The Loudest Silence
by Olivia_Janae

Summary

New to Chicago Emma, a professional cellist, is shocked to find that a beautiful deaf woman is her new president of the board. As their friendship grows Emma begins to wonder, what does it look like when a world of sound and a world of silence meet somewhere in the middle? SwanQueen AU
Chapter 1

This is the same story as the one that was up before, pre-published book. I did nothing. No editing. No spell check. I'm SURE it needs a reformat and a read through but I just can't right now.

Now fic based notes:

Chamber group/chamber music is: instrumental music played by a small ensemble, with one player to a part. It’s not the giant orchestra you normally see with five horns and twenty violins.

The El train in Chicago is something like the subway in New York or the Muni in San Francisco. It is one of the aboveground/underground train system that everyone uses to get anywhere. It’s just easier in a big city!

As for the deaf and how the deaf are portrayed in this story: I only have my own experiences to go from so I’m sure many and any of yours will be different. I based Regina’s experience off a friend of mine who was forced into extreme therapy her entire childhood and most of her teen years and therefore is now able to live similarly to someone who is hearing. As I said though, her experience is of course very different from many others.

There is some C.S. but—don’t let it get to you – this is a SwanQueen story.

There is an amazing video by Willow Hermione, y'all! Trailer by W.H.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Hey all! After a few months of The Loudest Silence and Shades of Blue being on the shelves, I thought the biggest thank you I could give Swen was to put the original story back up! So here it is!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It was quite an impressive hall for so small a chamber music group. She shrank back against the door she had just come through feeling like an ant amongst the ocean of steep red velvet seats; the stage looming in front of her was a huge half circle ringing with majesty. Oh, of course, she reminded herself that this was also the hall where the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, one of the largest orchestra’s in the country, rehearsed and performed so – there was that. Still when a hall could dwarf an average orchestra of fifty to one hundred and fifty people the measly group of twenty or so suddenly seemed comically small.

She bounced her shoulders and unconsciously rolled her head on her neck. She spent the better part of her life with a cello strapped to her back like a child’s backpack and while it only weighed thirty pounds, it left her shoulders and neck aching constantly. She didn’t even notice the discomfort anymore; it was just a way of life.

Stepping out of the way of a new person coming through the door she checked her phone again nervous. She hated the stress that came with leaving Henry with a stranger, something she rarely did. Unfortunately, they had only been in the city for forty-eight hours; anyone she would have left him with would have been a stranger. There simply was no other choice so she had hired an online babysitter that she had only just met this afternoon.

Get your head in the game, Swan. This is it, get in there and do your job. You want steady work? You want to stop freelancing? This is what it means. Let’s go, let’s go – stop worrying.

She clicked on her usual crooked half smile and started toward the stage, hands shoved deeply in the pockets of her jeans.

It is common practice when a job was won in the world of classical music someone somewhere posted the results online. It was just one of those unspoken rules, like taking down a for sale sign when a property had been purchased. A few people eyed her as she approached but, for the most part, the small group knew she was coming and, therefore, she was not of interest. She was thankful; she hated the times she would walk into the rehearsal space and everyone would turn and stare as if she were a zoo exhibit.
She introduced herself first to a number of official looking people in suits and ties, all wearing clear marks of being board members and then turned to the others, clearly musicians, who looked a bit more like her in their jeans and tee shirts. The casual wear helped to settle Emma’s nerves a bit further. She had been worried that the performers in a chamber music group of this prestige would always be in professional wear, concert blacks even during rehearsals. It had happened to her before. She had shown up to a new orchestra job in her typical jeans and tee to find the lot in ties and cocktail dresses. Emma had to admit she had pretty thick skin but that had been humiliating.

Still, for the sake of looking her best, she ran a hand through her blonde tangles wishing she had thought to style it better and smiled politely at those around her, releasing her cello from its case and beginning her warm up.

Slowly the seats around her began to fill as people joined her, freeing their instruments and plucking or tooting away, warming their muscles like athletes stretching before a game.

“You look nervous.” A slightly bored voice said behind her. Craning her neck a little, her cello supported between her knees, she smiled a little at the man behind her, his body hidden behind his huge upright double bass. His expression matched his tone, as his bored hooded eyes seemed to stay closed for just a moment too long each time he blinked as if it was all he could do to stay awake. He was handsome in a traditional tall, dark and handsome kind of way, his light British accent only supporting his looks. He was attractive enough, she noted, that the horn player just to the left of him kept shooting furtive glances at his way as if begging him to look over and notice her. The problem was the near smug boredom on his face told Emma that he was fully aware of the fact that he was good-looking, just as he was fully aware - and ignoring - the hopeful glances of the horn player. She couldn’t decide if she instantly liked the man despite his arrogance or if he instantly annoyed her. Both. Definitely both.

“Uh, I’m not nervous, exactly.” It was more that she wasn’t entirely sure she was supposed to be there. She had won the job, of course, but she still wasn’t sure they meant to pick her instead of some other thin blonde with her initials. It wasn’t a new feeling, she was always somewhat sure that someone somewhere had checked the wrong box passing her forward in the audition instead of kicking her to the gutter where she belonged. After nearly ten active years in the world of classical music, she was still a bit unsure of how exactly she fit into it. She had seen minutes into her first year of undergrad that the noble stereotypes movies and television put on classical musicians were not exactly true. They weren’t a group of highly educated elitist assholes that only cared for wine and Beethoven. As a matter of fact, she had never seen a group of people smoke so much pot or do quite as many keg stands as she had seen those people do. Still, it took her a few weeks in a new job to let go of the feeling that her background of foster homes and neglect had given her, sure she would be discovered for the interloper that she was and they would quickly throw her butt out.

She, of course, wasn’t going to tell this man all of that. Instead, she cleared her throat and said, “It’s kind of scary to know that if any mistakes are made they are all me. There’s no one else to blame in a group this small.”

The man shrugged, “We all make mistakes, love.”

She just smiled, noncommittally.

The man eyed her for a moment before leaning over; his bass clutched tightly in one arm and offered
his hand, “Killian.”

She took it, willing to be friendly, “Emma. Emma Swan.”

Her attention was drawn back to the front of the room as the leader of the group, Mary, called for silence and began running them through a few new notices, “and of course, as you all can see our new cellist has finally made it. Emma Swan. Welcome!”

Emma nodded her head politely, not surprised by the quick introduction. She had spent the past years since she graduated from college fluttering through city after city, freelancing, taking any temporary contract from any orchestra or music group and working until they didn’t need her and she was forced move on to the next. She was familiar with the way new people were treated.

Mary spent a while going over the plans they had for the upcoming season, what they would be playing for the first concert and explaining who would be playing with whom, something that was indeed new to Emma. Typically an orchestra of fifty or more players all played together however things were different in a chamber music organization. While the organization had around twenty people to choose from they never played together as a group instead different pieces of music were picked and then people were singled out into groups of three to six to perform together.

Emma was pleased to find that she was placed within a number of the small groups. She hated it when the new person was held back for a while to ‘learn the ropes’. She was very much a grab life by the balls, all or nothing girl.

Mary lectured a bit longer, clearly a fan of her own voice and it was beginning to bore Emma to tears. Why go on and on about pieces that were well known in the classical music world? It wasn’t as though they hadn’t played the music before - ten or more times. Her eyes were just beginning to lose their focus as they slipped into an undetectable daydream when a flurry of motion caught her eye just to the left of the stage. She squinted, trying to see through the glare of the overpowering stage lights. At first, she saw only an average height brunette standing there, back perfectly straight, chin high and glaring into the face of a man as if she wanted to claw his damn eyes out. Emma watched as the man cowered back a step or two and she couldn’t blame him in the slightest; that woman was fierce. Then she noticed next to the fierce looking woman was a tall, clearly leggy and slightly younger brunette with a wide grin on her face staring in clear concentration at the man, her hands jumping and dancing as he spoke as if she were copying the man word for word.

**Hmm, interesting.**

She had been all over the country in different halls and studios throughout and she had never before seen a deaf person in the hall during a rehearsal. What was a person who couldn’t hear doing in a music rehearsal? The leggy brunette finally let her hands fall still to her stomach as if in a rest position, her face blank as she turned toward the fierce brunette, expectantly. The fierce brunettes face grew ever more lethal her lips curling back in fury as she pinned the man with her eyes, saying something that seemed to make the man quake in his boots. He nodded quickly and without hesitation turned on his heels to escape. The leggy brunnete’s eyebrows shot into her hairline as her hands flew into action again in fluid beautiful motion. The fierce brunette rolled her flashing eyes and with quick stabbing motions of clear anger she answered the woman.
Two deaf people?

She would have to ask Killian about this, she was intrigued.

Her attention was drawn back to the violinist as she finally readied them to play.

The rehearsal went as smoothly as she could have hoped for. The group played beautifully and at once she was pleased and validated by her co-workers. She had known they would be good and it was a confidence boost to be amongst them.

On occasion as she played her eye would be drawn from her music to the flying hands somewhere around the room but she never had a moment to really look as she wanted to, her concentration filled by her task.

“So where did you come from?” Killian appeared at her side as she shoved her cello back into its confines at the end of the night.

“Err, well. The last place was Pittsburgh; I had a one-year contract with a few of the smaller groups around there. Before that, I was in southern California and before that I was in Utah.” She clicked her tongue and chuckled, her hands burying themselves in the pockets of her red leather jacket. Though the snow had been off the ground since long before she arrived, the wind was still chill in early May coming directly off of Lake Michigan and roaring through the wind tunnels of downtown so fast that the average sixty-five-degree air felt like forty.

Killian smiled devilishly, “Ah the life of a freelancer. Constantly moving, constantly unsure of how you will get by. We’ve all had to do it at some point in our career and I don’t miss it.”

Shrugging Emma laughed, “Well I’m looking forward to not missing it. I am happy to stay in one place, for a little while anyway. Who knows what’s next when this contract is up.”

The job had been well worth moving them from Pittsburgh but unfortunately, it was simply a two-year contract. That was longer than some, but she would still need to keep an eye out for something more permanent.

“Aye, well love,” Killian said as the laughter died, “you sound great. I’ll see you tomorrow. Welcome to the group.”

She nodded and returned to her things. Just as she was pulling the instrument onto her back to head toward the El Train she remembered the question she had for Killian.

Oh well, there is always tomorrow.

She hopped on her train as soon as it arrived, teeth chattering. If she was this cold now, how would she handle the snow next winter?
Her commute from downtown to her apartment in the area of town known as Wilson was only about thirty minutes long, assuming there were no delays but it was long enough for her to begin to lose the feeling in her toes.

Worst heater ever in here. What’s the point of even having one?

“Hello?” She called into her quiet apartment, hoping with everything she had that she wouldn’t find the unknown babysitter doing something she shouldn’t.

“Hi! I’m sorry, Ms. Swan!” The young girl appeared from Henry’s room, the little boy draped over her shoulder, half asleep. He grumbled and reached for his mother. “I’ve been trying to put him down since bedtime but he’s been so upset.”

“It’s okay,” she said, rubbing his back, “It’s usually a problem with a new babysitter. Don’t worry about it.” The babysitter didn’t look as though this information made her feel any better.

With a smile Emma held her getting to be kind of too long to be held four-year-old, paid the babysitter and headed back to his bedroom, maneuvering around the boxes still to be unpacked. “Hey, kid.” She smiled and rubbed his belly.

“You were gone,” he said with a big sigh that rocked his whole little body.

“I know, I had to work remember?”

He nodded, rubbing his face.

“You’re sleepy. Close your eyes.”

“You home?”

“Yes,” Emma sighed, understanding. “I’m home for the night.”

Henry rolled and Emma softly rubbed his back until his breathing became deep and even. Then she quietly got up and stretched, he was going to be tired in the morning.

It was hovered around ten, earlier than she had planned to be home so she took advantage of the time to get in a quick but vigorous living room workout before slowly brushing her hair and teeth and changing into her pajamas, banging her shins on a few boxes as she went. They had only been in the apartment for two days and Emma was already tired of the boxes. No, if she was being honest she was always tired of boxes. She hated them. She hated what they represented for her son and herself. She hated the way they looked. She even hated their smell. At least she and Henry didn’t have a lot of boxes; they had moved six times since Henry was born. After a while you simply stopped accumulating belongings that weren’t absolutely necessary. After a while all belongings were measured by ‘is this worth packing into the car?’

Deciding to ignore the boxes for another day she fell into bed with a sigh, exhausted as she was every single day.
The next morning Henry slowly crawled into the room, doing his best not to wake her before diving headlong under the covers.

“What? No!” She groaned, “Go back to sleep, kid!”

He refused, pulling her eyelid back and smiling, nose to nose with her, “But it’s time for cartoons! Where’s the TV mommy?”

Since Emma had a job that was primarily in the evenings their early mornings were often spent in bed, Henry nestled tightly against her as he watched cartoons on the bedroom TV and she got a little more sleep. “It’s not set up yet.”

Henry looked stricken despite the fact that she knew he could see it still under the blanket sitting dormant.

“Tell you what,” she said pulling herself up onto her elbow, “I’ll get up and we’ll clean up the kitchen, like Snow White, and then we’ll walk to the store and get some more groceries. What do you think? You wanna go for a walk?” Henry grinned at the idea of the time outside. “Yeah?” He nodded, “Yeah?” He nodded again, giggling at his mother’s silliness. “Oh yeah?” Emma buried her face in her little man’s stomach, blowing raspberries and making him scream with giggles.

Henry sang no specific tune lightly as he ‘helped’ his mother by pushing dirt from one side of the room to the other, grinning as he went. Once they were done Emma draped Henry in a coat and they started off, hand in hand, down the street.

“What about some bananas?”

He giggled, “No!”

“Apples?”

“No!”

“Some peanut butter?”

“No, silly!”

“Bread? I don’t know kid; what food are you thinking about?”

“Chic’in noodle!” he cooed as if this was the most obvious answer in the world.

“Oooh, you want me to make some chicken noodle soup?” She checked her watch. They had spent a lot of time cleaning out the kitchen, which had turned into cleaning the living room and Emma wasn’t completely sure if they would have time before the babysitter returned and she went to work. “Maybe I can, but you might have to eat it with Becca.”

He scowled but when she let him pick out the funny shaped noodles for his favorite soup he perked back up again.
A teary snot-laden face followed her through the house as she threw on her jeans and tee shirt, high pitched whines fumbling from his soggy lips. “Buddy, look,” she pointed into the kitchen at the large pot on the stove, “you get to have your soup with Becca. You like Becca, remember? You said she’s funny.”

“But I don’t wanna!” He wailed, throwing his arms around her knees, his head back as he hiccupped morosely. With a sigh she lifted him, kissing his temples. She hated this part, the part where her sweet little boy crumbled at the thought of his mother leaving him for yet another night. It was the worst part of the night. “Hey, I’ll be home soon, kid and you get to have your soup. Do you want your soup? Maybe Becca will put on Snow White.” She caught the babysitter’s eye and the girl understood she had permission to put the movie on. “Do you wanna watch Snow White?”

“Yes!” He wailed in her ear, deafening her for a moment.

“Okay well, I have to go so that you can do that.”

It was a fight getting the screaming child off of her neck but finally with a guilt-ridden kiss she slipped out the door and down the hall as quickly as she could go.

She hated this. She hated this. She hated this. She hated this.

Two nights later she had spent the day unpacking every box with Henry and doing her best to make up for his recent tearful nights with silly singing and dancing...but it was time for her to join a handful of people at her first performance. Henry was a little better at letting her go this time around. He understood that when she pulled her hair into a tight ponytail and put on her all black clothes and heels, her concert blacks, that it was time for mommy to go play music for someone.

She went in through the stage door feeling her heart beating hard in her chest. It almost wasn’t fair that her very first performance with the group included a solo piece. She had liked the sink or swim attitude originally but now she was beginning to think someone was messing with the new girl.

The gig was a small one; a fundraiser benefit for some local arts high school but that didn’t mean that there weren’t fifty or more impressionable little faces watching her.

“You ready, Swan?” Killian asked, handing her a bottle of water.

She scoffed, “Are you kidding? I was born ready.” She wasn’t sure if he could hear the slight wobble of her voice.

The small group of five gathered on the stage far too soon and before she knew it they were playing, the evening suddenly on fast-forward. The audience of children from the school sat upright in the seats in front of the stage eyes wide in wonder while their parents lingered in their party best just behind them, enjoying the entertainment but ready for the party to begin again.

A fluttering just off to the side of the group continuously pulled at her attention as she tried to focus on her task at hand, unable to look up from the music.
What the hell is that?

The first piece ended and with polite applause and the other four players cleared the little makeshift stage leaving plenty of room for Emma and her nerves she was refusing to acknowledge.

She was announced and the room fell into a hush, all eyes on her waiting for her to swoon them.

*Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit, oh shit.*

Taking a deep breath, she slowly let her bow arm slide across the strings, pulling a low deep moan from the instrument as she began.

Typically when she played she had something to focus on, the conductor, the music sheets in front of her or the players around her but playing from memory in front of the large crowd she had nowhere to look. The fluttering from her left side started again and before she could stop herself her attention was pulled to the wildly flying hands of the fierce brunette Emma had noticed days before. Scowling she did her best to dismiss the commotion as she played but the longer the hands flew, the less she could ignore them. The fierce brunette was standing against the wall, only kind of watching Emma as she clearly was chatting with the leggy brunette next to her. Emma had to admit despite her frustration building that the brunette was obviously beautiful. Her skin was a light olive that shone in the tinted light of the gala, her chin and cheeks angled around the full red lips. Noticing the woman’s beauty only made her more distracting. She scowled, muttering in her mind about the rudeness of strangers as she saw that all eyes, adults and children alike, near the woman were turned to her, watching her hands move instead of the performance happening in front of them. It wasn’t that Emma was so self-centered that she had to have all eyes on her but these were children! They were still learning how to behave during a performance from the adults around them and a bad example was being set.

She was pleased to sway her last note out and made a small nod of thanks to those clapping, anger pulsing in every vein at the constant distraction.

When the performers were released from their duty after two more pieces and free to mingle or return home she paused, knowing the first thing she wanted to do.

*I won’t be rude. I’ll just say something about how distracting it can be. I won’t be rude, I won’t be rude, I won’t be rude. I know I would want to be told if I were distracting those around me, right?*

She made her way to the fierce brunette, remembering the look she had held a few days ago as she crushed the man beneath her designer heel. Perhaps she should have been intimidated but she just wasn’t. Agitated she looked back at the other members of The Windy City Chamber Group and found that Killian was watching from the bar. She smiled half-heartedly and approached the woman who was staring intently at her phone screen, unaware of anything around her.

“Um, hi.”
The woman did not look up and Emma rolled her eyes at herself, had she really just tried to speak to a deaf person?

Softly she touched the woman’s hand and fell under the magnified gaze of those rich dark chocolate eyes. Emma blinked for a moment, just slightly dizzy and smiled. She went to speak she realized she had no idea how she would communicate with the woman. She didn’t speak Sign Language, what had she been thinking? She brunette saw her hesitate and smiled with cold professionalism. With two fingers, she made a circle around her mouth and stared intently at Emma’s lips as if trying she say she would be able to pick up on what Emma was saying.

“Okay, hi,” She said offering her hand. “Emma.”

“Regina Mills,” Emma was taken back for a moment by the fact that the woman had spoken. She didn’t know that deaf people could do that. How could you speak if you couldn’t hear? Though, now that she thought about it, hadn’t she seen the woman speak to the cowering man?

If she showed a sign of surprise she hoped she had wiped it away quickly, “So I’m the new performer with W.C.C.G.-”

The woman nodded in understanding, “Yes, the cellist.” Her voice was unusual but not what Emma would have expected. While the pitch was perfectly ordinary, if not a little deep, it was almost as if the woman had a very bad head cold making all of her words nasal and constricted. One word seemed to flow a little into the next but otherwise she was perfectly understandable.

“Uh, yeah. So I was just up there a minute ago.”

“Right. Is there something I can help you with, Ms. Swan?”

Emma scoffed, how was it the woman already seemed agitated to be spoken to? Wasn’t it customary to give someone time to piss you off before being rude to them? She had assumed the man from the other day had transgressed in some way but maybe this woman was just a bitch. Emma’s surprise at Regina’s tone made her words come out a bit more bluntly than she had intended, “I have to say, you were really distracting.”

“Excuse me?” Despite the slight distortion; her voice was cold, flat and dripping with venom.

“Forgive me for saying so but you were talking through the entire concert and it was very distracting. It wasn’t just me, I noticed the other players glancing your way so -”

The woman looked dumbfounded, a flash of something that looked like familiar pain crossing her eyes before hiding away behind indignation. Her hands began to move in the alien language but before Emma could inform the woman she had no idea what the moves meant a voice from behind supplied her with the answer, “I’m deaf.”

Emma looked around to notice the other brunette approaching with a drink in her hand, “Excuse me?” Emma was confused.

“Hi,” the brunette gave her a toothy grin, “Ruby Lucas, I’m Ms. Mills’ interpreter.”

But Ms. Mills was having none of these pleasantries, feathers clearly ruffled by what Emma had said.

“Tell this idiot,” Ruby read habitually as the graceful hands flew, “that I am deaf and Sign Language is my main means of communication. Oh-” Ruby blushed a little, “um-”

“Yeah, I got the gist.” Emma grumbled and turned to Ruby, “I understand that she’s deaf obviously,”
Ruby opened her mouth to say something but fingers snapped in front of her face, a sign which read clearly look at me exploding in front of her.

“Talk to her,” Ruby explained, “Pretend I’m not here. Geez, she’s really mad. What did you say?”

“I was trying to tell her that, all due respect, her hands going during the concert was really distracting.”

“And I told you,” Ruby read, “that I am deaf and this is how I communicate.”

Emma bristled, knowing the woman was taking her words the wrong way but the clearly hostile attitude dried any possible guilt before it came, “I know that and I understand that but we’re here teaching children how to behave while in a classical setting, right? So isn’t it rude for anyone to talk during a performance? Whether it’s with their voices or with their hands?”

Emma took a step back as the woman burst into speech, her hands moving so quickly that she wasn’t sure how the other brunette was able to follow it at all. It was mildly intimidating to stand so close to the woman as she yelled in her language, her hands flying, slapping loudly into her other each other as she went. It was like standing next to a small silent explosion.

“Are we also not meant to teach these children about tolerance and acceptance of those around them? I apologize,” her face clearly reading sarcasm, “if my language was distracting to you but just as handicapped rails are readily available on most buildings so all may enter, some allowances have to be made. Let us only hope that people with attitudes such as yours do not spend too much time with these children and, therefore, your archaic intolerances will not be passed on.”

“Wait, wait, lady,” Emma cried, irritated but the woman blew by her, chestnut hair bouncing as she went, “I wasn’t singling you out because you’re deaf, I was making a comment about anyone talking during the performance.” But the woman had her back to her so didn’t see her words and her interpreter friend didn’t see to hear.

What the hell was that woman’s problem? Why would she just assume that she was being rude because she was deaf?

She considered following, making sure the brunette and her interpreter knew exactly what her meaning had been but Killian stepped in front of her, an extra glass of wine in his hand for Emma. “I see you met the crocodile.”

“What?”

“We call her the crocodile because she eats people whole in one bite. Were you fighting with her?”

“Yeah, I guess so. She was using Sign Language through the entire performance and it was really freaking distracting.”

Killian laughed looking impressed, “Yeah, I noticed. Actually, we’ve all noticed but no one has ever had the guts to say something to her.” From across the room, the brunette caught her eye again and glared a bit. “Well,” he chuckled, clinking glasses with her, “good job, love. You just pissed off the boss.”

Emma took a large gulp of the wine and scowled, “Of freaking course I did.”
Chapter End Notes

So I don't want to blow up people's emails with all the chapters at once. So I'll put up one or two (depending on time) a day until it's all up again.

Come find me on Tumblr: ioliviajanae
Happy to answer any questions or comments you might have!
Chapter 3

Things were falling into a normal pattern over the next week. Emma and Henry rose each morning for breakfast then Henry would play or perhaps watch a movie at her feet while Emma did a quick workout. Next came studious practicing of her cello; as she had to do every day for a minimum of three hours. It wasn’t that she was a zealot but if you wanted to stay good it simply had to be done. It was just part of the job. Once her practicing was done for the day the two went to work on the apartment, doing something that they had never really done before; decorating.

Henry loved it.

“How come we can do this?” Henry asked, placing glow in the dark stars over his bed with a critical eye.

“Because kid, this is the first job in a while where I know we will be here for a few years.”

“No more packing boxes?”

Emma chuckled, pleased that she could say, “Not for a while anyway.”

_Assuming, of course, that I don’t get fired for insulting my boss._

She had felt a tense worry for the first few rehearsals after the high school event; worried she would run into the deaf woman - worried that the deaf woman would have her sacked for insubordination. She knew that she had worded herself poorly, she had thought that the stranger would assume that Emma had no bigotry toward the deaf but the more she thought about it the more she realized that the two brunette’s had had no way of knowing that. They didn’t know her from Eve. Ms. Mills had probably faced a lot of idiots over the years so it was fair to make assumptions. She knew she needed to apologize and explain but the thought of those deep chocolate eyes pinning her, boring into her in that same unwavering way they had been a little daunting.

“You seem distracted again, Swan,” Killian observed that night, “Still waiting for a crocodile attack?”

She grumbled a little under her breath not wanting to admit that she was, she felt a bit like prey being stalked by an unseen predator. “You said she’s here all the time.”

“Yes well, she is the president to of the board love; she’s in and out all of the time.”

Emma sighed, slumping against her instrument, letting her head rest on the wood, “I just feel like an ass. I need to say I’m sorry.”

He shrugged, “You’ll see her. Besides,” he insisted, “the woman is unpleasant at her best and a bitch at her worst. I don’t think you need to apologize. She’s an ice queen. She doesn’t like any of us anyway. Just let her be angry and ignore her.”

Emma ignored him.

He was right about seeing her, of course. Just as they were stumbling toward the closing moments of the piece they were rehearsing the stage door blew open and Regina Mills flew through it in a tidal wave of spinning hands; Ruby close behind her.

Emma smiled politely at Ruby who hesitated before smiling haltingly back. Regina noticed and rolled her eyes, waving her hand to Ruby to catch her eye she spoke quickly, quipping, “I’m sorry, am I distracting you, Ms. Swan?”

Emma’s eyes grew wide with humiliation as every eye turned toward her. She opened her mouth to respond but just let it close again, shaking her head in utter shock at being called out in such a way. Killian chuckled not bothering to lower his voice despite the deaf woman standing feet away, “Told you, Swan. She’s unpleasant.”

Emma buried her face in her hands mortified.
“I’m sorry,” Ruby whispered as Regina stalked away, “I know what you were trying to say. Regina’s just a bit defensive.”
Emma looked up and smiled gratefully, at least the interpreter didn’t think she was bigoted scum. “Put in a good word for me?”
Ruby laughed, “No way.”

Emma watched the woman as she spoke to a number of people in the group with kinder eyes than, thus far, she spared for Emma and she hated it. She needed to apologize but by the time she was free to do the woman and her sidekick had vanished again.

*God, that woman can appear and disappear like Batman.*

“So Emma,” her attention was immediately drawn to Killian as he used her name for the first time, “can I walk with you? Which train do you take?”
“Uh, the red line toward Wilson.”
“Right, I’ll walk with you.”
“Okay-” She said slowly as he put his arm around her shoulder companionably.

Emma watched him suspiciously as she walked under his arm. Was he about to warn her that being in the bad graces of Regina Mills would risk her job? Or perhaps that her playing had not been up to snuff? Perhaps he was going to try to recruit her to perform for the Mommy & Me music day she knew was coming up. Did he not know that Mary had already done that?

“When did you get here?” He finally asked, “The city, I mean.”
“About a day and a half before we met, why?”
“So you haven’t had much time to see the city?”
“Ooooh.” Understand hit, “and you want to show me around it. Right.” It came out more of a statement than a question and Killian looked slightly taken aback. “Oh, sorry. Did I just kill your game?”
“Little bit.”
She chuckled, debating. On the average Emma dated women more than men, finding she simply enjoyed the experience more. It took a fairly special man to really catch her interest - however, it had been a long time since she had dated anyone at all. Henry always made dating a bit more complicated. She refused to allow her son to grow attached to someone who would be out of their lives a few short months after entering. “So you’re asking me out.”
“So it would seem.”
They entered the platform for Emma’s train and waited with a small group of people. Emma shoved her hands into her back pockets and rocked on her heels thinking, “Killian, have I ever told you about Henry?”
He cocked an eyebrow, “Another man in your life?”
“You could say that. Henry’s my son.” She did not miss the look of surprise on the man's face, “Yeah, exactly.”
“What? No, Swan you misunderstand. I love kids. How old is he?”
“He’s four.”
“Well, I’ll tell you what. Come out with me and the next time we’ll take the kid to the park or something.”
Emma studied him. He seemed kind despite the frequent shows of overconfidence; still she frowned. Her gut reaction was to turn the man down flat, not sure she needed or wanted to spend time and
energy on dating. It was like eating junk food; tasty in the moment but ultimately bad for your health. She opened her mouth to tell him that but memory the evening before rocked through her mind unpleasantly, stealing her words.

She had been sitting in her living room with a bowl of Cookies & Cream ice cream watching a romantic movie on television. Normally she wouldn’t allow herself to do something like that knowing the effect that it would have on her but Eva Longoria was one of her favorite actors to look at so she had given in.

Sure enough halfway through the movie forlorn tears were streaming down her face and she was angry with herself for her moment of weakness. Suddenly the apartment had felt not like a comfortable and welcoming home but a huge lofty space filled with a sleeping boy, bats, cobwebs and a forlorn icy breeze that chilled her to the bone.

She was lonely. She had been lonely for years. If she was being honest, between growing up without a family and moving annually since she had left college she had been lonely most of her life. The idea that her night tonight, once she arrived home, would be filled with more ice cream and more lonely television forced the unexpected answer from her. “Yeah, okay. Sure.”

He beamed. Clearly he had not expected a yes, “Good.”

“It has to be after Henry goes to sleep, though. I already lose enough time with him thanks to our job.”

“Right.” He beamed again.

A few days later after Henry was asleep in his bed and the babysitter had flopped onto the couch with a book, Emma found herself double-checking her outfit in the mirror. It had been so long since she had gone out for an evening that she was looking forward to all of the first date silliness, the butterflies, the fancy restaurant, the awkward walk to the front door; it all sounded like a nice vacation from the world of mommy to the world of woman. Though it was the middle of May, the evening air was chill so she had slipped into a skintight wool dress with tall black heels.

“Do you know where he’s taking you?” Becca asked over the top of her book.

“Nope. He wouldn’t say.”

Becca sighed, longingly, her teenage heart full of unrequited romance; “I’ve been told that Chicago is so romantic at night.”

Emma chuckled, “Mostly, I’m looking forward to experiencing what a real five-star restaurant will feel like.”

“He’s taking you to dinner?”

“I’m not sure; I guess I’m assuming which I probably shouldn’t do. But he did tell me to dress up so maybe it’s a safe assumption.”

A small knock on the door let her know he was here.

“Hi.” She smiled, surprised by his tie and jacket.

He grinned and thrust a handful of flowers at her, “You look great.”

“Thanks.” She smiled, holding the flowers away from herself. She didn’t have the heart to tell him that she was very allergic. “This is Becca, the babysitter.”

Becca just blushed and giggled, making Emma and Killian exchange looks of awkward amusement.

Clearly he has a fan.
“So where is the man of the house?” He asked looking around.
“Oh, uh he’s already in bed.” First dates didn’t get to meet Henry.
“Oh,” his face fell into concern for a moment, “well I guess that makes sense.”
“Okay. You ready?”
“Yup.”

She was shocked when he led her from the El train into a tiny dingy looking pizzeria across town.
“Pizza? I had to get dressed up for pizza?”
He laughed rolling his eyes just a bit, “Haven’t you ever heard that sometimes the fun is in the dress
more than the activity?”
She grumbled, “Yeah, when your job doesn’t make you do it once a week.”
“Oh come on, Swan. This is the best pizza in the world.”
“I don’t know.” Emma sighed, “I have been in a lot of cities and tasted a lot pizzas claiming to be
‘the best pizza in the world’.”
“I guess we’ll just have to see then, won’t we?”

Though the pizza was good she was fairly sure that the pizza from a hole in the wall place in
Southern California had it beat.
They both finished two slices, leaving Emma feeling greasy and uncomfortable in the tight dress. She
knew she had a good body, she worked hard for it but that didn’t stop the fatty food from making her
feel like there was a pizza shaped bump jutting from her belly.
After the food they went for a walk down the Chicago River, where Emma tripped and stumbled;
her long heels catching on the uneven cobblestone.
“Here, why don’t we take a seat, love?”
Emma smiled gratefully and settled onto the bench, watching as the boats floated past on the water
and other couples walked arm in arm, locked in loving embraces against the chill.

“Well,” he said haltingly a bit later, “we’ve covered the cities you have lived in, as well as mine.
We’ve covered work and the crocodile.” Emma laughed lightly into the awkward silence that
followed. This date had been more like a job interview. “I’m sorry usually, I’m better at this.” He
finally confessed, addressing the elephant between them.
Emma smiled softly, wishing she could make him feel better while also wishing she was at home in
her pajamas with her bowl of ice cream. “First dates are awkward.”

When they arrived at Emma’s door forty-five minutes later she smiled a little and scuffed her shoe
against the baseboard of the hallway.
“Well, I didn’t exactly hit this one out of the park, did I?”
Emma smiled, patting his shoulder to placate him, “Look Killian, sometimes it’s just awkward in the
beginning.”
“Don’t give up on me yet, Swan.”
“Um,” she hesitated. That had been one of the most boring first dates she had ever experienced. Did
she really want to do it again?

See. Dating is like junk food.
“You’ll see. Just give me a second date and you’ll see.”
So Emma did and it was true the second date was better, not wonderful but better. He took her to a
gallery opening where they shared glasses of complimentary sour champagne and muttered together
at the utterly indecent artist work.

By the third date, a week later they had found their groove. Perhaps it was the simplicity that made
the date; he had taken her for a long afternoon stroll through the park. When he took her hand as they
crossed a bridge over the river she smiled a little and when he kissed her at her doorstep, while the
clouds did not part, she had to admit it had been very…nice.

By their fifth date, the month had slipped into June and things were going smoothly and Emma had
almost forgotten about her unfortunate situation with the woman Killian called a crocodile.

“Henry, hurry! We’re going to be late!”
Henry ripped from his room, excited; his little ears sticking out to the sides under his baseball cap.
“For the music?” Henry asked, slamming into her legs and nearly knocking her over.
“Yes!” She cried in a teasingly frantic voice, “Let’s go!” He giggled as she kissed between his neck
and jaw. “Let’s go!”
He squared his cap on his head and started to pull her toward the door, “Let’s go! Let’s go!”
For a moment, Emma was weak from the cuteness of his little twig legs sticking out of his shorts but
he gave her arm his best tug and they were off toward the Mommy & Me music day at W. C. C. G.

The building smelled reminiscent of childhood as they stepped inside, like salty Playdough, sticky
fingerprints, apple juice with a side of graham crackers and construction paper. Overwhelmed by all
of the other kids Henry pulled on Emma’s arm, a silent but strict instruction to be picked up. “Hey
kid, no need to be afraid,” She whispered as he buried his head in her hair. “Should we go find the
teacher? Yeah?”
He nodded.
Stepping into the large classroom, she looked around for a sign of someone in charge, a clipboard,
anything.
“Ms. Swan?” Emma turned and was shocked to see Ruby smiling at her.
“Ruby! Hi!” She didn’t know what it was about the woman but unlike her scary counterpart, there
was something easy about Ruby. She kind of…liked her.
“Are you here for the event?”
“I am,” She said a little confused, “Are you here for it too?”
“Oh no!” Ruby laughed, “I don’t have any kids. I’m one of the teachers.”
“Oh!” Emma was surprised. She had thought that Ruby worked privately for Regina Mills but she
must actually work for the W.C.C.G.
“I didn’t know you have kids. Who’s this?” Ruby asked with her large toothy grin firmly in place.
Henry peeked out from her hair, chewing on a finger nervously, “Just the one, this is my son Henry.”
“Hi, Henry! Oh my goodness, you’re so cute!”
She felt Henry smile a little on her shoulder. The little boy loved to be adored.
“So how did they rope you into working this? I have heard that most people don’t want to do this
event.”
“Actually uh,” slowly with an apologetic look on her face she brought her hands up and began
moving them as she spoke, “This is something we run every year.”
Emma’s eyes widened at the sight of the sign language and without thinking she hissed, “Noooo!
You’re kidding! Shit. No, don’t sign that.” She slapped down the woman’s hands making Ruby
laugh. Emma took a deep breath and turned to find herself face to face with the crocodile.
“Ms. Swan.”
Emma felt herself flush. Regina began signing quickly as Ruby translated, “Ms. Swan, have you signed in yet?”
“Not yet.” Not unpleasantly Regina handed her a clipboard and turned her attention to Henry, transitioning with ease to her slightly distorted voice, “What’s your name?”
He had buried himself in Emma’s hair at the appearance of a new person but now he peeked out and then straightened himself, looking confused, “Your voice is funny” he touched her throat lightly as if to emphasize his point.
Emma felt her skin burn with embarrassment.

Great, now she’s going to think both my kid and I are jerks.

But to Emma’s surprise, Regina smiled warmly, staying at his eye level, “That’s because I’m deaf. Do you know what that means?”
He shook his head, further fascinated by her voice and struggled free of his mother, standing perhaps a little too close to Regina with rapt attention.
“Well, it means that I can’t hear.”
“Anything?” He asked; his eyes wide.
“Nope. Nothing. My ears don’t work like yours do.”
As if just to be sure Henry pulled her further down to his level and screamed as loud as he could in her ear.
“Oh my god, Henry!” Emma blanched. She was screwed with this woman – that was it – there was no hope for her apology, she should just give up now and pick up the want ads on the way home.
Maybe if she were lucky this tycoon of a woman would allow her a night shift at a McDonald’s on the South Side.
Shock filled her again as Regina just laughed.
“Nope, nothing.”
“Wow! What are you doing with your hands?” He held one tightly to study it, willing it to present him with its magic.
“That’s called Sign Language. That’s how deaf people like me speak. See?”
Falling back into her natural silence Regina signed swiftly and Ruby supplied, “It’s nice to meet you, Henry. I like your hat.”
Henry had a number of questions including many for Ruby before he seeming satisfied and finally fell silent. Emma watched the entire interaction slightly horrified unsure which would be worse forcing his questioning to stop or allowing him to continue.
Regina smiled one last time and asked him, hands following her voice, “Have you met the other kids yet?”
He shook his head and to Emma’s great surprise when Regina offered her hand he took it happily.
Regina finally looked up at Emma, the warmth melting from her eyes and Emma could feel she had apology littered across her face.
“It’s all right,” Regina said her signing reducing itself to one hand, “children always have questions and I don’t mind them. Thankfully most children do not have the same prejudices their parents do.”
Emma’s jaw fell open and she couldn’t help turning to Ruby as the crocodile took her child across the room.
Ruby just laughed.
“I didn’t mean it like that!”
Ruby shrugged, “Tell her that.”
“Wha- damn it!”
She wanted to have fun as the group sang and played throughout the day but she couldn’t, she was miserable. Every time she began to let her hair down while playing with her son, Regina would catch her eye, burning her with her stare and the fun would be forgotten in a mix of angry humiliation. She had to say something to that freaking woman before they left today and get this behind her!

As the class wound down Henry was a ball of excitement, bouncing almost uncontrollably. He, at least, had a very good time.

“Okay, Henry sit right here for a minute okay? Stay here, I mean it.” She eyed her son knowing he could be a loose cannon, “What are you doing?”

He sighed, “Not getting up.”

“Good job.”

With him settled and the last few parents drifting out of the doors, she finally approached Regina, determined.

The woman jumped a little as she tapped her shoulder and scowled when she saw who it was. “Can I help clean up?”

Regina looked like she wanted to snap something back but instead pointed bluntly to the piles of handheld instruments and a large plastic bin. “Right.” Emma quickly gathered everything into the box and stacked it in the corner with other identical boxes.

“Anything else?”

The brunette shook her head and went to turn away but Emma caught her arm stopping her, “Look, I wanted to apologize.”

For a moment Regina looked at Emma’s hand on her skin as though she was going to take the hand off at the wrist but instead held up a hand to stop her speech, rolling her eyes dramatically and turned away, moving quickly out of reach.

“Stomp on the floor!”

“What?”

“Stomp a few times on the floor! That’s how you call a deaf person.” Ruby called from her spot next to Henry.

Emma stopped on the floor hard twice and Regina habitually spun around as if her name had been called, “I’m sorry!” Emma cried, “Give me two minutes. Please!”

Regina’s eyes narrowed but her arms folded on her chest, a single eyebrow rising slowly in challenge.

Relieved Emma didn’t give her a chance to walk away, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for what I said at the high school thing to sound the way it did. I insulted you but I swear I didn’t’ mean to.”

“What did you mean?” Regina asked in her own voice.

“All I meant was that I thought we were trying to teach the children that all talking, whether with our mouths or our hands was distracting to the performers and shouldn’t happen. I didn’t mean anything about you being deaf. I don’t care that you’re deaf! I am not some evil agent who is against all deaf people!”

Regina narrowed her eyes again and nervously Emma’s hands found her back pockets.

“Look, Regina, let me take you out to dinner or something. Let me do something to apologize, I’ve felt terrible that as a deaf person you thought you had to fight against me.”

Humor seemed to flit across Regina’s eyes for just a moment before disappearing again, “Why didn’t you say anything before this?”

“Because I haven’t had the chance! Every time I’ve seen you I have been in rehearsal and it wasn’t like I could have called you to apologize. Plus. You’re kind of scary.”

This time humor definitely settled in her eyes as Regina seemed to consider her for a minute before nodding, “Next Friday.”

“It’s a date.”

Regina cocked an eyebrow again and Emma flushed. She wasn’t sure if she was pleased or terrified. With a sweep of her hair Regina turned and headed to Henry again, switching places with Ruby who appeared at her side.
“That’s a good thing, right?” she asked in a low voice.
Ruby laughed and shoved her slightly, “Of course it is. Regina seems harsh when you don’t know her but she’s actually pretty great.”
With Ruby’s reassurances in mind, she went home to plan her ‘date’.
Emma hadn’t really been nervous for her first date with Killian, but she was sure as hell nervous tonight. She stood in front of the mirror smoothing her dress anxiously every few seconds and checking her makeup, her hair, her teeth again and again.

She had asked Killian and Ruby, the only two people she knew besides Regina, what was the best restaurant in the city - where she might be able to get a last minute reservation. Once Killian had gotten past his annoyance that she wasn’t asking for his own benefit he had insisted it was The Commons Club. Ruby debated with him for a minute but, in the end, had agreed.

She had been worried that she still wouldn’t be able to get a reservation but she had gotten very lucky, able to fill a slot that had only just been vacated the phone call before.

She and Regina had decided to meet at the restaurant strictly at 8:00 P.M. and Emma was not going to be late.

She checked her outfit again. Perhaps she should change? She had dressed in her very best I’m-nervous-about-tonight armor, choosing her favorite pink dress. It was a tight stretchy material that gathered lightly at her waist and her hips but was tight enough that, with little effort, the slightly protruding muscles of her stomach could be seen through the fabric. The dress showed off her arms and her legs in the most flattering way possible. She loved the outfit and only wore it when she knew she needed a boost in confidence. It wasn’t her style at all which ran more toward leather jackets and skinny jeans but sometimes you had to pull out all of the stops.

Refusing to allow herself to make even another change to her appearance she kissed Henry and headed to the door, only to stop once more as a thought occurred. What if Regina brought Ruby? A small jealous tremor shot through her but oh god, what if she didn’t bring her? What if they couldn’t communicate?

She hated that she couldn’t speak the woman’s beautiful language. She had spent the evening before on YouTube watching videos of hands moving, trying to learn a few basic things but she had given up quickly when she discovered that certain signs could go out of fashion or update over the years. Plus there was ASL, English, Cued Speech and something mysteriously called home sign. How did she know which ones to use? Would the woman laugh at her if she used a 1970’s version of a sign? Or if she used a sign from the wrong language? What if she just started at her confused?

Glancing around, she grabbed the small notepad from the counter and shoved it in her purse, just in case, before disappearing into the city.

Friday night in the West Loop was enjoyably chaotic, filled with people making their way to and from functions in every state of dress from elegant black tie to a man wearing only a tie and black boxer briefs. It was thrilling, sending Emma’s blood racing, her black stilettos clacking in time with the energy of the city around her.

“What’s the name?” The young girl behind the hostess station asked, barely looking at her clearly bored with all life had to offer.

“Swan.”
She lazily checked the booklet in front of her, “It looks like your party is yet to arrive. It will be another thirty minutes for a table. Would you like to wait here or in the bar?”

“Bar. Definitely the freakin’ bar.”

The bar was bright, backlit, giving it a harsh modern feel with lots of white fluorescents, highlighted by red and deep purple up-lighting surrounding the huge oval counter space. The gorgeous raven-haired bartender made her way to her with a slightly flirtatious eye and smiled expectantly.

“Jameson up, please.”

*Liquid courage.*

“Sure.”

She was waiting, patiently for her drink when she felt a warm hand on her arm. She turned and was surprised by the face she found looking back at her. Of course, it was the face of Regina, stunning as ever, though for the first time since they had met it held neither animosity nor malice. The change made her simply dazzling. Her rich chocolate hair was coiffed out on one side leaving a feathered look as it framed her face, touched with dark eye makeup and deeply red lips. The biggest change, however, was the fact that Regina was smiling a large devastatingly beautiful smile. It took Emma a moment to gather her thoughts, blinking rapidly. Emma definitely had not known a smile could be that beautiful.

*No, because smiles that beautiful aren’t supposed to actually exist.*

“I’m sorry I’m late,” She said kindly and then ordered a glass of wine. “What?”

Emma realized she was staring, “Crap! Nothing. You uh, clean up well.”

Regina cocked that oh so limber eyebrow of hers, “As do you.”

Emma flushed and stammered, “No Ruby?” her heart whapping in her chest.

“I gave her the night off.”

“Oh, okay.”

They smiled at one another for a few beats of silence before Emma flushed again and cleared her throat “So um, they said the wait would probably be about thirty minutes.”

Regina’s eyebrows creased, “I can tell you’re yelling. Why are you yelling? I won’t hear you any better if you yell.”

She was teasing her. Emma couldn’t believe it - this woman was actually teasing her.
Emma groaned her head falling into her hands embarrassed, “There’s a band playing.”

“So why are you yelling?”

“Right, because you won’t hear me any better if I yell over the noise.”

She shook her head, sipping her wine looking obviously amused.

“Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize, dear, but is easier for me to read your lips if you speak normally.”

Emma nodded.

“What?” Regina asked reading her face with ease.

Emma hesitated but decided to be completely honest; “I want to make this as easy on you as possible.”

Regina smiled, “Then just talk.”

“Okay.”

Regina finally sat in the seat beside her, taking a moment to look around before saying what Emma could tell she had been itching to ask, “So why did you invite me here?”

“Killian and Ruby said it was the best.”

“No, not here as in the restaurant. Why did you ask me at all? You could have just apologized and left it at that. Why invite me to dinner?”

Emma was blindsided, “Why not? Is it bad that I did?”

“No. Just surprising. This isn’t a date, is it?”

Emma blushed from the tips of her toes to the top of her scalp, “Like a - like a date-date? I uh, ac- uh, actually I’m kind of seeing someone.”

“Oh?” Regina seemed intrigued.

“Uh, yeah. It’s kind of new, obviously since I just moved here. Uh, Killian, the bass player.”

“Jones?” Regina almost choked out, her voice rising a bit higher than normal, “The bass player?”

“Yeah.”

The brunette surveyed her, a look in her eye as if she was rethinking something about her and it was Emma’s turn to ask; “What?”

“Nothing, I just would not have thought you were the type to go for a hairpiece.”

“A hairpiece!”

“The man is a walking hairpiece. That is all he has going for him. His looks are perhaps mildly satisfactory but his bass playing is adequate at best.” The brunette grinned wickedly over the rim of her glass making Emma’s chest tighten yet again, “So how is that going?”
Emma grunted for a moment, she was losing control over this date quickly and she wasn’t even sure how it was happening, “It’s fine.” She shrugged.

“Don’t be too excited,” She said dryly.

“Oh come on,” Emma rolled her eyes, “it’s fine. You know when you first start dating someone and you haven’t gotten past the awkward and kind of weird part yet? We’re there now. That’s all.”

Regina looked thoughtful, “Women aren’t like that.” She said simply. Emma choked on her drink. “If two women are together there is very little” she made quote symbols in the air “weird. Are you alright?” She pat Emma on the back lightly as the blonde choked, her airways constricting against the Jameson that had gone down the wrong pipe.

“Yeah, uh, I know – about the women thing.” She confessed when she could breathe again, “Or at least, I know that’s how it usually is for me, anyway.”

Regina’s eyes twinkled that radiant grin spreading across her full lips again, “I had a feeling you knew.”

Emma opened her mouth but found she had no idea what to say next.

“Swan, party of two?”

“What?” Regina asked as Emma’s head whipped around.

“They’re calling us.”

She turned back to Regina who sat looking expectant for Emma’s answer.

*Right, my back was to her. This is kind of complicated.*

“They’re calling us.”

Regina pulled Emma’s chin around so she was fully facing her accidently brushing the side of Emma’s lips with her thumb. The touch sent goose pimples all over her skin, buzzing in a deliciously frustrating way. It was as though Regina’s thumb had pressed the off button to Emma’s brain. She stared blankly at Regina, feeling her blood begin to heat before with a small smile Regina traced her own lips with two fingers as she had done before.

“Sorry. Our table is ready.”

Regina nodded; finding the calling hostess with her eyes and politely took Emma’s elbow, escorting her as they walked. There was something so confident and strong about this woman, Emma couldn’t place what it was exactly but it was addicting.
They scooted into the intimate table surrounded by strangers and ordered a glass of wine each immediately.

“How are you enjoying W.C.C.G.?”

Emma knew it was simply a conversation starter and dived in willingly enough, “It’s great. The people are all awesome, everyone sounds great together. I can’t complain.”

“It seems like there is something else there. Your eyes light up just a bit too much when I asked you. Is it Killian?” Regina’s eyes locked onto Emma’s as they always did. Perhaps it was the fact that she needed to study Emma’s lips to communicate but she had never met someone with such a piercing unwavering gaze. It made Emma feel slightly exposed as if she could read all of her secrets through Emma’s skin.

She laughed at her question, “No it’s not Killian. I mean he’s great – and all that but it’s true; I think I’m happier to be there than most to be with W.C.C.G. It’s because of Henry. When I was freelancing I was taking any gig possible so it meant my hours were crazy. I like having a steady schedule for him.”

Regina nodded, understanding, “It must have been hard for him to never know exactly when you would be home.”

“I think it was. I mean, he’s still with a babysitter more than I would like him to be but it’s less than it was before we moved.”

“Where did you move from?”

“Pittsburgh.”

“I was there once. If I recall I got stuck on the expressway in traffic for two hours.”

“That sounds about right.”

They fell into a thoughtful silence for a few minutes before Emma spoke again, “You know; it’s not just the schedule; it’s also the fact that I have a contract for longer than a year. I mean, I know it’s only two years but that is still better. Or maybe it’s worse, I don’t know.”

“Why would it be worse to be settled for two years instead of one?”

Emma huffed admitting a worry that had been on her mind since they had arrived, “I think it will probably be okay this time because he’s so young, he won’t make too many attachments but the older he gets the harder it will be to pull him away each move. He will start making friends and trying to build a life for himself in each new city. I moved a lot growing up and I never wanted that life for Henry.”

“Why did you move so much?”

Emma was surprised when she told her the truth; “I grew up an orphan passed from foster home to foster home and city to city. That meant I never really had a home of my own. I want Henry to have one but the only way to do that is to find a permanent job or to change careers.” Emma took a long
drink from her glass wondering why the hell she had just let herself say all of that.

Curiosity crossed Regina’s face, “If you grew up in foster care how did you find your way to the cello? Typically classical music is something children are forced into until they are old enough to decide they like it for themselves.”

“It was an outreach program. A foster mother, one of my few good ones; she signed me up for this program to bring music to underprivileged kids. They gave me a cello and let me join a community band. I loved it. It was the one thing that was constant in my life, you know? I got so good so fast that I won a few awards and eventually a scholarship to study music. I didn’t even know until I got the scholarship that classical music could be a career.”

“Really?”

“Yeah but I’m glad I found out. I can’t imagine what my life would have been like without it. I probably would have ended up in jail or become a bounty hunter or something.” She sipped her water again and turned the tables on Regina, “So I have to ask. How is it a deaf person ended up in the world of classical music?”

Regina caught the abrupt topic change and respected it, “I come from a large family of musicians. My mother is a harpist, my father an oboist. My grandmother played the flute and my grandfather was a concert pianist. They had expected me to pick up the piano after my grandfather. When they discovered I was deaf they didn’t know what to do with me. I spent my life being the one without music. So as I got older I began to work on the executive side of music. It just seemed the natural thing to do. It was the only way that I could be involved in my family's business.”

“Is it difficult?”

“Yes,” Regina said simply, “It is hard to be taken seriously when I can’t remember what music sounds like, not really.”

“Remember? You weren't born deaf?”

“No. I was extremely hard of hearing from birth but I didn't completely lose the ability to hear until I was seven.”

The server interrupted their conversation, “Are you guys ready to order?”

They placed their orders and fell easily back into the conversation. This was everything her first date with Killian had not been and nothing like she would have expected dinner with the crocodile to be. She was pleased to find that Regina was funny, even kind. She asked questions about Henry, demanding stories and explanations and made Emma laugh until her sides hurt with stories of the silly ways people treated her once they knew she was deaf.

It was easy, like breathing.

Once dinner was through they sat for a while simply talking over their empty plates.

“Would you like to walk for a bit?” Regina asked as they stepped outside.

“Sure, assuming you want to. I actually haven’t seen much of this city at night. Actually, I haven’t seen much during the day either. I need to take Henry out more.”

Regina smiled and led them down a busy street in silence before turning onto an absolutely bustling street.
The Gershwin piece ‘Rhapsody In Blue’ came to mind as the pedestrians weaved and wound in and out of each other in a constant frenzy to get from their point A to their point B. Technicolor lights glared down at them from each restaurant and shop as they passed, music blaring from buildings as their heels clicked, singing along with the song called nightlife. Glancing at Regina, she couldn’t help but to wonder what exactly it felt like for her. Could she feel the pulse of the city without hearing the screaming patrons, taxi horns and crooning of street performers? She decided that for now, she wouldn’t ask.

“This street is Michigan.” Emma was surprised to see that as Regina spoke her hands slowly began to work, speaking in her own natural language as she did her best with Emma’s. “If you go that way,” she softly touched the small of Emma’s back turning her around, “for about thirty minutes you hit the Magnificent Mile. That is the best shopping and probably one of the biggest tourist locations in the city. That is where Water Tower Place and Hancock Center are located. It’s one of the best places to go when you first arrive or you are entertaining out of town guests.” Regina took her elbow again, guiding her up a flight of wide stairs and into a huge plaza. “See that building there?” She pointed to a tall building shaped at the top by two meeting V’s, a large gash down the center split the point at the top and the bottom from meeting. “A few call it The Diamond building but most know it as the Vagina Building.”

“What?” Emma laughed, fully, hand on her stomach. It didn’t take a lot of imagination so see where it got its nickname but she wasn’t sure if she was more distracted by the name or by the sign that Regina had used for the word vagina.

“It’s actually the Crain Communications building but the nickname makes the locals laugh.” Emma watched in amazement as Regina quickly and easily spelled out names that seemed as though they should be crippling. “And this,” Regina pointed in front of them, “Is ‘The Bean’.”

Emma looked around realizing she hadn’t looked away from the transfixing brunette in a while. As soon as she did her mouth popped open. The giant sculpture was a huge mirror shaped like, exactly what it was called, a bean set on its side so it bowed in an arch tall enough to comfortably walk under. It was clear that in the day the sculpture would capture a mirrored image of the sky and anyone who stood close to it. But now, after the sun had set, the sculpture exploded into vibrant yellows, whites and gold’s as it reflected back to them every light in the skyline around them.

“This is amazing, Regina.” Emma smiled at the reflection of herself and Regina; who was standing close to her looking pleased with her reaction.

After a while Regina smiled and softly took her hand, leading them into the walkway that flowed underneath the arch. Emma laughed as she looked up at the elongated versions of themselves that reflected back before shooting into strange patterns and reflecting their faces all around them. She watched Regina’s hands moved upside down in the reflection as she spoke, “It’s actually called ‘Cloud Gate’, but I don’t think I’ve ever known anyone call it that. It’s my favorite.”

Emma made a silly face and Regina laughed a beautiful chuckle. “I can see why.”

After they were through admiring the statue they took a seat on a bench nearby.

“It’s my favorite when it’s about to rain. The sky turns black and it makes it look almost dangerous.”

“Henry would love this.”

Regina studied her for a moment, “Let’s bring him.”

“What?”
“The day after tomorrow. Let's bring him here. We can have a picnic in the park.”

Emma flushed with pleasure, her heart picking up pace again. If this had been a romantic date instead of an apology date she would have just had the rare and pleasurable experience of being asked on a second date before the first one had ended.

“Are you sure? I mean, Henry can be a lot.”

Regina shook her head firmly, “Henry is adorable.” She repeated a motion for emphasis that Emma imaged meant adorable.

Emma eyed Regina for a moment, curiosity bubbling in a moment of courage. “Will you show me something?”

“What do you mean?”

“Sign Language. I’ve been watching you since we left the restaurant and it’s beautiful. Teach me how to say something?”

Regina almost succeeded at looking bashful for a moment, “What do you want to learn?”

“How about my name?”

Regina didn’t hesitate a moment before she curled her hand into a fist, the tips of all four fingers resting gently on the knuckle of thumb as she shook it face down as if trying to flick off some water.

“That means Emma?” she asked surprised.

“In a way, Ms. Swan. It means you.”

“Explain.”

Regina laughed, “Well, every deaf person has what is called a sign name. It saves from having to spell the person’s name out each time they are referenced and it shows - familiarity.”

“How do you get one?”

“A deaf person has to give it to you. They choose a characteristic about you and base the name off of that.”

“What’s yours?”

“I have two. I have a professional one.” She crossed her index and middle finger and softly bounced the two off of her shoulder. “That one is very generic.”

“Then what’s your other one? No, you have to tell me!” Emma cried when she saw the woman blush lightly.

Crossing her fingers again, Regina touched her outstretched thumb to her temple and flicked the intertwined fingers toward the floor a few times.

“What does it mean?”

“Horse.”

“Okay uh, I don’t know what I was expecting but I can safely say that was no it.”
She laughed, “Ruby and I loved horses growing up. We used to ride them every day. She gave me that name.”

Emma smiled, “Show me again.” She copied Regina a few times before, giggling she asked Regina to show her how to do her name again. Softly Regina took her hand and scooted in close, molding her fingers until they matched the shape Regina had made. “Wait, what does it mean?”

Regina smiled, dousing her with that intense stare again, “Green.”

“Green?”

“Yes, green.”

“Why?”

Regina smiled, radiantly, “Because you have the purest green eyes I think I have ever seen. They’re beautiful.”

Emma blushed for a moment, trying hard to slow her tap dancing heart. “Show me something else. Something simple.”

“Shall we try the alphabet?” Regina leaned in again, molding Emma’s fingers. Emma couldn’t help but to be utterly and completely focused on the feeling of Regina’s arm and shoulder pressing lightly against hers as they sat, Regina’s hands cupped delicately around her own.

Finally, the hour growing far later than Emma had planned for, the two stood and started back toward the train platform.

“Did you drive or did you take the El?”

“Actually, I only live a few blocks from here just off of Grant Park.”

Emma nodded impressed. They stood together self-consciously for a little while.

“The day after tomorrow?” Regina asked casually, a small smile on her lips.

“Yes. I think that would be fun.”

“A few of the W.C.C.G. are playing a park concert in the afternoon. Do you think Henry would like that?”

“I think he would love it!”

“Good.”

“Okay well, I - uh,” Emma stumbled after another pause, “I guess I’ll see you then. Do you have my phone number?”

Regina laughed, “Emma, I’m your boss, of sorts. Of course I do.”

“Right. Duh. Dumb.”

“Okay well,” Emma wanted to reach forward but instead, she shuffled backward descending a few of the platforms steps, “Goodnight.”

Regina cocked her eyebrow reading her like a book, “Goodnight, Ms. Swan.”
Heart fluttering Emma did her best not to look back and failed. Of course those chocolate eyes were still pinned on her as Regina leaned against the railing at the top of the stairs. She blushed and hurried around the corner.

When she arrived home she melted onto the couch. She stared up at the patterns on her ceiling in awe of her evening.

*Out of the park.*

Chapter End Notes

Just sayin' y'all.
The date is better in the book!
Emma awoke the next morning to the sound of Henry speaking to someone. She knew he wasn’t on the phone because that was still charging on her bedside table and he wasn’t trying to communicate with his favorite cartoon characters through the TV because he spoke in mumbled confusion that not even Emma could understand when he did that.

Her first panicked reaction was to grab the baseball bat that her past had taught her to keep under the bed, but then she heard her son say, “You talk funny.”

She gasped and dived for the ribbed tank top at her feet, pulling it on over her bra not bothering to take the time to find pants, only slamming headlong into the mirror to attempt to smooth her unruly morning hair.

There was only one person she had ever heard Henry say that to.

“Henry!” She groaned as coming around the corner she bumped sleepily into the wall. “What have I told you about answering the door?”

“Swan.” Killian grinned slowly raking his eyes up and down Emma’s exposed legs, “The morning suits you.”

Emma swapped between surprise, excitement, and annoyance. She had told him that when she felt ready for him to meet her son she would invite him over and yet here he was pushing the issue after only a few weeks of dating.

“I thought you could use this after you date with the crocodile.”

Emma scowled but took the coffee.

“You went on a date with a crocodile?” Henry asked and then squealed into a giggle. “That’s silly, mommy.”

“Give me a minute.” She asked Killian and led her son back into the apartment, closing the door behind her.

“Did it bite you?”

“Henry,” she said dropping down to his level, “What have I said about answering the door?”

Her son’s small face twisted into a frown, “Not to.”

“Right. Next time you do it will be the time out chair.”

“But I don’t want the timeout chair!” he immediately wailed.

“Then don’t answer the door again, okay?”

“Okay,” Henry said, his bottom lip sticking as far out as it would go.

“Okay. Come on.” She poured him a bowl of cereal and set him in front of the TV for Saturday morning cartoons before slipping into the hallway, her hands planted firmly on her hips.

“So that’s Master Henry.” Killian smiled, seemingly unaware he was in trouble, “He’s cute. He
“I know how cute he is. Killian, what the hell?” His eyebrows rose in surprise. “I told you when I thought it was the right time I would invite you over.”

“I apologize, love. I didn’t think of it.”

She glared but she could tell Killian was being genuine. The man had simply forgotten all about her small son.

“So how did it go? I see she didn’t take an arm off.”

Emma rolled her eyes, “Stop calling her a crocodile. It’s - mean.”

He just grinned.

“It was,” she stood for a second or two trying to find the proper word “fine.” She finished lamely.

“Oh?”

“Yeah. She was actually – very kind.” She thought of Regina sitting shoulder to shoulder with her trying to mold her hand into a working shape and blushed.

“I’m glad to hear it. What did you two do?”

She shrugged, “Dinner.”

“And?”

“And what?”

“What else did you do?”

She scoffed, “Well we did spend a little time coming up with a solution for world hunger. What else would we have done?”

He scowled, leaning against the wall, “You don’t know.”

“Um, what don’t I know?”

He chuckled, darkly, “You’re new, I wasn’t thinking. Allow me to be the first to inform you that the crocodile is a renowned seducer of the fairer sex.”

Emma just stared at him for a while waiting for him to finish his thought before she realized he was already done, “As in she’s a womanizer or she’s, well, a lesbian?”

“Lesbian, love. Regina is a lesbian.”

Emma scoffed disliking the fact that the man clearly thought he was delivering some type of a blow, “Uh yeah, I know.”

His arms crossed over his chest, “Do you?”

“Oh god, Killian. Dinner. We had dinner.” She said kissing his cheek lightly and he decided to move on.

“So I was thinking,” he grinned clearly pouring all of his charm into his words, “well, I’m here. Let’s
“Killian, I can’t just rush off whenever you decide to pop by. I have a son.” Her hands found their way to her hips making Emma remember she wasn’t wearing pants and wish she were.

He looked at her as if she was missing an obvious point, “Bring the lad along, love.”

“Killian,” she started exasperated but before she could finish he nodded, understanding and started down the hall slightly dejected.

“Right. You’ll let me know.”

“Killian!” She stopped his retreat with a light kiss.

He smiled easily won over, “I like this outfit on you.” He grinned further as he wrapped his arms around her.

“Yeah, yeah, you just keep your hands to yourself there, Mister.” This was the most intimate of contact they had thus far and she couldn’t help but to think it was a little too early for it; whether in their relationship or in the time of day she didn’t know.

For the sake of his ego, she gave him a lingering, if not hesitant, kiss and sent him on his way returning to her son.

“Who was that, momma?”

“Oh no one, Henry. Hey buddy, do you remember Ms. Regina?” She asked casually knowing that the boy had spent the day after the first class talking of nothing else.

“Yes!”

“Well, she wants to take us to the park tomorrow to play and hear a concert. What do you think?”

Henry cheered, jumping up and down on the couch in his little tighty-whities.

From then on the day became about waiting for tomorrow - for both of them. While Emma was practicing, she was waiting. While Henry ate his peanut butter and jelly lunch, he was waiting. While she gave Henry his bath, they were waiting. Tucking Henry tightly into his bed washed and brushed and in his sock monkey footie pajamas, they were waiting, Henry with a case of excitement induced restless leg syndrome.

“You gotta calm down otherwise tomorrow will never come!”

“Like Christmas!” He bellowed at top volume.

“Exactly, like Christmas. Close your eyes.”

He obeyed slamming them shut and squeezing with all of his might.

She laughed, “Alright kid” and kissed his forehead.

__________________________

Henry was bouncing off of the walls the next morning.
“Is it time to go?” he shouted, scaring his mother awake at a bright and early 5 A.M.

“What? No! Come here.” She pulled the little boy under the covers with her and wrapped her arms around him, “It’s still sleeping time. Come on, put your head down.”

“But I don’t -”

“Henry.” She said warningly and the little boy did as he was told. They slept for a few more hours before she was shaken harshly.

“Time to go!”

“No, not yet kid!” She groaned and attacked his belly with raspberries.

“When?” he whined.

“Before lunch!”

“Okay.” He moped and headed to the kitchen for breakfast.

That afternoon Henry bounced by the door, yelling for his mother to hurry up, hurry up, hurry up! She had wanted to put Henry in her favorite polo and jeans but Regina insisted that Henry must wear his swim trunks and she must bring him a change of clothes and a towel - but no food. Emma was hesitant about what that could possibly mean and why her son needed swim trunks in a downtown park but had done as she was told putting her son in a blue tank top and his favorite orange trunks.

“I’m coming!” She checked her hair again making sure it was flowing in wide adventurous waves. She was going for a type of casual brilliance that said I didn’t spend thirty minutes in front of the mirror - I just threw on these skinny jeans and tank top but look at how amazing I look! It was an art form.

Henry appeared in her doorway, hands on his hips a mirror of his mother, “Mommy!”

She chuckled, “Sorry kid.”

Hand in hand, they headed to the El. Once in his seat, Henry immediately twisted around to watch out the window, elated by all the day had to offer him.

She laughed at herself as she craned her neck searching through the crowd in the plaza. They had agreed to meet just south of their location the night before last so they could bring Henry to the metallic sculpture together.

Henry saw the woman first, pulling on Emma’s arm and shouting as if Wonder Woman herself were talking through the crowd. “Alright, alright!” Emma released the squirming boy letting him fly toward the brunette, elation on his face. The moment Regina saw him her eyes and mouth popped wide in dramatic excitement as she waved with both hands. He flew into her and she happily scooped up and hugged tightly. Emma didn’t know which thing surprised her more, the fact that Regina had just scooped her son off his feet as if she had been missing him for years, the fact that as soon as he was settled on her hip she began to slowly sign to him not bothering to speak as she did or the fact that with a grin Henry signed something back. When had Regina taught him any Sign
Language? Regina signed something else to him and they looked around curiously until, spotting her, Henry pointed.

Regina caught her eyes and with a smile for Emma she winked.

*Oh boy.*

“When did you teach him some sign?” Emma asked after fighting her way through the crowd.

“At Mommy & Me. What did I teach you, Henry?”

Grinning proudly, he began to sloppily move his hands.

“What does that mean?”

“It means Henry!” He sang.

“What else did I teach you?”

His hands moved again, “Mommy!”

“What did I just teach you?”

He signed his first full sentence and shrilled, “Where’s your mommy?”

Emma laughed, high-fiving her little genius and then playfully high-fived Regina, surprised when the brunette held tight to her fingers for just a moment.

“Teach me!”

Regina grinned and from then on whenever she spoke out loud she accompanied her words with their proper signs; using both languages at once.

“So where are we going?”

“You ready to get wet?” Regina laughed, kissing his cheek and settling him on his feet.

“Ready!” Henry copied her sign with a grin and they set off toward the park.

“What the hell?” Emma gasped as they rounded the corner to the sight before them. The downtown Chicago plaza had suddenly opened into a huge wide space where children, teens and parents alike were skittering and sliding across the water-laden floor. On either side of the huge plaza were giant rectangle statues, electronic faces of every size and shape appearing and disappearing across the front video screen. As Emma watched one of the faces puckered its lips and a huge fountain of water poured onto the giggling children below. Henry’s eyes had turned into wide globes of excitement as he began to pull his mother toward it. “Did you see? Did you see? It spit water!”

“It’s called The ‘Jaume Plensa Crown Fountains’, in the winter they are dry but in the spring and
“Mommy, mommy, can I go? Pleeease?”

Emma laughed, worrying slightly about the boy’s knees if he fell.

“I thought that maybe we would tell him that he can go if he promises not to run.”

“How is it you always seem to know what I’m thinking?”

Regina beamed smugly.

“Okay Henry, did you hear Ms. Regina?”

He nodded solemnly so she pulled his shirt from him and watched grimacing as he sprinted away.

“Well, that promise didn’t last long, did it?” Regina laughed.

“No, but I didn’t really expect it to. It could be worse than a skinned knee, though. He’ll survive.”

Regina frowned, worry creasing her face.

“How do you know about all of these wonderful places?” Emma asked in awe as a torrent of water fell onto the boy’s head making him sputter and giggle happily.

Regina shrugged, pulling Emma to a bench “I’ve lived here most of my life.”

“Your family bring you here as a kid?”

“No.” Regina laughed but she didn’t explain further.

“Come on ‘Gina!” Henry cried from the puddles. “Gina! ‘Gina!”

“Henry, she can’t hear you when you call her!”

He rolled his eyes melodramatically as if to say he knew that and waved his arms over his head until he caught her attention then beckoned to her.

She shook her head and called back, “I didn’t bring any clothes like you did!”

Emma eyed her wondering what the woman would do if she just threw her over her shoulder and ran through the water. She could almost hear the high-pitched screech the woman would release. But she didn’t quite have the women pegged yet; would she be angry or would she laugh? Perhaps it depended on if Emma remembered to remove their cell phones first.

They watched him scream and run, finding friends amongst the other children until his teeth began to chatter.

“Henry, come get warm for a little bit!”

Henry swooped under the spout of water again pretending he couldn’t hear her.

“Henry!” Emma stood with her hands on her hips, scowling. “If you don’t listen to me now then you won’t be able to go back out once you warm up.”

“I think he’s calling you out, Ms. Swan.” Regina leaned playfully against her shoulder.
“I think you’re right.” She walked to the edge of the water area calling her son again. He spun around, grinning with the devil in his eye. “Henry –” she warned, knowing what was coming next. Sure enough, he took off through the crowd and habitually Emma shot after him.

“You can’t catch me, you can’t catch me!” He cried over his shoulder. Emma laughed calling in a threatening voice, “I’m going to squish the life out of you when I catch you.”

She could hear Regina laughing and cheering Henry on from the sidelines and the sound filled her with butterfly warmth removing any frustration she was feeling toward her son.

He giggled, running with his arms out like an airplane as Emma caught up. She reached out again, her fingers brushing his little arm when she froze, shrieking at top volume. She hadn’t been paying attention and ran out just as the water began to flow from the story tall face.

Henry’s eyes popped knowing there was a good chance he was in trouble now as the water drenched his mother to the bone.

Emma jumped in place shaking out her limbs and swearing at the arctic chill. Regina stood giggling into her hands at the edge of the water, looking far too amused for Emma’s liking. “Think that’s funny, do you?”

Regina’s grinned, “Actually, I do, Ms. Swan.”

Sheepishly Henry approached, looking worried. Emma kneeled by him and wordlessly pointed Regina’s way. It took the boy a second then he was pounding toward the woman accompanied by his mother, water flying behind them. Regina’s eyes popped and she jumped back, screaming a protest and trying to put the bench behind them. The obstacle caught Henry making him pause and evaluate how to continue but Emma was having none of that. She vaulted over the top of the bench, almost catching the woman, as she dodged out of the way yelling, “No! No! No!”

“I’m gonna getcha!” Henry cried, catching Regina from behind while her eyes were trained on Emma. She yelped as the cold soaked her jeans. Emma didn’t hesitate, catching her in a huge bear hug soaking the side of her thoroughly. Regina wailed in defeat.

“So uh, I know you’re my boss,” Emma joked, “so don’t fire me, okay?”

“Oh, you’ve been terminated. Effective immediately!”

Emma laughed, her head thrown back to make room for the humor pouring from her; how had she ever thought this woman cold?

Regina forced Emma and Henry into a fluffy towel and then into the sun, scolding them for her wet clothes as they grinned at her, a pair of children.

Once they were dry, or as dry as they were going to get, they went to the spot that she and Regina had shared so recently.

Emma hung back a bit, secretly snapping a picture of the two as Regina walked hand in hand with her son. She got the perfect shot of the moment Henry’s eyes rested on the sculpture, Regina warmly smiling down at him.

Henry let go of Regina’s hand and ran to throw his face against the mirrored metal, his nose pressing tightly against the cool material.
“He’s having fun?”

Emma was sure it was supposed to be a statement but it came out more of a question, Regina’s brows furrowing slightly as one hand played nervously with her necklace, the other laced around her waist.

“He is. Stop worrying.”

Regina smiled conspiratorially as if passing on a choice piece of gossip, “Speaking of worry.”

“What?” Emma pulled her eyes away from her son.

“The hairpiece stopped me at the hall last night to ask all about our date.”

“What?” Emma blushed, though whether at Killian bombarding the woman or the use of the word date, she wasn’t sure.

“I had some fun with him. I hope you don’t mind.”

“I might. I don’t know. What did you do?” Emma asked, eyeing the grinning brunette. There was just a little too much evil in that grin for comfort.

“I refused to say. Just kind of” Regina slowly winked, sultry desire emanating from her.

“You didn’t!”

Regina laughed, high-spiritedly.

“Well, I guess that explains why he showed up at my door with coffee this morning. You made him insecure!” She playfully shoved the woman a little.

“Oh whatever, Ms. Swan, he’s a homophobic asshole.”

“You think so?”

Regina just shrugged and signed something she wouldn’t explain.

———

“Table?”

Regina showed him the sign.

“Tree?”

Regina showed him the sign.

“Ice cream?”

Regina showed him the sign.

“Okay buddy,” Emma said pulling him into her arms and kissing his head, “let’s give Regina a break. The concert is going to start soon.”

Regina laughed and lay back on the grass, rubbing her still very full belly.
Emma had assumed their picnic would consist of hot dogs from a vendor or something along those lines so she had been surprised to see Regina produce a full meal of nuts, cheeses, fruit, french bread and tasty deli meats. After teasing her about the healthy food, the trio had dived in polishing it off without trouble.

Henry climbed on top of Regina his brows furrowed in thought and pulled her chin toward him, “How come we’re at a concert if you can’t hear it?”

Regina seemed to think for a minute before explaining, “Lay down. Both of you.” They obeyed, Henry only rolling onto his back on Regina looking up at the wisp of clouds above them. “Plug your ears and just feel.” Emma and Henry obeyed. “See; even though you can’t hear what’s happening around you isn’t it relaxing? The grass, the sunshine, the people all having fun, isn’t it nice?”

“Yeah!”

Regina caught the boy against her body and tickled him until screamed bloody murder then she released him. He began to spin on the grass, letting himself get dizzy and fall, only to begin again.

“You’re so good with him.”

“I like being with children. Though, he is specifically wonderful.” Regina’s smile was small but full of heart.

They watched him for a moment.

“Do you want one of your own?”

Regina nodded, biting her lip in anticipation. “But I guess I need the woman first before I get the child.”

Emma chuckled, “Or maybe not. It doesn’t necessarily take two to tango these days.”

Regina nodded, her eyes falling back to Henry. “Henry’s father? You haven’t mentioned him.”

Emma sighed, falling back on the grass. “On purpose I’m sure. That isn’t exactly a story that points to the best parts of me.”

Regina softly caught her chin, pulling it toward her.

Emma gasped.

“What?”

Blinking quickly, Emma repeated her comment and apologized yet again for forgetting.

The brunette propped her head on her elbow an expectant look on her face, wordlessly demanding Emma to continue. Emma studied her for a moment. It was amazing how much Regina could say simply with her face. She had never seen anything like it before; was it because she was deaf or was it simply who the woman was? She was beginning to wonder if she could hold whole conversations with those eyes alone.

There was something wildly sexy about her as she laid there, eyes only for Emma.

She flushed under the penetrating gaze but before she could begin her story a question popped from
her mouth, “Why is it that you have changed so much toward me in the past forty-eight hours? I don’t think it was all the apology.”

Regina laughed guiltily, “No, it wasn’t the apology. I knew you had misspoken that night at the gala long before you apologized.”

“You did?”

“I did.”

“Why didn’t you say anything? I was so – you were purposely torturing me!”

Regina shrugged, playful, “I have an evil side.”

“Yeah, I’m getting that!” Emma rolled her eyes; shocked that she had been so worried about Regina thinking she was a hateful person when Regina had been simply messing with her.

“I don’t know,” Regina finally said, “I suppose I wanted you to fully understand why I was upset. I know you meant well but the way you presented yourself, the way you spoke was less than kind. You were right; we were there to teach children. Besides, I think I was waiting to see what your next move was going to be. Now, tell me about Henry’s father.”

“It’s a simple story really. I went to a bar one night with a few friends, had a few drinks too many and before I knew it I was waking up next to a man.”

“Henry’s father?”

“Henry’s father.”

“Does Henry see him often?”

“Never. He was older. I guess a twenty-three-year-old was a good lay but not the best dating material. He took off pretty quickly when he discovered my age. I never bothered to tell him I was pregnant.”

“I see.”

Emma watched the woman sign, one-handed as she thought. It really was beautiful. She was beautiful.

A man over the loudspeaker announced the show was about to begin.

“What are they playing tonight?”

Regina told her, “- so it shouldn’t be a long concert, forty-five minutes maybe.”

Henry scurried back to her crawling tightly into her lap and watching as the players began to play their instruments.

“Did it start?”

Emma nodded to the woman lying next to her.

Regina smiled softly and fell back onto her back again where she seemed content the entire show to relax and doze.
She wasn’t the only one to spend a good part of the concert in a light slumber. As the crowd clapped, Emma realized that at some point Henry, his little body tired from the day's excitements had fallen into a deep sleep.

“Is it over?”

Emma nodded again.

“How did they sound?”

“Good! The sound quality of the mics wasn’t the best, though.”

“What?”

“Uh, it was just sort of distorted is all.”

Regina stood, wiping the grass off of her, shouldering her purse and looking agitated, the fierce woman lurking in the corner of her eyes, “I told those idiots to fix that. Come on, I need to catch them before they leave.”

Emma smiled knowing someone was about to lose an appendage and she was damned thankful it wasn’t going to be her.

“Is he asleep?”

“Completely.”

Emma tried to get up; holding her sleeping son but the boy was beginning to get seriously heavy.

No more green veggies for this guy. McDonalds from now on so he’ll stop growing.

Regina waved her hands toward herself soundlessly and assuming she was offering her help Emma reached out only for Regina to carefully transfer the boy to her own shoulder. His little head lifted slowly, looking confused then he smiled, “Hi ‘Gina” and let his head fall under her hair drifting off instantly.

Emma’s jaw dropped; she was fairly certain that in all of the years he had been alive he had never willingly slept on anyone else. He didn’t like to be vulnerable that way. She stood and reached for him but Regina waved her hands away.

“You sure? He’s getting heavy.”

Regina just winked and gestured up to the stage that angry fire doused by Henry’s sleepy sighs.

Emma was surprised when she found Killian putting his bass back into its case. She hadn’t noticed him from the crowd. “Swan! What are you doing here?”

She jerked her neck in the direction of Regina speaking with the parks sound technician, her still sleeping son cradled into her neck. The brunette caught her eye but instead of smiling her eyes swept quickly over the blonde and Killian holding the professionally blank look she had always held before
the dinner that had changed their relationship. The look would have been menacingly scary had Henry not been snoring on her shoulder, drool dampening the collarbone.

Was that look meant for her? Had she offended her in some way? Emma frowned in confusion but Killian brought her back from her thoughts, “Oh I see.” His voice was gruff almost rude, “You won’t let me so much as meet your son but you’ll allow the babe to sleep in the arms of a crocodile.”

“What?”

“Regina. That’s Henry, right?”

“Yes.” She chuckled watching them, not tasting the air well enough to realize his anger “I don’t know what it is with those two, they have only met twice but they are connected at the freaking hip. He won’t let her get more than five feet away from him - apparently even when he is asleep.”

“They’ve met twice?”

Emma finally caught the scent of bitterness, “What’s wrong with you?”

“What I said. How is it that I’m not allowed to meet your son, yet here he is sleeping on Regina’s shoulder? Explain to me how that works, Emma.”

“What? Where is the freakin’ connection? I’m not dating Regina, am I?”

“Aren’t you? Isn’t this date number two?”

“Stop it, Killian.” Emma said dismissively turning to leave the petulant man-child but he grabbed her, spinning around and kissing her deeply, much deeper than he had ever dared to before. She stuttered a little as he released her. “I want to meet your son, Swan.”

“Alright!” She threw her hands up in the air and began to move back to Regina, “Geez!” It was a daily freaking struggle to decide if she liked the man or if he annoyed the living hell out of her.

“I’m holding you to that,” He called over her shoulder the grin evident in his voice.

Once she reached Regina she was thrown a sign that she had to think about for a minute before remembering, “Oh yeah, I’m ready.”

“Was he checking to be sure I hadn’t taken a leg off?” Regina asked as they headed out of the park.

“What?”

Regina smiled, snapping her caged hands together in a sign that could only mean crocodile.

Guilt flooded through her and she flushed.

“People assume that because I’m deaf I don’t know what they are saying around me,” She said in explanation.

“I’m sorry, I told him to stop calling you that.”

Regina just shrugged, seeming truly nonplussed, “Why was he so upset?”

Emma rolled her eyes, “He’s mad because I won’t let him meet Henry.”

“You won’t? Why won’t you?” Regina seemed to share a secret smile with herself.
She shrugged, “We’ve had some run-ins in the past where I was seeing someone and Henry became kind of attached. It makes the break up harder because he doesn’t understand why the person disappeared from his life.” It occurred to her then that she was probably going to have that problem anyway, not with Killian but with Regina. How would the boy handle it when, for whatever reason, Regina disappeared from his life? “I think he really just wants a second parent.”

Regina made the same movement she had made earlier when she said Oh, I see. “It must be hard to date when a child is involved.”

“Yes, very. Have you never done it? Dated someone with a child?”

Regina ran her hand through her hair thinking, “No. I do a lot of dating but very little serious dating. If we are being honest, I have to confess that I have broken contact with women because I find out they are mothers.”

“Oh.” Emma shoved her hands into her pockets wondering why that had seared her insides. “But why? You seem to love kids.”

“I do, I do. That’s the problem. It’s similar to what you were saying, isn’t it? It’s difficult enough to go through a break up with someone but when you have also grown close to their child, well, you lose two people, don’t you?”

“I’ve never thought of it that way.” They fell silent again, studying one another for a moment communicating something, Emma wasn’t sure what.

“So are you going to introduce Henry to the hairpiece?”

Emma chuckled a little, “Hey just like he needs to stop calling you a crocodile, you need to stop calling him a hairpiece.”

Regina held up her free hand in mock surrender which woke Henry.

“Hi, Henry.” She soundlessly signed.

He rubbed his face and signed back, “Hi ‘Gina.”

“You want to get down, buddy?” Emma asked, rubbing his back. He nodded and Regina set him on his feet.

“Do you guys want a ride home?” Regina asked. Emma wasn’t sure why she was surprised; of course, Regina could drive. It would seem that there was very little the woman couldn’t do despite her ‘handicap’.
Emma didn't actually see Regina until June had blossomed into July a week and a half later but their phones had become well acquainted, the double chime that had been set specifically for Regina seemed to go off four and five times a day. Emma loved it. They never spoke about anything particularly important but instead seemed to keep a string of consciousness between them:

"Henry says hi, 'Gina. I keep trying to get the RE out of him but so far no luck. You're stuck being Gina."

"My mother swears these board meetings are enjoyable I will always need an extra cup of coffee to stay awake."

"I'm pretty sure Henry is in the kitchen trying to sneak a cookie. He doesn't seem to get that I can hear him!"

"I think the lunch vendor was trying to ask me on a date but I was looking for change so I missed half of what he was saying."

"Do you think ants feel it when we step on them?"

"My work day needs to hurry so I can spend some quality time with my pool."

In that time, Emma had finally given in and allowed Killian to join herself and Henry for a picnic in the park. Henry seemed to like him well enough, fascinated by his accent, but Emma thought she spotted a bit of sourness from Killian about the fact that the boy didn't take to him quite as well as he had taken to Regina.

Why the hell he thinks this a contest, I don't know. It's not like Regina has ever put her tongue in my mouth. Doesn't that give him extra points in his mind?

Emma was sweating heavily as she pulled her hair back into the professional ponytail clad in her concert dress black heels, tight black pants and a constricting black blouse. It was finally the first chamber performance and Emma was sure she was going to vomit. Why had she come so early? Next concert she would time it so she would walk in and right out on stage. These nerves were killing her. She could hear the audience chattering away, happily calling to friends and other regular attendees as she stood waiting in the wings.

"Buck up, Swan. You'll be fine."

Emma rolled her eyes but accepted the kiss Killian offered before returning to her panicked struggle with her heart rate. She took a few deep breaths, but it was futile. Instead of calming her heart rate shot through the roof at the tale-tell clicking of high heels approaching from behind. She looked up excited, a grin waiting on her lips, but Regina blew by her, deep in conversation with another board member, Ruby's hands flying.
her game to a long tight single diagonal strapped black dress that trailed to the floor, a high slit up one side exposing a toned and highly distracting calf and thigh. Ruby who was very much a short skirt and blouse kind of girl had given it up tonight for a long impressive blue number.

Emma blinked, momentarily dumb.

"Have you ever noticed how happy she looks when she's yelling at someone?" Killian whispered to her but she ignored him. It was true; while Regina was forbiddingly intimidating there was also something like a fierce joy on her face as if she would like nothing more than to rip the still beating heart out of the man's chest. It made Regina seem scarier – to those who didn't know her.

She didn't want to seem silly or like she was trying to catch the clearly very busy woman's eye but it felt like forever since she had seen her. She missed her.

She caught Ruby's eye first and they shared a quick smile.

*What are you doing, Emma? You are about to go on. Pay. Attention. We all know that Regina's hot – who gives a shit?*

She closed her eyes, letting herself lean slightly on Killian as she did her best to reach her place of meditation, the mental state she liked to be whenever she walked onto the stage.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes!" she snapped a little at him, frustrated by the interruption. He scoffed and went to unwrap his bass.

Almost without her permission, her eyes flicked up quickly under her lashes and back to Regina who was still arguing with the board member. Regina's eyes bounced to Emma's slight grin and away again quickly as if trying not to be caught herself.

*But ha, ha, I caught you. I caught you. I-*

Someone softly tapped her shoulder making her jump as Ruby leaned in whispering in Emma's ear, "We're going out for drinks after the concert. Do you want us to wait for you?"

Emma didn't have to think about it. Henry was already with a sitter asleep. "Totally."

When Regina's eyes bounced back to her again Emma grinned, a clear acceptance of the invitation. Though Regina's face stayed cold and severe as she faced the man who was clearly disagreeing with her about something, Emma saw one eye quickly drop into a wink, which was only for her.

Emma flushed scarlet.

"So Swan," Killian said kissing her tightly as stood after their bows had been taken and they were free to go, "I was thinking we should get that drink tonight. You've been promising me a drink for a while now and we should celebrate your first concert."
Emma was barely listening trying to track down Regina and Ruby in the huge crowd of people milling around the enormous hall. She would probably be in the lobby by now doing her job as President of The Board and greeting and thanking donors graciously.

Her hands still shook a bit, on a cheap high from the concert that had been nerve-wracking and wonderful. She was ready for a drink. "Can't. Going with Regina and Ruby." It occurred to her perhaps she should invite him to join them but dismissed the thought quickly as he pulled her against him yet again.

"I see," He said, morosely.

"Oh don't start." Emma joked, "Whatever you're going to say just don't do it." She pushed him away, hand on his chest but he caught her and kissed her again. "One of these nights, Swan, I'll get you to myself but I won't fight it tonight since a few mates are meeting me down the street."

Her eyes swept through the crowd as she moved, constricted by all of the bodies. It was difficult to do though as the moment the patrons saw her they stopped to shake her hand and tell her how amazing she had sounded on stage. She smiled politely each time thanking them, understanding the politics of her job and truly happy she had brought them enjoyment. She had locked her cello in an instrument locker, knowing she would just be right back in the morning, thank god otherwise there would have been no getting through the masses.

Finally, the sound of Ruby's voice caught her as she was passing a large group of old men in three-piece suits. She hesitated, hanging back and catching sight of Regina's lovely studious face as she spoke through Ruby to a number of people, "This is Mr. and Mrs. Harold, they are valuable donors to the organization, we couldn't survive without them. Right – right - Oh I would say since 2001, wouldn't you Jonathan?"

Emma waited until there was a pause in the conversation before softly touching Regina's elbow but whispering to Ruby that she would be by the stage door. Ruby nodded signing discreetly and Regina nodded once, the professional mask applied in a thick dose. Emma paused before leaving; she wanted for just a moment to wipe that look that was so worthy of any political office off of Regina's face. Perhaps it was childish but she couldn't help it so she leaned back into Ruby's ear, hand still tightly around Regina's elbow. "Can you tell her that she looks god damned fucking amazing?"

"Right now?" Ruby whispered from the corner of her mouth.

Emma grinned, "Yup. Word for word please."

"Word for word?"

"Yup."

Ruby cleared her throat and quickly signed; down by her hip trying to keep the words private despite the fact that no one around them would know what she had said.

Emma watched her face for her reaction and while you would have to be a professional to see it Emma triumphantly saw the very soft spread of pink through her friend’s cheeks. She squeezed her elbow again, saying quickly to Ruby as she left, "Don't worry, you look amazing too, Ruby."

Emma chuckled to herself all the way to the stage door.

Alright, so that was shameless flirting. So what? I never said Regina wasn't hot. It was innocent.
She replayed the flush across Regina's cheeks and laughed even harder. She was still chuckling to herself when Regina and Ruby appeared through the stage door. The moment Regina saw her she gasped and slapped her hard on the arm, which of course only tripled her laughter. Shoulders still high; back still straight she signed something that Emma was fairly sure she didn't need Ruby to explain.

The change in Regina was obvious as soon as they rounded the corner of the block; her mask dropped away as the three friends walked and Regina grinned widely as she teased Emma about Killian.

"So you basically just left him out in the cold?"

"I don't know what you're talking about!" Emma cried.

"Careful Emma, he's going to start thinking you would rather be with me than him."

"Yeah, well you look better in a dress." Emma blushed but chose to ignore Regina and her brat like ways. "So where are we going?"

Regina pointed up the street and signed, letting Ruby speak for her, "There's this great little hole in the wall up the way that Ruby and I like. Great dirty martinis."

"Wait," Emma said looking from Regina to Ruby, "Go back. What's Ruby? Show me Ruby's sign; I need to know that one."

Regina chuckled and pulled the intertwined fingers that Emma now knew stood for the letter R down over her lips.

"Why?"

Ruby rolled her eyes, "Red. I was obsessed with the color red growing up. All of my clothes, my bedroom, my bike – everything was red."

"Okay so wait, follow up question. You both have mentioned growing up together."

Regina laughed, "Growing up Ruby lived a few houses down from me," she explained through Ruby's voice, "so we were best friends. As Ruby got older she began to learn sign language. When she was good enough my parents started to hire her, simple as that."

"So how long have you known one another then?"

"Twenty years or so. I was ten and Regina was twelve."

"Wow." Emma couldn't imagine, "I've never had a friend longer than a few weeks! Jesus, twenty years. That's amazing."

They slid into a booth, Ruby immediately calling for three dirty martinis. "Wait, are we eating or are we just drinking?" Emma asked looking between the two suddenly concerned for her sobriety. Regina shrugged, endearingly batting her eyelashes in such a way that was both playful as well as drool-worthy, "A little of this, a little of that."

Emma did her best to suppress her grin as she rolled her eyes at the coy smile on Regina's lips.
I would like to taste that smile.

The thought startled Emma so badly that she slopped water from her water glass down the front of her. Ruby and Regina stared, eyebrows raised, "Uh, you all right?"

"You mean aside from being a complete klutz?" Emma asked, avoiding the table's eyes and mopping herself with a napkin. When she did look up Regina's face still held the coy smile that had caused the spill in the first place. "Shut up."

Regina burst out in sidesplitting laughter.

"Cheers." Ruby held out her glass as the other two followed, "you guys sounded amazing tonight."

Emma nodded in a courteous thank you, her own professional face slipping into place.

"So, Emma," Ruby asked, halfway through drink number one, "How's Henry?"

Emma smiled, "He's good. He might just die of a heart attack if he doesn't see this one again soon."

She jerked her head toward Regina.

Regina beamed and hands flying like lightning told Ruby all about carrying him through the park.

"He loves you. He can't stop talking about you. I don't know what you did to my son but he's bewitched."

"Awe!" Ruby pouted pointedly, "I want Henry to love me!"

"He does, Red, he does. He just needs to see you a bit more."

"I don't know about that," Regina grinned, wrapping her arm around Emma's shoulder leaning in conspiratorially, "I think he likes me best."

Emma scoffed, "I don't know. I think he might like me best. You're just a shiny new toy."

Regina laughed, flashing a wink at the woman under her arm.

They powered through three drinks in thirty minutes a feat, which Emma hadn't done since school. Everything had taken on the delightful foggy haze of slight inebriation and she loved every moment, relaxing in a way life never allowed her to relax. She needed to drink more often.

She had doubled over leaning heavily against Regina, whose arm had sort of just never left her shoulder once it was placed there, as she chokingly regaled them with the story of a man she had met earlier that night. "He was basically telling his friend exactly what he would like to do to me, in graphic detail."

"So what, he just thought because he was to the side of you that you couldn't possibly know what he was saying?"

"I assume so, yes."

"What the hell? Well, that slit is pretty intense."
Regina's eyebrow shot up and teasingly she crossed her legs so the long smooth appendages fell through the slit in her dress. Emma flushed and smiled down at the exposed thigh.

"Sorry! That was rude!" Emma smacked her hand over her eyes, laughing at herself. "I'm a little drunk. I'm sorry!"

"You have a point, though!" Ruby laughed, "Look at those things. Yaow!"

"Emma."

She yelped and jumped to straighten herself, legs flailing for just a moment in her haste to remove herself from Regina's embrace, knocking three empty martini glasses over as she did it; caught with her hand in the cookie jar. Speaking of hands, when had Regina's found a resting place on her thigh? "You didn't hear me calling to you?" Killian was standing at the foot of their table looking as if he wanted to knock something off of the wall. "What is deafness contagious?"

"Fuck off." Ruby groaned but Killian ignored her.

"Emma, I've been texting you and calling you from over there for ten minutes."

Emma looked between her two companions and almost laughed again to see Regina's face. Her cheeks were rosy with drink but her face had slipped into the hard mask again, her upper lip curled just slightly. Her look was possessive as though she would snatch Emma away if he got too close to her.

*I know that sign!*

She shoved Regina giving her a pointed stare that reminded her not to call him the hairpiece.

*What was her problem? Was it Killian? Yes, he had perfectly styled hair at all times – to the point it was a little freaky but still -*

"I'm sorry, Killian." She cried; her lip twitching as she scrambled out of the booth, "I was having fun." She shrugged.

Emma saw Regina's hand's fly behind her and without knowing what it was, she was saying turned and glared. Regina raised one eyebrow innocently, the blank features almost but not quite cracking.

"Ruby?"

Ruby just looked over her shoulder, pretending she hadn't heard Emma's request for translation, eyes shining with laughter.

"Come meet my friends for a minute, love."

Emma hesitated; she was out with her friends. She didn't want to be pulled away for the night.

Regina's hands flew again and Ruby burst out laughing.
"That," she said pointing, "I want to know about that when I get back." She had no idea what she had said but two of those signs seemed to speak for themselves.

"How much have you had to drink, love?" he asked as she trailed her to the bar and his friends.

Emma shrugged, sobering a little as she left the warm bubble of her table, "Only a few. Sometimes it's just fun to let your hair down."

He eyed her a bit but let it drop as he introduced her, "boys this is my girlfriend, Emma."

Her surprise at his announcement must have been clearly evident because a few of the men cracked into laughter, "She doesn't seem to know it, mate!" Emma blushed.

What they were doing; did it fall under that label? She wasn't sure she had agreed to that. It had only been just a month and a half. She wasn't sure that she agreed to that label at all.

Could you be someone's girlfriend if they haven't made it to second base? Wasn't a friendly relationship with at least one nipple required for the term girlfriend?

She smiled politely shaking each offered hand avoiding Killian's unhappy gaze. "What are you doing over there?" the one named Robert asked, eyeing Ruby openly. "You and your friends should join us."

"Oh," she laughed politely, "I think we're having kind of a girls night tonight but thank you."

No way Mr. Swarvy. I know your type.

Killian kept her tightly under his arm for the next few minutes and Emma smiled politely, nodding along with the conversation that she wasn't listening to.

How long do I need to wait here before it's no longer rude to leave? God, why is he squeezing so tightly?

Sighing she let her eyes slowly drift behind her apologetically. She had only meant to be gone for a moment. She had expected to find Regina and Ruby chatting but the moment she turned her heart jumped into her throat so harshly that she thought she might choke. Regina was staring intensely, here arms crossed over her ribs, watching her, reading her. The chocolate eyes were dark speaking tantalizing volumes as slowly murderously delicious she tilted her head to the side ever so slightly and cocked an eyebrow. Emma felt the flush start at her throat and slowly make its way down her body until it settled hot and wet between her legs. Emma stared perhaps a bit longer than was appropriate, her mouth falling open slightly before returning to the conversation her boyfriend-ofsorts was trying to include her in.

"Uh, Killian," she finally whispered, "I'm going to go back to the girls."
"Do you have to?" he asked, pulling her even tighter to him. "You could just say with me. I could finally take you home tonight." He whispered the last part in her ear.

"No, I need to go back to my friends."

"All right, if you insist." He kissed her deeply. The feeling of his tongue slipping past her lips for just a second was uncomfortable as if his stubble was grating against the pool those chocolate eyes had created, an oil and water mix.

She had to pull a little to get the man to release her but finally, she slipped back to the table and settled in, perhaps a bit more sedated than she had been before.

"Excuse me," she raised a hand to the passing server and tipped her empty glass to him, "Another round please."

"So." Regina spoke, "How was that?"

Emma glared feeling a bit naked as if Regina could see the effect her look had on Emma's body, "I want to know what you said before I left."

Regina quickly looked away; studying the wall, therefore, making herself, forgive the pun, deaf to Emma's insistence.

"Ruby?"

"I'm uh, going to go to the bathroom." Ruby laughed and disappeared shooting the still hopeful Robert a cold look as she went.

Emma took a huge swallow of the drink as it appeared before her and waved her hand, trying to catch Regina's eye. "What did you say?"

Regina looked away again, coquettish as hell.

"Hey!" Emma cried, grabbing her jaw and forcing her face back to hers. Regina's laughter died in her throat at their proximity. Emma narrowed her eyes, doing her best at intimidating and failing, "What did you say?"

Regina licked her lips coyly, "Uh-uh."

"What did she say?" she asked the moment that Ruby returned.

"Who said what?"

Regina smirked.

"Ruby!" Emma demanded.

"I said," Regina finally said boldly in her own voice, "Do you think they're fucking or do you think they know she's a dyke?"

Emma gasped, "I am not dyke!"

Regina's eyebrow just rose again and another wave of heat tore down her spine as if trying to make Emma's point.

"I didn't say I'm not gay-ish but not a dyke!" She felt watched. She could feel Killian and Ruby's
eyes on her as well as each and every pair of eyes near her but mostly, above all others she could feel Regina's eyes on her, so close that if she leaned in an inch she would probably be able to feel Regina's breath on her lips.

She jumped a bit as she felt Regina's hand brush lightly onto her thigh again, settling softly warm on her inner thigh. The contact snapped her out of whatever headspace she had been in. She glanced at Ruby and saw that Ruby was looking pointedly the other direction at a group of attractive men. She glanced in Killian's direction and saw his back turned.

Emma stumbled to her feet, "I uh, I gotta go! I gotta, uh, I gotta get going."

Regina reach for her arm, confused but Emma slinked away. "I'll see you guys later, yeah?" She smiled lightly at them and exited the bar at lightning speed, ignoring Killian's calls for her as she went.

"Emma! Slow down! Emma!"

She whirled around, unable to stop herself from waiting for Regina as the woman came clicking up the street, her dress trailing behind her in the breeze. "I'm sorry," Regina said slightly out of breath, "That was rude. I shouldn't have said that about you. I didn't mean it in a bad way I was just teasing you. I don't think you're overtly masculine or even a lesbian, I'm sorry. Really."

Emma shook her head, "I know. I just realized it was getting late and I, uh, need to let the babysitter off the hook."

"You're upset."

"No, I'm not upset." Emma wasn't sure if she was lying or not.

Regina studied her face, her eyes piercing her again, "Are you sure you should go? I should go with you to make sure that you get home safely."

"No, I'm okay. Really," Her head jerked up to look over Regina's shoulder as Killian called to her. Reflexively Regina looked behind her and frowned.

"Are you headed home?" he asked with the barest of nods toward Regina.

"Yeah."

"Oh well, let me take you. It's on my way."

Emma agreed with a touch of impatience, "See, I'll be fine. Killian will take me home. He only lives a few stops past mine and it's silly for you to come all the way home with me. You live, what, five minutes from here? You would have to go all the way there only to come all the way back."

"Yeah, Regina," Killian said smugly, "I'll take her home."

Regina's long lashes swept to Killian disdainfully, her highly expressive face etched in dislike so Emma softly touched her chin, drawing her attention back to her. She looked her squarely in the eyes, trying to reassure, "I'll be fine."

"What, she can't even trust you to me?" Killian whispered in her hair. "She's a bit possessive, isn't she?"

Regina's eyes searched for a moment clearly able to tell Killian had spoken but unable to understand.
A vulnerable frustration flicked through the chocolate eyes before they narrowed, hardening, a sudden distance building between them, "Text me when you get home."

"I will."

"Don't forget."

"I won't."

"What is she going to kiss you goodbye?" He breathed into her hair again earning him a hard shove in the chest. She turned back to the woman, her hands twitching, wanting to apologize so Killian couldn't hear it, wanting it to be just between them but she was drawing blank. She had no idea how to say what she wanted to.

*How could I not know how to say a simple I'm sorry?*

Killian chuckled, wrapping his arm around her again and turning them away toward the closest El train. With a glance back she saw Regina watching them go, backlit by the city so it seemed as if the woman was on fire, her lips pursed and her jaw tight.

"So Swan," He said proudly, "It looks like I have you all to myself."

Emma sighed, "Yes, it looks like you do."
Chapter 7

The night before had almost gone further than she wanted. Killian had insisted on walking her from the El train to her apartment, a gleam in his eye and then of course from the steps to her door. Once at the door he had kissed her, deeply until the deep dark lonely place Emma held inside began to whine for something, anything to fill it. She didn't know what it was but the place - it tasted slightly of sadness and she wanted to wash it away. She had invited him in.

Together they had spent time on the couch, tangled together as they kissed but each time Killian's hands moved from her arms or waist Emma would find herself pulling away a bit, unsure if she wanted to go any further. His hands would instantly become locked on their original and polite location until finally, perhaps tired of it or perhaps testing the waters by jumping in he had let a sliding hand cup her breast.

"Killian, no."

"Come on, Emma, it's been over a month."

Emma's head fell with an exasperated slap onto his chest. "Killian, I told you I'm not ready yet."

He sat up groaning.

"Hey," she had barked, "you can either wait around with me until I'm ready and see if it happens or you can get the fuck out. Which would you prefer?"

"If?" he cried, his voice cracking falsetto.

"If!"

He stood shaking his head, "I don't get you, Swan, I don't get you at all. We just started dating! Isn't this supposed to be the fun part, full of flirting and sex? How are we supposed to get closer as a couple if we do fuck all?"

Emma scoffed, "Killian!"

"But instead, it kind of seems like you're spending that time, my time, with Ms. Mills!"

Emma groaned, loudly, throwing herself back onto the couch, "First off, no one owns my time except Henry and second, god between the two of you! What the hell, man? Can someone just let it go? You're like fighting children."

Killian kissed her again, insistent and rough but Emma shoved him off, "Killian, I think you should go."

He had stood dumbfounded for a moment staring at her as if he wasn't sure what he was seeing before turning on his heels, muttering to himself and sweeping out the door.

Emma's phone chirped loudly from her pocket, with a sigh she pulled it out and read her text messages.

Did you make it? Or did Killian lead you off a cliff?
"I'm becoming quite worried about you."

Emma?

"You're going to get a phone call in a second."

Emma was surprised.

"You can call me? How would you call me? Is Ruby still with you? And where are there cliffs in Chicago?"

But before the message could be sent her phone rang with an 800 number she didn't know.

"Um, hello?"

"Hi, this is Jennifer translating for Regina, is this Emma?"

"Um, yeah. Hi."

"Are you ready?"

"What? Uh, yeah of course."

"Okay. Regina says, 'what the hell, Emma? It doesn't take you an hour and a half to get home I was worried something had happened to you'."

Emma's words stumbled thrown by the phone call and Regina's worry, not to mention how strange it was to hear Regina's words being voiced by a stranger, "I'm sorry, I'm really sorry. I only just got Killian out the door. He was," she shifted uncomfortably, "rather insistent on staying for a minute."

There was silence on the other line for a long while, "Regina says, 'Are you all right? I can still come over if you need me to'."

A soft knock sounded at the door.

"What? Of course, I'm okay. Don't come, it's late. Besides, he means well overall - I think."

"Regina?"

"Regina says, 'Okay, I just wanted to be sure you were unharmed'."

"I am."

They ended the call with Emma feeling more perplexed than she had before she kicked Killian out.

The knock sounded again and tensely Emma got up to look through her peephole.

"I know, I know." Killian held his hands up in defeat, "I'm sorry, it's late and you want me to go home."

"What Killian?"

"I just wanted to apologize. I was being very rude before and I'm sorry."

Emma's glare softened, "Look Killian. I have a son. I have a whole life on the road. I have reasons for wanting to take it slow. If you can't respect that then we can't see one another."
"I can, I promise." He said sweetly and gave her a chaste kiss.

"Okay." Emma said skeptically but was pleased to see when true to his word instead of pressing to come back inside he turned and left.

Emma fell onto her bed a few moments later exhausted. Why the hell was it she felt like she was scurrying to date two people at once?

Emma realized now that Regina and Ruby had been taking it easy on her, signing slowly as if talking to a child and now that Emma was seeing the real thing she was filled with both a severe defiance of her want to run and sick amazement. Regina's hands flew, loud slapping noises jarring between the women that forced a flinch out of only Emma.

She had done her best to melt into the background as the redhead had burst into Regina's office, interrupting their planning of Henry's birthday Barbeque, hands flying in anger. She had tried to leave but the moment her movements had caught the redhead's eye she had sprinted into action, angrily yelling at Regina. She had done her best to become a statue, occasionally getting baffling nasty looks thrown at her but now that she wanted out as she stood, hands in her pockets trying her best to look anywhere but at the fight.

The women's hands were an angry dance racing at impossible speeds. Try as she might, Emma couldn't pick out one word. It was the most intimidating fight she had ever witnessed; no sound was coming from them and yet it was the loudest fight she had ever seen.

Ruby slipped into the office, looking startled at the confrontation in front of her and then all the more surprised when she saw Emma against the wall wide-eyed and clearly wordlessly begging for help.

Ruby smiled a little, holding back a laugh and waved her over, leading her from the room. "Oh my god, thank you. I didn't want to leave and make Regina uncomfortable but I really did not want to be there. What was that?"

The brunette shrugged, sitting at the table there, "Regina's ex."

That stopped Emma in her tracks.

"Shit. That chic was gorgeous."

Emma wanted to go back in and get another look at the beautiful redhead. "Oh, um. What is she doing here?"

Ruby shrugged, picking at her nail polish, "They just broke up. Right after that concert when we all went out, what, two weeks ago?" Emma looked away; ignoring the significance of the night Regina's hand had found her thigh. "I thought it was over, but I guess not."

"Over? You mean they're still dating?"

"No, the drama. Rachel was kind of – upset."

Emma felt jealousy blossom in two separate threads in her core like morning glories at dawn slow
but deliberately bright. "How long were they dating?"

"Only a few months. It was nothing serious."

Emma scuffed her shoe against the side of the table thinking, but not about what Ruby assumed, "really," she promised, "It was nothing serious."

She laughed, "Yeah okay but actually I was thinking about something else."

"What's wrong?"

Emma studied Ruby for a minute, debating. She had been thinking about this nonstop for the past week. The hole the thought had been ripping into her stomach was giving her heartburn, night sweats and a constant low-grade fever but she – she just should have gotten here sooner.

"Emma."

She sighed, running her hand through her hair, "you know it's been a couple of months since I met you guys?"

"What?"

"Say something. In Sign."

Ruby signed a word that she knew, "what?"

"No, I mean, sign as if you were signing to Regina. Don't sign to try to help me understand you. Show me what a normal conversation would look like."

Unsure Ruby let her hands move, signing god knew what and Emma's heart fell. "Yeah, you guys sign really slowly when you're around Henry and I don't you?"

Ruby frowned, "we want you to pick up as much as you can."

Emma wanted to kick something – hard.

"What's wrong?"

What was wrong? Damn it, so many things were wrong. The tall redhead for one. And –

"I don't speak her language, Ruby."

Years of interpreting every one of Regina's thoughts both private and public came in handy just then as Ruby's face stayed expressionless. "Tell me what you mean. I kind of thought that you two had found a great way of communicating."

Emma shook her head, running her hand through her hair again agitated, "No. I literally don't speak her language. She does her best to bridge the gap between us and she does it well but that doesn't change the fact that I don't speak her fucking language."

Ruby was silent for a long time watching the woman pace. "This has been bothering you for a while, hasn't it?"
"No!" Emma almost shouted, "That's why I'm so pissed. It only occurred to me after that concert a few weeks ago. Killian was being rude and purposely talking into my hair so she wouldn't see. He was purposely talking shit right in front of her and I realized I couldn't apologize; I couldn't translate for her even if I wanted to. What kind of fucking friend am I?"

Emma had found herself, after the night Killian had been so rude, suddenly deeply aware of her hearing. In the days following the incident, she would be on the El train and would feel the sudden need to close her eyes, listening intently to the man a few people away from her as he whistled to himself. Or perhaps she would be making tea and she would find herself plugging her ears trying to drown out the sound of the water boiling. At night as she watched TV she would turn the volume all the way down and do her best to watch the show in silence. She was beginning to realize that there was a whole world out there, a world void of sound; Regina's world and she was missing out on it. "How could I not speak her language? Henry can almost have full, albeit basic conversations with her already. I have seen her numerous times a week for the last few months. Why haven't I learned yet?"

The door behind them slammed and the redhead went tearing across the lobby heading for the door. Slowly clicking heels began toward them, as Regina seemed to be righting herself post confrontation. Ruby leaned in quickly, "This is the easiest problem to solve ever. I'll teach you."

"What?" Emma couldn't help but to whisper.

"I'll totally just teach you. Trust me; it isn't as hard as I think you think it is."

"Sorry." Regina all but croaked as she approached, anger augmenting her voice past its normal distortion "I will never understand why some people insist on making a scene."

"Seemed angry." Emma shoved her hands back in her pockets refusing to think about why exactly the woman had been so angry.

Regina didn't respond.

"Henry!" Emma called over her shoulder. He looked up from his magazine at his name and pulled himself slowly up. He had seemed a bit sluggish all day.

"As I was saying," Regina finally turned to her, perhaps a bit more distant than she normally was when it came to Emma, "that it seems silly to have the Barbeque in the park. It will be the middle of August and Henry has been asking to come over to swim in my pool since June. We are running out of time and this opportunity is clearly perfect."

Emma flushed again. She couldn't believe Regina was offering to host Henry's birthday party. Who offered their home for a random kid's birthday? "Besides, who is going to be there apart from you, Henry, myself and Ruby? Who else do you know?"

Emma scoffed, "there are a few kids he's had play dates with after the Mommy and Me thing – maybe. And Killian – maybe."

"Mommy." Henry pulled on her sleeve and reached up for her, resting his head in her neck; seeming to do it without thinking Regina rubbed his back affectionately.

"I don't know, Regina. It's a lot."

"It's not a lot. It will be fun."
Emma knew on the way home that she wasn't going to win this argument with Regina. The woman swore her apartment was large enough to hold a great deal of people and unlike most apartments in downtown Chicago she had a patio with a small pool and plenty of outdoor cooking space. What's more, Emma could tell that for some reason, whatever the reason was, the woman wanted to host Henry's fifth birthday party.

"Mommy." Henry sighed and pulled himself into her lap despite sitting on the El train where he usually insisted on pressing his face to the glass like a puppy on a road trip. She cuddled him, her thoughts otherwise occupied.

"Henry?" she prodded him lightly, realizing he was asleep. The boy was not the most hyperactive kid she had ever met but he was never one to fall asleep during the day after his nap unless – Lifting his shirt she slipped her hand underneath and felt his skin, far hotter than it should be. Foreboding shot through her for a heartbeat as it did each time this situation arose and she cuddled him tighter, waking him.

"Hey kid, are you not feeling well?"

He shook his head, his little lip pushing out into a pathetic pout.

Emma swore to herself, "What feels yucky?"

"My head hurts and my arms hurt right here." He held out his elbow joints.

"Are you cold?"

He nodded.

*Shit. Why tonight? I have rehearsal tonight.*

With a small amount of effort, she carried him home and rested him lightly on the couch, covering him with a blanket.

Mommy!" he wailed the moment she stepped away from him.

"I know, I know." She cooed and grabbed his beloved Monkeyz the stuffed brown monkey from his bed. He hugged it to him and allowed her to place the thermometer under his tongue.

100.2. *Fuck.*

She measured out the baby Tylenol and gave it to him and then let him sleep, stroking his forehead comfortingly. She would need to get more before Becca came that night.

She hadn't realized that she was drifting on the couch next to him until her phone went off. "Ms. Swan, this is Becca. I can't make it tonight. My mother was in a car accident. I'm sorry to inform you so late in the day but I only just got the news. I'm sorry!"
No, no, no, no! Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck! No!

Classical music wasn't like most jobs. There was no calling off – ever – for anything. Unlike most jobs, there was nobody to pick up the slack for you, no stand-in or double to take your place. Come hell or high water, bleeding, vomiting, or missing an appendage you were at work every day no matter what.

She let her head fall back on the couch as she swore out loud.

Who else was there? I need to get more than one sitter. I only know Regina, Killian and Ruby and all three will be working tonight.

She was in a panic by the time it was time for her to go. She had called Mary and while Mary had sympathized she had said unequivocally that yes, Emma had to be there. "I'm sorry," she had said, "trust me I understand the sick kid thing, I really do but we need you there Emma. The concert is in less than a week. Look, just bring him. I'm sure there will always be someone in the audience who can sit with him and it probably won't be a long one tonight anyway."

Annoyed she dressed the boy, who immediately began to sniffle at the idea of being pulled away from his warm couch. She stuffed him into his favorite hoodie, despite the heat and gave him a reassuring hug.

"Did you go potty?" He nodded. "Do you have Monkeyz?" He nodded trembling lip. "Okay, do you want your blankie?" He nodded and held tightly to the baby blanket he still cried for when he didn't feel well. "All right then, let's go! You get to come with mommy to work tonight."

He only smiled weakly a true sign to how terrible he felt.

Three near meltdowns happened on the way to the concert hall. The first had been minutes from the house when Henry decided that walking was more than he could handle right now. She had talked him out of the crying jag by settling him tightly on her hip, despite his being nearly fifty pounds in addition to the weight of her cello. The next one was halfway through their El ride. He dropped Monkeyz and the poor big-eared stuffed animal got a huge smudge across its nose. The third was mere blocks away from the hall when he decided that he needed juice more than air itself. She knew she needed to tread lightly, the boy didn't feel well so any little thing could send him spiraling out of control in an embarrassing mess of snot and tears.

By the time she walked into the concert hall with only five minutes to spare, breathing heavily and sweating profusely.

"What's wrong?" Killian asked when Emma, in need of a good stretch and a break without the weight of the boy transferred him to her boyfriend's shoulder.

"He's sick." Killian immediately recoiled as if he had been handed a small pox blanket.

"Swan, you tell a person that before they take your son. I can't afford to get sick right now. We have a concert coming up."
"I know; I'm sorry but I called Mary and there was just no way I could miss tonight. His sitter is at the hospital with her mom. Killian, I need you to take him and keep him in the audience kind of far away from everyone in case he's contagious until you play." He looked as though she had a better chance of flying to the moon. "You're supposed to be my boyfriend, right? Please!" she echoed the last word loudly when she saw him hesitate.

He groaned unhappily.

Relief flooded through her as she could see she had won, "Henry?" she brushed his hair back and kissed his damp forehead, "you're going to sit will Killian for a while, okay? I'll be right there on the stage."

He nodded, "Hi Kill'in."

"Hi, lad." Killian softly pat his back and the two settled into their seats, Henry wrapped in his blanket in one and Killian talking softly to him in the other. Emma scoffed feeling her mama bear rise; he could at least hold her sick son. Christ.

Emma did her best to concentrate as the rehearsal began but within the first few chords, loud ragged sniffles began to fill the hall.

"I want my mooooommy." Henry began to cry.

Emma couldn't hear Killian's response but it seemed to only drag more tears from her son.

"Emma, take a second and see what he needs," Mary said, kindly looking apologetic that she had forced her into the rehearsal at all.

"Thank you."

"What's wrong, little man?" she asked, kneeling in front of him. He did his best to cuddle into her but, with a heart aching determination she held him at bay, "Henry mommy has to play right now. Can you see me up there?"

He nodded, beginning to cry again.

"It's only for a little while, okay? Can you be a big strong boy for me?"

He nodded again but it was clear the wails were barely contained.

With a herculean effort, she pulled herself away from her son, ripping off the Band-Aid and the screams spilt out. She gave Killian a meaningful look as he began to pat her son, awkwardly.

"I'm sorry everyone, I know he's really distracting today. His babysitter canceled on me and he's not feeling well." She knew everyone in the group, Killian aside, were parents and understood, still each wail for his mommy sent a physical pain through her chest.

Finally, seeming to realize he wasn't helping much, Killian took Henry by the hand. It took some effort since the four-year-old was balancing on a tantrum but eventually he successfully lead him into the outer hallway where at least his screams wouldn't be quite as loud.

"Killian isn't exactly the best with him is he?" The kindly old man, Marco laughed, "I guess he hasn't had much experience."

"No, I suppose not."
They made it through another piece everyone struggling as much as Emma was before Mary allowed her to spend another two-minute break checking on her son.

"Killian –" she cried as she entered the hallway but stopped at the dark look he shot her, patting Henry's back and he bawled.

"Your son," he said dryly clearly very unhappy, "threw up on my Armani long sleeve."

"He what?" Emma cried scooping him up not caring at all for his shirt and focusing on her ill son.

"You threw up?"

He nodded looking like he had just been rescued from torture. She cuddled him close planning on returning to Mary and insist on being allowed to leave but she knew it was no good when she saw a few board members in the audience.

"Swan." Killian started but Emma shot him an extremely stressed look and he quieted.

Henry's screaming doubled as Emma handed him back to Killian. As her tension over her son grew stronger, Emma felt frustration and anger rise. Was Killian even trying to comfort him? Why was she dating a man who couldn't comfort her son? Emma's stress was paramount by the second hour of rehearsal, her jittering fingers fussing notes left and right when suddenly the screaming from the hall stopped entirely. Every head turned toward the door where the boy and the man had disappeared, their instruments falling silent. That meant each and every person saw when the door flew open again and Regina marched through clutching Henry to her and shooting stern but rude signs at Killian who looked murderous as he tried to find a way to take the boy back.

Relief flooded through Emma. He would sit quietly for Regina. He would be comforted by Regina. Thank god for Regina.

Regina, followed as usual by Ruby, headed into the seats of the theatre where she wrapped the boy in his blanket and signing to him she began to rock him. Ruby flopped into the seat next to Regina and immediately began to argue with Killian in a low voice until with a smack, he stood, his seat automatically folding in on itself and he stomped toward the backstage area.

Emma tried desperately to catch Regina's eye. Chocolate sank into Jade and she knew relief was evident on her face when Regina gave her a worried but reassuring smile.

"Thank you." Emma covertly signed; trying to put into the simple words all of her gratitude.

Regina made a sign that Emma didn't know. Seeing she didn't understand Ruby mimicked vomiting.

Panic flashed through her at the thought that he had thrown up again. She hated how helpless she felt when Henry was sick.

Killian entered the stage a few minutes later, ready to practice the piece looking murderous.

"What's wrong?" she whispered once again not paying quite as much attention as she should as she watched Regina softly kiss Henry's forehead.

"You mean other than the fact that I'm now wearing a vomit covered shirt? I just can't see why you didn't ask your girlfriend in the first place."

Emma sighed and watched as Regina forced people to approach her, clearly conducting business from her seat with Henry.
Emma was distracted so it took her a long while to realize the topic of conversation that night.

"Are you sure she isn't going to eat him?" Mary asked Marco, not bothering to drop her voice. Marco laughed, "It's not as though she is the nicest person. I'm surprised she knew how to get that boy to settle down."

"I think it just proves," August the trumpet player scoffed, "that there is a woman in the evil queen."

"Evil queen?" Emma scoffed, picturing the wide grin Regina always had for her, "you guys don't know her very well, do you?"

"No, Swan," Killian said evenly, "nobody knows her as well as you do."

She ignored him.

"Look," August laughed, jerking his head toward the woman signing, "that poor idiot thinks he's going to be able to change her mind about next season's selections. She's going to rip his soul out through his testicles."

Emma flushed, anger bubbling sickly in her chest.

"I don't know why anyone bothers with the mute." August continued as finally they were released and they all stood to put away their instruments. "Maybe she slipped the kid some gin."

_That is fucking it._

"Hey!" she barked at the people around her, "Just because she can't hear you does not mean that it is okay to talk about her right freaking in front of her. Gossip, fine. Everyone does it but give her a little freaking respect." It hit her then and it was so obvious that Emma should have seen it earlier. Why Regina behaved the way she did; why in the building or anywhere near the building she was so stone-faced. She had to be. If she wasn't so cold they all would have assumed her soft and weak. She would never have gotten to the top slot - look at how they were speaking about now simply because she was holding a child. "We're all adults here; let's act like it, yeah? Also, mute, August? Really. She speaks. Put down the TV remote and read a freaking book every now and then."

Everyone eyed her like she had just spoken in tongues but no one argued with her.
"I hear you defended my honor quite chivalrously." Regina smiled the moment that Emma sat beside her.

"What?" she looked to Ruby who shrugged, unapologetic.

"They were – are idiots. Thank you for taking him."

Regina nodded, allowing Emma to take Henry who barely woke, contented into a deep sleep for the last hour. Regina clearly wanted to say something but though they stood there for countless seconds she couldn't or wouldn't form the words. Still Emma knew exactly what was on her mind.

"You're my friend, Regina." Emma finally said.

"Yes, well thank you."

"This is why you do it, isn't it? Why you keep your professional face on all of the time. It's so you don't have to fight even harder to get people to do what you say, isn't it?"

Regina looked at her for a moment before very slowly she began to sign, her voice in a whisper "talking with my hands-" she held them up and they both watched them flow, "it's unusual. It's unwelcome. People don't know how to respond to it. Not only am I a woman in the workplace but also a woman with a vulnerability - a disability. If I do not prove them wrong, they will walk all over me."

Emma's heart hurt at the raw torment suddenly hinting in Regina's eyes, a lifetime full of hurt. Softly she cupped the beautiful woman's cheek, "I get it. I hate it. But I get it."

Chocolate on Jade. Regina's fingers lightly danced over Emma's as if looking for a landing spot.

"Oh shit, Regina!" she finally had noticed the large splotch of sick across Regina's stomach and thighs.

Regina chuckled.

"I'm so sorry!"

"Don't be," She said, tendering stroking his head. "Let me give you two a ride home."

"What? No, your car!"

"We can get him something to be sick in."

Emma went to protest again but Regina held a hand up, "Would you rather he be sick into a bucket in my backseat or on the El?"

Emma's lips closed. Anyone that has ever lived in a big city has shared the experience of someone vomiting on public transportation; it was the worst.

"Really, really you don't have to! Puke is gross!" Emma insisted as Regina followed her up to her
apartment.

"I found a parking spot, Ms. Swan. That alone is proof that I am meant to come up and help you."

Henry moaned and spilled sick down Emma's back. "I'm sorry mommy!" he cried giant tears flowing down his face.

"It's okay, don't worry little man."

Regina took him so Emma could open the door and they immediately headed to the couch. They had just enough time to grab a pot from the kitchen before the poor sick boy heaved. Regina held him tightly, rubbing his back while Emma felt tears of worry fill her eyes. "Maybe we should have taken him to the E.R."

"What's his temperature?"

They took it and found it was 99.9, "That's a little better than before."

"I wouldn't worry then. Wait and see how he is in the morning."

Henry cuddled under his blanket, eyes growing heavy.

"Buddy, if you have to be sick again please tell mommy or 'Gina, okay?"'

"Okay, mommy."

She hurried into her bedroom ripping off the stained clothes and cleaning herself up as best she could. She wanted a shower but Regina should have it first so she pulled on a tank top and pajama trunks then brought a pair to Regina, "you should change. Seriously. Take a shower."

Regina eyed the clothes but took them reluctantly.

Emma settled next to Henry who was already snoring and rubbed his back lightly.

She hated when he was sick, even when it was clear it was simply a common flu like this surely was. Hopefully, he would wake with the worst behind him.

Regina reappeared not long after, her hair damp, her face clean of makeup; clothes in the plastic bag that Emma had given her. "Now I smell like you." Regina grinned playfully.

Despite her stress, Emma couldn't help but to stare. Regina in one of Emma's white ribbed tank tops was one of the most startlingly stirring sights she had ever seen, add the small pink cotton pajama bottoms hanging loosely off of her hips and Emma was dizzy. Something about forcing Regina out of her comfort zone, out of her usual stiff attire was so drawing. It was her first full glimpse under the mask of Regina Mills.

"He asleep?"

Emma nodded and did not complain when Regina settled next to her.

"Are you all right?"

Emma nodded, "I just hate that I can't help him."
"You are helping him." Regina sighed, wrapping a comforting arm around Emma. She sighed and let her head settle against Regina's collarbone extremely uncomfortable and awkward, yet entirely sated. She began to relax immediately.

"Not in any real way. I guess –" Emma never got to complete her thought because Henry woke ready for his Exorcist impersonation with a fury.

They made it through session one remaining clean but worried.

"How do you think he got it?" Regina asked as he was just falling back to sleep resting on her knees, bouncing lightly.

"I have no idea. I haven't been sick. Who is he exposed to except me?"

Round two was a nasty throw-down; it was Emma and Regina against the incredible vomiting boy. It wasn't until the early A.M. the women that won the battle, Henry's last session finally weak. When the sleepy boy was able to hold down a glass of Pedialyte the women relaxed into the couch, sure the worst was over.

Emma was about to whisper to Regina that she could go home when she was woken by a tickle across her nose.

She swiped at it but the tickle just continued. Slowly, groggily she opened her eyes and found that the thing tickling her nose was a brunette wisp of hair.

She blinked, confused as to how she had gotten in this position. She and Regina were still sitting up half a cushion apart from one another but their shoulders and heads had made the distance to lean heavily on the other, Henry a tiny ball between their hips each with a protective hand on him.

Emma didn't move. She couldn't move as thoughts raced through her mind recalling the previous night. She needed to have a talk with Killian. She couldn't be in a relationship with a man who was more concerned with his shirt then helping to take care of her sick child, what was the point? She understood completely. When she had first had Henry all of the unpleasant smells and liquids he seemed to spew had disgusted her. It wasn't until the second time the boy had covered her face in spit-up during a rousing game of airplane that she had grown used to all of it. She couldn't expect anyone without children to step up to the plate in the same way she did. And yet here was Regina, clothes in a bag in the corner because her son had covered them in everything he had to offer. Despite that, she was still asleep with the little boy wrapped in her embrace. What was it with Regina? She had hinted that she wanted children of her own. Could it just be that she wanted one so badly that she had taken Henry under her wing almost instantly, latching onto the closest thing to her in need of a secondary parent? It was obvious when you saw the two together that Regina was getting just as much out of the boy as he was getting out of her. Was this something she should encourage or should she perhaps limit their time together and avoid future hurt feelings? Her instincts told her to limit their time while her heart said they could gain so much from the other.

Emma groaned as her sore back registered. Regina felt her stirring and sat up, yawning and seeming slightly confused. Emma stifled a giggle at her flattened hair. This seeing Regina under her professional shell thing was addicting.

"I guess we fell asleep."

Regina nodded and stretched.

"Mommy?"
"Hey little man, how are you feeling?"

"When's breakfast?" he yawned.

Two weeks later the biggest day in Emma's life was here. It was three days to September and Henry was yanking hard on her arm to get her to hurry up, excitement bubbling over. "Henry, wait this can't be right!"

Her phone's GPS swore this huge warehouse was the location of Regina's apartment but for the life of her, she couldn't see how. The warehouse was shoved into the busy bustling's of Michigan Ave, not far from where Regina had taken her to see The Bean. The building looked abandoned and there was a homeless man sleeping in the doorway.

She had gotten the impression that Regina not only made a great deal of money but also came from a very wealthy family. Where was the doorman? Where was the valet?

Why hadn't she made it over in the past two weeks just in case? They had spent every single day together, how had they never made it to the brunette's home?

Carrying Henry past the snoring homeless man, they entered into the lobby to find it stark, empty brick walls, wood flooring - nothing to write home about. The only thing that alerted Emma at all that they might be on the right path were the two security guards eyeing her from a small counter against the wall. She smiled awkwardly and moved passed them only to stop when she realized the elevator required a key to open. Slightly nervous from their uniforms as anyone with a troubled past could attest to, she approached the formidable looking couple, "Hi, we're here to see Regina Mills. How do we get up there?"

"Name?"

"Swan."

He looked through his paperwork and cleared his throat. Without speaking, he approached the elevator and turned the key. The moment the elevator was open she knew she was in the right place as the inside were shining mirrored silver walls reflecting back the black marble flooring, a small table to the right held a vase of beautiful white and lavender Lilies as well as a small handmade sign that read Henry Swan's birthday - PNTHSE. They stepped inside and waited a few moments while the man stared down at his iPhone. When it flashed he turned a second key into the lock next to the number menu, "all the way to the top."

She nodded, looking down at Henry who was staring at the man wide-eyed. Just before the elevator doors closed the frankly scary looking man, looked down at Henry and gave him a quick wink. Henry collapsed into quiet giggles behind his hands. "Momma, did you see?"

"I did! He's funny, huh?"

"Yeah!"

As the elevator rose, so did Emma's stress level. She was beginning to wonder from the marble flooring and the armed security how for these past months, she hadn't really been aware of just how well off the woman was.

Does it matter, Emma?
Emma's background had been poor – always. Most of the foster homes she had passed through had consisted of two people who used the subsidies from fostering as their main source of income. She had spent her teen years stealing food and clothes for herself and her foster siblings because of it. Even now, she and Henry were comfortable but you didn't exactly go into classical music expecting - well a house with two armed security guards. Her mind warred with itself; Regina had never made her feel poor and truthfully Emma didn't care much about money. Did this new revelation change much about their friendship?

Was she really surprised?

*No. So shut up, Swan.*

The elevator door slid open and Emma's first impression of the room was white and black. It was startling to the eye. They stepped through the door and onto a high catwalk that followed the length of the long and thin room in either direction before either end bubbled open into large suspended and open rooms. To the left Emma could see a suspended living room, comfortable with a TV and few couches. Along the back wall of that room, an industrial-looking set of stairs led up to the open space of what seemed to be Regina's bedroom. To the right the catwalk led to an office with a computer and a fold up treadmill. The view in front of them, however, was the most breathtaking thing. The floor to ceiling grid windows showed a wonderful view of the patio containing a midsized pool, a table and chairs and a large outdoor barbecue grill. Beyond those things, the view suddenly exploded into the skyline of Chicago, up and over Lakeshore Drive, the park and onto a huge glittering view of Lake Michigan.

Henry leaned over the wrought iron railing to look at the floor below them. Under the lofted living room was a huge kitchen, filled with a stainless steel island and appliances Emma was sure she wouldn't know how to use. Below the floating office was a pair of huge glass doors, black curtains were half drawn over them but the bedding inside hinted at a guest bedroom. The huge open space in the middle of the room contained a few couches and tables but for the most part of left stark, the sparse look clearly something Regina enjoyed.

As they were standing there, mouths open in shock, a device Emma could see sitting on the table below began to lightly ring with what she knew to be a typical iPhone-like ringtone. What surprised them was that as the phone rang purple lights flashed in the corner of each room. She knew that the deaf had their own type of phone and wondered for a moment if this was it.

"'Gina!" Henry squealed, finally setting eyes on the woman outside by the pool. He ran down the industrial stairs just to the left of them but Emma was frozen in place. If the sight of the loft had been beautiful then Emma wasn't sure she had a proper term for what she was seeing now. Regina stood; still perhaps unaware of their presence, hands on her hips looking down onto a table littered with food a scowl on her picturesque face. The woman stood in nothing but a light sea foam green bikini, her eyes hidden behind huge Breakfast at Tiffany's sunglasses, two thin gold chains that fell lightly crisscrossing from her curvaceous waist and over her hips. Emma's eyes lingered there for a moment before she took the rest of her in, mouth falling open; the woman's arms, legs, and stomach were tight as if she and the gym were on a first name basis and in the afternoon light her skin glowed a slightly pale bronze of skin that rarely saw the light.

Regina caught sight of Henry and smiled largely, her hands moving quickly. He vaulted into her
arms and kissed her cheek sloppily.

Whoa, she spotted the sign for mom and knew that any moment Regina would spot her standing just inside the entrance ogling. She headed downstairs and though she was intimidated by her surroundings and though she was mesmerized by the awesome beauty of the woman in front of her she glued a smile on her face and joined her son, teasing, "Wow, yeah, this place doesn't look like you at all. It's so cluttered and unorganized. How can you live in this mess?"

Regina smiled, "I like structure. What can I say?"

A bright yellow light flashed twice behind them and Regina made the sign to Emma for 'door'.

"Who?" Emma sighed, clumsily signing back. She could swear every time Emma tried to sign to her the woman colored ever so slightly.

"I don't know." Regina shrugged, "Killian or the Mommy and Me kids. Will you say hi for me? Feel free to use the restroom and change. It's the door at the bottom of the staircase."

"What?" Emma called to the person who had turned her back to her, unable to hear her. The thin gold belly chains had distracted her again and she had missed her instructions.

"She told us to go to the bathroom and change!" Henry rolled his eyes at his inattentive mother.

Emma waited for another minute to greet the person, who turned out to be the parent of a recent play date, before slipping into the lavish downstairs bathroom to change. She had spent days choosing the perfect bikini for the occasion, although she wasn't wise enough at this point to be sure who she wanted to impress.

She had only seen Killian twice in the two weeks since Henry had been sick. The first time she had been so angry with him that she had decided it would be best to inform him they would speak next rehearsal and then promptly ignored him. The second time, he had appeared at the rehearsal with roses; though Lilies were her favorites the roses were nice all the same. He had apologized and while Emma had understood she decided that Killian would simply not be invited to the little birthday. She was not really ready to see him with her son anytime soon. But he had overheard Regina, who was not the best at volume control, speaking about the party and Emma had felt she had no choice but to invite him.

She pulled her hair back into a ponytail, studying it in the mirror before stripping down and pulling on her black athletic bikini. As much as she wanted to wear something flimsy and wispy as the little red number she had just spotted Ruby in she knew that a full day of chasing Henry would threaten the very life of the little strips of cloth.

Still she had shaved twice and manicured everything that could be manicured. Regina or Killian - or both - she didn't know, would hopefully approve.

When she stepped out of the bathroom Killian was standing awkwardly just inside the door above her.

"Hi."

"Hi!" He looked thankful to see her and came barreling down the stairs already in his swim trunks and nothing else.
"Whoa, gah! So much body hair."

"Change already?"

"No need. It's a nice day, just wore this here. Where's the birthday boy? Swimming with the crocodile?"

"Killian." Emma warned but he just laughed and kissed her cheek.

Her boyfriend headed outside to find Henry, so she headed over to Regina waving for her attention "anything I can do?"

Regina froze, eyebrows arched high and visible over the tops of her sunglasses.

"What?" Emma looked around for the problem, her heart catching in her throat. Had Henry fallen down? Was there blood? Shit, where is he?

With a smirk, Regina pulled off her sunglasses and bit the earpiece, grinning. Emma felt the hot flash start at her face and slam down her body only to hit her toes and ricochet back up shooting through the top of her head. "Is there anything I can do?"

Regina cocked an eyebrow and slowly shook her head, still nibbling on the glasses. "Oh stop it." Emma pulled the glasses away and plopped them next to her on the counter before turning and heading outside to find her son, feeling two sets of eyes following her Regina's and Killian's.

The day was a happy one, perhaps even a perfect one. Killian, never quite as amorous as he was that afternoon, was on good behavior. This was possibly the result of being behind enemy lines. She found his hands on her at all times that day taking advantage of her bare skin. For once she didn't mind, charmed as he laughed and cannonballed into the pool for the delight of the children, sprinkling her with water the moment he was beside her again. The man was all smiles, giving Henry piggyback rides and volunteering to be the bottom person in an amateur game of Chicken in the pool that made both Emma and Regina wince.

Despite her lack of annoyance, Emma found her eyes constantly seeking out the sea foam green bikini. She watched as Regina flew between the house and the food table, the house and the pool that she pointedly refused to get into; smiling each time she cuddled Henry or smothered him with kisses. Henry was alight the whole afternoon, bouncing at all of the love showered on him.

Sometime after most of the guests had found their way into the pool, Ruby put music on the heavy speakers. She wasn't sure exactly why a deaf person owned such industrial speakers but she was glad for the music, the party immediately lifting as the children gathered around the speakers and began jumping up and down in their five-year-old dancing. Henry almost pulled Ruby's arm from its socket trying to force her to dance with him. She joined in without a single thought, spinning and laughing as she held his hands above his head, her long wide smile shining toothily "Your kids a natural." Killian laughed by the side of the pool, his arms tightly around Emma as he joked. "The question is, does he take after his mother?" He buried his scratchy face under her jaw, making her squeal at the tickle. She was never a big fan of hair, especially in places like the face and
chest and it sent pins and needles down her spine.

"Stop it!" she laughed, only kind of teasing when she shoved his face far away from her skin, "No skin to skin contact until you shave!"

He laughed and buried his face again, holding her in place as her skin squirmed and her legs kicked, nails on a chalkboard.

Henry quickly signed across the room to Regina, catching Emma's eye. Regina laughed, nodding and made her way to the speakers. The two had a brief conversation, Henry standing studiously as he questioned her, Ruby distracted and dancing with the only single dad in the lot. Emma watched as Regina nodded exuberantly and held his little hand to the speaker. He squealed, jumping up and down and nodding. Then to Emma's surprise, a huge smile plastered on their faces Henry began to jump and spin again as Regina's hips began popping perfectly side to side and back and forth on the beat, her shoulders swaying – dancing.

A flood, yes a flood, of pleasure swept through Emma balling tightly in her nerves as she watched the woman move.

Holy shit balls.

"So I was thinking," Killian started somewhere in Emma's consciousness, far, far away.

Regina looked up and into Emma, her grin perking up in the corner. Biting her lip she beckoned to the woman with one finger. The pull was something that Emma couldn't refuse; she pushed away from Killian, excusing herself and danced over to her son and her friend, boogying in a circle with them, not at all surprised when Ruby joined again completing the circle.

Emma reached forward and ran just one hand down the side of Regina's twisting stomach.

She ran her nose down the slightly glistening collarbone, feeling her hair tickle her forehead.

She ran her hand over the back of the pulsing thigh –

"I didn't know you could dance!" she blurted out.

Ruby laughed hard beside Emma, her silky chestnut hair flying, "Oh if you only knew."

"Oh?" She looked back to Regina and faltered just a bit, losing the beat for just a moment as she found that look in Regina's eyes again, the look that had rocked through her at the bar, the sexy raw predatory look. Emma could feel it even from behind Regina's sunglasses.

"Cake!" she heard from the kitchen. The moment that her son had heard the word he was running from their circle and into the kitchen. Emma looked around confused; she was supposed to announce the cake. Why had Killian done it? She caught his eye and frowned at his scowl.

"What happened?" Regina asked watching Henry go.
"Cake." Ruby laughed.

"Ah."

They followed Emma, Regina and Ruby huddled around Henry who was laughing happily as he covered himself in chocolate before ripping through his gifts. Finally, the evening grew cool, hinting at fall in the future and the guests were forced inside and eventually to their individual homes.

Wrapping himself around her at the door Killian kissed her deeply, his belongings gathered in his hands to go, "Don't make me go, Swan."

"Do you want to stay and hang out here? Because that's what we plan on doing."

Killian's grin spread, "No. I want to come home with you."

Emma laughed to cover her annoyance. He had been so sweet all day; of course he would have to ruin it. She pushed against him lightly but he held his ground.

"Come on, Emma. At some point –" 

"Hey, a few months of dating before sex is completely normal. How many times are we going to go through this?" She spun him around, ignoring the clear lust in his eyes and shoved him toward the door of the elevator but he just wouldn't go.

"Swan –" he checked to see if the coast was clear and then pulled her tightly against him, pressing every part of him openly into her body.

"Um, whoa." Emma cried, glancing around for her son, eyes wide.

"I want to come home with you," He said slowly again, making his point clear. "Please. I want this for us. Don't you want that for us?"

Emma thought about it. Did she want that? It was true; man or woman, by now she normally would have jumped in with both feet. What was holding her back?

He growled in his chest and kissed her deeply, reaching for parts of her not to be touched in public but she pulled back, worried about Henry's possibly watching eyes. "Emma! Come on!"

She pushed him a little, "Henry could be watching."

"Swan you've used every excuse in the book not to be close to me. What is it? What's the real problem? I'm beginning to think you don't want to do this."

"I'm sorry, I'm just not ready and frankly you pushing me so hard is not going to make me feel ready any faster."

"Emma." He pulled her close again despite her pushing arms and nibbled at her neck.

"Killian, stop!"

"Just try relaxing for a moment. You're always so tense with me."

"Killian! You're not listening."

Killian yelped as he was suddenly ripped away from Emma. Surprise turned to a gasp of humor when she saw Regina holding the grown man by the tender part of the ear tossing him easily into the
elevator stating simply, "Not in my home, thank you." She mashed the down button and the elevator closed with a ding.

She knew her eyes were wide when Regina turned on her, face set.

She knew that what had just happened to him wasn't exactly fair. But the fierce twinkle in Regina's eyes made her laugh, a protected warmth spreading through her chest. "He's going to kill me, you know."

The scowl on Regina's face cracked, "Was that rude?"

"Regina, I'm willing to bet you are entirely aware of whether or not that could be considered rude."

Regina's lips twitched harder, the fire in her eye melted into a glittering humor and an obvious pride at her deed against the hairpiece.

Emma couldn't help it; she started to laugh reaching for the woman and pulled her into her arms for a tight hug. She heard the woman audibly gasp at the contact but a bit to Emma's surprise she returned the hug willingly.

The moment Regina's arms closed around her she wished she hadn't done it. Everything shifted from first gear to fourth in a sputtering, angry fury as her nose rested against the woman's temple. She could feel every inch of her skin instantly, wildly aware of the shorter woman's mouth resting politely against her collarbone, her hair tickling her chin, their stomachs and thighs grazing as they seemed unable to remain completely still in the embrace. Lightning crackled and sizzled. Fire roared to life, was doused and caught again.

Her head swam as if suddenly and heavily intoxicated.

Emma released the woman almost instantly, her poker face settled in place, "Thank you for doing this for Henry and thank you for that."

Regina nodded, barely looking at her as she headed down the stairs.

"Regina?" Confusion fluttered nervously in her core as felt the cheer she had been filled with all day drop away from her. Had she just gotten herself into trouble? Made her friend uncomfortable? Emma followed, "are you okay?"

Regina stared hidden behind her glasses.

"Oh. You're mad at me." She realized uncomfortably. "You're mad at me. Why are you mad at me?"

"Hey Henry," she heard Ruby say, "you want to show me your new basketball? The lobby is huge. We could play some one on one."

Emma watched the two go, feeling as though she wished she could hide behind them. Killian – that had been so rude! They had been so rude! Oh god, she shouldn't have touched her. What was she thinking?

_Stupid, Em. Stupid, stupid, stupid._

"Look it was wrong of Killian to do that in your apartment. I'm going to have a talk with him, I'm
"Sorry. But really" she squirmed uncomfortably as she dredged up things unsaid, "I shouldn't have hugged you like that. I'm sorry. I'm sure it, uh, you know, made you uncomfortable and-

Regina shrugged.

"Regina!" Emma caught the woman's arm as she turned again, "Why are you mad at me?"

The brunette studied her for a moment from behind her glasses before deciding to speak, "I'm not mad at you, I'm frustrated." The words came out of her mouth harsh, quick as if she had wanted to yell them for a very long time now but had been holding herself back.

"What? Um, why?"

Regina put some distance between them, her hands on her hips, "I cannot for the life of me understand why you're choosing to be this girl, Emma."

"What girl?" She could feel that her eyes had blown wide in surprise. She was really in trouble!

"The girl who dates a guy because, what? He's attractive? Because other women want him? I just do not understand why you're seeing him. You don't even like the man romantically or socially."

"Whoa, wait, who says I am dating him because he's attractive? Who says I don't like him?"

Regina scoffed, her arms crossing over her chest, challenging her to prove her wrong.

"Don't tell me what I do and do not like, Regina!"

"And you defiantly don't want him! Not in the way he wants you anyway." Regina continued over Emma's protests.

"Don't tell me what I want!"

"Are you sure? Are you sure, Emma, because I think I can tell you exactly what you want."

"And what's that?"

Regina laughed, her head thrown back over her shoulders as if the answer were the most obvious thing in the world, "Me. You want me."
Chapter 9

Emma got up the next morning and practiced much harder and longer than usual, reveling in the musical vibration up her spine massaging the stress from her limbs; her own at-home sound therapy. Henry, still coming down off of his sugar high from the night before, was happy to sit quietly and play with his new toys. He was quickly growing particularly fond of the Round Table figurine set that Regina had given him.

Me. You want me.

Emma practiced harder.

She could still see the flash in her eyes, the flash that both excited and terrified Emma as Regina took her sunglasses off, biting the earpiece again and finally said, “Come out with me tomorrow night.”

Emma had felt the blood drain from her face, “What?”

“Come out with me. Let’s go dancing.”

And Emma had said yes.

She had only a few hours before Regina would appear on her doorstep, ready to go out and Emma still hadn’t been able to steady her mind around Regina’s words.

She knew she wanted her, even if that meant simply being her friend, happy just to be near her. She also knew Regina was datable – hell, had she ever met anyone as datable at Regina? But her nerves were a wild tangle of confusion centering around:

Is this a date?

Should I date Regina? I’m crazy about her, is it smart for me to go down that road?

What about Henry? Can he handle losing Regina when we don’t work out?

Am I selfish enough to put him through that?

Is a date worth losing one of the only two friends I have made in years?

Do I need to be worrying about any of this? What if this isn’t a date?

Is this a date?
Though she was torn it never occurred to Emma, not even once that she could or maybe should cancel.

Emma did not allow herself to spend an hour in front of the mirror that night; she couldn’t handle it. The whir of her mind was making her dizzy. She just threw on a favored, though long forgotten going-out dress and heels, ruffled her hair a bit and planted herself on the couch refusing, to move until the doorbell rang. The moment the sound peeled through the apartment she shot up from the couch and threw the door open, perhaps a bit harder than she meant to in her nerves.

“What?” It was Regina’s turn to look around perplexed.

“Uh, wow.”

Regina’s face fell into a smirk, “do you need anything?”

She glanced behind her at the empty apartment. Ruby had come by the hour before to gather Henry. She had her keys and a wallet, “Nope.”

Still smirking Regina reached for her hand and pulled her down the hallway and out the front door, confidence radiating as she took each step surely.

Her heart began to beat faster as they went through the busy street, casually hand in hand sharing almost shy grins. It was long after dark by then and the young queers were out in full force. Men in make-up. Women in ties. Smoke poured through the doors of each club they passed. Purple-haired patrons sipping exotic drinks as they hung out of tall windows whooping cat calls to passerby’s.

“Get it girl!” The man passing opposite them cried to Regina snapping his fingers. Regina laughed, swaying her hips seductively response. Emma gasped, feeling every sway somewhere between the pit of her stomach and –

It seemed that all knowing smirk Regina loved to use on Emma so much refused to leave as they paid to get into her club of choice, heading to the coat check.

“What are you doing?” Emma cried with a small bite of her lip when Regina slipped her shoes off of her feet and handed them to the woman behind the counter. The coat check seemed far too taken with Regina to care at all that the woman was now barefoot in a place one should never remove their shoes under any circumstances.

The room was a huge warehouse with a bar to one side and strobe lights beating impulsively to the rhythm of the song. She wondered for a moment if this is why Regina had chosen this club over the many others that littered the gay neighborhood of Chicago, also known as Boystown.

The room was thick with moving bodies despite the early hour, little room on the dance floor; the air clouded with synthetic fog the scent of caramel.

*Only at a gay club would you find a smoke machine that smells like candy.*

“You ready?” Regina sighed, already beginning to sway.

Emma watched her, hand closed tightly on Regina’s in awe. How was it that something this beautiful, this wonderful – this kind – this warm could actually exist in a person? “How do you feel
“The music?” Regina signed back.

She nodded.

Regina beckoned her to the corner of the dance floor where they were mostly alone. The beat was strong here. The speakers loomed over them blasting in Emma’s ears - possibly the loudest noise she had ever experienced. From behind her, Regina wrapped her arms around the woman, covering her eyes and placing her other hand on Emma’s breastbone. Emma’s heart picked up its beat, matching that of the air vibrating around them. Quickly they began to sway together as with a finger Regina began to tap out the beat against Emma’s skin. She smiled, nodding to say she understood.

**What are we doing here?**

“I can also feel it in my feet, the floor vibrates so hard. That’s why I took my shoes off.”

Regina pulled her to the bar by the hip of her dress, bouncing deliberately to the beat and ordered a round for them.

Emma took a deep breath as she sat, trying to work through the ache that was filling her, trying to readjust to the absence of Regina’s hands on her body.

They polished off drink one with ease over sly glances. Drink two was shared with anxiously knowing smiles. Then they were on the floor, their hair flying, their bodies twisting thrashing to the beat. Songs changed, people bumped into them, once or twice slamming them out of their way in an effort to move from one place to another but the women stuck together laughing politely close enough to be familiar but far enough for propriety.

They watched one another as they danced, smiles secret, hands itching fully aware of the other.

If Emma wasn’t careful, if she saw that smirk one more time she would lose control and give into the seductive powers of watching this woman dance.

Was that why they were here? So that Emma would lose control of herself? Or was this a trial run – a prelude to a date? Ugh, she wished she had read the manual before coming.

“Ladies, ladies, we would love to buy you a drink.” A pair of very tall very masculine women wrapped their arms around both of them popping the bubble Emma and Regina had created for themselves.

“Excuse me!” Regina cried belligerently when one of the giant woman’s arms covered her shoulder, clearly annoyed with the interruption. She looked to Emma questioning and Emma did her best to sign the request. The question stayed on her face and Emma shrugged, “we might as well. Free drink.”

The giant women laughed, tucking the smaller ones against them.

“What are your names?”
“Emma, Regina.” Regina had planted herself in Emma’s side, clearly unable to follow most of what was happening verbally, that or simply not bothering to try. The women introduced themselves as Michelle and Ashley and ordered a round of shots for the four of them, then another.

It would never cease to amaze Emma that the most masculine dykes were always the ones with the sweetest, most delicate names. These Amazonian women looked like they could lift a car above their heads without breaking a sweat.

“Where are your shoes?” Ashley asked Regina staring down at her bare feet.

“I’m sorry, please, say that again?” Regina squinted a bit.

Emma explained to the women that Regina couldn’t hear them. The strangers seemed all the more taken with them after that, intrigued by a brush with something considered exotic. A few shots later everything was shimmering lightly.

“Ladies, shall we dance?”

Emma swayed perhaps a little more recklessly than she would have if she hadn’t been able to feel Regina’s hungry eyes on her, watching her every movement like a hawk. She knew she had no interest in this monstrosity of a woman but she danced anyway, allowing her hips to shake, her chest to twitch to the beat, aware of Michelle’s - or was it Ashley’s - hands tightly on her hips. Ashley or Michelle – whichever – held tightly to her rocking from side to side in a strong dyke swagger, washing Emma in her far too masculine scent.

She didn’t miss it when the other woman began to push at Regina lightly; bringing the huge women’s dance floor catches together, packing the woman between them. The forced contact, the contact that wasn’t entirely their own idea, seemed to motivate Emma, sending a chill of confidence through her veins.

Regina bit her lip as Emma was bent slightly backward, shoulders pulled against the woman while her hips gyrated freely.

Emma felt the sigh pull from deep within her as Regina’s hipbones circled her own quickly softly bouncing to the beat as she went. She felt herself being spun toward her slightly jealous dancing partner but she didn’t even register the boyish grin from the Amazon as she felt hips brush lightly in a circle over her rear. She gasped, delightfully lightheaded as sure hands clutched tightly on her ribs, holding her, touching her. She needed more.

Arms wrapped around her as Regina pressed tightly against her making room to sign at her waist “they are making us into an Emma and Regina sandwich. Careful they don’t take a bite.”

Emma smiled, looking over her shoulder to comment but the words died on her lips. At first, Regina looked startled as their cheeks brushed, drenching them in hot and cold convulsions but then slowly when Emma’s mouth popped open just a bit in surprise Regina smiled, smirking that I-can-see-you grin. Chocolate held Jade softly communicating for a beat – two beats – three before she finally looked away and began to remove her arms. Reflexively Emma’s hands shot to them, holding them in place. Regina gasped in surprise and closed tightly around her ribs.

The women detonated.
Emma groaned a little as perhaps without her permission she began to roll, her head falling back against Regina’s shoulder, her hips rubbing harshly against the woman. She had lost it. She had lost her control and she sure as hell didn’t want it back. Slowly, she rolled again and felt Regina shudder, breathily into her neck. A soft pant slipped from her lips at the breath, seduced. She turned in her arms and Regina, arms wrapping around her neck rolled herself relentlessly, their temples pressed together, their jagged breath falling on the skin of the other’s shoulder.

Emma gasped as Chocolate found Jade.

Regina’s tongue slowly found her own lips, dampening them as playfully Emma rolled, popping and twitching against her.

She needed this woman. She needed to touch her. She needed to taste her. It took everything in her not to just pull her to her and devour everything she had to offer. She felt Regina’s hand slowly slide up her arm and over her throat. Emma’s lips parted.

Regina slowly turned, spinning so her back was pressed against Emma’s front fully, taking Emma’s outstretched hands and slowly slid them down her sides until they were tight against her hip bones, following them as they rocked from side to side.

She couldn’t take it. She couldn’t – she - Emma’s hands tightened on the cloth under her palms, clenching it into her fists, scratching the skin underneath ever so slightly.

Regina had been full of smiles and suggestive looks for months now but as she turned there was no humor on her face. Emma felt her breath catch, all of her concentration on those lips suddenly so close.

“Let’s go.”

They were silent as they disentangled themselves from the other women not even hearing the Amazons cries of outrage as they walked to the coat check and then out of the club, hands not touching but every now and then brushing one another with an electric zap. There was simply no room for anything spoken.

When they stepped onto the El train and sat together, thighs almost touching. Though they were still blocks from Emma’s home their eyes met and with them they were touching, kissing, drawing the other to their pinnacle. A small gasp released from Regina’s throat.

They exited the train in silence, walking just close enough together. Both struggling to pull in a deep breath, not touching a rich stimulant, building.

Emma’s head swam, the point between her legs growing hot and damp.

I don’t know - if I can take this.

They entered the downstairs door of Emma’s apartment and slowly, tortuously climbed the stairs. Emma fiddled with the keys wanting to run, wanting to hurry but instead taking her slow time, watching Regina’s lips part as they took identical steps.
Finally, she pulled her eyes from Regina’s face and turned toward the door, needing her concentration to unlock it.

Fingers brush aside the hair at the nape of her neck and soft lips touch her there. Emma cried out loudly in surprise and pleasure, hand steadying herself on the door in front of her. She blushed, thankful that Regina hadn’t heard the sound and unlocked the door.
Chapter 10

She set her keys unhurriedly on the table of the living room; still feeling the only spot Regina had ever kissed her burn with pleasure. Slowly she ran her hand through her hair, watching Regina watch her from the doorway as she kicked off her shoes. A small smile crept over her lips as she turned, clicking off the living room light and starting toward her bedroom. She left Regina standing, eyes liquid fire, in the living room. Emma didn't have to wait long until Regina was there again; leaning against the doorframe with her arms crossed watching Emma as deliberately, eyes never leaving Regina's she reached behind her and began to unzip her dress.

In two steps Regina was there, pulling the clothing from Emma's body and taking her face into her palms.

Emma had expected seduction in those chocolate eyes, desire and possibly excitement but what was there was raw – pleasure, pain, possession, apprehension and joyous happiness. It made Emma's breath catch in her throat as the realization came; if they did this – this would be so much more than sex.

Slowly, Emma brushed her lips lightly against Regina's touching not kissing her; it would be Regina's choice to kiss her. A small sound rose from Regina's body, a little cry, perhaps a moan that sent shivers right down to Emma's core.

Regina closed the distance; her lips pressing tightly against Emma's and Emma accepted them willingly, feeling her own moan of pleasure ripple up her spine.

They burst into motion, thrashing together, lips parting, tongues probing, Regina's dress was pulled quickly away, shoes kicked off before they fell; Emma straddling Regina onto the bed.

Emma sat up, reveling at the sight of Regina beneath her, her chest rising and falling quickly, her eyes wild with desire – for her. Holy shit, that look was for her!

Slowly she trailed her nose up the center of Regina's stomach, breathing her in. Regina shuddered at the contact, her hands folding into Emma's hair as softly a trail of kisses were left across her skin, up over the cups of her bra, along her jaw and back into Regina's waiting mouth. Their lips danced softly together while Emma let her hands brush over the skin, teasingly hovering over the full cups she so longed to touch. Regina pulled her hands to her, crying out into the mouth connected to hers when Emma almost immediately found the hard little peaks through the cloth. Their shared breath grew rough as Emma buried her face in the cleavage, a heartfelt "oh my god" whispering from her lips as she surrounded herself in them, taking the skin into her mouth.

Regina reached over her back, unsnapping Emma's own garment and whined lustfully as the pale skin was released, pulling her higher so she could find one of the little mounds with her mouth.

Emma's hands clutched convulsively at the sheet above Regina as her face fell into the sweet smelling hair, a deep cry coming from the tips of her toes at the wonderful sensation. A flick of sadness darted across Emma's mind as she realized she wanted Regina to be able to hear that, to hear the sounds she pulled from her. She cried out again as Regina switched to the other nipple her hands finding and squeezing Emma's ass, pulling her tighter against her and grunting in pleasure. Emma pulled Regina's head back by the temples and kissed her severely, her tongue probing as deeply as it could possibly go, trying to fill Regina with herself, her hands slipping below her to free her from her bra.
She saw Regina watching as she closed the distance between her mouth and Regina's breast and revealed in the sharp jump of her hips that her mouth brought on. She worked quickly but efficiently on the points of pleasure there until Regina was crying out loudly, holding her to her and rocking with sharp fierce desire.

Slight grin on her lips Emma squeezed her legs together and slipped between Regina's catching herself on her knees so she could slide Regina's hips onto the tops of her thighs.

_I can smell her. Dear god, I can smell her._

Emma was sure she had never wanted anything more. She breathed deeply, licking a trail along Regina's inner thigh. The woman whimpered, her eyebrows drawn together in want; jaw trembling as she watched Emma enjoy her.

Emma could see that the once light lavender panties had grown to a deep purple between the legs, sodden. The sight was tantalizing, flattering. She ran a hungry finger over the spot, sighing as her hand came away wet. Regina twitched hard, her hand tightening into the forehead of Emma's hair as she softly gasped her name. Smiling, holding her eyes, Emma leaned down and softly placed a kiss where she knew Regina would be the most sensitive. Regina's eyes rolled back into her head.

That was all the self-control she had. She quickly freed Regina of her wet cloth and buried her face there, reveling in the extremely loud cry Regina let out as she bucked, meeting Emma flesh against flesh. Holding the woman by her stomach, she began to lap – everywhere, wanting to taste every crevice, every moment of skin. Regina's cries, perhaps some of the loudest, perhaps the most beautiful she had ever heard picked up pace almost instantly and though Emma hadn't intended to she sent Regina into her first spiraling orgasm without entering her.

She grinned, feeling every inch of her own skin and flattened herself atop of the woman, giving her no time to recover before she sank into Regina's opening. The woman clutched, her face burying in Emma's throat as she let out a high "shit". Emma chuckled, pumping slowly in and out, twirling and stretching, taking in every eye roll, every pant below her as they rocked as if back on the dance floor.

Regina's arms constricted around Emma's neck, her loud moans increasing until, rigid against her the woman began to wail, "Emma, Emma, I'm going to – I'm –."

Emma kissed her face, her eyelids, her lips, her throat whispering unheard words of encouragement as Regina flew over the edge, springing into her, rolling, writhing and yelling at top volume until finally she fell, limp in Emma's arms. Emma continued to languidly kiss her, breathing her pants of excursion until Regina's eyes were finally able to flutter open. The moment she held the chocolate gaze Emma smiled, bringing her own dripping fingers to her mouth and sucking Regina off of them.

Regina flipped them in a second, on her knees by Emma's side leaving the woman dreadfully yet wonderfully exposed.

Emma had never felt anything like it as she woman worked across her body almost as if she were playing her like a piano, signing beautiful poetry into her skin. Fingers dipping into Emma's mouth for a moment only to disappear a second later and sliding across her ribs, fingertips sank into exactly where she needed to be touched most only to vanish a moment later and reappear at her breast.

Emma was a panting mess in seconds; she had never felt hands like these. They could pull every
ounce of what they wanted from her with the slightest touch. A throaty chuckle escaped from Regina's lipstick smudged lips as she drew Emma close to her edge. Just before Emma fell into her orgasm Regina grabbed her jaw, pulling her eyes to her own, holding them. When she came, she came fully exposed under the eyes of her new lover, nothing there to cater to a hidden sense of modesty as she writhed in the woman's hands, calling, begging, thanking all at once.

Regina flipped her onto her stomach and pulling Emma's hips into the air just a bit, reinserting herself, making Emma collapse only to be pulled up again. She held her strong in her arm, her mouth at her ear kissing and licking, body pressed tightly against the other woman. Emma's eardrum rattled as she reached behind her, finding the woman and thrusting as she thrust into her. They rocked together, tandem sounds escaping them until their joined orgasm sent them splaying to the sheets again, crashing bodies.

When they finally could take any more, seconds and hours later they lay together, under the covers kissing and holding, pouring every ounce of passion they had into the other until, worn, they faded wordlessly into sleep.

The benefit of paying a little more for an apartment with soundproofed walls was the same as having a deaf lover; when you woke in the middle of the night, high on deeds recently done and decided to spend a moment with your cello, you woke no one.

Her body swayed a bit as she pulled the bow across the strings, basking in the deep resonance of the sound. It was a typical piece; one of the first you learn once you are able to produce a habitable sound on the cello but it had always been her favorite. The Prelude to Bach Cello Suite Number II. When played by a novice the sound was silly and light but when played by an artist it took on a life of its own, becoming deep and seductive, almost mournful.

Emma lived in it. Normally she was a fairly stiff player, not giving into swaying or movements of any kind but tonight, with her body well used and her head clear like it hadn't been in a while she gave in. Her back bowed a little, her head swayed as she listened, enjoying.

She didn't spend enough time with her cello these days. She missed it, her first love, her first savior.

Hands softly slid over her shoulders and down her breasts making Emma gasp a little and smile. She felt Regina softly kiss her neck, the blanket she had wrapped around herself wrapping around the both of them, cocooning their nakedness.

"You're beautiful." She signed into the silence.

Emma smiled, over her shoulder and took the kiss she was offered, giving back in trade and pushing the kiss deeper. When they released Regina wrapped her arms around her and asking her to keep playing. Emma smiled a little and did as she was told, pulling her bow with relish. Her eyes closed as she played enjoying everything around her, the music, the body draped over her back; a moment of beauty within a life filled by sadness.

She felt herself moved as Regina let the blanket fall to the floor, her palms gently resting on the cellos face, drinking in the vibrations. A soft smile began at the corners of Regina's lips as Emma deepened the groan, making the cello shake under her fingers. The smile blossomed and for just a moment they were speaking the same language.

When she was through playing she softly set the cello down and turned around on her stool, letting her lover's soft smile wrap around her like a caress.
Silent, Regina caressed her cheek. Emma's eyes drooped closed, feeling the warmth pass through her from the touch. Pulling her to her she wordlessly let her take her back into the bedroom where Regina slowly, tenderly made love to her.

The sun woke her late the next morning, shining sweetly with the new day. Regina was settled still asleep across her chest, her body intertwined with Emma's. Sighing she softly swept the hair out of Regina's face and felt the woman stir, stretching against her. The stretch sent shivers down Emma's spine and into her core.

"Good morning, lover." Regina signed. When Emma frowned unsure of the last sign. Regina spelled it out for her instead of speaking and the small act made Emma smile knowing that Regina relying on her own language was a sign of comfort. She was already reading Regina fairly well; she couldn't wait until there was no need for Regina's voice at all.

Emma smiled and pulled her to her by the chin. Willingly the woman scrambled on top of her, straddling her as they kissed, hands exploring, insatiable despite the night's activities.

She found Regina at her already moistening core but froze, hearing the patter of little feet in the kitchen.

"What's wrong?"

"Henry. They must be back."

Regina frowned, but only a little bit, never unhappy to see Henry. Feeling mischievous Emma let her hand continue on the course it had been on moments ago, plunging far into the woman on her lap, as deeply as she could go.

Her head fell back, a deep rattling moan falling from Regina's lips making Emma roll them over quickly, a hand covering Regina's mouth with a giggle, "You're really loud!"

Regina blushed, "I'm sorry, I didn't know. It's not always clear when my voice is louder than normal. As a matter of fact sometimes I can't tell if I'm using it at all."

Emma smiled, kissing her deeply, roughly, "Don't be, I like it." She covered Regina's smile with her hand and just for one more moment of evil pleasure thrust deeply again into the woman giving it everything she had before pulling herself up. Regina let out a feral snarl at her as Emma, pulling on underwear and a tee shirt, grinned a promise of later.

Cleaning herself up in the bathroom she called into the living room, "I'll be right there, kid."

"Hi!" Henry jumped into her arms. She smothered him in kisses before smiling at her friend, "Hey Red."

"Hey," Ruby said slowly, eyes suspiciously taking in her attire and ratted hair, "How was your night last night?"

Emma grinned in answer and jerked her head in the direction of the hall where Regina was emerging, clad only in one of Emma's tee shirts and underwear as well.

Emma did her best not to be aroused by the fact that the woman was wearing her underwear.

Ruby clicked her tongue but after a few moments of communicating with looks, Regina smirked and turned to Henry, hugging him tightly and giving Emma a quick kiss.
"So. Who's hungry?"

Ruby narrowed her eyes again turning into Teacher Ruby, "Sign it."

She laughed, placing Henry back on the floor and blushing signing, poorly, "Who's hungry?"

Regina laughed, "Good job, baby."

Emma and Henry cooked while Regina and Ruby sat at the kitchen table talking languidly.

"Have you heard about this Lyric situation?" Regina asked the room at large.

Emma spun around, the knife still clutched in her hand making both women's eyes widen in surprise. She laughed a little and apologized, "What's happening with Lyric?"

Regina seemed surprised, "I didn't even bother trying to tell you because I assumed you already knew. You're a cellist after all."

Emma frowned, "But I'm new to the area. I don't know anyone but you guys."

"Well," Regina leaned in about to dish her very best gossip, "You know the Rendell's?"

Ruby wracked her brain, "The husband and wife in the cello section right?"

"Well, it would appear that he has been sleeping with the flute section while married in the cello section."

"No! Ew!" Ruby scrunched her nose, "that's the older man with the huge bald spot. The one that always has food on his shirt."

"Right."

"Ew."

Emma laughed at the women in her kitchen, thoroughly enjoying both of them.

"Well, I guess now that his wife knows she might be leaving."

"What?" This time Emma did drop the knife. Amused Regina picked it up for her and continued to chop in her place.

Lyric Opera in Chicago was one of the best opera companies in the country and it was Emma's dream. The Metropolitan Opera in New York was wonderful and she never missed a performance when they broadcast them nationwide but Lyric was known for their edgy and modern interpretations.

Emma tried at casual but failed as she shrugged and asked, "So are they having an audition?"

Regina smiled, her eyes glittering at Emma's pathetic attempt at cool and kissed her lightly.

"We don't know yet. His wife, I can't remember her name, won't tell the board officially what her decision is. So there is a tentative audition scheduled for this spring after the season is over but we just don't know if we actually need it."

"Emma, are you okay?"
Emma blinked a few times to see all eyes in the kitchen on her, "Uh, yeah. I'm good. Thanks." She took the knife back from Regina and continued on her work, rattled.

The small group ate and then settled on playing a board game.

When Ruby finally had to excuse herself to teach a sign lesson before lunch Regina had sighed, saying she should go too. Henry without a second thought all but threw himself on her, "You can't gooooo!"

"Henry." Emma warned but not harshly. If she could have thrown herself over Regina like that without seeming desperate or clingy she would have done the same thing.

It took practically no effort to convince to Regina to stay. She worked from their living room, sending text messages and emails from her phone and Emma's laptop; Henry was planted firmly at her side while Emma practiced. When Regina was done she pulled Henry into her lap before the large instrument and she showed him what she had been doing the night before, placing their hands on it and feeling the vibrations. He grinned utterly in love with the silent world Regina was showing him.

Regina looked up as from her palms, the sultry gaze on her face reminding her of the night before, their naked bodies and their lovemaking.

Emma felt everything in her and about her burn with want.

That night they made dinner and after putting Henry to bed, they made love long past the time for sleep.

The next day while Emma was sure that Regina would leave bright and early, exhausted from two nights of more sex then sleep but was pleased when instead she helped Henry make breakfast this time. The trio spent the day doing very little, blissfully enjoying just being together, the women sneaking kisses and soft touches when Henry was occupied.

It wasn't until the third day of dreamily lounging together; basking in the new relationship that something tried to pop their bubble.

*Bach Cello Suite No. 2 Prelude:* the suite I was talking about. This is my favorite version if you want to hear it.
"Please!" Henry bellowed.

They had all gotten ready for bed, the three brushing their teeth together and changing into pajamas for Henry and big comfortable shirts and underwear for the women. They were nearly ready when Henry went off book and had taken off screaming and running through the apartment like they were trying to put him into a meat grinder.

It had taken a tag team effort to trap the little, but scary fast boy, between the couch and the wall. When they finally grabbed him he collapsed into giggles at the game neither woman wanted to play. Once they had him, they shoved him into bed like a sack of potatoes and tightly wrapped the covers around him. He stopped struggling like the bed was base in a game of kick the can and instead began to beg for his bedtime story.

"Henry you spent your story time running from us. You don't get a story now."

"Just one?" he begged his bottom lip trembling.

"Hey, what did I just say, kid?"

A huge tear slipped down his face and Regina turned to her, all but pouting herself.

"Oh, you're so weak. All right, one. If you promise that tomorrow night you go to bed without a fight."

"Promise!" His eyes lit up but he shook his head vigorously when his mother planted herself on the edge of his bed, "No! You."

Regina pointed to herself surprised but smiled when he nodded happily.

Sliding in next to him so the boy could lay in the crook of her arm, she began to read of knights and white horses with long shimmering manes. Henry looked confused at first before he wordlessly reached up and pinched her lips closed in a silent command.

She didn't hesitate as she slipping into Sign with a small smile.

"*Regina's reading him a bedtime story.*"

Henry watched above him as the hands swirled and danced painting a picture from long ago, his eyes slowly beginning to droop. Just as he yawned his last yawn a little sleepy voice passed through his lips in more of a sigh than words, "I love you, 'Gina."

Regina looked to Emma having felt his breath but didn't know what he said. Emma didn't hesitate in translating, smiling down at them warmly.

Regina's face blushed beautifully for a moment as she processed Henry's words and then with a soft kiss to his forehead she whispered, "I love you too sweetheart."

Emma watched them for a few more moments longer while a thought passing casually through her mind.
If this woman isn't careful she's going to make me fall in love with her.

"He's asleep."

Regina nodded, trying to covertly wipe away a splash of wet under her eye.

"Are you okay?"

"Of course." Regina chuckled, lightly.

"What is it?"

Regina hesitated then seemed to decide on the truth, "I've never had anyone accept me so completely before, even if it's just a small boy who is doing the accepting."

Emma nodded leaning down and kissing her long and soft, leaking all of her feeling into it. God, she understood that feeling. Regina was smiling when Emma released her. "I need a shower."

Slowly she washed her hair, the delicious wine of domesticity making her drunk. What did her life look like now that Regina was in it? Was this how it would be? What would the next weeks, months look like? Her affection for Regina had surprised her; if she had expected it, she would have kept her son away from her to protect his feelings. What would they do when Regina was gone from his life leaving only memories and a valuable skill in a new language?

Something slammed heavily in the living room making Emma jump and then sigh. She understood completely why Regina was so damn noisy in all things she did but damn. Sleeping kid.

She stepped from the shower wrapped in her own thoughts replaying Henry's sleepy confession over and over in her mind as she quickly dried her hair and pulled her shirt back on. Perhaps she just shouldn't bother. How would Regina react if she emerged from the shower dripping wet and naked? She had just decided to find out when a whisper of voices caught her ears.

The hell?

"No!" A loud voice yelled followed by a high squeal.

Henry!

Swearing she threw her towel into the basket and tore out of the room. Did Regina know he was in trouble? She couldn't hear him! She headed toward Henry's room but twirled in an 180 when she heard Regina yell loud and strict.

She leapt over a set of blocks and froze in the living room, her mouth popping into an O.
Regina wore her darkened snarl of a mask clutching a sobbing Henry to her hip as he wrapped himself tightly around her neck. Though Killian was mere inches from the woman's fury-ripped face her arm was straight out, clearly blocking his entrance to the apartment.

**Killian.**

It wasn't right, it wasn't fair; it was perhaps one of the worst things Emma had ever done but she had forgotten about Killian completely; so happy in the new life that had begun on her way home from the dance club.

She knew instantly why Killian looked as if he could kill, Regina had clearly answered the door in nothing but Emma's favorite ribbed tank top and a pair of Emma's underwear. While the woman looked sexy as hell, it didn't take much to make the proper assumption.

"Killian," Emma said, wide-eyed.

"Oh, there's the woman of the hour."

Regina turned to her, fury and hurt washing through her eyes. She looked like a mama lion with her teeth bared and eyes wild, clutching the whimpering boy as if she would lunge for the throat of anyone who came too close. It was both maternal and passionately sexy.

"What the hell is going on?" Emma asked trying to take her still crying son but he shrieked and clung to the woman's neck like it was his lifeline.

Killian went to speak but Regina held a hand up shutting him up instantly, "I answered the door and he didn't like what he saw."

Emma frowned, "how did you know-"

"He was hitting the goddamned door so hard he woke Henry, who came and got me." She signed dryly.

"What's she saying?" Killian demanded. "I know she can speak, make her speak!"

"What's wrong with Henry?"

"He was calling Regina names!" Henry wailed into Regina's shirt, "She's my best friend, he can't do that! He's bad man!"

Emma rounded on the man, "You yelled at her until you made my five-year-old cry? Are you fucking serious?"

Killian looked murderous; "Of all the things we have to discuss at the moment, I think a crying child is not one of them."

Twin fury riddled faces turned on him and he took a visible step back. "Clearly it matters to us! God, I hope you never date a woman with a child again because FYI you suck at it!"

Regina's breath blew from her, laughter exploding from her lungs.

Killian began to swear and that sobered Emma completely. "Hey!" Emma held a warning finger out
at him.

Regina softly touched her arm and signed that she was going to take Henry back to his room.

"What is she saying?" Killian bellowed, earning a hard shove in the chest.

"I said hey! Control yourself or get the hell out of here!"

"Well excuse me if I'm a bit upset. I just found another woman, in her underwear, in my girlfriend's apartment – my allegedly straight girlfriend's apartment. And don't tell me, love, that it's not what I think because I'm not bloody stupid. That boy clung to her like she was his second mother. Then to top it off she wouldn't let me in the bloody apartment."

Emma blinked at him confused, "I never told you I was straight."

"You bloody well didn't tell me you were gay either Swan but oh does it make a few things make more sense."

"What? That wasn't ready to sleep with you? That wasn't because I'm also attracted to women, Killian. That was because you wouldn't stop pushing."

"Yeah. Right."

A mix of guilt and anger were fighting for control in her stomach. "Killian, I'm sorry."

"Sorry, don't tell me-"

"Wait, pause. Look, you can come in so my neighbors don't call the cops and we will talk but only if you are willing to keep your voice down."

"Keep my voice down? It's not like she can hear me."

Emma just stared impassively, waiting for him to fix the insulting remark.

Finally he shifted, uncomfortable under her judgment, and nodded once.

Emma poured them each a drink and they sat at the kitchen table together.

"Killian, I really am sorry. I feel so bad, I should have said something. I just-" she stopped herself before she said the word forgot.

"The whole time? Was it the whole time?"

"What? No! Just a few days ago. We've sort of been camped out so it was easy to forget the real word. I know that's no excuse. But I promise you nothing was happening before then. I mean," she shifted uncomfortably, "I knew I was attracted to her but I just kind of thought - look at her, she's hot as hell. I didn't realize it was more than just a sexual attraction, I swear."

"So she was right then. You're a lesbian." It didn't come out as a question.

She shrugged, "I don't know. Yes. No. I don't know!"

"You'll sleep with her but you won't sleep with me."

"Killian, I told you before I didn't sleep with you because of how hard you were pushing me. You never gave me time to feel comfortable in our relationship."
"Lesbian."

"Stop saying I'm a lesbian! If you want a direct answer you'll be disappointed. I don't know. I've never felt like I do with Regina, man or woman." He scoffed and slugged his drink. "But I am sorry that I didn't tell you. I swear I didn't mean to hurt you, Killian. You have to admit, though, it wasn't freaking working anyway."

"Oh I'm not hurt, Swan. No, I'm just annoyed that you chose such a defective person over me."

"What?" The word came out flat and monotone; already well on her way to offended.

"Well think about it, love. She can't talk to you. She's a woman so I know she can't do the things I would have done for you. You took a step-down."

*The typical male argument against women sleeping with women. Tool. Fucking tool.*

Emma chuckled dryly thinking of the orgasms she had experienced the last few nights. Many of which had nearly rendered her unconscious, unable to handle her body's reaction to Regina's fingers and mouth, "Yeah you go ahead and keep telling yourself that."

"Well Swan," He stood and stretched, his ego seeming to swell, "if you ever change your mind."

She shook her head before he could finish the rest and pushed him toward the door, "Oh and Killian," she stopped him just before he stepped out, "don't ever behave that way in front of my son again."

He scoffed and was met with a door closing in his face.

Regina, who had crawled into Emma's bed with a book in hand seeming surprised when she reappeared. "I thought you would be busy for a while."

Emma shrugged, pulling off her shirt and cuddling into Regina suggestively. She had planned on simply coming back and going to bed but the sight of the woman sprawled on her bed had cleared those thoughts.

"He started to say stupid things."

"Like?"

Emma shook her head, slipping her hand under Regina's tee shirt and gently massaging a nipple. Regina shuttered, her back arching instantly, hand wobbling slightly as she signed. "Tell me."

"Nothing to say, really." She pushed herself onto the woman's lap, shoving the book out of her way and kissed her cheek.

"You're not upset?"

Emma frowned, "I feel terrible. I really do, it was crappy of me to forget about him, which I really did - completely. But how can I be too upset when he's a tool and this is waiting in bed for me?"
Regina smiled and kissed her, catching her lip and sucking lightly. Emma purred and began to rock in her lap catching them both in a gasp. "What did he say to you before I got there?"

"Nothing important, just called me a few names."

Emma stopped rocking against her. "What did he call you?"

Regina bit her lip and shook her head, rocking Emma's hips for her. Emma fell into a rhythm, sliding herself against Regina's stomach.

"He said you could never get everything you needed from me because I'm a deaf woman," Regina said unexpectedly.

"What?" Emma took her face in her hands her breath falling fast against Regina's face, "He said that?"

"He did."

"You don't think that do you?" She asked trying to catch Regina's eye.

Regina shrugged and easily distracted her.

But Killian's general whatever-I-don't-care-it's-your-loss attitude did not hold for long. Twenty-four hours later Regina had regretfully vacated their blissful bubble, unable to fight obligations in the real world any longer.

Emma put on a movie for Henry and he watched gleefully as Snow White sang to birds and dwarfs mined underground.

Emma practiced with fervor. When his movie was done, she put on Cinderella for the boy and practiced until with a gasp her finger split along the string, drawing a substantial amount of blood. It was probably better; if she kept practicing like that she would put herself at risk for tendonitis; the string players cancer.

"Mama you practicing too hard." Henry chided; a professional on the subject by default.

"I know," she sighed "but I swear I have a really good reason."

"Why?" he asked, only half listening to her.

"Because. There might be an audition coming up!"

She had Henry's full attention now, his eyes wide and instantly tearful, "we're leaving?" and without any hesitation, her small son burst into tears.

"Oh, no, no, no!" she cried scooping him up and kicking herself.

_You freaking idiot, Swan._

"But I don't wanna to go!" he keened, "I like it here and I like Regina and Ruby! I don't wanna!"
"No, no," Emma said habitually bouncing him a bit as he cried, "No Henry, I meant there is an audition here."

An audition that, if I got it, would mean we could stay. We could settle essentially forever. We could make a real home with couches instead of cheap Craigslist futons and own more than a few small boxes of possessions. We could move out of this place and maybe into a condo. You could be in the same school district for your entire life. We could have roots and make plans past a few months from now because there would be no chance of a stray audition uprooting us and flying us off to god knew where. We could live a normal life, Henry.

She wanted to explain all of this to her wailing five-year-old but she knew it wouldn't be fair. The audition wasn't even a guarantee; the woman considering resigning her spot could simply change her mind overnight. Besides, even if she did resign, it was a million to one shot that Emma would win; she would be competing with the best in the world. So she just held her son until he hiccupped into silence. "Look Henry," She set him lightly on his feet and bent to his level, "I can't promise you that an audition won't come up and we won't have to move again but I'm going to do my very best to be sure that if we move again it will be the last time."

He didn't seem satisfied but returned to his movie, subdued and cuddling under his blanket with Monkeyz.

Emma kicked herself and practiced all the harder. If that audition became a possibility she was going to be ready and she was going to fucking win – for her son.

Arms shaking from the vigorous effort of the afternoon and finger bleeding she spent the EL ride to her performance that night stretching and cracking her knuckles. She wasn't worried that she wouldn't have the stamina for the concert that night, of course she would, she just hadn't spent this much time practicing in a while.

The hall was buzzing as it always was before a performance, musicians scattered around talking and fiddling with their instruments putting off the moment when they would enter the sweaty lights of the stage.

Emma looked around hopefully as she entered but there was no sight of Regina. She hadn't really expected her to be there. Instead, the eyes she met were those of Killian. He smirked, condescendingly and Emma looked away, still somewhat perturbed with him.

He chuckled and whispered something to August standing next to him who looked up intrigued.

The sight sent an annoyed grumble through her stomach. She could understand that he was hurt; she could understand that he was mad but she refused to let him get to her. His indignation would blow over and she could wait for that. She just needed to stay away from him for a little while. He clearly wanted some trouble. She sighed deeply, pulling out her cello and riffling through her music for the proper pieces of paper.

When she looked up, Killian and August were still watching her, smiles on their lips.
"What?" she barked making Killian smile broader. "Creepy much?"

She swung around and entered the stage, just for a place to go that was away from those angry hooded eyes. She sat and immediately began to feel comforted, in her zone.

She heard Killian approach from behind and scowled as the men planted themselves on either side of her, "So we have to know" he drawled slowly, "what is a crocodile-like in bed? It seems like things would be rather—sharp and scaly."

Emma opened her mouth to retort with something that would dig, perhaps explaining about the softness of the hair between her legs or the gentle taste of her lipstick but decided against it. Instead, she rolled her eyes, knowing if she went down that road she would only be fueling the fire, "shut up, Killian."

"I'm impressed," August said genuinely. "I mean she's a hard one to take. I can't get near her without worrying about her taking my dick off."

Emma swiftly pulled her bow across the strings, making a hard jarring noise and her point all at once. "We're just curious Swan. I mean, there must be an interesting story there. I saw her the other night in her underwear. She didn't seem so scaly then."

"Killian!" Emma whispered hoarsely over August's good-natured laughter.

Killian just shrugged, flipping through his music and playing at innocence.

August stood, still laughing heartily and clapped his friend on the shoulder, making the papers fly from Killian's hand, "Don't feel bad, man. Some men just aren't man enough to keep their woman." Emma's face reddened, she knew they were teasing one another in boyish humor but she didn't really want to hear it and she definitely did not want to be part of it, "Some men just turn their girls into lesbians."

She didn't see Killian jerk away from August, not at all amused by his razzing but she did hear the names he called him.

"Whoa, whoa, I'm just kidding bro!" August looked shocked that his playful banter had been taken to heart. "I'm sorry! I was kidding."

Killian spat a few more impolite words at him before, returning a few of his own, August departed back to the brass section.

Killian mumbled to himself, seething as he began to gather his flyaway papers. Emma leaned forward to pick the one in front of her up, planning to apologize yet again, feeling terrible for the hit his ego had just taken but Killian pushed past her to get it himself, swearing and bumping purposefully, vengefully into Emma's side—hard.

Emma gasped as she watched, helplessly as her exhausted arms jerked. Her beloved cello flew from them and crashed with a sickening, splintering crash to the stage floor.

The entire room, stage, and audience as one let out a horrified gasp and fell silent; the sharp twang of the strings the only noise as the cello rocked on its face for a moment and then stilled.

Emma closed her eyes against the sight.
I heard it. I heard the crack. I heard it. Shit, shit, shit, oh my god, I heard it.

The drop of a pin could have been heard in the hall as everyone stood, statues in their shock at what Killian had done; a few looking at Emma or Killian's faces but most staring wide eyes at the now still instrument. In the music world instruments were worshiped, not only because each instrument was unexcitedly expensive but also because they were unexpectedly sentimental.

Killian had just sinned.

Emma squeezed her eyes tighter, her fist closing tightly trying to fight the panic that was stirring inside of her. She had bought that cello when she was nineteen years old. It was her companion. It was her best friend. She was still paying off the many thousands of dollars loaned from the bank. If it was damaged beyond repair - yes, it was insured but if it were damaged enough she would never be able to replace it.

Oh god, oh god, I can't look. I heard it crack. I can't look.
"Swan," Killian breathed, aghast.

His voice broke the calm and Emma dropped to her knees feeling tears begin to flow. Turning over the lifeless body she groaned deep and low in her chest in agony; the bridge, the small flap of wood that held the strings away from the body of her cello was laying sentinel on the floor beside the scene of the accident and a small hole gaped at her in the cello's face from where it had been ripped away.

The stage exploded, people rushing at Killian, shoving him back yelling in their whispered stage voices. August stood in the front of the line with Killian's shirt bunched in his fist as if he were going to hit the man.

Emma felt herself unwillingly break into rough sobs. Her cello was broken. She knew of no repairman in this city and even if she did her bank account was still fairly drained from her move there. How much would the W.C.C.G. insurance cover? Even if they covered everything sometimes holes could never be repaired – sometimes repairing a hole changed the sound of the instrument and, therefore, the owner's ability to play it entirely.

What am I going to do?

"Is it playable?" Mary leaned over her but Emma could tell from Mary's tone that she knew it wasn't. "Come on." She pulled Emma up and took the two of them, Emma and her broken cello, backstage.

As soon as they were out of the stage lights Emma's soft crying turned into full-blown weeping. Mary wrapped her arms around her for a moment understanding and then with the authoritative tone of the first violinist she held her at arms length, "I'm sorry, I want this to not be true but the show is supposed to start any second." She told her of a colleague in the audience whom she was sure had locked their cello in one of the instrument lockers.

Emma nodded, understanding and not at all offended.

The show must go on. For now, anyway.

She had a few minutes to gather herself before the other instrument was shoved into her hand and she was ushered back on stage.

She wished people would stop sending her furtive glances as if they were worried she was going to shatter apart. The more looks she got the more her panic turned, churning into hot anger. She could feel Killian behind her, wanting to reach out and apologize, but she internally begged him not to; she wasn't sure how professional she could be in that moment and time.

The new cello was fine but she didn't like it. It felt slightly wrong like driving someone else's car into a new city.
Emma played terribly that night only adding to her mortification. Her mistakes weren't because of the foreign instrument - she just couldn't focus. She knew no one would blame her but she couldn't help but to blush scarlet avoiding all eyes as they took their bows and rush off stage as soon as was possible.

So fucked, so fucked, I'm so fucked.

She handed Mary the other cello and returned to her own, which lay broken and bleeding on the table. She began to cry again, this time, tears of fury. Slowly she packed it up, unsure of what else to do with it, and turned to head for the door just needing an out.

"Hey guys," Mary called from the stage "I need you to stick around for a few minutes. The president of the board is on her way down with a few questions. I know, I know, it's late. We will get you out of here quickly."

Emma instantly felt just a bit lighter, Regina was exactly who she wanted to see just then. Even the thought of her soothed some of the burning ache in her chest as everything about her craved the woman, the comfort she knew she could find in her so-called crocodile.

The small group of people gathered on the stage, instruments packed looking furious and terrified all at once. No one was speaking to Killian. He took a seat in the middle of the group, looking like he might vomit and Emma, needing to be as far from him as possible, sat on the very corner edge of the group, her back to everyone making it as clear she didn't want to talk. She could hear the mumblings around her, gossiping and whispering about the event but no one spoke directly to her, reading her message loud and clear. She was glad.

Soon she heard the tale-tell clicking of heels coming through the stage door and looked up hopefully.

_Soon. She promised herself._

Regina was purple in the face, her lips pressed into a thin line, the professional mask twitching in place looking as if she was going to fry someone up and eat them for dinner. Even Ruby stalked behind her looking violent, wolf-like in defense of her friend.

The sight of them silenced the entire crowd instantly, children in the presence of the school's furious Principal.

Regina's eyes found Emma's face and for a moment her foot falls stuttered, shock crossing her face at the obvious red puffy eyes and tear tracks Emma knew she wore.

While Regina headed to the front of the class demanding every eye Ruby came to Emma's side, wrapping her arms around the woman's neck, leaning against her back in wordless support for a moment before stepping into her role as Regina's ears.

_Hands on her hips, her lip curling into an evil grin as she spoke to the group, "What the hell happened?"_
Silence met her question.

"What the hell happened?" she roared.

Emma opened her mouth to speak, the only one in the group not intimidated but Killian cut her off, "I bumped into Emma, her cello fell and it broke."

Emma whipped toward him knowing she was going to scream but people around her did it for her, a cacophony of it-was-on-purpose's and you're-making-it-sound-like-an-accident-asshole's surrounding her.

Regina held up her hand, demanding silence.

"I think there was some type of altercation between Killian, August, and Emma just before it happened." Mary supplied in a quiet voice, her head cocked slightly to the side as if unsure of what she was saying.

Regina glared for a moment before insisting, "Everyone but those three may leave."

Emma sat in her seat, longing for the mask hiding Regina's true face to fall away, panic about the thing that brought all of her income still clutching her chest suffocating her.

Ruby appeared at her side again, clutching her shoulder. The comfort from the touch was like a cooling sip of water on her throat that was burning alive from the screams she held back.

"Tell me," She demanded of August who stood his ground next to Emma despite those almost black eyes burrowing into him.

Briefly and honestly he told Regina everything that had happened from him teasing Killian to Killian purposefully bumping into Emma.

Regina's chest heaved as he continued, her anger visibly rising as she understood the situation, "You idiot!" she yelled though whether at August or Killian they weren't completely sure. "What were you thinking?"

"In my defense," he said slowly, "I never meant for any of this to happen. It was an accident."

Emma bit her tongue. She bit it hard, willing herself to stay quiet, willing herself to stay professional. Her wicked tongue had gotten her into trouble more than once in her life and she had learned the hard way to keep her trap closed.

"To be fair, friend, it didn't seem like it was." August shrugged.

Regina approached Killian with all of her distaste, all of her loathing evident on her face, "what were you thinking?"

He took a step back, his face growing remote and defensive, "I said it was an accident."

"Is this how you were taught to behave, Mr. Jones? Is it? Is this how you as a musician feel you can behave? An instrument is broken!" Regina began to tear into the man about professionalism but the more she did the angrier Killian's face became until finally he exploded, "I made a mistake!" He bellowed, "However yelling at me on behalf of your girlfriend is equally as unprofessional as what I did!"

Emma jumped to her feet, fury rippling off of her, a burning force.
"This is not," Regina screamed right back, "because Emma is my girlfriend, this is because of your rash and juvenile behavior!" She scowled deeply, "this is absolutely unacceptable, Mr. Jones!" In her vicious anger, for just a moment, Regina lost control of her anger, of her voice and a large honking sound escaped her lips.

Regina froze, mortified, her face going magenta.

Emma's eyes shot wide; she knew Regina had spent years, most of her life in fact in speech therapy learning to avoid a moment such as that one. Though she couldn't see it in Regina's defiant face she knew the woman would want to run away and hide.

Killian's eyebrows rose to his hairline at the sound but they settled into a disgusting look of smugness, a single, "heh" escaping his lips.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Emma roared at the top of her lungs launching herself at him.

She had to hit him. She had to get to her stupid fucking ex-boyfriend and punch him in his stupid little fucking face.

August and Ruby caught her around the middle, yells of surprise escaping them. She thrashed wildly, needing to sink her fist into some part of him.

As a pair, Ruby and August pulled her through the stage door.

The cool night air hit her like a brick to the face and sobered her a little. Breathing hard, she yanked away from them swearing and pacing.

"Emma, I'm sorry," August said softly, "I know this is partially my fault. Let me buy you a drink."

In truth she didn't blame August, he had just been teasing his friend; she blamed herself for not remembering Killian once she had fallen into Regina's arms. She blamed herself for dating the asshole at all. Still she glared at him, her impression of Regina perfect as she snarled, "you better buy me fucking several."

Informed that Regina would handle her broken cello for the night, Emma went to the bar that was becoming a frequent hangout and sat, fuming, in a bar stool staring at August expectantly.

"What about you Ruby?" he asked a glint in his eye. Ruby smiled back mischievously. The innocent flirting spiked Emma's want to hit something. She glared at August who grinned a little and ordered a double row of shots for each of them. The three slammed them back quickly, cringing and shuddering.

"Again!" he called to the bartender.

After her fifth shot, Emma began to feel a bit better. She wasn't drunk but she was well on her way and happy about it.

After her seventh she was drunk and nothing had ever felt better. She was beginning to wish for Regina. She was going to meet them when she was finished with Killian, right?

*Ugh, Killian and his stupid face. I hope she's serving it on a platter.*
"So." August said throwing his arm over Emma's shoulders, his inebriation making him bold, "you and the Evil Queen."

Emma snarled at him not quite drunk enough to allow badmouthing of Regina, "shut up, August."

"No, no, no!" Ruby cried, wrapping her arm around her friend's waist and cuddling in closely, "Regina has been refusing to talk to me about it. I want to know!"

Emma looked at both of them and rolled her eyes, "I am so not talking about this. Bartender, another round please."

"Emma!" Ruby cried shaking her, "tell me! I've been dying to know. How did it happen? Is she good? I always thought that sign language would make a lesbian really good in bed. All of those small movements, you know?"

Emma's lip twitched. She would never have shared this information with August alone but with her friend Ruby – she grinned, "It does."

Ruby slapped the bar as if to say I knew it!

"She took me dancing -"

"Wait, she can go dancing?" The slightly drunken women glared and he held his hands in the air, eyes wide.

"Why, because she's deaf?" Ruby challenged, "Some of the greatest dancers have been deaf. There is a deaf dancer at The Joffrey Ballet now as a matter of fact."

"Hey, hey! I'm not trying to start anything. I just didn't know. Cut me some slack ladies, sheesh."

Ruby turned back to Emma satisfied, "so?"

Emma laughed and recounted the evening up until, blushing, she had to stop or reveal what had come after they had returned to Emma's apartment.

"So are you happy? Are you in love now?"

Emma laughed, blushing and feeling lighthearted for the first time since that sickening crack, "I don't know. Honestly Ruby, I'm a little worried about doing this."

"Doing what? Being with Regina?"

Emma nodded slowly, unsure how to say what had been worrying her.

"Why?" Ruby bellowed a bit too loudly, ticking her shot glass against Emma's and August's before they swallowed them down and then glaring at her, "It's not because she's deaf is it?"

"Ruby." Emma drawled just staring at her.

Ruby narrowed her eyes for a moment contemplating "Then what?"

"I don't know - I'm worried about Henry. What will life be like for him when she's gone? What will it be like for me? I can't imagine how he will take her leaving when we break up."

"Break up? Why are you breaking up already?"
"What?"

"You just said when she's gone and how will he take her leaving after you break up. Why do you say when, shouldn't it be if? If you guys break up?" August grinned at Emma's blank face.

"Did I say when?"

"Yes."

"Oh."

"It hasn't even occurred to you that she might not leave, has it?"

Emma scowled, "Have you ever been in a relationship that didn't end?"

"No, but why assume she's going to leave?"

Emma didn't have an answer. Besides that was simply how things had always worked so she kept her mouth closed.

"That isn't it, though, is it?" Ruby eyed her.

"What?"

"There's something else."

They took another group shot, "I don't know." She gasped at the burn.

Liar, Ruby signed.

"Am not!" August looked confused.

"Then tell me." Ruby goaded.

Emma's drunken state made the confession slip past her lips before she had given it permission, "I don't know if I can do this! I think if I let myself be with her, I mean really be with her, with no bullshit then I – I'll fall in love with her."

Ruby and August burst into an uproarious fit of laughter.

"What?" Emma asked in a quiet voice, too vulnerable to take the laughter well.

"Emma!" Ruby chided, slapping her on the arm, "if you're worried about that then you already are!"

Emma was drunkenly blindsided, an SUV of words slamming into her at full speed.

"Yeah," August laughed, "let's just hope Killian doesn't break her too."

Ruby snorted, "I'd like to see him try."

"Very funny mate." The accented voice said dryly from behind them.

The three spun around to face the villain of the hour.

The man looked like death warmed over; clearly Regina had put him through his paces. Emma shot up, shoving him hard in the chest before she could stop and make herself think, "My cello, Killian! My cello? What is wrong with you? You fucking broke my cello because I wouldn't sleep with you?"
Because I would rather sleep with Regina? Are you fucking kidding me?"

Ruby tried halfheartedly to pull her back but seemed smart enough not to try too hard.

Killian winced but said nothing as she shoved him again and again.

"That was my livelihood, Killian! That was literally the food in my son's mouth! That was my rent! How dare you! How dare you! Do you know everything I will lose if I lose this job? My apartment! My son's food! We will have to move again and I just promised him we wouldn't!" With that last statement, she shoved him hard enough that he crashed into the table behind them. "All over Regina, you fucking idiot?"

The bartender shouted a warning at them but Emma ignored it continuing to shout and hit Killian, "We will have nowhere to go! What am I supposed to do without a fucking cello?" Emma screamed, her fist connecting with his chin in a flash of hot pain. Suddenly gruff hands grabbed her by the back of the shirt and the ponytail, making her yelp in pain, a familiar teenage fight or flight taking over. She writhed against the hands, doing her best to make contact with the body behind her, not entirely sure what was happening until with a cry she flew out the front door. She sat for a minute blinking confused as Ruby, August and Killian came flying after her, the huge bouncer yelling at them to sober up.

Clicking heels fell beside her as Regina finally appeared, yelling at the bouncer and helping her up. Emma cradled her hand growling.

"What the hell happened to your hand?"

Ruby and August roared with laughter, "She punched him! She punched him right in the fucking face!"

Regina's eyes flashed, "Ms. Swan, really? It's bad enough your cello is damaged, do you really need a broken hand too?"

Emma shrugged anger still hot in her chest, "Not the first punch I've thrown."

Regina pursed her lips, "Indeed."

Exchanging looks with Ruby Emma's face cracked into a grin as she asked, "Did we just get kicked out of the bar?"

Ruby doubled over, staggering a bit, the weight of her laughter almost too much for her skinny legs, "I think we did!"

"What happened?" Regina looked between them expectantly.

"Well Ms. Mills," August said pointedly slurring badly, "we thought it might be best to get Ms. Swan very drunk."

"What?" Ruby did her best to interpret, her hands slurring on their own.

Regina's lip twitched until ripping away from her, Emma charged again at Killian, her anger remembered. "You!"

Regina held her back easily.

"No, lemme hit him again!"
"Really, Mr. Jones." Her voice like acid, "I remember instructing you specifically to leave Ms. Swan alone for this evening. Go home. Get yourself together."

His jaw flexed, "I will, I know, I'm sorry. I just want to say," he tried to take Emma's hands but she ripped them from him with a roar, "I just want to say, I am so very sorry Emma. It was an accident but it was an accident that should have been avoided. I will fix it. I will cover any costs that the insurance doesn't. I have a good repairman. We can take it to him tomorrow."

Emma glared, "remind me of that when I'm sober."

Regina rolled her eyes, agitated, "Now please, Mr. Jones. Go home."

Killian lingered for a second longer before with a sigh he turned from them.

When he was gone Regina finally turned to her, pulling her into her arms, "Are you okay?"

Emma blinked at the sign, seeing double.

Regina kissed her lightly and much to Emma's drunken embarrassment the kiss ignited the usual flame in Emma.

Regina chuckled, feeling Emma's sudden spark, "You're quite drunk, aren't you?"

Emma scrunched up her nose, a little embarrassed and gave her best puppy dog eyes; "I guess we went at it pretty hard."

Regina's eyebrow tilted a bit at her choice of words.

"Well, Ms. Swan," Regina said kissing her in a way that made both Ruby and August clear their throats and look away, "I think I had better get you home so that I may go at it pretty hard."

They sat on the train together, Regina eyeing Emma as Emma giggled over anything and everything.

"What is Henry going to think of you?" She mused.

"Well let's hope he's asleep at this hour!"

"Very true."

"Plus, Becca will be happy. I promised her that I would give her a huge drunk tip every time I came home and I wasn't sober. You know, just in case I was later than I said or anything like that."

"A drunk tip?"

"Yup. A drunk tip." Emma kissed her cheek, "Are you staying?"

Regina grinned her wide pearly grin, "do you want me to?"

"Yes," She said simply enough.

"Then yes."

Emma nodded. "You called me your girlfriend."

"I beg your pardon?"

"You called me your girlfriend. When you were yelling at Killian and his stupid face."
"Aren't you?"

Emma giggled a bit, "Am I?"

Regina smiled, stroking the beautiful face before her, "Yes. You are."

Emma smiled, sighing as she rested her head against Regina's shoulder, "Okay."
Chapter 13

Killian made good on his promise. The following day Emma, entirely hungover, accompanied the unusually quiet man to his favorite repair shop.

He grimaced guiltily each time he saw her playing the foreign cello they had together rented. Emma was glad. The cello had a tendency to fall out of tune as she was playing, making her sound like an idiot and straining her muscles. The upside to this, if there was one, was that any and all angry or vengeful behavior from the newly dumped man had ceased the moment the cracking noise had sounded across the stage.

It wasn't until the first week of October that her instrument was back in her hands. She spent a week crooning to it, practicing and becoming reacquainted. It took a good amount of effort on Regina and Henry's part before they were able to tear her away and get her to the local Halloween store.

Henry was elated, running between the gaudy make-up sets and the masks, which left a thrilled but slightly hesitant look on his face.

"So what is the dress?" Emma asked, pulling on a pointed witches hat on Regina's head. "Cute."

Regina laughed, modeling it for Henry and then shrugged, "It's the annual Once Upon A Time Halloween Gala. My parents organization is a huge donor for it every year so I always have to go."

"And you want me to go with you? To help you represent your parents company?" Emma asked skeptically.

Regina just smirked.

"What about Henry? He loves Halloween. We have to take him Trick or Treating."

Regina looked surprised, "Of course we will. The Gala doesn't start until after his bedtime. We can take him to a neighborhood trick or treating site that I know and then have a babysitter come to my loft."

Emma scowled, she was fairly sure that no amount of money in the world would convince Becca to babysit Halloween night instead of going out and being young with her friends.

Regina read her face perfectly, "I assume Becca will be otherwise occupied. I thought I would go through a babysitting service."

"A service?" Emma blanched.

"Yes, I hear there is one that caters specifically to my building."

"And by you hear you mean you know, right? You own the building."

Regina just grinned.

Henry pulled on Regina's arm to get her attention and signed quickly, "Can I go as deaf for Halloween?" Both Emma and Regina laughed until they had tears running down their faces.

Emma had assumed her boy would want to go a fairytale character again this year, perhaps a prince or a knight as he had been almost every year previous but she was surprised to find that Henry had caught on to the idea of being a scary monster. She had to admit the development saddened her a
They gathered his white grease paint and plastic fangs with ease, vampire lore forever in demand. Emma's costume, however, was not as easy. She had spent a few nights, the rare occasions when Regina was not settled beside her, flicking through photos of the ball in former years. Her sense of intimidation grew with each photo. She was beginning to realize she couldn't just go as Frankenstein's Bride in a cheap throw away costume from the corner Spirit store. The people in these photographs looked as though they had paid handsomely to resemble Boris Karloff and Marilyn Monroe themselves.

Concerned, Emma had confided her worries to Regina who had promptly looked at her as if she was crazy. "Of course, everyone goes to a professional before the ball."

"Oh, I uh, crap."

"I have been going to the same company for my costume and makeup since I was a child."

"Of course you have." Emma laughed uncomfortably, rocking on her heels a bit, hands shoved nervously into her pockets.

"Emma, I assumed that you would be making an appointment too."

Emma went to protest but Regina silenced her with a kiss, "Don't worry, it's in the foundation's budget every year, make-up for myself and a date."

So Emma had relaxed, knowing that the problem was going to be taken care of by a team of professionals.

"Is it time to get dressed?" Henry cried jumping on Emma Halloween morning, his knees planting firmly in her gut.

"Not yet, kid." She coughed.

Fifteen minutes later –

"Is it time to get dressed now?"

"I promise I'll let you know, kid."

Finally, she allowed him to put on his cape and watched as he ducked and weaved throughout the apartment laughing his best evil villain laugh and gnashing plastic vampire teeth.

"Am I scary, mommy?"

"You're terrifying, kid."

Regina appeared in their apartment door around dusk making Emma's eyes pop. For the first time since Emma had met the woman she was in a pair of tight but comfortably worn jeans and a tee shirt; her face clean of makeup and her hair was pulled back into a light ponytail. It was the realest and the most attractive she had ever looked.
"What?" Regina asked after releasing Henry from his you're-so-damn-cute-with-your-plastic-fangs hug.

Emma smiled a little she clicked his movie back on, face purposefully blank, Emma pulled Regina by her hand closing the door behind them. Without hesitation, she pressed Regina into the back of the door her mouth on hers. Regina yelped in surprise, her body bowing into Emma in sudden response as Emma hungrily cupped the angle in-between her legs, moaning lightly as she did. Emma couldn't get enough. There was never enough.

"Not that I'm complaining," Regina said into Emma's mouth, "but what's with you?"

Emma sighed hating that she had to pull away from the woman's skin in order to speak to her, "I don't think you've ever been so fucking hot." Slowly, languidly Emma signed suggestive words telling Regina exactly what she wanted to do to her just then.

The brunette blushed deeply and bit her lip as Emma ran her hands over everything she still marveled that she was allowed to touch.

No matter how many times, how many ways she had this woman – and she had indeed had her in so very many ways - her longing for her only grew, tenfold.

Quickly, she dropped to her knees; pulling one leg over her shoulder she buried her face in between Regina's clothed apex, biting softly. Regina groaned at the pressure, grabbing her hair hard and pulling her back to her feet, sinking her tongue deeply into the blonde's mouth.

Emma smiled and with a slight wiggle pulled the jeans down just far enough, freeing one leg. Near frantic, she slipped her fingers between Regina's lips clutching her bottom jaw as she dropped back down to her knees, pulling down Regina's already panting mouth so her chin pressed heavily against her chest. Cupping her hand over Regina's mouth, she threw the leg back over her shoulder and let her tongue curl into Regina's velvet sweetness.

Regina sprang against Emma, her outcry muffled by Emma's purposely placed hand. Watching the woman above her she quickly rolled her tongue again and teeth sank into the skin of her palm. She yelped and grinned.

She curled again, hard, doing her best to be quick.

And again.

And again, making small circles, enjoying the woman coming apart so quickly.

And again.

Just as Regina began to shake, Emma pulled away, clutching her jaw and kissing her roughly.

She checked her face and hair in the mirror, pretending not to notice Regina gaping at her in shock and with a quick, almost impersonal smile she left the bedroom.

"You ready?"

Henry grinned.

"Got your sleepover bag?" He lifted the full to exploding bag.

Regina stumbled into the living room looking much like a cartoon character after it was hit over the
head with a frying pan or a mallet.

Emma caught her eye, her smirk growing as Regina stared back, red in the face and disoriented.

"I don't think that's ever happened to me before," Regina mumbled, stunned.

"What's happened?" Henry tilted his head, confused.

"'Gina had too much Halloween candy!"

"'Gina!" Henry stomped his foot hands going to his hips, "you're not asupposed to eat that many!"

Regina just blinked at him blankly.

The trio took a quick drive to the outskirts of town heading toward an area Regina seemed to know well. The streets were bustling with parents chasing after their children yelling empty threats about looking both ways and not eating candy from their bags. Flying from the car the moment it stopped, Henry looked like a horse waiting at the gate to be released. Emma went around the car planning to give Henry yet another lecture on Trick or Treating safety but Regina grabbed her by the arm, pulling her ear close to her lips, "Don't think that I won't get revenge for that. I can barely sit down, Ms. Swan."

Emma chuckled, trying to ignore the feeling her words sent through her body, "Oh please do, Ms. Mills. Please do."

Henry's spirits were high as he soared from house to house, laughing, showing off his candy and making friends as the same children seemed to follow him.

"Henry!" Regina called as he ran to join the others at the grandest house on that block, "Let's skip that one. Look, that one over there has a huge crowd in front of it. They must give out something really good."

As Henry began to grow tired he fell in step between them, clutching their hands tightly and only running at half speed up the walkways of the houses.

"We need to go" Regina signed, "our appointments are in an hour and I assume you want to check his candy before giving him any." Emma nodded. "And ration it out." Emma leered teasingly. When it came to dietary restrictions Regina was far stricter than Emma had always been. It wasn't that she didn't see her point as much as she had a strong attitude of well - he's five but she kind of liked that Regina cared about what Henry ate and, therefore, let her step in when she felt she should.

Nervous excitement shot through Emma again at the mention of the appointments. She had never had her makeup done and she couldn't help but to be excited. She wasn't sure exactly what her costume was going to look like, she and the gorgeous dreadlocked make-up artist had discussed general ideas but in the end, Emma had decided to give the woman full artistic license. She couldn't wait to see what the woman came up with as well as to see this hidden costume Regina was refusing to share.

"Okay, Henry are you ready to see our make up?"

He grinned yawning, "Can I have a candy?"

"So I get to sleep here?" He cried in awe of the huge sunroom. It had been weeks of dating and yet somehow they had never gotten around to a sleepover at Regina's; perhaps because sleeping in the
black and white loft required forethought enough to break their routine and settle Henry and the sitter there before heading to rehearsal. As a matter of fact, they had only been over when Regina needed to stop at home for something before heading to the Swan apartment.

"Sure do!" Emma cried, swinging him up in the air and tossing him, screaming giggles into the middle of the soft bed. Regina joined in, blowing raspberries on his exposed tummy.

"Does this mean that I get to sleep here too?" She mouthed soundlessly to Regina. The woman grinned, reminding Emma of the promise she had made earlier.

Emma youthfully smirked and left to dump the huge pillowcase half full of candy onto the silver kitchen island, shuffling through and immediately ripping open a bite-sized Snickers for herself. Regina tsked as she passed behind her. "I'm checking it for poison!" Emma called knowing full well that Regina hadn't heard.

The yellow light flashed in the corner and Emma searched her mind for a second trying to remember the colors.

Purple was for the phone.

Blue was the kitchen/stove timer.

Red was the fire alarm.

Yellow was the front door and downstairs.

She trotted to the intercom, "Who is it?"

"Emma? Hey, it's Amy."

"Come on up!"

"Makeup." She signed to Regina and began to dish out a small bowl of candy for Henry to snack on that evening putting the rest into a large bowl hidden on top of the fridge.

Amy kissed her cheek as they met in the kitchen with a warm it's nice to finally meet you. "And this is my girlfriend, Regina." Amy smiled and shook Regina's hand. Emma coughed, trying to cover a chuckle as she noticed the small jealous scowl cover her girlfriend's lips.

"And this is Michael, he's going to do your makeup, Regina." They shook hands.

"How do you want to do this?" Emma asked, smirking at Regina over Amy's shoulder, toying with the green woman.

Regina narrowed her eyes a bit, "Why don't you two use the downstairs bathroom and we'll use the upstairs."

"Right."

Putting The Little Vampire on the TV in the lofted living room Emma kissed Henry's head and reminded him that he was welcome to come down and watch if he wanted.

"So you should get into your costume first. You're going to need some help with that. Go ahead and take everything off and put this on.

Emma's eyebrow cocked at the white thong, "What exactly did I sign myself up for?"
Amy laughed, turning to give her privacy.

Emma hurriedly stripped down, pulling on the garment and then stood still, unashamed in her nakedness, allowing Amy to dress her. The costume consisted of snow opaque white tights and white ballet style slippers, which she would put on last. Amy pulled the tights into place without a struggle.

"How often do you go to the gym?"

Emma chuckled, "not as much as I would like to. I have a five-year-old so I'm the queen of at home workout tapes."

Amy nodded through the small talk, throwing a light fluttering cloth over her torso. Emma's breasts were small, so they fit without issue under the odd shirt - if you could call it that. The top was a light crème color with spots of light lace around the bottom that hung barely past her hipbones and gathered into ruching over a single shoulder.

Amy adjusted it and laughed as a breast peeked from either side of the sash–like top. "See this is what you needed my help with." She first tied the large snow-white sash around her waist, cinching the billowing material and turned to her arsenal of makeup products. She pulled out some kind of special tape and stuck the shirt to the far side of her breast on the shoulder that held the ruching and then taped the shirt so it crossed down her throat and chest. A just short of an indecent amount of her side breast was left exposed then letting the cloth trail purposefully down to her waist; she taped the cloth so her right rib remained bare.

Amy followed the same trail along her back so that the majority of Emma's right side was naked.

I'm going to be so cold.

Lastly, she reached for Emma's slightly translucent snow-white gloves that went from her fingertips all the way up to the hollow before her armpits. Amy quickly taped those as well to keep them from springing back on themselves.

"Okay now sit down and we'll do your hair."

In the chair, Amy teased Emma's hair lightly, playing up her natural curl before pulling it back in a very loose chignon leaving two tendrils of hair to frame her face. Studying Emma's face for a long moment she dived in, getting to work on the makeup.

Henry who had appeared mid hair sat transfixed for a long while, perhaps the longest Emma had ever seen him sit as Amy worked.

"How do I look, kid?" Henry seemed lost for words.

Anticipation had been building and just when Emma was going to ask to see or explode from the anticipation, Amy stepped back looking relieved at the product and said, "Okay take a look."

Hesitantly she stood to face the mirror and gasped.

Her skin, which was pale at the best of times, had been gently doused in something white making her glow opalescent. The makeup on her face seemed light, shades of blue making her seem as if she had
been touched by Jack Frost himself; but the warmth in her cheeks and lips made her seem healthy, vibrant and beautiful.

Her nose and cheeks had been angled, giving her the look of a classic beauty. Over her shoulders, cheeks and eyebrows was a dusting of something that looked very much like snow that had caught and frozen in place on her skin, the line of flakes flowing into her hair and spread, tinting her usually golden tangles into a soft shimmering white. In the center of her head held a small crown made from clear crystal quartz that hinted at royalty but was soft enough that it held a whisper of humility.

She couldn't believe she was looking at herself. The woman before her eyes pulled words like soft and quiet, shy and demure - wise and strong to mind, only one of which she would use for herself.

"Amy!" Emma breathed, "I can't believe it."

"I have to say, I'm quite proud of this work." The make-up artist grinning and snapped a picture with her phone.

"And the tape will hold?"

"Within reason. I'll send you with a roll just in case, though."

"Is Regina ready yet?"

Henry rolled his eyes, "she's been ready forever! She's scary mommy!"

"Oh?"

Taking a deep breath, hoping she liked it Emma stepped into her white ballet style slippers and stepped from the bathroom. She was met instantly with a gasp, which could only be returned as she laid eyes on her girlfriend.

Emma couldn't help but to start at the bottom of the woman and work her way up; eyes running quickly over the knee high, black riding boots and up onto the tight black leather pants. She took in the blood red jacket that squared on her shoulders, making them seem flat and long. She followed the sleeves that clung tightly to her arms before, at the elbow, billowing out into a flair ending in a thick black cuff stuffed with white lace.

The jacket held five small brass buttons that pulled the cloth skin taunt over the woman's ribcage before meeting at the top of the leather pants at her belly button. Where the pants and the jacket met, the cloth shot out into a severe V hugging tight from the belly button to the hips and out curling in on itself slightly, leaving the leather pants and boots entirely exposed. The top button was nestled low in her cleavage as the cloth there too spread into a wide V, accented by a sharply angled collar that rested flat along her collarbones but then shot upright and stiff to cup behind the choker adorned neck.

Her hair was pulled into a tight up-do, piled suavely on top of her head, highlighting the make-up darkened face. Her cheeks angled, her eyes cat-eyed and dark, topped off with blood red lipstick that matched her coat.

If Emma in her soft whites and creams was supposed to represent innocence and pale beauty then Regina was supposed to represent wickedness and sex. The impression emphasized by the sudden hungry look in Regina's eyes at the sight of her girlfriend.

"Fuck, Regina."
"Mama!" Henry bellowed, "Bad word."

Regina's eyebrow quirked. "you look —" Regina let the sentence fall but the sudden tightness of her jaw made her point clear.

"Who are you supposed to be?" Emma asked feeling suddenly as timid as her costume hinted at under Regina's hungry glare. Regina laughed deeply and pulled a perfectly polished red apple from behind her back, "What is it August calls me? The Evil Queen."

Emma bit her lip. Hard.

"And who are you supposed to be?"

"She's Snow!" Henry cried but Emma shook her head.

"No." Emma licked her lips lightly trying to hide the lust she felt for the wildly sensual woman in front of her, "Well it's a gala themed around legends so Amy says I am to call myself the White Princess."
Chapter 14

Pictures were taken. Henry. Henry and Emma. Henry. Emma and Regina. Emma. Henry. Regina. Henry. Regina and Henry. Henry. Emma's favorite had to be the shot they took to send to August, who had in the past weeks become something of a friend to them. Regina had held the apple above her head facing away from the camera, her arm cocked in a 120-degree angle, her other arm thrown carelessly behind her and an evil leer on her face as she looked up at the presented poisonous trophy. Emma could understand with that look on Regina's face why Henry had said she was scary.

August responded immediately exclaiming "THE EVIL QUEEN LIVES!"

Once pictures were squared away and the babysitter had arrived, Regina took her hand, kissing her lightly to protect Emma's pale lips from her own gory red ones and they started down the elevator together throwing glances every now and then at the other.

Emma couldn't decide if she was nervous excited or nervous going to throw up. This was her first benefit gala ever, let alone as the homo arm candy of one of the biggest donors and social executives in the city.

What if I make an ass out of myself?

What if I make an ass out of Regina?

Crap, I should have called in sick to this event.

When they arrived at the event, Emma's mouth dropped. The building was a huge beautiful old theater converted from its usual Prohibition-era look into a twisting glamorous nightmare as cobwebs and other typically tacky decorations were clearly applied with the most knowledgeable of hands. A huge banner hung on the outside of the building reading "C.H. Mills' Foundation and Gold Enterprises presents Chicago's '35th Annual Once Upon A Time Halloween Gala'". Emma blanched a little, catching Regina's eye "When you said that you were the representative of your foundations you neglected to tell me that one of your foundations is putting on the whole freaking event."

Regina shrugged, "It's silly to say my foundations."

"Oh?"

"Yes. First, it's my mother's foundation I just sit on the board of both and second, it's only one foundation; C.H. Mills' Foundations owns W.C.C.G."

Emma scoffed, "Oh, right. Of course."

I am so in over my head.

Stepping from the car Emma did her best to copy Regina's regal demeanor, chin held high, slightly impassive look on her face. If Emma had learned anything from fitting in nowhere, it was that in
order to fit in anywhere all you had to do was fake it.

They entered the building with literal paparazzi flashing their cameras and calling to Regina. She paused on the steps; turning and tilted her head in greeting while shots were snapped. Emma simply held lightly to her arm doing her best impression of cool and collected when on the inside she wanted to run crying holy shit they're taking my picture.

"Ms. Mills." A man just to the west of them called as they entered the grand hall. Emma wondered for just a moment if she should let Regina know someone was calling her.

*Why hadn't she brought Ruby? Is she expecting me to interpret for her?*

She panicked for a moment knowing she couldn't do it.

Softly she bumped her elbow into Regina's and nodded toward the man limping in their direction. Regina gave her one last twinkling smile before her face melted into the aloof deadpan of the president of the board, her hand reaching out for his, "Mr. Gold."

"Ms. Mills."

"This is my companion, Emma Swan. Ms. Swan this is Carlyle Gold of Gold Enterprises as well as the President of the board for Lyric Opera."

"Ms. Swan." The man paused, his hand still in hers as if trying to dig something from the back of his memory, "The cellist."

"I am."

The man openly appraised her and Emma couldn't help but to appraise back. He though his hair was long and slightly frizzy his clearly expensive suit and gold-handled cane gave him the air of a man with great power and wealth.

His lip quirked the slightest bit as he finally released her hand, "I've heard good things about you."

"Thank you, sir." She thought perhaps saying as little as possible would be the best way to get her through the evening without her tarnish rubbing off on Regina's flawless complexion.

"How is your mother, Regina?" He asked lightly, turning back to her.

"She is doing very well, thank you."

"Will she be gracing us with her presence tonight?"

Regina chuckled, dry and unattached, "Now Mr. Gold we both know that she doesn't come to events such as these."

"Right, right. Of course. Well, I must say, you two look lovely in your costumes."

Regina thanked him with a nod of her head but Emma just shuffled.
Would I be breaking etiquette to ask about the possible Lyric audition? Yeah, probably. Don't be stupid but holy shit the president of Lyric!

Emma watched intently as they mingled with the next few patrons, learning as she did. She understood watching Regina why she hadn't brought Ruby; an interpreter would have sullied the executive persona she was wrapping herself in. Regina would work hard tonight; doing her best to catch every word so no one would remember that the daughter of C.H. Mills' Foundation had a disability.

She followed Regina, holding lightly to her elbow as they made their way through the crowd stopping every few steps to smile politely, insist that yes, Regina and her mother were well and that Regina's companion for the night was the decadent Ms. Swan and no, her mother would not be joining them.

Emma entertained herself as she stood silently next to Regina by watching the people around her, each person surrounding them seemed to have stepped from the screen of a movie; Frankenstein's monster with what looked to be real metal bolts stuck into his neck; Elvis with his face so contoured you would have thought The King was alive again and in Chicago; King Arthur with a sword that looked so sharp Emma had no interest in further investigation for fear of her skin. She was impressed. It was almost as if she and Regina had stepped into the land of make-believe.

Regina took two glasses of champagne and handed one to Emma, "I promise the night will become more exciting. As these codgers drink they tend to become-" Regina blinked wearily "excitable. Assuming you are not the target of their attentions it can be quite fun. Though," the mask slipped for just a second, "I don't know if I can stop them when you look like that."

"Ms. Mills." Regina's face-hardened again instantly as she shook hands with the anonymous person.

Emma studied her as the night wore on from her silent position at her side; Regina wasn't having fun. Emma wasn't having fun. How could she fix the problem? Would it be rude to draw her from her mingling? Regina stifled a yawn and Emma had her answer. A tickle of mischievous excitement whispered in her as she came up with a quick plan. This afternoon she had picked her up only to let her down, playfully leaving her wanting. She would do it again and then if she could perhaps again. She grinned evilly already enjoying her scheme. If she could do it a few times before the end of the night perhaps, mixing a drink or two into the equation Regina would not only have fun but be a bundle of nerves by the time they got home – which would be fun for both of them. It was a game she had played before, a favorite even.

She spent the next hour supplying Regina with fresh glasses of champagne and Regina; so busy in her land of smiling politely and discussing drab topics such as the weather or city politics, drank them without notice.

After a while, she disappeared from Regina's side and back to the elegant bar.

"What can I make for you, madam?" Emma blinked surprised by the formality. She didn't often get madam. She supposed in her usual jeans and tank tops she didn't exactly look like a madam; she looked like a Miss at best. However right now, clad in an expensive get-up just like everyone around her, she didn't stick out; that both thrilled and worried her.

She ordered her typical cocktail and then turned, watching Regina as she mingled, waiting for the woman to notice her absence.
It didn't take long, after passing through three groups of hands all looking to swarm and charm her, the chocolate eyes began to flash around the room.

Finally, they settled on her clearly confused.

"I was thirsty." Emma signed slowly, one eyebrow rising ever so slightly. A convenient thing about sign language was distance didn't matter much as long as your eyesight was decent.

Regina's face flushed a little at the sight of her language but then the woman seemed to notice the look on Emma's face. She knew that Regina understood that look.

Regina was distracted as a young couple approached her for a second to say a simple polite hello. When she looked up again she was met only with Emma's empty glass sitting on the bar. She searched again and found the blonde just entering the bathroom, Jade on Chocolate as a small smile played across her lips.

Emma knew she wouldn't have to wait long. She stood at the sink, pretending to wash her hands as the little old lady, the only other occupant shuffled from a stall.

Regina blew through the door, eyes wild in anticipation but halted just behind Emma as she saw the white haired woman. Emma saw Regina's eyes flick to the empty stalls checking. Emma smiled secretly, letting the tension build between them catching the eye of the woman, holding it until it burned and then looking away, only to catch the gaze a few seconds later and bite her lip lightly. Regina's eyes flashed. Regina was not to be toyed with; especially not after Emma had brought the woman so close to her orgasm without completion. But the fact that she was so formidable only made toying with her all the more fun.

Emma dried her hands as the little old lady did the same and slowly, matching the old woman's pace headed for the door casting Regina her best seductive gaze as she did. Regina looked dumbfounded again and smug satisfaction filled her making her actually giggle out loud as the door closed behind her. She quickly found a person to talk to, continuing her game knowing that if she was unoccupied Regina would simply drag her back to the bathroom by her hair – or perhaps out to the car – or the coat check room. Emma's breath caught.

She watched from the corner of her eye as the savory looking woman emerged from the room doing her best at casual and failing entirely. She was caught just outside the bathroom by an elderly man who quickly fell into conversation, struggling to get his thoughts across to her.

Chuckling she caught Regina's gaze, doing her best to burn into her for a moment before looking away again.

She greeted a man she had met once or twice after a concert and then looked around again.

She saw Regina at the bar and without thinking swallowed the rest of her drink. Approaching behind her she pressed herself tightly against the woman, feeling her stiffen as she calmly handed her glass to the bartender over Regina's shoulder sighing, knowing it would ripple across Regina's ear as covertly under the bar Emma's hand lingered on her leather thigh. She thanked the bartender when her glass was refilled and then was off again.

Dancing had finally begun and gracefully Emma accepted the offer of a man whom she wasn't sure she had met, allowing herself to be led onto the floor.

She could feel Regina's eyes on her; feel the jealousy, frustration and excitement burning into her. Emma bit her lip; as much as the game was working on Regina it was also working on her own
bundle of nerves keeping her heart at steady gallop between her thighs.

Nodding a polite thanks, she waited until she was completely across the room before turning around and meeting Regina's fire filled eyes. She had taken a seat at the bar, sipping her drink and watching Emma.

Emma grinned back at her as a tall beautiful woman approached Emma, kissing her hand and asking politely for a dance.

"Yes, ma'am," Emma said, purposely avoiding Regina's eyes knowing this would drive Regina wild, pitting her somewhat possessive side against her all-consuming professionalism. As the woman swung her around the first time Emma saw that Regina had stood, watching intently her eyes glittering with humor and vicious want. Catching her eyes Regina slowly quirked one eyebrow and Emma smiled daring her.

*Go ahead. Come and take what is yours.*

When Emma was released she retreated back to the opposite side of the room, declining her next dance offer. Regina's eyes followed her, "this game you're playing. You won't win."

Emma cocked an eyebrow and slowly licked her lip, "You're having fun now, right?"

Before Regina could answer Emma slid with a last glance through the lobby doors and into the long hallway.

She wasn't completely sure if Regina would follow or put up her own fight in this fun battle of wills but she walked slowly, waiting, hoping.

She almost cheered when she heard the door open and close, quick feet coming after her.

"I thought you said I wouldn't win." She teased, walking backward down the hall, Regina gliding after her.

"Who says you have?"

Emma stopped moving; her point made when the second she was within arm's reach Regina attacked, mouth firmly against hers, hands going immediately to cup Emma's ass and breast. "I want you and I will have you, Ms. Swan."

Emma kissed back with everything she had, pushing herself, grinding herself against Regina making the woman whimper.

The door down the hall opened and simpering Emma skipped away from Regina, biting her lip again as she entered the main hall touching up her lipstick.

Emma was loving this. She slowly made her way through the hall, nodding politely at the strangers she passed. She glanced around a bit.

*Where* the hell was *that woman?*
She let herself be pulled into another dance but the longer Regina remained absent the more
distracted Emma became. She took another champagne from a waiter and began to circle the room,
fun ebbing to worry. Relief washed through her as on her second sweep of the room Regina
appeared from the bathroom.

Eyes flashing roguishly Regina signed one word, "cell phone."

Confused Emma lifted the phone from the hidden spot in her sash belt and saw she had a notification
of a video sent from Regina.

The shot was seconds long and only of Regina's hips rocking hard, her hand thrust deeply down her
own pants as rubbing fast, clearly in orgasm.

Icy fire began at Emma's face and slammed through her entire body hitting her suddenly throbbing
clitoris hard enough to make her legs involuntarily clench together.

_She didn't!

She looked up into Regina's eyes, dumbfounded, her heart ripping in her chest. Regina smirked,
suddenly in control of their game and turned her attention to her neighbor.

Emma stood rooted to the spot for a moment, a gentle fire building in her chest. How dare she take
the orgasm that Emma had been working so hard for! Handing her glass off, she strode purposefully
past Regina and into the bathroom. She didn't have to wait even a second, Regina followed so
closely behind her that they might as well have been attached. Emma marched straight into the final
stall before turning on the woman, slamming her into the tiled wall, holding her chin and putting
every last drop of effort she had into the kiss, ready for her vengeance.

She pressed herself into Regina sliding up and down her rubbing her body against Regina's as her
tongue worked, catching her reaching wrist and slamming them into the wall above her head. Regina
whimpered in the best way, catching at her jaw, her neck with her teeth. When Regina was writhing,
lightly trying to pull out of Emma's grasp so she could touch the woman pressed so tightly against
her Emma bit her lip and transferring the wrists to one hand she slid her palm quickly down Regina's
stomach. Regina began panting heavily; begging with her eyes, ready to be touched.

Emma grinned wickedly and instead of slipping her hand into Regina's fitted leather pants, quickly
thrust her hand down her own, pressing even harder against Regina's body so she could feel her
hand moving. Regina gasped loudly, eyes almost angry. She tried to pull away but Emma's strong
hands held her still, grinning. Fast and hard Emma caressed herself pressed against her lover; her
mouth falling open and she held back a moan. Regina was all but thrashing under her but the motion
only helped Emma. Her head fell roughly against Regina's forehead as she rocked careful to be sure
Regina could feel her fast breath on her face. Quickly, perhaps a little too quickly, Emma tensed.
Regina moaned a guttural animal sound as she watched Emma fall over the edge, rocking wildly,
smashing hipbone into hipbone as she came.

She didn't wait; as soon as she could stand without leaning on Regina she released the woman and
skipped out of reach.

With a bite of her lip and a wink she washed her hands and hurriedly left the bathroom, hearing
Regina's outraged cry of "No fucking way!"

Satisfied with herself, Emma laughed as the door closed behind her.

*Check-fucking-mate.*

Mind occupied replaying over and over again the look on Regina's face as she jumped out of reach. Emma wasn't paying attention and accidentally walked headlong into a stationary person.

"Oh, god, I'm so sorry, ma'am. I wasn't paying attention, are you all right?"

"Ms. Swan." The woman said grasping her shoulders to steady her, "I've been looking for you. Where ever have you and my daughter been?"
Chapter 15

Emma's jaw dropped open, trying to find words, but there were no words. There were no words in the universe just then so she just stammered, fumbling under the gray gaze of the woman.

"Emma!" Regina snarled from behind her clearly planning on pulling the woman back into the bathroom come hell or high water but the moment she grabbed her wrist she froze, "Mother!" Regina's eyes popped wide "You're here! You're never here! What are you doing here?"

The woman smiled indulgently and kissed Regina's cheek. "How are you, dear?"

"I'm, I'm well. Mother, this is Emma Swan, my girlfriend." Emma couldn't help but to note that Regina's hands balled tightly to her sides, the mask that had fallen across her lover's face was a new one, not professionally superior as it could normally be called but professionally blank, almost bitter.

"The cellist." She confirmed, "Cora Mills."

"It's a pleasure to meet you." She shook the offered hand. "How did you know I'm a cellist?"

_What am I living in the Cheers bar? Why the hell does everybody know my name?_

Cora laughed not exactly unkindly, "Well you do play in my chamber music group."

Emma frowned, "Right."

"Speaking of which, how is your cello? Was all of that ugly business successfully handled?"

"Uh, yes ma'am, thank you."

"Good. We were so concerned when we heard-" Cora launched into a long speech about the board and their decision about how to handle Killian after the incident.

Emma glanced at Regina and was surprised to see a fairly vacant look in her eyes. It was a look she had seen only once before. She glanced covertly between the rambling woman and her daughter, if Regina couldn't understand her mother then why didn't she say something?

_Why isn't Cora signing?_

Tentatively as the woman spoke Emma began to sign, low and very slowly trying her best to keep up.

Cora paused in the middle of her story, eyes catching Emma's moving hands, "Oh don't do that dear." Emma flushed scarlet.

Without looking away from her mother Regina reached out and softly lowered Emma's hands, "It's all right Emma, don't bother."
Cora continued on with her story as if nothing had happened but Emma was baffled.

*What the hell is happening right now?*

The conversation was light perhaps a bit strained until a board member that Emma vaguely recognized pulled Regina away.

"Come." Cora said pointedly, holding her elbow to Emma so she could take it in the most gentlemanly fashion possible, "I was about to go outside for a cigarette."

She led Cora silently outside dazed and not sure she was completely willing.

"So Emma, I know I have your bio somewhere but I can't say that I've read it."

Emma took that to be a request for information so Emma gave her a verbal resume, getting the feeling it wasn't her professional life Cora wanted to know about her.

"Uh huh. I've also heard tale of a child?"

Emma smiled and pulled her phone from her sash proudly showing off the homepage, a shot of Regina and Henry their faces pressed against a window so it looked as though the two were trying desperately to rip their way from the phone and into the real world.

Cora chuckled lightly, "My, my, on your phone. You must have taken quite a liking to my daughter." Emma cleared her throat unsure of what to say. She wasn't sure she enjoyed the way Cora said 'my daughter' as if Regina was a possession in a large and under-appreciated collection.

"Though I suppose," Cora drawled slowly, "I can see that regardless."

"Ma'am?" Emma asked, there was clearly something behind her words and she wasn't sure if it was something good.

Cora just smiled placating and looked over her shoulder, "Ah, Mr. Gold."

Emma smiled switched on a polite, albeit preoccupied smile. She couldn't tell if she was winning this woman over completely or crashing and burning.

"Ladies." He greeted, "Enjoying the party?"

"Of course." Emma chimed in.

Gold studied her for a moment "Gallantly polite Ms. Swan though I did notice you were the bell of the ball for a while. Please remember to save a dance for me as well."

Emma nodded.

"Carlyle," Cora started taking a long drag of her cigarette, "When is this secret audition no one is supposed to know about?"

If Gold protested to the subject bring brought up in front of Emma, he didn't show it. He just leaned back, palms resting on the top of his cane, "April. Why?"

Cora turned on Emma making her jump a bit; apparently an affinity for intimidation ran in the Mills
family line, "Emma, you will be taking it, will you not?"

All of the blood in Emma's face drained away and for a moment she felt dizzy, "Um, well ma'am, I was under the impression it was invite only."

Cora leveled a gaze at her, "Consider yourself invited."

Mr. Gold leveled her with a gaze but then nodded once.

Emma wanted to scream, to jump up and down and hug them, to vomit with sudden nerves but while her insides were doing a polka she simply crossed her arms over herself, freezing and nodded, "Thank you, ma'am."

She heard shuffling behind her and Regina appeared asking, "Where did everybody go?" She glanced at Emma and her eyes widened.

"What's wrong?"

Regina shook her head quickly and smiled slipping into her new professional mask as she turned back to the group. Cora was staring at Regina speaking something cold and without words.

Emma shuddered. She didn't understand. Cora was being so kind to her – kind of. What was this coldness saved specifically for her daughter?

"Seriously, what?"

"Ms. Swan." Cora dug through her purse and handed her a compact.

"Really mother?"

Nervous Emma looked into the little mirror searching her face and found nothing.

She glanced up quizzically and with a huff, Regina moved the compact so Emma could see the deep red long smudge across her jaw and throat exactly the shade of Regina's lipstick.

Emma gasped and began to rub but the action only managing to smear it. She had two choices, she could panic and try and rub at it under the watchful gaze of Regina's mother and the president of Lyric Opera or she could excuse herself and run for the fucking hills. She chose to run. "I apologize, Mrs. Mills, Mr. Gold. If you will excuse me."

She tried to walk quickly without running but slammed into the bathroom door a bit harder than she meant to, groaning as she looked at her ravaged neck in the mirror. The woman next to her gave her a scandalized look huffing a quiet, "Really!"

Emma scowled. She was ready for this night to end.

"My mother invited you and Henry to a late lunch."

"What?"

"Lunch. Next Sunday."

"Why?" Emma gasped. She wasn't sure she could face the woman again even if she had opened her
career to the biggest audition of her life.

"I think you impressed her."

"You mean with my lipstick hickey?"

Regina shrugged, "You never know with my mother; she is impressed by the strangest things."

"She gave me an invitation to the Lyric audition."

"I know."

"You know?"

"I do. I was the one to recommend you for it." Well, that explained why both Cora and Gold knew of her as a musician.

The valet pulled the Benz around and tipping him quickly, they got in.

The usual silence filled the car so Emma pulled out her phone to check for any messages from the babysitter. What she found instead was Regina's video. She grinned, her exhaustion and tension from the last hour suddenly vanishing, the sense of pride she had felt as she had jumped out of Regina's reach filling her again.

"What?" Regina asked glancing at her at a red light.

Emma beamed and showed her the video, "I so won."

The air crackled and exploded like a newly lit string of firecrackers as Regina bit her full lip, the hunger, and anger back instantly.

"Oh trust me, Emma" Regina breathed, "when we get home I'm going to win."

In that costume – with that look in her eyes Emma couldn't help but to believe it – and look forward to it.

The loft was quiet when they entered, a good sign. Regina, a huge smirk unfolding didn't bother to go downstairs, instead with a fiery stare she started up the second flight of stairs toward her bedroom, a room Emma and still yet to visit.

Emma chewed on her lip as she watched her go before grudgingly heading downstairs. The babysitter was packing her belongings into her bag, clearly having heard them come in.

"Hey, how was everything?"

The girl smiled, "Easy as pie."

"Great! Did he fall asleep all right?"

"I think he was excited to go to bed. He said this is his first time sleeping here."

Emma laughed, "It is."

"Right. I'm going to get going. Goodnight ma'am."

Feet climbed up the stairs and summoned the elevator while Emma tiptoed to the sunroom. Henry
was buried under the fluffy pillows looking comfortable but tiny in the huge bed. With a smile, she closed the door to his room tightly and shivering with excitement, started up the stairs.

She climbed the second flight and found Regina's wide smile, the devilish twinkle in her eyes as she lay head propped up by her arm on the bed, naked from head to foot and waiting for her.

Emma swore.

*God, life is good with this woman in it.*

The week could easily be measured by the number of stuffed animals; toys and dinosaur print tighty-whities that appeared in the sunroom. Each time they stopped by the Swan apartment a new article seemed to come back with them until by Saturday night Emma was fairly sure his room at home was bare.

They had spent the time much like they had just after Emma and Regina fell into their relationship, simply being together and it was wonderful. Emma was sure she had never known this type of happiness with a significant other before. It was just so – easy.

"I mean it!" Emma snapped at the boy as he stomped his feet mid-tantrum "You do not go to someone else's house and then trash the place. Go. Everything in the bag. We have to go home tonight!"

"Mooooooooyyyy!" He threw himself onto the couch, his tear stained face red as a tomato. "Mooooooooyyyy I don't wannnnnt tooooo! We stay heeeeeeere!"

Green lights flashed in the corners of the room and Emma's eyes rolled. In the case of an emergency while Regina was alone with Henry she had set up a device to flash whenever the child cried. It would be a useful tool if there was ever an emergency; Emma was sure of that but for now, it simply meant bath time, bed time and clean up his room time turned into a mini disco party. Usually, the sight of the light flashing made him laugh but he was having none of it tonight, not when mommy was talking about going home.

"Henry if you don't get up right now, put on some clothes and clean up your things you're going to go in a time out."

It was a rare occurrence that the threat of a time out pushed him into hysterics rather than serving as a sharp reminder to behave but today was one of those days. His usually sweet face turned purple and he screamed, "No time out, mommy!" making the green lights go haywire. Regina came stumbling downstairs, still putting her earrings on, her eyes frantically trying to find the clearly had-to-be-dying-a-horrible-death boy. Emma sighed and waved in her direction to get her attention, "he doesn't want to go home."

Regina looked surprised for a moment and started down the stairs.

"Henry David you have until the count of three. One!" Henry's face set. "Two!" He crossed his arms over his stomach, stubborn as his mother "– Three!" She picked her instantly wailing son up by his armpits and placed him on the stool that had already been designated the time out stool.

Henry held tight to the stool writhing and twitching but his butt stayed where it had been put
knowing it would be worse for him if he didn't.

Emma stood in front of him daring him to do something he wasn't supposed to.

Regina squeezed her shoulder seeing the unhappiness in her eyes at the punishment.

"I'm trying to get him to clean up his stuff in there so we can go but he doesn't want to."

Regina pouted ever so slightly making Emma's eyebrows shoot skyward, "You're going?"

Emma frowned, "you said you have to work all day, right?"

"I do." Regina admitted, busying herself by straightening her already immaculate skirt.

"Well uh, yeah, I assumed that we should go when you're not here. Besides you probably want your loft back sometime."

Regina moved to straightening her already straight cuffs, "Oh I don't know. Your cello is here. Henry clearly doesn't want to go. I assumed that you would stay."

Emma stared for a moment in disbelief slowly reading between the lines, "You want us to stay? Have five days not been enough for you?"

She could read the clear no on Regina's face and Emma's heart fluttered. "I will let you know when I'm ready for my apartment back."

Emma smiled and sighed, pulling the woman into her arms. She hugged her tightly, sighing a deep happy sigh. She loved how perfectly Regina fit into her arms, especially when she was high heelless like she was now. Temple met jawbone. Arms fit perfectly around ribs.

"You really want me to stay?"

Regina smiled, finally meeting her eye, "I do Ms. Swan."

An unfamiliar feeling flickered at the edge of her mind.

Wanted?

She sighed again before releasing her and turning back to Henry. Dropping to her knees she did her best to look her hiccupping boy straight in the eye, "Henry, do you know why you got put on the time out stool?"

He nodded, lips still trembling, "B'cause I didn't go clean up my room."

"Right, and when mommy tells you to do something or 'Gina tells you to do something you're supposed to do it, right?"

"Right."

"Now can you tell me why you're so upset?"

"B'cause!" He wailed again, "I want 'Gina and I don't want to goooooo!"
Regina dropped next to Emma and cupped the boy's wet cheeks, "I love you too Henry but you know you have to listen to your mom. Besides, even if you were to go home today I would simply see you tomorrow."

Henry hiccupped and launched himself into her arms, smudging her crisp white shirt with his runny nose.

"Hey, no sad face." Regina drew her face into an overly dramatic pout and Henry giggled. "Now, will you please do what your mom asked?"

He nodded and unhappily headed to the sunroom to gather his belongings.

'So you're not going to be here when I get home tonight?' Regina asked, pulling Emma close again and nuzzling her neck.

"If I didn't know any better I would think you wanted us to stay forever."

"It's so silly." Regina sighed returning to gathering herself for work; "we're so much closer to both of our works from here. The commute is thirty minutes shorter than from your apartment. Plus we have lunch with my mother tomorrow."

"I don't know," Emma thought about it, "is it bad to punish him for throwing a fit because we're going home and then decide to stay?"

Regina blinked a few times blankly clearly as unsure as Emma was about it. "Well, if you do decide to stay you have the key, right?"

Emma swore searching her pockets for her keys, "Right, I uh, I totally forgot to give it back to you."

Regina waved her hand, "seems wise for you to have it. Hold on to it for now."

"Okay." Emma grinned knowing that Regina was pretending that giving her a key was no big deal but decided against calling her out on it.

"Okay," Regina kissed her fully and pulled on her wool coat, "I have to go to work."

"Have a good day, dear." Emma teased. Regina rolled her eyes, kissed a still hiccupping red-faced Henry and was out the door.

Emma sat on the couch with a huff unsure of what she should do. She sure did love this place. The weather outside had begun to drop to freezing temperatures and the wall of windows had fogged against it, making the morning light soft and pale.

She was surprised to find out how at home she and Henry felt in the loft. The stark black and white coloring was neither Emma nor Henry's favorite and should have been off-putting but despite the lack of warm colors, the place felt as if there was always a jolly burning fireplace in the corner. Emma couldn't say she liked the idea of leaving.

I could practice for a while then Henry and I could walk down to the store and get stuff to make a really nice dinner for Regina; she'll be tired after such a long day. But oh, Henry is pretty much out
of clothes – but I could just wash them. Or we could stop by the apartment while we were out and grab some more.

The prospect seemed wonderful. So Emma smiled and called to her son.

The boy gathered his things at double speed, throwing his clothes into the washing machine with gusto. Now that leaving the loft meant going shopping instead of spending a night away he had found an uncanny motivation.

Once he finished, Emma wrapped him in his thick jeans, blue pea coat and favorite gray and red striped scarf. It wasn't freezing yet, snow hadn't fallen but in the low 40's the air had grown sharp teeth.

She pulled on her leather jacket, gloves and the silly poof ball beanie that made Regina laugh every time she saw it and hand in hand she and Henry started down the street.

"Um, lasagna?"

"I don't know kid; do you remember when Regina made it? I don't think we could top it."

"Pizza?"

"No, something healthier. Let's try to combat all of that Halloween candy."

"Soup?"

"What kind?"

"I dunno."

His eyes lit up as if he had thought of the best meal that ever existed on the earth, "Stew!"

"Stew?" she laughed.

"Yeah!" He began to jump up and down as they walked into the front door. Emma rarely made beef stew but when she did, it was Henry's favorite.

"All right kid, grab a cart."

"Can I ride in it?"

She scooped him up as he giggled and buried her face in his neck kissing him everywhere. When he couldn't take it anymore she plotted him down in the metal cage and steered them toward the produce.

"Can you reach?"

Henry reached into the huge pile of tomatoes and picked one up. Emma had to move fast to catch the other four that fell.

"That the one?"

"Yup!"
"Okay, in the cart."

They gathered all of the ingredients and happily the duo paid. Slinging reusable bags over their shoulders, they headed contentedly back to the loft.

The giant silent security guard who often stood sentinel in the lobby of Regina's building eyed them as they went past. He was beginning to know them but was always on the lookout. Henry was still fascinated with the man, too intimidated to speak to him but remembering the wink, he always stared.

"Morning." Emma said cheerfully.

"Ms. Swan."

She rolled her eyes at him and she saw the corner of his lip twitch.

*I'm going to break him one of these days.*

Just as they entered the elevator Emma sighed and tossed the man a huge muffin she had gotten specifically got for him.

The man's eyes grew wide for a second and Emma smirked as the doors closed.

"Okay kid, mama's got to practice."

Henry nodded and ran into the sunroom, leaving a trail of his coat and scarf behind him as he ran for his toys.

She put away the food and in the bright morning light she began to practice. Now that she had a goal in mind she was well on her way to becoming the best player she had been to date. She just needed the audition to be officially announced so they could tell her what exactly she would be playing.

Once she had spent a few hours practicing she made them lunch and they watched cartoons for a bit, Henry taking his nap in his mother's lap.

When it was rounding on 3:00 Emma woke him and said with a tickle that it was time to get the stew on the stove and the cookies in the oven.

They had fun cooking and baking, Henry getting a little messier than he should have.

"Okay, Regina should be home in about an hour. Bath time."

"Mooommmy!"

"Henry!"

He frowned but clearly didn't want another throw down brawl like this morning. She marched him right upstairs and drew a bath for him. Once it was full he waved her away, "I can do it! I can do it!"

*Stop growing up kid, I can't take it.*
Henry was just in his pajama pants, his hair sticking up in odd directions when the cookies came out of the oven. "Just one?"

"Not even one."

"But you're going to have one!"

"Nu-uh!"

Henry eyed her as if he didn't believe her at all.

"Help me set the table."

They were just finishing up placing the last of the forks when the elevator door slid open and Regina came clicking in.

Emma turned and caught her eye, not missing the warm domestic feeling that heated her extremities.

She couldn't read Regina's face, as she took in the freshly washed boy, the huge dinner and the blonde smiling adorably hopeful at her.

"How was your day, dear?" Emma asked, smiling a little.

Regina's face crackled into dawn, "You made dinner?"

"I made dinner."

Henry threw his arms around Regina in greeting, burying his face in her stomach. Regina laughed and stroked his back while reaching for Emma and kissing her wholly over his head.

"What's for dinner?"

_This is indeed happiness._
Chapter 16

Emma brushed her hair into a new style for the third time gathering it up into her signature professional ponytail.

"Seriously, it will be fine." Ruby threw her an exasperated sigh despite the fact that her leg hadn't stopped its nervous bouncing since she had arrived.

Emma scowled at her reflection, "She seemed to like me last week, kind of anyway but that so doesn't mean that she will this week. She seems to like that type of woman. Oh, and plus, when she saw me I had a huge lipstick hickey from her daughter."

"How's this?" Henry appeared at the top of the stairs to Regina's bedroom in a button up and jeans.

"Ruby, will you go and help him find something that isn't jeans?"

"Sure."

Regina blew out of the bathroom looking mildly frantic, "Have you seen my other pearls?"

"Did you look on the dresser? I put them up there so Henry wouldn't get to them yesterday."

She found them and grunted her approval or possibly her thanks, Emma wasn't sure. As a rule, Regina spent every day crisp and clean like a perfectly put together painting. Today, knowing she was going to be under her mother's eye, she had scrutinized every part of herself until she was immaculate. Her hair was combed and combed and combed until it flared perfectly on one side exactly the way she liked it. Her dress was black and fitted but not tight, covered by a cream and black Chanel suit jacket, her high heels were at the perfectly respectable length, her nails and make-up, done flawlessly.

Looking at her Emma felt a little like the messy kid sister in her fitted black dress pants and gray silk blouse that she had borrowed from Regina's closet. She groaned and ripped her hair back out its confinement as she pulled on her heels. This would have to do.

Regina blew past to check her hair in the bathroom once more but Emma caught her, the nerves she was feeling momentarily forgotten in an effort to settle Regina's, "You look beautiful. You always look beautiful. Why are you so nervous?"

Regina didn't seem to know how to answer right away, "My mother is very disapproving of me. Let's just say that."

Henry and Ruby reappeared, the kid was finally dressed adequately, his usually unruly hair flattened wetly.

"Okay." Regina sighed, straightening her already straightened shirt, "Let's go."

Emma wasn't sure if she was surprised when Regina, a little guiltily drove them straight to the little suburb of Evanston where she had taken Henry trick or treating.
"I'm going to go out on a limb and say the house you made us skip was your mother's." Emma said and Ruby was kind enough to sign to Regina, just inside of her peripheral vision.

Regina sighed deeply and spoke; "My mother doesn't give candy out on Halloween anyway."

"You could have told us," Emma grumbled.

"Oh, you guys came out here for trick or treating?" Ruby asked, smiling, "Henry, I bet you got a lot of candy. We used to get so much every year!"

Regina laughed, coldly, "Yes and then my mother would make us donate it to the poor."

Emma shifted in her seat awkwardly feeling a sudden looming gap between herself and the other women. Growing up she had spent most Halloweens being shoved off on the local foster organizations, where if she were lucky, she would be given a small bag of donated Halloween candy. She thought she might just keep that to herself for now.

Everyone seemed to fall silent as they pulled into the front gates of the huge Georgian mansion. Emma glanced back at Henry and together they stared, intimidated by the huge house.

"It will be fine, fun even," Emma promised Regina kissing her forehead. Regina gave her half a smile, knocking on the front door and exchanged a look with Ruby.

"Okay what am I missing?" but before Regina or Ruby could respond the door opened. Regina's back straightened and Ruby's face dropped into her own professional mask, a blank slate ready to be written on as she turned a little so she was facing Regina.

"You made it." Cora said kindly, Ruby's hands flew.

"Of course, we did mother." Regina kissed her cheek, "how are you?"

"I'm well dear. Emma." The kind affection Cora used when she spoke her name was baffling. What was the game here?

"Mrs. Mills. It's good to see you again." Emma shook her hand again "This is my son, Henry."

"Henry!" Cora smiled down at him, "It's very nice to meet you."

Emma's eyes flicked from Regina to Ruby to Cora.

Why doesn't Cora just sign for herself?

Henry blushed and habitually signed as he spoke, so much more advanced in his study of the language than his mom was, "It's nice to meet you, ma'am."

Cora ushered them in with the barest of nods to Ruby and they followed her into a huge sitting room with a larger than what seemed safe fireplace roaring aggressively.

Henry ran to it, stretching out in the chair before it, looking as if he had found heaven.

"Henry!" Cora chuckled as she watched him. "I'm sorry, he's excited."

Cora just held her palm up to silence her, "It's nice to have a child in the house again." She threw Regina an accusatory look.

"I'm working on it, mother."
"Can I get you something to drink?" Cora ignored Regina, "Coffee?" There were small nods from the group. "Henry would you like a glass of juice? Water? Milk?"

"Juice please," He said in a small voice.

"Belle!" Cora called and a woman stepped around the door as if she had been silently waiting there. Cora gave her an expectant look and the brunette nodded and headed out of the room.

Emma shot a questioning look at Regina noting her tightly pressed lips and clasped in her lap hands, "Belle is my mother's assistant who also gets drinks, cleans the house and on the rare occasion that the cook is off – cooks."

"CooK," Cora said lightly putting heavy emphasis on the K, clipping the end tightly. "Sometimes I don't know if those speech therapy sessions really did anything at all for you, dear. You want to be understood, don't you? CooK."

Regina flushed, hard, a childlike mortification clearly blanketing the woman as she whispered, "Cook" capturing the K clearly.

Cora beamed and pat her knee, "Good job, dear."

Emma felt her eyebrows shoot up. Cora had such a way of saying or doing things that left Emma confused about whether or not she should be offended for Regina's sake or pleased at the motherly, albeit slightly cold concern Cora felt for Regina.

'Yes," Cora continued as if nothing had happened, "Belle is a great comfort to me now that your father is gone."

Emma and Ruby exchanged a quick look but no one spoke about what had just happened.

They fell into something like a light conversation as a group; Cora asking questions for Emma and Henry to answer, Regina and Ruby perhaps uncharacteristically quiet until lunch was served.

"So Henry," Cora smiled at the boy, "What do you play?"

He looked to his mother confused.

"Oh, he doesn't play anything yet." Emma sighed, "I thought he should start on piano at five but we have been moving so often I guess I haven't gotten around to it. I should do that soon."

Cora nodded but disapproval was clear on her face, "I started violin at three. He should really be two years into his studies by now."

Emma wasn't sure how to respond so she shrugged noncommittally and changed the subject, "You play the harp, right?"

Henry's eyes boggled, "You play the harp?"

Cora nodded.

"Can I see?" He asked scooting from his chair.

"Uh uh, after lunch," Cora said strictly but with a small wink for the boy. "Emma, do you think you will be ready for that audition?"

Emma laughed and held up her bandaged fingers, "My calluses are getting calluses."
Cora nodded approvingly, "Wrap your fingers in tiger balm and gauze at night and that should help the cuts heal quickly. Are you wearing wrist guards while you practice?"

Emma frowned, "No?"

"Do you want tendinitis, dear?"

"Mother knows every trick of the trade." Regina sighed.

"Oh," Emma faltered, "I'll have to look into that."

Cora sighed, and lit herself a cigarette, "It's so nice to have another musician in the family." Emma blushed and glanced at Regina who was looking pointedly out the window, Ruby glaring hotly at the woman. "What is your practicing routine?"

Cora questioned her for what felt like hours and by the time coffee was set on the table after lunch one thing was blatantly clear; while Cora spared few words for her daughter and none for her daughter's interpreter Cora was absolutely taken with Emma and Henry. This should have been a good thing, a win for the new girlfriend but instead Emma was feeling as if she were being drafted to the wrong side – the side of evil.

"Excuse me, Mrs. Mills?" Henry asked, his little hands flying at a speed that still shocked Emma.

"Yes, dear?"

"Will you show me your harp now?"

Cora watched the boy for a second, thinking before calling him over to her. She took his little hands in her own and kissed the knuckles, "Henry, when you're in my house you don't have to do that."

"Do what?"

Emma felt Regina gasp next to her.

"With your hands. In this house, we don't do that."

"You mean sign?" The boy asked perplexed.

Emma watched in something adjacent to horror as Cora nodded.

"But then Regina won't hear us." The little boy's brow furrowed deeply as if she had given him a math problem a college doctorate couldn't solve.

"Oh, sure she will." She tucked Henry into her side facing Regina, "see Regina doesn't need to be coddled. She's a strong woman. Do you know what it means to be coddled?"

"No."

"It means we don't have to do things like use sign language with her because we made sure she could get along just fine without it, right dear?"

Regina's face was blank, "Right, mother."

Fury rippled through Emma.

Did that woman just tell my son not to speak Regina's language?
"Cora, I-" Cora looked up at Emma, her look plainly stating she would not win if Emma challenged her. Softly she felt Regina's hand settle warningly on her knee.

Cora nodded and took the boys hand, leading him from the room, presumably to her harp.

As soon as they cleared the door Emma whirled around to Regina and Ruby, both wearing unhappy looks on their faces. "Someone want to let me in on what the fuck is going on, please?"

Ruby opened her mouth but then closed it again so Emma turned to her girlfriend, "Regina?"

Her beautiful brunette shrugged a little, finishing her glass of wine in one swallow and stared dejectedly out of the window again.

The drive back to Regina's apartment was completely silent. Henry was still confused about his reprimand for speaking the language he was required to speak at home and Emma confused about - everything.

"Nap time?" Henry asked quietly as soon as they entered the home. Emma nodded ruffling his hair.

He disappeared into the room almost gratefully and Emma turned to Regina and Ruby who were opening a bottle of wine silently at the kitchen island. At that moment Emma could see their years together; the years of struggle, fighting the same fight. No words were spoken between them yet they clearly understood. Emma wanted desperately to understand so she took a seat with them and didn't bother to stop her words from falling from her mouth. "Well, usually the parents don't like me because I'm a woman corrupting their should-be-straight daughter. They never cared that you were gay?"

Regina laughed a little, "No, they never cared. I think for them, nothing was worse than the fact that I refused to hear."

"Refused to hear? It's not as though that is exactly your choice. You can't just make yourself suddenly hear."

Regina smiled a little at Emma as if Emma were a small child asking silly questions, "There are ways I could be better for them."

Time ticked into silence and Emma began to feel even more frustrated. "Regina what--"

Ruby sighed, putting her empty glass on the counter, silently communicating something to her best friend with her eyes, "I'm going to get going." Regina nodded but Emma stood, confused.

"Wait, what?"

Ruby kissed her cheek and Regina's before wordlessly slipping out the door.

Emma just blinked.

What the fuck is happening?

She was beginning to feel frustrated. It was as though everyone in the room knew a secret that she didn't. "Regina, please. I'm just trying to understand. Why would your mom tell Henry not to sign in her house? Why – god, is she always like that?"
Regina played nervously with the rings on her fingers, her face clearly lost. She settled on the couch and reached for Emma pulling her to her and then finding her lips, on top of her. Emma could feel the woman's childlike sadness, her want to for a few minutes escape from whatever was happening behind those silent lips. So Emma made love to her, softly and sweetly working to soak her adoration into Regina's skin, trying to heal the wounds she could see but only slightly understood.

Afterward, they dressed and Emma held her tightly in her arms.

"Thank you." Regina signed.

Emma just kissed her forehead and sat in silence for a little while longer. "Your mother doesn't sign to you," She stated the only thing she knew was fact.

Regina shook her head, which was still lodged under Emma's chin, "At first my hearing was functional enough that if you were very loud I could hear you so my parents spent the first five years of my life simply yelling everything at me. I remember my mother used to complain it was damaging to her vocal cords. Around the age of five, we started to notice that method of communication was not working as well. It caused quite a few fights." Regina cuddled in closer, silent in her thoughts for a long while, "I remember feeling my hearing go."

Emma's heart was beating hard in her chest aching for the little brown-eyed girl.

"I was just over seven and I remember it was near my birthday. I woke up in the middle of the night because suddenly everything felt different. At that point I was only hearing the loudest of things anyway; my mother had all but stopped speaking to me because she said it was too difficult. I remember I had been hearing something like a high-pitched buzzing for a few weeks and then I felt this little pop, almost like when you fly in an airplane and it was gone. It was the loudest silence I had ever heard. It terrified me. I ran to my mother and she screamed herself hoarse trying to force my hearing back but it was pointless."

Emma stroked Regina's hair lightly, imagining the horror that night must have held for her.

"After the doctor confirmed I was deaf, they hired a full-time interpreter as my nanny and they just spoke to me through her. It was easier than learning themselves. When I was eleven my mother was passed up for a board seat that she desired. The reason they gave was because she would probably be too busy caring for her disabled daughter. She decided that deafness was a sign of weakness and she would not cater to it. She had decided that I could live like a hearing person. So I did. She put me in all of the best speech therapy programs available and I was taught to use my voice and read lips. After a while, they fired the interpreter and that's how it was. I wasn't allowed to sign at home anymore. She started me on piano, which was pointless, and she just seemed to become more disappointed in me as time passed. I've told you my entire family are musicians – that is true on both sides and no one knew what to do with me. It was like I was the family pet more than a member of the family. They would pat me on the head, put me in a chair in the corner and then go off to discuss what they really wanted to - music. I think I finally got involved in the way that I could just to stop feeling so left out. I couldn't play their music but I could help to run the organizations."

"You must have been so lonely with no one to talk to."

"I was and it took a very long time for me to learn. My mother disallowed any sign that I was deaf, so I suppose you could say I had plenty of motivation. I spent years unable to communicate with anyone; thank god for Ruby. My mother never cared for her, she caught Ruby signing to me too many times but she was a godsend."

"How did she end up your interpreter?"
"On the very rare times circumstances required an interpreter we started hiring her."

Emma could see it all laid out before her, the lonely childhood that Regina had and Emma could sympathize. Being passed from foster home to foster home, feeling unwanted her entire life was not the same as being locked in her own mind, unable to communicate but she knew what it felt like to be lonely and unwanted. She felt one of Regina's tears land with a soft splat onto her arm and she pulled her tighter to her, willing the sadness away.

"It was never good enough for my mother, though. See, I could never understand her. Have you noticed that my mother mumbles when she speaks? There is nothing to read because she barely moves her mouth. She always thought I was doing it on purpose, pretending I couldn't understand her to get back at her. Truly, I think she does it to get back at me."

"Is that why Ruby came today? To interpret for your mom? I was wondering."

"Yes."

They sat there for a long time Regina wrapped in Emma's strong arms until Henry reappeared and shoved himself into Regina's lap and under both women's arms, "'Gina?" he asked.

"What, sweetheart?"

"If I want to sign to you is that okay?"

Regina smiled, her eyes still wet, "Of course it is."

"Okay. 'Gina?"

"Yes, Henry?"

"Why are you crying?"

Regina laughed a little, a few stray tears falling again, "well because I love you and I know that I am so, so lucky to have you and your mom in my life."

Henry beamed and Emma, touched, kissed her temple.

"Mommy!"

Emma woke with a start as Henry flew up the stairs and onto his mother's sleeping body. Regina yelped at the sudden body weight flying across her.

"Mommy, mommy, come on you have to look. Come on, come on, come on!" Emma grudgingly let herself be pulled from the warmth of the bed, jumping in place as the cold wood bit the soles of her feet.

"Look!" He shoved her hard into the window, bumping her shins against the dresser.

Emma blinked at the glare, what was she seeing? Then her eyes popped open, her mouth and eyes as round as Henry's.

Her little boy grinned his best toothy grin, "Its snow, mommy!"
Still in their underwear Emma and Henry blew down the stairs at a lightning speed and throwing the back door open they plunged into the freezing outdoors. Without hesitation Henry threw himself on the small peaks, his little mostly naked body swimming through the icy powder.

At some point in the night, the sky had opened and delivered them half a foot of their first snow in Chicago.

Shivering violently, Emma and Henry giggled as they flopped around in the thin layer of white before starting up a one on one game of launch the snowball as hard as possible at the others head.

Regina appeared at the patio door eyes twinkling as she watched them, both too excited to notice they were going to lose a few toes.

Emma saw her and pulled her arm back aiming for the dry woman. "Hey!" Regina yelled, a finger out in warning. "don't you dare!"

Emma and Henry exchanged mischievous grins and without hesitation pummeled the woman.

Regina screamed trying to escape inside but Emma caught her. Henry cheered jumping up and down, lobbing snow at both women. "Hey, little man!" Emma cried using Regina as a shield. Together they turned on him, pitching a few snowballs before hiding behind the lawn furniture.

It wasn't until their hair was wet and Henry's lips were developing a slightly blue tint that Regina insisted in her best strict mother voice that both of the children march their butts inside this instant before they all froze.

Each changed and wrapped themselves in a blanket before meeting, wide-eyed, at the window of the sunroom. The view from there was exquisite, the white blanketing city almost magical.

"It's so pretty, mommy," Henry said burrowing under his mother's blanket. Emma laughed and took Regina into her arms on the other side of her, "It really is. Our very first Chicago snow."
"You want to come with me to an all deaf dinner?" Regina deadpanned.

"I mean, I don't care that it's all deaf, I just want to meet your college friends."

Regina rolled her eyes, "But I haven't seen most of them since I was at Gallaudet. It's silly."

Emma had seen the Gallaudet flag hanging over Regina's computer in her office and being unfamiliar with the school she had asked Regina what it was. Regina's eyes had boggled for a moment; surprised that someone could have gone their entire life without hearing of the school. Hips swaggering with pride for her Alma Matter, she had said, "Think of it as Harvard for the deaf."

"Why is it silly that I want to go?"

"I don't know exactly. Perhaps because the main reason I am going to this dinner is because I feel as though I have to."

"You don't want a date?" Emma wrapped her arms around the woman's waist, "You don't want to show me off?"

Regina quirked her eyebrow, "Actually that does sound rather nice. All right if you insist. There's no need to dress up since we're just going to a Chinese restaurant."

They weren't just going to a Chinese restaurant; the Gallaudet alumni had completely rented the space out. They walked through the doors hand in hand, smiling and as soon as they were inside a sea of hands began flying in their direction.

Emma recognized a few flying signs like how are you and so on but, for the most part, she was an English speaker in a room full of native Mandarins.

She squared her jaw. She could do this. She would do this - and she would ask Ruby to double her lessons because this not understanding thing was getting old.

Regina pulled her to a tall strawberry blonde and signed "Emma this was my college roommate Kathryn. Kathryn this is Emma, my girlfriend."

Kathryn smiled and her hands began to race. Emma felt her eyes widen. Regina chuckled tapping Kathryn's shoulder and signed "Voice. She's still learning sign."

Kathryn nodded and said – something. Emma blinked. She had absolutely no idea.

*Was that what Regina's voice would sound like if Cora hadn't forced her into speech therapy? I think I understand now why so many hate to use their voices.*

It wasn't words exactly as much as a collection of vowel sounds. Emma flushed, "I'm sorry, I didn't understand. Try again?"
A flash of annoyance passed Kathryn's face but she covered it with a smile and spoke again. This time, Emma got it. "Hearing?"

"Oh, yes. I am." She didn't like the way that Kathryn made the word 'hearing' sound like a derogatory term.

Kathryn pat Emma's arm kindly, "Well good for you for trying to learn."

Emma scowled a bit knowing what she had really said was 'our local mandarin is far too complex for a silly hear-er like yourself but good job for trying. If you make it into the temple of doom I will be shocked.'

Emma had never felt so stupid.

Regina took her around the room passing her from hands to hands until Emma was dizzy. She had been studying sign for five months now but today she felt as if perhaps she hadn't been trying hard enough.

*Emma, this is probably a lot like what Regina feels when she is in a crowd of hearing people. Maybe you should pay attention.*

The thought was like a kick to the gut.

Overwhelmed she found her way to a table and took a seat, ordering a beer from the server as she walked by. The room was fascinating. The only sound was the strange piano versions of pop songs the restaurant had on as background noise for a group who wouldn't notice it. There was also the occasional cough or sneeze and, of course, the intermittent slaps of hand meeting hand in fervor but other than that the room was silent. She closed her eyes; it was as though the room was empty but the moment she slowly opened them again it was a visual explosion of hands and facial expressions.

She smiled amusedly.

She watched Regina smile and talk for once completely in her element, her grin lighting the seven seas. Regina caught her eye and waved her over, "What are you doing all the way over there? How can I show you off?"

Emma grinned and joined her girlfriend, slipping her arm around her happily.

"I was just talking to Orin here about the Gallaudet football team. They kicked Notre Dame's ass this past season."

Emma chuckled, "Go Bison's."

Regina beamed and Orin, laughing himself mumbled something unintelligible.

Emma wished that the people Regina kept introducing her to would stop trying to use their voices for her benefit. Not only were most of them completely unintelligible but also, Emma felt like a jerk every single time they awkwardly cleared their throats to begin speaking, like trying to turn over a dead car.

"Where did you go to school, Emma?"
Emma felt her hands twitch about to spring into action but she paused letting them fall back into her jacket pocket, embarrassed by her stage fright.

*No, it would be easier, quicker and less embarrassing for everyone if I don't even try.*

Smiling a bit, she did her best to dive into the conversation.

Instead of swimming, she sank. Emma stayed by her girlfriend's side, smiling when everyone else did, chuckling when everyone else did, only understanding bits and pieces.

Emma's phone buzzed in her pocket and though she knew it was rude to check your phone whilst in a conversation, you never knew, it could be Henry.

"*How's it going?*" Ruby asked.

"*Regina seems to be having a great time.*"

"*My first deaf event was hard too. Actually my first many. Don't worry, you'll get there.*"

"*Right now I don't really feel like I will. We need to triple our lessons, Red. This is beyond.*"

"*Okay we can do that but don't forget sign is a very hard language to learn. Cut yourself some slack.*"

"*Oh no, there's no way that will work on me. Regina hasn't had to use her voice with Henry in weeks.*"

"*He's a kid. That's how it works when you're a kid. Their minds are sponges.*"

"*Ruby...*

"*Cut. Yourself. Some. Slack.*"

She looked up from the text to see all eyes on her, waiting.

"I'm sorry!" she cried, shoving her phone back into her pocket with embarrassment.

"I was asking if you were ready to eat. Orin has invited us to his table."

"Oh! Thank you, Orin, yes I'm totally hungry."

She smiled at Regina but for the first time, she only received the polite professional smile back.

Emma did her best to focus as they ate, refusing to ask anyone to slow their sign. She could do this! She watched each set of hands closely, catching little. Most conversations looked something like "I told him – see – wife – thought – in the spring – twice a year." People tried to include her at first but eventually it simply became clear that she couldn't keep up. Slowly she faded from the conversation altogether, left to sit stare, as she played with the label of her beer.

Eventually, her mind began to drift into a daydream.

She knew she had been caught once or twice and each time she would snap back into focus only to
either feel so frustrated she wanted to throw something or to softly fade away again. She needed to get her head in the game and speak up otherwise Regina was going to be upset, thinking she was having a terrible time.

She wasn’t – she just was – lost.

She tried but despite her efforts she knew she was in deep trouble when she reached to take the bill and Regina ignored her, paying immediately, tight-lipped and avoiding her eyes.

Dread filled her. She could smell the fight in the air like she could smell rain.

Regina was silent on the way back to the car and silent the entire way home. The silence made Emma twitch; her fight or flight instincts ringing in her nerves. She could say she was sick. She could say she had a headache and needed to go straight to bed. Except – she couldn't. She wanted to tell her she had enjoyed the trip into Regina’s world but she kept quiet, giving Regina the time she needed and instead did her best to make herself small.

When they entered the loft Henry flew into their arms, expecting and receiving a plethora of kisses before simply grinning at them as if he hadn't seen them in months.

"Becca," Regina asked, "before you go do you think you could take Henry for a hot chocolate at that little place down the block? I know it's nearly his bedtime but I'm sure you both could use a warm treat." If Emma saw correctly Regina had slipped the girl some type of bill probably for the drinks as well as the extra task.

Henry looked surprised but bundled up happily at the prospect of hot chocolate – with cinnamon since that was the only way the boy would drink it.

The moment they were gone Emma sat with a thump on the kitchen stool not ready for her anger but ready to reassure.

Regina began quietly, "Emma I was very upset by your behavior tonight."

"Wait, what?" Emma had been expecting to hear something along the lines of its shitty that you insisted on going and then didn't have a good time at all or – something. How had she been behaving?

"I said I was very upset by your behavior tonight. I would never have thought that being in a room full of deaf people would make you so rude."

"Rude? What?"

"Emma you spent the entire evening either on your phone or completely checked out. After a while, people simply stopped talking to you because you weren't aware enough of us to answer!"

"Regina wait, I was only on my phone once! Once! And it was because Ruby texted me."

"Do you know how rude it is to a deaf person when someone sits on their phone during a conversation?"

"Wait-"

"Imagine if someone sat with their ears plugged in the middle of a crowd of people all trying to talk
Emma frowned, she hadn't thought about the fact that not looking at the people speaking would come off as not caring about what they had to say. She was still getting used to the new rules for this new community she had spent practically no time in. "Regina, I'm sorry about that. I didn't think about it that way but"

Regina held up her hand to silence her fury etched into her face, "I understand. You couldn't understand them."

Emma was thrown. So, wait, if Regina knew she couldn't understand the rapid signers then why was she in trouble? "Well, no, actually I couldn't. I feel like I only have the most basic of words down and they all signed so fast –"

"Emma, you didn't even try."

"What?"

"You didn't even try to sign or to keep up. You just saw that it was hard and you checked out."

"What do you mean I didn't try? I tried all freaking night. I have a killer headache because I was trying so damn hard."

"To do what? Daydream?" Regina spat, finally shrugging out of her coat.

"Regina! Come on, I'm sorry if I zoned out a few times but it isn't fair to say I didn't try."

"You didn't try, Emma! You didn't try to communicate at all. Everyone there would have understood that you are a new signer. They would not have had any problem as a matter of fact they would have tried to help you but you never even tried to speak their language – to speak my language!" Regina was yelling now and Emma was in shock.

"Regina, that makes it sound like I don't want to speak your language which isn't fair!"

"Isn't it?" Regina glared, icing over.

"No! If I didn't I wouldn't be trying to learn! I know it's been kind of slow but how else can I show I want to besides that?"

"By signing, Emma, by signing!"

"You mean by making a complete fool of myself in front of half of your graduating class. By making myself look like a complete idiot and you for dating the idiot."

"Maybe! What's wrong with that? Isn't that how you learn? You try and you fail. You try and you make an ass out of yourself. You were safe in that environment to do that. You were safe with me but you did nothing. You looked like an ass anyway; Emma, standing there and not even trying to communicate and you made me look like an ass."

"That is not fucking fair! I tried so hard to keep up. I'm sorry I didn't try to sign; I didn't think anyone would have the patience for my craptastic signing. Honestly, it was kind of a hit for me because I thought while I was terrible at returning it; I was decent at understanding it! Now I know that isn't true at all. I'm sorry that I began to daydream a few times but it wasn't because I don't care, you have to understand that. It's scary going into a situation like that and I felt terrible; especially when people tried to use their voices for me. You've made it clear how much people hate to do it and yet you kept
telling them to. I felt like such an asshole and then when people did their best to use their voices for me I couldn't understand them half the time. It's not like they are used to trying to communicate."

Regina folded her arms around her stomach looking violent and Emma knew she had said that wrong, "In that way." She tried to tack on but it was too late. "No, Regina-

Regina turned from her to get a glass of water cutting Emma off entirely.

Emma stomped on the wood floor knowing that Regina could feel the vibration; the summons but the woman ignored her for a moment longer.

"You didn't even try for me, Emma. Not even a little bit."

"Regina, no! That's not true. Maybe I didn't know how I should try or the way you wanted me to try but that just plain isn't true. I will know for next time and I will be better."

Regina sighed, not really paying attention to the other woman; "I'm tired, I want to go to bed early. I think you and Henry should stay at your apartment tonight." She turned her back to the blonde, completely dismissing her and started up the stairs to her bedroom.

Emma watched her go feeling dumbfounded; her anger building. She jumped to her feet and started after her, ready to inform her of just how silly she was being about this but stopped, changing her mind. She had been kicked out so she was sure as hell going to go. She didn't stay where she wasn't freaking wanted.

She threw her jacket back on, gathering all of Henry's belongings at a manic pace all the while listening for Regina. There was only silence from upstairs.

She had made a mistake. She saw Regina's point that she should have tried but honestly it had barely occurred to her; did that equal getting kicked the hell out? Did that equal being accused of not caring for Regina? Did she care so little that she could just throw her out on her ass?

She grumbled as she gathered and when she had everything she didn't stop, she didn't think twice before taking the stairs two at a time and slamming angrily into the elevator.

A flush of hurt washed over her as the doors closed. She had been sure Regina wouldn't actually let her go.

"Did you guys have a fight?"

Emma clicked her tongue as she and Henry walked hand in hand to the train. "You know sometimes kid you're wise beyond your years."

Henry just shrugged, "I know."

He had almost thrown another fit in the middle of the café when he heard they were going home but something in Emma's eye had made him staunch the flow; now he was just staring at her expectantly as if she was supposed to tell him every little detail.

"Well, won't it be nice to sleep in your room tonight?"

He sighed as if she was missing an obvious point, "I have been sleeping in my own room!"

Emma scowled.
The apartment felt cold, drafty and very empty when they entered. Regina's apartment always smelled like Vanilla, Chanel No. 5 and something spicy but this entirely Emma and Henry scent that had always been a sign of home suddenly felt foreign. They both shifted uncomfortably for a moment before throwing forced smiles at one another and stepping inside.

"Okay kid," bravado in her voice, "it's passed your bedtime. Teeth and hair brushed."

"Okay, mommy." He headed to the bathroom but stopped halfway there, "'Gina tomorrow? Like she said?"

Emma sighed, "Not sure kid."

Her heart was still beating quickly with aggravation and an old familiar feeling that she was defective in so many ways, as she stood in the middle of her living room alone for the first time in weeks.

Now what?
Chapter 18

She didn't hear from Regina the next day or the day after. They were in a we–both–think–we–are–right standoff and Emma was not going to be the one to break it. It was true Emma had made a mistake, she knew that but Regina had grossly overreacted. The woman had tossed her aside the moment she saw that the shiny coating on her new girlfriend-shaped toy had a scuff and the stubborn streak Emma lived in refused to let her give in. Regina was wrong. Only – she missed her.

So instead of picking up the phone Emma spent the days pacing, chewing her nails and trying not to panic. She would not be the one to give in but why hadn't Regina called? God, that woman is as stubborn and stupid as she is.

Ruby had said she knew nothing of the fight and could, therefore, shed no light on the subject.

By the evening of the third day Emma had a rehearsal and she was done. This fight was stupid and she was going to make Regina call it off.

She didn't have a lot going for her as a teenager, as a matter of fact nothing but her body. At the time, it had been her greatest weapon and now she was prepared to do the only thing she knew how to do; the only thing that had worked for her before.

*If this doesn't work then I don't – I don't know.*

She dressed in her best jeans that hugged tightly to her thighs and calves before disappearing into her knee high brown lace-up boots. The pants tied like shoelaces under her belly button just below her hipbones so that no matter what shirt she wore with it a small amount of toned stomach and lower back was always showing. The anxiety of a missing girlfriend from her life had given Emma back something she had forgotten to take – time to work out and she was feeling confident in herself for once. She pulled on a white ribbed tank top knowing that it was just slightly see through and combed her hair into a wild disarray of waves and curls.

She rid herself of her jacket the moment she walked into the building, pulling her cello onto her back and tossing her coat in one of the audience seats; coyly removing her weapon from its sheath.

"Hey Swan," August called, clearly glad to see her, "You know it's snowing, right?"

Emma shrugged, "I like to walk on the wild side."

August scoffed, "and the wild side loves you."

"Shut up."

"Drink after? I keep hearing about this little jazz place up the street and I was thinking about checking it out."

"Sure." She settled into her seat, sharing yet another slightly too formal nod of greeting with Killian, whose eyes were popping.

Now if she could just capture Regina that way this fight would be toast. Score one for Emma.
She was standing at the edge of the stage talking lightly with Mary when she heard the clicking she had been waiting for all evening and was just beginning to worry would not come. Unconsciously she ran her hand through her hair fluffing it a little and fighting the urge she had to turn and look with everything she had.

"Hey, Em." Ruby waved and Emma did not miss the chocolate eyes that shot from her hair to her feet and then away all in a moment.

Emma tossed a wink to Ruby but only smiled politely at the other conveying that yes, she was indeed still angry and would not be backing down.

Regina pushed through the curtain to the backstage area as though she hadn't seen her. Angry doubt flushed Emma's cheeks. Maybe this was a stupid plan. Maybe the best thing to do was just to walk up to her and demand to talk.

_No. There is no way I could handle that._

"Whoa. Um, trouble in paradise"

"Shut up, August."

Regina was in and out throughout the rehearsal doing nothing but distracting Emma, making her want to grab her and do something slightly violent, something slightly inappropriate. Each time the woman passed without making eye contact with her, the tension in Emma seemed to build until she was all but snarling at those around her. Ruby began to look concerned as if she knew she was standing too close to a ticking bomb.

Emma finally stood and began packing up her cello. She had to accept the fact that her plan, the only plan she knew how to make – the only plan her past experiences had given her - hadn't worked.

_Maybe that is it for us._

For just a moment Emma felt her head sink under water, drowning in grief. Was that it for their relationship? Could she stop it now if Regina felt that way?

Regina came around the corner of the curtains at that moment and without meaning to Emma caught her eye. She knew the slightly angry face Emma had been wearing all night had slipped leaving the raw worry exposed.

What would she do if this were it? She had thought this was only a silly little fight but if this was actually a breakup – what would she do? She needed that woman like she needed oxygen. She would survive, of course she would, she always survived but with her only a few feet away and sorrow wrapping constricting around her heart, she wanted more than anything to reach for her right then. But she couldn't; she just – she didn't know how.
I need a fucking drink.

Regina faltered a bit surprised when their eyes met before continuing on her path.

Emma swung her cello up and over her shoulder and turned to face August. "Ready?"

"Yeah," He said slowly watching her. "Uh –"

"Well then?" she snapped. He paused for another beat before deciding to leave it alone and throw his arm around her shoulders as they started for the door.

Her phone buzzed in her tight back pocket as they entered the club blaring with percussion and bass.

"I know what you're doing."

Emma's heart skipped a beat for a moment as relief washed through her. She was speaking to her. She jumped to answer despite standing in line to pay her entry fee.

"What?"

"The jeans. The shirt. It is far too cold out for those."

"I don't know what you mean."

There was a long pause that made Emma's skin itch with worry again before:

"Ms. Swan, I expect to see you in my loft in no more than thirty minutes."

This message was so Regina that she both loved it and was infuriated by it.

She took a long moment to think about how to respond. There was no way in hell, now that Regina was speaking to her, that she would go running. Regina had been unfair and somewhat hurtful. No, she was winning and she planned to see it through to the end.

"Actually, I have plans. I'm at the Blue Lantern. You can meet me here."

"Whaddya want?" August yelled and Emma yelled back her order, feeling better already.

When he returned they clinked drinks together and sat listening. The music was infectious and soon they were bopping and swaying in their seats.

Emma was almost, well not exactly grateful but something along those lines, for the cello incident with Killian because had it not been for that she would never have realized just how much she enjoyed August. He was easy to be with, easy to laugh with and his affection never felt anything other than brotherly which meant she could really let her hair down when she was with him.

"You wanna dance?" he called through the schizophrenic beat.

"Hell yeah!" They downed their drinks and then coming together chest to chest, one arm around their waists the other hand in hand they started to kick, dipping and stomping, feet flying as August spun her.

"Come on, Swan! You can do better than that!"
She was laughing to the point of tears as they whirled feet skipping and jiving together when she saw Regina walk in, straight-backed, jaw set, face stark. Emma considered breaking away from her dancing buddy but decided against it.

She laughed as August spun her again, shimming them across the floor with ease. When the song ended they stopped with everyone else cheering and clapping for the band. "Who taught you how to dance, Booth?"

He shrugged, his cheeks burning a bit from exhaustion "My brother was into vogue dancing in the 80's."

Emma stared at him for a moment, eyes wide before she doubled over, hands on her knees laughing until she felt a harsh snort rip through her.

August clapped her back and offered another dance but, tears slipping down her cheeks; she shook her head and nodded in Regina's direction.

"Ah. The Evil Queen."

Emma snorted again, "It would appear so."

They took their seats and hesitantly, rigidly Regina took one with them.

"How are you, Regina?" he asked not seeming to mind being the meat in a tension sandwich.

"I'm fine, Mr. Booth. How are you?" He sighed, shaking his head and taking a sip of his drink. Regina flushed ever so slightly and added, "I'm sorry – August."

"Can we get you a drink?"

He chivalrously went to the bar, getting her drink for her.

Emma caught her eye and both looked away, a slight edge still rippling below the surface.

So Regina isn't quite ready to give in completely. That's fine. I gotta hand it to us; we both know how to hold a damned grudge, don't we?

August returned and plopped her drink in front of her with a wink.

Emma took a huge sip from her glass and cheered clapping above her head as the next number started.

August and Emma discussed the technique of the players for a while, Regina sitting stiffly in her chair eyes wandering with them but very much apart.

Emma could feel she wasn't having fun. It was silly for her to have joined them.

August tried to catch Regina's eye as he called her but with no luck, he finally landed on a "What's with her?" for Emma.

Emma sighed, studying the woman who was watching the dancers unaware they were discussing her. "She's bored. Normally she can enjoy music, she actually has a big passion for dancing but that's
because usually she can feel the beat. Here," she placed August's palms flat on the table, "feel how there isn't just one beat but a beat for every instrument? She can't follow that. So she's bored."

A brainwave hit Emma.

_She's bored!

August scratched at his shaggy chin for a moment and then abruptly stood, pulling a startled Regina from her seat. He didn't give her time to protest, removing jacket and purse and then pulling her by the arm onto the dance floor.

It clearly took Regina a minute to loosen up, her feet fumbling. The song ended and Regina still looked a little confused. August laughed bowing politely to her but Regina waved him back, face set, a silent command to try again. Taking her into his arms he waited while Regina tapped out the beat she thought might be the right one. He shook his head and tapped the main beat into her back. She nodded once and they were off. This time they flew, spinning and twisting, crossing and twirling Regina's eyebrows tense, refusing to back down from the challenge but a small titter of laughter slipping from her lips.

Emma grinned, her anger fading as she watched until she was up, taking her girlfriend from August. Regina grinned back with Emma's favorite devil look on her face.

"You were bored."

"What?"

Emma spun her and they began to dance. "You were bored. Before August got you up you were bored. You weren't paying attention. We were talking to you but you didn't know it."

Regina's face was blank for a second as she danced and then understanding hit her, "Shut up, Ms. Swan."

"No, no!" Emma cried, spinning her back to her, "you gotta say it."

"Say what exactly?"

"I won our first fight. I didn't even have to make my point. You made it for me."

Regina broke into uproarious laughter.
Chapter 19

Henry looked at the turkey skeptically. Yes, the skin was burnt but his mother was grinning expectantly down at him so he gave her half a smile.

"Oh come on, kid. You don't need to look so scared."

His nose wrinkled, "Its burneded mommy, I don't think you did it right. Did you do like 'Gina told you?"

She heard laughter to the side of them and scowled at Regina.

"It's supposed to look like that!" Regina assured the boy but he wrinkled his nose even harder, "I don't think so."

Emma laughed and smacked his little butt lightly with the wooden cooking spoon she was holding. He jumped and giggled. Turning toward the kitchen, she followed Regina back through the door, smacking her butt with the same spoon. She jumped and gave Emma the look that sent yummy tingles through her entire body. They each grabbed the last of the bowls from the kitchen and plopped them down at the table.

"All right, who's ready to eat?"

"Me! Me! Me!" Henry bounced. They sat and loaded their plates quickly before raising their glasses.

"To Thanksgiving. May it be one of our best." Emma said with a wink at her son. "This year I'm thankful for - my life, where it is right here and now. I'm in the best playing shape of my life. I have a steady roof and plenty of food and wonderful people to share it with. What are you guys thankful for?"

Henry thought, scratching his chin as he had seen Sherlock Homes doing on television, "Chocolate pie!" he finally cried.

"Chocolate pie?" Regina feigned shock, "Not mommy or your food or The Avengers? Chocolate pie?"

He giggled, falling sideways in his chair as she tickled him, "Yup! Chocolate pie! You!" He pointed at Regina.

"Me? Well I," she looked around the table laughter still shining in her eyes, "I'm thankful for the turn my life has taken recently."

Emma smiled, meeting Regina's smile in her favorite just-for-them secret of a smile. "Let's eat!"

Emma dug in happily. She had never cooked so much in her life and she was sure it would be amazing. She had a theory that if you added only good spices to a dish that it had no choice but to come out well but as she bit into the turkey she learned she was very wrong. It didn't taste burnt exactly, instead the bird crumbled in her mouth, reducing itself to sawdust.

Her lip twitched as she took another bite avoiding the two pairs of eyes on her.

She chewed, looking around the room, everywhere but at Regina and Henry.

On her third bite she couldn't take it anymore, she sat back, "I'm thankful that your mom will have
food at her house." The trio burst into a clatter of laughter as Emma cried, "Why did anyone let me
cook the turkey? Whose idea was that? What were you thinking?"

"Try some gravy." Regina handed it to her.

The sauce turned the turkey into wet sawdust. "Well, at least I never said I could cook."

"Oh, you lie!" Regina cried throwing a dinner roll at Emma.

"Yeah!" Henry bellowed, not really understanding what Regina was talking about but knowing he
had an excuse to throw a roll at his mother.

"Hey! I didn't say I could cook well!"

Regina rolled her eyes, "You're not going to heaven, Ms. Swan."

Emma stuck her tongue out.

Their bellies filled, whether the turkey was a good one or not. They lounged on the couch to watch
'A Charlie Brown Thanksgiving', in a state of food coma, subtitles on of course. Regina flopped first,
kicking off her heels and Emma flopped onto Regina making her groan at the pressure on her belly.
Henry, grinning wildly, climbed on top of the pile of women and settled in a ball like a cat on a
perch.

"Oh, so full!" Regina moaned shoving Emma's shoulder out of her gut.

They dozed through the thirty-minute special, Henry purring on top of the pile, a very satisfied kitten.

When it was over, though their bellies still felt like exploding, they pulled themselves up and
changed into their going-to-the-Mills-family-house clothes.

"Why does she want me to bring my cello?"

Regina shrugged, "she always plays something after dinner for everyone. She's probably planning on
spontaneously asking you to play a piece with her. I'm sure she has some arrangement for harp and
cello."

"Oh god."

"Don't worry about it. Really. If she doesn't ask remember it's a compliment."

Emma stood in front of the mirror puffing her belly out as far as it went doing her best to forget
completely about what Regina had just said to her, "I'm so full I feel like I did when I was pregnant
with Henry!" She rubbed at the nonexistent bulge.

Regina sat on the bed lacing her tall heels and cocked an eyebrow at her.

"What?"

Her girlfriend pulled her over by the belt and kissed her belly, "you know I've never seen pictures of
you pregnant with him."
"You haven't?"

Regina shook her head, brushing her lips against the woman's skin. Emma sighed but pulled herself to her dresser taking a photo from the top drawer.

"Oh my god!" Regina cried. Twenty-two year old Emma looked so young even though it was only five short years ago. Her hair was back in her ponytail, as it always was in her concert blacks and thick black-framed glasses covered her very swollen pregnant face. "Your belly is huge!"

"I know! I put on a good thirty pounds."

Regina returned the photo to Emma and went back to her laces. She could tell from the way she was avoiding eye contact that Regina had something to say, so she went about dressing, one eye on the woman, waiting.

"Do you think you would want to get pregnant again?"

Emma dropped the hairbrush she had been holding, "What?"

Regina pointedly studied her shoes picking at invisible nothings along the sole, "Do you think you would want to get pregnant again?"

"You want more kids?"

Regina laughed softly, "Any kids."

Emma frowned, "Right. Uh, why are you asking?"

"I don't know," she shrugged finally looking at her, "we've been dating for a while now. We're both in our thirties,"

"Uh, twenty-seven, almost twenty-eight, thank you." Emma teased, not as uncomfortable with the subject as she would have thought she would be.

"All right, we're both nearly thirty then. I suppose I'm asking because you ask different questions dating in your thirties than you do when you're in your twenties."

Emma nodded, playing at thinking it over. She knew her answer. She had been raised with no family whatsoever. She knew by the age of fifteen that she wanted a whole horde of children. She wanted so many children she could create her own sports team just so long as she had a significant other to help referee. "Does that mean that, well um, I mean if, you know if it were, I mean if in the end it was uh, you know, you and I you would uh, want more kids than Henry?"

Regina smiled her all-consuming toothy grin, "You don't think Henry would want brothers and sisters?"

Emma's heart stopped and restarted hard in her chest but she did her best at calm, cool and collected, "I don't know, why don't we ask him?" Regina laughed and threw a pillow at her. "How many do you want?"

"Three."

"Three total or three more?"

Regina beamed, "Yes."
"Do you want to get pregnant?"

"Yes."

Emma couldn't help but to beam back.

"Henry, we need to go!"

Henry came stomping out of the room his tie in his hand, "I can't do it!"

Regina and Emma exchanged a look to substitute for the squeals they both decided to keep in. Henry in his little blue suit was the cutest thing either woman had ever seen.

Regina beckoned to him and took his tie. "Turn around."

Henry did and Regina immediately attacked the back of his neck with kisses. He squealed, caught off guard, and collapsed into her lap, tipping them both backward into a tumbling giggling pile.

Emma smiled. No, she really wouldn't mind having three more with this woman.
Belle answered the door to the Mills mansion with a smile on her face, "Hi guys, Cora is in the study. Ruby got here a few minutes ago."

Hand in hand in hand, the three walked toward the study, insistent that the rest of the evening would be as pleasant as the day had been.

Regina stopped by the kitchen first, grabbing herself a glass of wine with an I-will-make-the-best-of-this attitude.

"Good evening." Cora smiled politely, kissing Emma and Regina's cheeks before planting a huge wet one on Henry's forehead.

He made a face wiping at the spot and grumbling about all of the lipstick kisses.

"Sorry kid," Emma laughed, "you're surrounded by women. That means lipstick."

Ruby scoffed, "Don't worry in a few years he'll love that fact."

Emma rolled her eyes and hugged her friend.

"Ms. Lucas!" Cora hissed under her breath and Emma did her best to hide a smile.

"You don't wear lipstick."

"No, but uh,"

"She doesn't need lipstick." Regina signed, kissing Emma sweetly.

Turning to the group of people, Emma nodded politely while introducing herself and Henry. She recognized a few faces including that of Mr. Gold. Surprised, Emma shook Mr. Gold's hand heartily with Henry at her side, "Good to see you again, sir."

"You are becoming a regular occurrence, Ms. Swan."

Unsure if this was a compliment or not she smiled vaguely, "this is my son Henry."

"Lovely to meet you, Henry."

"What happened to your leg?" the boy asked. Emma flushed and nudged him hard in the back, earning herself a scowl.

"I'm sorry. Apparently he was raised by wolves."

"It's quite all right." He said politely but excused himself to speak to Cora.

"Are you kidding me, kid? I know I raised you better than that."

Henry hung his head and apologized.

"You're going to get your mama in trouble with her future boss!" Ruby teased.

"Funny, Red. Funny."
Belle delivered a glass of wine to Emma as well as Regina's second as they stuffed themselves into the tiny love seat, Henry in the middle awkwardly.

They watched the group of Cora's guests politely interact, every now and then exchanging looks that read of boredom. Regina and Ruby unabashedly plowed through wine as if it were their lifeline.

"Mommy," Henry complained after a while, wanting to get up, run, play, anything but Emma pulled him back in his seat and he understood the command for silence.

"I'm sorry you're bored, Henry." Regina signed, "Just remember that chocolate pie and it will be worth it."

He grinned.

"Cora, when are you going to bring out that harp of yours?" Mr. Gold finally asked just as Emma's eyes were beginning to droop.

This woke her fully, glancing at her cello, which was hidden in the corner, nerves suddenly striking with a knowing vengeance. Was she really going to ask her to play something?

Cora smiled feigning shock at the request, "Oh, Carlyle. Should I? Is that something everyone would enjoy?"

A look of amusement on her face, Ruby translated Cora's words for Regina. Regina scoffed, rolling her eyes and the two women shared a silent laugh.

Emma felt a secret grin split her lips for a moment. She knew Cora was a good liar, that came with the trade but she didn't even try to make that one seem convincing.

"What's funny?" Henry asked, looking between them.

"Nothing Henry," Emma said, biting the inside of her lip. Emma was learning a lesson she thought might be rather important one day. Flattery will get you everywhere with Cora.

Cora covertly nodded to Belle who disappeared and then reappeared rolling in the giant harp a few moments later.

The group slowly rummaged around the room finding seats slowly, while Cora smiled on expectantly, hands folded in front of her.

Regina slyly tapped Emma; "This is the part where she thanks everyone for wanting to hear her play as if it would never have occurred to her that she of all people could receive such a vast honor."

Cora glanced sideways at the sign, stiffly and Regina let her hands fall, looking studiously away but taking a huge slug from her glass.

"Thank you, everyone," Cora said breathlessly. "for joining me again this year. I hope you all ate your fill. Desert will be in another forty-five minutes but for now, the kind Carlyle Gold has asked if I will spare a moment to share my harp with you."

Regina yawned. Cora's eyes tightened slightly around the edges. Emma bit her lip; if she didn't know any better she would say that Regina was a little bit drunk.

"As always I thank you for listening." Cora slid behind the huge instrument and balancing it on her shoulder sent the group a large if not sickly sweet smile.
Emma had seen harpist play before, it would have been impossible to miss it but this up-close Emma felt her jaw drop. She had thought the cello took extreme dexterity but that was nothing compared to this.

Cora's hands twisted and contorted in ways Emma would have never thought possible as she steadily plucked out a song both light and breathtaking.

*Note to self, follow her advice more often. She might actually know what she's talking about.*

Henry’s eyes were glued; watching like a cat watches a bird, jaw slack.

The music seemed to go on forever and the longer it went on the more agitated Regina seemed to become.

Emma tried to pull her hand to her but Regina smiled, pulling away politely. She wasn't offended, she was beginning to learn that Regina was always a little more distant when Cora was near but she was concerned. What was happening just then in her girlfriend's mind?

"What's wrong?" She signed sloppily.

"The vanity of the Cora Mills show has always been a specific dislike of mine since I was a child."

Finally, with a few closing plucks, Cora's hands stilled. The woman's face glowed radiant, feeding off of the admiration of those around her.

"Succubus." Ruby spat in sign making Emma's eyes pop.

Everyone clapped politely and Cora took a small bow. Regina gave Emma a significant look that had her heart immediately racing.

*Not in front of Gold, not in front of Gold!*  

"Now, before we begin desert I was wondering if Emma," she included her head, "the newest to our musical family, might be willing to join me."

*Musical family?*

"Ma'am?" Emma said stiffly.

"Let's take a small break and then when we return we will hear our new star cellist."

*Star cellist? Jesus.*
Regina gave her an encouraging smile and then she and Ruby went to the kitchen to pour themselves another drink.

"What do you think, Emma?"

"What? Oh, yeah, of course."

"You're a little green, dear."

"What?"

"You're looking a little green."

Emma just smiled a bit, unsure of what else to do, swallowing back the nausea her nerves always produced.

She thanked all the powers that be when she saw the sheet music; it was something she had played before, though not in the right key. She would have to change that as they played. That wasn't too hard.

She pulled out her cello and did her best to avoid all eyes as they filtered back into the room watching her curiously. What if she couldn't live up to Cora's praises? Shit.

Cora spoke again but Emma was having a hard time following. All she knew was within moments Cora was behind her harp again and with a large breath in unison, they began to play.

Emma was fairly sure she had never concentrated so hard her entire life, staring at the page so insistently that everything outside of the page turned to a white fog. She felt her head move lightly, her bow balancing perfectly and though her breathing was slow and deep her heart raced ahead of them at triple speed.

Why the hell did I choose this career? What was I thinking? You're an idiot, Emma, a total idiot.

She finished the piece with a prideful look from Cora and she knew she had done well.

She beamed, catching Regina's eye who winked as she shook her hands, deaf clapping.

But before she could take a deep breath Cora nodded to her, a clear please go again and the process began all over again only this time with Emma by herself.

"Oh, I thought I was going to throw up." Emma groaned to Ruby and Regina who had hidden in the kitchen. Henry had stayed by Cora's side much too interested in the harp lesson he was receiving to join them.

"You did wonderfully." Regina said kissing her deeply.

"Room. Get one." Ruby rolled her eyes.

"She was testing you and you rose to the occasion. I think she kind of loves you." Regina said with a playful scrunch of her nose.
"I don't really get it but she seems to. Is it a trap?"

"Might be."

"I kind of thought I was going to fall flat on my face. You know that Gold will be the one overseeing the Lyric auditions right?"

Regina smiled devilishly and for a moment, Emma could see the rebellious teenager still locked somewhere in the woman, "Indeed. Would you like to go somewhere and make out, Ms. Swan?"

"Oh god," Ruby cried covering her ears, "you haven't changed since high school at all!"

Emma took Regina in her arms, nuzzling her neck, "I think you're drunk, Ms. Mills."

"Mmm, I think I am, Ms. Swan."

"Everyone, dessert is served." Cora called from the hallway appearing instantly through the kitchen door. Emma jumped away from Regina caught but Cora didn't seem to notice, eyes on her daughter. "How much wine have you had, dear?"

Regina blinked a bit and looked to Ruby. "Oh, right."

Regina sighed as Ruby translated, "Don't worry mother, I won't embarrass you during your dinner. You're safe."

Cora floated to just in front of her daughter caressing her cheek in a way that felt anything but loving, "You always were a petulant child, weren't you, Regina?" Regina scowled but before she could respond Cora turned to Emma, "Emma dear, would you follow me, please? I have something I want to show you."

She nodded, shoving her hands in her pockets and sneaking a mouthwatering kiss from Regina before following Cora out of the room.

"Emma," Cora said as they quickly ascended a grand staircase, "I was wondering if I could confer with you about a Christmas gift I have been considering for Regina."

"Oh?"

"Yes, dear." Cora opened the door to a huge office and directed Emma to a seat in front of a giant cherry wood desk.

"Well, I'm not sure how much I can help you." Emma shifted uncomfortable, feeling as though she was on the wrong side again, "I've been debating what to get her myself."

"Right well," Cora sat, stiff postured "all the better." Cora handed her a pamphlet filled with colorful pictures of ear canals and brainwaves, "This is what I was thinking."

Emma studied the papers, not understanding what she was reading, "Cochlear Implant?"

"Yes, dear."

"I'm sorry there is a lot of doctor speak on this page. What is this supposed to be?"

"They allow the deaf to hear, Emma."
Chapter 21

Emma's mind was buzzing as she drove them back, fingers tapping anxiously on the steering wheel. "Are you all right?" Regina finally asked. She was slumped lower in her seat than usual thanks to the wine but her eyes were still sharp.

"What? Me? Yeah, of course."

Regina eyed her not believing her claim of innocence.

"You've been weird since my mother pulled you aside. What did she say?"

"Nothing! She just told me about an audition in Louisville." It wasn't a lie, after they had talked at length about the implant; Cora had mentioned the audition in passing.

"It could help you get into better shape for the Lyric audition." Cora had said simply with a small smile.

Ruby scoffed from the backseat, "Of course she did."

"What?" Emma caught Ruby's slightly hazy eyes in the mirror, "What do you mean?"

Ruby stared back as if the answer were obvious, "Of course Cora would tell you about something that would –"

Regina slapped Ruby's leg sharply.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa lady, clearly there is something there I need to know."

Ruby sighed and shook her head, turning her gaze back out of the window ever the faithful best friend.

Perhaps if Emma's mind hadn't been so fixated on the new information about the implant, she might have noticed that there was something to stop and take note of there. Instead, her mind was full of wires and tiny gadgets. She was dying to ask her about the implant, to pull every bit of information Regina had on the subject from her Cora had been clear, this was a Christmas gift so don't you dare. She wished she had thought to ask Cora more questions. Why had Regina never told her this was a possibility? Did Regina know? Was it really possible she didn't know?

She was still buzzing when they arrived back at Regina's loft.

Regina poured herself another glass of wine as Emma helped Henry into his pajamas.

"I've never seen you drink this much," Emma smirked, "It's fun."

"Mmm," Regina sat with a thump on the stool in the kitchen, "It's the best survival tactic I've found. Helps me not notice all the little comments."

Emma laughed, "I sure as hell noticed. She's an interesting woman."

Regina offered her a glass and leaning against her; just enjoying being close to her. "It makes me nervous that you think she's interesting instead of abhorrent."
"What? Why? I mean I do, I can't believe the things she says but why would you worry about that? I can see she's kind of terrible."

Regina just smiled and pulled her in for a kiss.

They showered and enjoyed one another for a while but after Regina had drifted to sleep Emma slipped between the covers and tiptoed to the office. Once she was in front of the computer she typed two words into the Google search engine: Cochlear Implant.

She sipped at another glass of wine as she read about the structure and how they signal sound directly to the brain. She studied late into the night, tears flowing down her face as she watched a row of online videos of people of all ages hearing sound for the first time.

What would Regina's face look like? What would it show after she heard her name for the first time since she was a small child? Would she remember that's what it sounded like? If she did get it, would I be the one with the honor of saying it?

At some point in the night, she switched from wine to coffee but continued to study, to gather all the facts that she could before slipping back into bed with Regina around dawn.

Her mind was far too full for sleep, though. Emma was in love with this idea. The implant would take away all of Regina's problems, all of Regina's not so hidden pain. No more fighting with her mother, no more having to pretend she understood what was happening in a room full of people because could, for all intents and purposes, be hearing.

Emma rolled on her side, studying the sleeping woman's face.

"Regina." She said softly knowing there would be no response still she called again, louder and watched as her sleeping girlfriend did not react in the slightest.

A world with no sound. Emma's world revolved around sound, her life, her career was music. She imagined yet again what it might feel like, covering her ears as though that would give her an answer. Was it uncomfortable? Did she miss it? Would it be uncomfortable for Regina to hear again?

Softly Emma began to hum her favorite song, what would it be like to not know music?

She let a thumb softly swipe across her cheek and smiled as Regina's sleeping face twitched. This secret gift of Cora's could really change her life for the better. She had read a few negative things online, of course, of trials that had failed and a secret hatred for the devices in the deaf community but she couldn't help but to wonder what it would be like to help bring this woman she cared for so much out of her loudest silence and into the world of the hearing.

It took exactly one week for Emma's curiosity to win over her desire to hold Cora's secret and bring up the implant.

Emma was preparing for the night's concert, pulling on her proper outfit when Regina had caught her
"What?" Emma smiled over her shoulder at the woman as she cuddled into her. "Cold?"

Regina laughed, nodding and pulling her thin robe on over her less than dressed body.

"Well, then why'd you get up?"

"Bed wasn't as warm after you left it."

"Come here." Emma pulled her to her, wrapping her tightly in her arms.

Regina purred contentedly, "I wish you didn't have to go. We never have an evening where Henry is gone."

Henry had begged Ruby for a sleepover that morning when his hungry little eyes had rested on her newly acquired gaming console. Emma was fairly sure Ruby was the coolest person ever in his eyes just now.

"It's nice to be able to use my voice without worrying that he will hear me."

Emma grinned at her screamer girlfriend, "Yeah I gotta say, I like that too."

"Plus it's cold!"

"Cuddle weather."

"I'm sorry, what?" Regina chuckled.

"It's cuddle weather. So cold you want to strip down to nothing and cuddle under the blankets with someone."

"That seems counterproductive."

Emma's lips pursed, "You could come with me."

"What?"

As soon as she said it Emma rolled her eyes at herself, "Sorry, I guess that's silly. No point, right?"

"Do you want me to come with you?"

"No, I just –"

"What?" Those beautiful brown eyes staring up at her pushed her over the edge of her control. She had to know.

"Do you ever wish you could? Come with me I mean – and um, you know, hear a concert?"

"You mean, do I wish I could hear you play?"

Emma felt her face heat with a soft blush, "I'm sorry, you don't have to answer that. I'm, um, sorry, uh, that was stupid. Just curious, you know?" She turned back to the mirror, trying to swallow the scream she felt behind her teeth, the scream that would have read let me help you hear if she could release it.

Regina wrapped her arms around her from behind again, "It's all right, Emma. I'm not going to get
mad. Of course I wish I could hear you play."

"You do?" Excitement shot through her.

"Of course, there are many things I wish I could take part in."

"Would you change it if you could?"

Regina smiled slowly. Emma's face must have shown something serious because Regina just cupped her cheek and kissed her lips lightly, "sometimes. Sometimes I would."

"I don't know what the hell it was supposed to mean." Emma sighed as she packed up her cello that evening. August was leaning heavily against the wall thinking.

"She just said sometimes?"

"Yes! Leave it to freakin' Regina to find a way to answer a direct question vaguely."

"And you feel like you can't go along with Cora's Christmas gift unless she seems like she actually wants it?"

"Right. Kind of. I don't know, Cora is terrible. Why would she do this? I mean it's clear she would love to not have a deaf daughter but why? Plus this is a huge thing; it's surgery. And I just, I can't just ask her if she wants it, you know? Cora would kill me if I gave away the surprise but I just-"

"So then don't give it away."

"Gee thanks. Super helpful."

"I'm just sayin', she's her mom, right?"

"Right."

"They might have an awkward relationship but what it comes down to is that she is her mom. She knows Regina better than anybody. That's her job; to know what's right for Regina and what Regina would want."

An aching pain crashed through Emma's heart. She had never had that, not once. Was August right? A sliver of doubt snaked through her stomach as she remembered the word 'cooK', "I don't know. They don't have the best relationship. Cora's kind of a bitch."

"Still her mom though, kiddo."

August was probably right. Cora was perhaps a little pushy and frankly a little fucking rude but she had to have Regina's best interest at heart, right? Even that whole 'cooK' incident had been all for the sake of Regina communicating. It had been done horribly wrong, but it was done with love, right? August was right. She's her mother. Maybe Emma was just reading into it because - she had never had a mother. It was stupid of her to be so suspicious.

No mother ever meant their child true ill will.
The next morning she allowed herself to be shown into the giant office again.

"Emma, what a surprise. To what do I owe this honor?"

"Why?"

Cora's face remained blank but Emma had a feeling she knew exactly what she was referring to.

"Why what, dear?"

"Why do you want to do this for Regina?"

Cora tittered dryly, "Have I played the role of mother so poorly?"

"Well, kind of, yeah."

Cora's eyes burned but Emma refused to let her gaze fall away. "She's my daughter, Ms. Swan. Despite your ideas of me, I have always and will always give her everything she needs and wants."

"You want to improve her life?"

"Of course! My daughter may think of me as unscrupulous but that, well that simply is not true. She sees me as cold, I know that but I think, I think that this might help turn that around."

Emma's mind whirled as she stared at Cora's blank face. She believed her. She had always had a good sense of people, whether they were being honest with her or not and she could feel the truth radiating from the cold woman, "Then I've decided you're right and we can help Regina. What do you need me to do?"

Cora grinned slowly, "Well dear, I have already spoken to the best surgeon in the field. He will be flying in to perform the surgery five days into the New Year. All I need from you is to get her there."

"'Kay – when are you going to tell her?"

"Why don't we tell her together? A little Christmas surprise? As a matter of fact, why don't you tell her? This can be your gift."

"What?"

"Oh, I have years of giving her gifts under my belt. It would mean something to you to be able to do this, right? You said you were struggling to come up with a gift."

"Why would you do that?"

Cora rolled her eyes dramatically her voice coming out exasperated, "Ms. Swan it isn't as though Regina wouldn't learn of my part in the plan eventually. Is this not something you would like to do?"

"Of course."

"Good. Then this is a gift from you to my daughter."

"Okay, uh, great. I guess that means we're coming over -"

"For Christmas dinner, yes dear."

"Is it a yearly thing or?"
"No, just a family celebration."

"Right, then why don't you come to us?"

"I'm sorry?" Cora's voice was deadpanned as if Emma had just asked her to ride the El naked.

"Come to us. I think that would mean a lot to Regina."

"Emma —"

Emma held up her hand and surprisingly Cora stopped speaking "Wow, I didn't think that would work. Look. Just come over."

Cora's eyes narrowed and for a second Emma was sure she was going to lose her head. "Very well then."

"All right then. Okay, well um,"

"Emma."

"Yeah?"

"The Louisville audition. You're taking it?"

"I haven't decided actually. I'm not sure I want the job. I —"

"Emma."

"Yeah?" Why did she always feel like a lap dog when she was near the Mills Matriarch?

"Take the audition."

"All due respect ma'am but shouldn't that be my choice? I promised my son. Besides I hate Louisville, it's kind of my unicorn."

"I'm sorry?"

She shifted on her feet, "You know, my unicorn. The unreachable thing. I've taken Louisville auditions four times and I always make to the final round and I never win."

Cora just stared at her, "You want the Lyric audition, right? You want to succeed." There was something in Cora's eyes that Emma didn't like.

She's going to take Lyric away from me. Uninvite me. Can she do that?

"Of course I do."

"Then how would it look, dear, if an audition was handed to you and you did not take it simply because, as you say, it's your unicorn? That doesn't show good work ethic, does it?"

Emma pressed her lips together hands in her pockets and shrugged heading for the door.
She didn't bother to tell Regina the reason she was taking the stupid Louisville audition was because of her mother. There was already enough animosity there; she refused to be the cause of a little more. Still she wished she could as Regina's eyes grew distant over the next week. They completed their Christmas shopping. They cuddled, they touched but still there was a slight dull in Regina's eyes.

"What about your position here?" Regina had quietly asked when Emma had informed her she would be going.

"Are you asking as my girlfriend or as the president of the board?" Emma had been trying to make Regina laugh but instead the woman seemed to retreat further into her eyes.

"Both."

"Oh. Regina. I'm not going to win. I've never won an audition there. I just feel like I have to try, plus it will be a great warm-up for Lyric."

"That isn't until spring."

"I know, I know but stop worrying, okay? It will just be a fun little trip for Henry and I."

"You're taking Henry?"

Emma's brows furrowed, "well of course. I'd just leave him at the apartment but I'm a little worried he and his friends might throw a kegger with some top shelf apple juice."

Regina smiled a little, "Why don't you leave him with me?"

"Um,"

"Why not? He and I can have some fun."

Emma shrugged, "All right but don't come crying to me when he gets into your top shelf apple juice."

Now it was time to go and she didn't want to, not with that shadow on Regina's face.

"I promise," Emma said for what felt like the hundredth time "I'm not going to win. I can tell you're worrying."

Regina rolled her eyes, pushing her toward the elevator.

Emma grabbed her, wrapping her in a tight hug, "I'll be right back."

Regina frowned but kissed her. She tried to smile reassuringly at her as she stepped into the elevator but Regina didn't let her, suddenly cupping her face and bringing their lips together quick and hard. Emma gasped in surprise, feeling the pull of longing from Regina as she carefully slipped past Emma's lips. Emma pulled her close both reveling in and fearing the passion that was flowing over her like a tidal wave.

Finally, a bit breathless Regina released her and with clouded eyes she pushed her into the elevator again.

Emma grinned pleased with the send-off but as the doors to the elevator closed she was sure she saw...
Regina's smile drop from her face like a stone.

*She doesn't want you to take it, Emma. Come on, she doesn't want you to take it. She wants you to stay. She knows if you win you'll have to move to Louisville – you and Henry. Don't go. Cora won't take the audition from you, just don't go.*

She argued with herself the entire five-hour drive, debating turning around, hating the moment that Regina had lost her smile but she knew she couldn't. The Lyric audition was her chance at the future she wanted. She couldn't let it slip away. Besides, there really was no way she was going to win Louisville.

*Hell, I'm not even going to try to win.*

That's why when she heard the number fifty-four called as the three other finalists sat around her picking their nails and pacing she didn't even look up. She was busy texting inappropriate things to Regina and hadn't even heard.

The tall white-haired man cleared his throat again, "Fifty-four? Congratulations."

It wasn't until the entire room had quieted that Emma looked up from her phone. She caught the eye of the woman next to her who looked down at her with disgust, "What?"

"You won."

"What?" her head whipped around to the audition committee member, "uh, what?"

His brow creased, "Of course, if you don't want the job –"

"No!" Emma cried; standing and shaking his hand. The other finalists picked up their instruments and with a few sour looks departed "I mean, I don't know." Emma admitted, "I'm in the middle of a contract with The Windy City Chamber Group right now. Do you need a solid yes or no today?"

"No, Miss. Swan though I would require a commitment before the next season starts in May."

Emma nodded.

*Just after the Lyric audition.*
Chapter 22

Emma spent the entire drive back to Chicago near tears. What was she going to do? She wouldn't have even taken the damn thing if she thought there was any chance at all she would win. She hadn't even been trying, not really. How like her life was all of this? If she had tried, if she had cared, she knew she would not have won. She had never won in the past. She had caught her unicorn and now that she had it, she didn't want it.

Also, now that she had it, she couldn't ignore it. Her position in Chicago was only two years long and then she would be out on her ass once more. Did she really have the right to turn this down? Could she call herself a good mother if she turned this down? It was a full-time orchestra job with salary – a good salary and honest to god benefits. Lyric was the dream, the goal even, but how could she know that would work out? Truth be told, it probably wouldn't. What auditions would come up once she was back on unemployment and panicking daily about where her next paycheck came from? Would she have to break the promise she had so recently made to Henry and go back to freelancing? Moving every year?

She didn't have the right to say no. She had to do what was best for Henry.

The problem is – what is the best for him?

"Shit!" she cried yet again and yet again slammed her palms on the steering wheel of Regina's car.

And what about Regina? Can you leave Regina? Can you take her away from Henry?

She slammed the solid wheel again just for good measure.

What was she going to do?

When the metal doors to the loft slid opened she knew instantly something was very different. The apartment had smelled of nothing but the pine of their Christmas tree and Chanel for weeks now but this, she wrinkled her nose at the cloying scent, this was unpleasant.

"Close your eyes!" Henry screamed before she could take her first step. She did, startled and heard his little feet flying up the stairs.

"Close your eyes!" he screamed again.

"I did!" she yelped as her knees collided with the metal banister of the catwalk. "Ow! Christ! What's wrong?"

"Why would you assume anything was wrong, Ms. Swan?"
That deeply sensual voice followed by the clicking of heels on the stairs sent a small shiver down her spine and a smile to her face. God that woman was addicting.

A warm, familiar hand covered her eyes and soft lips brushed hers, whispering, "Welcome home."

Emma made a sound of contentment and smiled.

"Ew! Come on!" Henry groaned, pulling Emma's arm toward the stairs.

Trepidation fluttering through her gut she let her five-year-old lead her down the stairs where the smell only grew stronger.

"Paint?"

"Ready?" he asked, clearly excited.

"I guess so, kid."

"Open your eyes!" Henry cried, jumping up and down in place.

The change wasn't huge yet it rocked the apartment from top to bottom. Her jaw fell as she took in the sunroom in front of her. The black curtains that had once slid closed over the glass walls of the sunroom had been changed to those of a deep rusty maroon. Behind them, Emma could clearly see that the only wall in the sunroom that was not taken by windows had been repainted from its original bricked white to Henry's favorite shade of Superman Red. The bedding had been replaced from the simple white to a royal blue. Suddenly the room that had been so stark and cold had exploded into a color by number of her son, a large and highly realistic painting of King Arthur hanging over the bed.

Eyes so wide they stung Emma turned to Regina to say something but before she could Henry spun her around. Her already hanging loosely jaw dropped to the ground when she realized that his room had not been the only change. Where a geometric black and white throw rug had once lived how sat swirling rust, purple, brown and black design setting off the one wall that had been painted a deep plum purple. Upstairs Emma could see that the wall of the office had been painted a deep crème and far across the loft the wall above Regina's bed a deep burgundy.

The black and white couches had been replaced with warm comfortable looking burgundy ones and even a few of the steel appliances had been replaced with counterparts of mustard yellow and gray. Suddenly the stark black and white loft so mathematical had evolved rich and warm, screaming of homey comfort.

"We brought color!" Henry cheered, still jumping as if the boy were on a trampoline.

"Holy shit, Regina."

"Do you like it?" Regina had held tightly to her arm, leaning on her girlfriend just happy to see her. Three days was far too long in her book.

"This looks amazing. How did you do this in three days?"

"What this? It's only a few accent walls." But Emma could see her eyes sparkle as she said it.
She wanted to ask why she had done it but she couldn't. She had to sit down.

*Emma, this woman just painted her spare bedroom – for your son.*

When she looked up at Regina there was a shy look there, soft and sweet and she knew that Regina knew what she was thinking. They weren't going to talk about it or what it meant, not yet, but she knew they both knew.

*Holy hell.*

"So how did the audition go? My mother tried to call me but we were busy painting."

Perhaps it was the shock she still felt coursing through her because as wise as it would have been to lie she told her the truth "I won."

"What?" Both Regina and Henry barked.

"Yeah, totally." She tried at a smile and failed completely.

Chocolate found a reluctant Jade.

Henry screamed making her jump, "We're moving again?"

She had never seen that look on her little boys face before, rage, hurt and – hate, honest hate. "I'm not leaving." He bellowed at the top of his lungs and throwing down Monkeyz he ran full tilt into the sunroom slamming the door so hard the glass rattled.

Emma watched him go; hurt throbbing in every cell of her body and it only got worse when she looked at Regina's face. If the moment before Regina had been the sun, now she was the darkest night, her brows and lips twisted into a frown, ache screaming from the usually warm chocolate orbs. "You're leaving?" she whispered.

She didn't know what to say. Her mouth worked but no sound followed.

"I see." Regina straightened her skirt, retreating behind her mask.

"No, Regina, I don't know." She jumped up, reaching for her hands but they were denied to her. Pain ripped through her. She hated being the bad guy. "It's only four hours away."

Regina scoffed, pulling further away from her, frost tinting her features.

Emma stomped twice but Regina just settled herself on the new couch, folding herself into a stiff upright pose. Emma dropped to her knees before her, "I don't know Regina. Can you talk to me, please? I don't know what to do."

"What is there to do, Ms. Swan?"

The ice in her voice slapped hard across her cheek and Emma blinked, frozen. She hadn't been the
recipient of that tone since they had first met. "Regina. My position here is temporary. I have to think about Henry. I don't want to go but I'm not sure I can say no to this job. Please take that look out of your eyes."

Regina laughed without color and blinked a few times, "Am I that transparent?"

Emma smiled smugly, "You are to me."

Softly, her face still cold, Regina caressed Emma's cheek.

"It's not like we wouldn't see each other. Four hours is nothing. Besides, I really don't know. I haven't decided."

Regina just smiled.

Not sure what else she could say Emma tried to open the door to her son's new room.

She was met with a knob that refused to turn.

"Okay, how did I not know this room had a lock on it?"

Regina's eyebrows shot up, "It never even occurred to me that it did."

Emma knocked lightly, "Henry, unlock the door."

"Henry!"

Regina came and tapped lightly, "Henry, this is inappropriate. Open the door please."

It took ten minutes and a few threats of Santa only visiting the good children before the tear-stained boy opened the door.

Emma made a mental note to have that lock removed before sitting him firmly on the couch, "Henry, I understand you are sad but that," she angrily pointed back toward the sunroom, "is not how we behave. Do you understand me?" She felt Regina's hand on her shoulder so she took a deep steadying breath. She was angry but only a very small part of her was angry with him. She was mostly angry with herself, at her career, at the choice she had to make.

She had gotten into the field of music to create beauty – but was there really anything more beautiful than what she had with Regina? What Henry had?

Then again – could she really know that if she stayed, she and Regina would last? The odds are they wouldn’t.

Henry scowled at the floor, his arms folded tightly across his little chest; he was ready for a fight.

"Henry, do you hear me?"

"Yes!" he yelled, his face red.

"Henry!" The warning was clear in Emma's voice.

"Henry," Regina began, "why don't you sit on the couch for a few minutes and try to cool down?"

"I'm in time out?" he screamed, creating his own personal green disco with the noise sensors.
"No, you're not but Regina is right. Remember your deep breaths? Why don't you do that for a few minutes?"

They left her son sitting on the couch to find seats at the kitchen island. Emma pulled at Regina, calming when the woman wrapped around her neck easily.

"You're a good parent," Regina said kissing her eyelids gently. "You're a good parent so I have to accept that you're going. A good parent puts their child first."

Emma sighed, wishing she could have some time to herself, away from the sad eyes of her girlfriend and her son, "the problem is that I'm not completely sure what the right thing for Henry is."

Emma's phone vibrated and she was shocked to see it was a congratulatory message from none other than Cora Mills. For a moment, Emma had a very creepy I'm being watched feeling.

"Who was that?" Regina asked as she played with a strand of Emma's hair.

"Your mother. Congratulating me."

"You're kidding."

Emma shook her head and showed her the text.

Regina swore lightly.

"Also, since everyone is already mad at me I might as well finally tell you," a thought occurred to Emma, "that I invited your mother over for Christmas dinner?

"You did what?"

With a yelp, Emma clapped her hands over her ears.

Henry couldn't be calmed, not by Emma anyway. No matter what she said to him, no matter how many times she told him that she hadn't made a decision yet, his eyes just filled with tears. Finally, Emma gave up and let Regina take Henry for a long walk. She would kill to know exactly what her girlfriend was saying to him, how she would calm him, but she gave them space and called the two people she knew she could count on to talk her through it impartially.

"Yeah, I heard you won. You don't sound too happy about it, though."

"I'm not. Look Red is already on her way over, can I count you in or not?"

"Count me in for what?"

"Drinking."

"What's right, Booth? Tell me, what's right?" she slurred a few short hours later. Regina and Henry had not returned but instead of worrying she had slumped into the couch with her friends and proceeded to get very drunk.
"He's a kid! Kids need clothes and socks and toothbrushes!"

Ruby rolled her eyes, not quite as far gone as the other two were, "He needs stability. He needs to stop moving all of the time and have a life, a whole life in one place."

"See that – that doesn't help me, Red. Does that mean that I should move because after that I won't need to move again or does that mean I should find a way to make it work here so he doesn't have to move again?"

"He needs people!" Ruby cried, throwing her an angry glare.

"What people, Red, what people?"

"What the hell do you mean?" August shoved her hard, "What the hell about us?"

"Who? You two?"

"And Regina!"

Emma shrugged and grumbled.

"I'm sorry, I can't quite hear you." Ruby signed, rudely glaring.

"Red, come on."

They both just stared.

"I just mean, I don't know, staying for people seems like a stupid reason. People don't stay."

Ruby sipped her drink, "You're stupid."

"Hey!"

The loft doors slid open and a teary faced but calmed Henry stepped in followed by a surprised Regina.

"Hey kid."

Henry glared at his mother and wordlessly flew past her into his bedroom.

"Glad to see he's still mad at me."

Regina surveyed the trio and the half-empty bottle of whiskey on the table, eyebrow raised. She kissed the cheek of both of the guests and then softly ran a hand over Emma's shoulder before she too disappeared into Henry's room. With a slightly drunken grin, Ruby stumbled to her feet calling after Henry, insisting that she needed a hug.

"Hey," August leaned over, nearly toppling into Emma's lap, "speaking of decisions, did you make one about Christmas?"

Emma had been so drunkenly upset about the audition that it took her a moment to land on what he was talking about, "Oh! Oh yeah!" Emma bounced excitedly, scooting closer, "Yeah, I think you're right. I'm going to do it."

"Did you talk to Red about it? B'cause I'd-ve talked to Red. She'd have told you to do it!"
"What? No!" Emma shoved his arm, "Ruby'd tell Regina. She's horrible at keeping secrets. I just thought that you're right; Cora is her mom. She might be a bitch but she's not that big of a bitch."

"Hey!" Ruby wobbled and landed in a heap next to them, "What are you whispering about?"

"Shhhhh!" Emma hissed.

"Who's whispering?" August cried innocently.

"You still talking about the audition?"

Emma groaned instantly remembering her stress, burying her face in her hands. "Guys, I just don’t know what to do."

Ruby stared at her again, her opinion clear but August shrugged, "Time will tell."

Emma scoffed, '"Kay. Awesome. Thanks."
Chapter 23

The next two weeks were hell on earth when it came to Regina. They never spoke about the possibility of a move that loomed over them. It was an elephant in the room but Emma preferred the silence - for now. The silence meant she could place it out of her mind – at least until after Christmas.

Emma had learned the night she won the audition that in the many years Regina had been living in the loft; she had never invited her mother inside. Regina was a snapping, biting storm cloud of anger made worse by the soft hint of frost in her eyes left from Emma's indecision.

Emma had begged her to simply cancel but the stubborn Regina had refused, insisting that it would be much worse to cancel than to go through with it. So Emma had allowed herself to be turned into a quiet, accommodating puppy – you need this? Right away dear – you want that? Absolutely, sweetheart!

Emma was in the doghouse in every way possible. While she hated the fact that Regina's touches had grown remote, she handled the distance easily for one reason. Every day she was in the doghouse her excitement continued to grow. The calendar on her phone had become her favorite commodity. Twenty-five days until the surgery, fourteen until she got to tell her. Twenty days until the surgery, nine until she could tell her. Fifteen days until the surgery, four until she could tell her.

She had begun to picture it. Holding Regina's hand while the doctor fiddled with the device preparing to turn it on for the first time. Emma watching her face beautiful in its nervous state, waiting anxiously for the thing that hadn't happened to her since that little pop all of those years ago. Would Regina be one to cry like in the videos online or would she be one of the people who simply looked surprised and afraid? Would she remember what the sounds she was hearing meant or would Emma and Henry need to teach her again?

Will we be here to teach her or will that fall on Ruby?

She didn't know and she wouldn't care as long as Regina was happy. Emma could hardly breathe she was so excited.

She and Regina had done hours of shopping at all of the organic boutique shops in town for every tiny part of the meal that Emma had promised not to help Regina cook. Emma had laboriously carried the fancy chinaware from the storage locker in the basement and after many paper cuts and hours of wrapping on Emma's part; the presents were nestled under the tree. The morning of Christmas Eve dawned brightly snowy and despite the looming visit from Cora on Christmas day, nothing but smiles could be seen in the Mills loft.

"I hate this part of my job."

"What part?" Regina asked yawning from the sheets.

"This part." Emma sighed, looking longingly at the cooling spot next to her beautiful girlfriend. "Where I have to get up and go play for people on Christmas Eve morning while you and my son eat cookies and watch Christmas specials."
Regina's lips twitched in the corners, "I thought you were looking forward to this concert."

"I was!" she whined, glad that Regina couldn't hear her.

*Oh man, I'm going to need to stop doing that soon. Whoa.*

"But then I had to get out of bed."

Regina made a mocking sad face and slowly rose from the bedding, sheets falling away from her naked body and only emphasizing Emma's point. Emma swore under her breath and caught the naked body, pulling it tightly to her front. Regina sighed, head falling back on Emma's shoulder, eyes falling closed as Emma let her hands slide upwards slowly, savoring her thighs, her stomach, her breast, her arms then back down, her breast, her stomach, her thighs before softly cupping the soft patch of curls between her legs.

Regina's mouth fell open, puckering into a small O.

Emma considered moving forward, taking her once quickly before she had to go but no, the clock told her she didn't have the time. She groaned, annoyed as her hands feasted one on the shapely breast, the other still cupping -

*Never enough. There was never enough. She could never be close enough. She could never touch enough.*

She thrust the woman away from her making Regina laugh, warmly, seductively.

Henry was already on the couch in the lowest living room a bowl of cereal balanced between his knees, staring intensely at the prancing reindeer on the screen.

"Morning, kid."

He looked up, smiling at her silly Santa hat and threw himself at her. She caught him, shocked; thank goodness for Christmas miracles. He had barely spared a word for her over the past two weeks and there had definitely been no hugs or smiles or giggles.

She squeezed him tightly, breathing his little sticky scent in and relishing the hug that was worth a million bucks. "Merry Christmas Eve."

He grinned and kissed her with a slightly milky face.

She had definitely needed a good hit of the boy.

"I'll be back soon, okay and then we'll make cookies, okay?"

"Cookies for Santa!"

"Right, cookies for Santa."
"With frosting!"

"With frosting! Okay, I gotta go. Go get Regina. Remember to stomp."

She was pleased when he nodded and stood just outside the final step to Regina's room stomping hard on the floor.

_We really need to get a doorbell on that damn room or something. Or hell even a door – though maybe not – not if._

Regina scooped him up happily and with a wink for them both, Emma threw on her jacket to brave the outdoors.

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As a rule, a classical musician felt one of two ways about Christmas music and Christmas concerts: either it was fun and inspiring passing along the holiday spirit through love and music – or you wanted to crack your instrument over the head of every single concertgoer. There were only so many Christmas songs in the world and by high school each and every song was perfected and played by heart.

Typically Emma was the latter, sure that if she had to play Sleigh Ride one more time she would take out percussion with a well-placed launch of her bow. But as she walked through the bustling streets, Christmas music flowing from each little shop and store, she found herself leaning the other direction. She smiled as she skipped over a large icy pile of snow and went through the stage door.

August was the first one to see her enter, "How many now?"

"Twelve and one." A grin broke across his face and without a moment of hesitation Emma fell into his hug.

"I'm so excited August, I can't even – just so - so excited."

He transferred her to under his arm, chuckling, "I've gotta admit, I wish I could be there. Have you thought about videotaping her response?"

"I did but I don't know, I kind of want her response just for me, you know? And Cora, I mean."

He shook his head, still chuckling, "Its fucking romantic as hell, Em."

Emma grinned, blissfully.

"And uh, any decision –"

The smile dropped from her face, "I told myself that I wouldn't even think about it until after Christmas."

"Right, yeah," he shuffled awkwardly, "that's probably smart."

They sat in an awkward silence for a moment before August grinned again, "I just wish I could be there."
Like clockwork, Emma was grinning again.

"Well aren't you two cozy." Killian drawled, just entering the stage door.

"Have you heard about this Christmas gift that she's getting Regina, man?"

Killian hesitated, looking like he wasn't sure he wanted to know and perhaps it was the spirit of the holiday but Emma smiled at him and for the first time in months so he allowed himself be pulled into the conversation. "What is it, Swan? A new cuddly teddy?"

"Funny. Have you heard of the Cochlear implant?"

"No."

"It's a device that is implanted in the skull that allows a deaf person to hear." A shiver of smugness fell through her at the impressed look on Killian's face.

"We might all be done for if the crocodile can hear." Killian finally said with a slight smile.

August burst into laughter, "Right? That's what I said. We all sure as hell better start sounding better when we play."

The crowd was much louder than normal filled with giggling, screaming children and grandmothers yelling at them over the squeal of their hearing aids. Still Emma just smiled, the warmth of Christmas a shield from any negativity.

Small smiles played on the lips of the musicians as they performed and small child voices rose above the crowd to sing along, a few running out into the aisles to shake their little bodies and spin, excited for Santa's visit the following day.

"You know, I normally would have hated that concert but that was a lot of fun." Emma smiled as she packed up her music from the stand.

"I dunno Swan," Killian said coldly, "not everyone is as happy as you are today."

She frowned and before she knew what she was doing she pulled him into a quick tight hug, pecking his cheek, "I'm sorry you're unhappy, Killian."

Killian blinked, confused.

"My, my, you clean up well, kid!" August cried.

Emma swung around and there approaching the edge of the stage was her son, his hair slicked down so his goofy little ears stuck straight from the sides of his head looking very dapper in a clearly brand new black suit and pants, a Christmas red shirt underneath a festively green tie.

Emma dropped to her knees and clutched at her chest, "Oh my god, Henry! You're so cute. You've killed me! You've killed me with your cuteness."

Regina laughed behind him, grinning with pride.

"Mooooom, you're so silly."

"What are you guys doing here?" Emma grinned at him, pulling herself back to her feet.

"We heard you play!"
"You did?"

"We did." Regina smiled.

"Did you like it?"

Henry happily nodded; accepting the shoulder pat from August, then began to dance in place, singing his favorite carol.

"We thought that maybe you would want to get some hot chocolate and look at the Christmas displays."

"Are you kidding? I would love to get hot chocolate and look at the displays!"

"August?" Emma was pleasantly surprised when Regina turned to the man, nothing but warmth on her face.

"Red?" He asked hopefully.

"At home today."

August grinned boyishly, "In that case, I think I'll have to pass. Enjoy your family time, though."

The trio walked for hours, hand in hand in hand, sipping at the Styrofoam cupped hot chocolate they got from the merry street vendor.

No one wanted to return home despite their frozen noses and fingers but eventually, they had to or else be pressed for time when baking the cookies.

"Hey Red." Henry grinned happily, not at all surprised to see Ruby in the living room reading and waiting for them.

"Not you too!" Ruby cried, exasperatedly letting her head fall back onto the couch.

"I think you need to give in to the idea. It's your name again."

"Yeah!" Henry piped up, pulling lightly on her single streak of red that always lived in the underside of her hair. "You ready for cookies, Red?"

Ruby smiled and grabbed at him, tickling his sides until he squealed, "Am I ready? How can I be ready, look at you in your tie! Who put you in a freakin' tie? I need to take a bite out of you!" He flailed and screamed loving every second of it.

"That suit, Regina-" Emma ran her hands through her hair unable to find the right words.

"Isn't that the cutest thing?"

"That ever existed? Yeah."

Ruby finally set him back on his feet and with a pat of his butt told him to change into something he could bake in.

"Hang that suit up!" Emma called after him and headed to change herself.

It was only minutes later that flour and sugar covered all counters and floor space and a large mop of white stood next to her grinning, very satisfied with himself.
"Okay Henry, come get the eggs." Regina called biting back her chuckle at his shining red cheeks.

"Okay!" he hopped up on the footstool and very carefully took the eggs from her hands.

"Do you remember how I showed you?"

He nodded and cracked the egg lightly on the side of the bowl. The egg exploded in his fist showering everything within a one-foot radius in yolk.

Regina looked stunned but Ruby and Emma, who had also been covered in the flour incident, fell together holding one another up as they roared with laughter. "You two, quiet."

They only laughed louder.

Henry's stunned little face turned to Regina, "I'm sorry, 'Gina."

"It's all right, Henry. Should we try that again?"

Henry fulfilled each task with the most delicate and nimble of fingers after that, singing Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer under his breath as he worked.

Emma loved his little singing voice.

*I know Regina would too if she could hear it.*

Sadness crashed for only a moment before she did a little involuntary jig realizing that thirteen days from that very day she would.

"Uh, you all right there, Em?"

Emma flushed but couldn't hold in her grin, "Yeah, totally. Tomorrow is Christmas."

"Uh huh. Okay, crazy come help me."

Emma and Ruby had created a decorating station on the far side of the kitchen island and had to all but hold Henry back as the cookies cooled.

"The frosting will just melt! You can't decorate them yet."

"Put it in the 'frigerator!"

'Henry," Regina said with a smile, "maybe you and Ruby should go out to the patio."

Ruby glared at her best friend but there was no denying those squeals of excitement from the little boy. Throwing on their winter coats and gloves the two, Ruby grumbling all the time, headed out into the cold.

Emma wrapped her arms around Regina and they shared a laugh as Henry nailed Ruby in the side of the head with a huge snowball.

"Ten bucks on the kid."

Regina laughed, "No way! Ruby has a competitive streak."
"You're on, lady."

A bath and a warm blanket waited for the two as they stomped in, trailing snow behind them. Emma clapped her hands victoriously as a soaked Ruby looked scornful, glaring sourly while Henry giggled, his hair damp but otherwise untouched.

Finally, Henry was in his pajamas, his hair sticking everywhere, and they settled around the kitchen island. The news on in the background as the sun fell and the local officials reported the sightings of Santa's sleigh in various locations around the world.

"I don't know, kid. It seems like he's getting pretty close."

Henry's eyes grew wide, "But I haven't finished his cookies!"

Regina laughed, rubbing his back, "I think you have plenty of time. Don't listen to your mother."

Still, Henry concentrated extra hard as he painted frosting onto the cookie Santa's, candy canes and ornaments.

"Candy canes aren't supposed to be red and blue!" Ruby teased.

"Yeah huh! Cause it's my favorite and that makes it extra yummy for Santa!"

Emma laughed, wrapping her arms around her boy and kissing his ear, "I think you're right. Santa will love your extra special Henry cookies."

Smiling Regina kissed his other ear and asked if he was done.

The boy studied the cookies intensely, his little brow furrowing tightly, "Do you think he will like them? Do you think he'll think they're the best?"

Regina ran her hand affectionately through his hair, making it stand at even more of an angle, "I know he will think they are the best cookies in all of his stops over the entire planet. They're extra special Henry cookies."

Henry beamed and with a grin went to grab a plate.

"So what now?" Regina asked, looking around the kitchen.

"Well," Emma smiled pulling out a glass. "We pour the milk." Henry carefully chose the cookies he deemed 'the bestest of the bestest' and scattered them haphazardly on the plate.

"Right," Regina said uncertainly taking the glass she was handed.

"Henry, where do you want it?"

He looked around and decided on the wide window ledge closest to the tree. He arranged the plate and glass of milk with the utmost thought and then frowned, "We're missing something."

Emma smiled and pulled the carrot from behind her back.

"Yeah!" He jumped up and down in place for a moment, arms pumping, before taking it and placing it on a diagonal across the plate. "Perfect!"

"Okay. Is it bedtime?"
"Wait!" Henry bellowed, hands outstretched warning no one to move, "we can't go yet!"

Emma smiled and went to her cello case where she had stashed the book on the last visit to their apartment.

"Yeah!" He leapt on his mother who luckily caught him with one arm. Her son cuddled tightly on her hip, she wrapped her other arm around Regina and kissed her cheek.

"It's time to read."

"So I see."

Carefully they settled into the small couch. The Christmas tree and the many lit candles scattered around the room gave them just enough light to read by as they cuddled together under the warm festive glow of the evergreen. With Regina pressed tightly into her side, Ruby unabashedly cuddled on the other while Henry somehow managed to spread himself across the two, Emma had to pause for a moment, heart full. Chocolate caught Jade and they shared a small smile. Softly she pressed her lips against Regina's, smiling at the contact as they hugged tightly to Henry. Ruby caught her eye and the two shared a small smile of affection.

"Okay," Taking a deep breath and letting this new feeling wash over her, warm between the other three, she was perfectly content. Henry smiled as she opened the book to read.

Though Henry had been reading this book all of his life his eyes still grew wide as the books candy store owner unwrapped differently shaped jars and the bins filled with gumdrops and jawbreakers were opened to display their jovial colors.

When the little girl in the story was allowed to pop one gumdrop between her lips his face filled with relish as if he could taste the bright flavor himself. His eyes grew wide under the soft gaze of the three women, as the candy cane was pulled from the bin in all of its regal glory.

"Look, 'Gina, candy canes!" he pointed at the page, his face beaming up at her.

She smiled softly and stroked his cheek, "I see them, darling."

"Do you see it, Red?"

"I sure do."

His head began to rest lightly against his mother's chest as the book came to a close, his excited eyes growing sleepy. Finally, with a large smile, Emma softly closed the book with a small, "Until next year, little man."

He grinned up at them, satiated and kissed each of their cheeks, "brushing."

The three sat together in silence; Emma's head against Regina's, Ruby's against Emma's shoulder comfortably waiting for the little boy to return.

"I'm all brushed and washed." Emma and Regina hand in hand pulled themselves up and followed him to his room.

"Where do you think he is now, mommy?" He asked crawling under the covers.

"I don't know, kid. Could be anywhere."

Regina sat at the bottom of the bed while Emma flattened the blankets around him.
"Next door?"

"Could be. That's why excited little boys have to go to sleep. We don't want to miss him!"

He nodded, squeezing his eyes closed tightly.

"Good boy." Emma grinned and softly began to hum to him while Regina gently stroked his feet.

He wasn't completely asleep when the couple slipped from his room, closing the doors behind them, but he was well on his way.

"Do you guys want to put out his Christmas gifts?" Ruby asked hopefully from the couch, wanting to be a part of the family holiday as much as possible but Emma shook her head, "He'll probably come out at least once in the next few hours thinking it's morning. We need to wait."

"Hmm, that kitchen." With a chuckle, they set to work on righting the dusted white kitchen.

When they were done Emma checked her watch; it was only 9:30 but oh well; she could tell Ruby wanted to help. "Stockings? I think if we do it in the kitchen he won't see."

Regina grinned widely, eyes twinkling and they gathered up the empty stockings. Stocking stuffers had been wrapped and placed in individual plastic shopping bags, ready to be filed into Emma, Henry, Regina or Ruby's stocking.

Regina handed her two of the bags with a kiss and the two sat on opposite sides of the island while Ruby sat guard on the couch waiting for Henry to wake.

"Stop looking, missy." Regina chided catching Emma's eyes dodging to the wrapped parcels. "You don't get to see until tomorrow morning."

Emma bit her lip and grinned.

"Tomorrow. The day is finally tomorrow!"

Just as Emma had predicted before the task of the stockings was completed Henry began to call from his room. It had been a mandatory yearly tradition since he was old enough to walk that Henry was not allowed to come rushing out of his room on Christmas morning. As a mother, the best part for Emma was the moment his eyes popped in wonder at the magic that had transformed their normal living room into a Christmas wonderland. So instead, when he woke he would call to her and she would gather him, ready and hungry for that one special moment that only happened once a year.

"I got him." Emma smiled and slipped into her son's room.

He was waiting, groggily in his bed a large grin plastered on his face, "It's Christmas!"

"Not yet, kid," She said pushing him lightly back into bed, "It's still Christmas Eve. You only just went to sleep."

"Oh." He frowned. "You sure?"

Nodding she stroked his forehead; "Just a little longer sleep and it will be here, okay?"
"Okay."

She continued to stroke his forehead until the little boy's lashes fluttered and closed.

Ruby had her jacket on when she reappeared from the room.

"You going, Red?"

"Yeah, it's getting late."

"Well wait," she handed her a full stocking; "You have to help us hang them."

There was no fireplace in the loft but small temporary hooks had been placed on the metal of the grid window frames.

"I think this might be too heavy!" Regina laughed as the temporary hook popped from the window.

"Yeah, it usually is. Here," Emma settled Regina's exploding stocking on the floor and showed the other woman how they could settle them so it looked as though they were too heavy and had fallen into place from the window, temporary hooks tossed over them as if they had simply given up their job.

When the four stockings were arranged perfectly, the trio took a step back and admired their work.

"Good job, team."

Regina beamed at Emma.

They hugged and kissed Ruby goodbye with small Merry Christmas' and then sighed into the empty apartment, the glow from the tree still warm in their chests.

Regina took her hand, smiling, and kissed the knuckles. Emma's heart fluttered and she couldn't help but to grin. How had she gotten this lucky?

She followed Regina to a stool at the kitchen island where she sat in a calm silence as Regina mixed the freshly pressed apple juice from that morning and a few spices. Emma sniffed the air appreciatively as the loft filled with the delicious scent of hot apple cider. Two drinks poured, Regina handed her a mug and took her hand again, her wonderful chocolate seeming to melt into a light coffee as their eyes held for just a wonderfully contented moment. Together they curled back onto the couch under the glow of the tree again. Regina cuddling back into Emma and they simply sat for a while, sipping the drink and feeling the link they were sharing on this Christmas Eve. Regina's head fell to Emma's chest with a sigh and smiling a little Emma began to stroke the dark hair, playing with it, enjoying Regina's soft sounds of contentment.

"That feels nice."

Emma kissed her forehead and intertwined their fingers.

They sat that way for a long time, sharing each intake and release of breath, comfortable.

Finally, when glasses were long empty and the night was growing late they slipped upstairs together. Regina ran her shower while Emma pulled on her pajamas then with a smile Emma decided to pull her pajamas off again and slipped into the shower.

She wrapped her arms around Regina's wet stomach from behind, chuckling a little as the woman jumped ever so slightly. Pulling her to her she squeezed the woman tightly before releasing and
taking the shampoo bottle from her hands.

Regina smiled a little over her shoulder as Emma gushed, a handful of Regina scented shampoo into her hand and began to gently work it through the chocolate locks. Regina moaned lightly, enjoying the feeling of the fingers working over her scalp. When Emma had thoroughly worked it through she turned Regina and leaned her head back, scratching through the wet mass and letting the suds slide down the drain. Regina's smile was soft as Emma began to work in the conditioner, raking her fingers gently through the tangles.

A silence had never been filled with so many wonderful heartfelt words as Regina softly stroked Emma's cheeks, pulling Jade to Chocolate again. Emma smiled back tilting her chin up so she could rinse the woman's hair. When she was done with that she took the soap into her hands, lathering it and pulled Regina against her. With precision, her chin resting lightly on Regina's shoulder she let her hands travel over the bare skin, arms, stomach, legs, enjoying the small gasps that slipped past Regina's lips when her hands traveled over the sensitive parts of her skin.

When Regina was washed and rinsed Emma let herself be turned under the water, eyes closing as she enjoyed the feeling of Regina's nimble fingers combing through her curls and washing her body.

Emma carefully spent a long while combing Regina's hair once the two had been pat dry, running the blow-drier over it, annoyed to see she hadn't been able to achieve its typical style but sighing at the feeling of Regina taking her turn to dry the blonde's hair.

Once showered they slipped into their favorite pajamas and hand in hand they wordlessly started back downstairs to fill the living room with Christmas wonder.

Regina grinned as she opened the stuffed closet and Emma unplugging the tree so they were shadowed only by the candlelight.

"How should we do it?" Regina asked a breathy chuckle slipping unbidden from her lips.

Emma waved her over and taking her hand she pulled her to the cookies, "Santa has to eat his cookies." She slipped a confectionary between the other woman's lips and chuckled when Regina took a huge bite.

Nodding in satisfaction Emma placed that cookie back on the plate and quickly swallowed the other leaving purposeful crumbles and the perfectly bit piece behind. Then with a grin, she took a huge snapping bite out of the carrot and held it for Regina to do so as well.

"I'm not big on milk," Emma explained as she poured the majority into the sink leaving just a little bit behind. "There."

Then giggling silently, they pulled each box and bag of gifts from the closet, scattering them under the tree and over the side of the couch next to the stockings.

In a final touch, Emma scattered Christmas confetti in the shapes of trees and ornaments over everything, leaving in her wake a small array of chocolates and peppermint nougats.

They took a step back and beamed together at the sight before them.

"You're good at this." Emma gave her a small hip bump.

Regina beamed.

Hand in hand they climbed the stairs and headed into the bathroom.
Emma grinned to herself as Regina reached for their toothbrushes, wetting both of them and out of habit placed a small amount of toothpaste on her own brush and a huge glob on Emma's.

Emma took it and began to brush.

She felt eyes on her in the mirror and looked up into the burning chocolate. She didn't know what the look there was but her stomach fluttered, butterfly wings brushing softly against her insides and she returned the smile.

They cleaned their faces of the blue toothpaste foam and silently Emma took her hand, leading them back toward the bed, feeling the heat of it, enjoying the sensation of it and as if it were the most natural thing in the world pulled Regina to her, taking her lips into her own.

Regina sighed as if this was the exact thing she had been aching for, her hands immediately finding Emma's face, cupping it, holding those cherished lips to her own. Softly, gently their lips, their tongues moved until they were forced to separate so their shirts could be lifted from them. Regina, face unreadable, crawled her now bare self backward onto the bed, pulling Emma with her. Emma exhaled softly as her face found the skin of Regina's stomach, sliding her nose up over ribs and chest until her face was nestled tightly under Regina's jaw, breathing in the scent of the woman, relishing the closeness of their bodies, wanting - needing - to be all the closer.

Arms wrapped around her, clutching her to her as Emma's face found Regina's. Foreheads pressing for a moment, they fell into the kiss, their breathing ragged in a way neither of them recognized, soft and unison. Delicately Emma's fingers found Regina as they began to slowly rock together in her lover's tight embrace.

Regina sighed under Emma's fingers, gasping and clutching, her lips finding Emma's, her jaw, her face before settling, cheek pressed tenderly to cheek. Emma could feel Regina's body begin to shudder as they moved melodiously together, her gasps tight slowly growing ragged. A large quake passed through Regina as her hands danced over Emma's back and through her hair, holding her tighter to her; Emma felt a leak of something warm run down her cheek from the cheek pressed to hers. She gasped, pulling her tighter to her as another sharp shudder wracked Regina and a few more tears slid from her eyes, landing lightly on Emma's cheeks. Softly, desperately Emma kissed the beautiful diamonds away, feeling her lover begin to slip over her edge, clutching so tightly to her that there was little room for movement. Her cries washed over her as the drops slipped down Regina's face, falling against Emma's thirsty skin and into Regina's own hair.

When Regina's body slumped back against the bed Emma scooted them under their blankets holding the softly crying woman to her, kissing her face and stroking her wet cheeks until the brunette fell into sleep in Emma's tight embrace. With a peaceful sigh, Emma quickly followed her into sleep knowing that no magical world she could find in slumber would be better than the one she had while she was awake.
"Mommy!" Emma woke with a jolt, her chin still resting against Regina's temple with arms still tightly around the sleeping woman. "Wake up!" he yelled at the top of his lungs, trapped in the sun room downstairs.

"Okay!" she called back unsteadily. "I'm up!"

*What time is it? Ugh, 5:30. Come on, go back to sleep, kid!*

But she knew there would be no hope of that. Gently she brushed Regina's hair back from her face, stroking her cheek with her palm until slowly her eyes flickered open and Emma could lean down and kiss her. Chocolate eyes fluttered for a moment finding Jade and watched. Emma could see her looking for a reaction; nervous about the tears she had shed as they made love the night before. Emma smiled down at her, kissed her again and Regina smiled; the trepidation vanishing like smoke.

"Henry's awake." Regina nodded in understanding.

Breaking apart in order to attend to the day wracked both women with a small but almost physical pain. They both winced but then their thoughts were taken over by growing anticipation and they couldn't help but to throw their pajamas on, linking hands as they flew down the staircase.

Emma sat Regina on the couch across from the doors of the sunroom, the perfect seat to the show, and lit the tree again. She scrambled around the room a few times checking that everything was perfect before plopping down next to her and calling for Henry to come out.

He stepped slowly from the room his eyes bulging and jaw popping audibly as he gasped at everything around him, "Whoaaaaa.

Emma grinned, watching Regina's face; she had never seen such sheer joy as was displayed there at that moment.

"He came!" He bellowed launching himself at them hugging tightly, an arm around each neck. Then he turned in their lap, looking almost overwhelmed but eyed his mother, "Stockings first?"

It had been a tradition in the Swan household that stockings always went first but this year, the first year there was others to include in the festivities, "Hmmm, maybe stockings need to wait for Red to get here?"

Regina nodded, covering a small yawn.

"So-" the little boy tensed, a tiger coiling to spring.

"So –" Emma teased, holding him back for another second, "go!"

Henry was off tearing through paper and ribbons. They laughed, hand in hand and snapping a photo every few minutes as he worked vigorously, his little arms flying. His face scrunched with his effort as she tried to get through the paper that almost got the best of him until, with a cry of pleasure, he examined the new object for a long while; shouting his adoration and joy before settling the gift
delicately in a pile and beginning the process all over again.

When he was finally done he plopped in the center of the paper, which was almost taller than him, and sat looking stunned.

"Pretty good haul this year!" Emma cheered. He just blinked at her, unable to form words.

"You must have been a very good boy!"

He nodded, gulping.

"Do you know what you're going to give back to Santa's helpers this year?"

Regina looked startled; "He has to give some back?"

"No," Emma chuckled, "we have always moved a lot so to keep the number of boxes small we always give away some of his old toys to Goodwill after Christmas."

"Right, because you move a lot."

If Emma had been smarter she might have heard the panic behind Regina's tone but this morning she was distracted, too busy watching her son to notice.

"Okay, I'll get a trash bag!" Regina cried, perhaps a little too cheerfully and disappeared into the kitchen. When she came back any trace of despondency had been wiped away by Henry's grinning face.

Henry and Regina cleared the paper away into the giant plastic bag, bows taped to their foreheads.

Camera in hand, Emma called "Hey guys, turn around." Henry spun grinning but Regina continued to gather.

Elation flooded through Emma as she realized tonight was the night! Tonight she got to tell her that things like this would never happen again! No more missing when someone called her name! No more staring blankly in the wrong direction unaware someone was talking to her!

"Henry, grab 'Gina."

Henry grabbed Regina and the two posed, smiling hugely together, happiness radiating from them.

"Okay mister," Emma said, hopping up to begin a quick breakfast. "You and Regina sort everything into piles, okay?"

He nodded and, little fingers flying, they began to quickly set wrapped packages in piles according to name.

They ate in a hurried frenzy, barely swallowing their meals before Henry pulled them along, plopping them in their seats.

"Who goes first?" Regina asked, looking between them.

"Age before beauty," Emma said with a perk of her eyebrow.

"Me?"

"Yeah!" Henry chirped.
Regina picked up one of the boxes by her lap, hesitantly and slowly began to peel the paper back.

"Not like that!" Henry cried rolling his eyes, "You're supposed to rip it."

"I am?"

"Yeah! Come on 'Gina!"

"Yeah, come on 'Gina." Emma teased, making Regina grin.

"Okay!" Regina ripped through the first package making Henry shriek with delight.

They each took turns, tearing through the paper, admiring and then thanking the giver with a shower of quick kisses. They followed the circle until it skidded to a stop as Emma lifted the smallest box from the pile.

Regina froze.

"From you I assume?"

She nodded once, fixing her hair, a nervous twitch.

Feeling some nerves herself she pulled the wrap off, heart pumping when she saw the red velvet jewelry box. She took a final glance at Regina and popped it open.

There nestled in the plush lining where two large glittering diamond earrings.

"Oh my god." Emma breathed, softly touching the cold stones that seemed to glitter unnaturally in the morning light.

"What is it, mama?" Henry asked around his mouthful of chocolate. "Pretty!" he cried when, stupefied, she turned them around.

Regina's face was waiting, vulnerably tense, "Do you like them?"

"Regina –"

"I wanted to get something you could wear every day. Something that, well that looked like me." She flushed uncharacteristically shy as she spoke.

Looking down at the glittering drops she knew that Regina identified with them because they were cold, hard and beautiful but all Emma could see were the little diamond tears that had fallen from Regina's the night before - those oh so common yet oh so significant tears. Setting the box carefully down, she pulled her to her, kissing her fervently, "I love them."

"You do?"

"I really do." She slipped them on and smiled as she asked, "How do they look?"

"Perfect."

Emma grinned, "You're perfect."

Regina blushed lightly and let herself be kissed once more.

"I have a big gift for you too, by the way. You just don't get to get it until tonight."
"Oh?"

Emma laughed, "Put that eyebrow away, I didn't mean it like that."

Regina just laughed.

Ruby showed up around early afternoon and together they opened their stockings and then, much too soon, began the bustle of readying themselves for Cora's arrival.

"How should we dress? Should we put Henry back in his suit?"

"Definitely."

Henry scowled, "but it's Christmas. You never have to dress up on Christmas! It's a pajama day!"

Emma laughed, ruffling his hair, "Well this year we have to buddy. But I promise, pajamas for all as soon as she leaves."

Together they helped Henry shower, combed his hair back until it was neat and then forced him into his shirt and tie. He hissed and spit like a little cat but eventually he was dressed. They settled him with Ruby on the couch in front of yet another Rankin-Bass special so Emma and Regina could repeat the process on themselves.

Emma had thought long and hard about it and had chosen the perfect outfit. She showered and pulled her hair into a soft but assertive up-do and took time over her makeup, taking care to produce a warm yet I-take-no-crap message. Next, she pulled on a long sleeved black shirt of the softest cashmere and a pair of jarringly rough nonetheless stylishly creased leather pants and heels. She studied herself feeling hopeful that thanks to her outfit when Cora began – whatever crap she was going to begin with Regina - she would already feel like enough of a badass to, in proper badass form, tell the woman to go take a hike. It was her battle armor and she was ready. No one was going to turn their first Christmas together into a bad day, not even Cora.

Regina rounded the corner of the bathroom and caught Emma's outfit. Her eyebrow rose with interest, making Emma beam.

\textit{Emma Swan, badass extraordinaire – she helps the deaf hear – up next the blind see!}

The four of them were primped, polished and ready ten minutes before Cora arrived. Just before the yellow lights began to frantically flash Emma dashed to the downstairs closet, pulling from it the small box she had hidden there. Inside it held nothing but some cotton lining and an appointment card for 9:00 A.M. January 5th. Grinning she shoved it in her pocket, her heart thrashing with excited anticipation.

They were all at the ready when the metal doors slid open and Cora came gliding into the loft, instantly taking in everything with a highly critical eye.

Emma frowned as the woman appeared. For just a second a strange sensation, something akin to queasiness, passed through her. The warm feelings of the holiday suddenly off, awkward and tense.
The bond that solidified itself the previous night between herself and Regina, the new level of intimacy, seemed to side step as Regina closed herself tightly in her protective bubble. Somehow Emma felt as though she had been left, awkwardly stuck half inside its protective shell and half out.

Something flitted in the back of Emma’s mind, a concern she couldn't name and before she could try to solidly catch it in her hands Cora was upon them.

"Regina!" Cora wrapped her daughter in a frosty hug.

Regina smiled tensely, patting her mother's back, "Mother, Merry Christmas."

"Ms. Lucas." Cora planted a small tense kiss on Ruby's cheek, that clearly only confused Ruby. Then Cora turned to Emma, sudden warmth in her tone, "Emma!" Emma blinked, confused yet again by Cora's obvious affection for her, "I hear congratulations are in order."

Emma smiled tightly, "Thank you, ma'am."

"When will you be going?"

Emma shifted wishing in that moment she could be anywhere but there, "Um," she glanced at Regina who was studying the floor, "it's Christmas, let's not talk about that today."

Cora watched her like a hawk for another moment before giving in and turning her eyes "Henry! You look so smart in your suit." He smiled, fidgeting a bit in the stiff cloth but thanked her politely.

There was an awkward pause where no one seemed to know what to do or say next so Emma jumped in, "Cora, can I get you a glass of wine?"

"Yes, dear thank you."

"Mother, why don't you take a seat and I will get started on dinner."

Cora just smiled tightly and took Regina's arm demanding in her softest and sweetest tones to be shown Regina's home.

Emma hurriedly gathered a glass of wine for her girlfriend and her girlfriend's mother. When they reappeared by the kitchen both individually blank-faced, Emma handed them out and then ushered Cora away from Regina to the cozy downstairs couch next to the tree.

Cora settled in next to Henry who looked both pleased and terrified; constantly warring with himself over how he felt about the matriarch.

With a small smile, Emma kissed Regina's cheek and headed to the couch where Henry was rattling off about the things Santa had brought him.

"So, how has your holiday been so far, Cora?"

Cora smiled lightly, allowing the common nicety. "Quite nice, thank you. I had a wonderful dinner with the trustees last night and Belle made crepes this morning."

"Crepes wow. That sounds nice."

"And you have our little surprise ready?"

Looking covertly around her, she pulled the small box from her pocket.
"What's that mommy?"

Emma stuffed it back into her pocket's protection quickly and gave Henry permission to bring some of his toys into the living room, distracting him completely. "And you're sure," Emma had to ask just one more time, "that she wants it? I can't say I didn't try to get a feel for it myself but I couldn't get any information out of her without being obvious."

"Emma, dear. This isn't an autographed ball or a KitchenAid; this is the ability to hear. Who doesn't want to hear? She might take some convincing because of the bed rest, we all know she works too hard, but, of course, she will want it."

Emma nodded, her gut warring with excitement and nerves. "You know, I went a few days ago to hear the Chicago Symphony. I was sitting and listening and the piece was so beautiful. The sound of it was so much like Regina, beautiful and sad, angry and hurt but also, kind of wild and soft. It was almost painful knowing that she couldn't hear it. She has gone so long without this basic human function and I realized she doesn't know what my voice sounds like – or Henry's – or even yours, probably. She can't hear those things let alone this beautiful piece of music. What if we – she – uh, she has a baby? She would never know its cry. When Henry was born I could pick out his cry in a room full of crying babies." She cleared her throat and feigned a cough so she could subtly wipe away the tear that had built there.

"But dear," Cora took her hand with an abnormal gentle caress "after the New Year, she will hear it."

"I know." Another single diamond slipped down the side of her nose. "That's what's so amazing. Look, Cora I just want to say that I'm so thankful that you are letting me be a part of this, that you're letting me help bring sound back into her life."

Sharp alarm crossed Cora's face making Emma instantly weary.

"What?"

"You love her!" Cora whispered as an accusation.

Emma laughed, wiping her face before Regina could see the tears and get the wrong idea, "I do. Of course I do, how could anyone who knows her not love her?"

She wasn't sure what the look on Cora's face was but if she had to guess she would say frustration. "Anyway, we are supposed to go ice skating after we eat so I think I'll send Ruby and Henry along first. I thought we should maybe do it just the three of us."

"Whatever you would like, dear. Now. About Louisville."

"Oh, uh, yeah. Right."

"That look on your face tells me I won't like what you have to say to me."

Emma huffed, wondering how Cora had become a person in her life she had to answer to, "I'm not sure because the answer is, I don't know." She glanced back at Regina, her hair perfect, outfit perfect – perfect in every way except for the apron, a silly kiss-the-cook number that Regina wore proudly because Emma had bought it for her. Emma had to smile.

"Why is that?"

"I don't know if I can leave here." The words were supposed to come out harsh and authoritative but
instead they came out a garbled whisper, all the angst she had been feeling twisting her breath.

Cora pursed her lips, "When did they want your answer?"

"Not until May."

"Then Emma I would say it is silly to make that choice now." Her tone was so final that Emma knew continuing on the topic would be pointless. Madame Cora had made up her mind.

With food cooking in the oven, Ruby and Regina joined them on the couches. With a small, self-conscious smile Regina took Emma's hand and kissed it. Emma watched Cora track their interlocked hands from Emma's lap, up to Regina's lips and back.

"Shall we do presents?" Cora asked Henry who looked confused but hopefully excited.

"There's more?"

"There's more!" Cora laughed, rubbing his back. Cora wanted a grandbaby to love; that was abundantly clear. Still it always surprised Emma the level of kindness this woman spared for her son. He had clearly become someone for her to spoil. Cora was becoming a bundle of conflicting images in Emma's mind. She believed Cora that she loved her daughter and she could even see that in Cora's own fucked up way she was trying to tell her so with her gift. Still she was cold to Regina and even more distant and remote to Ruby. She was bossy and often rude to Emma but her attempts at kindness to the blonde felt genuine. Emma didn't understand but she wished that Cora would pick a side.

Cora rose and gathered her belongings from their resting place beside the door, handing Henry a long box and Ruby and Emma small thin ones. Regina cocked an eyebrow at her mother as a small envelope was placed in her hands.

The group looked between themselves, tensely unsure who and how to begin so Ruby volunteered. Carefully as if there might be a bomb under the paper Ruby pulled off the tape and opened the box. She gasped, confusion marring her beautiful face as she pulled two concert tickets from its lining, "Season passes to the opera?"

Cora smiled, not at all warmly, "You used to be quite fond of the opera. I asked Emma and she said you still listen to it in your car."

Ruby's eyes fluttered for a moment, struck dumb, "I do but –" There was clearly so much history there that Emma felt as though she was reading a book that was missing pages 100 through 210. Shakily Ruby stood and before the woman could protest, Ruby wrapped her arms around her and hugged the woman warmly. "Thank you, Cora."

Cora looked taken aback and ended the hug as soon as possible, a slight red to her cheeks. "And how about you, Emma?"

Nerves raked through her as she pulled off the wrap and saw a handwritten card, "A masseuse?"

"A masseuse who specializes in string players dear. She's been known to cure cases of tendinitis."

"Whoa." Emma wasn't sure what to say. Tendinitis was the looming nightmare of all string players. It was an illness that came on rather suddenly, caused by overuse of muscles. It was capable of hitting at any time and successfully ruining any venture you were on when it did, not to mention bringing on months of crippling pain.
She studied the ground, knowing this had cost much and thanked her.

Cora let her shoulders rise and fall slightly, "We all need it at times and you have a big audition coming up."

All eyes turned to Regina but she didn't notice, too busy staring up at her mother, "Have you decided that Emma needs a benefactor, mother?"

Cora laughed, breathlessly, "And why not? We all could use a helping hand now and then." Before Emma could ask them what the hell they were talking about Regina glanced down at her envelope, "I suppose it is my turn."

Emma squeezed her fingers. Slowly, cautiously Regina opened the envelope and studied it. At first, her cheeks flushed hot and then the color drained away to nothing as her eyes stared blank and unseeing.

"What is it?" Henry asked, shaking Regina's knee.

Regina didn't seem able to answer, instead her eyes traveled slowly from the slip of paper to her mother's face. Too many things were flicking between the women for Emma to land on any of them. A tear fell from each eye and Emma's stomach knotted. Was Regina touched or was she furious?

*Knowing Cora, she's furious.*

Emma touched her hand lightly but Regina recoiled, shoving the paper back into the envelope and tossing it on the table. "Now, Henry-" she croaked.

Henry's eyes lit up, excited and unaware of the stiffness in the surrounding adults.

"Go on." Cora chided lightly but Emma felt a sliver of frustration. What was it? Was it good or bad? Regina's face had been wiped clean, blank of anything and everything.

Henry ripped into the paper, drawing Emma's attention back to him.

Emma stopped breathing as the long, perfectly polished violin case lifted from the box. "Cora-"

Cora ignored her.

Whooping Henry threw open the lid and gasped at the beautiful golden wood. "This is for me?"

Cora nodded; a huge tender smile on her cheeks.

With a gentleness he showed for few objects, he lifted the violin from its case and held it to his chin pulling a disgusting out of tune splat from the strings.

"Henry," Emma beckoned him feeling lightheaded. Taking the instrument in her hands, she stared down at it. She knew this brand - she knew this model. This wasn't something you played - this was a timepiece, meant to sit on someone's shelf somewhere - possibly in a fucking glass case. The student violin Emma had been looking into for Henry had run around two hundred dollars, this – Emma gulped a breath of air – the maker was rare, only made perhaps three hundred violins his entire career – she hadn't even been aware that he made a half-sized violin. This piece in her hands would have to cost upwards of $20,000.
Emma looked up, finding Regina's eyes and saw her own feelings matched there, shock, awe, and pure unadulterated horror.

"What does this say?" Henry frowned down at the envelope that was hidden under the instrument in the case.

The violin still clutched in her shaking grasp, Emma took the card and read, "This is a voucher worth weekly lessons with Victoria Chinn until June of the next year at which time agreeable parties will reevaluate - Victoria Chinn?" Emma's voice rasped, forced from an unwilling throat, "Victoria Chinn, the concertmaster of the Chicago Symphony?" She realized she had stumbled to her feet at some point and felt herself flush, through whether in shock, anger or humiliation she did not know.

Cora grinned at Henry; "Ms. Chinn should get our boy right on track to becoming the prodigy we know he can be."

It took Emma a moment to decide which thing she needed to do first. Gently she handed the violin and the card to Regina, chest heaving, "Henry, do not touch that. If you'll excuse me, I need-" she let herself rush through the patio doors not bothering to finish her sentence. She ignored the icy sting on her skin, moving until she knew she was out of sight of the watching eyes inside. Her hands clamped tightly on the railing, fury, and grief washing through her in rock hard spasms.

Victoria Chinn - she had met her – she had recently attended a workshop put on by her, in which the woman proudly stated she didn't provide student lessons anymore but when she had, she charged a minimum of two hundred dollars an hour.

Two hundred dollars fucking an hour. How much would she charge post retirement?

Her brain whirled for a moment doing the math:

$200 a lesson at 4 lessons a week
800
800 x six months
4800

Emma's knees felt weak.

Throw in the violin and the gift was at least – her brain would not allow her to settle on the number.

She felt a hand on her arm and growled but Regina's face stayed stoic, understanding.

"Do you know how much she spent?" Emma bellowed and Regina nodded.
"She said $26,000. Emma I-"

"Twenty-six thousand dollars!" Emma felt like pond scum, no she felt like a pile of dog poo under someone's heel. That violin and voucher represented all things that Henry had never had, extreme wealth, opportunities beyond measure, the best teacher in the country – all of the things that Emma herself could not give him. "You know I could put him through college on that? That violin is worth enough to put him through fucking college, Regina!" she felt her hands slam down on the banister again.

"You don't have to take it!" her girlfriend snapped.

"Gee, thanks."

Apologetically Regina pulled Emma to her. It took her a long time to talk Emma down but when Emma asked about the mysterious envelope, Regina just shook her head sadly.

"Is it something good or did she fuck up?"

Regina didn't answer and that was answer enough.

They reentered the apartment, frozen to the core, only to see Ruby looking uncertainly scared as Cora helped Henry's fingers into the proper positions on the violin.

_Henry looks so fucking happy. God damn it._

"Mother, we are going to talk about this," Regina demanded, "however, dinner is nearly done so we will discuss after. Henry, violin away please."

"Okay 'Gina." Henry mumbled; his hands full.

Dinner was silent and stressed, no one sure of exactly what to say. Defiance radiated from Cora like a radioactive gas while Henry looked around confused and uncomfortable.

Everyone was happy when dessert was through and plates could be gathered. The night was almost done.

"Can I play with the violin again?"

"No!" Regina and Emma cried in unison and then in tandem kissed either cheek in apology for snapping.

"Skating? Are we going skating now?"

Regina nodded stiffly telling him to pull his clothes on and then asking Ruby in whispered sign if they would go ahead of them.

Ruby nodded looking grateful to go.

The moment they were out the door Emma swung around on Cora but the woman stood, a fierce statue, "The best students require the best equipment and the best teachers, Ms. Swan. We can argue until we are blue in the face about this but I refuse, absolutely refuse, to have my decision challenged."
"Your decision? Your decision? For my son?"

Cora's eyes narrowed, a sudden older mirror of her daughter, her lip curling ready to spring on her prey and rip its throat out before devouring it. "We can discuss this another time then." Cora's words her cropped, short and hard. Regina looked between them confused, unable to follow.

"What?"

"We have other matters to attend to just now."

"What?"

"The gift, Emma, the gift."

Emma flushed again, suddenly torn. She was furious but the time was here. She could finally hand her love the little box that would change her life forever. Huffing she warred with herself until Regina pulled on her arm, "what's going on?"

"She wants me to give you your gift first."

"What? I thought I already got my gift."

Emma sighed, stepping away for a second to jump in place, shaking out her arms and rolling her head. She had so been looking forward to this and she wanted to be present, not fuming over Cora and her ridiculous ideas.

"What's going on?"

When she turned back to Regina she let the excitement bubble over, doing a little jump in place dance.

Regina's smile cracked through her confusion at Emma's grin.

"Okay." Slowly she removed the box from her pocket and set it on the counter in front of Regina.
"You're supposed to open it." Emma deadpanned when Regina simply stared at the box, "That's typically how gifts work."

Regina cocked an eyebrow at her from behind her mask and carefully picked up the box. "Yes, thank you dear."

Emma thought she might explode if Regina took any longer, carefully removing one corner and then the other. Heart beating hard in her chest, legs shaking so terribly that Emma wasn't sure they would hold her. She grinned widely, her facial muscles stretching to their fullest as slowly the lid to the box was opened.

Regina stared at the card inside, her eyes sweeping back and forth quickly before she looked up dark confusion in her eyes. "What is this?"

Emma took her hands, Jade meeting Chocolate, "It's an appointment for an Otolaryngologist." "It's a what?"

Smirking a little Emma quickly spelled the word she had been practicing for the last week. It was the first time Emma had let herself sign like that in front of someone that was not her safe little group of friends and Cora's disapproval tickled down her spine uncomfortably.

Regina's hands convulsed, snapping out of Emma's grasp. "Regina, you have an appointment to get a cochlear implant."

Regina stared at Emma, her face blank. Anticipation built quickly in Emma's chest waiting for the smile, the look of disbelief on her face – some type of excitement. When the face stayed blank Emma frowned and lifted her hand to make the sign for the implant but Regina stopped her, holding her hand in place. "I know what you said."

Bewilderment poured through her and just a touch of disappointment. Cora had warned her that Regina would need to be convinced a little but she had been secretly hoping that it wouldn't be true. She had secretly hoped that Regina would be instantly as excited as she was.

Finally Regina spoke, her voice softly alarming Emma of imminent danger like a cat yowling before rain, "How did you find out about this?"

"What?"

"The implant."

"What do you mean?"

"How did you find out about them, Emma?" Regina's back was beginning to straighten, tall and lean, her chin rising high and Emma wanted to bat it all away and stop her from retreating farther behind the mask that Emma hated so much.

"Your mom," she turned to look for her but Cora was far from them, sipping a glass of wine and flipping through a magazine on the couch as if giving them privacy to discuss. "Cora?"

"You were working with my mother?" Regina's voice was quiet, dangerous and Emma was
beginning to feel storm clouds gathering above her, threatening bolts of lightning. "You and my mother booked an appointment for me to get an implant without even discussing it with me?"

"Regina, I don't understand. You seem angry. This is an amazing thing. I thought this would make you happy. It would solve all of those problems – Regina, this would make you hear."

Regina's eyes flashed dangerously. Emma flinched but she continued, desperate for her point to be made, unknowingly burying herself under her own words, "no more pretending to understand what people are discussing in a large crowd. No more dancing to the beat instead of the music at clubs. No more needing Ruby at your side to communicate with most of the world. You could do it yourself! No more fighting for respect. Plus you could understand your mother! You could understand me. Don't you want that?"

Regina turned on Cora her voice still like soft ice, "Mother. This explains your gift then. Salt in the wound?"

"What?" Emma's stomach soured. What had Cora done now?

"She began a charity foundation in my name that rehabilitates deaf children. Don't play coy, Emma."

"Rehabilitate as in –"

"As in everything she did to me as a child."

"What?" revulsion washed through her, "Wait, coy? I didn't -" But Regina wasn't looking at her; her eyes were trained on her mother.

Cora sighed as if this whole situation were a huge inconvenience. Setting her drink and her magazine down, she stood and boldly approached Regina. Cupping her cheek she caressed it lightly, lovingly then pat it, perhaps harder than what was kind and leaving a small red mark "it's time, Regina. It's time."

"What?" Emma cried, a picture falling into place before her.

It's time?

"I'm going to join Ruby and Henry."

"What? Cora?" Emma cried even louder. She watched Cora go in shock. "Cora!"

What the hell?

"Oh my god, I'm such an idiot. This has come up before." A small spark of understanding hit her. "This wasn't a new idea Cora just got, this has come up before."

"Yes." Regina turned back to her, frozen eyes falling on Emma's panicked ones, "this has come up many times before. This is just the first time she was able to recruit someone to her cause."
"But wait," Emma grabbed Regina's arm before she could turn from her, "don't you want this? Think about it, hun. Think about what it would be like to be able to hear again. Ruby's laughter? Music? Henry singing? The sounds I make when you make me come?" She grinned wickedly but Regina's face stayed frozen. Panic fluttered harder in her chest, beating an angry rhythm. This was bad.

"No, Emma," Regina said coldly, "I don't want this. I can't believe you let my mother talk you into doing this." Angrily Regina yanked her arm free, "How dare you!"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, Regina, wait, I don't understand. You're mad at me? You don't want it, fine but you're mad at me? She told me you did, want them I mean. I thought you would want it. I don't get it, being deaf makes you miserable."

"No Emma," Regina barked, loud enough to make Emma jump from her stool, "being deaf is who I am." The emphasis on each word was like a kick to the gut.

Emma had been living on such a high, so excited to help Regina through this wonderful change, that the abrupt let-down was filling her stomach with a nasty rock of hard shock. It was as though she had been enthusiastically descending a steep set of stairs, confident she knew when she was on solid ground again only to reach the supposed bottom and discover her foot flying through another six inches of air, crunching down, radiating a sick jolt through her bones. Perhaps she was Wile E. Coyote chasing after the obnoxious bird only to discover the cliff he had been running on had actually ended ten feet back.

She didn't like the look that was washing over Regina's face, the bitter mask falling aside and exposing the pain twisting her features as the realization hit her, "and you can't handle that."

"What? No! I thought this would be a good thing. I thought I was helping. Of course I can han-"

"Of course." Her lip curled back, her teeth hungrily exposed, her features seesawing back to anger, "you thought you would help the pathetic little deaf girl and all the pathetic little deaf girls in the future. Take their hands and show them back into the world of normal."

"Regina, no!" Emma could see a swirling cloud erupting in Regina's eyes; building, fury growing and it terrified Emma.

*How the hell did I get here? How did I make her look at me like that? I'm such an idiot. I should have known!*

"It sounds like you think I pity you but Regina I –"

"It's true that deaf is not all that I am but it is a huge part of who I am."

"Of course!"

"Not all deaf people want to be hearing, Emma. I am proud of who I am," she boomed, "I am proud of what I am."

"Regina so am-"

"If there was a magical surgery that could turn you into a heterosexual, Emma, a surgery that could make you" she spat the 'you' so it lie mangled and disgusting on the floor between them, "normal as
the world states normal must be, would you do it? Would you give up your Sapphic ways that I know you love so much in order to fit in the box you were given at birth?"

Emma frowned deeply, her defenses beginning to flair, "But this isn't the same."

"Isn't it?" her voice roared, clashed over her ready to open the angry clouds and soak Emma in the suddenly vile venom. Emma could see Regina's anger and hurt building, the meter to exploding slowly filling with angry purple smoke. Her instincts told her to run, to duck and cover and get out of there before she lost her safety net but she couldn't. She needed to make her point and she needed to do it quickly. She needed to calm her love down.

"No! It isn't! Regina, I get that you're proud, I love that about you but it's not the same! I am not missing a basic human function! It's a basic function that you could get back! Have you ever considered it? Have you ever thought about what you could gain? Who you could be?" Regina just stared at her in horror so Emma kept talking, unable to stop "I didn't have anything to do with the foundation, I promise I had no idea but isn't it a good thing? Helping children get along better in the world?"

The mask dropped away again, exposing the raw flesh underneath. There was so much pain in Regina's eyes, a lifetime of being ripped open and sewn up only to rip at the stitches all over again before they had the chance to heal. "You're just like all of the rest of them." A knife's edge slipped between Emma's ribs. "I can't believe I ever trusted you. I can't believe I ever thought -- you would teach a whole new generation of children that they are wrong? That they need to be fixed?" A little hurt girl stood where the fierce and angry Regina had stood a moment before.

Emma reached for her; a denial fast on her lips but Regina recoiled as if a spider had touched her fingertips.

"You can trust me! I don't want to teach children that they're wrong! They aren't! Regina, how could you think I would think that? The foundation is in your name! You can make it better, Regina. You can decide what type of therapy is offered -- stop! Listen to me for a second!" Emma shouted frustrated, her eyes exploding with tears. There was something in Regina's voice that was scaring Emma to death, a finality that Emma didn't understand nor did she want to understand.

"I thought I could trust you." Regina's face was pale, mortified behind her eyes. She wasn't listening to anything Emma was saying, too busy locked in her own head. Emma could tell she hadn't been listening for a while now.

"You can! That's the only reason why I'm saying you should think about it because you can trust me. I swear I was only trying to help. I thought I was doing a good thing. Damn it, Regina, I thought this was something you would want. I thought this would be a good change!"

Regina's sad eyes searched Emma's face while Emma clung tightly to the side of the kitchen island, begging her internally to trust her, to see she only meant to help - she only meant to make her life better. "Why can't I ever be enough?"

"Regi--"

"Just me. As I am."

"Regina!"

"I never thought you would need to change me in order to be with me. Not you."

"No, I don't!"
Regina's eyes began to fill as they swept over every inch of Emma's face, looking for someone she knew. "You're not who I thought you were, are you? Who are you?"

"Regi-"

"What do you want from me?" Regina screamed at full volume, her hands coming down like thunder on the island, tears flowing, dark and bloody, so unlike the beautiful crystal drops Emma had experienced the night before. "I can only be who I am, Emma!"

"No, no, Regina," Emma sobbed suddenly feeling something coming, feeling the spring about to snap, "you don't understand. I'm sorry –" her arms felt heavy, her mind dizzy as she watched her loves cold face stare at her as if she were a stranger, a bug.

"I thought you – I thought you loved me."

"I do! Oh god, I do!" Emma bellowed, reaching for her again and again was denied. "I love you so much, Regina, please. Listen to me! I made a mist-"

Regina backed away, her head shaking, those walls snapping up around her and leaving Emma out in the cold, in the dark. Her neck lengthened, her chin held high as the woman disappeared behind herself, only her eyes remained dejected, confused, "What the hell have you done to me? This isn't who I am. I don't – I don't need people like this. This is so silly!"

"Regina!"

A ripple of fury crossed Regina's face. Emma's dawn exploded, lightening stuck, "You sided with my mother. You're just another lackey, another person who jumps when she tells them to."

"No!" Tears dripped from her cheeks, her heart that had pounded with such joy, such happiness for months was cracking, shattering. Emma clutched at it in her chest, trying to hold it together. This couldn't happen. She couldn't handle this. No, this couldn't happen. "Regina, no! Stop!"

"You sided with my mother! How could you side with my mother? How could you be this person? No wonder you never tried to learn to sign with me. You thought you would tell me to do this and the silly little deaf girl would just comply."

"Regina!" she launched across the room, forcibly taking Regina into her arms but Regina shoved her away.

Her voice was low, purposeful as she went for the throat, "You lied to me. You made me believe - that is unforgivable, Emma."

"Regina, please." The words were meant to be a scream but they only came out in a faint whisper. "Please don't do this."

"Unforgivable." The furious brunette roared, shaking the windows, "Get your shit. Get you shit and get the fuck out of my house. I want nothing to do with you."

Emma's knees hit the wooden floor, slayed where she stood. "Regina!"

But Regina was gone. She had turned and disappeared up the stairs and into the metal box for her escape, running.

Emma couldn't believe it, the words echoed in her mind like a pendulum, slicing into her stomach with every swing. She had barely been in the fight. Regina had, for the second time, built and ended
the fight almost entirely herself, leaving Emma strapped to the tracks of the train unable to do anything but watch and wait for the collision.

This is why you never learned sign with me.

But that wasn't true.

She was on her feet, flying after Regina, "No! That is not it! I am not losing this! No!"

The slammed her thumb into the button signaling for the elevator but it didn't come. She pressed again and again, screaming in frustration and planting a kick into the door, yelping with pain as it finally opened.

"Come on, come on, come on!" she kicked the walls as the machine slowly descended.

She flew into the lobby but there was no hope. Regina had vanished like a cloud of smoke.

Emma called her phone three times each time being informed politely by the operator that the number Emma was calling did not pick up.

"I'm sorry, ma'am but it looks like the call is going straight to voicemail now. I think the phone has been turned off."

Emma screamed in frustration, planting a kick into a potted plant. It exploded showering the ground with pottery and dirt.

"Shit!"

Cora fucked me. Cora fucked me. She knew exactly what to say to get me on her side. Cora fucked me. I'm an idiot. And Regina dumped me. What do I do now?

She stood for a long while, looking around blankly. She would go back up, she would go back up and wait. Regina had to return sometime and when she did Emma would fucking be there waiting.

She spun on her heels but a throat cleared next to her.

Humiliation flared but it was only a dull flicker to the barely contained panic coursing through her. "I'm sorry about the plant, I shouldn't have done that. I'll pay for it; I'm sorry."

The giant man who always stood by the elevator was looking down at her, clearly sorry for what he was about to say, "I'm sorry, Ms. Swan but Ms. Mills has asked me to help you gather your things and to escort you to the El."

"What?" Disbelief froze her, "you've gotta be kidding me."

"I'm sorry ma'am." He summoned the elevator "Right this way."

Emma felt like a convict, a death row prisoner as she did her best - and failed - to staunch the tears
she sobbed while she picked up the things belonging to her and her son. She could feel the man's
pitying eyes on her as she went, slowly, jumping when he spoke again, "forgive me, ma'am, but she
said you only had thirty minutes."

Cold. Mean. Nasty. She had always known there was a frost in her girlfriend but she had never been
on the receiving end. It burned, biting at her and devouring her willpower.

She couldn't make eye contact with anyone as he waited with her for the El train. She wanted to ask
about Henry but she knew that, mad as Regina was, she would not allow anything to happen to him.
He would probably show up at home that evening after everyone went skating.

She stepped onto the train, blankly, freezing inside the door unable to process where she needed to
go now.

He cleared his throat again behind her, "Merry Christmas, ma'am."

A small sarcastic jilt of laughter popped from between her lips, a bubble from a recent stab wound.
The laughter died instantly as the doors to her life for the past months closed with a ding.

She tied Regina's phone constantly that evening, even tried Ruby's once or twice with no luck. She
was being frozen out all over a stupid mistake.

It seemed so stupid now, why had Emma trusted Cora? What had made her think Cora was
trustworthy? Why was she always such an idiot? She could have sworn she had a talent for picking
up when someone was lying to her – why had she put so much power behind that? Stupid.

She paced back and forth in the living room for hours, tears never slowing until she had no idea what
else to do or who else to call. She picked up the phone and, words hitching with every sob, she
explained to August what had happened.

"I don't – I don't know what to do – what do I do now?"

August was silent a long time, "I think you give her time, Emma. She's mad, let her get over it."

She threw her cell phone across the room.

A knock sounded at the door a few hours later. Emma knew it would be Henry but she flew to the
door and wrenched it open, knowing Regina would be there with him making sure her son was safe.
Instead she growled when she saw Cora, holding tightly to Henry's shoulder.

"You! Are you fucking kidding me? Henry, go to your room."

Henry looked shocked by his mother's yell but booked it in double time.

"Do not take that tone with me, young lady! Before you get mad, allow me to explain."

Fury and hurt beat against Emma's temples. She couldn't listen right now, she knew she couldn't.
"How can you explain? You treacherous bitch, you played me! She dumped me. Because of you."

Surprise flicked across Cora's face, "She broke up with you?"

"Yes, Cora. She did. Of course she did. Just like you wanted."
"I assure you, Emma, that I –"

And Emma slammed the door in the woman's face.

Henry cried when he saw all of his things in the living room, his little feet stomping until he threw himself into his room, slamming the door.

Emma let him go, crumbling onto the couch in a sobbing heap.

Had she really been so foolishly happy a few hours before? It felt so fake now laying here in the cold breeze of her apartment. She could hear Henry crying into his pillow and as much as she wanted to go to him, to apologize for snapping but she didn't think she could - not right now.

She needed a distraction so she could calm herself enough to comfort him. She turned and caught the glitter of something in the mirror. Nausea ripped through her as she saw the glittering diamonds; the drops so like those wonderful tears that were still nestled in her ears. With an anguished cry, she ripped at them, scratching pulling until they sat in her palm, her lobe bleeding slightly. Her arm wrenched back, ready to throw them across the room, her sobs dry in her throat but she stopped herself at the last moment. Instead she walked shakily to her dresser and set them down, covering them with a picture of Henry so she didn't have to see them.

She started in the kitchen and scrubbed and sweat her way across each room – the progress doing nothing to wipe away the ache she felt.

Each moment Regina did not call her back seemed to settle on her like a weight pressing her deeper into the ground, making her sink.

Finally close to his bedtime, Henry emerged from his room, face swollen. Emma jumped up, quickly wiping away her own tears. "Hey kid. Come here. I'm sorry I yelled at you."

He crawled into her lap, still shaking slightly as he cried, "'Gina doesn't like us anymore?"

"No, no, Henry."

Why didn't you hide his stuff and introduce the idea slowly? Scum of the universe. You always have been and you always will be.

"Regina loves you. She does but sometimes – well sometimes when people are dating it doesn't work. They don't make one another happy."

"But you were happy!" he wailed.

"I know, I know. I'm sorry, Henry."

Everything in Emma's life changed over the next few days. It was like she was a teenager again. Old wounds she thought had long healed were suddenly open and bleeding. No matter how she held herself, wrapping tightly against the gashes, she could not stop the bloodshed.

She had been thrown out, kicked to the curb yet again in her life, passed over in favor of better things and she didn't understand how she had gotten there. Didn't she protect herself against this happening?

She and Henry simply sulked around the house, not saying much but simply surviving together until
the ache of the loss waned.

Neither Regina nor Ruby would answer her phone calls and Emma was given a sharp prod of a reminder that before Killian, before Regina; Emma had been entirely alone in this city.

The only person who refused to leave her alone was Cora. She called once a day every day until the morning of New Year's Eve when finally exasperated Emma picked up the phone.

"Did you not know your daughter enough to know that she didn't want it or were you using me?"

"Emma, I wouldn't say-"

"You used me."

"Excuse me?"

"You told me you wanted to make her life better but you used me to push your agenda, didn't you? You knew she would attack you if you brought the implant up so you had me do it. I was disposable to you."

"On the contrary Emma, I thought she would listen to you. I thought you would make her see reason."

"Well, she didn't. She didn't listen to me; she kicked me out of her life which means you are out of my life. So stop calling me."

"Emma. You left Henry's gifts. I have them for you."

Emma considered telling Cora where exactly she could put those gifts but decided against it, "Keep them."

"I will not, Ms. Swan. You will pick them up tonight."

"Tonight?"

"The benefit."

"What?"

"Emma, have you forgotten about the Black and White Ball I am hosting this evening? You are supposed to be playing. I would advise that you do not miss this evening."

She had. Emma had forgotten entirely in the wake of the destruction of her life. Becca had been expensively booked for that evening and would be there within hours. She had forgotten. She wished she hadn't been reminded. "You can't really expect me to go."

"I most certainly do. Mr. Gold has information for you. You will be there, Ms. Swan."

Anger bubbled, "What the hell gives you the right to tell me what I will or will not do, Cora?"

"Because we both know it will be to your benefit to arrive tonight."
Chapter 26

She stared at the beautiful black dress that had sat crumpled in the back of her closet since Christmas day. She had reluctantly pulled it out and hung it on the inside her closet door so she could stare at it with hate.

August, her last remaining friend, had hightailed it to her apartment when Emma had called begging and now sat silently behind her. "It's a good dress."

"It was a good dress," She spoke as if the dress had died.

"And what did she say exactly?"

"We both know it would be to your benefit to arrive tonight. She clearly doesn't give a shit about Regina so I think she's threatening to give away my spot in the Lyric audition."

"You think she would?"

"If I didn't do what she wants, yes. She called herself my benefactor. Regina called her my benefactor, so I think I have a benefactor."

"Well, she did get you the Lyric audition."

"Is that what a benefactor does?"

"Dunno, Swan. Never had one. I think so. Gets you gigs, gets your name out there, sets up auditions. Kind of like an agent."

"Right." She glared a few more daggers into the dress. "Don't you usually agree to those types of relationships?"

He nodded not so much as a yes but because he was deep in thought, chewing his lip, "You know Danny? The guys whose cello you borrowed."

"Of course."

"He tried to get a spot in the audition, said they laughed at him."

She nodded understanding and resenting his point. If she wanted the audition, she needed to continue to kiss Cora Mill's behind until the very last moment. "I don't know if I want it anymore."

"Oh don't be a teenager, Swan. Of course you do, a break up doesn't change that."

A breakup.

Those words still sliced like knives.

"Unless you're just planning on going to Louisville," He added, his voice so low; it was almost a sad whisper.
"I'm thinking about it. I'm not going to win Lyric. I need something stable, Booth." They each avoided the other's eye, knowing neither wanted to talk about it. "Henry needs something stable."

Tears flicked down Emma's cheeks and she brushed them away angrily.

"Look," he said kinder, she'll be there tonight. Go looking all hot and sexy – and emotionally stable. She will want to talk to you. It worked last time. Just go get in the shower. Get in the shower and do your hair and makeup. Then we will see what happens next."

She stared at the dress, the idea working its way into her mind.

_It had worked once. Maybe it would work again._

Emma took extra care as she showered, washing and shaving everything twice. When she blow-dried she curved the brush, painting her hair into her best wild lion's mane of golden locks. She spent a long time listening to Henry and August play in the living room as she painted her face, coloring her eyes with dark grey shadow, drawing her lids out in thick black cat eyes in honor of the evenings black and white theme. She shadowed her cheeks with a soft black blush and finished the look with perfectly shaped black lipstick and took a step back. She was jarring on the eyes, stark and angled. It was beautiful body armor and her face said she was ready. She let her features twist until she found her own regal mask and studied herself. She knew she was being stupid. Regina was done with her – of course she was, but she had to try at least once.

_I hope this works._

She pulled on the sleek black dress and heels then stepped out in front of her men. Her heart was pounding, singing and breaking all at once, knowing she would be seeing Regina in a few hours even if Regina continued to deny her calls. She needed their approval.

"Whoa, mama." August whistled.

"Wow, mommy."

For the first time in five days, her lip almost twitched into a smile.

"If she turns that down, Swan, then you need to find yourself a better woman."

There had been little in her life that was as hard as stepping from the car Cora sent for her. She could see the line of paparazzi again waiting for their victims to walk through their trap and she wasn't sure she had that in her. She had felt like a stone cold statue throughout the ride, letting her makeup hide the eyes that had been bleary, the cheeks that had lost their warmth but now, could she be who she needed to be to pull this off? Did she want to? Maybe she should just go home.

"Ma'am?" the driver asked politely.
"Uh, right." Emma nodded, opening the door and sliding out. Summoning all of her courage she reminded herself of a valuable life lesson: when you don't fit anywhere, just pretend you fit in everywhere. She could do this. Her skin was thick. She was ready. She started for the doors, showing her invitation to the man at the rope.

"Miss. Swan, Miss. Swan!"

Emma jumped as the man behind the rope called her name.

*How the hell? Why does everyone always know my name?*

She smiled a bit as she had seen Regina do and then quickly dived inside.

Though the decoration was different, there was no denying that this was the exact building where she had spent her Halloween as arm candy.

The inside of the hall did not make her feel any better, the abrasive black and white contrast reminding her thoroughly of Regina's loft.

*Before she painted it for my son and me, that is.*

She took a champagne flute and began to circle, doing her best not to search the room. She would not do that.

"Ms. Swan." Mr. Gold appeared beside her, "Lovely to see you."

"Mr. Gold. How are you?"

"Fine, fine. Congratulations on your newest job."

"My newest job?"

"Cora led me to believe you would be taking the position in Louisville. Now I have to admit, I'm a little surprised. I thought you would be a forerunner in the Lyric audition but –"

"I want to be!" It popped out of her mouth before she could stop it.

Gold forced a chuckle, seeming always stuck somewhere between enjoying Emma and detesting her.

She cleared her throat and tried again, "I'm sorry, Mr. Gold but while I haven't decided about my future in Louisville I do know that I plan, with your good graces, to take the audition."

He smiled, "That's what I wanted to hear, dearie, that's what I wanted to hear. I will have the set list and your time slot sent to your email address this evening."

Relief flooded through her. If she had her audition time and material did she really need to be a little puppet on Cora's strings anymore? Cora couldn't take it from her, right? She didn't have to have a benefactor. "Thank you, sir."
With a nod, he allowed himself to be distracted by other guests.

She continued her circle wishing desperately she had brought company, August or even Henry.

Across the hall, Cora caught her eye. Emma glared, an automatic response but Cora only looked fondly amused, her eyes shifting to the left of the room. Stiffly Emma's eyes followed Cora's prompt.

The sight of her hit Emma's heart like an angry baseball bat. Had she always been that beautiful? Had her eyes always been that sad? Dressed all in white Regina stood stiffly smiling as she shook hands with patron after patron; mumbling a polite greeting to each.

Cold brown eyes rose from the old man in front of her and met Jade. Her mouth popped open a bit when she saw her and hope bloomed in Emma, maybe – the eyes dropped away dismissing Emma before she had even had a chance to try.

No.

Making her way through the crowd, she took another glass of champagne and waited at Regina's arm for her to say her polite goodbye to the person in front of her. Then she stepped directly in her line of vision, forcing a very difficult to hold smug grin on her face.

She handed her the extra glass, which Regina took, politeness habitual and waited as Regina purposely looked everywhere but at Emma, the deaf equivalent to plugging your ears.

After a minute of this Emma rolled her eyes, stuffing the ache deep down inside and grabbed her chin, "I've been trying to call you."

"Please do not touch me, Ms. Swan." Her voice was black velvet.

"All right, then look at me when I speak to you."

"Ms. Swan, if you'll exc-"

"No. I won't, Regina. I need to speak to you."

Regina stepped past her, falling into a conversation with a waiting silvered gentleman instantly.

"Just give her time." Cora sighed.

"Cora, look, I don't mean to be rude but please leave me the hell alone." She stepped around her and quickly accepted the first offer to dance she received.

The game they played this time was very different from the one they had played previously in this hall. Instead of heat filled glances and coy smiles they shared angry charged glares and failed attempts from Emma to corner Regina into a conversation. She tried catching Regina in the bathroom, reddening at the memory of their last encounter there but Regina's face had held such disdain that Emma had lost her nerve and let her go. She tried to catch her at the bar but Regina stiffly introduced her to someone she said was a strong admirer of Emma's and sauntered off as the man wrapped Emma in a layer of sleaze.

In between all of her attempts Emma danced. She didn't care who it was that asked her so long as it kept her mind and body busy while she plotted her next ambush attempt.
When Cora finally caught her arm reminding her she was scheduled to play, she followed blindly and played the beautiful and moving melody with just a touch of ice.

It wasn't until fifteen minutes before midnight, very much ready for the evening to be over, that she got Regina alone at all.

Regina was sitting in the hallway on a bench, Cora next to her rambling on and on. Emma had simply been heading to the coat check for her phone when she caught a glance of them. Even in that glance she could see that Regina's face was a sharp, her eyes red and fogged over.

Emma had no idea what Cora was trying to say but she knew Regina couldn't understand her and Cora was beginning to feel frustrated.

"Can I help?"

Regina glared at her, promptly turning her head away.

"I think we need another moment to ourselves, Emma."

Emma hesitated but stepped willingly past the line that was her place as the now ex-girlfriend, "Cora do you see that look on her face? You think she's being defiant when she says that she can't understand you but she isn't. You don't move your lips when you speak. She can't understand you. Learn her language."

"That's enough, Ms. Swan," Regina growled.

"Regina just let me help."

"No! I do not, in any way, need your assistance. Please just mind your own business and allow me to mind mine."

Emma faltered, her heart burning, "Cora can you give us a second, please?"

For once, by an act from the powers that be, Cora removed herself without an argument.

She knew she didn't have a lot of time so she dived in, "I did not take your mother's side. I did not choose your mother. I did not agree with your mother. I did not sign off on the torture of children. Don't you see that, Regina? She tricked me. I thought I was doing something you wanted!"

Regina rolled her eyes turning to leave but Emma caught her arm, "Please, Regina, please talk to me."

"All right," Regina's voice sent a layer of ice over her skin as she clamped a palm down on Emma's mouth, "Talk to me. Go ahead. Tell me about your day. Use your hands, Emma. It's been six months since our first date. Say something more than a single worded sentence. Go ahead; tell me all about your day. Surprise us all by actually trying to speak my language."

Defiantly Emma began to sign, "I've been trying."

"Yeah," Regina drawled nastily, "you have not exactly been straining yourself. You would rather, just like my mother, alter me rather than yourself. It's disgusting."

"No. I wouldn't."

"Besides," Regina released her, taking a few steps away, "my mother already informed me of your departure. What does it all matter? You're leaving anyway. You were leaving before we broke up. I
just made it easier on you."

Regina disappeared through the door that led back into the hall.

She couldn't keep doing this, chasing after a woman who was so clearly pushing her away with all of her might. Maybe she was right. Maybe it was time to move on from this life and into the next.

*But you love her.*

Emma scoffed at the tiny voice inside. She didn't know, understand or want love anyway.

*That's not true, Emma. Go, get her back. Find happiness.*

She sighed as the group in the theatre began to chant, "Ten – nine – eight –"

Emma stood. She was a fighter. She had always been forced to be a fighter. She had one more idea. Put it all out on the line.

*Be honest.*

"Seven – six – five."

She crossed the room to where she knew Regina would be, somewhere inside, counting down to midnight with the other guests.

"Four – three – two"

She saw Regina in the corner; her eyes red and makeup clearly recently wiped back into its proper place.

"One! Happy New Year!"

She didn't allow herself to think about how this rejection would feel – how it would damage her- she had been damaged before. She would heal. She slipped quickly across the floor past the cheering people and passionately kissing couples. She didn't give Regina time to speak as she approached, seeing only her rolling eyes before she yanked her to her, wrapping her arms around her urgently. Her lips found Regina's quickly holding her in the hard insistent embrace. Slowly, deliberately she parted her lover's lips, gently tasting her, gently touching her. She did not miss the fact that as her lips began to move, her tongue softly exploring, the oh so familiar other slipped against her own, greedily prodding as it had always done. She kissed her so long, so hard that they were all but doubled over by the time Emma pulled away as if she had elegantly dipped the woman before planting the kiss.

She held her like that, breathless under the stare of the swirling Chocolate eyes; "One of my foster mothers told me once that if you kiss a person you love at midnight it's a promise from you to them
that you will kiss them every day for the next twelve months. I love you, Regina and I want to make good on that promise."

She didn't see Regina's face as she turned and walked away.
By the end of January, she wasn't so sure her plan to leave everything in Regina's hands was a wise one. There had been no phone calls, no messages – nothing. As a matter of fact, she rarely saw her now. Either her business at rehearsals had dried up or she was conducting it from her office, far away from Emma.

By the end of February, Emma was sure she had made a mistake not simply throwing Regina over her shoulder and claiming her for her own. Depression was edging into a resigned gray feeling as her life began to pick up a normal pace again. Valentine's Day came and went in a stumbling drunken blunder of a night. She and August tucked Henry into bed and then drunk their weight in whiskey landing in a comatose pile on the living room floor a few hours later.

By the end of March, Emma had simply given up, accepting that it was over, she had ruined it and she was out of luck now. The everyday pain of her stupidity mellowed and she was back in the well of bitter loneliness she had existed in before she met Regina. She hurt. She hurt every day. She hadn't just lost a love, she had lost friends – she had lost an entire life and she wanted it back. This was a very familiar feeling; as a teenager she called it the new foster home blues.

When you have a five-year-old child and a severe lack of 'people' - no friends - no family; you're very seldom alone. There isn't anyone besides yourself to take him to the movies and give you the afternoon off. There are never any birthday parties he attends alone and no school for him to disappear to. There are no unexpected sleepovers or day trips to the zoo.

In a solitary lifestyle like the one, Emma and Henry led you can assume that your child will be with you at all times, no matter what.

Which is why this felt so weird.

The only 'people' she had now, August and Henry, were out in some distant suburb at some Boy Scouts of America jamboree learning how to tie knots they would never use and select non-poisonous berries they would never eat. It was boys bonding time and was strictly no girls allowed. Emma was grateful that Henry still had August after losing Regina and Ruby but -

Today. Of course, the event had to be today.

Though maybe this was better. Emma, above all else, was a mother and that meant no matter how gray she was feeling she could never give in to it; never let it overwhelm her. If Henry had been home she would have been far too distracted to find herself in her underwear watching trash TV for hours.

Her head hit the back of the couch again; alerting her that she had once again slipped into a comatose state as she stared blankly at the screen. She coughed to herself and changed the channel.

Pretty woman - she jumped to change the channel as if the happy smiles on the screen had burned her retinas.

That used to be one of her favorite movies but I don't know, maybe it had burned her. Maybe she
was just allergic now. Maybe she had just reached her maximum threshold of times she could be thrown away while still keeping her head above the water and now she didn't have room in herself for shit like romantic comedies.

Hadn't she learned how to avoid this? Her head hit the couch again and she let it stay there, staring vacantly at the wall. She had worked so hard to never let life break her – but her walls had been down. The damage had been done before Emma had realized she was in danger.

Yes, she was allergic now.

Maybe she just needed a full night's sleep. It had been so long since something had triggered this feeling of inadequacy and abandonment; she had forgotten about the dreams that had haunted her in the past. Dreams of showing up on the doorstep of a new home only to be informed that she was not expected or wanted. Dreams where she was informed by her social worker that they could find nowhere else for her to go so she had been assigned to live the rest of her life in a cardboard box behind a local fast food chain.

It wasn't just that she had been broken up with; that had happened a few times since her teen years. It was that her voice in the situation had been taken away; she had absolutely no say in the matter. She had been living life happily and then a power greater than her own had swooped in and removed her, dumping her into the gray all-consuming depression. She thought she had moved past these feelings but perhaps being an unwanted, unloved child was something you never moved past – not fully.

She reached for her coffee on the table, moving too quickly and sloshing the drink across her bra. She stared down at the tinting tan cloth for a long moment, not really caring that the garment was soiled but simply watching the light color spread. She took another swig and shrugged at the empty room. There was nobody here to judge her – even if she judged herself.

All right, if she was being honest with herself this wasn't just her abandonment issues or lack of sleep – not today. She had always abhorred the women who fell apart once they were kicked to the curb by a lover. This also wasn't just because she was allergic now. No, this was because today was the worst day of the year.

She had always hated this day. There was no better holiday to remind Emma of how alone she was; how alone she always had been.

No parents to call and regale with tales of her birth.

No best friend to show up unannounced with a cupcake or a shot of whiskey.

No significant other to kiss her cheeks and tell her that they were thankful Emma was born.

She clicked the remote again and settled deeper into the couch watching, but not really seeing the show on the screen.

Should she be doing something else? She could clean but she had been unnaturally clean these past few months. She could work out - yeah she should do that. She pulled herself halfway off the couch before giving the idea up as a bad job. She could study, but she had been studying so much over the last few months that her hands felt permanently cramped. Her glare fell on her cello – no, she didn't want that either.

So she allowed herself to just sit and stare emptily at nothing in particular.

Why had she let Henry go? She knew he was still too young to call her out on her dismissal of the day - much like you-know-who would have done. But at least if he was here she could bury herself
in him. She could use him as her own personal sun and drive away the drab. He would fight off the loneliness that was gripping her. She could focus on being a good mother; being a good housekeeper or a better homemaker. She would have spent the day with him, helping him to bake a cake and waiting nervously while he used the big boy scissors to cut an odd amount of wrap for whatever strange object a five-year-old found fitting for a gift.

She knew if she had told August he would have insisted on something but perhaps that was the problem. Each year growing up she had been in a different home when this dreaded day hit. There had never been any special surprises or knowing cheers because - no one ever knew. She could tell them, yes, and perhaps they would grudgingly buy a sheet cake or something. While that was great and all no one had ever known her, her history, her life well enough to know the day was coming on their own. She had simply stopped telling those around her by the age of ten to avoid the vibe of obligation and that was a hard habit to break. What was the point of telling? Birthdays were days to share with people who loved you and besides Henry – she had never had any of those.

Emma woke a few hours later slumped over, her face pressed to the seat of the couch, unaware she had dozed. An M&M had melted to the side of her face, streaking her skin with blue as she swiped it away. The smurf gore on her fingers jarred her with a moment of clarity. She was wallowing. What was wrong with her? She didn't wallow! She checked the time and realized it had been five hours since she had first sat down. That was unacceptable – and so desirable. All she wanted to do was crumble back into a ball on the soft seat and be a lump but no; she had to get up.

She stood unsteadily and headed to the bathroom, washing her face and brushing her teeth. She had to get out of this cold, cold house.

She pulled her clothes on over the coffee stained bra and underwear and brushed out her hair.

She stared at herself in the bathroom mirror, bleary-eyed and decided she didn't care how she looked. She just had to go before she gave into the soporific and comforting call of the couch and reruns of Kitchen Nightmares.

She had no idea where she was going when she got on the train, no real plans set but thirty minutes later she found herself on the beach of Lake Michigan not far from Cora's house. She could stop by the Mills' mansion but no, as deadened as she felt that day, Cora had demanded her presence every Tuesday evening over the past months and that was enough.

Instead, she nestled into a groove in the sand and watched the people around her. Each set of happy parents chasing their children, each happy and loving couple taking a stroll anesthetized Emma a little bit more. What was their life like? Did they have the same types of problems that she had? Did their smiles cover the fact that they were broken – just like Emma's smile hid for her?

When she could take it no more she rose, brushing the sand off of her and headed back toward the city.

What were Henry and August doing? Should she call and check on them? No, they were fine without her.

Morosely she passed a lively bar and grill, a group of college students cheering happily from just inside the doors. Without knowing exactly why she slipped inside and sighed, feeling the vicarious warmth and merriment wash over her.

"Noel is turning twenty-two! Let's hear it for the old lady!" the freshly groomed man in the Northwestern hoodie called from the center of the table.
"Just one, Miss?"

Emma jumped, not having noticed the host watching her closely, "Oh, uh, yeah. Just one, I guess."

"Right this way."

She smiled blankly at the young man and followed him to a small corner booth meant for close and intimate dates or other rejects eating alone.

*Great. Now I'm one of those people who eat alone in restaurants. What am I even doing here? You're sinking, Swan.*

"Your server will be right with you."

"Uh, thanks."

She wasn't sure she was hungry, it was a little early for dinner but the cheer of the party was addicting.

She watched as the birthday girl was forced into a small cone birthday hat, blushing as her friends took turns hugging her warmly. Envy - jealous and angry green flooded through her. It wasn't pretty and she was ashamed of herself but it couldn't be helped. Like a stone, the envy dropped into sadness, would she ever have that? People. Would she ever have people? Did she even want people? People seemed to be predictably disappointing.

Why didn't she just go out and make friends? It had been easy enough as a child; all you had to do was walk up to someone and say you're my friend now and boom, best friends forever. Did the same rule work in adulthood? Could she walk up to a businessman with his suit and briefcase and simply inform him they were best friends forever now? Tell him that the first sleepover would be at her house that Saturday at five?

She was pretty sure they would chuck her in the looney bin.

*No, what you need, Swan, is a dog. A dog is faithful. A dog loves you no matter what.*

A dog! That was perfect. She could finally get that Dalmatian she had always wanted. Fuck, it was her birthday – where was the nearest shelter? This was a genius plan! Joy filled her for a moment; but, shit, no – her hopes crashed down as quickly as they had been raised. It wasn't right to keep a dog in a tiny suburban apartment. Even if you took the thing for a walk every day it wasn't right.

The server came smiling back to her table and Emma realized she hadn't opened the menu. "Um, Jack and Coke and whatever your house cheeseburger is?"

"Very good, ma'am."

Her eyes fell back to the college students with their cheerful faces. Did they know at all what this was like? To be lonely in your soul – to be unworthy-
She gasped, humiliated when a large tear rolled down her cheek. Oh god, that wasn't something she was going to do right now. No way.

She hadn't meant to have three but watching the group of college students had been like her own personally vindictive movie. The drinks had kept coming easily and she had nursed them, living in their bitter burn down her throat.

She wasn't drunk, but through the haze of misery, she wasn't exactly sure how she had gotten from point A to point B. All she knew was that suddenly she had found herself on the cushion of her couch again, back down to her underwear and staring at the patterns in the ceiling.

*I handled this day in the worst possible manner. Good job me.*

She sighed into the gathering darkness. Would she always be this alone? She should have fought harder for Regina chased more, insisted, stalked. She should have done everything she could have. Having people was great, wonderful even but having people she loved, well that was a dream not granted to many and she craved it with every fiber of her being.

She should have signed more.

What had she been afraid of? Being humiliated? Looking stupid? So what? Did that really matter? She was an idiot.

She took another sip of the now cold coffee, slopping it over herself again and began to hum, hands slowly singing in the air above her -

*Happy birthday to me, happy birthday to me…*
Chapter 28

Emma yelped loudly as the paper to-go cup buckled in on itself, coffee pouring over her arm and across her chest in a blazing fire. She hissed, clenching her teeth until the painful burning passed. She was left staring after the train, which had not waited despite her run, and dripping her fairly expensive Columbian roast.

"Shit." She tossed the cup in the platform trash and did her best to ring her shirt out; ignoring the sympathetic looks from the other platform patrons.

A few days after her birthday Emma had run into Ruby in the grocery store. At first she had hidden, afraid of what her former friend would say to her but eventually loneliness had won out. She had approached and during the tense conversation had not so casually mentioned that she was looking for a new A.S.L teacher. Her plan had worked perfectly; Ruby had frosted over entirely the diva inside of her offended by the thought of her taking lessons with someone else. It had taken her the last two weeks of March to convince Ruby to begin those lessons again and now she would be late for the first one – and covered in coffee.

Great. Just great.

This was life now; try as Emma liked, everything was just slightly off. Heading to work her train would arrive a few minutes early so she would be forced to watch it go by as she ran up the street, cello rapping harshly on the back of her knees. Or perhaps the train would be running late, causing her to jump up and down in anxiety and landing her five minutes late to her destination. She would go to her frequented café looking forward to her favorite blend only to discover the person before her had received the last cup – and the café wouldn't be receiving another shipment of coffee grounds until the following month. Movies she wanted were always rented out at her nearest Redbox. Her freezer had broken but not fully so her landlord wouldn't consent to replace it, so it blew air just cold enough to keep her ice cream semi-firm. She had never received more paper cuts, stubbed toes or bumps on the head than she had since her depressive birthday disaster.

She had never felt quite as swallowed alive as she did now. Chicago had never felt specifically big; she had traveled and moved so much in her life that an expansive urban jungle could not intimidate her. However, suddenly as the numbers of her support circle dwindled back down to - her son - the city seemed to grow, filling with jagged angles and packed sidewalks too busy to find room for her. She had always been the immovable object that the unstoppable force could not jar, only now that force had shoved her out of place.

She didn't know if it was luck, Regina's departure or perhaps of her own making but everything was just – off.

Nervously Emma checked the time and sent Ruby a quick text,

"Missed the train. Covered in coffee. Be five late."

Ruby's response was as brisk as she had been with last two weeks,

"I have somewhere to go after you so hurry up. I can't give you extra time."
Emma rolled her eyes and shoved her phone into her pocket roughly; feeling the small sting Ruby's tone had expressly meant her to feel.

She groaned as she felt her pocket she had stitched up numerous times give and her phone slide through the pouch and into the pant leg of her skinny jeans.

Cursing, she began to jump in place, shaking her leg like a crazy person trying to work the device down to her ankle.

She pulled her phone from the tight space at her foot just as the recently arrived train's doors began to close. She shot an arm through the space and winced as the metal bounced off the skin. Oh, well, she was on the train.

Packed. Nowhere to sit. Of course.

She swore, tipping backward into the glass partition as the train launched her toward downtown.

She arrived at Ruby's doorstep still damp from the coffee and huffing, pleased she was only two minutes late instead of five. "Hey Red."

Eyes narrowed Ruby opened the door to her apartment, allowing Emma in.

"I'm sorry I'm late."

"Clearly you have a reason."

Emma sighed. She wasn't even sure she needed lessons anymore; with no distractions like dating and wanting to impress a particularly pretty deaf woman, Emma's understanding of the language had shot through the roof. Now she could hold standard conversations with her son easily. The problem was, she was fairly sure that outside of her ex-girlfriend there was little call for the language in her life, but she had continued forward out of stubborn animosity never forgetting the look on Regina's face as she challenged, go ahead, tell me about your day.

No, the entire reason she wanted to continue with her lessons was not necessarily because she was so interested in sign language. She just wanted the lessons because it was a good excuse to see her friend again. Perhaps if she tried hard enough, she could resurrect something of a friendship from the ashes. But how would that work if Ruby wouldn't let her guard down and stop being so damned angry with her?

God knew she needed it to work; she couldn't live life this alone.

She stood with Ruby in the middle of the living room for a moment, awkward and unsure.

"So, how do we-"

"Right." Ruby pulled two chairs from the corner and set them facing one another. "Do you remember where we were?"

The first lesson was all business. Every time that Emma tried to stray to more personal topics or, in fact, any topic at all that was not sign language Ruby's eyes would narrow again suspiciously, any professional courtesy leaving them.

The second lesson later that week consisted of Emma sitting in the chair, awkwardly, while Ruby explained more of the basics that Emma already knew.
She hated it.

One of the things Emma had loved best about her friendship with Ruby was they seemed to understand each other from the very beginning. There had never been a phase of awkwardness or discomfort. They had met and instantly become friends. She wanted that back.

"No, that's not the proper order." Ruby scolded, harsher these days than she had ever been before, "Try it again."

Emma let her tired hands fall, "Red, I hate this. Come on, we were never like this."

"Is that about Sign Language?" Ruby's sharp chin jutted through the air, accusing.

"Ruby!"

"Emma, I told you I'm not going to talk to you about Regina!"

"Fine! Let's talk about our friendship. I didn't do anything to you, so will you knock off the wronged woman routine?"

Ruby scoffed, her eyes dark, "you didn't do anything to me? You broke my best friend's heart! That affects me an awful lot."

"I wasn't trying to change her, Red! I was an idiot who got played by Cora because I'm a freaking idiot. I honestly thought that it would make her happy. Yeah also, I was not agreeing to the torture of helpless deaf children. I didn't even know about Cora's bitch of a gift until Regina told me."

The depression had finally evaporated after spending her birthday drowning in it - at long last; but that had only left a condensed layer of anger in its wake. She had made a mistake, yes, but what Regina had done – that was so much worse.

"Whatever, you're paying me to teach you Sign, let's just work."

"Fine!" Emma snapped back.

So they did – tensely - for two more lessons before Ruby exploded again.

"Why are you even here?" Ruby cried, exasperated. "Clearly you've been practicing. Is this just a game to you? Why are you paying me?"

"What? No! Why do you think I'm here?"

"I don't know!" Ruby all but shouted, "You tell me! What's wrong with you?"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa lady! I think you're talking about something else here now."

"Of course I'm talking about something else!" Ruby sat with a thud on the couch and glared at Emma.

Emma sighed, her head falling into her hands, a familiar pose for her life now "Look, do you want to get lunch? Can I buy you lunch? I promise not to get dumped by your best friend or conned by your best friend's mother until afterward."

Ruby thought about it for a long minute before sighing and agreeing.
"So, you're mad at me." Emma said, stuffing a few fries into her mouth. "I get it, everyone's mad at me. Regina's mad at me, you're mad at me, even Henry is still a little mad at me. I'm mad at me."

"Well, you're stupid." Emma glared at her friend, insulted. "You are. Emma Swan is stupid. That's just how this little story goes."

"Jesus, Ruby!" Emma put down her burger before she took a bite feeling the ever-present anger flicker, "Can you maybe for one minute think about what was happening on my side of things? I know she's your best friend but can you just freaking try? My girlfriend's mother, her mother Red, had come to me saying this was something that Regina really wanted – I thought I was good at catching people in a lie and I had heard my girlfriend repeatedly say how hard her life had been as a hearing impaired person. I wasn't trying to change her. I thought I was bringing her happiness – I thought I was bringing her something that she wanted - which was all I wanted. I didn't realize I would offend her so deeply. I didn't realize that her mother was a total scheming bitch. She totally fed me this story about wanting to give her daughter everything and about changing the way Regina saw her. I was an idiot for believing it but I wasn't trying to go behind her back, I was trying to surprise her! I didn't realize I was committing a terrible sin. Not until she threw me in the freaking trash, that is."

"Yeah, well it's your fault for listening to Cora. I think we made it pretty clear you couldn't do that. Besides clearly, Regina was right. You're Cora's lap dog! She's your benefactor now, what the hell, Em?"

"Hey! Cora is way more into that than I am. I don't need a freaking benefactor. I don't want one! I get plenty of work on my own but if I tell her to take a hike then she calls me ungrateful and I lose my Lyric audition."

"So clearly knowing that...you were aware she wasn't trustworthy and you still went ahead with it."

"Yes, I know now that she isn't trustworthy but no, at the time I didn't. I thought she was just some misunderstood Stepford mother who couldn't show her daughter she loved her, so instead was a jerk all of the time in some weird type of reverse psychology. I thought she was trying to do right by Regina. I don't know, it was stupid and idealistic but it should have been forgivable. You're so damn angry on her behalf but the thing is two of us got screwed, Henry and I. This could have been a three-second conversation that looked something like hey get this implant – no, my mom is a bitch and I don't want the implant. Oh, okay, I love you – I love you too. The end."

"I don't think you get to decide what Regina should forgive."

"I know that, of course, I know that."

"You know, you just don't get it!" Ruby cried in defense of her friend, "She literally is morally opposed to the damn implant, can't you see that? She thinks that just because someone is deaf it doesn't mean they need to be changed. Of course, if they want the implant then that's their choice and that's fine but no one, I mean no one, should be forced into getting it just so other people feel like they are normal and I completely agree with her."

"Ruby, I get it! I do! My point is more along the lines of maybe you should stop treating me as though I'm the worst person in the world. I made a mistake, yes, but she assumed she knew my intentions and my meaning and she way overreacted." Ruby pursed her lips but Emma could tell that Ruby couldn't argue so she softened her tone a little, "So. Can I ask the question yet? How is she?"
Ruby shrugged, avoiding eye contact, "She was a mess for a while but not as much of a mess as it seemed you were."

"Ouch, Red, thanks."

"Well, you're forgetting," she continued ignoring her "that Regina is very used to losing. Cora takes everything from her, if she can. I don't know if she means to but she does."

"I'm sure that's why she insisted that I take the Louisville audition if I wanted to take the Lyric one." Things like this had become abundantly clear over the past months.

"Probably." Ruby sat in silence for a few minutes thinking, "No one has ever really tried for Regina, you know? Tried to get to know her despite her disability, ever fought for her - even you, Emma."

"That's absolutely not true!"

"Oh come on, you barely signed. You know that's what the break up was mainly about, right? And I know that you knew a lot more than you let on, I saw you in our lessons but you never really took that extra step to show her that you were willing to meet her in the middle. Besides, you were leaving anyway. So she thought she was just expediting the process."

"I guess I sensed that she was just going to throw me away at the first real bump in the road. Just like everyone else always has." Emma ran her hands through her hair immediately feeling guilty for snapping at her friend, "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have bit, Red. I just – as much as Regina was hurt, I was also hurt. I keep saying this but I don't think you're getting it; she literally threw me in the trash. She never really let me explain what happened, she just saw red and threw me away. She literally didn't even let me speak as she was dumping me. This tornado of life crushing anger just kind of blew through and tossed me out the door. And while I suddenly have this fucking rep for never trying with her that isn't true. I made a mistake with Cora, I know, I let myself get under her thumb and I still haven't found a way out. But you know what; no one ever really tried with me either. No one has ever fought for me. No one besides Henry has ever loved me. You say that she is used to losing, the fact is that she didn't lose me. She got rid of me. I wasn't the one who didn't try, she was."

"But she was losing you. How can you throw away something that was already gone? You're leaving. She was going to lose you, plus she was going to lose Henry. Throwing a kid on top of it all just makes it so much worse. She loved him just as much as she loved you. As a matter of fact, why are you even still here?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Henry? Well, of course, she loved him. She painted the sunroom for him; I think she was going to ask you guys to move in."

"No, no, no," Emma waved her hand ignoring the kick in the gut Ruby's off-handed comment had landed, "what do you mean why am I still here?"

"Louisville. Doesn't it start soon? She made a comment the other day about how she's been waiting for your resignation but it hasn't come. I think she's starting to get pissed. It's kind of shitty of you to leave it until the last minute like this."

"Wait, Cora didn't tell you guys?"

"Tell us what?"

"I passed on the job months ago."
"What? You're kidding! Does Cora know that?"

"Of course she does! She's my benefactor." She let her face curl into a childish scowl as she said the last word. "God that woman drives me up the wall. Did you know I wasn't even going to take the Louisville audition? I had, like, no interest at all but Cora pretty much told me that I had no choice. I even all but told her it was Regina that made me want to stay where I was. I turned the job down months ago yet she still insists I'm going. She tells everyone! I almost lost my job because Mary heard I took it and started looking for a replacement to recommend to the board! She tells everyone I'm still going. She's up my ass always. She calls me every day. She even tells me what I should be practicing. It's like Regina never became a musician so she's substituting me in and trying to control me like she would have controlled Regina." Emma finished her tirade by letting her head fall onto her arms with a huff.

"That sounds like Cora. Though you better not let Regina find out that you're still seeing her mother."

"Funny. You're real funny, Lucas."

"You know what's fucked up?"

"What?"

"I've known Cora for a long time now and I've seen her with people she doesn't like. She's the total opposite."

"What, you mean she only does that shit if she likes you?"

Ruby shrugged, chewing on a fry but before she could answer their server reappeared at the table just in case their food wasn't exactly the way they liked it.

"I think she was hoping you would come after her," Ruby said after a pause, watching the server retreat. "You know as part of that no one has ever really fought for her thing."

"She threw me away," She said pointedly as if talking to someone incredibly slow. "Overreaction. Made a mistake."

Ruby shrugged, "that's just the vibe I got. I didn't say it was right or that it is even what she wanted. I just think she wanted to see if you would come after her."

"I did! I stalked her all of New Year's Eve."

"I know," Ruby smiled for the first time since they had sat down together, "she said you dipped her like Fred Astaire. She got all red and blushy when she told me."

"Not on purpose." Emma grinned, "It just kind of happened that way, wait what?"

Ruby just shrugged.

"Okay well, I call bullshit on her wanting me to fight. I did. I left it in her hands. She threw it away."

"God, stop saying that. I swear the two of you have your freaking break up mantras."

"Oh?" Emma studied a bird outside the window hoping at casual, "What's hers?"

Ruby groaned, "She never even tried. She's leaving anyway."
"God damn it, I did try! And I'm not fucking leaving! I have another year on my contract!"

Ruby shrugged blowing her off. "So you're not leaving huh?"

"No, I'm not leaving. Cora – has a huge mouth."

"Then can I see Henry?"

Emma debated it seriously; the vacant spot in Henry left by the absence of the two women was only just beginning to heal. What happened when Red dumped her again?

_He loses things just as much as Regina or I do. Every move. Every break up of mine. Every new job he loses something whether it's a person or a place._

"Listen to my audition pieces?"

"Deal."

They walked to the El in silence, taking a seat on the train the moment they could board.

"Do you miss her?"

Emma laughed, letting her head fall against the window, "all day, every day. But I'm pissed. Honestly, I don't think I would take her back even if she asked me to. She did something unforgivable too, Red. She walked out on us. I can't – I couldn't take that twice."

__________________________________________________________________________

Henry's face, when he saw Emma's companion, was priceless. Without a second thought, he flung his violin, which Emma had bought to replace the timepiece still living in the Mills mansion, onto the couch and threw himself on her. His little eyes squeezed closed in rapture as he hugged her tightly around the neck, "I missed you, Red, I missed you!"

He pulled back and looking behind her "Where's 'Gina?"

"She's not here, buddy," Emma said rubbing his back.

"Oh. Why?" His lip began trembling again, as it always did when he talked about Regina. The women exchanged guilty looks.

"But I am! I'm here!" Ruby cried trying to wipe away his sad face and hugged him again. He grinned and hugged her back.

She settled on the couch, Henry attached to her side. "So when is the audition?"

"Soon. Very fucking soon." was all she could get out of her suddenly sticky throat.

"You feel ready?"

"Depends on the day. I've been spending most of my time practicing. Cora has been forcing me to go to that stupid masseuse. Did I tell you that she had her show up at my apartment when I refused?"

"God that woman is a pain."
"Yeah but I have to say, I don't think there is such a thing as feeling ready but if were I would credit the masseuse."

She was halfway through her audition pieces when there was a loud knock on the front door.

"I'll get it!" Henry cried, launching himself at the door before Emma could protest, "It's August!"

August appeared in the living room with Henry plopped on his shoulders. "Well look who it is. It's the pretty little shot taker. Does this mean Regina's back?"

Emma shook her head, trying to ignore the battling emotions in her chest.

"All right, well how are you, pretty little shot taker?"

Ruby giggled.

Emma rolled her eyes.

It took three more lessons before Ruby was willing to go out for an evening of drinks with Emma and she was slightly suspicious that her finally giving in was more about August joining them than Ruby suddenly wanting to see Emma socially again.

"Regina would have my hide if she knew I was here."

"You're not allowed to spend time with me?"

"No, I don't think it's that. Regina just likes things –"

"Her way and she says I don't exist anymore."

"Right. You're getting better." Emma had taken to Regina's old trick, if words were coming out of her mouth, as halting and exhausting as it was; they were coming out of her hands too. It was humiliating when she made a mistake, which she did often, but she found that it wasn't actually as scary as she had thought it would be.

"Thanks. I still, I don't know, I can't get that rhythm that you have. I've been studying flashcards though trying to get all of the words down and Henry and I have been having no talk afternoons." Ruby's eyebrows arched and Emma just shrugged, "Good to have something to focus on that's not, you know, my life."

"You know if you had done all of this before you might still be with her."

Emma ignored her, not because she thought she was wrong but because the thought pissed her the hell off, not only in defense of herself but because she knew she was right. She had been scared to let loose and try. Perhaps she had been afraid if she was bad at the language she would lose the woman; plus it had been easy not to put herself out there with Regina's remarkable skill at getting by. Ironically she had lost her anyway.

"Oh, gee, I can guess what you two are talking about." August groaned as he slid into the booth, drinks for the table in hand.

"Sorry, we'll drop it." Emma huffed.

"No, no," August chuckled, "don't drop it, just do something about it, Ems."
Emma glared, "What would I do? Besides, I don't see her anymore. Ever."

Ruby chuckled to herself, "you will tomorrow."

"What?" her beer exploded out of one nostril and covered the table.

"Yeah, she has to go in for a meeting. Also," Ruby sipped her drink looking nervous, "I think she's meeting Robin there."
Chapter 29

Emma was in a bad mood. She had been in a bad mood all night and all day - and, you know what, she planned on being in a bad mood until the end of freaking time. She was the Grinch – screw that – she was Grumpy dwarf – it didn't matter, all that mattered was that if this damn barista didn't get her cup of coffee into her hand very freaking soon she was going to gnaw his freaking arm off with her bare freaking teeth.

She's moved on.

Her mind rattled in a high pitched mocking imitation of Ruby's voice.

That's what you're supposed to do, isn't it?

"Emma?"

"Thank you, geez!" Emma growled as she snatched the cup. Guilt flooded her immediately so she sighed and apologized, "Not your fault that I'm in a bad mood."

The young barista behind the counter just eyed her warily.

Three months. It had only been three months since we split up and Regina was already dating a Robin. A fucking Robin! Who the fuck was Robin? How is it she felt ready to date? I don't feel ready to date!

Ruby had clammed up as soon as she let the announcement slip. All she had gotten from her was that the relationship was new and that the notorious Robin was nice.

I'm fucking nice!

What was Emma supposed to do with this information? She would have paid a lot of money to go back twenty-four hours and not receive the little tidbit right before the big audition. Wasn't she enough of a wreck? Her stomach had been twisted in knots since she woke, knowing she had less than forty-eight hours until it was time. It was like the opposite of a Christmas morning joy.

She really just didn't want to think about this Robin. Hell, was there a way she could make it not be true? This Robin - this fucking Robin was dating her girl!
Okay so maybe she isn't my girl anymore but that's not the point. Hands freaking off! Go find something of your own instead of taking someone else's.

She was still grumbling when she crashed through the stage door catching August and Killian's eye immediately.

"What's with you, Swan?"

August just chuckled, knowingly.

"Shut up, August." Emma snapped moving to pass him but he caught her in a bear hug, lifting her off the ground easily despite her kicking legs and swinging arms. Emma felt like a preteen girl caught by her annoying older brother. "Putme-putmedowngoddamnit!" she cried, muffled against his chest.

"Her audition is the day after tomorrow," He explained to Killian making her glare all the harder. "No sightings yet," He whispered into her ear "but I did finally get Ruby to go out on a date with me."

"Oh?" This news was interesting enough to distract her.

"Yeah." He grinned a huge boyish grin, "It was great."

"Kiss?"

"Second base."

She punched him playfully in the arm, "Good job."

"Hey, Em." Ruby appeared at her arm, a huge grin planted on her face.

"Speak of the devil." August teased.

"Did you just call me the devil?"

Emma tried to smile at their playful banter but her stomach was too busy dropping. She felt her eyes involuntarily rake through the crowd but the perfectly brushed chocolate hair was not there.

"She isn't here yet."

It took Emma a while to realize they were talking to her, eyes continuing to scan the crowd. "Uh, sorry, what?"

"Emma!" Ruby groaned, "She's not here yet, I told you. Besides the meeting is upstairs, I doubt you'll see any of them."

"What? I wasn't – I uh - I have to warm up."

She did her best to concentrate but the task was nearly impossible when her emotions were rollercoastering back and forth from anger over the fact that she had moved on so soon, elation at seeing Regina for the first time in weeks and distaste for this evil Robin person.
"Twenty more hours. Twenty more hours and assuming Becca is free I am going to tie one on so hard it will become a legendary master of all of the I-just-saw-my-lover-with-her-new-lover slash post auditions drunks in all of Illinois – screw that in the world."

August clapped her on the shoulder, chuckling a bit, "Well, of course, you will, you'll be celebrating!"

She would have been touched by his sentiment if the words hadn't been exactly the type of thing all musicians say to a fellow musician about to walk into an audition comparable to a sand trap filled with broken glass and angry scorpions.

"She's deaf, August. She's fucking deaf."

"So?"

"So?" her voice squeaked, "So! How can I compare to that? They're from the same world! That's something I can never have in common with Regina."

"That's like saying a Parisian would only be happy dating another Parisian." Ruby scoffed, arm in arm as they walked.

"If both Parisians were deaf then yeah, that's exactly what I'm saying."

Ruby just rolled her eyes but punched her hard with a bony fist, "and you didn't sign again! What's wrong with you, why won't you sign?"

Emma cried out, batting the assailing fists away "I did a little bit! Besides, what's the point?" She had vowed on her couch the night of this last terrible birthday that if given the chance to sign to Regina again, she would no matter what, but that had been B.R. - Before Robin.

"Well, first off you looked like an idiot speaking through me when I know you can speak for yourself and second, clearly you still think you'll get her back since you're comparing yourself to her new date and you won't do that unless you fucking sign!"

"Oh shut up, Red. You know what I said to her? On New Year's, you know what I said? I said I wanted to kiss her every day for the next twelve months. How stupid is that? I would be dating too if my ex was that lame! God!"

"Maybe you should be." August shrugged, holding his hands up in defense before Emma turned on him, "I just mean, maybe that's the best thing you could be doing."

"I've thought about it."

"Well, even if you do you're never going to find someone that nice."

Emma couldn't argue, "Fuck, Robin was so god damned nice! What the hell is wrong with her?"
It had been the social gravitational pull that had brought Regina and Robin to Emma; not that Regina was necessarily willing or happy about it. Emma had been sitting on stage discussing her audition plans at great length and for the first time all night she wasn't thinking about the imminent appearance of Regina and Robin.

Ruby had slid up behind her, putting an arm around her shoulder. Emma smiled briefly, concentrating on August's meditation technique and wrapped an arm around her friend's waist. It was just so easy to be affectionate with Ruby; she gave it so freely – once she had forgiven her for being broken up with that is.

"So do you have this meditation on your iPod or do you get it from the Internet because I think the idea of meditating in the warm-up room at the audition is so much better than sitting and practicing all the crap you've been practicing for months. You either know it by then or you don't, right?"

"Right, right. Yeah, it's on my phone. I think it's short enough I can email it to you."

When the couple had finally appeared at the foot of the stage Emma's heart had clenched in her chest. It was a convulsion she had expected but it had been far more painful and frankly maddening than she had anticipated. For once her eyes did not sweep longingly to her former lover as they usually did, but instead to her former lover's new lover, the beautiful woman next to her with the perfectly straight chestnut hair, strong chiseled features and strangely soulful eyes. Emma had been torn immediately between hatred and the absolute want to chuck her cello directly at the woman's face – either way, it was a win/win in her mind. Trying not to pay attention Emma couldn't help but to notice they were arguing lightly.

"No," Regina signed, "let's just get going. Really, I have to insist."

"But I would love to meet everyone. We can invite them to join us at the bar! Please? I feel as though I've heard so much about so many of them. Which one is Killian? It has to be that one, right? He's the only one that could ever be called a hairpiece."

Emma laughed quietly into her hand.

"No really, I don't want to interrupt them, plus" Regina's eyes shot in Emma's direction "let's just get going, Ruby will meet us later. There is no need to invite them to join us. I'm sure they're busy."

Regina looked worried as Robin stared toward the stage; her hand rubbing at her stomach absentmindedly as if it pained her; a Regina Mills nervous tick.

If you don't want your current to meet the ex, Regina then you don't bring your current to the ex's work.

Emma was enjoying watching Regina struggle. She wasn't simply saying let's avoid Emma which meant that she hadn't told the woman about her. The thought was slightly cheering, surely if she had really moved on so completely then in full disclosure Regina would have spilled the information, right?

"You don't want me to meet your friends?" Robin's face fell into knowing concern.

"No!" Regina replied biting her lip, "It's not that. I can just tell they're going over the audition coming up and I don't want to interrupt. Plus they are hardly my friends they were more -." Regina looked flustered, "the only one up there that I've known for longer than a year socially is Ruby."
"Oh, don't be silly. They are clearly your friends! I've heard all the stories." Robin continued, "Your friends won't mind being interrupted and I'm sure they would love to come and have a drink."

Regina finally noticed Emma watching over her shoulder and glowered, hand still rubbing absently at her stomach.

Emma couldn't help herself, smirking she signed, "Something you ate, Regina?"

Regina's eyes narrowed, her face flushing. "Okay fine, let's go." Regina gestured that she would follow Robin up the stairs to the stage. Once at their side, Regina cleared her throat, mask thickly in place, "I apologize for interrupting. Ruby, we're going to the bar for a drink. Would you like to join us? The invitation is, of course, open to all of you."

"All of us?" Emma asked, dryly. "Oh! That sounds nice! Doesn't that sound nice, August?"

Regina glared at August, daring him to answer.

Emma fought to hide a smile, amused and pleased she was getting under Regina's skin so easily.

Call it a vindictive pleasure.

"Well, I know that I'm free. Anyone else?"

"By all means, Ms. Swan. Join us." Regina gave her a cold stare and Emma grinned.

The mention of Emma seemed to bring her to Robin's focus. She waved for Ruby to translate for her, "You must be Henry's mother! Emma, right?"

Emma's own jaw was not the only one to drop to the floor; it seemed each jaw hit with a collective thud including Regina's, "Um, yeah." She said stiffly taking the hand offered to her.

And you're the jerk sleeping with my woman. Hi, nice to meet you.

"He just looks so much like you, it was clear you're his mother. He has beautiful eyes, just like yours."

Did you just tell me I have beautiful eyes? Because Henry has my eyes - different color - but my eyes.

"Uh, not to be rude or anything but how the hell do you know what my son looks like?"

Robin's face flushed deeply at Emma's cool stare making Emma feel bad for just a moment, "The picture. In Regina's office?"

All eyes turned to Regina who bristled a bit under their gazes, arms folding over themselves
defensively as she glanced from side to side, "I just haven't gotten rid of it yet."

Robin frowned, confusedly but Emma beamed, smug satisfaction filling her chest. "I didn't know he was there at all."

*After three months, huh? Well, at least if I didn't make it Henry did.*

Regina pretended not to see her speak.

"Oh my goodness." Robin covered her face clearly embarrassed, "Should I not have said that?"

*Is she fucking kidding with this?*

Emma raised an eyebrow at Regina giving her a look that read clearly, really, Regina?

Regina's posture seemed to stiffen even further, "Anyway, this is August, Emma, and Killian." She still spoke Killian's name with sour venom. He rolled his eyes and walked back toward his bass grumbling about past wrongs. "And now that you've met everyone, Ruby?"

"Right. I will meet you there."

Regina nodded once and avoided Emma's gaze as she and Robin turned toward the back door.

"She still has a picture of Henry in her office?"

Ruby shrugged, "I think she misses – him."

Emma frowned, "There's a lot you're not telling me, Red."

She didn't like the way Ruby chuckled at that.

Turning back to August, the amusement of the situation drained and she was left with a sick empty and oh so lonely feeling.

She wanted a drink but now she knew she couldn't go to her favorite bar unless she wanted to watch Regina and Robin.

Twenty more hours.

She had planned on waking the next morning calm, cool and ready but her stomach had other plans for her. She woke from a vicious stress dream to find her stomach in knots. She had been playing and playing in her dream, trying to force the beautiful melody but the only sounds that came from her cello were awkward squawks and groans. The judges had run from the room screaming, their hands pressed firmly over their ears.
She groaned, wrapping her arms around her waist before dashing to the bathroom where she was violently ill.

Henry came around the corner looking surprised, a box of dry cereal clutched to his chest. "You sick, mommy?"

"No buddy," Emma smiled weakly, "I'll be okay. Go watch cartoons and I'll join you in a minute."

She was sure she wasn't sick. She washed her face and brushed her teeth then pulled on her most comfortable I don't feel good sweater.

She tried to settle into the cartoon with Henry but all of the negative thoughts she was trying to hold at bay kept kicking her hard in the soft spot of her temple. She stood pacing the length of the living room imagining herself stepping up on stage but instead of sitting as she was supposed to she tripped and fell flat on her cello - shattering it - ruining her chance at the audition and ending her career in one swoop. She imagined getting halfway through the first piece and forgetting everything that followed, her hands running dry. She imagined beginning, playing better than she ever had in her life until suddenly the strings sliced her finger open to the bone. She imagined every possible and unlikely version of failing over and over again, tormenting herself.

She rushed to the bathroom and was sick again.

At some point in the day she thought she would be drained, her fear eliminated or, at least, reaching its highest peak but it never seemed to happen. She had never taken an audition this big, where the odds were stacked so perfectly against her.

It's because the odds aren't stacked against me. That's the problem. If I knew that there was no chance in hell of winning then I wouldn't be nervous – but there is a chance.

She rushed back to the bathroom.

The only time she stopped getting nervously sick was when she spent the hour of Henry's naptime trying out August meditation. It worked well until Mary called to sweetly wish her luck, reminding her of just how big of a deal the situation was.

As the afternoon wore on she couldn't help but to think about the plans she and Regina had previously planned for this day. They had agreed that distraction was the best plan, a day trip maybe.

Wouldn't that be nice?

Around dusk, she heard someone knock forcefully on the door. Sweaty hair pulled back into a tight ponytail, her cheeks were sallow and she was on her fourth Smart Water of the day.

August stood behind the door carrying a take-out bag and looking stunned as she adjusted back and forth from one foot to the other, "You look like shit, Swan."

"Thanks, August."
"You all right?" he scooped up Henry who giggled at the man's scratchy face.

"Mama throwd up."

"What? You sick?"

"No."

"Worried about tomorrow?"

"No," she choked and rushed back to the bathroom.

"Don't do this to yourself!"

"Shut up, August!"

She had planned on kicking him out but his unannounced appearance was actually a blessing in disguise. He made her laugh. He force fed her Chinese food and then kept her giggling so she would keep it down. Then after helping to put Henry to bed, he forced her into bed as well.

"There is no reason to be nervous. Just see it as a growing opportunity. You got this, stop worrying."

Emma scoffed, "Easy for you to say."
Chapter 30

She woke up the next morning feeling exactly the opposite of how she had felt the day before. She was slightly thirsty after the excursions of the previous day but she was thankful to find she was calm, she was cool and she was ready to do this.

It was a professional habit. Lose your shit the day before but keep it together when it came down to it and she was nothing if not a pro.

Win or lose, let's do this. At least by this time tomorrow it will be freaking over and I can move on with my life.

She didn't say much throughout breakfast and Henry seemed to understand. Emma kissed his cheek; happy her audition time was early and headed out the door as soon as Becca arrived on her welcome mat.

She got the audition space forty-five minutes before her actual audition time of 10 A.M. and headed straight to the check-in desk.

"Name?"

"Swan."

"Okay Miss Swan, here is your preliminary list and you are in room 3C, down the hall. Door three on your left."

She nodded; her nerves set and followed the volunteer to the small green room. The noise of the room was a physical force strong enough to knock her clean off her feet. Emma had learned there were two types of people at all auditions. First was the type to sit back, perhaps practice casually but mostly they just tried to enjoy the experience. The second type was the people who sat in corners, glaring at anyone who dared to interrupt them. They spent their time practicing the music they had been given frantically, perhaps scratching notes in their panic, eyes growing wilder each time it happened.

She recognized a number of faces in the crowd. It was typical to run into one or two people you knew at any given audition but she had never been the talkative type once nerves hit, so she didn't bother to greet them; she never had before.

She found a corner that was perhaps a little less chaotic than the others and put her headphones in. She would practice only enough to warm her muscles and then it was time for August's meditations.

Her hands flowed smoothly over the cello strings, allowing muscle memory to take over as Emma listened to the loud rock and roll blaring in her ears. She hummed, her head bopping as she tried to lose herself, earning her a glare from many around her. Her plan worked perfectly though and she was too busy listening to Joan Jett swear she didn't give a damn about her bad reputation to notice the daggers being flung at her.

She couldn't help, however, catching her breath for just a second as the personnel manager appeared in the doorway, summoning the first few people into their private practice rooms before their
audition. The whole room collectively held their breath to see if it was their turn and then released it, returning to their activities when their number was not called.

Emma's nerves only flared their ugly head once when the tall balding man appeared in the doorway shouting over the cacophony, "Hart, Swan, Carter and Thomas please."

Her stomach and her head swam as one. She stood quickly, worried about the need to be sick again.

No, Swan! No!

She swallowed the nerves and followed the man to her individual little room.

"Okay. Made it this far. I got this." Emma played quickly through the music the audition committee would ask for once, then closed her eyes, putting on August guided meditation and taking long deep breaths.

The knock on the door roused her. She had clearly relaxed so thoroughly she had drifted off.

"We're on the person ahead of you, Ms. Swan."

"Right. Yeah, okay."

She packed up her belongings and continued her deep breathing, mind zeroing in on the task ahead with a nervous tremor. She could do this. She was a badass. Henry had always insisted she was a rock star and right now she needed to believe it. She could do this! Her mind roared in a tribal war cry as she bounced on the balls of her feet, pumping herself up.

The personnel manager appeared at her door again with a professionally blank smile and led her to the stage door. Again, her nerves fought to free themselves from the cage she had shoved them in but she had locked them away too well. They were her prisoner.

"Number forty-eight?" A small woman just inside the stage door asked. She knew from habit that this was the union representative; there to be sure the audition was run fairly and without any bias.

"Yeah." She shook her hand but was distracted by the typical audition set up. The large partition was pulled up over the gigantic but bare stage of the Civic Opera House; the permanent home of her dream job. On her side of the partition was a small stand for her music and a single chair to sit in. This was typical. To avoid any bias or judgments on anything other than the music played most auditions were behind partitions or screens until the final round.

The sight of the empty stage sent a course of adrenaline through her blood stream, hardening her to the core.

Badass extraordinaire. I got this.

With a stiff nod to the union representative, she walked to her seat and settled in as best as she could.

"Candidate number forty-eight." The representative behind her called to the unseen committee and
gave her a nod.

"Right," She whispered.

She played a few notes, listening to the sound of the hall. It was bliss and it was terrifying. She had always been told the acoustics of this hall were some of the best in the world.

Taking a final deep breath, she closed her mind to all the possible nagging worry and began to play.

It wasn't perfect, not by any means but she let herself sway as she got into the music, waiting for the moment someone would stop her; only no one did. She played through each required piece, breathing perhaps a bit shallowly and when she was through stopped awkwardly. Had she ever been to an audition where they let her play the whole list? Was that a very good sign or a very bad?

She heard a few papers rustle behind the partition and a quick, "Thank you."

The union representative was at her elbow then, smiling the same smile that would be used for the very best player to the very worst. It was unreadable. "If you could return to the green room. Thank you."


She opted instead of continuing to practice to slip her headphones back on, watching a silly comedy on Netflix.

Still, her nerves were starting to get the best of her again when the personnel manager finally appeared at the door.

He cleared his throat but there had been no need, the moment he had arrived the room had fallen instantly silent as death.

"The Lyric Opera company," he began, "would like to extend a large thank you to each and everyone one of you for being here today. Of course as musicians ourselves we know how strenuous an audition can be, not to mention the time commitment involved. For those of you who advanced to the second round congratulations and for those who did not, we wish you better luck next time." He paused taking a deep breath as if he were the bundle of nerves and driving the room at large crazy, "All right," The room held their breath, "if your number is called please remain here, if not, you are free to go. Two, five, sixteen, twenty-seven, thirty-three, forty-eight, fifty-two"

Emma gasped when she heard the number that had replaced her name for the day, ignoring the rest of the numbers called. She jumped to her feet; bouncing and stretching like a boxer.

Okay. Okay, okay, okay, made it.

"A short lunch break will be taken now for the committee as well as yourselves. Please be back in this room at a quarter to one."

Emma stared at the man as if he were kidding.

Food? The last freaking thing I want is food. Are you freaking kidding me?
Despite the fact that this break was routine she was always surprised by it.

She ignored the grumbles and moans of the people around her either packing their belongings or shuffling around debating what to do during their break.

"Did they call your number?" a small plain woman asked when Emma didn't leave like the majority of the group.

"Oh, uh, yeah. It did."

"Mine too. Are you going to go eat?"

"I don't know. I'm not really hungry."

"No, I'm not either but the break isn't really for us, is it? It's for the judges."

"Yeah, though I would rather have a judge with a full belly then a grumpy empty one."

The woman giggled, "I suppose I would have to say I agree. I can never decide if I should eat during the break or not. I'm never hungry but you know if you don't then by three you'll be starving."

"Exactly." Emma chuckled and offered her hand, "Emma."

"Keegan. What about a light snack and maybe a granola bar for later?"

"That's kind of what I was thinking, you want to join me?"

"Please."

It was always good to find an audition buddy; someone putting him or herself through the same torment as you, all for the sake of a possible long term contract. It helped to break up the stresses of the day and though Emma rarely indulged she was glad for it today.

They walked to a nearby bistro in courteous small talk, "Yeah I'm local." Emma shrugged, "but to be fair only recently. I'm new with a chamber group here. Where are you located?"

"New Orleans."

"Whoa." It never ceased to shock Emma how far people would travel for an audition, especially a good one. "That's one of the few places I haven't been. Do you like it?"

It helped the nerves to talk to someone, even if that someone would be out of your life by the following day.

They ordered a small amount of food for now and a small amount of food for later just in case they were to advance to the final round.

Emma laughed as she and Keegan left the bistro, Keegan quietly stopping at a table to toss a little salt over her left shoulder. "Good to see the stereotypes of people in New Orleans are true."

Keegan laughed, "Buying food you will only need if you advance to the final round doesn't feel like a jinx to you?"

Emma frowned, now that the thought was in her head she knew she wouldn't get rid of it. She went
back inside and shook the salt over her shoulder making her companion giggle behind cupped hands.

It was another two hours before the personnel manager entered the room again looking stuffed and happy from his large lunch while everyone in the room looked a little worse for wear. "All right everyone, thank you for your patience. We are ready to begin the second round. Will numbers forty-eight, twenty-three, and seven follow me, please?"

Emma's heart leapt, "Shit, that's me."

"Break a leg!" Keegan smiled, "I'm sure the salt will do you some good!"

Emma smirked and silently hoped that if she did advance again then Keegan would too. She liked the woman. Granted, Keegan looked like a frumpy schoolteacher but that didn't surprise Emma; the cello often attracted women who needed a little sin in their life.

Emma was back in her individual practice room but this time there was no falling asleep. She didn't pace as she wanted to but there was no staying entirely calm either. She sat in her chair focused entirely on a small crack next to the floor and just forced herself to breathe, in and out, in and out slowly and steadily.

"Ms. Swan, we are on the person before you."

"Okay."

Again she was walked out a few minutes later to the gigantic but partitioned stage. Again the union representative announced her number and again she played a few notes, adjusting.

She couldn't have been prouder of herself if she tried as she closed the last note. There was no such thing as a perfect performance, it wasn't possible but Emma had almost achieved it. Her sound had been smooth, the melodies falling from her fingertips as if by magic. Her heart was pounding and for once it was not because she was afraid.

"Number forty-eight, could you play that second piece over again please but, this time, a bit softer."

Emma obliged and when she was ushered from the stage again she was practically skipping.

_Holy crap, holy, crap, holy crap!_

She knew she had advanced before her number was even called an hour and a half later. She didn't cheer or swoon as a few others did, just nodded determined and ready for the final round wishing it would hurry up before she lost this killer edge she was riding.

Next to her Keegan frowned.

"Did they cut you?"

"Yeah."

"What? But the salt!"
"Clearly it worked for you!" Keegan smiled a truly genuine smile and winked. Emma felt guilty as she watched the woman go, sad to know her companion would not progress with her. This was just how it worked. It was cut throat, bloody and there were no apologies. She waved sadly as Keegan left the room hoping they would meet at an audition again.

*One more round. One more. Let's freaking do this!*

This time, she was sure she was going to vomit. There was no doubt about it and there was no stopping it. The disgusting part was when she rushed to the bathroom she was not the only one in it.

She avoided eye contact with the person at the sink when she relieved herself of the stall, washing her face and hands. "Some job, huh?"

The woman laughed with only a touch of bitterness to her voice, "Yeah, some job."

She had more time in her warm-up room than the last two rounds. She took full advantage practicing the music for the last round diligently, ignoring the cellos in other rooms that were doing the same.

What if it turns out I know someone on the committee? It's totally possible that Gold or Cora will be there. Will they cut me to avoid nepotism? Will I get nervous and play worse?

She chuckled miserably at the thought of Cora's chocolate eyes burrowing into her; those evil expectant chocolate eyes so much like Regina's.

*Oh god, Regina! She couldn't be here… could she? No! No, no! You are not going there. Don't even think about it!*

But her mind did without her permission. She thought of the many ways that set of chocolate eyes had flashed to her. She didn't allow herself to indulge in if-I-win thoughts; that would require more salt over her shoulder. Still she couldn't help but to wish that if she won she could find the courage to smack some sense into Regina. Fate would clearly be on her side, right? She imagined what the day would look like if she won the job of her dreams, stability, a salary that would put most to shame as well as the heart and forgiveness of her former love. It was all too much; would she even be able to handle that? If that day happened unicorns would also, of course, fall from the sky and hell would have inevitably frozen over. Shops would be handing out free ice cream and Robin would be shot from the planet to Jupiter where she would – of course, live a full happy life – far away from Regina.

"Ms. Swan we're on the person before you."

"What?" she cried, nearly dropping her cello. She had been daydreaming instead of practicing.

*Shit!*

Heart pounding she stood, readying her cello and following the personnel manager, wanting to run
for the hills.

_Come on, come on, where's your confidence? You've only thrown up once today. It's been like seven hours of this, don't give in to your nerves now._

Her mind ground to a stop as she wondered again if she would find Regina's eyes at the audition table, that dark familiar gaze burrowing into her, judging her – deeming her worthiness.

Nausea washed through her and before she could stop herself she lunged for the small garbage can ahead of them and was sick yet again.

Swearing and wishing she could be anywhere but there, her eyes stinging with watery humiliation, "I'm so sorry."

He had jumped when she had rushed for the garbage but now he just bit back a smile, "It's quite all right. To tell you the truth, it has happened before."

"That doesn't make me feel better."

They stood at the stage door both awkwardly unsure. "Are you ready?"

Emma cleared her throat and nodded slightly.

"Okay. Good luck."

The door swept open with a crash and Emma stepped inside the massive hall.

The house was easily quadruple the size of the hall where Emma normally worked. She knew of its grandeur, of course, but suddenly seeing the image from the side of the stage, the small group of people dwarfed amongst the seats she wasn't so sure she wanted the job anyway, not if this was how many people she would be playing for each night.

_Pressure. Too much pressure._

"Emma Swan?" The man at the table asked.

Emma jumped; she had frozen a foot into the room. "I'm sorry. Number forty-eight, Emma Swan."

"Take a seat please, Ms. Swan."

She nodded, breathing only slightly easier now she had seen that no familiar faces lingered amongst the strangers. She did, however, recognize the principal cellist for the opera company, which made her stomach somersault.

She sat, stiffly trying to relax.

"Ms. Swan we would like you to begin with-" the man rattled off the piece in perfect Italian and Emma nodded.
She slowly let her bow rest on her strings amping herself as much as possible but couldn't. "I'm sorry, can I have a second?"

"Take your time."

She stretched taking a few deep breaths and shaking her head gruffly.

_You've already made it to the finals. You're a badass. Everyone will think you're a badass, no one will even notice that you didn't win. Just doing what you did is a huge deal so relax and play! Have fun, Emma. Just have fun._

She thanked them again and, this time, resting her bow to the string she began to play. The first piece – she almost walked out after she played it- she clipped two notes as her hands shook with nerves.

_Two notes! You might as well give up now._

The committee asked her to try it again and though she knew she played it well the second time around it didn't matter. She was screwed.

They named the second piece and she played it quickly and efficiently, complying when the people behind the table, scribbling notes, asked her to play something again quicker or louder.

"Okay the last thing we would like you to do is play through that piece again with Elena."

The principal cellist nodded and stood, pulling her cello onstage with her. Emma watched her approach mournfully wishing this all could just be over and she could go home to Henry and her life.

She was surprised though how fun it was to play with the woman. It was like driving a highly tuned race car. They flowed together, bending and twisting with the curves of the music anticipating one another and meeting easily in the middle. Though Emma knew she hadn't won the audition she was smiling when they dropped their bow arms, "That was fun."

Elena laughed.

"Thank you." The man said just as blankly as the last two times from the audience.

Emma sighed deeply, resigned and shook Elena's hand.

She considered simply leaving, that drink she had been waiting for calling her name but it was only 5:03, August would only just be beginning the W.C.C.G. rehearsal and Ruby would still most likely be required by Regina until much later so she paced. She paced for a full hour never stopping, never dropping her nervous fingers from her lips.

_What if it's that guy who wins? He seems like a total tool. EW. Or her, she keeps checking her makeup in the mirror. Does she think that will help her case?_
She didn't feel nauseous for the first time in twenty-four hours when the personnel manager entered the room again, simply ready to be done with the day.

*Ten bucks the winner is the tool.*

"Again, we want to thank you for spending your day with us at Lyric. I know you are all very anxious so I will get right down to it. The runner-up today is Mr. Matthew Vargus. Matthew?"

The tool's face set. It was a huge honor to win runner up at an audition such as this, it opened so many professional doors but of course, runner-up was not the winner. Emma frowned, surprised by her dejection as she clapped politely. She had been hoping that by some miracle she would, at least, be runner up but no luck. She slung her packed cello over her shoulder hovering by the door. She pulled her phone out of her tight back pocket and text August that she would be able to make it for the second half of rehearsal if Mary still wanted her to.

"And the winner of today's audition is" the five people still waiting held their breath in sync, "Ms. Emma Swan."

Emma's phone hit the floor with a crunch that reverberated through the room.

*That's me, right? Emma Swan? That name sounds familiar. I can swear I have heard it before.*

The people around her clapped politely for a second, a few slapping her companionably on the back but Emma just stared around.

"Me?"

"Number forty-eight. The woman who vomits."

"Holy fucking shit."
Chapter 31

She entered the stage door for her usual evening rehearsal, her heart still beating hard in her ears.

Would they know? How quickly did word travel?

She pulled out her cello unsure if her nerves would allow her to play anything but disjointed scratches.

The moment she stepped on stage, the room exploded. Someone took her cello from her carrying it to safety while arms wrapped around her, people clapping and cheering.

"You did it! I knew you would do it!" She heard August yelling from the back of the crowd, his head bobbing over the others, disappearing and reappearing again as he jumped up and down.

She had kept all her energy inside since the moment her name had been called, refusing to do the yelling, singing, shouting that her body wanted to do but now, there in front of her friend she screamed, jumping up and down and launching herself into his arms. He laughed spinning her in the air, "I'm so proud of you! Congratulations!"

"How do you feel, Miss. Newest-member-of-the-Lyric-Opera-Company?" Mary asked grinning from ear to ear with a small kind pat on her shoulder.

"Dizzy!" Emma admitted, "I can't believe it."

"Oh, Swan." August clapped her hard enough on the shoulder to launch her a foot forward, "We are getting so, so, so drunk tonight."

Emma just grinned, ready.

"A shot of whiskey for the lady!" August cried the moment they walked into the bar. The bartender scowled. Apparently he hadn't forgotten that they were part of the group that got thrown out all of those months ago. "We're celebrating?" He tried as if that might make up for his boisterous voice.

"Oh yeah? Celebrating what?"

August told him, his arm clamped proudly around Emma's waist.

"You did huh?" The bartender looked slightly impressed as he poured her a shot of what happened to be Emma's favorite whiskey, "Here, this one is on the house, lady."

She thanked him and together she and August took their first shots.

Ruby announced herself a few minutes later by screeching like a banshee in excitement. All heads snapped toward her startled, but she didn't notice. She was too busy wrapping herself around Emma's back like a sloth, "I can't believe it, I can't believe it! You're staying! You're staying forever and ever!"

August smiled guiltily at the bartender, "Can I just tip you now so you don't throw us out again tonight?"

"I'll pitch in for that." Emma agreed reaching for her wallet but August slapped her hand away, "your money is no good here tonight, Swan. You can take us all out after your first big concert."
Shots and drinks seemed to appear from every direction that night, first August and then Ruby, only to be followed by August again and then a line of near strangers pitched in. Mary appeared at the bar with a shot for herself and Emma. "We're sad to see you go!" she wailed after they took it, throats burning. Even Killian stopped in for a minute to smile a genuine smile and hand her another shot and some congratulations, diplomatically.

Emma couldn't have stayed sober that night if she wanted to. Her booth felt like the most popular table at the high school prom, people approaching steadily to offer their congratulations and the occasional drink.

"I can buy a house!" Emma cried, the thought triumphantly occurring to her, "I should buy a house! Do you have any idea how long I've wanted a house?"

"How long?" Ruby asked, her tongue chasing the ever-moving straw around the cup.

Emma held the straw for her and Ruby grinned at her before slurping loudly, "Since I was six! Since I was six, I've wanted a house that stays put - in one place - in one city. I can give Henry that!"

August sniggered, "As opposed to houses that don't stay put?"

"Wait, should I buy a house? Is that something people still do? Condos? Is it all about condos now?"

"I don't know, Swan. Then you might have to stay put."

"Hey! I can stay put with the best of them!"

Emma gasped sinking down in her seat as if someone had just lobbed something very heavy at her head. Reflexively August straightened, head jerking around looking for the danger. Ruby dived half under the table, eyes poking from just above the surface in alarm.

"What? What?" Ruby cried, her words falling in an awkward drunken jumble.

"It's the Evil Queen!" Emma hissed, trying to steady herself as gravity pulled her toward the seat of the booth.

"What?"

Emma's chin jerked toward the couple ten feet away being sat at a table.

"Ooooh." August nodded slowly, disjointedly understanding.

"Regina!" Ruby cried waving, habitually happy to see her best friend.

"What? Don't call her!" Emma hissed, coming up only to shove Ruby before diving again, hiding.

"Oh right." Ruby scowled, "I forgot. God, this is annoying!"

Emma watched Regina settle primly across from Robin hating the light smile on the woman's face.

*It's clearly not a day of wishes being granted because Robin is still here and not on her way to Jupiter.*
Robin looked around for a server while Regina read the menu and Emma again considered throwing something at the back of Robin's head.

*She wouldn't know it was me!*

She had a wadded ball of napkins in her hand ready but their server interrupted her, "Can I get anything else for you guys?" The server glared a fake smile down at them, the smile of anyone who has to deal with unruly groups of drunkards on a regular basis.

"Oh!" She dropped the wad, a better idea popping instantly into her mind, "another round for us and you see that stupid beautiful brunette over there."

"Uh, ma'am?"

"Send her a very dirty gin martini, please."

"Ma'am."

Ruby's eyes were huge lamp like globes, "she's going to be so pissed. You're calling her out!"

Emma smirked, smugly. She had loved getting under Regina's skin the other night. Let's hope she could do it again – and maybe again.

"God Ems," August slurred, watching Regina and Robin as they spoke lightly to one another. "That language is scary. How did you ever learn it?"

"I didn't!" Emma cheered, perhaps a little too loudly, "Or at least I didn't according to Regina." She sang her name in a drunken sing-song. "That was the issue, right Red?"

Ruby scowled again, "I don't know. She's had a different reason every time I ask her."

"Though!" Emma cut across her, "For someone who didn't learn it, I can sure speak a whole freaking lot of it."

"That's right, you can! So why don't you show her?" Ruby cried in defense of her best friend, trying to smack her arm. She missed and instead slapped Emma hard in the temple.

"Ow! No more for you, lady!"

Ruby just giggled.

Emma watched as a server carried over one cool dripping martini glass to the table ten feet away, a grin already spreading on her face in anticipation. The server handed the drink to Regina, not bothering to spare her a look before rushing off to his next task.

Emma could read the conversation that commenced easily.

"When did you order?" Emma didn't need to see Robin's face to see that ordering without her perturbed the woman.
"I didn't." Regina's eyebrows pulled together.

"What is it?"

Regina took a sip and her confusion grew, "Dirty martini."

"Gin?"

"Yes. Do I come here so often that they know my order by heart now?"

Regina began to look around for the server confused. Chocolate fell on Jade and understanding of the drinks origins hit her instantly. Emma raised an eyebrow at the woman; letting her eyes darken, intensifying into a knowing gaze. It was the look that had always been able to send her lover from across the room, scrambling for the buttons of Emma's pants. She held Regina's shocked eyes for a moment and then purposely broke contact turning back to August.

"What's she doing? What's she doing?" she whispered frantically, barely moving her mouth.

"I think she's trying to decide if she should drink it or throw it in your face," August whispered back his entire body turning to wood as though Regina would know what he was saying if any part of him moved at all. "Oh shit, she's getting up. Run, Ems, run!"

"Look, Red – Red!" Emma jerked Ruby's chin toward hers, her face a breath from Ruby's but neither woman noticed, "Don't let me get up. You hear me? Do not let me get up. I am drunk and I will make bad decisions. Decisions that lead to public humiliation. Decisions that might lead to me throwing a shaker of salt at Robin's head."

Ruby's face set in determination, "Right" her arms went tightly around Emma, clutching her to her side and Emma gave her a quick peck of thanks.

"Right. Good."

"It seems you two are together every time I turn my back these days." Regina raised an eyebrow but Emma simply looked up at her from under her lashes, her gaze still dark.

"Ms. Swan." Regina's eyes danced, looking murderously at Ruby for a moment as if she had betrayed her by being there with her ex-lover.

"Ms. Mills. How are you?"

Regina's eyes narrowed at the look in Emma's eyes but a flush passed over her cheeks and chest. Emma knew, whether Regina wanted her to know or not, that the flush meant Regina's panties were growing damp. The thought only made Emma's eyes darken further, her skin itching at the base of her spine, triumphantly. "I hear congratulations are in order."

"How did you hear that?" August asked loudly.

Emma rolled her eyes, "how do you think? Her mother has probably called half the city by now."

Regina stiffly inclined her head in consent.

"Well thank you for the congratulations, Regina." Emma nodded tightly, her eyes narrowing in challenge.
"I guess this means you'll be staying in Chicago then."

Emma sighed deeply, finally dropping the scorching look in favor of one of exasperation, "I declined the Louisville job months ago. Your mother knew that, Regina, which means you knew that months ago."

Surprise slipped under the mask for the barest of flashes, "Actually yes, I did."

"You didn't tell me!" Ruby cried, belligerently.

Regina ignored her, staring at Emma with the drink still in hand, clearly debating saying something that was on her mind. Her eyes cleared as she decided against it. Instead, with a polite professional smile, she leaned slightly on the table almost threateningly, meeting Emma's challenging stare head on. Emma's heart picked up pace remembering all the times the aggressive move lead to a quick hungry thrust of her tongue into Emma's mouth. "Don't forget to give Becca her drunk tip tonight."

Fury ripped through Emma like a plague and she jerked out of Ruby's arms to sit up straight, "you don't get to remind me of things like that Regina, you're not helping me raise Henry anymore, remember secret picture keeper?"

Regina had been turning away but she knew she had understood all of it by the slight pause of her former lover. Emma scowled at her, "You take it down yet?"

Regina glowered, her arms folding again, "Of course."

She turned, not bothering with their table any longer and hips swaying more than Emma was sure she could handle; she returned to her date, sipping the drink as she went.

"Damn that was cold, Swan!" August hooted rowdily, thoroughly amused.

Emma shrugged frostily, "she dumped us."

Ruby pulled her close again, "Oh well, her loss. You'll be my Emma now!"

"The picture really gone?"

Ruby snorted into her drink making it splash over the sides, "It wasn't this afternoon."

Though the celebration was in her honor the three-minute long confrontation with Regina had sobered her greatly. She had lost her party mood so, much to her disappointment, by the end of the evening it was Emma who was helping a giggling couldn't stand on her own two feet Ruby out of the bar instead of the other way around.

"No, no, no!" Ruby cried, clinging to Emma's neck. They were outside of the bar in the early A.M., Emma clutching desperately to the woman, as she swung back and forth. She was so drunk that she seemed to forget that August couldn't read sign language, which she was speaking exclusively "I don't want to go home."

"Rubes, you kind of have to."

"Let me come home with you!"

August laughed, always in a good mood, "I don't know what she's saying but her saying it is sexy as
Ruby scrunched her nose up like a bunny at his comment and blew him a sloppy kiss.

"Yeah, she doesn't want to go home to an empty apartment which - trust me - I get it. But we're good August, I got her."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, totally."

He hugged them both, kissing Ruby's cheek and headed off toward the El, wobbling a bit as he went - a sure sign of a good night.

"Okay, Red. Do me a favor and try to stand up." She pulled the drunken woman tighter against her, making Ruby giggle and squirm as if she were getting tickled. Tall heels hit the cobblestone of the bars entrance behind them and she knew without looking that she had an ex-girlfriend audience. She could feel Regina's hands flying as she said goodnight to her obnoxiously sweet date.

Emma had known Regina's evening was winding down; she hadn't been able to keep her eyes off of the new couple. She had been fascinated to see that while they shared numerous drinks together and a small amount of food, Regina's professional mask never slipped away.

"Okay, Red," she hummed, "I guess let's get you to my place."

Ruby's eyes glazed for a minute and Emma frowned, "No, no, I know that look. No, no, Ruby, don't you dare! Ruby look at me." She held her chin firmly in her grasp, holding the woman's unfocused eyes, "No, you are not going to puke. You hear me? You are not going to puke. We will never get all the way back to my place if you start puking!"

Ruby nodded as if readying herself for war but then sprinted to the trashcan and was violently ill.

"God damn it!" Emma stomped in place for a moment before she pulled Ruby, who was hanging off the side of the trashcan for dear life, to her feet and tied her hair back into a bun, rubbing her back as she was sick again.

"Well, I have to say, Ms. Swan, I'm glad I got out before this became my fate."

"Oh yes, Regina, because I have complete control over how much Ruby has to drink. Somehow this is my fault." Ruby groaned and Emma pulled her back to her, "Can I help you with something?"

"It would seem you are the one who needs help."

"We're just heading back to my place."

Regina scowled, "Yes, I suppose you would like to be alone."

Emma rolled her eyes obnoxiously, "What is that some type of martyr crap? What the hell, Regina."

Ruby was sick again.

"Well, whatever your plans were, give her to me. I can take her to my loft. It's closer."

"Regina-"

"Don't be incompetent, Emma. Let's go."
She wanted to snarl at the woman but knew she was right. She wasn't going to get a sick Ruby all the way back to her apartment easily. Carefully, she took her arm from around her neck and wrapped it around Regina's, doing her best to ignore the shock of her fingertips accidentally tracing Regina's soft skin. Smoothing the little bit of hair from Ruby's eyes with affection, she did her best to catch her barely conscious attention, "Red, you're going to go home with Regina, all right?"

Regina growled under her breath.

Confused Ruby looked around as if trying to find Regina and grinned foolishly when she did, "Regina! When did you get here?"

Regina chuckled, turning her face away from the stink of Ruby's breath. "Right, uh, thanks." Emma shifted, hands in her pocket.

Regina nodded slightly and turned to head back toward her apartment. They made it a few feet before Ruby threw them back around, signing sloppily, "wait, where's my Emma?"

"Your Emma?" Regina asked, sharply.

"Yeah, she told me I could keep her since you dumped her." "Oh my god, Ruby, shut up." Emma pinched the bridge of her nose.

"Emma!" Ruby yelled launching away from Regina and stumbling to her knees, her heels twisting on the cobblestone.

Emma swore, glaring at Regina as she pulled her back, "Are you sure you can handle her? Because it doesn't seem like you can."

"Of course." Regina gritted her teeth, trying to hold a once again slipping Ruby.

"Uh, maybe I better help you."

Regina snarled, "If you must."

They walked in silence, tense and resentful. Had it really been just a few hours ago that Emma had been daringly giving this woman the look that used to make her bones quake? Now she wanted to get as far away from her as possible, suddenly sick and tired of missing her, of wanting her.

Entering Regina's apartment again sent a painful wave of nostalgia through her. Vanilla, Chanel No. 5 and something spicy.

"Henr – I mean, guest room?"

Regina nodded, heading toward the kitchen while Emma dragged the woman into the room that had formally been her son's.

The sight of the room hit her like a ton of bricks. The blue and red slashed through her almost as sharply as the small perfectly folded stack of little boy clothes that sat abandoned on the dresser.

"All right Red," she tossed the woman on her back and began pulling her disgusting clothes off, "we're going to get you undressed and in bed."

"Mmmhumph." Ruby sighed.
The soft pat of feet on the wood let Emma know Regina was back but the small gasp and growl was what surprised her. She knew it was because Emma had Ruby nearly down to her underwear but she chose to ignore her. If Ruby were sober she wouldn't care in the least that Emma was undressing her for this purpose.

Regina seemed to regain her mask and plopped a small wastepaper basket where Ruby's head would be, as well as a glass of water on the nightstand.

Emma tucked the woman in, "You need anything?"

"No," Ruby sighed, sinking in comfortably.

"Okay, you feel this basket? Good. If you're going to be sick again do it in there, okay?"

"Okay." Ruby smiled as Emma kissed her forehead, patting Emma's head a bit harder than was comfortable, "Night, Red."

Emma thrust her hands into her pockets, debating thanking Regina for the help. No, she decided that Regina could live without the thanks and instead started toward the stairs at a lightning pace. She had to get the hell out of there.

She only made it as far as the catwalk before a couch pillow smashed painfully into the side of her head. She yelped, ducking reflexively. She looked around for the cultrate and found Regina's homicidal face, teeth bared "So what, you're dating my best friend now?" Regina had skipped talking politely; she had even skipped yelling and gone straight to roaring like a lion.

"What?" Emma straightened, feeling slightly silly in her crouch but not understanding the woman, "and ow! What the hell? What do you mean I'm dating your best friend? I'm not dating Ruby."

"I saw you kiss her. "Whether Regina meant to or not she had slipped into sign; a sure warning that she was irate, barely in control of her temper. Had Emma ever seen her this angry? She hadn't even unconsciously slipped into sign when she had broken up with Emma.

Emma nearly raised her hands to sign back, the habit had developed so thoroughly in the last few months but she stopped herself.

No way! No way would she make herself vulnerable to this crazy-eyed woman right now. "What do you mean you saw me kiss her?"

"What do you mean, what do I mean?"

"You're crazy! I never kissed Ruby!"

"Yes, you did! Tonight, while you two were cuddling." Her lip curled over the last word as if it were a mouthful of sour milk, "When I was walking to your table to thank you for your oh so inappropriate drink."

Emma's face contorted in confusion; the woman had lost it. Then she remembered - the quick thank you peck that she had given Ruby just before her confrontation with Regina. "Oh god, that? That is what you're basing all of this on? That wasn't real!" Another pillow connected painfully with her face, rocking her head back. "Ow!"

"You have been together almost every night. Don't bother trying to tell me –"

"She's dating August, Regina! I'm not dating anyone! You freaking idiot, I'm not over you and I
know that you know that!" Emma cried back, rolling her eyes and turning to go. She made it two
more steps before the last pillow on the couch slammed into her so hard that she crashed agonizingly
into the wall, her shoulder connecting with the raw brick.

Jesus, what was she a pitcher in a former life?

"What the fuck is your problem, Regina? Why are you so pissed? I'm not kissing Ruby! I'm not
dating Ruby." It occurred to her, "wait." She turned back to Regina who was still standing cross-
armed glaring at her, "why the hell do you care?"

"What?"

Emma stared over the edge of the catwalk, eyes wide almost laughing as joy and anxiety filled her,
"Why the hell would you even care? You're done with me."

"For Ruby's sake, of course." Regina frowned, blinking too many times for her look of nonchalance
to take.

"I'm not buying that." Emma felt her face begin to transform back into the look she had given Regina
in the bar; eyes darkening, mouth beginning to water as she realized triumphantly that she knew
exactly why Regina cared and this was the best opening she was going to get.

"Stop looking at me like that, Emma," Regina commanded, holding her ground, "How would you
feel if I began to date your best friend?"

"If I was dating someone new? A beautiful Aphrodite like Robin?" Emma shrugged, still advancing
on Regina. "I don't think I would care."

Regina gasped at her approach, eyes flicking and took a step back. "What are you doing?"

"Well clearly, Regina, leaving the choice up to you was a stupid mistake."

She grabbed the woman across from her.
Chapter 32

Their shared moans of pleasure reverberated off the walls around them as their lips touched for the first time in months; groaning each famished for the other. Emma didn't give Regina a moment to protest, attacking hard and fast, one hand locking on the back of Regina's head the other cupping possessively somewhere between thigh and ass. She didn't have to pull Regina to her; the moment Emma's hands were on her Regina bowed into her body, crying out in surprise; though whether at Emma's actions or her own reaction she didn't know. Emma couldn't help a small snort of pleasure at the fact that her suspicions had been completely right – she was right!

She clutched at her greedily, sinking her teeth into the woman's lip roughly as Regina's arms snapped around her, grasping her to her, reaching for skin under her shirt; her stomach, her back, her breast.

"You still want me," Emma growled, pushing Regina's face away just slightly so she could see her words.

Regina's hands popped from Emma's skin instantly and, eyes wide, she childishly swore, "No, I don't."

Emma only grinned wider. "Yes. You do. I can't fucking believe it but you do."

Regina rolled her eyes, turning away from her in dismissal but Emma caught her collar, pulling her harshly so her back slammed into Emma's body.

*If I'm going to go for it, I might as well really go for it.*

She buried her face in Regina's neck, immediately sucking and biting there. Regina let out a delicate but validating cry at the contact. In the reflection of the window Emma watched Regina's lips part, her eyes closing as she contorted unable, as always, to stay still while Emma tickled the sensitive spot behind her ear. Silently praying she wasn't about to lose them at the wrist; she let her hands slip across Regina's ribs and graze her breast.

Regina's cry grew louder, deeper as the sides of Emma's thumbs made contact with the hardening peaks under the layers of cloth; her hands clamping in a vice on Emma's thigh. Encouraged, she ripped open the shirt, unlocking the front clasp bra and seizing the soft flesh in the palm of one hand. She wrapped the other arm around her waist, holding her steady as she sucked, pulling deeply on the spot Regina loved between her ear and her hairline.

This was bliss. This was torture; both heaven and hell wrapped into one delicious swirling moment.

"Ms. Swan!" Regina suddenly shouted shoving her away and with a resounding smack, slapped her across the cheek.

Regina's hands cupped her mouth, eyes instantly filled with mortification but Emma grinned; somehow the slap had felt more like encouragement; like further proof that she was right than a warning to keep her distance. Malice bubbling Emma pounced, pulling Regina back to her, licking, touching, biting her bare skin, not at all surprised when Regina's hand fell to the back of Emma's head, leading her sucking mouth to a hard nipple.
Emma chuckled evilly as her name fell from Regina's lips. She spun her again, pushing them forward so Regina's bare skin pressed tightly against the ice-cold window. Regina hissed, her back arching away from the cold but a snicker escaped her taut lips, enjoying the aggression.

Regina turned in her arms, clutching Emma's head and groaned, "I've wanted to do this since the bar when you gave me that stupid look from across the room." Twisting a hand through Emma's hair, she wrenched the fistful to the side so her throat was exposed and trailed her tongue, long and flat from the dip of Emma's collarbone all the way to the lobe of her ear.

Emma's eyes closed, a shudder tickling down her spine as her breath turned from a gallop to a race.

She needed to consume this woman, be part of her again. She needed to smack her, throw her, punish her for the pain she had caused.

She shredded Regina's clothes quickly, feasting on the sight; the most appealing she had ever seen, before spinning her again. She found a sick pleasure in the shriek Regina let out as she was pressed against the window again.

Emma held her there, rejoicing in the way Regina's arms reached behind her, clutching her to her in fistfuls as their mouths mercilessly met over her shoulder.

"Henry?" Regina signed.

"Sleepover with the babysitter."

Pressing tighter, Emma let her hand find Regina, almost buckling to the floor at the sensation of the drenched curls. Had she ever been this utterly and completely aroused before? She moaned into her shoulder as Regina panted, tiny wisps of begging floating from her lips as Emma let her hand linger there, feeling, coating, cupping.

Face in the brunette hair at the back of Regina's head she plunged her fingers in, surprising Regina, making both of the woman's hands slap onto the glass she was pressed against to brace herself.

Emma didn't want to be nice as she moved, pulling sounds from her ex-lover like she had never heard before. She didn't want to be gentle or sweet. Anger at the loss of her, at the betrayal of Regina's final words rolled through her like a heat wave, she went on at a punishing rhythm, grunting from the excursion with each stroke. She could feel everything in Regina's body begin to tighten as Emma pounded into her. Just when Regina's cries reached their highest Emma stopped, letting the budding orgasm fall flat, removing a boiling pot of water from its heat source. Regina cried out in frustration but before she could turn Emma was back, drawing her close again. She waited just a second longer, letting Regina's body begin to tremble before pulling her touch from her.

Regina growled, hands slamming angrily on the glass in front of her, her forehead falling against the window as she snarled.

Emma was back; swearing crossly as she only had a moment to touch her before she removed herself yet again.

"No!" Regina cried tragically, pressing as hard as she could into Emma.

Emma smiled, shallowly pleased as the first tear dropped from her lid. She grabbed Regina, holding her across her chest and shoulders, her face burying in her hair and breathing her Regina scent in. Sticky tears of sorrow spilled from her as she clenched Regina to her, holding the one thing she had ever had to call her own besides her son - the one gift the universe granted her before so rudely taking it back. It only took three strokes before Regina was unraveling, her head falling back onto
Emma's shoulder, mouth open, eyes closed. Emma's tears grew colder at the sight, the tormenting beauty there.

With a gut-wrenching sob, Emma turned away before Regina was steady on her feet. She had to get out of here; she had to go before Regina saw – she didn't do this, she didn't cry like this! She didn't cry for herself. She was stronger than that.

Regina's hands scrambled at her, trying and struggling to catch her as Emma fought for escape.

Emma had to get away before she could lose everything she had again. She had to run as she had run from everything and everyone - except one - since she was a child.

Regina finally caught hold of Emma and pulled her to her; catching in the embrace Emma had only just held her in. Arms wrapped tightly around her from behind, constricting so forcefully that Emma couldn't struggle; she could only hang her head in defeat as Regina brought them to their knees, her head resting against the back of Emma's neck.

Another agonized cry ripped through Emma, shaking her body violently and threatening to tear her hole-ridden soul apart. Regina held her all the tighter, letting her cry.

When the tears did not slow Regina scrambled around to Emma's front, clutching her to her, pulling her face into the crook of her shoulder, stroking her hair desperately and whispering apologies.

Emma gritted her teeth, unwilling to allow this to happen any longer but Regina frantically caught her lips again. Emma kissed her back, begging a quiet plea to the universe as Regina took her hand, pulling her quickly up the stairs and into her lofted bedroom.

Regina's nimble fingers made quick work of the shirt and the bra underneath; Chocolate never leaving Jade, vulnerably watching for a sign that moving forward was prohibited. The moment Emma's torso was free Regina buried her face in her chest, rubbing her nose against her. Regina's eyes closed, smelling her, breathing her as her arms wrapped tightly around her in an aching embrace.

Emma's heart burst at the show of relieved satisfaction from her former lover, her arms closing around Regina's shoulders. "Oh, I missed you." She breathed into her hair and let herself be pushed back onto the bed.

Sitting on top of her, Regina's eyes burrowed holes into her, softly brushing away the few remaining tears and staring as though she had questions that needed answering or riddles to solve. Smiling lightly, Emma stroked her cheek. Regina's eyes rolled closed at the contact, covering Emma's hand with her own and kissing the palm she held to her face; then leaning forward to slowly, gently kiss Emma.

Their bodies heated together as Regina stripped her of the rest of her clothing and began kissing across her body, touching every part of her before slipping between her thighs and softly, intimately taking her into her mouth.

Emma's cry was soft though the feeling was powerful. Her hands stroked through Regina's hair, the side of her face as her other hand intertwined and closed in Regina's, clutching them together, binding them. Regina worked her tongue slowly, torturously up and down, in and out and everything began to filter away; everything except the places where Emma's body was connected to Regina's.

Emma pulled her up, clutching her tightly to her and sank into her. Regina gasped, fingers clutching Emma's shoulders tightly and then she was in Emma in a sudden blinding flash of pleasure. They
rocked, skin rubbing skin, lips rubbing any and every part of the other they could find.

They came together, each murmuring the other's name, clutching, pulling the other deeper. The release only egged on more, twisting and turning against one another they pulled more from the other and then another after and yet another. When exhausted, Emma let herself roll onto Regina, happy just to kiss her again, wiping Regina's damp hair from her face and cupping her cheeks.

Regina's face twitched into a smile but fell almost instantly when Emma's face stayed somber, "What's wrong?"

How could she even explain?

"Are you going to throw me away again?" The day had been such a rollercoaster of emotions, up, down and sideways. Emma was exhausted; all she wanted to do was sink into a long and comfortable sleep but she couldn't settle into the peace that Regina was clearly feeling. Each time she reached for tranquility the same thought crashed in on her: how long before she throws me away again? Am I here to stay or have I simply been granted a visa for the night?

"What?" Regina looked appalled and Emma was sorry for it. She knew now that Regina was sorry for her actions. She could tell from the way she touched her that Regina perhaps even went as far as regretting them – but that didn't mean that the actions wouldn't happen again.

"I need to know. I'm sorry, but I do. You don't understand. I've spent my whole life in the same pattern, Regina. I go somewhere new and I feel welcomed, maybe even wanted and then slowly over time something happens. A contract ends, the family I was staying with gets pregnant, a younger sweeter foster child becomes available, whatever. No one misses me, no one thinks about me twice after I'm gone. Then it's on to doing it all over again. I can't do that with you again Regina, I can't. Henry can't. He's been a mess since you left. The only reason I even let him see Ruby again was because he was still so broken over you, I had to give him something. We can't do that again, Regina. You're too – everything to me – and to Henry. I need to know. Should I stay or are you just going to chuck my son and me out the front door again one day?"

"Emma!" Regina gasped as if Emma had said something utterly indecent but Emma just clutched her face in her palms, waiting, not allowing the woman to turn away from her.

Regina's eyes flashed back and forth between Emma's, her hands lifting, searching for words. It was a long minute before, eyes glistening; Regina asked rhetorically in a defeated voice, "What do you want from me?"

Emma didn't have to think before she answered, "I want you to keep us."

Regina's mouth opened, soundlessly, pain cresting every inch of her face. Like a swift jab of a knife, Regina pulled out of her hands, twisting across the bed to pull on a shirt from the floor.

Emma hadn't moved when Regina turned back to her. She was busy staring blankly at the bed, her mind whirling.

What am I doing here? Why – why did I let this happen? I knew before I even asked – Emma, you fool! You fucking idiot! Why did you put yourself back in this situation?

Regina dropped to her knees on the bed, taking Emma's hands in her own. "Emma."
Emma wanted to pull away, to run as far as possible from this stupid situation she had put herself in. She knew that tone; she knew exactly what it fucking meant.

"Emma, it's me."

She scowled up at her former lover, waiting to see what the hell that meant.

"It's me. I'm broken, Emma, haven't you understood that? Don't you get that by now?"

"Why? Because you're deaf?"

"No," Regina shook her head sadly, "because I can't. I just can't."

"You can't what, Regina? What?"

"I can't – I don't have the courage - I'm not like you. Besides, who's to say you won't just walk out on me? You were going to do it before."

Emma fell face first onto the bed and groaned, signing over her head as her face stayed planted in the pillows, "I was not!"

"Emma, we both know there's no guarantee and I just can't. Besides, you can't love the unlovable, Emma and I – I just can't be here when you realize that." She cupped the blonde's cheek lightly, bloody tears falling from her self-loathing eyes, "You are perfect. I can see you blaming yourself. Don't. There's nothing wrong with you, don't you understand. It's all me. I just, I can't be what you need."

Painful heat bubbled in Emma's soul, "You can't be what? Be loved? Trust? Be worthy of my trust? You're just afraid Regina. You're afraid I will eventually reject you, so you're not even willing to try. You're a coward, Regina. You're being a coward."

Regina opened her mouth again but Emma didn't want to hear it. She slipped out of bed, finding her clothes and pulling them on.

She heard the harsh sob rip from Regina behind her but she didn't turn, desperate for escape. She limped toward the door; her soul wound bleeding, leaving a trail of blood behind her.

She didn't turn from her course to the door until she heard the small whispered, "Emma."

Regina was wrapped around herself, staring wide-eyed, her tears washing away the last remnants of the smile she had worn a few minutes before. "Emma. Please don't give up on me."

Pain ripped through Emma's chest. That just was not good enough. She stepped through the door before Regina could one day push her out of it.

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*Please don't give up on me.*

*Please don't give up on me.*
She knew she should be flattered when instead of remaining with her best friend, Ruby showed up at her apartment around six the next morning.

"I'm sort of mad at her."

Emma scowled not even bothering to hide her desolation, "Why?"

"Well, you guys were kind of loud last night so you woke me up and, I might still be a little drunk, but I saw a lot of that up against the window business -"

Emma gulped waiting for the embarrassed flush but her body couldn't muster the energy. "You could have told us you were there."

"I'm sorry!" Ruby whined, "I was drunk. It didn't even occur to me that I shouldn't be looking until, well, what came afterward."

She thought perhaps she should have been mad that Ruby had been spying on them and all the angrier because Ruby had seen Emma's breakdown, but she didn't have it in her. "But why did you come here?"

"I guess I assumed that if you weren't still there then she probably did something really stupid or really bad. I know Regina and how she's been since she split up with you. She probably turned you out again, right?"

"Not exactly," She answered honestly, "I left before she could."

"So – wait-"

"She didn't turn me down but it was clear she was going to, if not last night then soon after. She just kept saying she couldn't."

"I guess I'm asking too much from her."

"What do you mean, Ems?"
Emma shrugged, letting her head fall back onto the couch, staring dejectedly up at the ceiling, "I think she knows that I want to stay around. I want her to want to stay around. I want to move into her apartment and see her every morning and every night. I want Henry to call her mom. I want her to sign P.T.A. permission slips. I want to fucking know her, you know? I want her to know all of me. I don't take risks, Red, not when it comes to possibly getting hurt. That's not who I am, I do better on my own. But she makes me want to take them, you know? Like, if I thought jumping out of an airplane holding a sign that said 'I love you Regina' would fix everything I would do it. Ugh, I just want to fight with her because I accidentally left a red crayon in with the whites. I want - I want to know her mother if that makes her happy. I want to do the grocery shopping with her every week and -" She nearly jumped out of her seat when Ruby sniffed loudly, hands covering everything but her eyes. "What? What's wrong? What did I say?"

Ruby sniffed again, not bothering to wipe away the huge tears that were falling like rocks from her eyes as she wailed, "You want to marry her!"

This time, Emma did jump from her seat.
"That's fucking it! That's it, Red, you're a fucking genius!" Emma scooped the still sour smelling Ruby into her arms and spun her around until Ruby forced her to stop, threatening to be sick again. Emma wasn't going to give up on her.

"Emma, you have to explain!"

August had shown up at her apartment minutes before. His hair still stood on end from the shower he had been just stepping from when Ruby had called him, frantic about Emma's sudden shift from giddy to hysterical. "What's happened? I don't get it."

Emma was searching through her belongings tossing the unwanted papers over her shoulder, finding everything except the one she needed, "Damn it, where is it?"

"Emma!" August clapped his hands trying to draw her attention. She only briefly glanced over her shoulder before diving back into her accordion file.

"She and Regina hooked up last night and I think she cracked." Ruby chewed her lip nervously as she watched her friend.

"She break up with her again?"

"No? I don't know. I'm going to go get in the shower, see if you can-" she waved at Emma worriedly and left the room.

"Ems. Look at me, look at me."

"Ah ha!" Emma screamed, her fist pumping into the air while her feet flapped excitedly on the cover of the mattress she had been perched on. She kept all of her online banking information for that special emergency move account written on a small piece of paper amongst her legal documents. Her bank account had been wiped clean by outside parties too many times throughout her life to trust in saved passwords on her laptop. Not saving her passwords was an efficient habit but it made moments like this take an obnoxiously long time.

She dived past August, her mind running a million miles per hour. She opened the laptop sitting on the coffee table and swore when it didn't even try to rouse itself despite the power button being repeatedly mashed. This led to another ten-minute long search of the apartment, numbers running through her as she debated all of the worst-case scenarios ranging from probable to impossible.

Henry, I have to think about Henry. What if this job falls through? I'll never have enough to move us where we would need to go. I can't just dive forward and -

"Got it!" She plugged the computer in, drumming on the table impatiently. Ruby reappeared just as
she was getting the web page of her bank account open.

"Any luck?"

"I've gathered she was looking for that piece of paper and then her computer cord. That's all I got."

"I can hear you!" Emma laughed surprising them with her exuberance.

"She speaks!" August cried in mock exaggeration, flopping on the couch next to her, "What the hell, Swan?"

Grinning at the number she saw flashing on the screen she jumped up again and kissed their cheeks, "Will you pick up Henry at noon? I'll text you where." Before they could answer she was out the door.

The decision had been shockingly easy.

White gold. 2/3 CT Princess-cut centered stone - small framed teardrop chips sprung from each corner of the center and nestled lightly between each tear drop - framing the princess cut were small round diamonds. It was intricate and beautiful, delicate and strong – more Regina than Regina herself.

She walked with determination, her brows furrowed as she thought, flipping the box into the air and catching it.

Ruby had been right. This was exactly what she wanted - this was exactly what she needed – had to have with all of her being.

Ruby had also told her not so long ago that people had a nasty habit of giving up on Regina. No one had learned sign purely for Regina, no one bothered to know her. No one had ever tried to meet Regina half way. When she said she couldn't Emma understood now that Regina had meant she didn't have it in her to put herself out there, simply to fall on her face again. There was only so much strength a person could muster; so many times they could be hurt before they were too afraid to try again.

Emma understood, better than most. She needed to get rid of the metaphorical back door in their relationship. If she wanted Regina to take a chance, to put herself out there then she needed to be sure that Regina understood she was safe to do so; there would be no negative repercussions.

If she was going to ask Regina to keep her, then she sure as fuck was going to make it crystal clear that Emma wanted to keep her in return – always.

Perhaps it was a mistake. She was fairly confident that Regina, her wild and damaged girl, would say no but she had to try. She had to make the gesture – and just maybe she would get very lucky.

But first –

She rang the showy doorbell listening to the chime reverberate off of the mansion's walls and couldn't help but to roll her eyes at the petty extravagance. So like Cora.

Her fingers shook, her legs jittered ready for the fight she knew was coming but this had been itching at her and it was damned well time someone said it. She would go in swinging because that was the
only way she could do it.

"Emma?" Belle looked surprised to see her, "Did Mrs. Mills forget to mention you were coming? It's not Tuesday."

"Nope." Emma brushed past the woman, "office?"

"Uh, kitchen," Belle called after her. Emma just nodded and wordlessly changed her course.

"Emma!" Cora's eyes lit the moment Emma stepped through the doors but fell when she saw the set look of her features. "What's wrong? Don't tell me you're turning down Lyric."

"What? No! God Cora, you and I just need to talk."

"I'm sorry?" Cora's features slowly wiped themselves clean, her arms crossing over her chest.

"Sit down."

"Excuse me."

"Sit down, Cora!" she thundered, surprising herself.

Shock covering her face, Cora slowly sank into the chair, eyebrow raised in challenge.

"So here's the thing." Emma softly shifted back and forth on the balls of her feet, terrified, "You have been a pain in my ass for months."

"I beg your pa-"

"Months, Cora! From the moment you invited me to the stupid Lyric audition you have been hovering over me, trying to force my decisions."

"Ms. Swan!"

"Why did you tell everyone I was moving to Louisville when you knew I turned it down?"

Cora scoffed, "You become a valued commodity when you are in high demand."

"A commodity, Cora? I'm a person!"

"A highly sought after person, correct?"

It was true that since the New Year, Emma's popularity had skyrocketed. She had been contracted out to gig after gig for months.

"You made my life freaking miserable. You took your daughter from me. You told everyone I knew that I was leaving – and you pushed. You pushed every freaking day, forcing me to the masseuse, telling me what to practice, telling me when to practice, making me play for you. Well, I won, Cora. I won. You have pushed me and prodded me, insisting that I do all of this and I won so thank you."

Cora's brows pulled together in confusion.

Emma cleared her throat and continued in a softer voice, "I know your secret Cora. I see you. You pretend to be so hard, so rough – you've treated your daughter like shit for years, trying to force her into decisions that she thinks are purely for your benefit, but they aren't, are they? Let me rephrase, Regina thinks the reason you push this implant, the reason you manipulated me into pushing the
implant and basically threw me to the wolves over it, was so you would no longer have to admit that
you have a deaf daughter. But that isn't true, is it?” Cora's eyes fluttered, a perfect mirror of Regina
under stress, "No," Emma continued, "it's because you want Regina to hear. The reason you pushed
so hard before the audition – you wanted me to win."

"Emma-

"You care about her! You care about me!"

Cora sneered, "When I put my name on something, Ms. Swan, I refuse to be embarrassed by it; that
goes for you, Henry and my pigheaded daughter. Of course I care about Regina; what are you
implying?"

"I'm implying that you're being an ass, Cora."

"Emma Swan I will not-"

"The rehab for the deaf children. Why did you start the foundation in Regina's name? You know
how much she hated her days in therapy."

"I'm sorry?"

"She thought it was another act of cruelty. It seemed like a nasty gag. Was it?"

"Ms. Swan-"

"Oh stop pulling your crap, Cora, and just answer me." She had been harsh with Cora before, you
had to be to get the woman to listen - but never like this.

Cora's eyes shot through with fire and malice but there was also a hint of something unexpected
-something that looked a lot like respect so she changed her tone into a soft but firm one. "Just tell
me."

"I suppose," Cora admitted grudgingly, "I thought that if Regina had gotten the implant she would
have liked it and changed her tune, so to speak."

"What does that mean?"

"It means, you idiot, that I thought once Regina regained her hearing she would want to help others
do the same. I thought, Ms. Swan, that you would be able to talk my daughter into the implant.
Disappointingly, you failed."

This sent confusion rocking through her, "You thought I would be able to talk her into it? Why?"

"Because, you stupid girl, she clearly loved you."

"Right." Emma laughed, "And yet, you still wanted to break us up."

"And who told you that? Was I not the person who convinced you to go to the New Year's ball? Did
I not point her out to you once there? Did you not finally corner her only because I held her in one
place?"

Emma's mind had just blown into a thousand little bits.

"Uh, wow. But wait – if you love her so much, Cora, why do you treat her the way that you do? I
mean, we covered this before and you lied to me so it would be kind of great if you didn't do that
"Ms. Swan," her voice was liquid ice, "I understand that you feel as though you are entitled to ask questions of this type because of your affair with my daughter, however-

"Cora!" she slammed her fists on the kitchen counter, frustrated by Cora's evasive responses. She turned on the woman, not at all afraid or intimidated by the woman's flashing eyes or lip that was slowly curling back on itself, "You're going to lose her, Cora. You will. Any day now. You are going to lose her. You basically already have. How many years had she been living in that loft before I invited you over? When was the last time she called just to tell you about something that was happening in her life? She did that all the time with me, she does that with Ruby! You're her mother. Does she do that with you?"

Cora's lips pinched closed but Emma didn't need to wait for an answer. She knew Regina called her mother as little as possible.

"Did you know she once told me that the only way she could get through going to visit you was if she was a little drunk? She's broken. She thinks she's unlovable – she has actually told me that she is unlovable and it's because of you. It is your fault, lady! It's because you never showed her that she could be loved exactly as she is! You have never loved her fully as a mother should love their daughter!" Cora frowned as Emma pulled the ring box from her pocket, "I'm on my way to propose to your daughter. I don't know if she will say yes, I kind of think she won't but if by some fucking miracle there is a god out there and she says yes, I will support her when she walks away from you for one simple fact: you refuse to speak to her."

"I do not!" Cora's hand flew to her chest, the offended maiden.

"You do! I'm sorry Cora but you do. Refusing to learn sign language and refusing to speak to her is the same thing. She has been deaf since she was seven years old. That's twenty-six years of not being able to speak to your daughter. She's not going to get the implant, she doesn't believe in it and she shouldn't have to! Give that up! You are her mother. You are supposed to love her for who she is, not spend twenty-six years trying to change her." Emma knew she needed to slow down else get trapped under her own downhill snowball but she couldn't. "She needs you and frankly, you need to know your daughter. Think about what is coming in her future; marriage whether with me or someone else, and children. If you want to be a part of that - if you want to know your daughter and know your grandchildren then you need to learn her language. Otherwise, there is no way in hell you will. You'll be a stranger to them, Cora. You won't even see them on holidays."

Emma eyed the woman nervously. Cora had made no response to Emma's rant; instead, she sat staring glassy-eyed at the floor. "Besides," Emma stepped to her, softly caressing her cheek and using all of the courage she could muster she whispered, "It's time, Cora. It's just freaking time."

She had no idea if that would work, she prayed it would but decided perhaps it was best to go. "Ruby will be here tomorrow for your first lesson," She called over her shoulder before slipping out of the kitchen door.

---

She was on a roll. Her confidence was high and she was on a mission.

Operation Make-Regina-Mine.
Her confidence didn't waver until she entered the lobby of Regina's building. Should she have the hulking man who had once sorrowfully escorted her and all of her belongings to the El train let her up to the apartment? He would have to check with Regina before he would do it. What if Regina said no, Emma couldn't come up and she was stopped before she ever tried?

She felt for her keys in her pocket and shuffled through the ring. She still had her key. Their breakup had been so sudden that Emma had never been given the chance to return it.

Squaring her jaw she winked at the huge man and headed toward the elevator full strut. She stopped just before the key slid into home, a thought occurring to her. Turning she marched over to him, hands shoved nervously in her pockets. "What's your name?"

"Ma'am?"

"I don't know your name. After all of this time, I still don't know your name."

The man cracked a grin for a moment before quickly swallowing it down into his badass Borne Identity look, "It's James, ma'am."

Emma nodded, "James" and headed through the elevator doors.

She didn't feel nervous as she rode to the top floor. She wasn't anxious or even worried. Yelling at Cora had been scarier than this because this – this was simply right. She would lay it all out on the table and hope that equipped with the knowledge of how serious Emma was about all of this, Regina made a better decision than the last time.

The elevator dinged and she stepped into the apartment, listening to the silence of the room before her. Nerves suddenly slammed through her body, crippling her in place.

What the fuck am I thinking? She's going to eat me alive! I'm proposing knowing she is going to laugh in my face. Who does that? This isn't a fucking romantic comedy, Ems, people say no.

She turned on the spot, ready to flee back through the heavy metal doors but paused. Okay, so she might eat me alive but it was worth the risk, wasn't it? Even if Regina saw the ring and proceeded to chew her up and spit her out, wouldn't it be enough that Regina finally understood the depth of Emma's feelings for her? She would finally see that someone besides Ruby was willing to stick around through thick and thin. She was meeting her love halfway and if she were lucky, Regina would bridge that gap.

She could do this.

She would do this.

She would also leave the elevator open for a quick escape.

Is she even home? How like my life would it be for her to not even fucking be-
She heard a sniff from downstairs and felt her nerves turn to steel.

You got this. You can do this. Just tell her the truth. Tell you that you love her with all of your heart and soul.

She placed her bag in the way of the elevator door, keeping the small metal room open for her; she wasn't going to be here long.

She pushed the button just inside the door of the apartment that made the yellow light manually flash.

A small gasp came from the ground level and Regina rushed to the center of the downstairs living room, checking her phone for the source of the summons.

When nothing was on the phone's screen she whipped around.

Regina's face was red and swollen, her eyes bloodshot. She was still in the light tee shirt she had thrown on the night before, despite the fact that it was early afternoon - something Regina never did. But the most surprising part was that her ever-perfect hair was yet to be brushed, still in the wild tangles that Emma had created against the pillows the night before. She clutched at her cup of coffee as if she needed it desperately, hands shaking. If Emma had to make a guess she would say that Regina had been up since she had left somewhere in the early morning and she had spent that time crying. Her heart wrenched in her chest at the sight of the disheveled woman; why had she been crying? Was it the things she had said to her? She shouldn't have just walked out that way. She was hurt but that was no excuse.

"Emma? What are you-"

Emma held up a hand, stuffing the small box into her back pocket and summoned her. Regina came slowly as if she wasn't sure she wanted to come at all.

When she was near Emma took a deep breath and flew by the seat of her pants, allowing her hands to dance through her words.

"You're so dumb."

"What?"

"You're so dumb, Regina and the amazing part is that you don't even know it." Regina's eyes popped wide, whether at the insult or the sudden display of sign language Emma didn't know but she didn't slow her words, "You're not broken, Regina. You're not unlovable. You're hurt and you're scared and I get it. You've lived every day of your life feeling as though you were less than. You were brushed into a corner and forgotten, wrapped up in a box and put in the back of the closet so you wouldn't be in anybody's way. You aren't unlovable, you were taught that you are unlovable and there is a huge difference between the two. But here's the thing Regina, you're wrong. They were wrong. You're the sun. You're the sun, Regina." Regina's eyes swept Emma's face, confused tears gathering, desperate pain still settled there as she watched Emma's hands in wonder, "you're the sun and I orbit you gladly. That's why you're so dumb because you don't understand that fact. I told you I would kiss you every day for the next twelve months and I will, Regina. I will kiss you every day, every week, every month, every year for the rest of my fucking life if you let me because,"
carefully she pulled the box from her pocket and opened it. Regina stumbled backward, hitting the banister with a clang, hands barely catching her as her mouth and her eyes popped wide in shock, "what I didn't tell you Regina was that when I said I wanted you to keep us what I really meant was we, Henry and I, want to keep you."

She gently took Regina's hand and placed the box in her open palm.

Regina's hand fluttered over her mouth, tears pouring, her lips trembling as her brows knit together.

Emma stood for one beat – two – three and then she had to get out of there. She couldn't stand it.

She took a step back into the metal box, lifting her bag and watched Regina's frozen face, eyes burrowing deeply, pleadingly into hers "Just think about it." The doors closed.

Okay, now what?

Emma sank her hands into her pockets as she stepped out of the elevator, unsure of exactly how she felt. Regina's face had given nothing away. Should she celebrate her victory or mourn her idiocy?

She wasn't sure.

She hesitated. Regina would call her if she decided to turn her down, right? She wouldn't just- I don't know – pretend it never happened?

She started down the walkway to the front door.

The sudden snatch of her arm sent a high-pitched yelp from her lips and her first thought was the huge man behind the booth, James had grabbed her. She spun to fight off her attacker but hands grabbed her collar and shoved her into the wall of the barren lobby.

"Ow! Crap!"

"Did you really just propose to me and then fucking leave, Emma Swan?"

Emma's lip twitched but she frowned, "I did. I thought you might want some – space. Did you just say fuck?"

"You thought I might want some space?" Regina asked in a deadpan, her face so close to Emma's that she could feel the tickle of her breath; she could smell her still tear soaked skin, her makeup remover and the soft scent of coffee from her lips.

"Um, yes?"

Regina's eyebrow cocked over her still soggy eyes, curving into a perfect arch, "Allow me to give you some advice, Ms. Swan. There are moments when you give someone space and there are moments when you most certainly do not."

"Meaning?"

Regina smiled, pulling Emma the last bit of distance between them, "This is a moment when you do not." Regina's lips found Emma's, clinging tightly her hands cupping Emma's face. "Did you really just propose to me?"
This time, Emma did grin, "I did. I want to marry you, Regina Mills. I thought proposing might be
the best way to make that happen."

"You learned Sign." Regina's wide eyes filled again.

"I was always learning it, Regina. I just – I got better."

Regina's eyes searched her face, looking for a hint, a clue to some magnanimous riddle, "you really
want to keep me?"

"Every fucking day. Every fucking night." Emma smiled, her arms wrapping around Regina's small
waist.

Regina's eyes narrowed after a moment and Emma's heart leapt painfully. She had assumed because
of the kiss - "Do it right."

"Um, what?"

"Do it right!" Sniffing harshly, Regina pulled the small box from her hurriedly thrown on jeans and
forced it into Emma's hand.

Emma wasn't sure exactly what this meant but her heart began to refill slowly, with warm hope. She
felt herself foolishly grinning as she took the ring from its bed of velvet and slowly, Chocolate on
Jade she bent before Regina.

Regina's face glittered, shining as fresh diamonds slid down her cheeks.

Emma balanced the ring gently on her knee and looking up into those suddenly hopeful pools of
brown she signed, "Will you please, for the love of god, just marry me already, Regina?"

Regina's smile could have lit the world and Emma found it warmed the dark and hurt places in her
soul. There was no hesitation, no moment of indecision from Regina, "yes."

Shock so strong it almost blew her away rocked through Emma as she jumped to her feet, nearly
losing the ring in the process and having to clutch wildly at the air to keep it in her grasp, "Yeah?"

Regina laughed, "Yeah."

"Holy shit!" Emma shouted, unable to believe her fucking luck. She grabbed her love and pulled her
tightly to her, lifting her from her feet and spinning her in a circle, "Really?"

"Really."

"Oh my god." Emma pulled Regina back to her, celebrating her, kissing her with every cell of her
body.

They broke apart again breathless and laughing to the cheers of the men behind the security booth.
Chapter 34

Things moved at a hyper pace over the spring and summer and yet they weren't quick enough for Emma.

Boxes were packed.

Appliances were compared and thrown away or more often updated and replaced.

Furniture was condensed to the bare essentials and then new pieces were purchased to fit the new accommodations.

The apartment and the loft were stripped naked and for the very last time Emma and Henry gathered all of their belongings, their entire lives into the small tan cardboard boxes. This time, however, they weren't just thrown haphazardly into the back of the bug but placed, amongst their new brothers and sisters all bearing labels such as bathroom, kitchen or books, in the back of the moving van.

Henry couldn't sit still. So far he had only seen a picture of the newly remodeled Tudor deep in the heart of Evanston.

"So any room at all?" He asked with barely contained excitement bouncing as the bug slowly made its way through the city traffic.

"Within reason. I don't think you can have the master bedroom and you probably want to avoid picking the rooms with toilets in them."

He rolled his eyes, showing his transition from toddler to a little boy but grinned at her.

The huge moving van was still beside the lawn when they pulled up, Emma held onto Henry's collar so he didn't throw himself from the car before it had come to a full stop.

Men were gruffly mumbling as they pulled box after box from the van and set them in the middle of the grand foyer of 108 Davies St.

"Mom! Lemmiego! Lemmiego!"

"Hold on!" She turned the ignition to off and released the squirming boy. He ran from the car, hands waving and flying,

"'Gina – 'Gina – I mean," he stopped running; looking delightfully baffled and beamed, "I mean, mama."

Regina scooped the nearly six-year-old boy up and kissed his cheeks, their hands flying together.

It hadn't been a rocky transition from 'Gina to mama at all, not that Emma was really surprised. Regina had stepped into that role the moment she had picked him up the day in the park, hadn't she?

Emma got out of the car, grinning, her heart hammering as it always did when she saw the beautiful brunette. It was as though each time she saw her, the tightly clenched organ in her chest needed a moment to acclimate all over again.

*This beautiful, wonderful thing standing in front of me has agreed to be my wife. She has agreed to*
take my son for her own. She has even agreed to give me her body next year or maybe the year after to grow him a brother or sister. How the fuck did I get this lucky? Since when did my life look like a fairytale?

Regina's eyes lifted from Henry's and she smiled a genuine and uncomplicatedly happy smile, "You're late."

Emma held her hands up in surrender, "Henry needed the bathroom!"

"I did not!"

Regina laughed.

"Mommy, can I go? Can I go look?"

"Can you go?" Emma sighed, in mock horror, "No way, I'm going to go first!"

She sprinted around Regina, stopping only for a brief kiss and dashed for the door. Henry screamed that she was cheating as he flew after her, giggling.

They flew up the huge center staircase toward the bedrooms, Emma taunting her son over her shoulder.

"What about this one?"

"No way! It's a bathroom!"

"I thought you wanted to sleep in the bathtub!"

"This one, this one!"

Emma rounded the corner to see a huge empty room, window seat and window open to the front of the house and the giant tree nestled safely just outside the screen.

"This one?" Emma caught him and tickled his sides.

"Yeah! Look, I can see the whole block!"

"Okay kid, go downstairs and tell the movers to bring your boxes up here."

Heels clicked on the hardwood behind her and Regina nestled her head in the crook of Emma's neck, "Want to see our room?"

Emma's eyebrow cocked suggestively and Regina grinned, her teeth sinking lightly into the skin of her ear. She pulled her along by the hand until they found the large room. They passed through it however and out onto the large patio overlooking the huge grassy lawn where men in moving uniforms were grumbling as they tried to put the swing set up.

"Any regrets, Ms. Swan?"

"About the house?"

"Amongst other things."
Emma laughed, pulling her to her and kissing her deeply, "are you freaking kidding me, woman?"

They remained locked in their steamy passionate embrace for a long moment before Regina had to finally pull away, panting, "Let's not give the movers a show, darling."

Emma shrugged, pulling her back to her, "Or maybe we should." She kissed her again, littering kisses over the woman's cheeks and jaw until Regina was a crumbling mess in her arms.

"You're unfair." Regina smiled softly.

"I am."

Regina gave her one last kiss, "I love you, you know."

"I do. I do know."

"Come. Let's start bringing boxes up."

Regina kicked off her heels and the two began to lift boxes up the stairs sorting them into the study, the practice room, bedrooms, and bathrooms.

Eventually, all the beds were assembled and in their proper rooms, couches and all boxes removed from the truck and the small family had their new home to themselves.

Emma blasted music through the house, placing the speakers right next to Regina in the kitchen and caught the woman, hand on the speaker begin to lightly dance as she unpacked plates and cups.

Grinning, Emma wrapped her arms around Regina and softly, with one finger, began to tap the beat into her breastbone.

Regina smiled tenderly at the memory.

"Anybody home? Hello?"

Emma smiled and signed to her wife, "Red's here. I'll get Henry."

Regina nodded.

Red sauntered into the kitchen holding a huge take out bag and looking exuberantly confident.

"Thank god, I'm starving. Where have you been all day?" Regina grabbed her glass of water but froze with the drink halfway to her lips. Emma, not paying attention, headed to the foot of the stairs to yell for their son then froze upon reentering. Even Henry, who had come running pell-mell down the stairs, stopped when he hit the kitchen door.

Cora stood looking almost shy, next to Ruby her hands twitching over the flowers, seeming nervous.

Regina recovered first, glancing between her best friend and the woman her best friend had always disliked so much, "Mother! What are you doing here?" Regina's voice cracked slightly; it had been weeks since she had felt the need to use her voice at all now that Emma understood her own private language. She flushed, clearly waiting for the reprimand.

Instead Cora smiled, handing Ruby the potted tulips she had been holding. "Regina –"
The glass in Regina's hand shattered against the floor. Emma's heart began to pound in astonishment; even Henry's mouth popped open into a perfect circle as shakily Cora's hands lifted and she signed, "I thought – your new home – could use some flowers."

Regina clutched at the kitchen counter, her eyes wide and frozen. "Mother?"

Cora shifted, "I'm trying." The woman looked annoyed and dropped her hands, "I don't know very much yet. It has only been a few weeks."

Emma watched her soon to be wife as she swayed on the spot.

"You're learning Sign Language?" She shifted glances between her mother and Ruby, "How did you – why did you –"

"Well, Regina" Cora stepped forward and in a very un-Cora-like move, kissed Regina's knuckles, making the brunette's eyes boggle, "I did a lot of thinking and I decided that Emma was right when she told me it was time."

Regina's shocked eyes darted around the room, tears slipping over the brim of her stunned gaze. "Emma? Emma did this?"

"She – she helped me to see a few things I hadn't seen before."

"Emma?" The name was a whisper on Regina's lips, "Where is she? Emma?"

Emma stuffed her hands into her pockets, flushing deeply as her soon to be wife found her in the doorway.

"Emma?"

She scuffed her shoe a bit, pulling her face into a small sideways grin. "Hi."

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