyes roamed her body with unhidden lust. "Like this?" she asked, purring.

He swallowed as she dragged her folds over his cock, letting him feel how wet she still was. She took his hands, bringing them up to her breasts. "What do you want?"

"You," he croaked before licking his lips. "I want to be inside you. Please."

She grinned as his thumbs flicked her nipples. "Well, I think that can be arranged."

He groaned as she sank down onto his cock, letting him fill her completely. She reached down to clutch at his shoulders, taking a few deep breaths as she reacquainted herself to the feeling of him inside her. Robin was patient, massaging her breasts as he waited for her to move again.

After a few minutes, she began to move, letting him fill her over and over as she picked up a fast pace. She wasn't going to draw this out like he had earlier. Not with the fear that this could all be taken from her at any moment. And as good as this was, as it felt, she wanted to spend as much time curled up in his arms as possible.

"Regina," he moaned, the sweetest sound she had heard since Roland called her mom. "Harder."

"You sure?" she asked, panting already.

He groaned, hands sliding from her breasts to her hips as he met her with his own thrusts. "Yes, please."

Regina picked up her speed, feeling herself climbing to that high again. She moaned, knowing she was close and hoping to take him over with her. "Come with me," she panted.

Sitting up, he kissed her as she wrapped her arms around his neck. He trailed wet open kisses down her neck as stars exploded before her eyes. She came again with his name on her lips, feeling him spill into her only a few moments later.

They collapsed back onto the mattress, Regina laying on top of Robin. Her ear was pressed to his chest, his heart racing under it. It assured her that he was truly alive and it soothed her.

"I look forward to a lifetime of this," he said, kissing the top her head.

"Mind-blowing sex?"

He chuckled. "Well, yes. But I meant lying here with you in my arms."

"Oh," she replied, smiling as she played with his chest hair. "I guess I look forward to that too."

"You don't sound too sure about that."

"I'm still not sure this isn't some wonderful dream, remember?" She sighed, closing her eyes. "I'm trying to remain cautiously optimistic."

Robin laughed. "I like that. Cautiously optimistic."

Sleep tugged at her and she rolled off him, landing on her side of the bed. "We should get under the covers," she murmured.
"Okay," he said, kissing the back of her neck. "I've got it."

He wrapped them in the blankets and spoon against her. "Good night, Regina."

"Good night, Robin," she replied. "I hope I see you in the morning."

"You will," he promised, arms tightening around her. "You will."

Regina woke up the next morning to soft kisses being trailed along her shoulder, up her neck and then someone nipping at her ear. "Good morning, lovely," Robin said, voice hoarse from sleep.

She rolled over, smiling as she saw him lying next to her. The sun backlit him, casting a beautiful glow around him as she rubbed his cheek. "Good morning," she replied.

"I told you I would be here." He grinned.

"Yes, you did." She wrapped her arms around his neck. "I'm so glad you are."

Robin kissed her. "Me too."

She continued to kiss him, pulling on top of her. As his lips found her pressure point again, Regina wondered how he was going to top this Valentine's Day next year.

She couldn't wait to find out.
Regina groaned when her mother returned to her rooms, grinning. It was never a good sign and usually meant that Regina was going to have to entertain someone her mother thought would help them but who usually just ended up boring Regina instead. "No, Mother," she said. "Go away."

"Don't you want to know why I'm here?" Cora asked, not flummoxed at all.

"You've brought someone for me to meet," Regina replied, still seated at her vanity. She wasn't going to turn to face her mother. Maybe she would get the hint and leave.

Cora nodded, leaning against her chair. "I have found him."

"Found who?" Regina asked, confused.

"The man with the lion tattoo."

That caught Regina's attention and she turned around, looking up at her Mother. "You did? Where?"

"Does it matter? I found him and he's waiting to meet you," Cora said, pulling Regina to her feet. She looked her over and shook her head. "You can't go to meet your soulmate looking like that."

Regina glanced down at her tight black pants, red leather corset and the long jewel-studded coat she wore over them. She frowned. "What's so wrong with this?"

"Just trust me." Cora raised her hand and Regina was engulfed in the familiar cloud of her mother's magic.

Annoyance flared up inside her as she recalled all the other times her mother had changed her outfit into something she deemed more appropriate. It was no doubt going to be something Regina would never choose for herself and pulled too tight to give her a tiny waist as well as a bigger bust. She was probably also going to find her feet shoved into shoes that were a size too small to boot.

When the cloud died down, Regina gasped. It had been years since she had worn a ballgown as delicate and bright as the one her mother had changed her into. The sleeves were off her shoulders, showing off her cleavage without it being overbearing, and the entire dress was a beautiful light blue color she had favored when she was younger. In fact, when she turned to face the mirror, she glimpsed the girl who wanted to run off with the stable boy rather than the Evil Queen, especially with her hair down and curled around her shoulders.

"I believe you liked this color," Cora said, placing her hands on Regina's shoulders. "You look beautiful."

"I can't believe you remembered. Actually, I didn't even think you knew," Regina said, her walls crumbling.
Cora turned her to face her, cupping her chin. She smiled. "Of course I knew, Regina. I know I was overbearing and perhaps didn't listen to you enough, but I paid attention. I knew your favorite doll was Isabella, I knew you preferred apple pie over cherry pie and I knew your favorite color was blue."

Tears pricked Regina's eyes. "Mother…"

"Now, now," Cora said, conjuring up a handkerchief and dabbing at Regina's eyes. "You don't want to ruin your makeup."

"Why did you do this for me?" Regina asked.

Her mother smiled, squeezing her arms gently. "I told you. I want to change things between us. I can't bring back Daniel but I have brought you the man with the lion tattoo. Who, by the way, is called Robin."

"Robin." Regina let the name roll around her tongue and she found she liked it. "Robin."

Cora nodded. "Now go. He's waiting for you by your apple tree."

Overwhelmed, Regina hugged her mother. "Thank you, Mother. I really do appreciate this."

"I'm glad," Cora replied before letting go of her daughter. She gave Regina a gentle push. "Go. Be happy."

Regina hurried down to her courtyard, spotting her tree in the moon's glow. A distinctly male-shaped shadow stood under it, staring up at either her apples or the stars—she wasn't sure. She stopped, feeling her heart flutter and her stomach flip as she pressed her hand to her abdomen. This was it. She was finally going to come face-to-face with her soulmate.

Her mind wandered to that fateful night all those years ago, when Tinkerbell's pixie dust had brought them to that tavern. She could still remember how warm and bright it had looked inside, even though she knew her mother would've had a fit to know Regina had even considered going into such a place. Or perhaps it looked so warm because of the man bathed in green dust sitting inside with his back to her. She couldn't tell the color of his hair or anything else about him except for the lion tattoo. What did he look like? What did his voice sound like? Would he be everything she had built up in the back of her mind when she let herself wonder about him?

Doubts then began to sneak into her mind. What if she wasn't what he liked? Who wanted to romance the Evil Queen? He would probably just look at her in disgust before storming off, if he didn't try to avenge some wrong she had committed against him. Because if she had to put money down, she probably had wronged him in some way.

The same flight response that had made her run from the tavern started to rise in Regina. She could run upstairs, tell her mother it didn't work out or that she got the wrong man with the wrong lion tattoo. Regina could once again lock away her heart and keep it safe—keep herself safe from the pain of rejection, of a happy ever after snatched away yet again.

Her feet, though, remained rooted to the spot much like her tree was rooted to the courtyard. No matter how much her head screamed at her to run, her legs would just not obey. Instead, she stood there and watched as the shadowy figure turned to face her.

"Milady?" a soft voice carrying the familiar accent of Sherwood asked. The figure stepped from beneath her tree and into the torchlight illuminating the courtyard, allowing Regina to see his face at
He was taller than her and she knew that once she took her heels off, her head would only come up to his shoulders. He was also broad-chested but had the slim physique of someone who was built more for speed and agility rather than brute strength. Thick dark blond hair fell across his forehead and matched the scruff covering his cheeks and chin. Blue eyes took her in as he stood with his hands clasped behind his back, which hid his arms. Not that she would've been able to see his tattoo anyway as he was clad in a white linen shirt with long sleeves under a green leather jerkin and black pants tucked into worn black boots. He certainly wasn't like the other men her mother had tried to pair her up with before and he looked like he went to taverns.

Still, she needed to be certain. Part of her still suspected a trick on her mother's part, even as most of her longed for her mother to be genuine this time. Holding her head high, Regina ordered: "Show me your right arm."

The man tilted his head. "Milady?"

"I need to see your right arm," she repeated before softening her tone. "Please, it's important."

He nodded, bringing his arms back to the front of his body. Regina watched as he unbuttoned his right sleeve, rolling it up to his elbow. "Is this enough, milady? Or do you need to see the full arm?"

She could tell he wasn't teasing or mocking her but that he genuinely wanted to help her. Regina shook her head as she approached him. "This is enough. Thank you."

Regina took his arm in her hands and stared down at the tattoo on his wrist. It was just like she remembered. The lion roared against the black shield, marking him as her soulmate. Her fingers ghosted over it, proving it was real ink and no magic was involved. The ink had been there for some time, so it wasn't new either. Everything to her it was genuine and that her mother had found her Man With the Lion Tattoo.

"That was a youthful misadventure," he said, sounding slightly embarrassed. "I didn't realize how permanent it would be."

"I like it," she said, releasing his arm. She then bobbed a quick curtsy. "I'm Regina."

He smiled, bowing slightly to her. "Robin of Locksley, at your service."

The name rang a bell and she racked her memories to find out why. As she found something, she frowned. "Robin Hood? The thief?"

"That would be me," he admitted before looking around. "I guess this where your guards come and arrest me. I thought it might be a trap but your mother seemed so earnest…"

Regina shook her head. "There is no trap. No guards waiting to arrest you. And I promise you can leave if that's what you want."

He nodded, smiling softly. "Thank you."

"May I ask you something?" When he nodded, she took a deep breath and continued: "What did my mother tell you to get you here?"

Robin's smile faded and he grew somber. "She found me trying to buy medicine for my son. He's been sick since he was born and the medicines he needs is hard to come by. Your mother said you could provide those medicines for me."
Pain filled her. Would her mother really have brought her someone she knew was married? Was this to torment her with the life she could've had if she hadn't been too scared to go into the tavern?

She wanted to turn him away, to tell him to go back to his wife and son. Yet she couldn't turn away someone who was clearly a loving father who wanted to save his young son. Nor could she stand to think of a baby in such distress.

"I can," she said softly. "Have you had a physician look him over?"

He shook his head. "I can't afford one nor can I risk discovery by inviting one to my camp. One of my men, a learned friar, has been caring for my son."

She knew many friars held good medical knowledge, though not the same as a trained physician. Regina knew what she had to do would be painful for her but she was used to pain by now. "Then go back to your camp and bring your family here to my palace. One of my physicians will tend to the boy until he is better."

Relief crossed his features and he took her hand, bringing it to his lips. She felt a jolt go through her when his lips made contact with her skin and quickly pulled her hand back. He didn't seem fazed by the rather rude gesture, smiling widely. "Thank you, Your Majesty. I appreciate this."

"You're welcome," she said. "Now go. I will let my guards know that they can let you in when you return."

With one last bow, Robin was gone.

Cora was waiting for her, smiling widely as Regina returned to her rooms. "Well? How did it go?"

Anger bubbled up inside Regina, boiling her blood. She slammed her hand down. "How did it go? He has a son, which I assume means he has a wife. So how do you think it went?"

"Oh, Regina," she sighed, sounding apologetic.

"Don't, Mother. You had to know. He said you told him that he could get medicine for his sick son here," Regina replied, sitting down at her vanity.

Cora sighed. "True. But I thought if the fairy was right about him being your soulmate, it would be a small problem we could deal with."

"Like you dealt with Eva," Regina snapped. She then turned around to glare at her mother. "Or Daniel?"

Her mother's shoulders sagged. "I really was trying, Regina. I'm not perfect…"

"Well, that's a first. Cora Mills admitting she's not perfect," Regina sneered. She turned her back to her Mother again. "Good night, Mother."

"Regina…" Cora started to plead.

"Good. Night. Mother."

Regina continued to stare at her reflection, absentmindedly brushing her hair until she heard her door close behind her mother's retreating form. She then laid the brush down and stood, passing her full-length mirror. Her full reflection stared back at her, taunting her. The young, innocent-looking
ingenue all dolled up to meet the love of her life. It was a joke.

With a wave of her hand, the gown was replaced with her black nightgown. Her hair was braided and her face wiped clean of makeup. She still looked young and like an ingenue. However, there was no leading man waiting for her.

Her life was a tragedy, not a romance.

Robin returned to the palace the following afternoon. Her guards brought him to her study, leaving him there without a word. She wore a long black lace gown with a tight bodice and long lace sleeves. Her hair was pulled up into a bun and her makeup was immaculate, including her reddest lipstick. She had her armor on to protect against the rest of the world.

He tilted his head as he took her in. "Well, this is certainly a different look from last night."

"Last night was an anomaly," she said, standing. Her eyes focused on the bundle of blankets in his arms and when she looked in, she found a sleeping baby in them. The child was pale and she could feel him struggling for air. She frowned. "It's his lungs."

"That's what Friar Tuck said," Robin replied. "Can your physician help him?"

She nodded, her heart breaking as she watched the small baby struggle for air. Regina looked up at Robin, seeing the desperation and hope in his eyes. She didn't want to let him down. "I'll send a servant to fetch the physician and I'll show you to your rooms. Is your wife waiting outside?"

A dark look passed through his eyes before he shook his head. "My wife died shortly after Roland's birth."

"I'm sorry," she said, her heart clenching at the pain in his eyes. She then glanced down at the baby in his arms. "How have you been feeding him?"

"With my waterskin," he said. "No one will refuse a hungry baby some goat's milk. It's been nourishing him."

She nodded. "That sounds good. I have plenty of goat's milk for him too. We'll need to make certain he's nourished. That will help him as much as whatever medicines my physician gives him."

"Thank you," Robin said, sounding relieved. "I just...I can't lose him. He's all I have."

All he had. For a moment, Regina envied the fact he had someone to love, someone who needed him. That he had a tangible reminder of his wife while all she had were memories of Daniel.

She then thought about how he had lost someone he loved, like her, and how he seemed to be a broken soul just like her. Perhaps that came with them being soulmates, allow them to connect better. She wondered this as she led Robin down to his rooms.

Regina gave herself a mental shake. She hardly knew this man, just that pixie dust once said he was her soulmate. That was years ago and they were different people. Were they still soulmates then? And was that enough to sustain a relationship? What if he hated her? What if she hated him?

Her mind came to a resolution: she would honor her promise to help restore his son's health. She would see what happened during that time but she knew that in the end, she was going to watch him go back to his life and leave her alone once again.
"This is your room," she said, opening the door. It was a nice sized room that must seem large to someone living in a tent in the forest. She had had her servants light a fire in the hearth so it was warm for him and his family. A large bed meant for two sat in the middle of the room and a cradle was set up next to it. A table sat in one corner with a few chairs around it and there was a large vanity as well as a wardrobe.

Robin stepped inside, eyes widening as he took it all in. "This is just for me and Roland?"

"Well, I had thought there would be…I mean, yes, it's all for you and Roland," she said, feeling a bit awkward. She motioned to another door. "There's a tub in there you can use. Just summon my servants and they'll fill it with hot water for you. They can also bring up a little tub if you want to bath Roland."

His expression softened and he gave her a little half-smile. "Thank you, Your Majesty. I appreciate this. Truly."

"The physician should be with you shortly," she said, starting to back up. She motioned to a gold cord by the door. "If you need anything, just pull the rope."

With that, she turned and fled down the hallway.

At first, Regina tried to avoid Robin and Roland. She had purposefully put them in a room far from her own and made certain to avoid their hallway whenever she wanted to go somewhere. Her physician gave her daily reports so she didn't have to go check on the baby or his father. And the times she almost ran into the two in her gardens, she only admitted to herself that she ran off in the other direction. One time, she used magic to return to her room, which scared the chambermaid cleaning it.

However, Roland's prognosis wasn't good. "I am doing everything I can, Your Majesty, but the child's lungs just aren't strong enough," her physician reported. "I am afraid all we can do is keep him comfortable in his final days."

The answer wasn't good enough for Regina and she dismissed him with a wave of her hand. She glanced around her study and smiled. If medicine couldn't heal the boy, perhaps magic could.

Regina took a deep breath and walked toward Robin's room for the first time since his arrival. A maid left the room, closing the door behind her. The frightened young woman dropped to her knees before Regina. "I was just cleaning, Your Majesty."

"I would hope so," Regina snapped. "It is your job."

The chambermaid looked near tears and Regina sighed. "Are the thief and his son still inside?"

"Yes, Your Majesty," the girl replied, voice shaky. "They are both asleep, though."

"Good. You can go now." Regina waved her off and waited until the girl had disappeared around a corner before opening the door.

Like the maid had said, Robin was asleep on top of the covers of his bed. He laid on his side, facing the cradle that contained his son. Regina tiptoed carefully around the bed, trying hard not to study him as he slept. She needed to guard her heart before it could be broken yet again.

Yet her eyes seemed to have a mind of their own and cared little for her fragile heart. They swept his long form, clad in only a shirt and breeches, as he laid curled in slumber. They watched as his chest
rose and fell in a rhythmic pattern. They studied how even in sleep all his worries were clear on his face, wrinkles appearing between his brows and his lips turned down in a frown. Her fingers then betrayed her, reaching out to try to smooth away his troubles.

Little coughs stopped her before she could touch Robin. She turned to find Roland writhing in his cradle, unable to get comfortable as he struggled for air. Her heart pounded in her chest as she picked the infant up, cradling him close. She could feel his labored breathing and how wet every cough was. There was fluid in his lungs, she knew, and they had to drain it.

"Come on, little one," she whispered to the baby. "Let's make you feel better, hmm?"

She rocked Roland as she left his father to his rest, knowing it would be easier for her to work without him hovering over her. Regina began to hum as she returned to her study. It was a lullaby her father used to sing to her when she was a girl and it made her smile.

Roland opened his eyes, revealing they were a beautiful shade of brown. Along with his dark curls and tan complexion, Regina knew he had to favor his mother. She ignored how this indicated that Robin had been attracted to a woman who shared physical characteristics with her—dark hair, dark eyes, a darker complexion than usually found in the Enchanted Forest. It only gave her a false hope that love could come to her again.

She cursed that wretched excuse for an overgrown bug and her stupid pixie dust.

The baby writhed in her arms, letting out little mewls. Regina realized she was holding him too tight and that he no doubt was picking up on her anger. She loosened her hold on him as she apologized to him. "I promise not to squeeze you like that again. I won't hurt you," she vowed.

It still felt like a lie.

Regina conjured up a little cradle near her desk and laid him inside it. Next came a blanket and she tucked him, cooing to him the whole time. "There you go. You just rest and I'll try to find something to make you feel better, okay?"

He let out a little yawn in response, brown eyes closing yet again. She rubbed his little body until he fell asleep, still having trouble breathing.

Straightening up, Regina turned to her books with a determined look in her eyes. "Let's find you a cure, Roland."

Regina tossed another book aside, letting out a frustrated groan. From his cradle, Roland began to cry and cough. Panic and guilt seized her as she reached for the baby to comfort him. "I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to startle you."

He only cried louder as she continued to rock him and she felt at a loss. She would give him anything he wanted...if only she knew what it was. "What do you need, sweetheart?" she pleaded.

"He's hungry," Robin said. She looked up to find him standing in the doorway to her study, holding his waterskin.

Robin crossed the room toward her, holding his arms for his son. Regina gave him the crying child, watching as Roland's little lips closed around the Waterskin, sucking in the goat's milk inside. He calmed down and his eyes closed again as he rolled closer to his father's chest.

"I didn't know he was hungry," she said stupidly. Of course the baby was going to get hungry. Why hadn't she thought that's what his cries meant?
His father nodded. "I've come to recognize his different cries. I am his father, after all."

"Right," she said, turning back to her books. She opened one full of healing spells, though she doubted it would be useful.

Robin leaned over her shoulder. "That looks like it's magic."

"You can read," she said sarcastically. "I didn't know they had books in the forest."

"I'm going to let that pass since you're trying to save my son, but I won't let you use magic on him," he said, serious.

She felt anger radiating off him and she looked up, frowning. "My physician can't find anything else to help Roland. Magic may be his best…"

"No." He turned and started to walk away.

His apparent dismissal of her and her hard work made her see red and she stood, slamming her hands down on her desk. "And why not? It might be the only way to save Roland."

"I used magic once before," he said, keeping his back to her. "It kept Marian alive but only long enough to give birth to Roland. And now he's sick. I was told all magic has a price."

"It does," she confirmed in a softer tone.

He turned his head, letting her see him in profile as he gazed at his son. Sorrow and guilt clung to him as he asked: "What if this the price I have to pay for trying to use magic to save them?"

Robin's pain spoke to her own and she felt her walls against him crumbling down. She approached him cautiously, not wanting to scare him off. "No, I don't think this is the price for the magic you used. And if anyone is going to have to pay a price this time, it's me."

"And you would pay it?" Robin asked, turning to face her. He held out Roland, who had filled his belly and fallen asleep in his father's arms. "You would pay it for a child that isn't yours and who you just met?"

She met his eyes, seeing disbelief yet hope in his blue irises, and said: "Yes."

"Why?" he asked.

"Because no child should suffer like this," she said, running a finger along Roland's smooth skin. "And no parent should lose a child. Even a thief who lives in the forest."

"Thank you," he said softly. Then he smiled. "Who knew an Evil Queen had a soft spot for children?"

She raised a finger. "Don't press your luck, thief."

"I won't," he said, rocking Roland. "May I stay? Perhaps help you?"

Regina sighed, wanting to keep her distance from him but not wanting to be parted from him or Roland. She hated feeling torn like this. But she nodded. "Just don't get in my way."

"Wouldn't dream of it," he replied.

"We'll see," she scoffed. "We'll see."
True to his word, Robin did stay out of her way. He often sat off to the side, watching her and helping to read books when she needed him to. At first, they worked in silence with him breaking it only to ask a question here or there. Roland slept in his cradle between them and Regina believed it was a decent amount of space.

Robin then began to ask her questions that had nothing to do with their quest—sometimes they were just general questions about magic or about life in the castle. Then there were the more personal ones about her, ones she tried to deflect. He was undeterred, though, and began talking about himself and his life since she was close-lipped about hers.

He had been raised by a minor lord and his wife but had felt stifled by his life of privilege. When his parents had tried to arrange a marriage between him and the daughter of another family, Robin had balked. He had found the girl frivolous and vain, someone he didn't want to spend the rest of his life with. Robin's father had issued an ultimatum—marry the girl or be disowned.

Robin packed a few belongs in his sack and left that night.

At first, he was able to stay in inns with the money he had taken from his father. He spent his evenings carousing, his nights with lovely women and his days sleeping. Regina did the math and figured out that it was around the time she had been taken to the tavern by Tinkerbell. Most likely she would've ended up another notch in his bedpost before he moved on.

Some soulmate.

"I started to pick up friends from my nights galivanting around," he said, flipping through a book. "But as the money started to run out, I learned who really was my friend. That was the start of my Merry Men."

"Let me guess. That's also when you started stealing?"

He nodded. "It was."

At first, he said it was easy as many of the other nobles hadn't known that Robin had been disowned by his father. He was granted entry to their fine homes and received invitations to their parties. Once inside, he could sneak his men in and they were able to ransack the houses for gold, jewels and anything that might fetch a handsome price at markets. It supported his lifestyle for a few more months.

Of course, the nobles began to notice they were being robbed and started to pinpoint Robin as the common denominator. Then they started to receive word that Robin technically was no longer one of them and they shunned him accordingly. Many set sheriffs and their own guards after him, beginning Robin's life on the run.

His skills as a thief grew sharper and he was legendary with his bow. Robin and his Merry Men kept moving around, stealing whatever they needed…and some things they didn't. "And that's how I met Marian," he said.

Regina's heart constricted and she wasn't sure she wanted to hear how her fated soulmate fell in love with someone else, married her and had a child. Yet she sat there, pretending to read as he recounted stealing a horse from Marian's family and how she demanded he give it back. "She changed my life in many ways," he said. "I first tried to give up being a thief but that didn't quite pan out. So then I started to steal from the rich and gave it to the poor, to make their lives better. It felt better than any amount of ale and dancing."
"How noble," she replied, surprised when it came out free from any sarcasm or disdain.

It seemed to surprise him too, judging by how his eyebrow went up. "I would think you would berate me for breaking the law."

"I've learned that sometimes, we do the wrong things for the right reasons," she said.

He nodded, closing his book before motioning to hers. "Have you found anything?"

She felt like she had been jolted from a dream and realized she had been staring at the same page for a long time. Regina shook her head. "Not yet. But I'm not going to give up."

"I didn't think you would," he said, smiling softly as he reached over to take her hand. A jolt raced up her arm as he squeezed it.

Regina pulled away as soon as possible and stood up, closing the book. "I think that's enough for today. Why don't you and Roland go get some rest?"

His face fell but he nodded, picking up the sleeping infant. "Roland's going to be hungry soon. I should go. I'll see you tomorrow, Regina?"

She hated how he felt the need to pose it as a question, as if it wasn't an automatic assumption. Regina swallowed and nodded. "Of course."

"Good," he said, sounding relieved. The soft smile returned. "Good night, Regina."

He walked across the room and left, the door closing behind him. Only then did she say: "Good night, Robin."

Regina began to open up to Robin after that, telling him about her tense relationship with her mother and short-lived romance with Daniel. He listened to her, handing her a handkerchief after she finished recounting how her mother had killed Daniel. "Is that why you're so intent on capturing Snow White? Because you blame her for his death?"

"I told her it was a secret," she said, dabbing at her eyes. She hated crying in front of anyone and Robin still was no exception. "Yet she turned around and told my mother anyway. Because of that, Daniel died."

He was quiet before nodding. "I see. But will it really do anything? Killing Snow White?"

She frowned, regretting telling him about it. Of course he would side with the sweet princess. Regina threw the handkerchief back at him. "Get out."

"Regina," he said, almost pleadingly.

"It's 'Your Majesty,' thief," she snapped.

He held up his hands. "I'm not saying you shouldn't kill Snow White. I know the pain you are going through. But killing Snow White will only provide a temporary relief from that pain. Because once the vindication wears off, Daniel will still be dead."

She paused, pressing her hand to her stomach as she fought the fresh tears threatening to fall. "It's not fair. She deserves to be punished."

"Yes, she does," he said, stepping closer. "Have you ever told her why you hate her?"
"She knows. I don't think she gets the severity of what she did, though," Regina replied, hugging herself. "I don't think she's sorry."

He approached her cautiously. "Then I support you making her feel sorry. Just…don't hang everything on revenge, okay? Punish her and then move on."

Regina almost laughed. Everyone else had kept telling her that getting her revenge wouldn't make her happy and that she should just move on. Robin was telling her almost the same thing, except that he agreed Snow needed some sort of punishment first. Maybe not death, she guessed, but something.

"Regina?" he asked again, hesitant to touch her.

She threw herself into his waiting arms and started to cry. He rubbed her back as she sobbed into his chest, feeling comfortable in a way she only felt with her own father. Robin wasn't going to call her weak or try to exploit her emotions for his own gain, she knew.

Perhaps that pixie dust had been right all along.

Once her tears had dried, Regina pulled away. Robin handed her his handkerchief again. "You can keep it this time," he said.

"Thank you," she replied with a chuckle. She took a deep breath. "Let's get back to the books, shall we? We can't waste any more time."

As Robin worked his way past her defenses and into her heart, so too did Roland. If Regina was honest, Roland had probably blown them apart before she was ready to admit it. The baby boy grew more comfortable with her and she swore he even started to smile whenever she held him.

So it broke her heart to listen to him struggle for breath, to watch him grow weaker before her eyes. Regina refused to give up, knowing she couldn't lose this child and not just because it would break Robin. It would break her too.

"Still nothing?" Robin asked her one day as he fed Roland.

Regina frowned. "Well, there is something…"

He jumped up and she hated that she had given him even an iota of hope. Her guilt grew when she heard it in his voice as he asked: "What is it?"

"It would remove the fluid in his lungs and heal them…but it involves light magic," she explained. "I only have dark magic."

Robin's brows furrowed and she took a deep breath to continue: "I'll keep looking. There has to be something…"

"I believe in you," he said.

It alleviated her guilt a bit and she nodded. "At least one of us does. I'll check another book…"

"No." Robin gently gripped her wrist as she started to move away from him. "I believe that you can perform this spell."

She frowned, turning back to face him. "I told you. It involves light magic."

He took her hands in his. "I know. And I believe you can do light magic. There is good inside you,
Regina. It's just been pushed aside by your need for revenge. And I'm sure others have tried to make you think all you had was dark magic for their own purposes."

"I suppose," she said, thinking about Rumpelstiltskin.

"You need to believe in yourself too," he said. "Believe in the part of you that has been working from sun up to long after sun down to find a cure for a baby you didn't carry and give birth too. That's where you'll find your light magic."

She knew it was impossible but his faith in her and the hope in his eyes drove her to nod. "Alright. We'll try it. I'm just going to need a few items. Meet me back here in an hour with Roland."

Robin laid Roland in the wicker carrier he had used to transport the boy to the palace, tucking his blanket around him. He glanced back at Regina. "You certain it won't hurt?"

"For the most part," she said. "If it involves light magic, I can't imagine it would also involve pain."

He nodded, stepping back. "Where do you want me to stand?"

"Right next to me," she said, holding out her hand in a wordless plea. He took her hand, lacing their fingers together.

Drawing strength from him, Regina turned to the open book and began chanting the spell. Robin's grip tightened on hers but she didn't stop. She continued to read, starting to see a white light out of the corner of her eye. Hope flared up inside her.

Maybe this would work.

Regina finished the spell as the white light died down. She turned, holding her breath as she took in Roland. He gummed his fingers, gurgling as he kicked his little feet. The spell didn't seem to have hurt him, but had it helped him?

"Come here, my boy," Robin said, picking up the baby. He held Roland close and relief crossed his face. "He's breathing easier. I don't hear any wheezing."

"Good," Regina replied, picking up the jar she had placed down at the start. It was full of a thick dark yellow ooze and she felt her stomach churn at the sight.

Robin stared at the jar in disgust. "That was in my son's lungs? No wonder he couldn't breathe."

"Well, it's out of them now," Regina said, putting the jar back down. She smiled as she placed her hand on Roland's back, happy to feel him breathing normally. "He's going to be just fine."

"Thank you so much." Relief and gratitude filled Robin's voice and eyes. He smiled at Roland, kissing his son's forehead.

She nodded, still rubbing Roland's back. "I'm glad I could help."

"I don't know how I'm going to repay you," he started but she held up her hand, shaking her head. She told him he owed her nothing, that just knowing Roland was going to alright was payment enough for her.

A strange look came over him and he lowered Roland back into the basket. Regina held her breath as he reached out, cupping one of her cheeks. Her heart sped up as she recognized the way his gaze dropped to her lips and she managed to pucker up right before his lips covered them.
The same jolt she felt when they touched raced through her as she melted into his embrace. She wasn't sure who deepened the kiss first, but his tongue was in her mouth and she clutched at his shirt as if trying to pull him closer. Robin felt like home, love, acceptance and hope. It thrilled her and she found herself wanting more, praying he would accept her invitation to stay. After that thought, her mind grew hazy except for one thing:

This was what a soulmate must feel like.
"Okay, we've had bath time, you have a clean diaper, are in your sleeper and have had your night time bottle," Regina cooed to the baby girl in her arms. She sat down in the wooden rocking chair, pulling out a well-worn book. "Now it's time for your story."

The little child gurgled as she waved her arms, giving Regina a little smile. Regina smiled as well. "I see someone is excited."

It had been the adjustment to having a baby in the house again. Zelena had struggled after losing her magic and needed to find out who she was without it, much like Regina had had to do after first casting the curse. There had been a lot of back and forth between the two sisters but after much discussion, Zelena agreed to leave Robyn in the care of Regina until she was able to determine what she was going to do with her life. She still visited the girl every chance she got but for all intents and purposes, Regina was the girl's mother.

She knew it would've been what Robin wanted.

Regina then did everything to give the little girl she nicknamed Poppy, due to her red hair, a place of her own. She decorated the nursery with a forest scenery and painted little lions amongst the bushes as well as engraved the same lion Robin had had tattooed on his arm on the crib. Regina had also set up what little pictures she had of Robin so that Poppy would always know what her father looked like.

Poppy would also know about how brave and noble her father had been. Henry was working on a book detailing Robin's adventures in Storybrooke, Camelot and the Underworld to add to the adventures already in the storybook. And despite all the inaccuracies Robin had found in it, Regina found herself reading *The Adventures of Robin Hood* to Poppy after taking the book home with her from New York. She made a point of telling the little girl about all the inaccuracies though she doubted the baby cared.

"Now, where were we?" she asked in a sing-song voice. She opened the book, removing the bookmark. "Ahh, yes. Papa and Little John had just escaped the Sheriff of Nottingham and were on their way to rescue Maid Marian. Now, your Papa would've insisted that the Sheriff never got that close to him but I think your father's ego might've made him remember things a bit differently."

The baby didn't seem to care about that, hitting the book with her hand. Regina chuckled. "Okay, okay. I recognize those impatient Mills' genes."

Adjusting her grip on the book, Regina began to read. "Robin and Little John rode hard toward the tower where the evil Prince John had locked up Maid Marian. They knew it would be heavily guarded but Robin was clever. He would find a way to sneak in and rescue his beloved."

*Robin and Little John dismounted some ways from the tower so they could hide their horses. It*
would be better for them to sneak in on foot, eliminating the chance of them being heard. Now, they had to find a way into the tower without being seen—especially with several guards standing around it.

"Ho, Robin, I think nasty Prince John finally has you beat," Little John said. "There is no way we can get past those guards. There are no shadows."

"It will take more to beat me, dear Little John. I will not give up—even though I am trapped in this book..."

Regina paused, blinking a few times. Yet the words never changed. *Even though I am trapped in this book.*

What the hell?

Glancing down, she found that Poppy's eyes were closed and her breathing was evening out. Regina placed the bookmark back in and set the book aside. She rocked Poppy gently, patting her bottom before kissing the girl's feathery hair. "Good night, sweetheart. I love you."

She laid Poppy down before turning on the nightlight in the room. After switching off the lamp, she took one last look at the book. Her fingers itched to grab it, to see if those strange words were still there or if there were any more but she resisted. It was late and she was no doubt tired. She would check again in the morning when everything was clearer, she decided as she closed the door behind her.

Emma walked down the stairs to Regina's vault, entering cautiously. Since the final battle with the Black Fairy, things had finally quieted down in Storybrooke and it was almost like it had been before the curse was broken. Regina's urgent summons must've been concerning to the Savior. "What's wrong? Someone else crawling out of the abyss to threaten us now?"

"No," Regina said, staring down at the book. She had taken it from Poppy's room after confirming she hadn't imagined the strange dialogue. Poppy didn't mind—she was just as happy with Dr. Seuss as she was with the stories about her father for the moment.

Regina had carefully combed through the book and found snippets here or there—dialogue or narration that didn't fit in with the rest of the story. She wrote them all down in order and results were so surprising, she needed to share it with someone else. While Snow had been the first to pop into her mind, Regina worried that the other woman would think Regina was chasing ghosts again. Zelena had been next but even with the progress the two had made in their relationship, her relationship with Robin was still a point of contention between them as Zelena still had not shown any remorse for what she had done to Robin.

So that left Emma, who Regina knew still felt guilty for her role in Robin's death and would therefore be more willing to help Regina in this case. Emma looked confused and concerned as she got closer. "Okay, then what is it?"

"It's Robin," Regina replied.

Her friend looked sympathetic and almost had a pitying look in her eyes as she sighed: "Oh, Regina. He's gone. And if we could go back to the Underworld to try and get him back like we did Hook, I'd go with you in a heartbeat. But you said yourself that Hades' said the crystal obliterated a person, including their soul."

"Hades was also deceptive," Regina pointed out. "Robin's soul wasn't obliterated. It's trapped in this
She held up her worn copy and Emma's eyebrows went up. The pity in her eyes turned back to concern but there was also surprise in them. "Robin's soul is trapped in a book?"

Regina rolled her eyes. "I know how it sounds but I've gone through it and wrote down passages that don't make sense. Read the results for yourself."

Emma took the paper from her and read it over to herself. Her eyebrows furrowed in confusion and she frowned as she looked up at Regina. "Are you sure about this? That you haven't seen something that isn't really there?"

"Yes. You can check the book yourself," Regina offered, holding it out to her friend.

As Emma perused the book, Regina once again read the message Robin was trying to send to her from wherever he was.

_I don't know how this has happened, my love, but I assure you that I appear to be trapped in the book. It is strange. I can look up and see the words in the sky. It takes a lot of energy but I am able to rearrange them every so often. I know you are smart enough to pick it up and can put together my message to you._

_First, I love you. And I have no regrets about taking that blast for you. I would do it again in a heartbeat._

_Second, I can hear you, though I can't see you. Whenever you open the book, your voice then enters this realm. I love hearing it again and how it changes when you are talking to my daughter. I'm sorry...our daughter. I never got to tell you, Regina, but I wanted you to be her mother. I wanted to raise her with you and be a proper family—you, me, Henry, Roland and my daughter. I hope we can still be one._

_I know if anyone can get me out of this book, it's you. I can't wait to see you, our family and our friends again._

_Love always,_

_Robin_

Emma placed the book down, her eyes wide now. "That's weird. Why do you think he ended up trapped in a book?"

"I don't know," Regina replied. "And I'm trying to figure out how it fits with the fact that Robin was there in the Wish Realm, having not aged and able to come back to our realm though the wardrobe. Maybe it was because part of Robin's soul lived on."

"So, how do we get him out?"

Regina picked up one of her small tomes, holding up the dusty book. "I think I found something. But I'm going to need your help to pull it off. Will you help?"

Emma nodded. "I'll do whatever it takes."

"Good," Regina smiled, opening the book. "Take this down..."
plans. "You're playing with some dangerous forces, Regina. Magic was never really meant to bring back the dead," she warned.

"I know," Regina replied. "But if Robin never truly died, are we really messing with the natural order?"

"I don't want you to have all this hope and then for it to fall through," Zelena argued.

Regina frowned, feeling her defenses go up. "You just don't want Robin back because then you might have to finally deal with what you did."

"I thought we were past that."

"Really? We're not. We keep arguing about it but you want to believe we're past it, that I've forgiven you without you having to actually apologize or acknowledge that what you did was horrible," Regina argued, feeling her face heat up as she glared at her sister.

Zelena sighed, looking down at Poppy. "And how will this affect my daughter?"

"She'll get her father back," Regina replied, playing with Poppy's hand. "Beyond that, that's something the three of us are going to have to decide for our daughter's sake."

Kissing Poppy's cheek, Regina told her to be a good girl and that she would see her in the morning. And she might have a surprise for her. She then straightened up and nodded at Zelena with a solemn expression. "I'll see you later."

"Yes," her sister said. She then sighed. "Regina…I hope this works for you."

Pausing as she acknowledged silently that that had been a big step for Zelena, Regina then nodded. "Thank you."

Regina raised her hand, disappearing in a cloud of smoke. She felt the familiar tug associated with traveling using magic before she landed in the middle of her vault. As the cloud of magic died down, she found herself staring at Emma, Hook, Henry, Snow and Charming. "I didn't realize this was going to be a family affair," she said.

"We didn't want you to do this alone," Henry said, approaching her. She noticed there was dirt on his pants and shirt as she hugged him. He grimaced before saying: "Well, that's why I'm here."

"I'm here to help with the grunt work," Hook replied, motioning with his one hand toward the dirt-encrusted shovels resting in the corner.

Charming nodded. "I just want to make sure this isn't a repeat of the last time you tried to bring the man you loved back to life."

Thoughts of Daniel rampaging through town and having to kill him again had crossed her mind so Regina nodded. She wrapped her arm around Henry, holding him close. "I understand your concern, but I think this time will be different."

"I hope so, Regina," Snow said, reaching for her hand to give it a squeeze. "For your sake. Just…be careful."

"I will be," Regina promised, stepping closer to the wooden coffin resting in the middle of the room. She ran a hand over it lovingly, eyes tearing up as she remembered picking it out and then having left the cemetery as she was unable to watch it be lowered into the ground.
Everyone gathered around and Hook grimaced before asking: "I hate to be blunt here, but Robin's been in the ground for quite some time. Do we really want to open that?"

"Killian," Emma warned.

Her husband frowned. "I'm just pointing out the obvious."

Regina glared at the pirate, even though she knew he had point. "I put a preservation spell on Robin's body. I just…I couldn't bear the thought of him…well…"

Everyone nodded, understanding, and they all looked relieved as Regina undid the clasps keeping the lid closed. She raised it and glanced down at Robin's body inside.

There had been some debate between her and Little John over what to bury him in. Robin's friend had wanted her to conjure up one of the outfits he had worn in the Enchanted Forest, feeling it was better to bury him in the clothing he had worn for most of his life. She though had wanted to bury him in the outfit he had worn during their picnic in her office after he had returned her heart to her chest. He had looked so handsome and they had been so happy then…

She had won.

Robin laid in the velvet lined coffin in his dark pants, light green shirt and dark sweater. His blond hair had been brushed until it glowed like gold and was styled just so. With her protection spell, he looked like he was just sleeping rather than had been dead for a few months now.

"Regina, we don't have much time," Emma reminded her. "The moon will only be at its peak for a few minutes."

She nodded, stepping away from her soulmate's body. If all went well, soon it wouldn't just be an empty shell.

Regina approached a table she had set up and saw that Emma had laid out the items she had requested—the book, two white candles, a knife and one of Robin's arrows. She waved her hands over the candles and little flames danced to life. Regina placed the book between them, opening it to the middle.

"What is the knife for?" Charming asked, sounding concerned.

She didn't look at him as she picked it up. "This is a spell that was created by powerful sorcerers who wanted to cheat death. However, there were only limited ways it could work. They would first have to separate their soul and put it in a receptacle, much like a horcrux from Harry Potter. In this case, we have the book. Most could do that. Where they often failed, though, was not having someone with whom they shared a powerful enough connection to help release the soul."

"But since you and Robin are soulmates, you should be able to do it," Henry realized with a grin.

Regina smiled at him, nodding. "I just need to prick my finger and place a few drops of my blood on one of Robin's arrows, which should have some of his essence. Then I'll place it in the book, recite the spell and hopefully it will work. I'd stand back, though, if I were you."

Everyone nodded and Emma pulled their son back, wrapping her arm around his shoulders. They watched as Regina pricked her finger, wincing at the short burst of pain. She took a deep breath, reminding herself it was worth it as she squeezed a few drops of blood over the shaft of the arrow. Once it was nestled in the middle of the book, Regina took a deep breath and recited the ancient words.
The flames grew longer, stretching until they were almost towering above her. Gray smoke curled over her head as the table began to shake. Regina watched the arrow, wanting to make sure it stayed in the book as she continued to chant.

When the ground beneath their feet began to tremble, she gripped the table to steady herself. Nothing was going to deter her, not when she was so close to the end of the spell. She ignored Snow's startled cry and Hook's pleas for her to stop, reciting the last few words.

Regina's vault was plunged into darkness as the flames went out and the shaking stopped. Her body still trembled and she held onto the table, unable to do anything. She closed her eyes and prayed it had worked.

When she opened them again, Emma had relit the candles in her vault. The two candles on the table were burnt down to the holders but the arrow was still resting in the book. She took a deep breath as she slowly turned to Robin's coffin.

Her heart plummeted as she saw his closed eyes and unmoving chest. Tears pricked her eyes as she approached it, a lump forming in her throat. It appeared she had once again gotten her hopes up for nothing. Her only connection to her soulmate was going to be through a book it seemed.

Life wasn't fair.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, leaning over to press a kiss to his cold lips. A tear ran down her cheek and she felt it run off her chin, no doubt landing on Robin's face.

A gust of wind blew past her and she felt the familiar pulse of magic she had only experienced with Henry. It was True Love's Kiss and she pulled back, amazed as she watched Robin's chest begin to rise and fall. She pressed a hand to his chest, choking back a sob when she felt his heart beating beneath her palm.

Robin's eyes fluttered open and his blue eyes focused on her face. He smiled, raising his hand to her cheek. "I knew you could do it," he whispered, voice hoarse from months of nonuse.

"Robin!" Henry exclaimed, coming to her side as the man sat up. He hugged his mother. "Mom, you did it."

"And I see I'm not the only one back from the dead," Robin said, motioning to Hook.

The pirate nodded. "Aye. I'll tell you that story over a pint soon."

"Sounds like a plan." Robin then accepted Charming's hand, letting the man help him out of the coffin.

Once he was on his own two feet, he pulled Regina in for a hug. She started to cry again, fingers curling around his sweater as he peppered her face with kisses. "You're back. You're really back," she sobbed.

"I am," he assured her. "And I promise that I'm going to do everything I can to never leave you again."

"I'm so glad you're back," she heard Henry say. She felt Robin hold out his arm and then felt Henry pressed against her side. He held the two of them close. They were almost a complete family again.

Regina knew there was a lot of them to discuss. They would need to find a way to the Enchanted Forest to get Roland and she would have to figure out how Zelena fitted into their lives now that
Robin was back. Robin would need to adjust to being alive again and to being a father again, but she knew he would make it.

She also knew there was plenty of time to tell him everything that he had missed. Regina didn't know how he would react to her splitting herself, to hearing about his Wish Realm doppelganger or about the final battle but she couldn't wait to tell him all about it. She also couldn't wait to hear about his time in the book. Then they would be able to plan their future, just like they had planned to do once they got back from the Underworld.

Hope flared up inside her and she smiled as she laid her head on his shoulder, just enjoying having him back for now. There was a long road ahead of them and it was going to take a lot of work but she knew they were going to make it.
Abducted

Chapter Notes

For OQ Prompt Party #65. Robin is a disgruntled former employee of Cora Mills who, in a moment of desperation, kidnaps Cora's daughter, Regina.

This is probably his worst idea ever. But he figured by now there was no going back. In for a penny, in for a pound—wasn't that how the saying goes? He should just pick up the phone, use the voice distorter and make the ransom demand.

Was one million dollars too cliché? Should he double it? Triple it? How much would he really need to replace his lost salary? Would it make up for the benefits he also lost?

And if he were caught…what would happen to Roland? Neither he nor Marian had much by the way of relatives. Would his son have to go into the foster care system? Would he grow to resent his father for doing something stupid and throwing both their lives away?

"You're a terrible kidnapper, you know that?" his victim said. She sat across from him, her silk-clad arms crossed. Her red lips scowled at him.

Robin scowled right back at her. "You get kidnapped often?"

"Once," she said. "They demanded one million dollars and released me after a couple hours after they got their money. I had bruises from the duct tape for a week."

He stared at her, blinking a few times. Besides thinking that he shouldn't then ask for a million dollars, he also felt guilty for forcing her to relive what was no doubt a traumatic experience. "I'm sorry."

"For what? That I was kidnapped or that you kidnapped me this time?" she asked, raising her eyebrow.

"Both," he replied, grimacing. "I guess."

She rolled her eyes, scoffing. "Just like I said. Terrible kidnapper."

"I'm not a criminal," he protested before frowning. "Well, there were a few youthful misadventures…but nothing like this. I didn't really think this through. I was just acting on impulse."

"What impulse would lead you to kidnap me from my company's parking lot?" she asked, looking incredulous.

"Your mother fired me." He hated how he sounded—more like a petulant child having a tantrum rather than a grown man facing a crisis.

Her incredulous look grew as she stared at him, slack-jawed. "So you thought kidnapping me would get your job back?"

"No," he replied honestly. "I just wanted enough money to take care of my son, maybe move and
"Good luck with that," she muttered but he noticed she had softened when he mentioned his son. Her arms were uncrossed and the incredulous look was gone. She tilted her head. "What about your wife?"

He swallowed, feeling the phantom pain inside him yet again. "She…she died a few years ago, when Roland was still a baby."

To his surprise, she reached out and took his hand. "I'm sorry."

"Thank you," he said.

She pulled her hand away, biting her lip before squaring her shoulders. "I'm Regina."

"Robin," he replied, holding out his hand. She shook and he let out a soft chuckle. "I really am a terrible kidnapper, aren't I?"

"I believe that's been well established," she shot back, but there was no malice in her words. In fact, it sounded like she was now teasing him.

Did Stockholm Syndrome kick in so fast?

She leaned forward, resting her arms against the table. "I wouldn't bother calling my mother, though. She has a 'will not negotiate with terrorists' mentality when it comes to kidnappers."

He frowned, replaying something she had said earlier. "But I thought you said your last kidnapper got paid?"

"Because Daddy paid them," she replied, a sadness coming to her eyes that he recognized—grief. "Mother berated him for giving in, berated me for being stupid enough to get kidnapped. Daddy pushed back though, saying he wasn't going to leave my fourteen-years-old self to their whims."

"He sounds like a good man, a loving father."

She nodded and he heard her voice catch when she said: "He was."

Robin didn't press her, giving her time to recover from her moment of grief. When she cleared her throat, she continued: "Anyway, if Mother believed it was my fault I got kidnapped at fourteen, can you imagine her reaction to learning I got abducted when I'm twenty years older?"

"She's a right bitch," he said, frowning as he crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair. "And she runs a company that's supposed to help people."

"Only because she took it over from Daddy. I'm sure she schemes ways to make sure she earns more money at the expense of the people she's supposed to help," Regina said, disgusted.

He nodded. "That's…That's why she let me go. I worked as a case manager and I got into a very loud argument with her trying to get more resources for the family I was working with."

Regina's eyebrow went up. "And you walked away? Alive?"

"Alive but jobless," he said, sighing. "She also made sure that my termination reason made me ineligible for unemployment. And so I got the incredibly stupid idea to kidnap her daughter and try to get the ransom money. Which I bungled spectacularly."

start over in a place that hasn't heard of Cora Mills."
"You haven't even tied me up," Regina pointed out, shaking her arms for emphasis.

He groaned, realizing there was nothing keeping her here. Robin had taken her to an abandoned warehouse with no locks, so she could easily just make a run for it. While he would probably give chase, there was no guarantee he'd catch her or win in a fight. Regina Mills looked like a lightweight but now he believed she was a probably a petite powerhouse. Freedom, then, was completely in her grasp. That only left one question.

"Why are you still here then?" he asked.

She didn't answer right away, as if pondering the question herself. He watched as she turned her head toward the door only feet from the table they were sitting at. Robin held his breath, expecting her to bolt.

He wouldn't stop her, he decided.

Regina turned back to him and shrugged. "I guess I was curious to see how this played out and now I'm invested."

"Invested. How?" he asked, surprised.

"I'm sure you can tell that I don't particularly care for my mother," she said. He nodded as it had been evident in her words and tones.

Regina then continued: "I believe in helping others too. Daddy taught me that and Mother showed me how not to do it. So I went to law school and became an advocate for those who need. Didn't you notice where you abducted me from?"

He had been more focused on getting her into his car than his surroundings but he dimly recalled it was a parking lot for some law firm. Her name was even in it…Something, Mills and Someone.

"Draco, Mills and Swan," she filled in, as if reading his mind. "I'm sure you've heard of us if you're in social services."

Robin had heard of them. They were a prestigious firm that he and the other case managers would sometimes recommend to their clients—behind Cora Mills' back, knowing full well they could face her wrath if caught—to help with particularly difficult cases. He also knew they lobbied the city and state for better and more resources.

"I see the spark of recognition there," she said, pointing her finger and wiggling it.

He nodded. "But aren't all social service organizations connected to your mother? Because I tried to interview at a few places but she shut me down. Another reason why I turned to kidnapping."

"A lot of organizations are connected to her, but Mother's grip on the sector isn't as tight as it once was," Regina replied. "She's made a lot of enemies and infuriated a few people. I can assure you has no friends at City Hall, for example."

"Really?" he asked, surprised. Cora Mills always seemed so powerful and appeared to constantly be meeting with the movers and shakers in their area.

Regina nodded. "She backed the wrong house in several elections and the real winners were no fans of how she helped people in need. The fact you were fired by her is going to work in your favor. Trust me."
"Is the city hiring?"

"Yes," she said. "It would mean a salary substantially lower than what you were making at my mother's but their benefits are amazing. And I know a few smaller non-profits that might have part-time opportunities for you if you want to supplement your salary."

He gaped at her, amazed that she was willing to help him after he had abducted her and held her in the warehouse. Robin shook his head. "You are too good, Regina Mills."

"No one really says that. But thank you," she said.

Robin's spirits crashed though as he rubbed his face. "Too bad it's all for naught. Who wants to hire a kidnapper?"

"Who did you kidnap?" she asked, tilting her head.

He narrowed his eyes, not sure what she was playing at. "What do you mean? I kidnapped you."

"I wasn't kidnapped. I agreed to help someone in the field I specialize in who was down on his luck, meeting up with him for a late lunch or an early dinner, however you want to look at it," she replied.

"But…I mean…how?" he gasped out.

She chuckled. "No one really saw you kidnap me. You brandished no weapon and didn't exactly shove me into your car. So it wouldn't look too suspicious on our cameras. And I'm not going to press charges. In fact, there's a restaurant around the corner that's pretty good. We can go there, talk some more and then you can drop me off at my car. Everything will look above the board."

"You'd really do that?" he asked, touched.

"I don't want your life ruined any more, not after everything Mother did to you." She reached out, taking his hand as she gave him a little smile. "So, are you free for that dinner? Or do you need to get your son?"

He shook his head. "My friend agreed to watch him until six. We should be good then."

"Great. Let's get out of here before we breathe in something toxic and we can talk a bit more." Regina stood up, brushing off her pants.

Robin stood as well. "I appreciate this, Regina. Thank you."

"No, thank you," she said, still surprising him. "You made my afternoon a bit more entertaining. I was just going to go home and probably do some more work."

He asked her. "All work and no play, Regina."

Regina rolled her eyes. "You sound just like my partner, Emma. She's the 'Swan' in our name."

"Tell me more," he said, taking a chance and placing his hand on her back. When she didn't step away, he relaxed and the two headed out of the warehouse together.

He was really glad he kidnapped Regina Mills.
For OQ Prompt Party #152. Robin and Regina meet at a singles vacation resort, have a blast together, and agree not to see each other when vacation is over. But then someone breaks that agreement....

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

She was absolutely pathetic. That's what Mother would say if she knew how Regina was spending her weeklong vacation and she probably would be right. But as much as she loved her friends, she was tired of being the fifth wheel between Mary Margaret and David as well as Emma and Killian. Mal had Lily, so she couldn't come with her, and Regina had learned not to invite Cru on vacation ever. Not if she wanted to make it out with her liver intact.

All of that meant that, yes, Regina was going on vacation alone. She was staying at a singles-only vacation resort, which was probably the only part her mother could possibly approve of since it meant that Regina would be surrounded by single men. Mother would hope that she would be able to bag one by the end of her vacation, Regina knew.

Good thing she wasn't planning on telling Mother about this. Ever.

Regina checked in and was handed the key to her room. The clerk then smiled at her. "Would you like someone to help you with your bags?"

"No," Regina said. "I think I can handle it. Thank you."

She rolled her suitcase behind her as she approached the automatic doors. They slid open, letting her out of the air-conditioned main building and into the heat of the tropical sun. People in bathing suits milled around the patio. Some laid on lounge chairs, soaking up the sun, while others played volleyball together in the pool. Regina made note of the bar that one could swim right up to and order. Despite it being the morning, several people already had alcoholic drinks.

Music blared through speakers tied to the palm trees around the pool deck and people danced. A large bulletin board listed several activities for the day and Regina knew she wasn't going to be bored. She also noticed there were hammocks and other places where one could go to just have some quiet time to oneself. It seemed peaceful.

By the time Regina got to her room, she believed she had made the right decision to come here on vacation—even if she was by herself. She stepped into her room, taking in the little kitchenette area—a refrigerator, a coffee maker and a microwave. It was nestled next to her sitting area, which included a couch, a coffee table and a desk. Moving further into the room, she came across her single queen-sized. The TV was mounted to the wall across from the bed, right over a set of drawers. A closet was between the nightstand, which held a clock radio and the phone, and the window. The last part of the room was the separate area with the mirror and a sink while a separate door led to the bathroom.

The piece de resistance, though, was next to the set of drawers. It was the minibar—which was literally a bar. Regina ran her hand over the various nozzles, which had several types of draft beers
and handcrafted liquors ready for her to use. The room price had been all inclusive, so she was free
to drink however much she wanted. It had been one of the selling points for her to choose staying
there. Regina Mills was no lush but she was definitely going to unwind and have fun this vacation.

Unzipping her luggage, she retrieved her toiletry bag. She was going to shower and then change out
of her traveling clothes into something appropriate for her tropical paradise. And then she was going
to really start her vacation.

Almost an hour after she had arrived, Regina was lounging by the pool. She had found an empty
lounge chair and she set up camp, rubbing sunscreen on herself before letting the sun warm her skin.
Her goal was to return home to Maine with a nice tan, something she wasn't able to work on
between her long hours at the law firm and the long winters, something she had escaped. She closed
her eyes behind her sunglasses and let herself start to relax.

Regina laid there soaking up the sun, trying not to drift off so she didn't end up burnt on one side.
She definitely wanted to tan evenly and knew she was going to have to flip soon. Then maybe she
would take a dip in the pool, get a drink…

A cold drop of water landed on her stomach and she let out a startled cry as she sat up. She felt a few
more droplets douse her and she grew indignant as she lowered her sunglasses. The culprit appeared
to be a man about her age with dark hair and a toned physique she may have admired if she wasn't
too busy wondering why he had decided to shake off the access water like a dog.

"Excuse me," she said curtly as he toweled himself off.

He turned, revealing bright blue eyes. When he smiled, she couldn't help but notice two dimples on
either side of his face. "Is there a problem?"

"Yes," she replied. "You got me wet."

To his credit, he looked sheepish. "Apologies, milady. I guess I was wetter than I thought and didn't
realize I was dripping on you."

"Well…Be more careful next time," she sniffed, laying back down. "And move. You're blocking my
sun."

His shadow didn't move and she found herself scowling. When he spoke, she could hear the
bemusement in his voice. "I'm sorry. Who died and made you queen of the pool deck?"

"We had a vote while you were underwater."

She felt his shadow pull back and when she glanced over, she found he was sitting on his lounge
chair. He bit his lip, his eyes raking over her body. Regina was impressed he didn't hide his
admiration of her and she felt proud he was looking. She worked hard to maintain her body (yet
Mother still insisted she could do more), eating healthy (though still too much for Mother's taste) and
exercising several times a week (but not daily like Mother wanted). But Regina knew everything was
toned—arms, abs, and legs—and all were shown off excellently by the white bikini she wore.

"Like what you see?" she asked, teasingly.

"I must say, I do," he replied. This time, she noticed he had a British accent, which suddenly raised
him up a bit in her mind. And she also now noticed how fit he was as well. His arms were muscled
but not to excess and he had a nice six-pack. Definitely not too bad, even for someone who had
disturbed her tanning session with his cold water.
He smirked. "Like what you see?" he asked back.

Busted, even with her sunglasses. Regina smirked as well. "Not bad."

He laughed, leaning back a bit. "You here alone?"

"Isn't that the point of singles' vacation?" she asked.

"Good point," he conceded. "But I meant if you were traveling with friends."

Her stomach dropped and she swallowed as she debated if she was going to lie or not. She bristled a bit. "What's it to you?"

"I'm just trying to make small talk. And figure out if a girlfriend is going to come sweeping in to stonewall me on your behalf."

Regina smirked, able to imagine Mal doing just that. Probably with a few acidic barbs thrown in for good measure, no doubt having already measured him as unworthy of Regina's attention. But she had to admit she was enjoying this back and forth with him, so she admitted: "No, nothing of the sort. I'm all alone."

"So am I," he replied, biting his lip again. She noticed he did it as he grew excited about something and she had to admit, it was kind of sexy.

He leaned closer to her. "Want to be my vacation buddy?"

"We don't even know each other's names," she replied, raising her eyebrows.

"Fair point, but I've been here a day and have thoroughly enjoyed our brief conversation more than anything I had at the mixer last night," he admitted. "Besides, isn't the point of coming to one of these places to have fun."

He wiggled his eyebrows at that last word and Regina rolled her eyes thought she let out a soft chuckle. He continued: "No strings attached. We have fun together, whatever that ends up being, enjoy our vacation and then part ways."

Regina had to admit that was a very good offer. Even at the singles' vacation, she wouldn't be too self-conscious about being solo if she was with him. And she was having fun with him. Maybe they could even have the eyebrow wiggling version of fun he eluded to and then they could just say goodbye. No messy feelings.

She sat up, turning to sit so she faced him. Holding out her hand, she said: "You have a deal."

"Great," he said, shaking her hand. "I'm Robin."

"Regina," she replied. "Nice to meet you."

Chapter End Notes

There will definitely be a part two! I didn't have much time due to my mother's birthday and wanted to get something up for Day 4. (I want that button!) But I do want to write the rest.
-Mac
For OQ Prompt Party #44, Regina picks up the newest book by her favorite writer. Another best seller that she can't get enough of. What she doesn't realize is that the heroine from those books is inspired by her and the books were written by her sweet, handsome but oh so shy (at least in RL) neighbor Robin.

"I'm going to get the mail. You go inside and put your things in your room. And if I see a shoe on the stairs..." Regina Mills let the threat dangling the air as she stared at her preteen son.

Henry rolled his eyes as he shouldered his backpack. "Okay, Mom. I promise to not leave my shoes on the stairs."

She nodded, watching as he bounded up the walk. He paused, waving to their next-door neighbor. "Hi, Mr. Locksley!" he called out.

"Hello, Henry," Robin Lockley's familiar British accent floated across her lawn. She glanced over to find her quiet neighbor waving back at her son. He wore an oversized green sweater over what appeared to be a white button-down shirt and paired with khakis. A blue scarf was wrapped around his neck. Regina didn't know what he did exactly-he tended to keep to himself and their few conversations usually went two ways: general pleasantries or him asking her random legal questions—but she believed whatever it was allowed him to work from home.

Robin lugged his garbage pail behind him, reminding her she would need to put hers out later, as he asked Henry a few questions about his day. Henry answered enthusiastically and Regina smiled as she pulled the mail out of her mailbox.

"Keep working at it," she heard Robin tell Henry. "You'll get it and who knows? You might end up being a math whiz."

"I doubt it," Henry said with a scowl. Regina bit back her laugh, knowing how much he detested math.

Robin then glanced over, spotting her. He grew more sheepish and she noticed his eyes didn't quite meet hers. "Good evening, Regina."

"Good evening, Robin," she said softly. The poor man always seemed like a horse that was easily spooked and she wished she knew why. "How are you?"

He nodded. "I'm good. I see you got a package."

She glanced down and her heart sped up as she spied the familiar brown back with the black and blue Amazon tape around it. Regina knew it could only be one thing—the book she had preordered the moment she could.

"Yes, I did," she said, wanting to end the conversation so she could open it. Regina began to push Henry toward the house. "Excuse us, we need to eat dinner. Good night, Robin."
"Night, Regina, Henry," Robin called to her retreating form.

Once inside, she sent Henry to his room while she headed straight to the kitchen. Regina pulled a pair of scissors from the drawer and got into her package. She opened the lid and marveled at the book inside, the latest from best-seller Rob Hood's red-hot series: *Drowned*.

The cover showed the lead character, Roni, dressed in a bathing suit and in the ocean, reaching her hand up as if trying to get away from drowning herself. Intrigued by it, Regina opened the cover to read the summary printed on the inside flap:

*Roni Morales is looking forward to a quiet and relaxing vacation with her rapidly growing son, Jack. She wants to spend as much time with him before he hits the dreaded teen years and considers himself too cool to hang out with his mother. Two weeks spent at the beach seem perfect of them and for the first week, it is.*

*Until a body washes up on shore just outside their rental house. The police dismiss it as a drunk drifter who wandered into the sea but Roni's gut tells her there is more to the story than they are letting on. She suspects a cover up and begins to investigate on her own, even calling in annoying but resourceful journalist Aidan Byrne for help.*

*It's a race against time to solve the mystery before Roni needs to head home and go back to work. She, Aidan and Jack gather as much information as they can without arousing suspicions...or do they? Will they solve the mystery or will Roni's vacation end in disaster?*

The rest was praise for Rob Hood's writing and his captivating characters. Regina set the book aside to start dinner, giddy with anticipation for Roni's newest adventure. Maybe this time something would actually happen between her and Aidan, as the tension was so thick she was certain she could cut it with a knife. But before she could find out, she needed to get Henry fed and check his homework. So she did her best to focus on that.

It was difficult though. Regina loved Roni and really identified with her. She knew most fans said that and she had read comments about how they admired Roni's dedication, her persistence, her "bold and audacious" personality, and so much more. Yet Regina felt her connection was deeper—like she was Roni. They both had grown up in affluent families with Puerto Rican backgrounds, only children to a loving father and a borderline abusive mother. Both had excelled in school, studying law and passing the bar on their first tries. After losing the loves of their life (Daniel for Regina, Matthew for Roni), both became workaholics before adopting their sons.

She even looked like Roni, based on descriptions for the books. Roni had "soulful" brown eyes and plump red lips along with tanned skin. She had black hair of varying lengths in the books, though she had cut it short at the end of the last one. Often described as "petite," Rob Hood write that Roni felt taller due to her confidence, her take-no-prisoners attitude and the large collection of heel she owned. Her salary as a successful lawyer helped her stay impeccably dressed, whether in a skirt suit or something more casual. The only physical differences were that Roni embraced her curls while Regina tended to straighten hers and that Regina had a scar about her lip thanks to a childhood neighbor's cat. Still, when she had posted a picture of herself to an online fan community, they had all agreed she looked like Roni and someone at the bookstore had once asked if she was the model on the cover.

(Of course, the other main difference between her and Roni was that Regina didn't solve mysteries in her spare time. She gardened).

It often made her wonder about Roni's elusive creator, Rob Hood. Everyone knew it was a pseudonym but no one knew his real name. There was no picture with his bio anywhere nor did he
do radio or TV interviews, only print. They only knew Rob Hood was in fact male because his publisher and numerous interviewers confirmed it. Was he shy? Scared of fame? A convicted felon? No one knew and no one knew really who inspired Roni, except she was a neighbor of Rob Hood’s. He then said nothing else about her.

Whoever she was, she had to be an amazing woman though Regina doubted she was as amazing as Rob Hood had made Roni. She managed to balance a successful law career, motherhood and solving crimes while still managing to flirt with the handsome and gentlemanly Aidan. No wonder people loved her.

A door slammed, jolting Regina from her thoughts. She caught sight of Robin through her kitchen window, watching him fill the bird feeder he had hanging on his back porch. He was just as mysterious as Rob Hood. In the time she had known him—six, maybe seven years—he hadn't offered many clues about his life. All she knew was that he was British and that he moved to Storybrooke after some kind of loss as he had a familiar air of sadness around him when they first met. Regina also knew he spent Christmas in England with family as she collected his mail for him (and he also always brought back little knick-knacks for Henry). And she had once caught him shooting arrows at a target, watching him land bullseye after bullseye and admiring his physique for a few moments.

Otherwise, she knew little else about him. He was a quiet conscientious neighbor who was always nice to her son. In the end, she figured that's all that mattered.

Robin looked up and noticed her. He smiled, giving her a little wave. She returned it and he headed back into the house. With a deep breath and reminder that Roni was waiting, she returned to her dinner preparations.

Robin set his bird seed down and headed back into his study. A blank Word document was open, waiting for Roni's next adventure. His agent and his publisher had encouraged him to take a vacation but was happy to stay home and start on his next book. Vacation meant going away from his muse, Regina, and not being able to talk with her and Henry. Even though he did try to keep his conversations with Regina brief as he knew she read Rob Hood's books and loved Roni. He worried she would be angry if she ever realized that she was essentially Roni and that he had taken everything she had ever confided in him to create a character.

He couldn't bear to lose her.

So he limited their conversations so as not to reveal something he shouldn't have. Especially as he already pushed it but asking questions about the law to help write his books. Regina probably thought he was weird but she always answered his questions, explaining things in an uncomplicated way without much legalese attached. He loved listening to them.

Of course, he could also listen to her just read the phone book. He loved her voice, loved her smile, how much she loved her son, how she exuded confidence and leadership…Robin just loved her. He hadn't thought he would find love after losing Marian to cancer so soon after their wedding, but after moving to Storybrooke to get away from the memories, he discovered his beautiful and kind neighbor. Since he was still grieving it had taken some time, but Robin was soon inspired by her.

By the time Roni was on her second adventure, Robin was in love with Regina. Still all the reasons he kept his distance from her meant he couldn't just ask her out either (though he doubted he was her type. She probably liked go-getters, powerful business men and not quiet writers like him). Instead, he used Aidan to say everything he ever wanted to say to Regina, though directed to Roni.
Maybe one day he would say them to Regina.

Maybe.
For OQ Prompt Party #175. s7 setting, cursed Robin (with another name), Seattle university professor, goes out for a drink after a rough day at a bar he usually avoids as he knows many of his students frequent there, making eyes to the 'zesty and feisty' bar owner. When he meets her, he understands why... What he doesn't understand is why his heart flutters the moment she speaks to him nor does she get why a strange tattoo on his arm seems strangely familiar.

This had to be the worst day in Professor Roald Sherwood's professional life.

First, he had been late to his morning lecture on Myths and Legends due to a car crash that had snarled traffic for miles. By the time he got to his classroom, he was a half hour late and so his students had left after waiting the traditional ten minutes—since he wasn't an adjunct. He trudged to his office and apologized to the dean for his tardiness. Thankfully, he wasn't usually late, so the dean was lenient on him.

It ended up being the best part of his day.

He gave a quiz in his British Literature class that proved all of them were woefully unprepared and he laid into them for not reading the assigned material. Some looked sheepish but most just stared at him blank-faced as if he were barmy for even expecting students in a three hundred level class to do the reading. Those expressions all changed when he threw them out of class and warned them that they needed to have the reading done by the next class.

Steamed from that experience, he marched down into his office and found the dean waiting for him again, along with Victoria Tremaine. Her daughter Ivy was in his Literary Writing course, something he could tell her mother was not pleased with but only accepted because it fulfilled the elective credits Ivy needed to graduate. Ivy was a good student, a solid B+, but apparently Mother thought her grades could be better and he was to blame. He had to sit for an hour defending his grading policies to a helicopter parent while his dean sat stony-faced in a corner.

The dean finally said something to end the meeting, promising Victoria that Ivy's grades would improve. He then ordered Roald to give Ivy higher marks, even if she didn't deserve them, because Victoria was a major donor to the university and they didn't want to risk it. Roald had argued about ethics and integrity but the dean was firm.

Roald nearly resigned right there but he managed to keep his anger in control. The last thing he needed was to overreact to one bad day and one bitchy but powerful mother and lose steady employment he usually loved. Besides, he needed the paycheck to keep his apartment—who knew how long it would take to find another job? His savings wouldn't last more than a few months at best.

By the time the sun had gone down and he turned off his office lights, all he wanted was a drink. A really, really strong drink. Maybe two. Heck, it was Friday. He could live a little. Three really, really strong drinks it was.
The campus he was assigned to was near Hyperion Heights, a rather bohemian community Roald was interested in but never really interacted with. Many of his students lived in the area and frequented the local businesses, so he didn't spend time there outside school in order to avoid the awkward encounters with his students.

He really wanted a drink, though, and didn't want to drag himself across town to the bar by his apartment. Roald knew there was a bar not far from the university campus called Roni's. All his students praised it, saying it had the best burgers in town and that the drinks were reasonably priced, even for broke college students. They also spoke about the "feisty" owner, Roni, and her easy-going manner. Many felt comfortable around her and quite a number, both male and female, admitted to being attracted to her.

Roald, though, wasn't interested in Roni. He just wanted something really strong to help him forget what a craptastic day he's had. So he trudges toward the bar, ready to unwind for the weekend.

The sign was lit up in red and green neon, Roni's written in fancy script while arrows decorated it. He thought it was an unusual choice but shrugged it off as he entered the bar, showing his ID to the bouncer. The man nodded, motioning for Roald to pass. Alcohol was in his grasp.

He took a seat at the bar, trying not to make eye contact with any of the students there. If he kept his head down, hopefully they wouldn't spot him or draw attention to him. Roald didn't think he could deal with any reminders of work.

"Well, you're a new voice," a sultry voice said. "What will it be?"

"What do you have on tap?" he asked, eyes still down.

"How about you stop staring at my bar top and glance at the menu over my head?" the sultry voice replied, sounding both annoyed and amused.

Roald did as she suggested, but his eyes never made it past her face. He suddenly felt as if every romance novel cliché had come true at once. Time seemed stop and a light shown on her as his heart skipped a beat. The sultry voice belonged to an equally sultry woman with sparkling brown eyes which popped with her smoky makeup and beautiful, kissable plump red lips. Her dark hair was cut short and framed her face in frantic but gorgeous curls. She wore a tight black shirt with some band's name on it and he could see the start of her jeans, which no doubt were as tight as the shirt.

No wonder half the student population at the university wanted to have sex with her.

She raised a perfectly sculpted brow at him. "Do you speak? Or are you mute?"

"Sor…Sorry," he stuttered out. "I zoned out there for a moment."

"I see," she replied, smirking as if she knew exactly why he had zoned out. "Happens all the time. But I can't wait all night for your order."

Growing sheepish, Roald finally looked up at her menu. The beer list is quite extensive, both bottled and on tap. Yet his eyes drift over to the mixed drinks menu, each named after various fairytales and legends. That intrigued him. "I like your drink names," he said.

"Thank you," she replied, chest puffing out with pride. "Some students try to make suggestions and insist I need to meet some professor…Sherman, I think. They say he's an expert on these things. Fairytales, legends, myths, I mean. Not booze."

Roald grinned as he leaned back a bit. "Oh, I'd like to think I'm somewhat of an expert on booze too."
And it's Sherwood, by the way."

She tilted her head. "Sherwood? As in Robin Hood?"

"Yep," he replied. "I'm from Nottingham too. I'm sure you can imagine the jokes."

"I think I can," she said, a smile toy ing with her lips. She then motioned to the menu. "So I guess I should make you the Robin Hood, then?"

Something jolted through him at the name. It wasn't the first time. Every time he discussed Robin Hood with his students, something would niggle at the back of the mind, like he was forgetting something. Roald spent hours combing through his notes and lessons, wondering what he might've left out only to find nothing. Yet the way she had said the name of the legendary thief had magnified that feeling and his heart sped up.

He tried to play cool as he took stock of that particular drink—blue curacao, melon liquor, orange juice, lemonade and a touch of grenadine. It seemed like a good starter, so he nodded. "I'll take it."

"One Robin Hood, coming up," she said, moving down the bar to make it.

Roald tried not to follow her with his eyes but he couldn't help it, watching her hands deftly mix his drink while talking with the other patrons. She easily joked with them, her eyes sparkling with laughter as she smiled at whoever she was talking to. He couldn't wait until it was him again.

She returned with his drink, setting it down in front of him. It looked appropriately green and he picked it up, holding it toward her. "To you…"

"Roni," she supplied. "I know I wasn't very creative, naming my bar after myself, but I wanted people to say they were going to Roni's."

He smirked, appreciating her rationale. "Then to you, Roni, and your wonderful bar. Cheers!"

She laughed as he took the first sip. It was a bit sweeter than he usually preferred but he had to admit he liked it. He took another sip, letting the alcohol slide down his throat and start to soothe away the cares of the day. "Thank you," he said.

"You're welcome," she said, pushing away from the bar. "Let me know if you need anything else."

He resisted the urge to say he wanted her to stay, that he wanted to look into her eyes and hear her voice for the rest of the night. Instead, he took another sip and forced himself to pace himself. It wouldn't do to drink too fast and get sick right away.

She wouldn't appreciate it, he knew.

Roald tried to distract himself with the game on the TV or watching the students playing pool, but his gaze always returned to Roni. He was captivated with her and as he finished his drink, had to admit he was absolutely smitten with her already.

God help him.

Roni had seen many customers in her many years as a bar owner. Mostly they were students and some of the residents from the area, all mingling at her establishment which had become the center of their community. Events and protests were often staged within her bar's walls and she gladly helped in any way she could. She had heard every complaint and sob story imaginable, offering a
sympathetic ear and a shoulder to cry on. Never before, though, had she felt as pulled to a customer as she was to the professor who had set up camp at the very end of her bar.

He ordered dinner, going with one of her famous burgers and offering up his full name—Roald Sherwood. It seemed appropriately stuffy for a professor yet absolutely inappropriate for him. As such, she had actually taken to calling him "Robin Hood," which seemed more appropriate. She didn't know why, but it felt like she had called him that for far longer than just a few hours.

Robin Hood had surprised her by ordering the Evil Queen cocktail after he finished his first drink. It was something usually ordered by women but he said he was intrigued by it. Roni had to admit it was one of her favorites as she whipped it up, presenting the blood red drink in front of him. He raised it to her again, once more toasting her, before taking a sip. She watched as he took another before nodding. "That's good. The apple juice is a nice touch."

"Thank you," she said. She knew she should move on but she couldn't pull herself away from the man. Her other bartenders could handle the dwindling Friday night crowd.

Roni leaned closer. "So, what brings you to my fine establishment?"

"Proximity and a rather shitty day," he admitted. "I couldn't make it to my usual bar."

"Well, I'm flattered, though sorry you had a bad day. Wanna talk about it?"

He shook his head. "It'll just get me flustered again and that will setback all the good your alcohol has been doing to relax me. Let's just say that Victoria Tremaine is a bitch and leave it at that."

"You'll get no arguments here," Roni said, frowning as she thought of the well-bred brunette who was determined to run her business out of the area in order to gentrify the area and put it in an ultra-sleek bar that would serve overpriced drinks and food that would no doubt pale in comparison to hers. She wasn't going anywhere.

Robin Hood nodded, taking another sip of his fan. "Not a fan either?"

"Not at all," she said. "But if we keep talking about her, I'll need a cocktail."

He smirked, looking far more sexy than he had any right to in her opinion. Leaning back, he unbuttoned his shirt sleeves and rolled them up. "Why don't we talk about something more pleasant than?"

Roni's eyes focused on the tattoo on his right wrist. It was a black shield surrounding a roaring lion, something that looked like it would be on a royal crest or on the shield of a fantasy character. Yet it seemed familiar and something knocked at the back of her brain, as if something was trying to enter her memory. She felt drawn to the tattoo and she brushed her fingers over it, ignoring the jolt of electricity that passed through her.

"Oh, that," he said, smiling sheepishly. "Would you believe alcohol was involved?"

She chuckled. "Yes, but tell me how."

He laughed, leaning forward. "Well, my mates and I decided to get absolutely plastered after our finals one semester and went to a local pub to achieve it. This pub happened to be next to a tattoo parlor..."

Roni cracked open a beer, sipping it as she listened to this buttoned-up professor reveal how he agreed to a tattoo and smiling. It had been a long time since she had been interested in anyone
romantically and Robin Hood here wouldn't have normally been her type, but maybe it was time for a change.

Robin Hood ended up staying until she shut down the bar, having some nachos and drinking a beer. He had run up quite the tab but he happily paid it, saying it was actually what he would've paid for a single beer and dinner at his place. When he stood, he was a little unsteady on his feet so Roni insisted on walking him out.

She found a cab for him despite his insistence he could public transit home. As she held open the door for him, she smiled at him. "I hope you come back, Professor. I enjoyed your company."

"I enjoyed yours, milady," he slurred, sending that familiar niggling feeling coursing through her mind again.

He then leaned forward, capturing her lips in a sloppy kiss. Robin Hood pulled back, looking at her with unfocused eyes. "I promise to come back and do that sober."

"You better," she said, pushing him into the backseat. "Go home, drink some water and get plenty of sleep. I'll see you soon, Robin Hood."

"Yes, you will." He winked at her and she shut the door, watching the cab drive away.

Roni didn't know what had just started but she had a feeling it was something that could change her life.

She couldn't wait.
Chapter Notes

*OQ Prompt Party Special Request for "Better When I'm Dancing": A little dancing accident on Regina's side throws Regina and Robin's schedule off, especially when she doesn't tell him she's hurt at first.*

*(Thanks to glindalovesshoes, who revealed she sent in this prompt!)*

*This is set in Week 8 and is actually an alternative take on what I plan to happen during that chapter. I hope you like both versions.*

"And one two three and one two three...Robin, a waltz isn't that hard," Regina said, stopping them as the music played on. "We've danced this before. What's going on?"

He pulled away, running a hand through his hair. "Sorry, sorry. I just need a moment."

She sighed, nodding. Robin had been distracted all day but unusually quiet, so she was trying to give him his space. A few minutes wouldn't hurt their practice. "Take five. Go clear your head," she told him.

Robin didn't even thank her, making a beeline for the door. She thought she heard him mutter that it would take longer than five minutes as he passed her and she frowned. Maybe a talk with her partner was in order if they wanted to get anything done today.

"What's up with Robin?" their PA asked, though her tone was ambiguous. She could've been asking out of concern or to get a sound bite from Regina.

Knowing the show, she assumed it was the latter so Regina just shrugged. She then gave the woman a side-eyed look. "I'm going to continue rehearsing on my own, plan out the next steps. Excuse me."

"Of course," the woman said, taken aback. She walked away and Regina started the music again. They couldn't afford to miss any time because Robin was in a mood.

Regina held her arms up in proper hold with an invisible partner. She counted herself in, working through the steps she had already choreographed before letting the music guide her to through the next steps. Closing her eyes, she got lost in the music and imagined that Robin was in fact there with her, dancing with her as he smiled lovingly at her.

Because her eyes were closed, she didn't know what had happened. All she knew was that she felt her leg turn in an unnatural direction before she went down, landing hard on the ballroom floor. She felt the wind get knocked out of her and struggled to catch her breath again, staring at the lights overhead.

"Regina? Are you okay?" the PA asked, leaning over her. She frowned. "Do I need to get the medic?"

Regina shook her head. "No, I just landed wrong. I just need to walk it off. Can you help me up before Robin gets back?"
The PA nodded and helped Regina up. When Regina placed her weight on her right foot, pain shot from her ankle and went up her leg. She winced and knew it was noticeable as the PA grew concerned. "Are you sure you don't want to me to get the medic?" she asked.

"Yes," Regina said, waving her off. She hopped away. "Just give me a few moments. Nothing too bad."

Yet each time she tried to put weight on that foot, pain kept shooting up her leg. She had definitely done something to her ankle, though she wasn't too sure if it was just a strain or a sprain. The rational part of Regina's brain told her she needed to put her leg up, ice the ankle and rest but she was pushing against a deadline. She could do that later.

Robin returned, looking calmer though still appearing a bit out of sorts. She held her head high, praying her pain was evident. "Are you ready to continue?"

"Yes," he said curtly. He stepped up into hold. "Let's go."

She took a deep breath, trying to favor her left foot as they danced. However, she landed on her right every so often and tried not to wince in pain. Robin didn't seem to notice, but on the other hand, he still seemed so far away. She wondered where he went to as he spun her.

Regina landed hard on her foot and cried out, crumpling to the floor. He caught her just before she also added a banged-up knee to her problems, cradling her closely. "Oh, God, Regina. Did I hurt you?"

"She fell earlier," the traitorous PA said. "Refused to let the medic look at her."

He frowned as he brushed some hair from her face. "Will you let me take a look at it?"

"Sure, but I'm sure it's nothing," she insisted, wanting to get started again. "We have a deadline…"

"Fuck the deadline, Regina. Your health and wellbeing is far more important than this conversation," he said, taking off her shoe and rolling down her sock. He frowned as he saw her bruised and swollen ankle. "Fuck, Regina. How were you even dancing with this?"

She shrugged. "I've danced through worse."

Robin's frown deepened and he looked up at the PA. "Get the medic, please. I'll make sure she doesn't turn him away."

"I'm not a child!"

"Well, right now, you're not making reasonable choices," he argued, glaring at her.

Anger burned inside her, even surpassing her pain. She pushed his shoulder, trying to get him away from her. "I won't be lectured by you."

"I'm not trying to lecture you, I'm trying to make sure you take care of yourself. I can't lose you."

Her anger gave way to confusion as she frowned at him. "How would a swollen ankle cause you to lose me?"

Robin didn't answer as the medic arrived. He moved out of the way, letting the other man examine her ankle. Regina kept her focus on her partner, though, trying to figure out what was going on. There was a sadness to him and a worry that intrigued her. She knew something more had to be at
The medic didn't think Regina needed to go to the hospital and so he sent her to a clinic nearby she had been to before. Robin went with her, as did the camera crew. She tolerated them as they filmed a doctor at the clinic diagnosing her with a strain rather than a sprain. He prescribed some painkillers and told Regina to ice and elevate her ankle for the rest of the day. "I'd also take it easy tomorrow," he advised.

"Take it easy? We can't take it…" Regina started to argue before Robin silenced her with a withering glare.

"I'll make sure she rests," he promised the doctor. "We'll take care of that ankle."

Once Regina was discharged, he carried her back out to his car. She watched as he turned to their camera crew. "I trust this is where you leave us. Regina needs her rest."

"Sure," the PA said. "I have to let Isaac and the other producers know what's going on. Someone will call to check on Regina tonight and offer other options if her ankle is still bothering her tomorrow."

"Thank you," Robin replied, climbing into the car. He pulled out of the parking lot and turned to head toward her house.

Regina sat in the front seat, arms crossed. "What does other options mean?" she groused.

"You're not the first dancer to get injured," he told her. "When that happens, they usually ask a member of the troupe or an eliminated pro to step in and practice while the other dancer continues to choreograph."

That…didn't sound too bad, actually. It would allow them not to lose too much time. She sighed as she lowered her arms. "I guess I could ask Ursula to dance with you. She's close to my style."

She saw tension leave Robin's shoulders and he nodded. "Thank you, Regina. You need to rest and we don't want to chance anything."

"Once again, it's just a sore ankle," she reminded him. "It's just a sprain."

"Just a sprain. Just like we thought Marian's fatigue and aches were just pregnancy. Look what happened then," he said, bitterness in his voice.

Things started to clear up in Regina's mind and she grew concerned for him. He was far too emotional to drive. "Pull over," she ordered.

"What?" he asked, startled.

"Pull. Over. Now." She motioned to an empty parking lot of a closed down store. It would give them some privacy.

Robin did as she asked, parking the car. He blinked a few times at her. "What's wrong?"

"I was about to ask you the same thing," she said. "Does today have any connections to Marian? You're angry and just out of sorts today. And now that comment…What's going on?"

He sighed, rubbing his face. "You're right. I'm sorry. It's just…It's the anniversary of Marian's death. I'm always a bit…tense… today."
"That's an understatement," she replied before taking his hand. "I know this can be difficult. I've been there. The anniversary of Daniel's death isn't a picnic for me either. But maybe you shouldn't be biting my head off?"

"You're right. I'm sorry, Regina." He leaned over, kissing her cheek. "I guess my head just hasn't been in a good space."

"Well, why don't you take me home and then go home to spend time with Roland? I'm just going to sit in bed alternating having ice on my ankle and then not. Emma will be able to help me," she said, resting her hand against his cheek.

He nodded. "I think that sounds good. But if you need anything…"

"I'll call," she said, crossing her heart with her fingers. "Promise."

Satisfied, Robin started the car again. "Then let's get you home so you can rest and get better."

"Great. Drive, Jeeves," she said, trying to mimic his accent.

"You did not just call me that." But he pulled out of the parking lot, turning back toward her house as Regina laughed.
All in the Enchanted Forest feared the Evil Queen. She chased their beloved Snow White across the country, hellbent on destroying the fair princess. Most believed it was because she was jealous of how beautiful the girl had become and her vanity demanded she be considered the fairest in the land. So she would not stop until her only competition was dead.

It was also well known that the Evil Queen was a witch and used magic to make sure she stayed young and beautiful forever, no matter how dark the spell was. Some whispered she needed the blood of young virgins, which was another reason why she massacred whole villages in her quest to defeat Snow White. The Queen would then take all the virgins back and drain their blood so she could bathe in it.

The people had a warning that she was coming. As a witch, she had a familiar—a midnight black cat that would be spotted in the village. They knew the tom was hers from the bright blue eyes he possessed and his odd behaviors. He appeared to be listening to their conversations and gathering intel. Everyone tried not to speak too loud in his presence but he was stealthy, able to hide in places they didn't think to check for a cat.

Not long after the cat appeared, the Queen's foreboding black carriage would be spotted on the roads. Shouts would rise up in the village. Mothers would scoop up their children, racing into the woods to hide amongst the trees while the men would take up arms. They knew it wouldn't protect them from the Queen's magic but they refused to go down without a fight.

Guards in black armor and with helmets covering their entire faces marched alongside the carriage, dispersing to gather up the villagers who weren't hiding so that they were all together when the Queen left her carriage. She flung the door open, blood red curtains swishing from the movement, and smiled coldly at them. "My beloved subjects," she said, climbing down from the carriage. Her black cat followed, sitting at her feet.

"Snow White ain't here," a man called out, feeling braver than he was. "We're not hiding her so you can go on your way."

The Queen paused for a moment before turning her smile on the man. People swore the temperature around them dropped several degrees and they started to shiver as she approached the group. "I'm sorry. Were you ordering me?"

"I was just telling the truth," the man said, voice shaking though he managed to hold her eye contact. "Snow White isn't here. So you can just leave."

She tilted her head and slowly raised her hand. With a flick of her wrist, they watched his head turn in an unnatural way as the crack of his neck echoed around the quiet village. The man's lifeless body crumpled to the ground, his eyes staring unseeing at the sky.

Keeping her hand raised, the Queen walked along the perimeter of the crowd. The other men backed
away, averting their eyes and she smirked. "I trust no one else will be ordering me around?"

A murmur rose up from the crowd, one that sounded like: "No, Your Majesty."

"Good," she said. "Now, my guards are going to search for Snow White. Anyone who tries to stop them or make a run to warn her joins your unfortunate neighbor in the afterlife. Understood?"

They all nodded.

Her smile morphed into a smirk. "Guards, leave no nook and cranny unchecked if you value your own lives."

"Yes, Your Majesty!" they chanted. They then marched into town, pushing past the men to get to their cabins and huts.

The Queen retreated to stand next to her carriage, scooping up her black cat. He purred in her arms as she scratched behind his ear, both watching the guards tear the village apart in hopes of finding the princess that had fled from the place a week prior. She was far away by that point and they wished that the Queen would go bother someone else.

She moved from scratching behind his ear to scratching under his neck, the cat's purring growing louder as his black tail wrapped around her arm. The Queen smiled at him, unnerving the men for it was genuine and almost…fond.

It was disarming.

The guards returned to stand in front of her. "No sign of Snow White in this village, Your Majesty. She's long gone."

Scowling, the Queen pushed past them and glared at the villagers. "Where did she go?"

"We don't know," one of the village elders said. "She left us last week. We're not hiding her, Your Majesty."

She nodded. "I see. But you were hiding her."

The man shook his head. "She just passed through. We gave her no quarter, Your Majesty. We promise."

"But you didn't tell my guards that she was here or that she had passed this way," the Queen pointed out.

"We didn't want any trouble," the elder protested. "Please, Your Majesty, we promise not to make the same mistake."

She smirked. "You would betray your princess?"

"You are our queen," he said, kneeling before her though he grimaced as she heard his knees crack.

Her chest puffed out and she looked pleased, brown eyes surveying the whole village. "You all agree?"

There was some silent as the men shifted awkwardly. It appeared to her that the smartest person in the whole village may have been their elder—he knew the way to get her to leave them alone was to swear loyalty. And she could tell he would keep his vow, even if the others just paid her lip service.
It was a start, at least. Just as soon as the others followed their leader's example.

"I don't care who you are. You're just a vain bitch who can't stand that some princess might be prettier than her. You know why that is? Because Snow White is beautiful inside and out. You might be beautiful on the outside but you are the ugliest creature ever on the inside," a fool yelled from the back of the crowd.

She frowned, fire coursing through her as her cat hissed. "Who said that? Show yourself!"

The man was clearly hoping to stay hidden from her sight, judging by the shocked and betrayed look in his eyes when his neighbors all stood aside, leaving a clear path to him for the Queen. She took slow, deliberate steps toward him, delighting in the way his knees knocked together and the color drained from his face. Fear filled his eyes and she could hear his silent prayers for his immortal soul.

"Dare to say that again?" she asked, lip curling into an evil smirk.

He swallowed and the fool held his head high. "You heard me. You're nothing but a dark witch and so your soul is black and shriveled, an ugly thing. No wonder no one loves you."

With a wild howl, the cat leaped from her arms and his teeth sunk into the man's neck. His eyes widened as he fell to the ground, blood spattering the ground as the cat tore his neck open. It swiped at the wound, deepening it and making certain the man bled out.

Its work done, the cat leaped back into the pleased queen's arms. "Good boy," she told him, scratching behind his ear again.

She turned back to the villagers, her black cape swirling around her. "Well, I'm still waiting for an answer. Do you all pledge your loyalty to me…or to Snow White?"

All fell to their knees, supplicating her with adulation. She walked through them, smiling, and returned to her carriage. "Good. Then you all shall live. But I promise you that I will not be as merciful if I learn you have harbored or aided Snow White again. Understood?"

"Yes, Your Majesty," they all chanted.

The elder prostrated himself before her. "Thank you for your mercy, My Queen."

"You're welcome," she said before snapping at a nearby teen: "Make sure to help him up."

"I will," the boy said, eyes wide.

She nodded and let her cat climb into the carriage first before taking the hand of a guard as she climbed into the carriage. The Queen gave them all one last chilling smile before closing the door. Her carriage rolled away and the men stayed on their knees long after it was gone.

They were spared unspeakable horrors.

For now.

The carriage shook from side to side as it went over bumps and rocks. Regina scowled as she bounced around, the velvet cushions not enough to keep her comfortable during such a rough ride. "There has to be a way to make roads smooth," she muttered.

Besides her, her loyal cat meowed and pawed at her. She smirked at him, scratching the scruff of his neck. "Do you want free from this form, pet?"
"MEOW." The cat sounded quite indignant, which only amused her more.

She raised her hand, engulfing the cat in the purple smoke that accompanied her magic. It grew larger and when it died away, it left behind a naked man. He had thick blond hair that matched the scruff on his chin as well as the coarse curls on his chest. Amused blue eyes watched her and he smiled, revealing two dimples. "You really don't like putting clothes on me, milady," he said.

"Why bother?" she asked. "They're just going to come off."

He chuckled, leaning closer to rest his forehead against hers. "You let them live."

"I did," she confirmed before smirking. "But don't worry. I'm not getting soft, pet."

"I didn't think that."

Regina smirked. "Good. I let them live because they agreed to betray Snow. And I know they will. The people are weakening, realizing that supporting her is not the wise choice. She will be mine soon."

"Very wise, milady. I eagerly await your victory."

She hummed, resting her hand against his cheek and wiping her thumb against his lips. "You have some blood still on your lips."

"I see. Did you wipe it all off?" he asked, hot breath hitting her.

"No," Regina said. "Do you want me to?"

He smirked. "Depends. How do you propose to do that?"

"Like this." She slid her hand behind his neck and closed the gap between them, kissing him passionately. Her tongue darted out, tasting a coppery substance on his lips and lapping it up as he laid her down on the cushioned seat.

She slipped her tongue inside his mouth, still tasting blood and feeling herself grow wetter between her legs. Pulling away, she panted as she hitched up her skirts. "I need you, pet."

"Say my name first," he told her, the only one who could get away with giving her an order.

Regina gasped as she closed her eyes, feeling his fingers brush against her clit. "Robin…"

"I love it when you say my name." He pushed up her skirts before opening her legs more. "Just lay back and I'll do all the work, my queen."

She moaned as his tongue gave a broad lick at her clit, grateful for the day a desperate thief who wanted to escape the hangman's noose offered to be her servant. He had turned into a most faithful companion, a useful spy and the best lover she had ever had.

Who said black cats were bad luck?
Robin crept down into Regina's vault, careful not to disturb her. She had warned him, Henry and Emma about how many dangerous things she possessed in that vault as well as the powerful magic she could be conducting. "If you don't to lose something important or spend a week as a bug, you will take extreme caution when interrupting me," she told them, glaring at each of them as they sat like errant children.

He peered around the corner to check on Regina and see if it was safe to enter the room or not. She stood along a wall, pulling out little boxes and frowning as she shoved them back into place in frustration.

No dangerous magic but still a danger of having his head bitten off.

Robin knew he had to chance it. She had been distant the past few days, since they were trying to figure out the newest threat to Storybrooke. A strange figure had been seen in the woods at night so they all split up to try to find it. It was fruitless search for most of them but they knew Regina had to have encounter something. Robin had found her unconscious on the ground and when she had roused, she was disoriented and not feeling well. Since then, she had spent a couple days in bed—most unusual for her.

He was glad she was out of the house but he was concerned for her. Robin hoped she would talk to him here in her safe spot. "Regina?" he asked softly.

She jumped, slamming the boxes closed as she turned to face him. "What are you doing here? It's late."

"I could ask you the same thing," he pointed out, sitting down on a chest. "Something's been bothering you, Regina. Please, tell me what it is."

"I can't," she said, turning her back to him. Her voice sounded strangled, as if she was trying not to cry. "Please go home, Robin."

He stood, approaching her though he didn't touch her. "No. Not until you tell me what's wrong. You can tell me anything. No matter how bad you think it might be. I thought I've proven that to you? That nothing you do or say could drive me away. Please, whatever is bothering you, let me share it."

When he saw her shoulders slump, Robin wrapped his arms around her. He kissed the side of her head. "We can get through it together."

"I don't know if we can get through this," she said, voice cracking.

"I know we can." He turned her around, giving her a hopeful smile as he tilted her head up to meet his eyes. "We can do anything. You just have to tell me what's wrong."

She took his hand, leading him to her mirror. "I think it's best to show you. Look at my mirror."
He frowned as he looked in the mirror, wondering if her magic was going to show something. Robin concentrated, waiting for something to happen. An image to appear, the glass to ripple, shatter, just do something. Instead, all he saw was himself standing there. He turned to Regina, who was standing right next to him…

Wait.

Robin turned back to the mirror, confirming he only saw himself in the glass. Yet Regina hadn't moved. She was still standing right there by him and he gaped at the mirror. "What the…?"

"I lied when I said I didn't know what was haunting the forest," she admitted softly. "I know exactly who is haunting it. It's Dracula."

"Dracula?" Robin asked, frowning in confusion. Was he supposed to know who he was?

She sighed, slowly unwinding the scarf around her neck. When she removed it, Robin saw two red marks on her skin as if she had been bitten. Regina gently touched them. "He's a vampire, Robin. And now I'm one too."

"Oh," he said, trying to process everything. He had heard legends of vampires—the living dead who drained people and animals of blood at night for the sunlight burnt them and who could transform into bats to fly around. Now he was dating one.

That was going to take some time to adjust to.

She wrapped the scarf around her neck again. "I wasn't sure if I was one. I don't feel dead. I took out my heart but I couldn't tell if it was unlit or just still dimmed by my darkness. But the lack of a reflection, sensitivity to the sun, and a sudden aversion to garlic convinced me I was turned. Especially now. I have this overwhelming desire for blood."

"Is that why you're down here?" he asked.

Regina nodded. "In addition to hearts, I sometimes took blood. It comes in handy with spells and the like. I was hoping I could use that to quench my desire…but I can't find them."

"Okay. Then what's Plan B?" Robin asked, crossing his arms as he watched her.

"I don't know. I guess I can try eating raw meat and see if that works," she said with a sigh, hugging her arms around her.

He nodded, his mind working. "Perhaps the butcher can also give you some animal blood to help hold you over?"

"The town may not think of me as the Evil Queen anymore, but I doubt anyone would be okay with just giving me blood," she said, voice starting to crack from her frustration.

"We'll figure something out. I promise." He reached out for her but she stepped back.

She shook her head. "I think it's safer if Henry stays with Emma and you take Roland and Peanut far away from me. I don't think I could live with myself if I lost control and bit one of you."

"You won't do that," he insisted, believing that with all his heart. "So don't do what you usually do—push us away because you think you're keeping us safe. I think by now we've proven that we all fare much better when we work together."
Regina's shoulders slumped as she nodded. "You're right. I just…I just never thought something like this would've happened to me."

"No one does. But together, we'll figure out how to rid you of your vampirism."

"I don't think one can rid oneself of vampirism," she replied, raising her eyebrow.

He smiled, pulling her into his arms. "We've brought people back from the dead, from complete darkness and even got your sister to act decently…most of the time. I think if we all put our heads together, we can figure out a way to return you to…you."

She let out a soft chuckle. "That's one hell of a pep talk. Thank you."

"Anytime, sweetheart," he said, kissing her. They would find a way to help Regina. And if not…Well, he wouldn't miss garlic all that much anyway.
Roland was the one who found the puppy trapped in a hole in the woods with a broken leg, starved and dehydrated. Concerned, Roland had run into the Merry Men camp and dragged his father and Little John over to help the little dog. Together, the men got him out of the hole and Robin decided to bring him to the animal shelter.

That night, Roland begged Robin and Regina to keep the puppy. He promised to help take care of him and to love the puppy forever. "Please," he pleaded, hands clasped and wide brown eyes on full blast.

"We'll talk about it," Regina said, caving under his doe eyes. Surprised, Robin agreed to that.

The whole family went to pick up the puppy the next morning. Roland dubbed him "Lucky" and attentively listened to the worker at the animal shelter explain how to care for a dog. He promised to do everything he could and then beamed at Lucky, his smile melting Regina's heart.

Lucky quickly became part of their family, though he was mostly Roland's dog. The boy fed him every morning and night and made sure to play with him whenever he could. Henry, Robin and Regina all helped him walk the dog since he was too young to do by himself but Roland happily cleaned up after his dog. At night, Lucky curled up on Roland's bed and the two slept together.

It fell to Regina and Robin to train him, though, which they didn't mind. She realized she couldn't expect a five-years-old to know how to housebreak a dog but Roland watched his parents carefully as they trained Lucky not to use the bathroom in the house and not to chew up everything he found.

The training worked and Lucky was a good dog—except for one thing. No matter what they did, they couldn't get him to stop digging holes in the yard. He was proud of each one he dug, judging by his bright eyes and wagging tails, no matter how many times right after he was scolded or sent away so one of them could fill the hole back in.

One day, though, Lucky surprised them all when he ran in with a bone in his mouth. Regina frowned as he placed it on her clean kitchen floor, dirt flying off it as he gnawed at it. She hurried over to him, pulling on the bone. "Lucky, drop it."

The dog thought she was playing and pulled back at it, tail wagging. She frowned, making sure to use her mayor voice as she repeated: "Lucky, drop it."

With a whine, the dog released the bone. Regina gave him one of his treats and tossed a toy bone into the living room for him to play with. She frowned as she turned over the bone she had taken from him in her hands, identifying it as a human femur. Where had he gotten it?

"Robin!" she called out. "Meet me in the backyard. Now!"

She hurried outside, her soulmate meeting her as she exited the back door. He frowned as she
approached. "What's wrong?"

"Lucky found this." She held up a bone.

Robin frowned as he took it from her. "Is this a human leg bone?"

"Yes, it is. The question is...where did Lucky get it?" she asked, scanning the yard. She found dirt strewn about a far corner and headed toward it, Robin following her.

They got to Lucky's newest hole and gazed in. Parts of two other bones stuck out from the dirt, only slightly disturbed from when Lucky picked up his prize to take back into the house. Regina frowned, confused. "I don't get it. Why is there a skeleton in our yard?"

"So it's not from your past as the Evil Queen?" he asked, trying to process the sight.

She scowled at him. "If I killed someone, I didn't hide their body in my yard. And the only person I killed here in Storybrooke was Graham. He certainly isn't buried in my yard."

Tears pricked her eyes as she thought of the late huntsman. She felt sick as she recalled the anger and jealousy that had driven her to crush his heart, driven to kill him more because he was choosing Emma over her though telling herself it was to keep him from uncovering the truth. Graham had deserved a lot better than what she had given him but he had had a proper burial.

Robin sighed as he looked down at the hole. "Okay, so now what do we do?"

"I guess we call Emma and dig this poor soul up," Regina replied, wincing at the utter destruction about to be wrought upon her lawn. "Maybe we can find a clue as to who he or she is."

It took most of the afternoon, but they were finally able to dig up the entire skeleton. Emma laid it carefully into a body bag she had brought from the sheriff's station before zipping it up. She was going to transport the bones to Whale for him to look over in hopes he could at least tell them the sex and age of the mystery person.

"I think we can also possibly do some facial reconstruction, but we'll have to see," Emma said. "Until then, maybe there's someone who didn't realize a loved one was missing because they thought they were still in the Enchanted Forest. Once we let the news out, maybe they'll come forward with a possible identification."

"I hope so. It seems sad to think no one would ever know who he or she was, to not honor them properly," Robin said, wrapping his arm around Regina.

Emma nodded. "Well, if this is the biggest mystery in town, I'm glad. I definitely wouldn't want another curse."

"I think we all agree on that," Regina replied, her mind turning. She still couldn't place who the skeleton belonged to and why it was in her backyard. But she decided to leave it in Emma's hands and not worry about it anymore.

Someone—or something—else would end up having other plans.

Chapter End Notes
To be continued...
Regina glanced up and down the country road, watching for any cars that might be coming. She knew none would drive down this way, especially not this late at night. It wasn't used much anymore, not since the town built the main road that connected Storybrooke to its two closest towns years before her birth. The only people who now used the dirt road they were on were those who wanted to go on a long drive or who wanted to visit the old town cemetery, like them.

She looked over her shoulder to see how her friends were doing. Her boyfriend, Robin, was crouched down picking the lock on the gates to the cemetery while their friend Emma held her flashlight to give him light. Killian stood nearby, peering through the fence into the dark graveyard. "This is going to be so amazing," he said.

"I know," Emma replied, grinning. "Do you think the stories are true?"

"Of course not, Emma. Ghosts don't exist," Regina scoffed, trying to sound braver then she felt.

Emma's grin turned into a scowl. "Why are you even here then? If you're going to be a wet blanket, you could've stayed with Mary Margaret and David."

Regina seethed, seeing red as she turned around. "I'm a wet blanket for not wanting to break into someplace where we are clearly not wanted. Nor am I one for wanting to disturb sacred ground and the resting place for so many souls. It just seems...wrong."

"Admit it, Regina, you're just scared," Emma shot back. It sounded like she was close to clucking at her.

Straightening up, Robin sighed. "Emma, leave her alone. If she doesn't want to come in, that's fine. You and Killian can go in while I take her home."

"Come on, mate, we agreed to do this together. Regina can wait in the car." Killian clapped him on the shoulder, shaking his arm.

Regina frowned, crossing her arms. "Stop talking about me like I'm not here."

Shaking off Killian, Robin approached her and gently gripped her arms. He crouched down a bit to make sure he was looking in her eyes. "If you want to go home, just say the word. I don't want you to do anything you don't want."

Melting under his gaze, she almost asked him to take her home so they could cuddle and watching movies together. But Regina caught sight of Emma over his shoulder, flapping her arms as if they were wings. She was calling Regina out and that couldn't stand.

Squaring her shoulders, Regina met Robin's eyes again. "I'm fine. Let's go in, prove that this stupid ghost doesn't really exist and get out of here."
"That's the spirit," Killian said before chuckling at his own stupid joke. He swung the gate open, its creak echoing around the empty graveyard.

Robin took Regina's hand, giving it a squeeze. "You give me the word and we can go, lovely. It'll be okay," he told her.

"Thanks," she whispered, her bravado already failing as they followed Killian and Emma into the graveyard. She swallowed, reminding herself that there was nothing to worry about.

The dead couldn't hurt them.

Regina didn't have a good grasp of time but she had to guess they had been wandering around the cemetery for almost an hour. They passed by several tombstones and she stopped to read them, marking the ones from back when the town was founded back in the early 19th century. "Imagine what life was like for them back then," she said.

"They definitely wouldn't recognize Storybrooke now," Robin replied, standing beside her. "Imagine trying to explain cars to them? Or television? Or any modern device?"

"There's probably a lot they could still tell us about, though." Regina glanced over at another tombstone—1868. "This one experienced the Civil War. Wow."

"Stop geeking out over there, Regina," Emma called out from a nearby hill. "We're almost at the part of the cemetery they say the ghost inhabits. The one where they put the prisoners and those executed for crimes."

Killian motioned for them to follow. "Come on, you two."

Regina glanced back at the tombstones, deciding that she would come back another time—during the day—to study the history in this place. She took Robin's hand. "I guess we shouldn't keep them waiting."

He gave her hand a squeeze as they headed down the broken stone path leading down to the derelict section of the graveyard. Tombstones there were knocked over, some were crumbling and most were so faded, whoever was buried beneath them were lost to time. Bare, gnarled trees grew among the stones, all radiating out from one weeping willow whose branches waved in the cold wind that now blowing through the area. They brushed against the imposing mausoleum at the very end of the cemetery, marble gargoyles perched at the edge as they smiled wickedly at them.

Cold seeped into Regina's bones and she felt like she would never be warm again. She struggled to breathe as she inched closer to Robin. He wrapped his arm around her. "It's okay," he whispered.

She tried to believe him…until all their flashlights all died at once. With the moon shrouded by clouds, it became difficult to see and everything turned into blobs in the darkness.

Killian frowned, shaking his. "Bloody useless torch."

"Guys, they say when a ghost tries to manifest, it pulls energy from electrical items, draining batteries. Maybe a ghost wants to show itself to us," Emma said, her voice full of excitement as she looked around.

"Do we want to meet a ghost from down here?" Robin asked, frowning. "What if it tries to kill us?"

Killian rolled his eyes. "Ghosts can't kill you. They're dead and have no bodies."
"They can't kill you because they aren't real," Regina insisted, though her body was trembling and she had the distinct feeling they were being watched. She continued, though. "Our flashlights died because you got cheap batteries."

"We all can't have rich parents who can buy the good kind," he snapped back at her.

Robin stepped between them, giving Killian a push. "Leave her alone, mate, or you we'll be having a conversation."

"Come on," Emma said, pointing to the mausoleum. "The ghost is supposedly in there. We have to go in to see him."

Looking at the mausoleum, Regina felt pure dread. Despite the chill still wracking her body, she broke out into a sweat and her gut told her to not go into the mausoleum. Her feet felt rooted to the ground as her heart beat wildly in her chest, keeping her in place. Shadows moved all around her, pushing her away from the imposing building.

"Regina? Are you coming?" Robin asked. She tried to answer him but no sound came out of her mouth. Tears pricked her eyes and he gathered her in his arms, holding her close.

"Well? Is she in or is she out?" Killian called out.

Robin looked over his shoulder. "We're both out. I'm taking her home."

"Let her go back to the car and wait for us," he argued. "There's no reason why you should miss out on this."

"I'm not leaving her, not for some stupid ghost story. You two have your fun, we're leaving," Robin said, wrapping his arm around Regina. "Call me in the morning, yeah?"

Emma smirk. "Oh, yes. We'll tell you about everything you missed."

"Come on, Regina." Robin pulled her forward and her feet finally worked again once she was moving away from the mausoleum. She looked back, watching Emma and Killian disappear into the darkness of the building. An eerie red light glowed from the eyes of the gargoyles overhead and she gasped, looking away.

It had to be her mind playing a trick on her.

She and Robin made it back to the main part of the cemetery and a feeling of peace washed over her. Regina felt safe and the pressure was lifted from her chest, allowing her to breathe normally again. Warmth from Robin finally crept into her limbs as she curled closer to him. "Thank you. I know you were looking forward to that…"

"Yeah, but it got a little too creepy," he said, the two walking back toward the gate. "It was like something didn't want me to go in there."

"I felt the same way," she admitted. "I think it was our preservation instinct."

He chuckled, kissing her head. "My little scientist."

They left the cemetery and returned to Robin's car. As she reached for the door handle, she noticed the sky by the back of the cemetery glowed red, as if something was on fire. She pointed it to Robin. "What do you think that is?"
"What?" he asked, looking over his shoulder.

Regina blinked and the sky returned to normal. She frowned. "Never mind. My eyes must be playing tricks on me."

They climbed into the car and Robin started it as Regina turned on the radio, eager for some music. A loud shrieck came from the speakers and they winced. She reached out to turn it off, a chill going through when she thought she heard what sounded like a laugh. With a flick of the switch, she plunged the car into silence again. "Let's just get out of here," she said.

"Agreed," Robin replied, flooring the car and pealing down the road.

Emma and Killian never called to say they got home safely as they never returned home after that night. The police investigated, talking to Robin and Regina about the last time they saw the couple. Both spoke about seeing the couple go into the mausoleum before they left the cemetery. When the police went to the cemetery, they found Killian's beat up truck but no sign of the two teenagers.

Despite several of their friends—Robin and Regina included—testifying that neither Emma nor Killian mentioned running away, the police concluded that's what had happened. After all, both were in the foster care system and had ended up in their current group home after previously running away. While the police weren't too sure why Killian and Emma didn't take the car, they figured the two were long gone.

No one in their social circles believed that though. Even if they had run away, all of them believed that either Emma or Killian would've reached out to let them know. They would've wanted them to know they were safe and probably would've wanted the items they had left behind, which just reinforced the idea they hadn't run away. Regina held Emma's beloved baby blanket—the only thing she had from her parents—and knew her friend would never leave without it. She took it home with her, cherishing it forever.

Robin and Regina never spoke about the other things they experienced that night—the strange feeling that told them they needed to leave, the cold, the flashlights turning off, the glowing red eyes, the red sky or the strange sounds that came from the radio. After graduating from high school, they moved far away from Storybrooke and married after college. They started their own family and went on with their lives.

Still, Regina looked for Emma and Killian whenever they went some place new, wondering if their friends had created a new life for themselves. However, deep in her heart, she knew she would never see them again. Something supernatural had happened in that cemetery that night and had taken her friends.

Forever.
Breaking the Curse

Chapter Notes

Written for Spooky OQ Day 5: Curse

Inspired by the movie "Penelope" starring Christina Ricci and James McAvoy

Regina Mills looked at herself in the mirror, sighing. She wore a white strapless ballgown with flower appliques at the waist. The dress was cinched tight to "accentuate" her "assets," per mother, and made it difficult to breathe or move. Her dark hair had been straightened and twisted to be pinned against her head. The veil was then pinned inside the twist, allowing the lace to flow over her hair and down her back. With light makeup, Regina was every inch the spring socialite bride.

Well, except for the pig's nose she had possessed since birth thanks to a curse laid on her family centuries earlier. The only way to break it was for one of her own kind—a blue blood of noble descent, the elite of society—to marry her. So she was about to walk down the aisle to James Spencer, whose family had blue blood about as old as Regina's. It was to be a grand union of two established houses and everyone was excited for the wedding.

They didn't care that her groom couldn't bear the sight of her. Or that he had vilified her in the press, calling her a monster and suggesting that scientists experiment on her. James had campaigned against her since he first laid eyes on her, running from the house in disgust. The only reason he was marrying her now was because his campaign had backfired. Regina had been embraced by the people, becoming a beloved celebrity. The Spencers face a hostile public and so George had ordered his son to fix. James proposed and Regina accepted after her parents convinced her he was her only chance to break the curse.

Yet she couldn't help but think of another blood blue, one with kind blue eyes and thick dark blond hair. Unlike other men of their station who remained clean-shaven, his chin and cheeks were covered with scruff he liked to rub as he joked about wanting to look dangerous. Regina thought he looked sexy but she never told him in the hours they spent talking, where they discussed everything under the sun. She felt she could tell him anything as he never made her feel like her opinion wasn't valid or that she was stupid for her beliefs. He did challenge her, made her see things in different ways and she did the same for him. They matched each other in intelligence, creativity and sass and made her feel alive in ways she hadn't before.

When he spoke of the world she hadn't seen because her parents kept her hidden due to her nose, she could almost picture it. He had promised to show it to her and she had believed him, falling hard for him. She had worked up the courage to show herself to him and unlike other suitors, Richard Lyons didn't recoil from her. He had stared at her with awe and for the first time in her life, Regina had felt beautiful.

But then he had turned around, leaving her with only a weak "I can't give you what you want" explanation and broken heart. Her last memory of him was watching as he paused at the door, looking at her with pain and regret. "Don't let them keep you imprisoned here, Regine. There's a wide world out there and you deserve to see it."

Then he was gone.
Regina took his advice though. She realized that if Richard Lyons couldn't free her of the curse, no one would and so it was time to start living. After her parents had gone to bed, she packed a suitcase, grabbed her father's credit card and left to experience the world. It had been a crazy ride that involved her revealing her full face but it had been worth it. She had gotten a job she loved in a bakery—baking had been one of the few pleasures she had in her house—and found good friends in bail bond person Emma Swan and pub owner Killian Jones. Regina went to street festivals, got drunk, sang karaoke, went to the movies and even to a burlesque show. She felt as alive as she had when she was with Richard.

Could she now give it up for married life with James? Would everything get better once the curse was broken? She doubted they would learn to love each other and she feared she would be stuck in an unhappy marriage, trapped by how scandalous divorce still was amongst their kind.

"Regina? Sweetheart, are you ready?" her father's soft voice interrupted her doubts. She turned around to find him standing in the doorway in his tux, looking concerned.

For a moment, she wanted to tell him that she had changed her mind and didn't want to marry James. That she was fine living the rest of her life with her pig's nose if it meant she didn't have to wake up beside a man who thought she should be killed. Yet she knew that it wasn't just her life affected by her nose—her parents had retreated from society after her birth to avoid any uncomfortable questions. This was a chance at a normal life for all of them and she couldn't let it pass by.

Regina took her father's arm. "Yes, I am."

They stepped out of the house and walked down the marble stairs that led to her family's prized gardens. Several rows of white chairs were set up and each one occupied by members of society's upper crust. Regina had fought hard to get Emma and Killian invited and she couldn't even spot them in this crowd.

A white runner lay between the two groups of chairs and led to the dais set up in front of the grand fountain in the center of the gardens. James waited there with the justice of the peace, looking like he was waiting for a root canal rather than marriage. He scowled as everyone rose, watching her come down the aisle on her father's arm.

She squeezed Daddy's arm and he slowed down, looking at her. "Is everything alright?"

"My groom hates me," she said. "Look at him."

He glanced up, grimacing slightly. "He doesn't hate you, sweetheart. He hates your nose."

Regina sighed. She had always heard that growing up—"You're beautiful, it's your nose that's not," "You can't go outside with your nose," "Once your nose goes away, everything will be better." It was always her nose that kept her from perfection and happiness.

"I promise you," Daddy continued, "everything will get better once you're married."

'No, it won't." Regina gasped when she heard the familiar hoarse, accented voice. She slowly turned around, finding Richard standing right behind her. He frowned as he said: "James Spencer is a monster who doesn't deserve her."

Mother came storming up the aisle, her purple skirts swishing with every determined step. "You have no right to be here," she told him.

"I couldn't let you marry Regina off to that bastard," he said, glaring at James. "She deserves so much better."
"Like who? You?" Regina asked, the pain of his rejection filling her chest yet mingling with the hope that he had come back for her.

Mother shook her head, grabbing Regina's hands to force her to look at him. "You can't trust him. He's done nothing but lie to you since day one. His name is not Richard Lyons."

"She's right. It's not," he said, stepping forward and drawing Regina's attention back to him. "My name is Robin Locksley and I'm not some lord. I'm just a washed-up musician with a gambling problem who accepted money to get a picture of some socialite. But I never lied to you about anything else."

She felt like her world was shattering as she took in Rich…Robin's contrite expression and appearance. He had always worn the same suit when he met her—blue jacket, blue pants, white shirt and a black tie. And it always seemed ill-fitting, which should've struck her as odd for someone in their station. A lord, or a future lord, would've made sure his suit was tailored to fit just right. Now, though, Robin wore a button-down shirt paired with jeans and a navy sports jacket. It all fit him perfectly and matched his personality better.

Regina shook her head. "I don't understand. Who paid you to take a picture of me?"

"Take a wild guess," he said, tone flat as his eyes once again focused on the man waiting behind her. Anger filled Regina and she clutched her bouquet of white roses tighter as Robin nodded. "He wanted proof that you were a monster. But after our first meeting, I knew you were no such monster. I wanted to back out but the money would've paid off almost all my debts and I wanted an excuse to keep talking with you. I knew I would've been thrown out on my ass if you knew who I really was."

"With good reason," Mother confirmed, sniffing.

Robin reached for her free hand, taking it in his own. "I'm sorry I lied to you. And I'm sorry I hurt you. I gave you hope I shouldn't have. When I finally saw you, I realized what was really at stake—your heart and your life—and I knew I had to walk away."

She replayed that moment in her mind yet again—I can't give you what you want—and the truth finally sunk in. "You couldn't break the curse."

"Right," he said. "I left, threw the camera in a nearby pond and told James I was done. I then went and got a couple proper jobs, including giving some music lessons, and am slowly paying back my debts. You inspired me to be a better person, Regina Mills, and you deserve the whole world."

"You gave that to me," she said. "Your words and rejection finally gave me the push I needed to get out there. And I've had quite the adventure."

He grinned, revealing the dimples she had fallen for so many months ago. "I know. I've been following along, proud of your every move. I almost went into the bakery where you work but I figured you didn't want to see me."

She would've loved to have seen him—either as Richard Lyons or Robin Locksley.

"Regina," Mother hissed. "Everyone is waiting. Stop giving this liar anymore of your time."

"He's not a liar," Regina replied, smiling at Robin. "Yes, he made a bad decision but I know in my heart he's always been truthful to me about what really matters."

He squeezed her hand. "You deserve to be happy, Regina, and you deserve to be loved. James won't
do that for you."

"It doesn't matter! She'll at least be normal!" Mother shrieked. "Don't you want to that, Regina?"

Regina let go of Robin's hand, turning to face her mother. "I want to live my life, Mother. I want to work at the bakery, hang out at the bar with Emma and Killian, go where I want and do what I want."

"But your nose!" Mother exclaimed.

"There is nothing wrong with my nose!" Regina yelled back. The truth had been slowly creeping up on her but realization had still hit her like a truck. When she had been away from her mother, she hadn't noticed her nose at all. She looked at the mirror and saw herself. And herself looked perfectly fine.

Holding her head high, Regina stated: "I like myself the way I am."

Thunder rattled the manor despite not a single cloud being in the sky. Guests cried out as a powerful gust of wind tore through the wedding, twirling Regina's dress and veil around her. She struggled against it, feeling herself fall backwards as if falling down a whole. Regina let out a cry as the blankness surrounded her.

When she landed, she was kneeling on a black surface. It was black all around her, no matter which way she turned her body. She stopped, noticing a young girl now standing in front of her. The girl had long black hair in plaits and wore a bright pink party dress with white Mary Jane shoes. Big brown eyes stared at Regina, looking down past her pig nose. It was Regina when she was about five years old, when she wanted to know why she couldn't go to the birthday party for Kathryn Midas like all the other children and was told it was because her nose made her too different.

Regina rose into a kneeling position, looking her younger self in the eyes. She then wrapped her arms around the girl, holding her close. "You're beautiful," she whispered.

She felt the girl disappear inside her as a bright light engulfed her. Her face felt warm, like the sun was beaming down on it. Regina closed her eyes, relishing the feeling.

"Regina?" Robin asked. She felt him shake her arm. "Regina, are you alright?"

Opening her eyes, all Regina could see was the white lace that made up her veil. She struggled to push it from her face, finally able to see Robin and the sun again when she did. His mouth fell open and surprise filled his eyes.

"What's wrong?" she asked, concerned by his reaction.

Emma had joined the group and she held out her compact. "See for yourself."

Regina took it, opening it up so she could look at herself in the mirror. At first, she didn't recognize the woman she saw. Her pig nose was gone, replaced by a normal looking one that resembled her mother's and high cheek bones like the ones she saw on models in magazines. She touched her hand to her nose, feeling the rounded shape rather than the flatness of her snout before brushing her fingers along her cheeks.

She had broken the curse.

"I don't get it," she said. "I thought I had to marry a blue blood to break the curse."
"The curse said you had to be accepted by one of your own," Daddy said.

It all made sense to Regina then. For people of their station, marriage was everything. They married to secure bloodlines, business, land, money, power...everything but love. Getting one of their own to marry her despite her nose would've appeared to have been the best way for her to be accepted but it never would've broken the curse. Whoever married her would've just done so for her fortune and lineage, not because he truly accepted her.

Anger then flared up as another truth revealed itself to her. She didn't have to have the childhood she had. Her parents didn't have to hide her away, keep her from all the other children and prevent anyone from seeing her. All they had to do was love her for who she was—pig's nose and all. The curse could've been broken when she was barely an hour old but no, she hadn't even been accepted by her own parents.

Mother still appeared to be struggling with what had happened but Regina could see guilt creeping into her father's eyes, meaning he was realizing the same thing she had. That all he had to do was look past her nose rather than fixate, rather than always add the "except your nose" caveat to everything, and she would've been freed.

"Do you need a hand?" Robin asked softly, holding his out to her. She took it, letting him pull her to her feet.

She smiled at him. "What do you think?"

"You've always been beautiful to me," he said. "Nothing's changed."

Regina wrapped her arms around him, kissing him. His hands were a warm weight on her waist, holding her close as he deepened the kiss. She had always wondered what it would be like to do this with him and she was pleased to know she had guessed right—he was an excellent kisser.

"Excuse me, you're supposed to be marrying my son," George Spencer said, breaking their kiss. Regina glanced over to see him standing there, red-faced.

She glanced up at Robin, who raised his eyebrow in response. With a big smile, Regina shook her head. "There will be no wedding today."

"Regina, think of what you're giving up," Mother said, sounding absurd to her.

"I'm not giving up anything," she replied, confused. "The only reason I was marrying James was to break the curse but I did that on my own. What else do I have to gain by going through with this?"

Her mother sputtered something about money and land and how this was the way things were always done. Regina shook her head. "Then maybe it's time for a change. Maybe that's why the witch really cursed us—to show us what acceptance and love really is. Even though my nose is gone, I still don't belong here. These aren't my kind. My kind are people like Emma and Killian and Granny and Robin. People who pursue their dreams and live."

Mother started to reach out for her but Daddy stopped her. "Let her go, Cora. We've kept her from living her life long enough. It's time for her to be free and to find her own happiness."

"Thank you, Daddy," Regina said, stepping away to hug him.

He held her tight. "I'm sorry I didn't just accept you for who you were, my darling daughter. I just hope you don't cut us completely out of your life..."
She shook her head as she pulled away. "Don't worry. I'll be sure to call regularly and stop by for dinner. How does that sound?"

"It sounds perfect," he replied. "And bring Robin…you know, if this works out. Which I have a feeling it will."

Regina glanced over her shoulder, taking in the smiling man watching her. Love always seemed out of her reach and she had often sat in the park, watching older couples as they strolled happily down the paths and wishing she could have what they had. She wasn't sure what the path before her would bring but she knew she was going to walk it with Robin by her side.

She stepped toward him, taking his hand. "I think I owe you a drink."

"Yes, you do," he said, lacing their fingers together. "Yes, you do."
When Daniel died, everything happened so fast, Regina didn't register what had happened at first. For a few glorious moments, happiness had been in her reach. Then it was yanked away from her and crushed by her mother's own hand. She had sunk to her knees, clutching Daniel's still warm body and praying he would open his eyes. Realization spread through her, like tea seeping into hot warm. Daniel was dead and nothing—not even True Love's Kiss, could bring him back.

Time slowed almost to a stop when Robin died. She watched as the blue bolt of energy hit him square in the chest and felt as if it had hit her as well. She knew he was dying as he turned around, wanting her to be the last thing he saw. His body then crumpled to the floor at her feet, leaving behind the ethereal form of his soul. Robin reached out for her and her heart shattered in pieces when she realized she would never feel his gentle, warm and tender touch ever again. He faded away as tears poured down her cheeks and the awful emptiness of losing another love took over her body.

She had felt numb throughout the hours immediately following Daniel's death. Then Snow had admitted she had betrayed Regina's trust and anger consumed her, rage fueling her every move for years. Anger came quicker this time as Regina glared at Hades while holding Robin's lifeless body. Zelena's arrival only seconds later added fuel to her fire. She had trusted her sister and was burned yet again. Zelena had chosen to align herself with a god who had a crystal powerful enough to destroy them all and was more than willing to use it rather than her, the sister who kept giving her chance after chance—even hurting Robin in the process. Now he had paid the ultimate price and someone was going to suffer for it.

Hades, naturally, tried to cover his own ass. Regina watched as he tried to convince Zelena that Regina and Robin had attacked him when he tried to keep them from taking the baby from her. That he had had no choice to use the crystal because he loved Zelena and wanted to do what was best for her.

It made Regina sick. But when it appeared to sway Zelena, Regina had to put her foot down. Even if it meant letting go of Robin.

After lying Robin's limp body back down, Regina rose onto her shaky legs and stared down her sister. Zelena had been denied love for years and didn't recognize true love, unlike her. She had received an overabundance of it in recent years—from Henry, Roland, Mary Margaret and most of all, from Robin. Her voice cracked as she told Zelena what true love was, pointing to Robin's dead body as she spoke of the sacrifice he made for her, all in hopes of getting Zelena to see the truth. Regina didn't care if they shared True Love's Kiss—Hades didn't truly love Zelena if he could lie and manipulate her the way he was doing now.

In the end, though, it worked and Regina realized their new start in the Underworld had been too little, too late. Zelena stood next to Hades, her voice hard and cold as she addressed Regina. "You're always taking from me. Mother, the life I should've had, Rumple, my victory, my baby...I won't let you take the man I love. This time, dear sister, I win."
"Shall we do this together?" Hades asked, holding out the Olympian crystal.

Zelena smirked as she wrapped her fingers around it, the crystal pulsating bright blue. "Yes, let's. Goodbye, sister."

Regina tried to figure out a way out of the room, but nothing seemed to work. She could use her magic to poof herself and Robin out of the room but then Hades and Zelena would come after her, putting more people she loved in danger. Her magic wouldn't work against a god like Hades. She could try to take out Zelena but he would still hit her with the crystal. It seemed her only choice was to accept her fate and she closed her eyes, waiting for the end. She apologized to Robin, regretting that his sacrifice was coming to nothing, and then to Henry. Emma and the Charmings would take him in and make sure he continued to grow into a good, honorable man. She was certain of that.

"Look at you," Zelena said, scorn clear in her voice. "The great and powerful Evil Queen brought to nothing over the loss of a man. Pathetic."

"We both knew it would come to this. One of us was going to have to kill the other. It appears you get to kill me. So just do it!" Regina yelled, keeping her eyes closed as she waited for the bolt to hit her.

"Regina!" Emma's voice rang out as a blast of cool air hit her face. She opened her eyes to see the Savior standing over Hades and Zelena, both who had been blown back by Emma's magic.

The blonde turned to Regina, a panicked look on her face. "Run, Regina..."

"I can't," she said, looking back at Robin's body. "I can't leave him."

Emma's eyes widened. "Is he...?"

"Dead," Regina said, drowning the word in bitterness as she stepped closer to the two still on the floor. "They killed him."

"Well, I was aiming at you. He just got in the way, noble fool," Hades said, getting to his knees. His eyes locked onto something ahead of him on the floor. "But I'm going to finish the job."

She followed his eyeline to the crystal laying on a foot away from her. Regina lunged for it, grabbing it before Hades could reach it. She held it out, anger coursing through her. "This can kill a god, right?" she asked, seething.

Hades put his hands up in surrender as Zelena crawled closer to him. "Regina, please..."

"No!" Regina shouted. "You don't get to ask me favors, you don't get to plead for anything, Zelena. You made your decision. Now live with the consequences."

A blue bolt shot from the crystal, hitting Hades and Zelena. It engulfed them in a bright light and Regina had to look away, dropping the crystal in the process to help shield her eyes. When the light died down, she opened her eyes and then glanced back to where the two had been. Zelena's body laid sprawled out on the floor beside a pile of dust, a small bluish-white crystal resting among the god's ashes.

"Regina, are you okay?" Emma asked, stepping over Zelena's legs. She rested a hand on Regina's arm.

Tears filled her eyes as she shook her head. "No, I'm not. I've lost Robin and Zelena. I'm alone."
"No, you're not. You still have Henry. And my parents. And me." Emma hugged her awkwardly. "I know what you're going through. But we'll get through it together."

Regina laid her head against Emma's, knowing she should find some humor in the fact that her once sworn enemy was giving her comfort but unable to do so. All she felt was the overwhelming sense of loss-mostly over Robin. He was supposed to be her second chance at love and now it was gone, thanks to a vengeful god and her awful sister.

Perhaps she just wasn't meant for romantic love.

The door burst open and the Charmings stumbled into the room. David held up his sword, looking around the room as he tried to find any threats. Snow, though, pushed past her husband and focused on Regina. "Are you okay?"

As Regina shook her head, Emma awkwardly addressed her mother. "Something bad happened before I got up here..."

"Oh no," Snow breathed, green eyes widening as she took in Robin's body. "How did he...?"

"He took a blast meant for me. Hades shot off that Olympian crystal and not only killed him but obliterated his soul," Regina said bitterly.

Emma frowned. "So even if we went to the Underworld and tried to get him, he wouldn't be there?"

Regina shook her head. "Besides, it's not like going to the Underworld worked for you and Hook."

"True," the other woman agreed, looking downcast. Regina hated that she made Emma recall her own grief but at the moment, she was too tired and emotional to really care to apologize.

David sheathed his sword, touching Zelena and frowning. "Is she dead too?"

Regina nodded. "She chose Hades over me and shared his death when I shot him with the crystal. It was the only way to stop him."

"Of course it was," Snow said, her tone no doubt the one she used when placating an upset student. She came over and took Regina's hands in hers. "I'm sorry, Regina. I know you and Zelena were trying to make a fresh start..."

"Yeah, well, as I said, she made her choice. And it wasn't me." Regina pulled her hands away, trying hard not to break down even in front of the closest thing she had to a family. She reached down and picked up the crystal. "We should probably make sure this doesn't get into the wrong hands."

She stood but her legs grew weak, forcing her to brace herself on her desk. Her head began to swim and everything started to look like she was viewing the world through a fishbowl. Everyone stared at her in concern and when David spoke her name, it echoed. What was going on?"

"Regina!" Snow yelled, looking horrified. Emma slapped Regina's hand and everything snapped back into focus, feeling normal once again.

Confusion filled her as she glanced around the scared faces of the Charming family. "What's going on?"

"I don't know," Emma said, voice shaky, "but I think that crystal was pulling your soul from your body. We saw a blue form that looked like you and the light in your eyes dimmed as your body started to sag."
Regina stared at the crystal, once again lying on the floor, as the Charmings talked about how they would remove it. She then glanced over at Robin's body and her heart sped up as her mind formed a plan. He was her soulmate and his soul was gone. Charming's heart was technically gone but he was sharing his wife's heart because they were True Love. Was it then possible for her to split her soul in two and share it with Robin? Could she bring him back to her?

"Regina?" Emma asked, sounding even more concerned. "Regina, what are you thinking?"

"Split my soul," she said, looking right into the Savior's eyes.

Emma blanched and shook her head. "Regina, you can't be serious."

"I am," she replied. "Just like I split your mother's heart, I want you to split my soul. Robin and I are soulmates, right? It should be the same in principle."

"Aren't you the one who is always telling me that when it comes to magic, just because something works in one case, it won't in a similar case?" Emma asked, still looking uncertain.

Those had been Regina's words but she also had told Emma to trust her instincts. And Regina's instincts were telling her that this would work. She just had to believe it would work. "Please, Emma. We have to try."

"Regina, if it doesn't work, you could die," Snow reminded her. "What about Henry?"

Guilt hit her and she had to wonder if this risk was worth him losing his mother. Would he understand? Or would he resent her? Would it affect how he grew up if she left him now?

"I believe this will work," she replied. "And if it doesn't, I know the three of you will take care of Henry. That'll you'll raise him to be a good man."

Tears filled snow's eyes as David wrapped his arm around her. Emma still looked hesitant but nodded. "What do I have to do?"

"Once my soul is out of my body, trust your instinct. It'll help you split my soul." Regina squeezed her hands in reassurance.

She then stood next to Robin's body before bending down to pick up the crystal again. With a deep breath, her fingers closed around it and she started to straighten up.

The fishbowl effect returned but the dizziness passed quickly. She felt light, almost like a balloon floating through the air. Everything was now tinged blue and she heard nothing, even though she saw Emma's and David's lips move. When she glanced down, she saw her body curled up next to Robin's. They were facing each other and almost looked like they were just sleeping.

Regina looked back and silently pleaded with Emma to hurry up. The Savior raised her hands, white magic illuminating them. She felt a warmth spread all over and then a tingling feeling, like she was really excited for something. It grew stronger and stronger before just disappearing. The warmth dissipated almost as instantaneously. She frowned, worried it hadn't worked after all.

The Charmings, though, stared at her in awe. No, she realized, they were staring just left of her. She turned her head and let out a silent gasp. Instead of seeing herself duplicated, she saw the blue outline of Robin's soul. He looked around the room, his eyes widening when he saw her. She reached out and took his hand before glancing down at their bodies. Robin nodded and together they laid back down in their bodies, eyes on each other the entire time.
She felt as if she had just been blasted into a wall and she took a big gulp of air, gasping as she stared at the ceiling. Her entire body tingled as it accepted her soul again and her heart beat wildly. She turned her head, relief flooding through her as Robin's eyes opened and he gasped, also gulping in air.

He turned his head toward her, his voice raspy as he said: "Regina."

"Robin." She let out a sound that was a mixture of a cry and a laugh. Tears wetted her cheeks as she reached out to touch his face, relieved when it felt warm against her palm.

Robin pulled her against him and they started peppering each other's faces as they rose to their knees, resting back on their haunches. They faced each other and he reached out, cupping her cheek as confusion clouded the beautiful blue eyes she thought she would never see again. "What happened? I thought Hades said the crystal would obliterate my soul."

"It did," she said, body trembling as she relived that awful moment. "But since we are soulmates, I was going to split my soul and share it with you…"

"What? That sound incredibly dangerous," he said. He glanced up at the Charmings. "You let her do this?"

Emma held up her hands. "You try telling her no when she puts her mind to something."

Regina cupped his chin, gently guiding his face back toward her. "I guess, though, there was still a part of you in my soul and Emma pulled you out. And here you are."

"Here I am," he echoed, gaze softening as he smiled at her.

Cries pierced the air, reminding them the baby was still in her carrier on the table. Regina wondered how she had slept through everything while Robin jumped up, scooping the little girl up into his arms. He rocked her, soothing her as he said: "It's alright now. Daddy's got you."

Regina stood, heading over to join him. She laid a hand on his arm, smiling down at the baby girl already starting to fall asleep in his arms. Robin kissed Regina's head before saying: "Mummy and Daddy have you."

"Why don't we go home and get her settled?" Regina asked, joy coursing through her. "And we can send for Roland too."

"That sounds wonderful." He turned and paused, no doubt seeing Zelena's body for the first time. Robin held the baby closer as he glanced at Regina, confusion once again in his eyes.

She remained stoic as she took his arm. There would be plenty of time later for her to explain what happened. Now, though, they just needed to leave. "Let's go. Someone will get…her…later."

Emma nodded, promising to send someone as soon as possible, before they all left. Regina felt her steps growing surer as they walked away from her office. That awful episode was behind them and before them was only a brighter future.

Zelena received a small burial. Regina had told Robin he didn't have to go but he insisted on being there for her. Emma was also there with Henry, who also wanted to be there for his mother. Rumpelstiltskin completed their small group and they all watched as Zelena's coffin was lowered into the ground, the witch no longer a thorn in their sides.
Emma then went to visit Hook's grave and Henry joined her for moral support. Rumple left with only a nod in Regina's direction, leaving her to stare at her sister's grave as Robin wrapped his arm around her trembling body.

"You didn't what you had to do," he assured her.

She nodded, leaning against him. "I know."

"Come on. Let's go home." Robin guided her away from Zelena's grave and toward the street.

Before they could reach their car, a surprising sight stopped them. Emma peppered a somehow very much alive Hook's face with kisses as a smiling but clearly comfortable Henry looked on. Regina glanced over at Robin, who let out a wry chuckle. "I guess I'm not the only one around here back from the dead," he said.

"Guess not," she replied, shaking her head. "Let's go see how the pirate managed to do it."

Hook told them that he was granted passage to the other side, to the place of eternal happiness. But he ended up on Mount Olympus instead, where Zeus offered to return him back to life as a reward for getting Emma important information that helped with Hades' defeat.

(That last part made little sense to Regina. Emma had blasted her way into the office but had done little else. Regina had been the one to defeat Hades, fueled by anger and grief—not any information from the pirate).

Robin shook Hook's hand. "Well, I say this deserves a proper welcome home party. Why don't we round everyone up and head to Granny's to celebrate?"

A week later, they were back in Granny's for another celebration. Regina insisted on having a presentation party for Robin's daughter. "After everything she's been through, this little girl deserves a party for when we announce her name," she insisted as she washed the baby girl.

Robin had the good sense not to fight her on it.

So now all of Storybrooke was gathered, crammed into the booths and lounging by the bar as music played in the background. Regina sat at a booth in the back, a bottle in hand as the baby girl in her arms happily guzzled down her dinner. As she rocked the girl, Regina's gaze fell to Robin. He stood across the diner talking with his Merry Men, Roland on his hip as the boy clung to his father. Their trip to the Underworld had made him nervous that his parents would disappear at any time, so she and Robin were trying to assure him it wouldn't happen again—even if it meant sitting out an adventure or two. Joy bubbled up inside her as she remembered the first moment Roland had called her "Mom." They were really becoming a family.

Henry slid across from her, grinning. "You look happy, Mom," he said.

"I am happy," she said, easing the bottle from the baby's mouth and raising her to her shoulder to burp her.

He nodded. "Good. You deserve to be happy."

"And you got the big family you always wanted," she said as the baby let out a big burp. She lowered the girl down, grinning. "That's my girl."

"So, are you finally going to introduce this pretty lass to the rest of us?" Hook asked, arm around Emma's waist as they smiled at Regina. He then raised an eyebrow. "Or are we going to call her
'baby' for the rest of her life?" Regina shot him a look. "Fine, fine. I'll go get Robin and we'll introduce her since *some* people are too impatient for their own good."

Hook stepped aside, letting Regina and Henry head over to Robin. She motioned for him to meet her halfway and he obliged, excusing himself from the Merry Men so he could jog over with Roland. He grinned at her. "Is it time?"

"People are apparently getting antsy," she said.

Robin nodded, turning to Roland. "Is it okay if I put you down? Mom and I will be right here."

Uncertainty flickered in his brown eyes as he looked between Regina and Robin before nodding. "Okay. As long as you stay right here."

His feet touched the floor but Roland leaned against Robin's leg as Robin wrapped an arm around Regina's shoulders. Henry clanked a spoon against a glass, drawing everyone's attention as silence filled Granny's diner.

"Regina and I want to thank everyone for coming this afternoon," he said. "Your presence here means a lot to us as we officially become a family by welcoming our littlest member. Her life has certainly been adventurous and hopefully it'll be calmer now. And I can't think of any other place I would want to raise her."

People cheered and clapped as one of Robin's Merry Men let out a piercing whistle (Little John, she suspected). Once they quieted down, Regina held up their baby girl for everyone to see as she said: "We are pleased to introduce Lark Locksley-Mills."

"Aww, man. I lost my bet!" Leroy groaned. "I for sure thought you would go with an 'R' name."

Granny chuckled, holding out her hand. "Pay up. I told you it would be a bird, like her father's name."

Regina's mouth dropped open. "People...people were betting on our daughter's name?"

"Yeah. There was also a pool on what Snow and David would name their kid," Whale said, motioning to the two standing nearby. "No one won that though as none of us thought they'd name him after Neal. I think Granny put it into a savings account for him."

Snow looked stunned too. "Oh. That's...nice."

Henry cleared his throat as he held out his finger so Lark could grab onto it. "So, why did you name her Lark, Robin?"

"Because when I was hiding with her in the woods in the Underworld, her soft coos were the first thing I woke to every morning. It reminded me of the larks that would sing in the morning back in Sherwood," Robin explained, smiling down at his daughter. "And I figured she's also bringing us a brand-new start as a family, so why not name her Lark?"

"It's beautiful," Snow said.

Robin motioned to the baby. "Would you mind holding her for a minute? There's one more thing I want to do."
Confusion filled Regina as Snow took Lark from her arms. She turned to Robin, frowning. "What's going on?"

"Regina," he said, taking her hands in his. "This latest misadventure in the Underworld and then your office has proven to me that everything can change in an instant and that I shouldn't keep putting off things because tomorrow isn't guaranteed."

A lump formed in Regina's throat as her heart sped up. Was he really doing what she thought he was doing?

"I meant it when I said you are my future, Regina, and I want to make that promise to you official today. I know marriage wasn't kind to you the first time around, but I am hoping that you give it a second chance, just like we are each other's second chances." Robin got down on one knee, pulling out a black velvet ring box from his pant pocket. He opened it to reveal a simple square cut diamond set on a platinum band, which was encrusted with crystals. "Regina Mills, will you marry me?"

She felt everyone's eyes on her and it seemed like there was no air in the diner, as if everyone was holding a collective breath as they waited for her answer. Regina looked right into Robin's eyes, seeing the love and adoration he felt for her in them. She knew she wanted to spend the rest of her life looking into them and she slowly nodded before whispering: "I will."

Robin slid the ring on her finger as more cheers echoed around Granny's. Regina heard the older woman proclaim that she was going to get a bottle of champagne—on the house—so they could celebrate properly. But all she wanted to do was kiss Robin. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she closed the gap until her lips were against his. He kissed back, dipping her slightly as her lips parted for him.

He righted her and once they broke the kiss, Roland threw himself into her arms. "We're going to be a family, Mom!" he said.

She chuckled, holding him close. "Yes, we are."

"You were right, Mom," Henry said, wrapping his arm around her. "I did end up with more family than I know what to do with."

Everyone shared a laugh as she rested her forehead against his, Robin's hand on her back. She had never thought she would have such a big family like this but there were many things Robin had brought into her life. And as her ring caught the light, casting a beautiful colored display on the wall, she couldn't wait to see what else he brought into her life.

Chapter End Notes

Used the following suggested prompts: Zelena dies instead/Regina splits her heart and puts half in Robin/Robin realizes life is short and he proposes to Regina/Robin names the baby
Robin hated New York. It was too loud, too crowded and there weren't enough trees. Each night he laid awake on the couch as Marian and Roland slept in the bed, oblivious it seemed to the cars, horns and other sounds drifting up from the streets no matter the hour. The fights were the worst, he believed, as they would last the longest and he was forced to wait, unable to do something. He had tried to break up one fight early on and got a black eye for his troubles. People in New York weren't as kind as the people in Storybrooke.

Storybrooke. He missed the idyllic town he first called home in the Land Without Magic. If given a choice between New York, Storybrooke or his beloved Sherwood Forest, Robin would still choose Storybrooke. It was relatively safe—at least free from ogres—and had many technological advancements that made life better. The people were friendly, most active with honor and it was quiet. And most of all, Storybrooke had Regina.

Robin's heart ached whenever he thought about his beautiful and spirited queen. He missed her so fiercely, he was unable to feel anything else. And it was starting to affect his family. Roland was withdrawn and quiet around him while Marian's anger always simmered below the surface. She was trying to reconnect with him and he knew he was only giving a half-hearted attempt. Marian knew it was because of Regina and had forced him to make a clean break—he had deleted Regina's number from his phone and let him throw out the few mementos he had of Regina, save for the book of tales about him. The book only survived because he had lied and said Belle had given it to him. Yet unless there was some way to also purge Regina from his mind and heart, they both knew their marriage would never work. Both, though, were too scared to admit it out loud.

At least, he was too scared to actually say it. He and Marian had little resources in New York City except for the money Regina had given them, some faked identification cards and the keys to Baelfire's apartment. Work was not easy to come by as they had no experience to speak of and most of their skills were not marketable. They were stuck together and even if he could leave Marian, she couldn't return to Storybrooke and had made it clear she wanted to stay in New York. And she wanted to keep Roland with her. He couldn't abandon his son like that. It wasn't the man he was, the man Regina loved.

He was already letting Regina down as it was. When it became clear the only way to save Marian was for her to leave Storybrooke, it was obvious they couldn't send her out into a strange world on her own. Nor could they separate a mother from her son, which meant that Roland had to go as well. It all added up to Robin needing to leave. He had wanted to settle his family in a town near Storybrooke so he could travel between Marian and Roland and Regina and Henry. However, there was a curse on the town line they had yet to break and Regina couldn't guarantee he'd ever be able to come and go as he wanted. She insisted he needed to go to New York because if he stayed in Maine, he would spend the rest of his days trying to come back to her. With tears in her eyes, Regina
insisted she didn't want that kind of life for him and they agreed it was best he tried to start over with Marian. What would she if she knew he wasn't trying as hard as he could be? That he was still pining for her?

Every day, Robin pondered all of that as he sat in a park by his apartment. He just needed to get out of the tense atmosphere there and clear his head at least once a day. Not that he ever succeeded in completely clearing his head. This afternoon was no different and he sighed as he stood, noting it was time to head home to the wife who would know he had spent another afternoon in the park thinking of another woman. Shoving his hands in his jacket pockets, he turned to head home.

A familiar blonde woman in a red leather jacket, though, blocked his path, panic but hope in her green eyes. "Hello, Robin," she said.

"Emma," he gasped. "What are you doing here?"

She fidgeted with her jacket, glancing around at their surroundings. "Is there some place where we can go to talk in private?"

"Why?" he asked, narrowing his eyes in suspicion. There had to be a reason why she was here and not Regina, an unknown reason that made his stomach twist into knots. "What's going on?"

"It's Regina," she replied. Her voice shook as she then said: "She's dying."

Robin took Emma to a small pub by the apartment, ordering a whiskey for himself and a beer for her. They sat in silence until served and he took a large gulp before asking her: "What do you mean Regina is dying?"

She sighed, fiddling with the peeling label on her beer bottle. "After you left, Regina barely made it back into town, driving erratically until she got to Town Hall. She stumbled out of her car and collapsed in front of the building. Whale and then Rumple examined her and apparently her heart literally broke, shattering into pieces. Magic is the only thing keep her alive right now."

"How can I help? I don't have magic," he said, frowning. His own heart hurt like it was breaking all over again hearing that his Regina was in such danger. Robin would do anything to save her…he just couldn't see how.

Emma explained that there were pieces of Regina's heart scattered inside each of the people she loved. "They vary in size depending on how much Regina loves them," she told him. "Henry had almost half her heart while Rumple had a tiny piece."

He raised an eyebrow. "Rumple?"

"Don't ask. It was the most surprising discovery of this little adventure, including digging up Cora, finding a piece in a horse painting and the decent-sized piece I pulled from my mother." Emma took a long pull of her beer. "Not to mention the piece Rumple pulled from me."

"How much more of her heart do you need?" he asked, wondering how big a piece he held.

She gave him a soft smile. "A piece almost as big as Henry's. We all know it's yours."

"How can we get it out then? I thought your magic doesn't work outside Storybrooke." Part of him knew the answer but he needed her to say it out loud for it to be true.

"It doesn't," she replied softly, reaching out to cover his hand with her own. "You'll have to come
back to Storybrooke."

His heart sped up. "The spell on the town line is down?"

Emma shook her head. "We have a way to get back in, though."

"But what about Marian?" Dread filled him as he realized she would need to stay in New York and keep Roland. He couldn't walk away from his son but he also could let Regina die. Either way, though, he felt he was going to have to lose something and his own heart felt like it was breaking even more.

"I know this isn't an easy decision to make," Emma said softly. "But time is of the essence. If we don't put Regina's heart back together by the end of the week, we'll never be able to revive her."

Robin downed the rest of his whiskey, nodding. He needed to make a decision and he needed to make it fast. Somewhere in his heart of hearts, he knew what he needed to do. But there was someone he needed to talk with first. Standing, he turned to Emma. "Come on. Let's go see Marian about this."

Robin let himself and Emma into the apartment as Marian came out of the kitchen, carrying two plates with slightly burnt pizza slices on them. She gave him a smile as she approached their table. "I found a frozen pizza buy and thought we could try this rather than ordering out all the time," she explained. "Roland's napping. Can you wake him?"

"I think it's best if he stays asleep for now." Robin didn't want the boy to hear the inevitable argument as he stepped aside, allowing Marian to see Emma.

Her face fell and a cold look he didn't like came to Marian's eyes. She almost didn't sound like herself as she said: "Emma."

"Marian, we need to talk," he said, his stomach all twisted up as he stepped closer. "It's about Regina."

"Of course it is," Marian replied with a scowl. Her eyes flickered again toward Emma. "But I see she didn't bother to come in person. She sent a messenger instead."

He felt Emma tense up and he held out his hand, a silent signal to tell her he would handle it. "She didn't come herself because she's dying, Marian, and she needs my help. Her heart broke.

Marian rolled her eyes. "The great and powerful Evil Queen can't handle a little heartbreak? Pathetic."

That didn't sound like his Marian and something nagged him in the back of his mind. He frowned, hoping to get her to understand the severity of the situation. "It apparently broke literally."

"Smashed to pieces," Emma confirmed. "Little pieces of heart were scattered all over the sidewalk."

The image of Regina lying still on the sidewalk, surrounded by the shards of her broken heart made Robin bite back a sob. He felt himself start to shake as he fought his tears and as Marian set the plates down, crossing her arms. She appeared stern—her posture screamed "not pleased"—but there was a glimmer in her eyes he didn't like.

"So I guess there's a way back into Storybrooke?" she asked.
Emma nodded. "Ingrid left us something we can use."

"Right, the Snow Queen. Who put a curse on me. Which means I can't go back." Marian glared at Robin.

He swallowed, nodding as the fight he was prepared for was upon them. "I know. But I was hoping to talk this out. Maybe since we can get back in, if you move closer to Storybrooke, we can share custody of Roland and work something out."

"What if I like New York? What if I want to stay here with Roland?" She leveled him with a menacing glare that seemed alien to her features. "Would you walk away from your son? For the Evil Queen?"

"Marian..." he started before she cut him off.

"Why should we save her anyway? Wouldn't everyone be better off without her?" she asked, almost in a snarl.

Anger boiled Robin's blood. That didn't sound like his Marian at all. She had been the one to make him a better man, to help people, to do the right thing—no matter how hard. He couldn't believe such harsh words were coming from her mouth and he wondered when she had changed so drastically.

"How can you be so cruel?" he asked. "This isn't you, Marian. Not the Marian I married."

"Well, I'm not your Marian," she snapped.

"That's certainly true," Emma said, studying Marian with a guarded expression.

Confusion mixed with Robin's anger as he stared at the blonde. "What do you mean?"

She moved closer to Marian, her own arms crossed as well. "Rumpelstiltskin told me a pretty interesting story before I left Storybrooke. That's a lovely necklace, Marian."

Marian clutched the gold chain around her neck, scowling at Emma. "What does it have to do with Rumpelstiltskin? It's just a necklace I own."

"A necklace," Robin said softly, mostly to himself. He had seen the chain around her neck but never questioned it, even though the only jewelry they had ever owned were their wedding rings. He had tried to give her a bracelet once but she had sold it to buy medicines for a sick child in a nearby village. So where had she gotten the necklace?

Robin squared his shoulders. "Show it to me."

"No," she said, stepping back from him and Emma.

He leaned forward and easily pried her fingers from it. There was a glass case hanging from the chain and inside it was a six-leaf clover, one he was very familiar with. After all, he had used it to disguise himself so he could sneak into the Dark One's mansion to get the wand to save Marian. If she was wearing it, though, that meant...

"Go on," she taunted, smiling at the look of horror no doubt on his face. She leaned forward, smirking. "Turn it."

She covered his shaking hand with hers and twisted the top. Marian's form melted away as her dark hair became long red locks. Brown eyes morphed into blue and his wife became Zelena, the Wicked...
Witch of the West.

Robin recoiled, as if burnt. He looked over at Emma, feeling sick. "You knew? Why didn't you tell me?"

"Seeing is believing," she replied, "especially in this case."

He nodded, glancing over at a sleeping Roland. Bile rose up in his throat as he realized his son had been sharing a bed with... that. And now he had to lose his mother all over again. Robin shut his eyes as he grabbed his stomach. "Oh gods..."

Zelena let out a cruel laugh that made his stomach churn even more. "I've enjoyed our time as a family. It's been fun."

"Why?" he asked without looking at her. "Why put on such a charade?"

"I thought that would be obvious. If I had revealed the truth to you, you would've taken Roland and run back to Regina. And I wanted her to feel pain and loss. I wanted her to eventually found us and realize I had taken the life she wanted like she took the life I wanted. But her heart literally breaking? That's a wonderful bonus!" She let out a gleeful chuckle.

Emma backed up toward Robin, placing a hand on his arm as she glared at Zelena. "Get Roland. We're leaving."

"And I suppose you're taking me?" Zelena asked and Robin looked up to see she was pouting, though her eyes still sparkled with mirth.

Emma shook her head. "I think you'll do less damage here where you magic doesn't work."

Zelena's pout morphed into a snarl again. "Then what makes you think I'm just going to let you walk out of here and go rescue my sister?"

"Tie her up," Robin said, hatred he hadn't felt in years filling him. "She doesn't have her magic and I imagine you'll be able to overpower her easily. Tie her up just enough so that she can't prevent us from leaving or sneak away with us. I'll go get Roland."

He closed the doors dividing the bedroom from the rest of the apartment, quickly packing their few belongings into a bag as the sounds of struggle came from the other side of the doors. Robin lifted a still sleeping Roland into his arms, letting his son settle against his shoulder. He prayed Roland stayed asleep for several more hours. Maybe by then, he would have answers for the difficult questions he knew were coming.

Robin opened the door and Emma stood there, leaning against a chair. Zelena sat in it, struggling against the twine binding her hands behind the chair. Rage filled her eyes and her face was turning red. "You'll regret this! I will return to Storybrooke and destroy you all!"

Ignoring her, Robin motioned to the front door. "Come on, Emma. Let's go home."

Regina lay on a bed set up in the middle of her vault, her hands clasped over her chest. Her hair was perfectly coiffed and Robin imagined Snow coming every day to brush it for her. If he hadn't known better, he would've thought she was just sleeping rather than under a preservation spell to keep her alive.

Covering her hands with his own, Robin leaned closer to her so his lips were against her ear. "I'm
here," he whispered. "We're going to get you back."

He straightened up, looking at Emma. "Okay. What do you need me to do?"

"Just stand there," she told him. "And brace yourself—it will hurt. Trust me, I'm speaking from experience."

Robin nodded, watching as she raised her hands. A burning sensation filled his chest and he struggled to breathe as he hunched over. He clenched his fist and gritted his teeth, determined to stick this out. Regina was worth any amount of pain.

The feeling of being poked—as if being hit by several of his own arrows—followed the burning sensation and he winced, certain he would see blood if he looked down. However, the pain began to recede, and he took a large gasp of air as he straightened up. A large red piece floated between Emma's hands and Robin rubbed his chest, realizing it came out of him. "That's it?" he gasped.

"Yes," she said. "Now we just need Henry to get here…"

The sound of feet stomping down the stairs followed that. Henry entered the room, red-faced and breathless as he carried a carved wooden box. His eyes lit up when he saw Robin. "You came!"

"Of course," Robin replied, reaching out to give him a one-armed hug. He motioned to the box. "Is that the rest of her heart?"

Henry nodded, opening the box. An incomplete heart floated out of it and Emma merged Robin's piece with it. The heart still looked dull and lifeless, causing them all to frown. At least, it was why Robin frowned. He realized they frowned for another reason when Henry pointed to a spot out of Robin's sight. "There's still a piece missing."

Emma blew out in frustration. "Who is it? We tracked down everyone Regina loves. You two, me apparently, Mom, Dad, her parents, Daniel, her horse, this town, Rumple…"

"Roland!" Henry exclaimed, hazel eyes wide. "She loves him too."

Robin's heart sped up at the thought his son held a piece of Regina's heart and then over the fact he would need to suffer the same pain Robin did. "Do you think it'll be better if he remains asleep?" he asked.

Emma nodded. "And it should be quicker since his piece is a small one."

"I'll go get him," Robin said, heading up to where Little John waited with a still sleeping Roland. He took his son and brought him down to the vault, praying he was doing the right thing and that the spell didn't do any permanent damage to Roland.

Emma had him lay Roland on the bed next to Regina and he held the boy's hand, watching with renewed pain as Emma held her hands over his son. Roland's face contorted with pain and he let out a soft whimper, clutching Robin's hand tighter. But Robin saw a small red piece emerge from his son's chest—the last piece of Regina's heart. Once it was out, Roland calmed down and peace returned to his features.

"Here," Emma said, holding out Regina's heart once she merged the last piece with the rest. It was still a dull shade of red and wasn't beating. Robin was confused until she added: "You have to kiss it to restore life to it."

He raised his eyebrow but took the heart, raising it to his lips. Pressing a tender kiss to it, Robin
poured all his love and adoration for Regina into it. A silent prayer sprung into his mind, hoping that it would work and Regina would come back to them.

To him.

A soft red glow spread through the heart before it began beating. Hope and joy bubbled through him as he looked up, holding the organ out to Emma again. "You'll put it back?"

She shook her head. "I need to take the preservation spell off. You can put it back. Just press it to her chest and her magic should do the rest."

"Okay," he replied, hesitant. He watched as Emma lowered Regina's clasped hands to her stomach, leaving her chest clear for Robin. She then waved her hand over the queen's body. It shimmered with a pale yellow light before it died down, telling him the preservation spell had been lifted.

He took a deep breath and placed the heart in the center of Regina's chest. He gave it a gentle push, watching as it easily went through her clothing and skin. Robin held onto it until it snapped back into place and he pulled his hand back out, praying it had worked.

Regina's eyes flew open as she took in a large gasp of air. Her hand flew up to her chest, feeling her heart beating inside it once again. She glanced around the room, surprise filling her eyes when she saw him. "Robin?" she breathed.

"Yes, milady," he said, voice cracking as tears filled his eyes. He stroked her hair as he took her hand again. "I'm here."

"How?" she asked before it appeared she fully comprehended where she was. She frowned. "What happened?"

He and Emma helped her sit up as Henry explained about her broken heart. "We had to find pieces you had given to others and put them back together. Robin and Roland held the final two parts we needed," he said.

She opened up her arms and Henry stepped inside, hugging his mother as Robin rubbed her back. He loved seeing Regina's maternal side—he loved all her sides—but there was just something about the way she glowed around Henry that made his heart speed up and a warm tingle fill his body. It was love, he was certain of it.

Regina turned and ran her fingers though Roland's curls as the boy began to rouse at last. He blinked open tired brown eyes and gasped when he saw everyone. "Regina! Henry! Miss Emma! What are you doing in New York?"

"They aren't in New York," Robin said, crouching down to be eye level with his son. "We're back in Storybrooke."

The boy frowned. "What about Mama? And the ice spell?"

Robin didn't know how to answer that and Emma looked like she wasn't going to be any help. He glanced up at Regina, who frowned. "Robin, where is Marian?"

"That's a bit of a complicated story," Emma said, shoving her hands into her jacket pockets.

"Mama's fine," Robin lied, watching his son grow upset and confused without an answer. "We'll see her very soon."
"Henry, why don't you take Roland upstairs?" Emma asked as Robin helped the boy down.

Henry nodded, taking Roland's hand. "Your uncle Little John is waiting upstairs. I'm sure you want to say hi."

"I do!" Roland exclaimed, bounding up the stairs with Henry.

Regina swung her legs around so she was sitting on the edge of the bed. Her voice was stern and there was a familiar fire in her eyes as she looked between Robin and Emma. "Will someone please tell me what's going on? What happened to Marian? And do you need to leave again?"

She directed the last question at Robin, who shook his head as Emma said: "He really can't. We have no guarantee your heart won't break into pieces again if he leaves. I doubt we'll find more pieces lying around."

"And Marian…Marian is dead," he said, taking her hand. "She's always been dead."

Regina frowned. "What do you mean? Emma and Hook brought them back from their little time adventure."

"It was someone disguised as Marian. It was…It was…" He felt the bile rising to his throat as he once again recalled Marian turning into Zelena, making him unable to finish his sentence.

Emma jumped in. "It was Zelena."

"WHAT?" Regina jumped up, swaying a bit. Robin reached out to steady her and she held onto him. "My sister is alive? Where is she?"

"New York, for now. I didn't want to chance bringing her to Storybrooke. She's safer out there where she can't do magic," Emma said. "And she's far away from us."

"For now. She seemed pretty bent on revenge when we left," Robin noted, wrapping his arms around Regina. He held her close, breathing in the familiar vanilla and apple scent of her shampoo. It was distinctly her.

Regina squared her shoulders even as she relaxed against him. "Well, we'll be ready for her."

"I just don't know how I'm going to answer Roland's questions," he mused to himself, feeling guilty for the lie he had already told.

She patted his hand. "I have a memory potion we can give him and I can give him just enough to erase all memory of the fake Marian. We can spare him the pain of losing her all over again."

"Thank you," he whispered, kissing her neck. "That means a lot to me."

Regina then turned in his arms, facing him as she wrapped her arms around his neck. "And you promise you'll never leave?"

"I promise," he said, resting his forehead against hers.

Emma cleared her throat. "I'll give you two a few minutes alone and go wait upstairs with the others."

Once she was gone, Robin captured Regina's lips in a passionate kiss. He had almost two months to make up for, kisses stolen by Zelena for her petty revenge against Regina. She had stolen two months of hugs and cuddles, of picnics by the fireplace and ice cream runs. They could've spent the
two months bonding as a family—him, her, Roland and Henry—and growing closer to each other.

There was still time for that, he realized as she moaned into the kiss, tangling her fingers in his hair. Now that he was back and her heart was restored, he wasn't going to waste another second with the amazing woman in his arms. They were going to be a family and together, achieve their happy ending.

No matter what.
After the Final Battle, the people of Storybrooke settled into their happy beginnings, looking forward to some peace and quiet now that the ultimate battle of good versus evil had been decided in favor of good. Regina's main concern at that point was to continue helping those from the Land of Untold Stories settle into their new lives and stories.

One person from there, Pecos Bill, met with Regina one day to discuss taking over the stables and creating a horse ranch. The current owner, an older man, was willing to sell and Regina saw no reason to turn down the proposal. As she signed the required paperwork, she noticed Bill pick up a picture on her desk and study it.

"Here you go," she said, holding out the paperwork as she tried not to glare at the picture frame in his hands.

He looked sheepish as he held it out to her. "Beggin' yer pardon, ma'am, I didn't mean to snoop. But I was wondering who this here fella is."

She glanced over, her heart skipping a beat when she noticed it was a picture of her and Robin taken at the Miner's Day ball she was convinced to hold the year before. Regina wore a sleek black dress with one strap and her hair was pulled into a tight bun on top of her head. She smiled as she danced with Robin, who was dressed in a finely made tuxedo with a dark green cummerbund. His blond hair had been brushed and gelled into place, though one piece refused to be pushed back and rested against his forehead. They had been so happy.

"His name was Robin," she whispered, caressing his image.

Bill frowned. "Was, ma'am?"

She felt a lump form in her throat as she replied: "He died, protecting me."

"Are you sure about that?" Bill asked.

Regina glared at him, ready to give him a tongue lashing. Of course she was sure he died. She saw his body crumple to the ground, saw his soul disappear before her eyes. Nothing then would bring Robin back and she had to bury another loved one. How dare this man suggest she was lying.

He held up his hands before she could give him the dressing down he deserved. "I'm sorry, ma'am, that came out wrong. I'm just confused as I'm pretty certain I met a fella who looked just like that back in the Land of Untold Stories."

"What?" she asked, her stomach twisting into knots as she found it hard to catch her breath.

"Course, he wasn't dressed all fancy like that," he continued, looking at the picture again. "He was
dressed more like Robin Hood, complete with bow and arrows. He was trying to get out the Land of Untold Stories, saying he had a family to get back to. Almost like he didn't choose to go there but was sent there by some other force."

She grabbed her desk as her head began to spin. Was Robin really alive somewhere else? Had his soul not been obliterated but reincarnated in the Land of Untold Stories, since Robin's ended prematurely? Was that why the Robin from the Wish Realm was able to come into their realm? Because part of Robin still existed and the two Robins were connected somehow?

"Ma'am? You alright?" Bill asked, frowning.

"I'm not sure," she said. "But thank you for that information."

He nodded, thanking her for the paperwork and left her with a tip of his hat. Once he was gone, she leaned back in her chair and pondered if the impossible really was possible.

Was Robin alive and trying to get back to her?

Regina spent the next few days mulling it over, trying to talk herself out of believing Pecos Bill's words. She knew she didn't need the heartbreak of losing Robin for a fourth time should it be that he was mistaken but hope was a traitorous thing. It burrowed deep into her heart, into her soul, and refused to leave. She realized the only way she was going to know for sure was to go to the Land of Untold Stories and try to find Robin herself.

She finally told her family about her theory at their weekly dinner at Granny's. They were hesitant about it at best. Snow and Emma feared it would end up being a repeat of what happened with the Robin from the Wish Realm—that she would pin her hopes on resuming her relationship with Robin only to discover he still wasn't her Robin. Zelena, of course, made it all about her and how Robin's possible return would affect her life. Regina knew her sister enjoyed the autonomy she had when it came to raising Baby Robin and didn't want the minor inconvenience of having to co-parent.

Only Henry seemed excited and started to figure out ways to get Regina to the Land of Untold Stories, including asking Hook if he could contact Captain Nemo. Hook wasn't too certain but did offer to try, which surprised her. And even though she still looked angry, Zelena did suggest trying to use the Apprentice's Wand to try to journey to the other realm. Regina's spirits soared as a plan seemed to form and she felt she was one step closer to get Robin back.

Unfortunately, Nemo had not yet finished repairs on the Nautilus and so was unable to return to Storybrooke let alone usher Regina to the Land of Untold Stories. The Apprentice's Wand also ended up being a dead end as even with some of the Evil Queen's darkness back in her heart, Regina was unable to activate it. It seemed Zelena really was the only one who had been able to use it and she no longer had her magic, which she complained loudly about until Regina excused herself.

Regina wasn't going to give up yet. There were many other ways to get to other realms and she knew she would find one soon enough. It was Emma, though, who ended up giving her her way into the Land of Untold Stories. Clorinda still had the key Ashley had given her that would allow her passage to that realm and happily gave it to Regina. "Go. Find the rest of your happy beginning," she told the brunette.

"Thank you," Regina said, taking the key. "I appreciate this."

Emma nodded. "Good luck, Regina."

With a deep breath, Regina approached the door to a spare bedroom. She inserted the key into the
lock and turned it. When she opened the door, all she saw was a vortex of gold. Her heart sped up and she gently touched it, her hand going right through. She glanced back at Emma before stepping through, a cool tingle brushing her skin as she emerged on the other side.

People pushed past Regina as she emerged in a bustling marketplace. There was a mixture of wares being sold and everyone wore different styles of clothing based on the stories they had come from. She recognized the fleur-de-lis emblem of the Three Musketeers and spotted three blind mice working their way through some of the stalls. As she looked around at the mass of people, her spirits sank. There were so many people with untold stories. How was she to find Robin?

She reached into her pocket and pulled out a picture of Robin she had grabbed. It showed him in his usual street wear—his green jacket, jeans and blue scarf—and she hoped that people would recognize him even if the clothes seemed strange, just as Pecos Bill had recognized him even though he was in a tuxedo. Hopefully, someone would've seen him and would be able to help her.

Turning the picture around as she approached a vendor, Regina paused as she discovered a little satchel taped to the back of the photograph. She sat down on a wooden bench, pulling it off. A little note fell off as well and she opened it.

Regina,

I heard you were looking for Robin. I believe this might come in handy in leading you to him… again.

Tinkerbell

Confused, Regina opened the satchel and almost let out a laugh. Inside was pixie dust, the very thing that had first brought her to Robin. It seemed appropriate to use it again to find him once more.

She dumped the pixie dust into her hand and closed her eyes. Picturing Robin as she first met him—standing over her, dressed in a white shirt and green jerkin, bow at the ready—Regina then tossed the pixie dust into the air. She opened her eyes and smiled, finding a trail of sparkling green dust winding its way through the bustling city. All she had to do was follow it and pray her Robin was on the other end.

With a beaming smile, Regina set off to locate her soulmate.

The sun started to set as Regina finally arrived at the end of the dust path. Her heart sped up as she approached a tavern, remembering the first time she spotted the man with the lion tattoo. She reached for the door handle, pulling it open and stepping inside.

Her eyes were drawn to a far corner where a man sat bathed in a green glow. His back was to her, but she recognized the linen white shirt and green jerkin as he sat hunched over at the table, studying something. She smoothed down her pantsuit as she approached him, her heart beating faster with each step.

Especially once she spotted the lion tattoo.

"Can I buy you a drink?" she asked, her stomach feeling like she had just drunken really hot coffee.

The man tensed up before slowly turning his head toward her. Warm blue eyes widened when they landed on her and he jumped up, looking shocked. "Regina? What are you doing here? How did you find me?" he asked, his familiar accent soothing her nerves.
She smiled as tears filled her eyes, holding up the satchel. "Pixie dust. It brought me to you once again."

"Oh, thank god," he breathed, pulling her into his arms. He held her close as his hand cupped the back of her head. "I've missed you so much, Regina."

"I've missed you too," she said, feeling a few tears roll down her cheeks. She brushed them away as she pulled back. There was something she needed to do first, to make sure it was really him. Grabbing his shirt, she pulled him close for a kiss.

It felt like fireworks were going off inside her as their lips met and she sighed into the kiss, feeling the familiar tingle of love and excitement that always coursed through her when Robin kissed her. This was what had been missing when the other Robin had kissed her in the vault, the feeling she had wanted to experience again with him.

They broke the kiss and Robin rested his forehead against hers. His eyes were closed though she stared at him, afraid he would disappear again. "How did you end up here?" she asked.

He had her sit down, explaining that he remembered being hit with the Olympian crystal and watching her face until everything faded to black. "I figured that was it," he said, "until a bright light nearly blinded me. When it died down, I was back in my old clothes and standing in the middle of the marketplace. One of the vendors greeted me, explaining that I was in the Land of Untold Stories, saying most people choose to come here to stop their stories. Mine just seemed to stop even though there should be more. From that moment on, I tried to get back to you."

"There was a whole group from here who came to Storybrooke," Regina pointed out. "Why didn't you come with them?"

"I tried. But by the time I found the dirigible, it had already taken off and I couldn't catch up with it. All I could do was watch it fly away back to you," he said, shaking his head. "But how did you know where to look for me?"

She squeezed his hands as she explained about Pecos Bill clueing her into his location. "I was worried it would be another let down but…"

He frowned. "Another let down?"

"That," she replied, "is a long story I will gladly tell you once we figure out how to get home."

"I have that covered." Robin reached into his satchel and pulled out a translucent bean. "Just managed to procure this today. I was going to use it in the morning to get home to you."

She grinned. "Well, now we can use it to go home together."

He nodded, taking her hand again. "I meant what I said in that corridor, Regina. You are my future. That hasn't changed."

"I know," she said. "And once again, you're mine. Though it's not going to be easy. We're going to have to deal with my sister, who has already made it quite clear she's not going to be pleased to share custody of Robin with you…"

"Robin?" he asked, confused.

Regina nodded. "After you…died…Zelena named the baby after you."
"That's…touching," he replied, though he didn't appear thrilled by it. Of course, after everything Zelena had done to him, naming their daughter in his honor probably was too little, too late. "But I think we're going to have to come up with another name to call her. Having two Robins around might be confusing."

She chuckled. "Yeah, I think so. And I'll tell you now, Zelena doesn't have her magic. She gave it up to help save the town from the Black Fairy."

Robin's mouth fell open. "How much time has passed since I died?"

"You know Storybrooke," she said. "Something is always happening. Though things have calmed down since the Final Battle."

He shook his head. "We definitely have a lot to talk about."

She smiled, waving down one of the barmaids. "Yes, we do. So let me buy you that drink and we'll spend the whole night talking."

"Well, I would hope we can spend part of the night doing a bit more than talking, yeah?" His blue eyes sparkled and he raised her hand to his lips, pressing a gentle kiss to the back of her hand.

Regina smirked back at him, heat pooling low inside her at the look he was giving her. "I think that can be arranged."

The barmaid brought them over two tankards of ale and Regina set down some gold coins she had found in her vault. Robin picked one up and held it out to her. "So, shall we drink to pixie dust?"

"To pixie dust," Regina agreed, picking up her own tankard. She clanked it against Robin's before adding: "And to happy beginnings."
Written for OQ Fix It Fic Week Day 4: The events after 4A never happened day

Used the following suggested prompt: Regina and Robin discover that they met and fell in love in the EF until Cora found them, separated them and put a memory curse on them

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Regina pushed Isaac into a chair and used magic to bind his hands to the armrests, just in case. He struggled against the bindings, pulling his arms up a few times before he settled back down. Isaac rolled his eyes at her. "Is this necessary?"

"Since you have a tendency to run," she said, leaning against a table and crossing her arms. "Yes."

He rolled his eyes. "Okay, what do you want? Your happy ending too? I know you've certainly have had your share of hard knocks. Out of all my characters, you seem to get screwed over the most."

She let a wry laugh, believing that to be the biggest understatement she had ever heard. But Regina shook her head. "I have my happy ending. I feel I finally belong somewhere. I belong here, in Storybrooke, with my family and my friends."

"Someone's sounding a bit like Snow White," Isaac taunted her. He then pulled against the bindings again. "So why do you want me here?"

"We want to talk," she replied.

He frowned. "We?"

"Yes." Robin emerged from the shadows of her vault, leaning against a spot on the table next to her and crossing his arms as well. He smirked at Isaac. "We."

Isaac's cocky demeanor melted away and his eyes widened. "I heard you two were together here. I figured this day would come."

They glanced at each other, both frowning in confusion. Regina let her arms fall as she stood up straighter. "What day?"

"You mean you haven't figured it out?" he asked, narrowing his eyes as he studied him. "You haven't guessed the truth?"

"The truth?" Robin echoed, his own arms falling to his side as he stared at Isaac.

Regina reached into her jacket pocket and pulled out a folded-up piece of paper. She opened it up, revealing the image of her younger self kissing Robin in the tavern where Tinkerbell had first shown her the Man with the Lion Tattoo. Holding it up, she showed it to Isaac. "Are you talking about this?"
His mouth fell open and he looked up at her, surprise in his eyes. "Where did you get that?"

"It appeared one day while I was in the library," Robin said. "Was it your doing? Were you trying to give us a message from the book?"

Isaac shook his head and Regina frowned. "What is it then? Is it an alternate version? A cruel joke? A sign that we can change our stories? What is it?"

"It's not supposed to exist," he snapped. "Your mother destroyed it decades ago."

Regina's heart nearly stopped when she heard her mother was involved. Her hands shook as she pulled the paper close to her chest and Robin wrapped his arm around her. "What does my mother have to do with this?"

Isaac sighed. "That is the real page twenty-three from the book. She destroyed your real story so that everyone's memories changed to hide the truth—you went into the tavern that night, Regina, and met the man with the lion tattoo."

"Whiskey?" Robin asked, holding out a glass filled with the amber liquid to her.

It was late at night and the house was quiet. Henry and Roland were both sound asleep in their rooms upstairs and almost all the lights were off except for the ones in Regina's kitchen. She sat in her pajamas and robe at the table as Robin had filled up glasses at her bar, barefoot and wearing a loose t-shirt and a pair of gray sweatpants.

Regina took the glass and gulped down a large amount of whiskey. The amber liquid burnt as it slid down her throat and she coughed a bit. "Ooh, it's the strong stuff."

"I think we deserve that," he said, taking a large sip of his own whiskey. He set the glass down and stared at the page spread out on the table between them. "So...that's our real story."

"Apparently. I'm not entirely sure why I'm even surprised that my mother was involved. I bet Rumple was too. He probably got her back from Wonderland just so she could track me down and drag me home like a runaway child," Regina said, crossing her arms as she leaned back.

Robin leaned against his hands with his elbows on the table, still staring at the picture. His eyes were distant. "This changes everything. What memories are real? What are fake? Are my memories of Marian real?"

"I'm sure they are," Regina assured him, reaching out for him. "Given everything you've told me and Roland's age, you most likely met her after my mother interfered. So yes, that's all real."

He nodded, taking her hand. His thumb brushed the back of it gently. "Do you...Do you think we were happy?"

She glanced down at the picture of the two of them kissing and smiled. "I think we were."

"Are those memories lost to us now?" he asked, looking pained. "Will we never know what happened to us during the time we were together?"

Regina picked up Page 23. "I think I know something that might work. Isaac may have written the stories away but maybe this page showed up to tell us that the memories survived. We just have to unlock them."
He slid over, kissing her fingers. "I trust you, lovely. Do whatever you have to do."

"I'll get started in the morning," she said, cupping the back of his neck as she leaned closer. "For now, why don't we finish our whiskey and head to bed?"

Robin smirked, brushing his nose against hers. "That sounds like the perfect plan."

Tinkerbell squeezed Regina's hands. "Your soulmate is waiting on the other side of this door. All you have to do is open it and step inside."

"What if he doesn't like me?" she asked, glancing at the door. "What if he doesn't want me?"

"He's your soulmate, Regina. That's a powerful bond that ties you two together. Of course you're going to like each other. And over time, you'll come to love each other. This is your second chance, Regina. Take it," the fairy encouraged her.

Regina nodded, taking a deep breath to try to calm her nerves. Her stomach churned and her heart sped up as her breathing grew shallow despite her attempts. Wiping her sweaty palms on her skirt before reaching for the handle. She gave it a good pull before her nerves could get the best of her, revealing the crowd inside. People milled about, laughing and drinking. Some danced in the back where a band of musicians performed.

Her eyes, though, were focused on one man sitting by the bar bathed in a green glow. She watched as he drank from his tankard, laughing with some of the men who sat around him. Did she just walk up to him? What would she say to him?

The music died down as did the conversations and laughter. She realized that everyone was staring at her. Glancing down, she realized her dress was too fine for a place such as this and she stuck out like a sore thumb. People eyed her silk gown and the jewels sewn into the bodice. She should've asked Tinkerbell to give her a more appropriate dress, something like the drab linens she saw on the barmaids circulating throughout the room.

"What's going on?" the man with the lion tattoo asked. His voice sounded a bit hoarse and he had an alluring accent she hadn't heard before. She held her breath, waiting for him to speak again.

The barkeep, an older man with gray hair and a lined face, motioned toward her with a rag in his hand. "A beautiful woman in a very fancy dress is staring at you, Rob."

"Very funny," the man, Rob, said. "I'm gonna turn around and it's gonna be Little John or something, right?"

"Take a look," the barkeep challenged him.

Regina's knees started to knock together as Rob turned around on his stool, his eyes widening as he spotted her. He stood, approaching her with wonder and awe, his lips twitching into a smile. "Hello," he greeted her, a warmth in his voice she hadn't heard in a long time.

"Hi," she replied softly. She studied her supposed soulmate—who stood a good head taller than her and was broad shouldered. Though he wore a loose linen shirt, she could tell that he was on the lean side and noticed how big his arm muscles were. He was someone who either performed manual labor or did some other work that kept him fit. She then noticed his soft and thick blond hair, cut close to his head though a few locks fell against his forehead. The color matched the scruff on his face, covering his cheeks and square jawline.
But her favorite feature so far were his blue eyes. They gazed on her not with the lust of the king or the wide-eyed adoration of Snow White. Instead, they held a warmth to rival his voice and an openness. For the first time since Daniel, she believed he saw her—and not what he wanted her to be.

He held out his hand to her. "May I buy you a drink, milady?"

"Yes," she said, taking it and relishing his strong but gentle grip as his fingers closed around her hand. "I would love to have a drink with you."

Chapter End Notes

_To be continued, I promise!
"Are you okay?" Robin asked her, wrapping her arm around Regina's shoulders. They sat in the park, right by the lake, watching as a few ducks swam through the cold water.

She shook her head, still feeling numb. Pain would come—it always did—but for now, it seemed he kept it at bay. And for the first time in a very long time, she believed she wouldn't have to deal with the pain alone. Robin would be there for her, to hold her, kiss her and rock her until the worst of it passed.

It was a concept both alien yet comforting to her.

"Do you want to talk about it?" he asked, rubbing her arm. It provided a little warmth as they sat there, huddled close together.

"About what? About how my sister chose to kill herself rather than accept my offer of a second chance? Rather than try to form a relationship with me?" she asked bitterly. "Or about how a certain blonde Savior wants to take my son away from me?"

Robin sighed, kissing the side of her head. "Don't look at it as Zelena rejecting you. She just couldn't see past now. All her plans, everything she had been focused on for years, everything she had expended her energy and time on, the reason she got out of bed, the thing that she thought gave her life, it was all gone. She no doubt felt she had no purpose, nothing to live for and that everything was meaningless. Unfortunately, she decided that she would never find something else to give her purpose, unlike some other people in her position, and so she chose to end it all."

"Other people in her position," Regina mused. "Are you talking about me?"

With their memories returned, she could now recall their first adventure together when they broke into her palace. And she remembered how he pleaded with her not to use the sleeping potion on herself. How she had wanted to end all the pain by falling asleep forever (or until Henry came, no matter how impossible that appeared) but putting those thoughts aside after meeting Zelena.

"Yes," he said, tucking a piece of her hair behind her ear. "You thought there was nothing to live for after losing Henry but you found something to put your energies toward."

"You mean revenge? Destroying my sister?" She frowned, once again staring at the ducks as they dove their heads into the water. "I guess I accomplished that last part."

He gently cupped her chin and guided her until she was looked at him against. Robin smiled softly. "You may have started out seeking revenge but really, you've been trying to protect and save us. Which you did. Need I remind you about the light magic you used the other day?"

She grinned at the memory of the white magic emanating from her hands and then knocking her sister over, stopping her nefarious plans. And she even saved Zelena, stopping Rumpelstiltskin
from killing the witch. "I did save everyone, didn't I?"

"Yes, you did," he said, sounding very proud of her. He kissed her forehead. "Zelena wanted your heart because it was the most resilient. She wasn't as strong as you, milady, and that is not your fault."

Regina closed her eyes, again seeing the image of her sister on the sheriff stations' security footage. She seemed to move about her cell before retreating to the back, using the last of her magic to destroy herself. It made her heart stutter before she took a deep breath. Robin was right. Zelena just hadn't been strong enough to realize the opportunities that had been offered to her and that wasn't Regina's fault. She let out the breath, releasing her guilt with it.

"Feeling better?" Robin asked, nuzzling her hair.

She nodded before frowning. "Well, about Zelena at least. There's still Henry."

"You're his mother and he remembers that now. He wants to stay in Storybrooke with his family, with you. I'm sure Emma will have to take that into consideration," he told her.

Calm came over her as she realized that her spell had only affected Emma's and Henry's memories, not on reality. Emma had "remembered" choosing not to give up Henry but she had done so and Regina had adopted him. The paperwork was all still filed with the proper authorities. As far as all legal agencies knew, Regina Mills was Henry's only parent and legal guardian. Emma technically couldn't take him away from her.

Not that Regina was going to play that card right away. Maybe a year ago, she would've in her desperate bid to keep Emma Swan from Henry. Now, though, she was changing and appeared that at least part of her was hero. Heroes worked things out and compromised to do what was best. While Henry wanted to stay in Storybrooke with her and the rest of his family, he would also want to be able to continue his relationship with Emma. Regina realized that if Emma continued to insist on returning to New York, she was going to have to have a conversation with the blonde where she laid everything out and then gave Emma the choice: Stay in Storybrooke with Henry or go back to New York without him.

Hopefully, it wouldn't come to that and even if it did, Regina believed Emma would chose Henry. But they would cross that bridge when they got to it.

"Well, someone seems a bit brighter than when we got here," Robin said, a warm hand now on her knee.

She glanced over at him, grinning. "You're very handy to have around, you know that?"

"Glad to be of service, milady." He leaned in and they shared a quick kiss as the ducks looked on.

Regina, though, didn't want it to just be a quick kiss. Her fingers grasped his jacket and she pulled him closer, deepening the kiss as Robin let out a little moan. When he nibbled on his lower lip, she opened hers and let his tongue into her mouth. She didn't care that they were making out on a park bench like a pair of teenagers. Especially as she felt like a teenager, enthralled with her first love, and yet felt like she was kissing someone she had been with forever. Her heart sped up as Robin pulled her closer, his body heat warming her.

Or maybe that warmth was coming from somewhere else.

They broke apart as Regina's lungs began to burn for air, panting as their faces remained only inches apart. She could see their breaths in the cold air, the two mixing together in an apt metaphor for the
moment. Regina never wanted it to end but knew it must so they could make more of these memories together.

Robin stood, holding out his hand. "Might I entice you to come back to my camp? Now that he has his memories back, Roland is quite eager to spend some time with his beloved Majesty again."

Her grin morphed into a beaming smile as she remembered the sweet curly haired toddler who had wormed his way into her heart back during the Missing Year. Roland had been a lifeline on days when she missed Henry too much, it felt like her entire body was full of cement and she didn't see the point in moving forward. He hadn't been a replacement for her little prince, but it had lifted her spirits to spend time with him—outside in the gardens or in the kitchens baking. Even just getting a random hug from him had gone a long way in helping her continue living.

She took his hand, letting him help her up. "I would love to see my little knight again. Lead the way."

Roland had been ecstatic to see her and had given her the biggest hug a four-years-old could give. She had held him close, letting his curls tickle her as he babbled away about everything he had discovered in his new world. It seemed he was fascinated by the boats in the harbor and loved Granny's chicken nuggets. He was scared of the cars but Regina soothed those fears and the train whistles sometimes woke him up at night, but she soothed his fears and told him that those whistles were just the trains saying hi to him. That seemed to please him and he continued on babbling as the Merry Men watched on in amusement.

The sun began to set soon after and Regina checked her watch with a frown. "I should be going," she said. "I don't want to be late for David and Mary Margaret's party for the baby."

"Please don't go, Regina," Roland begged, clinging to her. "Not yet."

"We are going to the party too," Robin reminded her. "They invited everyone in town. Maybe we can go together?"

She smiled, looking between the dimpled boy and his dimpled father. "Well, I think that's a great idea. And I have an even better idea too. Why don't we leave now and I'll introduce you to a place that's almost as good as Granny's?"

Roland gasped and looked at his father, locking his fingers together and giving him big brown puppy dog eyes. "Can we go, Papa? Please?"

"Please, Papa?" Regina echoed, also clasping her hands together and pouting for extra measure.

Robin gave an exasperated sigh but his smile to her he felt anything but. "Okay, I guess we can go," he said.

Giving a little cheer, Roland leapt from Regina's arms into his father's. He hugged Robin tightly as he said: "Thank you, Papa."

"Come on, Roland," she said, holding out her hand. "I know you're a little frightened of them, but we're going to ride in my car. How does that sound?"

The boy hesitated but looked up at her with complete trust in his eyes. "You'll be making it move?"

"Yes," she told him, crouching down to be eye level with him. "And I'm very good and very safe at it."
"Okay, Regina. I'll get in the car with you. Only you," he stressed. She laughed, thanking him as she hugged him.

She led the Locksley men to her car and conjured up a car seat for Roland, helping him into it and buckling him up as she explained that it was just for extra safety. "I don't want anything to happen to you," she told him, gently bopping his nose.

He giggled and she closed the door, hopping into the driver's seat. Once she was certain Robin was buckled like she taught him, she started the car and headed into town. Roland watched the trees go by with wonder in his eyes as his little legs bounced against the car seat. And when she glanced over at Robin, she met his shining eyes and bright smile.

Zelena hadn't been able to see past her own anger and jealousy to see the beauty in the world and everything it could offer. Regina could understand that for once upon a time, they weren't much different. Yet she was glad that even when she was at her lowest and the world seemed the darkest, she had listened to Snow and not buried her heart and then she had not put herself under the sleeping curse. For now, things were so much brighter. She had Henry back and she had love again—both Robin's and Roland's. A family was starting to form here, she realized with a burst of warmth in her stomach, and happiness was in her reach.

So with those pleasant thoughts going through Regina's mind, she beamed as she parked outside Any Given Sundae, ready to introduce Roland and Robin to the magic of ice cream.
Second Chances

Chapter Notes

Written for OQ Fix It Fic Week Day 6: Roni Day

Uses the following suggested prompts: Roni gives a homeless person (AKA Robin) a job in her bar

She discovered him sleeping in his car in the alley when she went to throw out her garbage one chilly Seattle morning. It was a beat-up piece of crap she believed was once green but now covered in dirt and mud. A person's whole life appeared crammed into it—pillows, blankets, clothes, knick-knacks—and sleeping in the middle of it all, a man about her age. He had matted blond hair and a matching beard. She couldn't see much more as he had wrapped his blanket around him like a cocoon to stay warm.

He wasn't the first homeless person she had encountered living in Hyperion Heights and she tried to help out those she could with a dollar here or there, but he was the first one she felt really drawn to help. It almost felt like they were meant to meet and she was supposed to give him a second chance.

Not that Roni would ever admit it out loud. She didn't believe in things like fate or that spiritual junk.

But she tapped on the window, startling the man awake. He blinked open beautiful blue eyes and she almost felt like she had once drowned in them before. She shook the feeling off as she motioned for him to roll down the window so they could talk.

He sighed, leaning over to lower the window and immediately launched into a spiel he must've been used to giving. "Sorry. I'll move the car so I won't be your way anymore. Just give me a couple minutes."

Roni was surprised to hear him speak with a British accent and wondered what brought him to Seattle. But she figured she'll find that out in good time. For now, she had something else to ask him: "Do you need a job?"

"What?" he asked, blinking in confusion. He then stared up at her, making her fidget.

She barreled on, hoping she wasn't making a fool of herself. "My custodian quit on me the other night and I could use with someone who can help me keep the place clean. The pay won't be so great and I can't offer you benefits, but I can give you a lot of hours to come up with something resembling a decent paycheck. If you want it."

He stared at her. "Really? You would just hire me like that?"

"Consider me desperate," she said, trying to play it cool. "So, you want it or not?"

"Yes, yes. Thank you," he replied, gratitude and relief in his eyes. "I also have my own tools in here so I won't need those. And I promise I'm legal. I can work in the States."

He then held out his hand to her. "I'm Rex, by the way."
"Rex?" she asked with a snort, unable to help herself. "Isn't that a dog's name?"

"I had strange parents, what can I say?" He shrugged before giving her a little smirk. "I trust that won't keep you from hiring me now."

She shrugged as well. "I guess there are worst names to have."

"And may I ask who I am working for?" he asked, eyes sparkling as he looked up at her.

"Roni," she said, finally shaking his hand. "Named the bar after me, so you'll be able to find it. I'll see you at three?"

He nodded. "I'll be there. And Roni? Thank you."

"No, thank you. Really saving my life here." She gave him a wink with both eyes while stepping away from his car to head back inside as she ignored the way her heart wanted to beat right out of her chest.

Rex was a model employee. He showed up on time, looking neat but appropriately attired for work as a custodian, and performed his tasks skillfully. He also went over and beyond what she asked of him, doing repairs to parts of the building and making some improvements for her. Rex kept the bar clean and everything running smoothly, which Roni was grateful for.

After a month of working for her, Rex came in one day and told her that he would like to give her an official address for his payroll file. She recognized it as an apartment building not far from her bar and was glad he was able to find a good place to live now. He said he didn't have much by way of furniture yet, but he didn't mind sleeping on the floor. She felt awkward buying him furniture but did purchase him an air mattress, insisting it was a housewarming present. "Besides, I can't have you throwing out your back, right?" she asked, trying to brush off the conversation.

She turned away, knowing that if she saw his beaming smile and those irresistible dimples, her stomach would do flips and she would flush. And that would ruin her tough girl exterior.

A few days after he got a new place, Rex came in with shorter hair. It still appeared thick but it was cut close, especially on the sides, and revealed some silver there. She stared at him for a few minutes, knowing her mouth was open, and he started to squirm. "I, um, finally got my hair cut. Does it look bad?" he asked.

"No," she said, almost stuttering. "It looks...good...on you."

He grinned, running his hand through his hair before rubbing his chin. "I also got a shave. That beard was a bit too much, yeah?"

When he moved his hand, she saw that the long beard was gone though there was still hair covering his cheeks and jawline. It gave him a scruffy but handsome look and she swallowed, nodding stupidly. "Yeah..."

"Well, I'm glad I look a bit neater. And I feel lighter," he said, grinning as he walked past the bar. "I'll go get started on the floors for today and leave you to your tasks. See you in a bit, Roni."

"Yeah," she said again, feeling like the biggest fool on the planet.

Once he was gone, she groaned as she covered her face with his hands. She hadn't expected to fall in lust with her janitor when she hired him, she just wanted to help him out. But here she was. So what
did she do? Suffer in silence and wait for the feelings to ultimately fade or make a move and hope Rex was receptive to it?

That seemed like too much of a risk, though, and she didn't want to drive off the best janitor she ever had. So it seemed she was going to have to suffer in silence. Her crush would fade over time, she knew.

At least, she hoped.

Rex started to open up to Roni as he continued to work for her. He talked about how he came to America to attend university, studying political science and finding work with a non-profit that helped the less fortunate back East in Boston. While working there, he met and fell in love with a woman named Madison. The two married but she became sick within a year of her marriage. "It was cancer and it was aggressive. The doctors tried to fight it with just as much aggression but it was no use, she died shortly after our second wedding anniversary," he told her.

"I'm sorry," Roni said, squeezing his hand. She then poured him a glass of whiskey, holding it out to him. "On the house. Don't tell the boss."

He chuckled, taking a sip of the whiskey. Setting down the glass, he continued: "Living in Boston was unbearable, so I quit and moved faraway. Seattle seemed pretty far."

"That it is," she agreed, pouring herself a whiskey as well.

"I tried to find a job similar to the one I had in Boston but I found my heart wasn't in it anymore," he confessed. "So I went to go find myself. Unfortunately, my savings ran out before I could find who I was and I found myself living in my car, which thankfully I had paid off before I moved out here."

Roni's heart broke listening to his story and she rested her hand over his. "Have you found yourself yet?"

He shook his head before smiling, lacing his fingers with hers. "But I think I'm getting closer, thanks to you."

She smiled, ignoring the way her heart beat faster and her skin grew warmer as he continued to hold her hand. "Well, glad to help."

Roni took another sip of her whiskey before sharing her own story of woe. "I opened this place with my high school sweetheart, Darren. He's the one who named it after me. I wasn't that narcissistic or unimaginative," she told him.

"I think it's a good name," he replied, now rubbing the back of her hand with his thumb.

She shrugged. "I guess so. Anyway, we got everything up and running and things were good. We even felt secure enough to discuss marriage but then these two really drunk guys got into a stupid argument. Darren went to break it up and in the blink of an eye, was stabbed with a broken bottle."

"Oh god," he breathed, giving her hand a squeeze as she took another sip of her whiskey.

Once she swallowed, she continued: "I called the police and the ambulance. The EMTs got him stable and rushed him to the hospital but there was little the doctors could do since he lost too much blood. I barely got to say goodbye and tell him I loved him before he was gone.

"People thought it was weird that I continued to run this bar but it was our dream, you know? I
 couldn't just walk away from it, from him. And I'm glad I haven't. It's everything to me." She smiled as she glanced around at the bar.

Rex let go of her hand and picked up his glass. "I propose a toast. To those we've loved and lost."

"To them," she said, clinking her glass against his. She then took a sip. "Thanks for listening. It's been a long time since I talked about Darren."

"Well, if you ever need someone to talk to, you know where to find me." He gave her a little half smile.

She smiled back, squeezing his hand. "Same to you. Listening is kinda my specialty, being a bartender and all."

He laughed and they finished their whiskey in a comfortable silence as Roni realized that maybe, it wasn't a crush after all.

Maybe—just maybe—it was love.

Roni locked up after the last of the Halloween crowd finally staggered out the door. She pulled off her Marilyn Monroe wig with a weary sigh, leaning against the door. "Thank god. I thought they would never leave," she said. "Cash out and then clock out. I'll see you all tomorrow. Or later today. Whatever."

Her staff eagerly finished up and left, leaving only her and Rex behind. Rex took off the leather jacket for his James Dean costume, hanging it behind the bar as he stared at the mess left behind by the revelers. "This isn't too bad," he said.

"You can go home," she told him. "I can handle this."

He shook his head, grabbing the broom. "I'm your janitor. This is my job. Let me do it, please. You go home."

"I am home," she reminded him, pointing to the ceiling. On the other side was her living room, which led to her very enticing bed. But she wasn't going to leave him alone with this mess. "Let's do this together, then. It'll go faster."

Rex nodded, handing her the broom before retrieving his mop. They worked together in silence, slowly but surely cleaning up the mess. Once the last garbage bag was tossed into the dumpster, Roni placed her money into the safe and closed it for the night before locking her office. "Time to hit the hay," she said.

She turned, finding Rex at the jukebox. Frowning, she approached him. "What are you doing?"

"I was thinking about what you said to Henry earlier," he told her. "You know, about moving on and taking chances? I thought I would take a chance of my own."

Her heart beat wildly in her chest and her palms grew sweaty. "Oh? How so?"

Rex selected a song, playing Yazoo's "Only You," before turning to her. He held out his hand. "Will you dance with me? And, maybe, go out for dinner tomorrow? Er, tonight?"

"I would love to," she said, taking his hand. "And the same goes for dinner."

The smile gave her as he pulled her close was bright enough to rival the sun but she didn't mind
looking into it. She smiled back as they danced around the bar. It had been a long time since Roni had felt loved and safe like she did in his arms and she hoped the feeling never ended.

Lying her head on his shoulder, she was glad she took a chance on the homeless guy sleeping in his car behind her bar.
Robin awoke in the dusty foyer of a mansion. An unlit fireplace sat in front of him with a portrait hanging about it. It showed a handsome young man with brown hair, dressed in a finely made dress coat and silk cravat. He looked like someone Robin would happily relieve of a bag of coins and a few jewels during one of his many raids. So why was he here?

As he watched the portrait, it began to change. Wrinkles appeared on the mans' face and his hair turned gray then completely white. The skin appeared sallow and then started to fade away, revealing the bone underneath. Soon, it was only a skeleton in fine clothes staring back at Robin.

Where the hell was he?

"Welcome, Robin of Locksley," a deep voice boomed, echoing through the room. "Or do you prefer Robin Hood?"

He looked around, trying to find the source of the voice. But the room appeared to have no doors or windows. Aside from the fireplace, there was no place for someone to hide. Robin frowned as he called out: "Who are you? Where am I? Where are you?"

"You can call me Master Gracey. I own this ghostly retreat. So I guess you could also call me your Ghost Host." He chuckled.

A chill went through Robin. "Ghost?"

"Yes...I didn't realize you were a newcomer to our realm. I would've eased you into this instead," this "Master Gracey" said, sounding contrite.

Robin frowned. "What do you mean by that?"

Master Gracey sighed. "I hate when I have to do this. Robin of Locksley, better known as Robin Hood, you are dead."

"Dead?" Robin couldn't be dead. He could still feel fear and dread. And he swore he just got colder, with color draining from his face. How could he do and feel all that without a body? And wouldn't he remember dying? He wracked his brain, trying to recall what had happened before he woke in this strange house.

He recalled being with his Merry Men, about to pull a big job that promised a great reward that would help feed the villagers through the harsh winter predicted for Sherwood Forest. He remembered dressing up as peasants with offerings to bring to the greedy duke before pulling away
from the guards to let his men inside the gates. They spread out, grabbing whatever they could that would help the villagers, while Robin headed toward the Duke's vault. He recalled breaking the code and getting inside, but after that it was a blur.

"Oh, your death must be really recent. You've not yet processed it and have blocked it out of your memory," Master Gracey said. "You were caught by the duke's guards and tried to escape but the Duke took you by surprise, running you through with a sword."

Robin pressed his hand to his stomach, a cold sensation filling him as shock took over. "I can't believe I went down so easily."

"You were caught by surprise," Master Gracey said. "If you could've, I'm certain you would've put up quite the fight."

"I just...I wish I could remember." Robin held his head, a dull ache coming to it as he tried to come up with the memories.

"You will, in time. But for now, let me show you to your new room. Feel free to explore your new residence, get to know your housemates. We're a...lively...bunch." Master Gracey chuckled at his own pun but Robin was in no mood for jokes.

He was dead.

And this strange house was apparently the afterlife.

This was awful.

Everything just kept getting worse for Robin after finding out he was dead. He didn't think anything could top that but then he saw his room and realized he was wrong. He might have lived in a tent in the woods while he was living but that didn't mean he was looking forward to having a coffin in his room. A nice bed and a comfy chair would be nice. Even if he was dead, didn't he deserve some comforts?

There was also no sunlight. Whenever he looked outside, it always appeared to be night. A full moon hung high in the sky, unmovable, as stars twinkled throughout the inky black night. Below his window was a graveyard, tombstones lined up as far as the eye could see. He saw others milling about, a diverse group all dressed in a variety of clothes. They chatted happily together and he heard singing from a far corner but it was nothing he wanted a part of. If he had to haunt a place for eternity, he would rather be in his beloved Sherwood amongst the green trees and bright sunshine. Not this dreary place that just reeked of death.

He needed to break out.

Now.

Robin laid on the floor, staring at the cobwebs on the ceiling. He didn't feel dead and it seemed he was still corporeal. Robin had been able to open the coffin as well as move items around easily. Ghosts couldn't do that.

Of course, he had to go through a wall to get from the foyer to this room, so that proved he wasn't corporeal.

Unless he was dreaming...
Knocking interrupted his musing and he sat up, raising his eyebrow. "Come in. It's not locked."

The door creaked open and an older woman bustled in. She had curly gray hair and half-moon glasses perched on the edge of her nose. Looking over their rims, she studied him. "So, you're the new resident."

"I think there was a mistake," he said. "I don't belong here."

"Because you're not dead?" she asked, raising an eyebrow.

He frowned, trying to figure out how best to answer that. "I don't feel dead but I'm coming to accept that. I just don't feel this is where I should spend my entire afterlife. It's just so...so..."

"Morose?" the woman supplied. "Uninhabitable?"

"Both work," he said.

She chuckled. "It can seem that way at first but once you get settled in and start meeting the other residents, you'll find that it's not that bad. You might even come to like it. I'm Granny, by the way."

He raised an eyebrow. "Just Granny? No other name?"

"Everyone calls me Granny," she said with a shrug. "I know I have a real name. It's out there on one of those tombstones, so I can always go look it up whenever I want. But I like Granny."

"Then Granny it is," he said, holding out his hand. "I'm Robin of Locksley. Better known as..."

"Robin Hood. You're something of a legend," she told him. He grinned, feeling proud that he managed to make an impact on the world before his untimely demise.

Granny shook his hand before giving him a little tug. "Come on. Let me give you the grand tour and I'll introduce you to some of the other residents of this place."

"So, how many of us are here?" Robin asked as they wandered the hallways a few floors up. Door after door lined each hallway, all apparently occupied by some other departed soul.

"You are our nine hundred ninety-ninth soul," she told him. "From what I understand, the manor can hold a thousand. So Master Gracey has been getting really picky about who he lets in now that room is scarce. It's not like any of us move out, you know."

He paused, wondering if he would really have to spend the rest of eternity there. Was it a punishment for doing wrong—stealing—for the right reason—to give to those who had not from those who had too much? Could he spend eternity in this place? Or would he go mad first?

Granny stopped, studying him. "Something bothering you?"

"Just...this place. Is this really where I'm to spend the rest of my afterlife?" he asked, grimacing.

She frowned. "Why? Where did you expect to spend it?"

He shrugged. "I guess some place sunny and green. Maybe just roaming my beloved Sherwood Forest for all time."

"That does sound nice," she agreed. "But it doesn't last."

"What do you mean by that?" he asked, frowning. How would Sherwood Forest not always be
there?

Granny motioned to a bench and they sat down. "When I first died, I haunted my little cabin in the woods. I kept my eye on my granddaughter and on the locals. But over time, things started to change. Our little village grew and my cabin was torn down after my granddaughter left. Over time, the village grew into a town and then a city, growing more modern and growing bigger. They cut down more and more trees and soon, it wasn't my world anymore. I felt like a stranger. That's when Master Gracey found me and brought me here. My granddaughter's spirit is here too, so we were reunited, and I found a new purpose taking care of the souls in this place."

"I can't believe that would happen to Sherwood," he said, trying to picture houses and shops where once there had been endless trees. It was impossible.

She patted his knee. "I know, but it will happen. Time marches on. You'll come to find this is your real home now, Robin. All you need is to make some friends and maybe find a purpose here. You'll see."

Robin knew that she thought she was being comforting but he felt far from it. He doubted he would ever get used to this place, even once he got to know his new neighbors. Nor did he think he would ever find a purpose here either. His purpose was to help the less fortunate. They were all dead, living in a mansion that appeared to have everything. No one was lacking for anything, except perhaps freedom. Yet he doubted his purpose was to break anyone out. They all seemed quite content with where they were.

He was going to be miserable for all of eternity.

"You don't look convinced," Granny said.

"I'm not," he admitted. "I mean, my idea of home sweet home doesn't involve a coffin for a bed."

She chuckled. "Oh, that. You can change your room to appear however you want. I made mine look like my cabin, actually. A little bit of home away from home."

"That sounds nice," he said, already thinking about how to change everything in his room.

"I'll show you how to do that later." Granny stood. "Come on. There's more to be seen and I'm sure we'll find someone to introduce you to yet."

"Fine," he said, figuring there was nothing else for him to do.

They passed by a door and he paused, thinking he heard something. He frowned, leaning toward it. As he pressed his ear to the cold wood, he heard soft sobs coming from behind it. It seemed someone else was just as miserable as he was.

Granny tugged on his arm, frowning. "I wouldn't go up there."

"Why?" he asked, still staring at the door. "What's up there? Who's up there?"

"That's the attic. And it's her domain," Granny said, eyeing the door with trepidation.

He frowned. "Her? Who's her?"

She took a deep breath. "The Queen. She came here decades ago and locked herself up there. Rumor is that she killed her husband the king and then waged a bloody civil war with his daughter over the throne, killing thousands in her quest for power. The stepdaughter got the best of her, killing her."
Why Master Gracey would choose to let her live here, none of us know."

"And she never comes down?" he asked, frowning in confusion.

Granny nodded. "And no one ever goes up. We may be dead but there are things that can hurt us in the afterlife. She no doubt knows them."

"Because she was some Evil Queen?"

"And because she was witch," she told him, lowering her voice as if the Queen could hear them. She tugged him away from the door. "Forget about the attic and forget about the Queen. You'll be safer that way."

Robin let her pull him down the hall but his mind remained focused on the mysterious Queen, even as Granny introduced him to his new neighbors. They were an eclectic group and even though he was introduced to a woman named "Leota" who was just a head floating in a crystal ball, the Queen remained the oddest thing about the place. Why would a bloodthirsty witch lock herself in an attic and refuse to deal with anyone else?

And why would she weep like she did?

Time passed by and Robin settled into his life in Gracey Manor, the official title of his new home. He still missed fresh air, sunshine and green trees and still tried to figure out a way to leave but the property seemed to extend out for miles. It would take days to finally get away, he figured, but the manor had some pull on him. He had tried to keep walking through a night but found himself back in his room not long after the sun came up.

It seemed he was trapped on the property.

After he accepted that grim fact, Robin decided to see if he knew any of the other spirits from when he was alive. Specifically, one spirit.

"Marian?" Granny asked, leaning back with a thoughtful expression after dinner one night as she knitted a blanket. "No, that name doesn't sound familiar. Who is she?"

"My…wife." He swallowed past a lump in his throat. Even though he was dead, the sorrow and pain from her death still filled him. "She was sick and though I tried everything I could do, she couldn’t get better. I was hoping she was here."

Granny nodded before sighing. "Not everyone lingers here in the spirit world, trapped between the world of the living and what we like to call the Better Place. Your Marian may have gone straight to the Better Place. It’s also likely Master Gracey didn't invite her to join us."

Robin frowned. "Is there a way to know?"

"You can ask Madam Leota," she replied. "She has a deep connection with the spirit world. If your Marian is out there, she'll be able to find her."

He nodded. "Thank you."

Leaving Granny, Robin wandered through the endless hallways until he found the dark room Leota called hers. Objects floated around the room and Robin had to duck as a trumpet whirled past him, blasting a few notes. He approached the table as Madam Leota floated in her crystal ball. "Robin of Locksley, I've been wondering when you would come to see me," she said, eyes closed.
"You were?" he asked, slightly unnerved. "Do you know why?"

"You seek your wife's spirit."

He stepped closer to the table. "Yes. Do you know where she is?"

Madam Leota opened her eyes, revealing they were pale gray. "I do. She is in the Better Place, Robin, and she's happy."

"She is?" Happiness filled him but it was mixed with sorrow that he wouldn't see her again. When she had died, he had hoped they would be reunited in the afterlife.

"I know you miss her," Leota continued, "but there is a reason you are here at Gracey Manor. Once you find it, you will come to enjoy this place."

Robin doubted that would ever happen but thanked Madam Leota anyway. He left the room, heading back to his own with a heavy heart. As he turned a corner, he found himself by the door to the attic yet again. Soft crying continued to come from behind the door and he sighed, wondering just what the Queen's real story was.

Because he knew there had to be more to it than met the eye.

Once he accepted his fate, Robin started to make more friends in Gracey Manor aside from Granny. He quickly befriended her kind and outgoing granddaughter, known as Red. Red then introduced him to a few other residents, including a rather flirtatious woman named Cruella (who always had a glass of gin in hand) and a brooding pirate who went by Hook, which was what he wore after losing his hand. "It seemed even in death I'm doomed to have this," he said, raising the item in question.

Robin's other new friend was a quiet young boy named Henry who haunted the library. He often found the boy floating at the very top, reading a rather large tome that would've weighed more than him when he was alive. Henry was drawn to fairy tales and legends, even knowing who Robin was.

"So my story outlives me?" Robin asked him, pleased by that.

Henry nodded. "There are lots of books about you. I have one up...well...up in my room."

Robin noticed the hesitation in Henry's voice but decided not to pursue it. "I would love to see it. Maybe you can bring it to me sometime? Or I can go to your room..."

"No!" Henry's eyes widened before he cleared his throat. "No, I can bring it to you. That's fine."

Though he knew it was most likely none of his business, Robin's suspicions were raised. He thanked Henry but that night, he followed the young ghost to find out where his bedroom was. Robin was surprised to see Henry float through the attic door and not come back out, meaning he shared a room with the Queen.

Curiosity got the best of him and Robin slipped through the door, wanting to see why Henry chose to spend his nights here. He floated up the stairs, spotting a pile of junk around the room. Upon closer inspection, though, he spotted his own bow and arrows, meaning these were mementoes of their lives.

He ignored his prized bow for now, hiding behind a mirror as he spotted Henry settling into a child-sized bed. It had a large blanket with the image of a man wearing red, white and blue and carrying a big shield on it. Squinting, Robin was able to make out the words "Captain America" sewn into the
Once he was settled under the blanket, he looked up at someone with a smile. "Okay, Mom. I'm ready."

Mom? Robin frowned, even more confused. Why did Henry call the Queen "Mom"? Or was there someone else in this attic as well? Did the Queen even exist?

His mind then went blank as "Mom" appeared in his eyeline. She was a beautiful woman with big brown eyes and long dark curls that hung down her back. The woman wore an elaborate purple dress with a black velvet fleur-dis-lis design. Even though she wore no crown, Robin knew she was the Queen. She just carried herself with a regal bearing.

She crouched down and kissed Henry's forehead. "What story do you want tonight, my little prince?"

"Robin Hood, please," Henry said, smiling sweetly.

The Queen shook her head, though she kept smiling. "You've been on a real Robin Hood kick lately."

He nodded, sitting up. "It's because he's here. Master Gracey chose him to live here with us."

"And you've met him?" she asked, sitting down on a chair by the bed with a red book in her hands. Robin could see the title was *The Adventures of Robin Hood*.

"I have," Henry told her. "I'm going to bring him the book so he can look through it."

She smiled at him, raising an eyebrow. "Do you think you can part with it?"

He paused for a few moments before shrugging. "Well, I guess I could read it with him and then take it back at night so you can continue reading it to me as well."

"I guess you could do that," she told him, running her fingers through his hair before picking up the book. "Okay, where did we leave off?"

"Robin ignored everyone's pleas not to go to the Sheriff's archery contest because they all knew it would be a trap," Henry said.

Robin frowned, wondering what they were talking about. He never willingly walked into one of Nottingham's traps just to prove a point. Yes, he had his pride but he also had self-preservation instincts. He leaned closer, wanting to hear what this book had to say about this.

The Queen flipped a few pages. "Ahh, yes. Here we are. Robin borrowed clothes from Friar Tuck and stuffed them with hay to fill out the extra room as Tuck was a rather rotund man. He found a large brimmed farmer's hat and kept his head down as he entered the competition, trying not to linger too long in a spot where someone might be able to spot him and alert the Sheriff to his presence."

"Despite their disapproval of the plan, his Merry Men were dressed as farmers and other peasants in order to blend in with the people gathered to watch the competition. They would jump in if something went wrong for Robin, always ready to protect their beloved leader," she continued.

He smiled, knowing that was true. It then fell into a frown as he wondered how his men reacted to his death, to being unable to protect him from being pieced by a sword. Were they still together or had they drifted apart without his leadership? Did they still steal from the rich to give to the poor or
resort to a less than honorable life?

The Queen read on, talking about how Robin easily destroyed the other competition except for one of the Sheriff's best archers. It resulted in a winner-take-all challenge, where they had to land their arrow on the bullseye. The soldier released his arrow and hit it but then Robin fired his own, slicing the soldier's arrow in two.

Robin certainly liked that.

"The Sheriff stood. 'Well done,' he said. He then smirked as he added, 'Robin of Locksley.' Everyone gasped and, realizing he was found out, Robin ripped off his hat and gave an elaborate bow. 'I'll be taking that reward now, Sheriff,' he said. 'The only thing you'll be getting is a death sentence,' the Sheriff said, motioning for his guards to step forward," the Queen read.

Henry leaned forward, eyes wide. "Did they get him?"

"Robin's Merry Men burst from the crowd and began fighting off the guards but the Sheriff had sent for reinforcements. They prevented Robin from escaping into the woods amidst the chaos and the guard seized him, dragging him before the Sheriff for judgment," she replied, reading from the book.

Indignation filled Robin and he stepped out from behind the mirror. "I beg your pardon," he said, cross. "I was never captured by the Sheriff. What pack of lies is in there?"

The Queen's brown eyes grew wide as she clutched the book to her chest. Henry jumped up out of bed, frowning. "Robin? What are you doing here?"

"I saw you coming in here," he told the boy. "And curiosity got the best of me."

"Come to gawk at the Evil Queen?" the woman asked, almost mockingly. "Come to fight me?"

He frowned, shaking his head. "Of course not. I don't think you're evil at all."

She narrowed her eyes, leaning closer. "Why?"

"Well, for starters, it is clear you love Henry and care for him as a mother cares for her son," he said, glancing over at the boy who was inching closer to the woman. "And he loves you very much."

Henry beamed as he nodded. "I do. She took me in when I first got here and I finally found the mother I had been looking for throughout my short life. Mom's everything to me."

The Queen's lip began to quiver and she lowered the book as she hugged Henry. She then cleared her throat as she studied Robin. "So, you're the real Robin Hood?"

"At your service," he said, giving her a low bow.

Henry glanced over at her, uncertain. "Can Robin stay and hear the rest of the story with us? Please?"

The Queen glanced over at him, her lips starting to twitch upwards. "Well, he's already heard so much, I guess it's only fair to let him hear the rest. If he can contain himself."

"I can't make any promises," he told her as she gave him a pointed glance. He pointed to the book. "That author clearly is trying to slander me."

She laughed, a beautiful sound that would've made his heart stop had he still been alive. He gave her a soft smile and she turned to Henry. "Okay, you, back in bed and then we'll continue reading."
Henry nodded, jumping back into bed. Robin watched as the Queen tucked him in again. She smoothed down his hair before motioning to another chair. "You can sit there," she told Robin.

"Thank you," replied, sitting down. "I can't wait to see what else this book gets wrong about me."

She rolled her eyes but continued to smile as she looked down, resuming the story for them all to enjoy. And he counted himself blessed to be sitting next to her, to listen to her and to share her space for this brief time.

After that, Robin was often a visitor to the attic at Henry's bedtime. He sat next to the Queen, listening to her as she read stories about him (some true, most false) and admiring her beauty. She was happiest when with Henry, that was clear, but Robin glimpsed a sadness in her eyes. Was it guilt for all the people she had killed?

Did she really kill anyone after all? Could she? Because when Robin looked at her, he only saw a lonely young woman with a big heart even though it had long stopped beating—not a murderous evil queen who was also a witch.

Once Henry drifted off to sleep (or pretended to. Some spirits liked to keep up the charade of their old routines, including going to bed), the Queen would then thank Robin for coming and he would be on his way. He never wanted to overstay his welcome for fear he wouldn't be allowed back.

That was his worst nightmare.

As they approached the end of the book, dread settled into Robin's less than corporeal body. He worried that once it was over, he wouldn't be allowed back into the attic and he wouldn't get to spend more time with the Queen.

That was his second worst nightmare.

One night after Henry had drifted off, the Queen motioned for Robin to follow her. He did so, climbing a few steps until they were sitting on a little balcony attached to one of the attic's windows. The graveyard stretched below them for as far as his eye could see and a full moon shone overhead, illuminating the Queen's translucent skin. It only made her look more beautiful in his eyes.

"My name is Regina," she said softly, startling him. She turned her head, her brown eyes locking onto his blue ones. "I thought it was time to tell you that."

He smiled, happy she trusted him with such information. "Regina. It's beautiful. Is that why people call you the Queen? Because of what your name means?"

She shook her head. "I really was a Queen when I was alive. Not that I wanted to be but Mother was determined to see me on the throne. That's why she named me Regina."

"What did you want to be?" he asked, frowning at the pain and bitterness in her voice.

"Free," she whispered. He felt as if his heart was breaking, even though he didn't have one anymore. He took a deep breath, asking his next question. "Is that why you studied magic?"

She turned to look at him, her eyes wide. "What?"

"Everyone says you were a powerful witch," he told her. He then frowned. "That's not true?"

Regina shook her head. "My mother was a very powerful witch and maybe I would've been but I
"And I take it you never killed the king and then fought a bloody civil war with his daughter?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

"I definitely didn't do that last part." She then dropped her gaze to her hands on her lap. "But I did kill the king."

He resisted the urge to take her hand, feeling herself shrink on herself as if to protect herself from something. Or someone. And a cold feeling settled over him as he started to understand why she had killed the king. "You don't have to tell me anymore," he told her. "You don't owe me anything. I owe you."

She looked up, now frowning in confusion. "What could you owe me for?"

"For letting me stay and then to spend time with you and Henry. I appreciated it," he said. "The bedtime story is my favorite part of the day."

"It's mine too," she replied. "And I'm glad we were able to share it with you. I love Henry but sometimes it does get lonely with it being just the two of us."

"Why don't you join the rest of us? Why stay up here in the attic all the time?" he asked her.

She raised her eyebrows. "People think I'm a murderous queen who is also an evil witch."

"Fair point." He bit his lip before asking: "Why don't you go down there and show them you're not?"

"I just didn't want to be around people when I first died. And now...I don't think I can face them," she admitted. "I've gotten used to being alone. Even before I died."

He scooted closer to her, brow furrowing in confusion. "But you were queen. You were surrounded by members of the court, weren't you?"

"I was a replacement queen who was really just a glorified nanny for a bratty young princess," she told him, bitterness creeping back into her voice. "No matter what, it was clear I was never going to be good as Queen Eva in anyone's eyes, especially my husband's."

"Not that that mattered at night, when he came to my bedroom. He was determined to have another heir, preferably a boy, and didn't care what it took to have one." Her voice trailed off and her eyes grew distant. Robin didn't press her for more information, able to fill in the blanks. He knew many men who thought they had a right to their wives' bodies and it had made him sick even in life. It was not an honorable approach to marriage, in his opinion.

Regina took a shuddering breath before continuing: "However, I never conceived. And despite the fact he was much older and it had even taken Queen Eva years before she had Princess Snow, no one dared to suggest the problem lie with the king."

"So they blamed you?" he asked, frowning.

She nodded. "They thought I wasn't able to have children but then there were some at court who knew my mother was witch. So they then began whispering that I was too and that I cursed myself to never have the king's child out of spite. It seemed everyone but the king realized I never had wanted to marry him."

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"Did the king believe that?" he asked.

"Yes. Or at least he saw it as a way to get rid of me in order to find another queen who he hoped could give him an heir. So he signed my execution order." Her voice grew more bitter as she spoke. "He told me after forcing me to perform my so-called wifely duties. I was so angry I took the knife I kept under my pillow and finally stabbed him like I wanted to."

Robin wanted to reach out and take her hand for comfort but doubted it was what she wanted. "Then what happened?"

"I killed the king," she replied. "So I was hanged for treason. Then I found myself here."

"You deserved so much better," he told her, meaning every word. She had deserved to live a life of freedom, spent with someone who loved and respected her. Regina had deserved to be a mother.

No wonder she cried when she was alone.

She shrugged. "Maybe. I don't know. All I know is that I can't handle any more stares or whispers. So I stay up here and take care of Henry."

"Thank you for sharing your story with me," he said.

"Thank you for listening." She then turned to him, smirking. "So, how did the legendary Robin Hood finally die?"

He chuckled, rubbing the back of his neck. "Well, it's a bit embarrassing. I died on a job…"

As he told her his death story, Regina reached over and took his hand. She laced their fingers and he felt as if his breath was taken away…until he remembered he didn't breathe. The sensation remained though and he studied Regina in the moonlight, realizing that even though he didn't have a heart, he could still feel love.

For he was falling in love with the beautiful queen.

Even though they finished the book about him, Robin still joined Regina and Henry for bedtime stories. They moved on to Shakespeare and so he was enlisted in reading some of the parts for Henry's amusement. It was his favorite part of the day.

Robin also continued to watch over Henry when he wasn't in the attic and he started to entice the boy to engage with the others in the house. Hook and Red happily took the boy into their social circle, though they kept Cruella at bay. She obliged them as she wasn't fond of children in life or in death.

Then something changed in the house. A strange undercurrent ran through the air and it took Robin a few days to finally put a name to it: excitement and anticipation. Something was coming and everyone was looking forward to it. He just wasn't sure what it was.

"Halloween," Granny told him when he finally asked. "We have a grand soiree to celebrate. Food, dancing, and even fireworks. It's a great night for all of us."

"Sounds like it," he said.

She then grinned at him. "You taking anyone special?"

"Depends." He leaned closer to her, flashing the dimples Marian once called irresistible. "Are you
going with someone?"

Granny patted his cheek. "You're sweet. But I go with Gepetto every year. I'll introduce you two at the party."

He laughed and thanked her before heading out of the dining hall. Robin floated about the manor until he arrived at the attic door. An idea came to him and he figured it would just be nice to ask his Queen, the only date he would really consider bringing. Going through the door, he climbed the stairs and looked around for Regina. "Milady?" he called out.

"Robin?" She appeared from behind a mirror, frowning. "Why are you up here so early? Is something wrong?"

He shook his head. "Nothing is wrong. I've just found out about the Halloween ball and was wondering if you would like to come with me."

"You know I don't like to leave my attic," she replied, frowning as she wrung her hands. She looked nervous and he believed she had started to shake. There was a lot about her time at court she still refused to talk about and he wondered if she had had bad experience at balls as well.

"I know. I wasn't expecting you to say yes. I just thought it would be nice to ask you." He smiled at her, hoping to put her at ease and feeling like a heel for just asking to make her feel wanted. Robin never wanted to remind her of something unpleasant from her life.

Her lips parted as her eyes grew big in surprise. "Oh. That's actually...really sweet. Thank you, Robin."

"You're wel..." His response died away as he felt her cold but soft lips against his cheek. It was the closest he had ever gotten to her and an aroma of vanilla wafted around him. It suited her.

And it also soothed his mind. He hadn't traumatized her after all.

She pulled away, her brown eyes almost sparkling with life. "Can you keep an eye on Henry for me? He should go and enjoy the party."

Robin recovered his sense and he nodded. "I will happily take care of him, milady. And should you change your mind, we'll be happy to have you."

"I doubt I'll change my mind," she told him, still hovering close. "But I'll remember that."

He smiled at her. "Though I know you won't come, I will save you a dance. Even if I have to come up here at the end to get it."

She smirked, floating away from him. "Maybe you'll get one. We'll have to see."

"I guess so," he said, heading back to the stairs. He grinned to himself. "I guess so."

Nine hundred and ninety-eight ghosts converged on the ballroom for the Halloween ball, many spilling into the graveyard. Spirits sat on bare tree branches and danced amongst graves, laughing as music blared from every corner of the manor. Jack-o-lanterns illuminated the graveyard while several candelabras and the grand chandelier lit up the ballroom, where spirits ate and drank though they were neither hungry nor thirsty.

Robin himself sipped at ale, relishing the taste although he no longer felt the effects of the alcohol. It
was familiar, a reminder of his life, and it seemed appropriate for a party. He watched as Henry tried to bob for an apple, the red fruit floating through his form as he tried to bite into it. It made him laugh, though, and Robin was glad the boy was having fun.

"So, mate, you going to share a dance with one of the many fair lasses who call this place home?" Hook asked, appearing beside him with a flask of rum.

"I'm not sure," Robin replied, watching as Red twirled around with another woman in a dress with a blue and white square pattern. "Maybe Red, but just as a friend."

"Good call. Dorothy is quite dangerous, even when you're already dead." Hook took another swig as he chuckled at his joke.

Robin looked at his pirate friend from the corner of his eye. "What about you? You going to dance with anyone?"

Hook's flask disappeared. "I'll have you know I've already danced with a fair share of eligible maidens. But they all want to dance with our resident legend. You're breaking a lot hearts… figuratively speaking."

"There's only one woman I want to dance with," Robin said. "But she's not going to be here."

"Right, Marian. I know it's hard when you're trapped here and the woman you love has moved on, but take it from me, mate. You need to move on. Or your eternity will be miserable." Hook clapped him on the back.

Robin took another sip of his ale, wanting to tell Hook he had moved on from Marian. However, he had promised to keep his relationship with Regina and her true story secret. So he had to pretend that Hook was right.

Henry bounded up to them, an apple in his teeth. Robin raised his eyebrow. "I see you finally got one," he said.

"Yep," Henry replied, taking the apple out of his mouth. He then took a bite, chewing as he asked: "What are we going to do next?"

"Swallow," Robin and Hook said in unison. Robin shook his head. "What would your mother say if she saw you?"

Hook raised an eyebrow, asking in confusion: "Mother?"

"Robin," Henry hissed in warning, frowning. Disappointment, anger and panic filled his eyes and guilt filled Robin.

"What's going on here?" Granny asked, coming over with an older Italian man she had introduced as Gepetto. She frowned as she looked at their faces. "Why aren't you all having fun?"

Before Robin could play his comment off as a careless slip to the tongue and apologize to Henry for forgetting the boy was an orphan, a hush fell over the crowd and the music died away. People turned to the door and Henry gasped, his eyes widening as he exclaimed: "MOM!"

"What?" the three adults said and Robin looked up, surprise and excitement filling him as he saw Regina glide through the parted crowd.

She had changed her purple dress into a light blue off-the-shoulder gown. Tiny crystals reflected the
candlelight with her every movement as did the diamond she wore on a chain around her neck. Her dark hair was gathered into a low ponytail on the side of her head, thick curls cascading over one of her bare shoulders.

"Is that…the Queen?" Gepetto asked, Italian accent thick from surprise. "The one who lives in the attic?"

Hook pointed to Henry. "And did you call her 'Mom'?"

"I did. She's now my mom," Henry said before throwing his arms around Regina as she approached their tiny group. "You came!"

She kissed the top of his head but kept her eyes on Robin as she smiled. "I got a bit lonely up in the attic. And I was promised a dance…"

"You were?" Hook asked, surprised. "By who?"

"Me," Robin said as he glided forward, holding out his hand to her. "Milady?"

Henry let go of her and Regina took his hand. They headed to the center of the empty dance floor as everyone watched. Robin nodded to the ghostly musicians gaping in the corner and they quickly started playing a nice waltz for them to dance to.

Robin bowed to her before placing his hand on her waist and taking her hand in his. They moved as one, Regina following his lead as they moved about the room. He twirled her, her skirts flying out around her as she laughed. Robin twirled her back toward him and she grinned at him. "Where did you learn to dance?" she asked.

"I wasn't always a thief who lived in the woods," he replied, holding their arms over his head as she moved around him. He then pulled her close to him again. "I was raised the son of a nobleman."

"What happened?" she asked, leaning closer to hear the part of his story not covered in the book nor shared by him after Henry's bedtime.

He felt the old bitterness and resentment creep up. "My father supported King Richard but when he was captured during the Crusades, his brother Prince John took the throne and seized my father's title and property. I was fighting him as much as I was helping my people."

Admiration shown in Regina's eyes. "You really are a hero. So what do you see in a villain like me?"

Robin frowned. "You aren't a villain. You were trapped in a shitty situation and forced to act. And if you don't believe me, just look at the love in Henry's eyes. You're a hero to him, trust me."

"He's my hero," she said softly, smiling at her son as they passed by him. He gave them a wave and they returned it.

Once again, Robin spun her out and then spun her back to him. Her back was pressed against his chest and he wrapped his arms around her. "I am glad you decided to come down and join us," he told her.

"Me too," she said. "Even if everyone is staring at me as if I had three heads."

"They are amazed by your beauty," he replied, rocking her gently. "Just like I am."
She glanced up, giving him a cheeky smile. "Laying it on a bit thick there, thief."

"I only speak the truth, for I am an honest thief. You are stunning… in every way." He spun her back out as the song ended.

Regina's pale skin seemed to take on a pinkish tint and she avoided his eyes as she walked past him. "I think I need some punch."

"Punch sounds good," he agreed, following behind her. He watched as she ladled some of the red liquid into a glass before doing the same. Robin held out his glass to her. "A toast?"

She raised an eyebrow. "To what?"

"Halloween," he replied. "And to new beginnings. Even when you're dead."

"Cheers." She clinked her glass against his before taking a sip. Regina then reached out and took his hand. "Thank you, Robin."

"For?" he asked, confused.

She looked down, clearly sheepish. "For pulling me out of my self-imposed prison. For listening to me. For seeing the woman behind the rumors."

"Well, I think Henry did that first," Robin said, raising his glass toward the boy spirit who was now dancing with Red.

Regina smiled, nodding. "That's true. But knowing I had your support as well finally got me to leave the attic. I know you've heard me crying. Henry told me. I often sit up there and think about the life I could've had and all the people I was taken from—my father, Daniel, my first love—and I would get so bitter, I would just cry. But you and Henry reminded me that I can't keep mourning the past. I have an entire eternity before me and I need to enjoy it."

He took her hand again. "I'm happy for that. And to be honest, you and Henry taught me the same lesson."

"Mom!" Henry ran up to them after his dance with Red ended. He bowed to Regina, his hair almost brushing the floor from how low he dipped. "May I have this dance?"

She looked impressed and handed Robin her glass before curtsying in response. "Yes, you may."

"Have fun you two," Robin called after them, watching with pride as Henry led his mother onto the dance floor.

Hook slid up to him, eyes wide. "You're romancing the bloody Queen? What the hell?"

"Her name is Regina," Robin replied, keeping his eyes on her and Henry as she taught him the reel everyone was dancing.

"She's a murderer."

Robin gave him a side-eyed glance. "And you're going to tell me you were the one pirate who didn't murder anyone?"

Hook huffed. "Fine. But still…"

"What? I'm dead. She can't kill me." Robin sipped his punch to try not to laugh at Hook's annoyed
"There are the rumors that she's a witch. I'm sure she still has her magic in that case and can send your spirit somewhere even Leota can't contact," Hook said.

Robin shrugged. "I guess that's a risk I'll have to take. She hasn't sent me anywhere yet, so I think I'm good."

The dance ended and Regina curtsied to Henry, who hugged her. They stood in the middle of the dance floor, locked in a sweet embrace. It almost made Robin feel alive again and almost feel warmth yet again.

"Oh gods," Hook groaned. "You love her, don't you? I can see it in your eyes."

"Can you feel love if you're dead?" Robin asked him, trying to avoid answering the question even though he knew the answer.

It was a resounding yes.

Henry ran up to him with Regina following at a slower pace. The boy wrapped his arms around Robin, giving him a hug. "I'm really glad you came here," he told Robin.

Robin chuckled, hugging him back. "Well, I didn't really have a say in it, but I'm glad Master Gracey brought me here."

"May I have the next dance?" Regina asked, holding out her hand to him again. Hope filled her eyes as she smiled. "Please?"

He took her hand. "Of course, milady. I would be honored."

They joined the others on the floor but she stopped, tilting her head as she listened to the music. She frowned. "I don't recognize this. I don't think I can dance it."

"Then we'll make our own dance," he said, guiding her to a corner. "The important thing is that we have fun, right?"

She hesitated. "I'm not used to just having fun. Everything had to be perfect, first for my mother and then for the king."

"I don't want perfect." Robin leaned closer, cupping her cheek. "I want you to be happy."

Something softened in her eyes and she leaned closer as well. "I am happy. I have Henry…and now I have you."

"Yes, you do." He took her hand and spun her around, watching as her skirts flared out around her. Robin's spirits soared as she laughed, a sound that was almost as beautiful as the music that was playing.

Regina took his other hand. "Have you ever done a chassis?"

"Those are my specialty." He led her down the floor, following the wall as she laughed again, clearly enjoying herself.

Robin wasn't too sure if ghosts could get drunk but it seemed Regina had relaxed more after a couple more glasses of punch. She smiled easily and even took part in conversations with some of the other
ghosts they shared the manor with. He stayed closer to her, just in case something went wrong, but everyone she encountered was pleasant to her. It appeared she was having a good time and he was glad to see it.

He also enjoyed the fact that when they had sat down to rest, she hadn't taken the empty chair next to him but had plopped down on his lap with a giggle. Robin held her close, enjoying the contact for he wasn't sure if she would feel this way in the morning.

Then somewhere deep in the manor, a clock chimed thirteen times. The music died away but the room continued to vibrate with a sense of excitement as people began to spill out into the graveyard.

"What's going on?" he asked Granny.

She smiled. "It's the witching hour, my dear."

"The what?" he asked, confused.

Regina slid off his lap, looking nervous. "Maybe I should go back to the attic. It's late and Henry should really be in bed..."

Granny's eyes widened and she shook her head. "That's not what I meant. At all. It's time for the fireworks."

"Can't I watch the fireworks, Mom?" Henry asked, clasping his hands together as he stared up at her with wide eyes. "Please?"

Robin watched her melt easily and she smiled at Henry, tucking two fingers under his chin. "Of course, my little prince."

"Mo-om!" he whined, ducking away from her.

They all chuckled and Robin took her hand. "Are you coming to watch the fireworks too, milady?"

She laced her fingers with his. "I would love to."

"Yes!" Henry let out a whoop. "Let's go before we miss them."

They laughed, following him outside to the verandah. Henry wormed his way to the railing and they followed, Robin and Regina still standing next to each other. They all looked up to the sky, waiting for the show to begin.

Bursts of red and blue filled the eyes, followed by gold and green ones. Robin pulled Regina and Henry closer to him, realizing that they were starting to become a little family. If he had to spend eternity with anyone, he would definitely pick them.

Judging by the smile Regina was giving him, he believed she would pick him too.

This was definitely a happy beginning.
Firsts

Chapter Summary

Set in my "Reunited at Last" verse. Regina and Robin spend the afternoon with their one-year-old daughter, which turns into one they will never forget.

Firsts

Regina set down her quill atop the completed documents she had worked on all morning. New laws, new trade agreements, some arrest warrants—everything routine but necessary. However, it was easy for her to push this part of her royal duties aside as more pressing matters came up daily. Robin did his best to help her with the paperwork but even he often found himself pulled in multiple ways throughout the course of any given day. It was why they agreed to set Saturday mornings aside to focus on the paperwork, alternating who worked at the desk and who took care of Diana. Once the afternoon rolled around, they would meet back up to spend the rest of the day together. Everyone knew not to interrupt unless it was a true emergency, giving the royal couple time to relax and regroup for the upcoming week.

And of course to make precious memories with their daughter.

Standing, Regina massaged her neck to work out a few kinks. She left her study and headed down to the courtyard. Robin had mentioned taking Diana outside to enjoy the beautiful spring sunshine and warm weather. It sounded appealing and she hoped they were still out there.

People greeted her as she passed through the hallways. She returned each one but never stopped moving, hoping to keep from being dragged into a larger conversation. Regina arrived at the courtyard quickly, bright sunshine greeting her as it warmed her face. She stopped for a moment and closed her eyes, lifting her face to the sun as she took deep breath of fresh spring air. All her stress melted away, making her ready for time with her family.

Regina opened her eyes again and they went straight to her apple tree, moved from the Winter Palace so she could continue to nurture it. It had come their meeting spot so she was not surprised to find Robin with Diana in its shade. He was crouched down a few feet away, his hands outstretched as he watched their little girl. Diana stood on her pudgy legs, holding onto the low stone wall around the three. She bounced on them, making her dark curls swing as she smiled at her father, revealing her little baby teeth. However, she was happy where she was and didn’t listen as Robin tried to cajole her into taking her first steps.

It was going to happen. The only question was when. Diana had been pulling herself up for a few weeks now. She hadn’t let go yet, just happy to be standing or shuffling along the chest at the foot of the bed Regina shared with Robin. Regina knew her daughter would walk when she was ready but in a switch, Robin was the impatient one. He constantly encourage Diana to take her first steps but so far, it hadn’t happened.

Now that Diana was one, maybe things would be different.

The entire kingdom had celebrated her birthday as many towns in Mist Haven had declared it
a holiday. People poured into the city by the palace and since the kingdom prospered in the past year, Regina felt confident enough to order a festival be held for those who came to celebrate. Food, music, games and other festivities were quickly planned and everyone enjoyed the day. Diana was still too young to join in but the people had been happy to just get a glimpse at her when Robin and Regina stood on the balcony overlooking the courtyard to thank everyone for coming to celebrate their daughter’s birthday. When Diana took her nap, Robin and Regina visited the festival and spent time surrounded by their subjects. They spoke with everyone who wished to have a conversation, no matter their station in life.

Diana celebrated her birthday during an intimate party held in the Great Hall. Widow Lucas baked a cake for her and watched proudly as the young princess happily dug her hands into her slice. The Merry Men surrounded her, cheering her on as she ate the cake, and Regina laughed at the antics of the people she called her family. She had changed into one of her old linen dresses so she didn’t care when her daughter smeared cake on her skirts. Diana then climbed from person to person for birthday cuddles until her sugar rush ended and she grew sleepy in Tinkerbell’s arms. She crawled from her fairy godmother to her father, cuddling against him until she fell asleep in his arms.

Regina couldn’t have asked for a better birthday for her darling daughter—surrounded by joy and love.

“Come on, sweetheart,” Robin said, his voice pulling Regina away from her musings. She blinked and her husband came back into focus, still crouched in front of Diana with his hands outstretched. He wiggled his fingers. “Come to Papa.”

Diana giggled but made no move toward him. Robin sighed and Regina walked over to him, placing her hand on his back. “She’ll walk when she’s ready.”

“I know,” he sighed, before smiling as she crouched down next to him. He gave her a quick kiss. “You get everything done?”

“For now,” she replied, taking his hand. “And now, I have the rest of the day to spend with you two.”

He smiled, dimples deepening. Robin gave her another quick kiss before saying: “We can’t wait to spend the day with you. Right, sweetheart?”

They looked back at Diana, who watched them with a big smile. She let go of the wall and they both held their breaths, waiting to see what happened next.

She stared down at her feet before looking up at her parents, frowning in concentration. Diana lifted a little foot and set it down in front of her, holding up her arms to keep her balance. She did the same with her other little foot, laughing when she realized she had moved. Regina continued to hold her breath as Diana repeated it a few more times before falling into her mother’s waiting arms.

“You did it!” Regina exclaimed, holding her close. “I am so proud of you!”

“That’s my girl!” Robin yelled, rubbing her back. He smiled proudly, pleased that she had walked at last.

Diana leaned away from Regina, clapping her hands against her mother’s cheeks. She smiled widely as she said: “Mama!”

Both parents gasped. Not only had she taken her first step, but Diana had also said her first
word. It was a truly monumental afternoon.

Regina turned to look at Robin, noticing he was now scowling. “She takes her first steps toward you AND you’re her first word? That’s not fair.”

“Come on, now,” she replied, her voice muffled since she couldn’t move her lips with Diana’s hold on her cheeks. “It’s not a competition.”

He sighed. “I know. I guess I just really wanted her to walk to me.”

Regina pried her daughter’s hands from her cheeks and set Diana down on her feet. She pointed to Robin as she told Diana cheerfully: “Go to Papa.”

The little girl let out a happy squeal before taking the few steps to Robin. He caught her and hugged her, kissing her forehead. “Good girl.”

Diana pressed a noisy, wet kiss to his cheek and he laughed. He set her on her feet again, facing her mother. “Go ahead, sweetheart. Walk back to Mama.”

“Mama!” Diana toddled over to her, falling into Regina’s arms yet again. “Mama!”

“I’m right here,” she told her, kissing her cheek.

Diana, though, didn’t stay there for too long. Now that she could walk, she was determined to do it as often as possible. She headed back to Robin, letting him kiss her cheek before she walked to Regina again. Diana walked between her proud parents, who were happy to kiss her each time she went to them.

After several trips back and forth, Diana walked to Robin and clung to his neck. He held her close, rubbing her back as Regina smiled fondly at them. “No matter what, she still wants you when she’s tired,” she pointed out to Robin.

“Yeah,” he agreed, rubbing her back with a small smile on his face. He stood, grimacing slightly as Regina heard his knees pop. When she stood as well, her own knees felt stiff from her crouching for so long.

He stepped closer to her, lowering his voice. “Why don’t we go put her down and then go for a walk ourselves?”

She grinned, knowing a walk for them usually ended up with a detour to some secluded glen where they could spend some quality time together. “That sounds like a perfect idea.”

“Then after you, milady,” he said, motioning for her to lead the way. She headed back into the castle, Robin close behind her. It had been a great afternoon so far and she had a feeling it was just going to get better.

Regina couldn’t wait to see what happened next.

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