There Once Was a Town in Maine

by TheDameintheRaininMaine

Summary

The savior, the curse, the town. The same old song. But this Emma Swan has a family, an identity, a life she worked hard for. But does she really have any idea what awaits her?
When Emma's twenty-eighth birthday finally came, the suitcases were packed, and the route mapped out.

"I don't understand" she says, holding a print out from the computer. "I couldn't find it on a single map, I can't find a single reference to Storybrooke, Maine anywhere, related to anything".

Neal looks up from his book, "Maybe that's a part of the-

"What? Curse?" Emma shakes her head, "I still can't even wrap my head around any of this, none of it is normal".

"Normal ended for me the day I fell in that damn portal, and I doubt it was ever the same as your normal. It doesn't matter. We go on vacation, we find a place to stay. We check it out, if it genuinely seems-

"Cursed".

"We figure out what to do. If it's just a normal sleepy little town, we have a boring week, then come home and continue our lives".

Emma sits down beside him. "Magic. Fifteen years ago I would have laughed in your face if you told me magic was real. I still kind of feel like laughing in someone's face".

"I'm just wondering how we're going to explain all of this to Henry. He's got a normal life here. This week is fine, but how can we just uproot him?"

"Guess we will cross that bridge when we come to it".

Henry, was, at the moment, supposed to be asleep. Lights out was nine-thirty on a school night, and Dad had said tonight too because they had to leave that morning. But he had snuck a flashlight from under his bed and had open in his lap a large, ornate book of stories.

The next morning, Neal's carrying the last bag to the car when he stops and looks around the apartment.

"All these years, you would think we would have accumulated more stuff".

Emma comes up behind him holding the keys. "Stuff's overrated. At least it means if this curse thing actually works out- oh my God did I actually just say that? Forget I said anything".

They rock paper scissors for the driver (Emma wins), and flip for the music (Neal wins).

The next morning, Neal's carrying the last bag to the car when he stops and looks around the apartment.

"You OK back there kid?"

"I'm fine mom".

Emma turns back, Henry's never been good with long car rides.

"ETA says twenty-two hours" Neal says beside her, "Think we can drive it straight through?"
"We'll see when it gets dark. If there's a motel around we'll stay the night, or if the area seems safe we'll sleep in the car. Otherwise, we can just swap and continue."

Henry doesn't cause a problem, he's too absorbed in his book, and the decision ends up being made for them. When they cross the state line into New Jersey, it's raining heavily, and Emma's starting to get tired. So they find a Super 8.

Henry's never been in a motel before. He breaks himself away from his book to explore, excitedly reporting that the basket in the bathroom has coffee and tea and hot chocolate.

After Henry falls asleep, Neal tells Emma.

"Happy birthday by the way."

Emma's sitting on the bed with her knees tucked up to her chest.

"Twenty-eight. I never could have thought I would end up somewhere like this".

The next day, when they finally cross into Maine, Henry finally asks.

"Why are we even going here? I've never heard of this place before".

"Your mom grew up in Maine, she wanted to see if it had changed any".

Emma snorts. True she had lived in Maine until she was old enough to run away, but the state had made no impact on her whatsoever.

"We wanted to go somewhere quiet. And if some of my unfinished business can be quieted, that would be all the better".

It's going to be a can of worms if the whole curse thing ends up being true. Unfinished business, that's a laugh.

When they further away from the bigger cities in the south of the state, Henry's drifted off in the backseat.

Neal stares at the map on his phone.

"Are you sure we're on the right road?"

"It's not on the map, it's not on any map, the internet had nothing. I had to try to figure it out based on the signs in a couple of the postcards."

"The internet's never heard of it? It must be magical."

"Either that or it's stuff 50 years ago".

About three quarters of an hour later, Emma catches a glimpse of a sign out the window.

"There! I saw it- Storybrooke Maine".

Just then, a small white figure crosses into the road, forcing Emma to swerve. She comes to a stop on the side of the road, breathing hard. Henry jolts awake in the backseat, murmuring,

"What happened?"
"Nothing" Emma says, glancing over her shoulder. The figure is still behind them, a large gray-white wolf. Wait- how would she know a wolf if she saw one? But it's a wolf- she knows this deep in her bones.

"Just a dog in the road. It's OK, Henry you can go back to sleep again if you want to, but we should almost be there."

He doesn't though, almost seeming eager.

Neal whispers to her when she turns back on to the road.

"Pretty dramatic entrance, whatever this place is".

"It's just an animal. I doubt it stays out here to scare everyone on this road".

It then occurs to Emma that she hasn't seen another car in over an hour.

Slowly the woods give way, and buildings start. First comes a field with a wooden structure that looks like a stable to Emma. After that, a couple of industrial warehouses, and signs that point to the docks.

"We're closer to the coast that I thought, most of that part of Maine is pretty populated."

Then come the houses, and that's when Emma starts noticing odd things. All the houses are small, and they don't look like tract houses. They all have little details- decorative siding, unusual roofs. Lawn ornaments decorate perfectly clipped lawns, the occasional sign is printed in pastel colors with floral font. There's an errant bicycle on one street corner, but somehow even it seems perfectly imperfect.

"This whole place looks like it's off of one of those postcards" Neal comments when they turn onto Main Street.

The strangeness continues onto Main Street. Despite the modern-looking cars, the shopfronts look like they could be straight off of Main Street at Disneyland.

"Have you seen a single chain store?" Emma asks.

"Not a one. No fast food places either."

At one crossroads, there's even a clocktower. Emma's only seen those in pictures.

Neal sticks his head out the window.

"The clock looks like it's stopped, what time is it?"

Emma slips out her cell phone. "It's seven oh three. " She still has service out here somehow, which amazes her.

"We should stop for dinner, that'll give us time to ask about places to stay."

Eventually, Emma drives past a greasy spoon looking place, called "Grannys". She parks in an empty place out front. And they all climb out.

"Henry, leave the book in the car or you'll end up forgetting it".

The diner is old fashioned too- but not in a "retro 50's" way either. But it's also full of people,
blessedly ordinary looking people. It's dinner time, and since Emma hadn't seen another restaurant this whole time, this might be where most of the town comes.

Emma was just starting to feel better about the whole situation, when everyone in the place stops and looks at them when they enter. It makes her skin crawl, rarely has people paying attention to her meant any good. She jumps a little when the waitress- a young woman with two dark red-streaked ponytails and heavy makeup approaches them and asks with an almost overly-cheery smile, "Table to three". Neal ends up being the one to stay "yes please".

The waitress leads them to an empty booth by the window. "You guys from out of town?"

"Yes, Florida" Emma replies. The woman's name tag reads "Ruby".

"Always wanted to see Florida. I'll have to apologize for the third degree, and the audience" she says, gesturing at one of the men at the bar, still staring. "Step off Leroy. We don't get many travellers through here".

She hands them their menus and says "Take your time".

Neal glances around again. "Can't say I expected to be on stage here".

Emma opens the menu "This place is so strange. I haven't seen prices this low in years".

"Mom, can I check my email on your phone?" Henry, who's been oddly quiet this whole time, asks.

"Sure" she says, reaching into her pocket. "Wait, my battery's low, can you wait?"

"Can I use yours Dad?"

"I left mine in the car". Neal replies. Henry gets pleady eyes, so Neal reaches into his pocket and gives him the keys "It should be in the glove compartment".

"Do you miss everyone that much already kid?" Emma asks.

Henry nods. "Tiana said she'd email me if I missed anything at school".

"It's only been two days".

"Lots could have happened in two days! Maybe Mrs. Henderson's wig finally blew off, or someone finally figured out what the mystery meat is!"

"Go ahead" Emma says fondly, clapping him on the shoulder. "But if you take too long, I'm going to order for you".

Not too long after Henry leaves, a woman with short, dark hair in a severely, but perfectly, cut gray suit. The atmosphere in the diner changes, and Emma feels her blood go cold when the woman approaches their booth. She has a wide, and vaguely fake looking smile on her face. It doesn't look like Ruby's did- Ruby's seemed to hide a fountain of curiosity. This woman's seems like it might hide fangs.

"I heard that there were some travellers come to see out lovely little town, and I just had to see for myself."

She extends her hand to have both of them shake it.

"I'm Regina Mills, I'm the mayor of Storybrooke".
She sits herself down on the edge of the booth. Emma tries not to shrink away from her.

"Can't say we get many tourists through these parts, might I ask what has brought you here?"

Emma suddenly has a frog in her throat, which doesn't go away until Neal speaks up first,

"Just a family vacation. We're from a fairly big city, and wanted to go somewhere quiet, get away from it all a bit".

"I grew up in this part of Maine, and haven't been back here in years. We just kind of drove around until somewhere caught our eyes, and neither of us had ever seen a town so...quaint, so when we drove in we thought it would be perfect for a week or two".

"Well I'm sure you'll fine our town friendly and enjoyable. The Fall Festival is next Friday. I would like to personally invite you, as I feel it would be the perfect way to top off your vacation before you leave and return to your normal lives".

And with that she stands up and leaves. Emma heaves a sigh, and she watches as Neal's posture softens.

He asks, "Is it just me or did that feel like-"

"A theat?" Emma replies. "Yep."

"Why would the mayor bother herself with a couple of tourists?"

"I don't know". Emma says, "But something was definitely off about her. She was picking her words very carefully. Whatever is going on here, I have no doubt she's in the thick of it".

Ruby then approaches the table to take their orders.

Neal cranes his neck to look behind him. "What's taking Henry so long?"

What was taking so long, was he was only telling a half-truth about wanting to check his email. True, he did miss his friends terribly, but something had been bothering him since they had walked into the diner.

Opening the car door, he leaned into the back seat to retrieve his book. He flipped through a couple of the pages and stared at the end pictures.

He was right, the waitress looked exactly like the drawing of Little Red Ridng Hood. A couple more flips. The old woman he had glimpsed in the kitchen was a dead ringer for the girl's Granny. The man at the bar could have been a twin for one of the Seven Dwarves. He slams the book shut. There as a weird separate chapter at the end, he'll have to finish and do some more investigation.

"You need to leave", a voice says behind him. He jumps, and spins around. The voice belongs to a girl, a bit older than him with long dark hair.

"What did you say?"

"You and your family, you need to leave soon. "

Henry's confused. "We're just on vacation, we should be going home by the end of next week".

The girl shakes her head. "That might be too long, you might not be able to".
"What are you talking about? Why couldn't we leave?"

"It's this town, it's cursed".

Henry's ears perk up. A curse? That sounds like something out of the book, something which could mean a great adventure.

She continues. "No one leaves. No one else came here either, save me, until today. Just leave, as soon as you can".

Her eyes are dark, with circles under them, suddenly seeming to Henry very old. "Leave or you'll end up like me".

She jerks her head towards the diner, and says "I have to go" and then leaves.

"Wait" Henry calls after her, "What's your name?"

She turns over her shoulder and says, resignedly. "Lily".

And she's gone as quickly as she came.

Henry shakes his head, not entirely sure what had just happened. He then retrieves his dad's phone, shuts and locks the car door, and goes to rejoin his parents.

A block away, Lily jumps into the backseat of another car as fast as she can, buckles herself in, and pulls out her homework. She does all this just fast enough before she sees Mayor Mills turn back to the street.

The mayor unlocks her car door and gets in. She glances into the back seat, saying, "Time to go home now Lily".

She responds, her heart still racing, "Yes mother".
Chapter 2

When Ruby brings them the bill, Emma asks her if she knows of anywhere in town to stay.

"Only hotel in town is the Inn my grandmother and I run, but we don't really get many guests. If you want to stick around until I'm off in an hour, I'll take you over and get you set up".

She brings them all hot chocolate, and some time later hands off her apron to a tired looking blonde woman.

"Looking to be a slow night Kathryn, you can try to hit the books".

When she gestures to the three of them to follow her outside, she said, "My friend Kathryn. She's been trying to apply to law school, but her dad cut her off so she's been working two jobs to try and save up. She'd be one of the first to leave her and make something of herself, so I try to make it easier on her".

"Do people not leave here a lot?" Henry asks.

"Hardly at all. If you're family has a family business, you join the family business. If you're smart, you take classes at the junior college and teach, or else you work at the docks or the cannery. I can't remember the last time someone left".

There's bitterness in her voice. As strange as this town in, Emma has lived in places like this before, and it's not the first time she's heard the sentiment.

Ruby gets in her truck and leads them to the inn a few streets over. It's a warm building, old and cozy looking, but as empty as Ruby had said.

"Not a lot of travelers here, so most of our clientele are either people who get kicked out, or lunchtime quickies". There's a candor to her voice, when she reaches behind the desk and pulls up the room list. "So you're going to get your pick of rooms."

"How do you stay in business with so few guests?" Emma wonders.

"Diner brings in decent business, and Granny and I both live on the property. Taxes would probably eat us alive if we didn't have a standing deal with Mr. Gold."

"Who's Mr Gold?" Neal wants to know.

"He owns the town pawn shop. And also half the town".

Ruby tells them the rate, which is shockingly reasonable, and leads them to their room. It's smallish, but has a wall dividing the area, so that Henry's bed is off by itself.

"We don't have onsite breakfast, but if you come into the diner tomorrow morning, I can probably give you a discount" Ruby says, before shutting the door and leaving them to their devices.

When Henry's in the shower, Emma makes a few calls.

"I forgot the rent on my office is due next week. Guess we're going to have to decide what to do quick."

"You're office is a closet. I'm sure Peretsky can find something else to do with it".
Emma gets up to retrieve her pajamas and change for bed. "It's been two days, and it already feels like we've fallen into another life. You're lucky- you can work anywhere."

Neal pulls his sketchbook out of his bag.

"That's provided I ever finish this thing, if I expect to get paid for it I mean".

"Did you bring your canvases?"

"They're in the trunk- I'll pull them out and work on them tomorrow or the next day."

She moves to close the curtains. The view of the town outside is pretty great.

"What exactly are we going to do here?"

Neal looks at her from the bed. "I don't really know. Usually this is the part in the story where some kind of wise mentor figure approaches to guide the hero. Or there's a prophecy read aloud, or the villain appears and announces their plans".

Henry then emerges from the bathroom saying that he's tired and going to bed.

When he's away from the bed, Emma flops back onto the comforter wondering, "How do you even break a curse anyway?"

Henry doesn't say anything, but he can hear them talking through the wall, and his heart races with excitement. He pulls the book out of his bag, and he reads through to the end using his little metal flashlight as fast as he can. When he finally finishes, the light from behind the wall is off, and he can hear his mom snoring lightly. It's pretty late, but he's still wide awake.

It has to be true. The baby in the last picture- the blanket is identical to the one he had when he was a baby, the one with his mom's name on it. The same name too.

He lays back in bed. That meant- fairy tales were real, MAGIC was real. His mother was meant to be a great hero, and he would get to see it all.

Trying to go to sleep, he wonders how they know. And he wonders where his dad comes into it all.

The next day is pretty uneventful. They have breakfast at the diner, and Henry and Emma go to explore some of the shops on main street. Neal stays in the diner with his sketchbook, intending to get some work done.

Ruby finds them fascinating, so he tells her about the project.

"Guy I know is doing a series of retold fairy tales- setting them in real places. The one I'm working on now is Snow White, set in Mission-era California. I think he wants to invoke the whole colonial theme or something- I think it's kind of far fetched, but the art's challenging as a style at least."

Ruby picks up one of his preliminary designs of the Evil Queen and snorts.

"Hey! This kind of looks like Mayor Mills".

Neal takes it back from her. "It's not done yet".

That night, while Neal sets up his easel to do the line work on one piece, Emma says,

"I need to go shopping tomorrow morning, get some cereal and stuff for making sandwiches so we
don't have to keep eating out, can you take Henry?"

"No problem, he wants to check out the library tomorrow."

Emma quirks an eyebrow, "HE does?"

"Yes, it's not just me. Ruby told me it's only open two days a week, so tomorrow will be perfect for us".

Something happens at the grocery store the next morning that blows Emma's mind to pieces, and blows away any skepticism she might have had about this place.

She was in the canned foods aisle, examining labels (this town seems to have far more off-brand and store-brands than she was used to) when she caught sight of Mayor Mills out of the corner of her eye. Groaning, she moves to go further down the aisle and hope she didn't see her, when she also caught sight of the girl with her.

Dark hair, ponytail, tan skin. She almost had convinced herself she was seeing things, until the girl pauses at the end of the aisle, and raises her hand in acknowledgement until the Mayor, clearly distracted, says "come along Lily".

The name shoots to Emma's core.

After heading back to the Inn, she asks Granny, cleaning the front room on her day off, about the girl.

"Oh yeah, Lily wandered into town a while back, a runaway, got caught trying to break into an empty house. The mayor took her in, said she had told her she had no family. Adopted her, gave her a home. Said she had emotional problems, which given her life wouldn't be a stretch- and I can't imagine living with someone like the mayor would-"

She quiets abruptly.

"Why are you curious about her?" She questions pointedly.

"She just....looked so much like someone I used to know. How long has it been since she was adopted?"

"Seems like forever. It's too bad really- she helps Sheriff Graham out at the station sometimes, but other than that, nobody sees her much."

"It must not be her then, " Emma says "I don't think she's old enough to be her then."

When Neal and Henry return, she's sitting at the little table in the corner, with the shopping bags in front of her.

Neal catches her eye almost immediately. "OK, what's wrong?".

"I saw Lily today".

"What?"

Emma gets up and moves toward the bed and sits down again, her head in her hands.

"Did I ever tell you about Minneasota?"
"Wasn't that where you went when you first ran away?"

She nods.

"I was thirteen. Left in the middle of the night and hopped a bus. Ran out of money immediately, and took to shoplifting. I met this girl- she stopped me from getting caught once- and showed me a place to crash in town."

Emma feels tears dripping onto her cheeks, she hasn't thought of this in so long.

"She was the closest thing I'd ever had to a best friend. She was just like me- an orphan who never felt like she belonged. But her adoptive family found her and she went home, but she swore we'd always be friends and always look out for each other. But I never saw her again. Until today. I caught sight of her in the grocery store, with the mayor. I thought I was going crazy until she looked at me. It's her, I'm sure of it."

"Are you sure Emma? It's been a long time, you can't have know what she would grow up-"

Emma interrupts forcefully, "She hasn't. I don't know what the Hell is going on with this town, but she looks exactly the same as she did then."

"Her name was Lily? Dark hair, about thirteen?"

Emma jerks, and realizes that Henry's been listening the whole time. Shit, how are they going to explain this to him?

"Henry, I..."

"She came up to me the first night we were here. Said we had to leave or we would never be able to, that she never could. It must be part of the curse."

That gets Neal's attention, "Henry how do you...."

Henry darts back behind the wall to where his own stuff is. He comes back with a large, leather bound book.

"Someone sent me this in the mail a few weeks ago. I thought they were just fairy tales, but some of them are different than stories I've heard. And there's whole chapter at the end about a curse."

Neal continues, "About how the Evil Queen,"

"Sent everyone from the Enchanted Forest here, and stole their lives and memories. And how Snow White and Prince Charming's daughter."

Emma rolls her eyes.

"Was saved from the curse, and would return when she turned twenty-eight, and would be the only one who could break the spell and save everyone."

"What makes you so sure this is the truth Henry?" Neal asks, Emma is still stone-struck.

"Because all of the people in this town look like the characters in the book." He opens the book and flips through, "See? Look-" he gestures "It even has one of Mom in her baby blanket. Plus" he quiets, seeming a bit ashamed, "I heard you guys talking last night, I wasn't spying I swear! But I heard you- you know it's true don't you?"
Henry's worked himself up, so he pauses to catch his breath, then continues without confirmation. "So this town is under an evil witch's curse, and only Mom can save it. So how are we going to do it?"

Neal finally finds the ability to speak up, "Can't say we know for sure either kid".

The rest of the day, continues like normal. Scarily normal, frighteningly normal. Neither Neal or Emma says a word, and Henry, for his worth, only makes a few light hearted comments.

Later that night after Henry goes to sleep, Neal sits in bed reading the book.

"The mayor has to be the Evil Queen," he points the page towards Emma.

"It does look like her, and she certainly gave herself enough power."

She sounds faraway.

"Something still bothering you?"

"When Lily saw me earlier, she didn't say a word. She looked....she looked like she'd had the life dragged out of her. When we were kids, she was so confident, so sure of herself- she saved me from a jam pretty easily. That was gone, all of it". I talked to Mrs. Lucas earlier. She said Lily has emotional problems, and that the mayor adopted her. But even though Lily was an orphan like me, she had a family- a real one. I was so mad that she had lied to me about them...."

She reaches up to rub her temple.

"And even though she insisted that she felt invisible, they still spent all that time finding her when she ran away. I don't doubt they would do it again. However Lily ended up staying here, I doubt it was of her own free will. And if the mayor is the Evil Queen, I just....curse aside, we have to get her away from her."
Two days later, Neal returns to the library, asking the woman at the desk (Kathryn?) about where to look for apartment listings in town.

"Mr. Gold owns pretty much all of the property in town, you would have to go see him. He owns the pawnshop- but be careful, he can be a real shark if he smells weakness".

She pulls a textbook off of a stack next to her, "It was a bitch and a half getting this place open again because of him".

"Why was it closed?"

Kathryn shrugs. "Only other employee here is Ms. Belacqua, and she had a brush with agoraphobia a while back and couldn't deal with keeping it open herself- still can't really. If I leave to go to school, it will probably close again".

"That's a shame" Neal says.

Meanwhile, Emma and Henry had gone to the elementary school to pick up enrollment papers. The woman in the office had seemed a bit put out by the question, and had taken quite a bit of time to locate them, but in the end, she found them, and they stopped by the park so Emma could fill them out.

When Henry pauses playing to sit on the bench next to her, Emma prods.

"You sure you're OK with this kid? Moving is a pretty big change, and we've lived in Florida your whole life."

"Are you kidding?" Henry asks with incredulity. "You heard about the curse. Stuff like this NEVER happens in the real world. Back home, I'd never get a chance to be part of a great adventure like this".

Emma slides an arm around him and squeezes.

"Your dad and I...we never really wanted anything more than a chance to live an ordinary life. It's nice that you were able to hope for more".

Later, when they get back to the hotel, Emma asks Neal,

"Any luck on your front?"

"We have to go talk to the pawnshop owner apparently. You want to come?"

"Yeah, I'm going to need to find out about office space anyway".

Neal glances back over to where Henry's sitting on the bed.

"Kid, you want to come with us to look for apartments?"

"No, I'm going to try and Facetime everyone back home."

When they leave to go to the car, Emma comments,
"I don't think he really gets what this will mean. He's thinking of it like he's the hero in one of his books- he's going to end up missing his friends a lot".

"He'll probably make new friends fast, he's always been good at that. Besides, if he goes in with the hero instinct, maybe he'll be of some help, god knows neither of us know how to do it".

When they find and enter the shop, it seems completely empty. The floor is crowded with all matter of strange stuff for sale. Antique looking desks, an old fashioned baby crib, a bizarre looking clock. It's unlike any of the pawn shops either of them had been in before- no out dated electronics, no half broken items marked for like a quarter that someone had probably left on the road.

Emma gets momentarily distracted by a glass mobile over the baby crib when a voice asks,

"Can I help you two?"

Emma turns to see a short, impeccably dressed man standing by the counter. He's an older man, his hands resting on a cane, and there's something amiss in his voice to Emma's ear.

"Hi." She says a big hesitantly, not sure how to approach. "I'm Emma Cassidy, and this is my husband Neal. We're new in town, and were told that we should come here to ask about renting an apartment, are you Mr. Gold?"

"Indeed I am. Nice to hear that you two are so enamoured of our little town that you've decided to make it your home. Unfortunately, I have a few appointments this afternoon that I need to keep, but if you come by tomorrow morning, I can give you a tour of some of the properties I own."

He reaches under the counter to retrieve a group of papers that he hands to Emma before walking them to the door.

He reaches out to touch Emma on the shoulder before she exits and asks,

"What was your name again dearie?"

Emma furrows her eyebrows and replies, "Emma", before turning her back to him, and letting the door shut behind her.

All she can think outside on the sidewalk is "That was weird".

When they get back to the hotel, Henry's still on Facetime on his bed. Emma sets the papers on the little desk and sits to go through then. She then notices Neal sitting on the bed, slumped. Emma had noticed that Neal had been strangely quiet, both in the store and after they left, but his demeanour concerns her.

"Hey" she says, glancing over her shoulder "You OK?"

He's quiet for a long time, before saying quietly, "That was my father".

That gets her attention. "What?"

"I'm sure".

She gets up to sit next to him on the bed, their shoulders brushing.

"How are you so sure?"

"He looks the same- not exactly- we could never dress that well, he actually looks better than he
did...but his voice, his demeanor, it hasn't changed a bit. I spent so long running from him, hoping I would never see that face again".

"Did he..."

Neal briefly jerks away from her, before continuing.

"I looked him straight in the eye. He definitely saw me, and didn't recognize me".

He looks so defeated. Emma hasn't seen him like this since Henry's very difficult infant years.

"It's been three hundred years, I don't know what I thought would happen".

Emma reaches across to take his hand, and they sit quietly for a bit.

"We're supposed to go look at apartments with him tomorrow morning. Do you want me to just go by myself? It's OK if you do".

"That...might be best".

The apartment Mr Gold shows her tomorrow is small, and almost overwhelmingly cute. Pictoral wallpaper and white molding. Normally it would be far too much for Emma's sensibilities, but it seems to be the style in this town, and the price is more than right.

She takes some pictures with her phone to send to Neal, then asks.

"You said you could also show me something available for an office?"

"Yes, you said you were, what a private detective? Well, you will probably find work a bit thin in our little town, but I do have a space available at an excellent price, that I feel you will find more than satisfactory".

Emma is confused when he then leads her to the town's sheriff's station.

"What are we-"

Mr. Gold smiles a bit. "Storybrooke you will find, is quite quiet. What little crime there is is easily handled by our Sheriff, Graham Humbert".

Emma keeps her mouth shut. This is beyond weird. Every little town she's ever been in has had more than one cop, even one's that were so small they were covered by a county's department. Little towns, in her experience, had their share of crime.

But she smiles politely, when Mr. Gold introduces her to the sheriff, a handsome man with curly hair and a bit of an accent she can't place. She returns to her characteristic questioning when Mr. Gold shows her the space he was recommending- essentially, an unused filing room.

"Isn't this...like, a professional conflict? Having an office within the actual sheriff's department?"

"Miss Cassidy, can you tell me, in your area of work, what sort of cases do you see most regularly?"

Emma pauses,

"Cheating spouses, deadbeat parents, missing people".

"The first two aren't exactly matters for law enforcement, and the last one...do the police generally do
much for people looking for missing adults?"

Emma's taken aback. "No, no they really don't".

"Then I feel that the two of you can get on without stepping on each others toes. It may come to pass that the proximity may allow you to help each other".

Though she still has some misgivings, she agrees to the deal and Mr Gold lets her sign the papers there. When she gives them to him, she says.

"You can go ahead without me, I need to make a phone call".

Emma takes the time to call Peretsky back in Florida. Her receptionist picks up, and seems a bit confused initially, before catching up and agreeing to have Emma's files and computer shipped up to Maine this weekend. She then calls Neal, who had taken Henry out to purchase his school uniform. She'll take them both to see the apartment tonight, and bring the papers by Mr. Gold's shop the next morning, and they could move in the next day.

When she hangs up the phone and gets up to leave, she stops to say goodbye to the Sheriff.

He shakes her hand firmly, and she says. "Thanks for letting me share your building Sheriff Humbert, I'll try not to step on your toes".

"Thank you for the courtesy Mrs. Cassidy, but I doubt that will be a problem. Like Mr. Gold said, this town is very quiet. And please, call me Graham, everyone else in town does".

Just as Emma's about to turn to leave, the door of the station opens.

"Afternoon Lily, have any homework to do today?"

"Just reading for English".

Lily's in her school uniform, and looks happier than when Emma had seen her last.

Before she can open her mouth and make this whole situation awkward, Lily walks past Emma and drops her backpack, spilling her books and papers.

When Emma squats to help her pick them back up, Lily looks her straight in the eye, hands her a folded up piece of notebook paper, and says, "Don't read it right now, wait til you're alone".

Then she gets back up, throws her backpack on the extra desk and pulls out a book like nothing had just happened.

Emma leaves the station, still confused.

She opens the paper later in the car, it reads:

"Emma,

Tomorrow morning, 7am behind the house (there's an address written), it's the biggest house on the street, you can't miss it. DON'T LET ANYONE SEE YOU THERE"

She shows it to Neal later after dinner when the three of them come to check out the apartment.

"Does this sound like one of those signs you talked about from the stories?" Emma asks.
"Sure does" Neal agrees.

Henry interjects, "Lily did try to warn me, she might know something we don't. Besides, she's in danger, and we're the heroes. We have to try and help her".

The next morning is overcast, and the three drive to find the address Lily gave them. Emma hangs back a bit, wary of her words about letting people see them. They hadn't met many people in town, and who knew who would tell?

And it's true- the Mayor's house is extremely easy to find. Emma loops the car around parks it by the side of the field that stretches behind the building, sloping up into a hill. It takes a bit of a ways too- the house's fence encloses an area nearly the size of a football field, full of trees and ornamental hedges.

Emma steps out, and gazes out into the distance. Neal and Henry follow her. It takes less than a minute until Lily comes around the same side, walking close to the fence.

She turns to talk to Emma first. Emma is struck by her eyes- at some point they look exactly like the girl she met all those years ago, at others they look as though she's lived a thousand years.

"Sorry about yesterday. Graham wouldn't deliberately tell on us, but he might let something slip, I didn't want to risk it".

Then she turns to Henry. "How come you didn't listen to me before?"

Henry's indignant. "Because the book led us here, the one with everyone's stories, and how the Evil Queen cursed them so none would be able to have their happy endings. And now only my mom can break the curse. That means she's a hero, and a hero would never leave people in trouble".

Lily snorts. "A curse. That's perfect."

"You didn't know?"

"I knew something was wrong here".

She sits down on the ground, crossing her legs, careless of the grass and dirt on her skirt. Emma quietly sits beside her, and Henry and Neal stay close.

"A few months after Minnesota, I ran away again. Did what you said, hopped a bus, but headed east this time. Ended up near Bangor and kept moving. Walked across here one day."

She smirks again, but makes it look almost sad.

"Thought a small town like this would be an easy mark. But it was like I had a giant sign on my back. Everyone saw me, and everyone knew I didn't belong here. I tried to leave, that was when I found out I couldn't. When I got close to the town line, I would get lost, or sidetracked, or I would fall and hurt myself".

She rolls down her knee socks, revealing long healed scars on her ankles.

"Broke both my ankles the last time I tried that. The mayor took me in. I wish I told her that I had a family, one that would be looking for me, but..."

She cuts herself off again.

"It's not just that. Nothing changes here. That clock tower has been stopped since the day I entered
town. All the kids stay in the same grade. Everyone stays the same age. Even when it seems like the seasons change, they just kind of blend into each other. No one is born, or dies, or comes or leaves—at least until you three”.

She fixes Emma with a faraway look again.

"I didn't even really realize how long it had been, until you guys showed up. I saw you through the diner window, realized how old you had gotten..."

"How did you know things had changed?" Henry wants to know.

"The night you got into town, the clock tower started ticking again, I can see it from my room. I thought I was seeing things at first, but it really happened."

Emma nudges Neal on the shoulder.

"Can you guys drive back, drop off the paperwork at Mr. Gold's?"

She quiets her voice.

"I kind of want to talk to her alone for a little while".

Lily doesn't respond, she's barely acknowledged Neal or Henry at all. Henry protests a little, saying he wants to hear the whole story.

"I'll give you a blow by blow later, I promise".

When the others leave, Emma finally asks.

"Lily, does she...hurt you or scare you?"

"I guess I thought maybe she would be different. I mean, she wanted me to be her kid, told me that to my face. She doesn't love me, only pretends she does. Tells everyone I'm crazy, so they'll feel bad for her having to put up with me".

She stretches her legs out ahead again.

"It was when I started realizing things were wrong that she made me start seeing Dr Hopper. He's a good man too, but he's under thumb just like the sheriff. Just like everyone else here. She doesn't hurt me, not physically. But everyone in town is under her control here. The school, the store owners, even Mr Gold doesn't cross her. I'm scared of her sure, and so is everyone else."

She stands up again.

"I guess I should have thought magic before. That would explain this".

Rooting around the ground, Lily picks up a rock the size of her thumb. She wings it back towards the house. It gets decent air, but when it reaches the space by the windows, it stops and falls.

"I tried sneaking out my window a few times. It was like hitting an electric fence. Tried walking out the front door, same thing. I can't leave unless she lets me".

Lily pulls out her phone.

"Speaking of, I need to get to school. I was supposed to be seeing Dr. Hopper this morning, but he's sitting with a sick friend. If I don't get to school on time, they'll call and tell."
Emma stands too.

"I'll walk you to the road. Lily..."

She looks at her again, with a sprig of the old mischief in her eyes this time.

"So you got married and had a kid? How'd that happen".

Emma smiles and laughs a little.

"I know right? I mean, it didn't exactly happen in that order..."

She trails off, remembering that Lily is still as young as they were.

"It was hard, and it hurt sometimes, but it was worth it. Finally found some place I belonged."

Lily's eyes are downcast again.

"Your own happy ending. I wish I had".

Emma reaches out to grab her by the arm.

"Lily, I promise, I am going to do whatever I can to fix this town. And whether or no the Mayor is the Evil Queen like Henry's books says she is, I am going to do everything in my power to get you away from her. Whatever your happy ending may be, I don't think being trapped here is it".
Emma sends for their things that weekend. It seemed easier than driving back down and back again. The three of them pack up the hotel room, pay Ruby for the last day and leave.

Henry loves the new apartment, his room is bigger than it was in Florida, and the window he says has a better view (he can see the whole park).

The whole apartment is bigger than their one in Florida.

"I can't help feeling like we shouldn't be able to afford this", Neal comments when they finish bringing in and making their bed.

"We'll see how this works in a month if I haven't gotten any clients. I might have to start outsourcing; taking cases from people in Bangor and Boston".

"I've still got my tools, I could give tattoos on weekends for extra cash if we need it".

Emma snorts, "I'm sure that will endear us to the townsfolk, I've never seen a place so old fashioned. I saw a man with a pocket watch today".

"Have you started..."

"Yes, but I didn't tell her. Lily never thought much of her adoptive parents, but it's the only thing I can think of. If her adoption was legal and her papers are in order, Regina won't have any grounds to keep her here".

They had moved out into the kitchen to tell Henry to get off his phone and put his boxes in his own room when a knock at the door.

When Emma answers, she is greeted by a petite woman with short dark hair, carrying a covered tray.

"Hello! I saw you bringing in boxes and thought I'd stop by to meet you. I'm Mary-Margaret Nolan, I rent the apartment across the hall".

She pushes the tray into Emma's hands.

"I made a cobbler, but there's just too much for just me, I thought it would make a good welcome gift. I'm sorry for the eagerness, I haven't had a neighbor in so long".

It's Neal who finally manages to say, "Come in, please".

Emma's never been particularly good at pleasantries. Nothing like Neal or Henry who were charming and gregarious by nature, but even she soon finds Mrs. Nolan easy to talk to, and has joined in the conversation while spooning the cobbler onto plates.

"Oh, please, call me Mary-Margaret. I kept my maiden name for teaching, and using Nolan at all still feels strange."

"You're a teacher?" Henry asks, gulping down a bite.

"Fourth grade" she nods. Then pauses.

"Oh! They did tell me I would be getting a new student this coming week, that must be you, Henry"
Henry smiles, but looks a bit dazed.

"You're not going to come over and watch me do my homework are you?"

"I'm sure you don't need me to do that".

Neal interjects, "Yeah, telling you to do your homework is our job".

He takes Henry's plate and put it in the sink.

"Go start putting your stuff away".

When Henry leaves, Emma finally asks.

"Is your husband at work? We'd like to meet him too".

Mary-Margaret's smile falters.

"My David fell ill some time ago. He's been comatose for so long. The doctors don't know what's wrong and if..."

She stops suddenly. Emma's face is burning, she can't believe she stepped into this conversation, she should know by now when to not say anything.

Mary-Margaret swallows, then continues.

"But nevermind that. Is Henry excited about starting a new school?"

"About as much as can be expected", Neal says. "He's a good kid, a good student. He had a lot of friends back in Florida, so he'll probably miss them a lot, but I'm sure he'll adjust".

"I'm glad to hear that. And what do you two do for a living?"

Emma finally finds her bearings again.

"Neal's an artist, I work as a private investigator."

The corner of Mary-Margaret's face twitches, just a bit.

"That sounds...interesting."

Her tone changes, to curious.

"Have you had a visit from the mayor yet?"

"She...made herself known when we first came here" Neal says, slowly.

Emma raises an eyebrow. "Should we be concerned?"

Mary-Margaret smiles again. "You may want to make sure you have all your paperwork and permits in order...Mayor Mills is a bit of a...stickler for propriety. She can be very critical of anything she deems unbecoming of our town, and if you get on her bad side, she could make life very difficult for you".

With that, she stands, takes her now empty cobler tray, and returns to her own apartment.

A little bit later that night, when Neal goes to check on Henry shortly before bedtime, he finds him
pouring over another section of the book.

"What have you found this time, kid?"

Henry lifts the book and points the open pages in Neal's direction, showing him the illustration.

"Mrs. Nolan- she's Snow White I'm sure of it".

Neal takes a look at the picture. It DOES look quite a lot like the woman from earlier, to be sure.

"You've got a pretty good eye."

"It's not just that dad, look".

He flips to the very last page. His voice is fast, and excited.

"We knew Mom was sent here to break the curse, that she was the chosen one- it was because she was Snow White and Prince Charming's daughter. That means that Snow White is her mother- and my grandmother".

Neal pauses, before picking his words carefully.

"You might want to hold off telling your mom about this."

"Why? Wouldn't she want to know- It's not like Mrs. Nolan was mean or horrible."

"Henry...what has Mom told you about her childhood?"

Henry pauses too, suddenly thoughtful.

"She told me that she grew up in foster care and didn't know who her real parents were- why wouldn't she want to know now?"

"Because your mother didn't have a very happy life growing up. She told me once until she met me and had you, that she never once felt like anyone loved her. She worked hard to get to where she is now, and she's extremely protective of me and you because of it. Finding her parents- finding out their alive and good people- after going through that- it could be very painful for her. It's probably going to come out eventually, but I don't think you showing her a picture in a book will be the best way for her to find out. So sit on that for a while, promise?"

Henry nods. "That makes sense I guess. Thanks Dad".

Neal leans over and hugs him.

"Goodnight kid. Get a good night's rest, you have school tomorrow".

Before Henry settles down, he looks at the last pages in the book one more time.

"They loved you so much Mom, and you didn't even know".

The first week that Emma has in her office is boring as hell. Storybrooke it turns out, is terribly dull it turns out. She does a bit of online work for a couple of her aging colleagues back in Florida who weren't as tech-savvy as she. Graham brings her coffee once, and shares some of his stories (apparently having only one cop in town works out just fine somehow). But overall, her first week passes with hardly anything notable occurring.
Then, the last hour on Friday afternoon, a young man walks into her office just as she's planning to pack up and head home.

"Are you Emma Cassidy?" He asks nervously. He's young- barely twenty if that, and well dressed and groomed. But he's sweating. He doesn't want to be here.

"I am. Do you need something?"

He rubs the back of his neck.

"My name's Sean Herman. I heard that you were a private detective, and I thought..."

Emma raises an eyebrow.

"It's my girlfriend Ashley. Her roommate said she didn't come home last night, that she hasn't seen her in three days".

"Is that unusual for her?"

Sean just nods.

"It's not just that- she's eight months pregnant."

That gets Emma's attention.

"Do you know where she could have gone?"

"I've called all her friends, her stepfamily, everyone I could think of. It's just- we've been fighting a lot, my parents have been pressuring her to give up the baby because they think she's beneath me- and she said something last week about making a deal- and I'm just worried about where she could have ended up."

Emma hands him a piece of paper.

"Write down everything about her and where she's been the last few weeks that you can remember. And- I hate to bring this up now, but there is the matter of payment..."

"It's not a problem" he says, quickly. "Just find her please".

And just like that, Emma's weekend got a lot more interesting.
Chapter 5

Henry spends the weekend after his first week at school at the park with his new classmates, and Emma spends it working.

She does find the more traditional detective work a nice change of pace.

Ashley's coworkers and classmates all paint the same picture; a young pregnant woman working and going to school, devoted to bettering herself and becoming a good mother.

Her stepmother and sister tell another story, one of an immature and irresponsible girl who couldn't handle being on her own.

Dejected, Emma returns to her office. She's staring at her computer trying to come up with a new lead when she hears a noise from the other side of the station.

It's Sheriff Graham, walking through the front door with Mr. Gold.

"I can assure you, that I will do everything that can be done."

"I understand that Sheriff, but don't be insulted if I find that my own efforts may be more fruitful".

After he leaves, Emma asks, "What was that all about?"

"Someone broke the front window of his shop last night and stole some of his paperwork."

"That's...sort of an odd target of theft. Nothing else?"

"No, but Mr. Gold is a businessman of many trades here."

Emma pauses, and then is hit with a thought.

"What sort of deals does he make? I know he's a landlord, but what else?"

"Sales and purchases, contracts of all kinds."

"Does he ever deal in adoptions?"

Graham looks somewhat surprised at the thought.

"I've...heard some rumors over the years. It does sound like something he would do, he's always been very concerned on matters of child welfare here. But I should warn you, some of his deals edge into very shady territory."

"You know this and don't do anything about it?"

"He's a powerful man Emma. Small town like this, people of power can get away with a lot. Not just him. All you can do is try to protect others from their wrath."

Before leaving the office, Emma makes two phone calls.

The first is to Ruby, who she asks if Ashley had a car.

"She walked to work and school, and I gave her a ride sometimes."
There's a note in her voice that Emma picks up on.

"Ruby, if you know something, you do realize that she could be in danger right? And if she is, and you don't tell me..."

There's a long pause.

"My truck disappeared from out front the other day. It's not been running well, so I thought maybe Granny had it towed, she always said me driving that thing was dangerous, but Billy didn't seem to know..."

Emma cuts her off to get the description and plate number.

She then calls Sean on her way out.

"Has either of your parents ever mentioned business dealings with Mr. Gold?"

He waits a long time before saying. "I know my dad has worked with him in the past. Do you think..."

"I think a lot right now. I'll call you as soon as I find out."

When she gets in the car, she heads straight for the town line. If what Lily said was true, she shouldn't have to go far.

The town's line is desolate. The few properties outside of the town proper end their line markers at minimum meters away from it. Emma's barely past the town sign when she sees a truck fitting Ruby's description parked off road by a tree, it's driver's side door open.

Emma gets out and checks. The door is open, but the truck is parked, and the keys are on the seat. She grabs them.

It's only a few hundred yards from the road when Emma finds her.

Ashley just looks at her dazed. She's panting, and sweating, and looks like she's been doing both for hours. Her skin is pale, her lips cracked. Before Emma can say anything, Ashley lets out a groan of pain and tenses up in a way that is immediately recognizable.

Emma brings her a bottle of water from the car, and asks her before calling for an ambulance, "How far apart?"

It turns out, not far enough. They had barely made it to the hospital when Ashley delivers a healthy baby girl.

The minutes after are sharp, careful. Emma tries to let her rest before she starts asking questions.

"Whatever you took from Mr. Gold's shop, it was about the baby right? An adoption contract?"

It takes some time before Ashley nods in response.

"What could have been so bad about that that it would make you try to run away? Did you just change your mind?"

Ashley doesn't respond to her question directly.

"It was a good deal...No contact at all, a decent amount of money. Mr. Herman said it was a very
lucrative deal, But the other day, I just...I couldn't go through with it. I couldn't give up on her because everyone had given up on me".

Emma sighs. "Ashley, payment in exchange for adoption is considered selling a baby. Laws about this are very strict. If you had just changed your mind there's no way the contract would have held up in court."

Ashley just shakes her head. "You don't know Mr. Gold. If you agree to something with him, you follow through. I've never heard of anyone who came out the other side breaking a deal with him."

Emma sighs.

"Ashley, do you want to keep your daughter?"

"More than anything".

"Then this is it. You can't back out now. All the ups, all the downs, they're all on you now. You can't run away from this".

Ashley shakes a little. "I'm scared, I don't know what Mr. Gold will do when he finds out I broke our deal. But I want to do this"

"Then do it. Take your time now, if Mr. Gold shows up, let me deal with him."

She waits a minute before asking.

"Do you want to call Sean? I agreed to find out what happened to you for him, but I don't have to tell him where you are if you don't want me to."

"No...it's okay. If he wants to be here for us, he has a right to."

Emma steps out of the room to give her some time to rest.

She calls Sean first, who sounds as though he's been up for days. He says he'll come by to see Ashley later, but Emma warns him not to spook her.

Then she calls Neal to check up on what she's missed.

"I just finished dinner, you can make it if you hurry. Henry's still at the park, I called him and he's on his way."

"I'll be home as soon as I can, I might have a few loose ends to wrap up."

*Meanwhile*

Henry had told the truth. He was at the park when Dad had called him. But the most part earlier in the day he'd wandered around some of the streets nearby. Storybrooke was a strange place. Back at home Mom and Dad would have never let him stay at the park by himself ALL day. But here it was like one of those towns on TV, where everything was in place all the time and nothing ever happened. Henry hadn't thought places like that actually existed.

He doesn't realize he's on the same street the Mayor lives on until suddenly he sees her leaving her house. He ducks behind a hedge, slowly looking over his shoulder before creeping back out as she drives away.

He walks closer to her house. He remembers Lily demonstrating the forcefield the other day. He
wonders how that works. Is it like a net? A wall? Does it have a top or bottom? How far out does it extend?

Collecting a handful of pebbles from the road, he sets off to test. Pebbles plink on all of the windows, never bouncing, always sliding straight down. And there's a lot of windows to test, this place is huge.

With only a small amount of guilt, he jumps over a small side fence to around the back.

The ground starts to slope down, and then up again, and it's at this dip that Henry notices the set of windows. They look like basement or cellar windows, and they're beneath the level of the rest of the bottom floor.

He throws a few more pebbles. The first ones slide like the others. The last, lowest throws, hit the windows just like they normally would.

Picking up a stick, he prods gingerly. Touching it (and it's a few inches away from the walls) feels a bit like pushing a fork into the skin on top of Jello. Firm, but not solid, but not something that could be broken either. He keeps pushing, and then, yes. The whole field falls off just at ground level, right above the window.

Kneeling on the ground, he reaches out, and lets his fingertips touch the glass. They do.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Henry jerks upward so fast that he falls backwards onto the ground.

Looking up, it's with a rush of relief that he realizes the voice belongs to Lily, who's face is looking down on him from an upstairs window.

"Do you have a basement or a cellar?"

Lily looks confused. "Yes, but we don't use it, it just has the water heater and other stuff".

"Will your mom be back soon?"

"Umm...no it's a City Council meeting, they never last less than two hours, but you still shouldn't-"

"Then come down, I want to show you something."

A few seconds later, her head disappears from the window.

The minutes before the top of her head appears in the basement window crawl by, Henry certain that she was wrong and the mayor was going to return any minute.

Finally, Lily shows up, and pushes the stick to hold the window open.

"What?"

"Can you fit through the window?"

"What are you talking about, I told you I can't leave. I've tried-"

Henry takes the stick and pokes it through the window, nudging Lily's shoulder with it.

"The force field, or protective spell, or whatever keeps you inside stops at the ground. It missed this one spot, if you can fit through, you can get out".
Lily is stunned for a moment, but then shocks Henry by almost immediately pushing through the opening. Her shoulders nearly get stuck, but generous wiggling lets her slide through. When she gets out, she lays flat on the ground and laughs.

"All this goddamn time..."

"Does your mom leave you alone a lot?"

Lily sighs. "Every Saturday for City Council. Tuesday nights for school board, some Wednesdays for dinner with friends. I'm not supposed to do anything but homework."

"Then I can come back then, and you can get out and we can try to find out a plan to help my mom break the curse".

"You can try I guess, but I don't think I know much. I've spent most of my time here just dreaming about leaving".

"Do you have a cell phone?"

Lily shakes her head.

"When your mom leaves, and you're sure she's gone, dial this number" he hands her a piece of paper with his own number written on it. "And then hang up. If I can come, I'll dial back and do the same. It'll be like a code".

She looks uncertain, but takes the number.

"Be careful. I don't know what she'll do to you and your parents if she catches you."

Henry smiles. "It will be fine, we're the heroes of the story. That means we have to win in the end, no matter how hard".

Then he leaves the street to go back to the park and call his dad.

Emma doesn't get home until both Henry and Neal had finished dinner and cleared the table. Henry goes to watch TV while Neal reheats Emma's dinner.

"So how'd your first case here go?"

Emma grimaces. "Ashley has a healthy baby girl named Alexandria, her and Sean reconciled, and to make him go away, I now owe your father a favor".

Neal's face goes stony. "Emma, I've told you. Deals are my father's bread and butter, he'll have you now..."

"It was all I could do to get him to lay off. Even when I pointed out that his contract with Ashley had no legal standings, he was completely right that she could be painted into a corner that would leave her far worse off- out legal fees, claims of her being an unfit mother. Small towns breed this kind of thing. We'll deal with this favor, whatever it is when it comes up again."

She fixes him with a soft, but sly look.

"Besides, it's not like he can ask for my first born. No one makes deals for them once they reach adolescence."
Chapter 6

The first phone call comes the next Monday morning.

It's mayor Mills. Emma has to bite her tongue to stay civil.

She congratulates her on finishing her first case. Then the manufactured sweetness in her voice drops.

"I do hope you don't plan on continuing to upturn everyone's lives with your job. You might find yourself unwelcome by the townspeople. We like our lives here, no reason to change the status quo".

Emma's eyebrows shoot up.

"Ma'am, my clients come to me. All I can do is make my services known. I think you'll find any changes in people's lives here are of their own will".

The mayor's goodbye is sharp and biting. Emma winces. She fears she may have just brought a shit storm onto herself.

She takes a breath, then leaves to get a cup of coffee.

"Mayor just called to read me the riot act" she tells Graham, who's at his desk doing paperwork.

"Yes, Regina has never done well with change. She has her place in life all set and she likes it that way".

Emma smiles. "Well she'll just have to deal with me, because I'm not leaving."

There's a companionable silence before Emma asks.

"What's her daughter like? I saw her here the other day."

"Lily does her homework with me after school, and helps me sometimes with filing. She's a smart girl, stronger than most."

"I've heard some of the others in town talk..."

"That she's crazy? She was a runaway. No family, no home. Dr. Hopper's been trying to help her adjust to living here. It hasn't completely worked. But she's not insane."

Emma feels abashed.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean...But the mayor, is she a good mom?"

"She's more strict than she needs to be, and she's not the warmest person. And she doesn't exactly help the image that the town has of Lily being troubled. But parenting a teenager is hard, and I think she wants to do good by her."

Parenting any child is hard, Emma thinks. Much less a child who doesn't want to be there.

Neal has been spending his middays around town, working on his paintings.

The very same Monday, he's got his easel set up in the park by the apartment when he too is
approached by the town's mayor.

"Strange place to see someone this time of day" she starts off.

Neal shrugs. "I work where I can, I like painting outside, it makes for better inspiration."

"Yes, I heard you were an artist. One would usually call that a hobby rather than an occupation".

"I'm working on a series of works intended as illustrations for a series of children's books."

Regina smiles.

"How lovely! Does that afford you a regular paycheck, or does supporting your family fall onto your wife's shoulders?"

Neal knows exactly what she's doing. In his experience people didn't need to be evil to imply that it was unmanly for Emma to make more than him. And Regina clearly wants to get under his skin.

"It's not exactly steady, but the paycheck is good enough for doing something I love, and getting to spend more time at home with my son".

Regina's face falters. She clearly had expected that comment to work.

"Well, I must ask that you leave this park by the time school lets out. This area is intended for children, not shiftless adults".

Neal nods in acknowledgement in her general direction. He's been called way worse than shiftless before.

At dinner that night he relates the story to Emma, who responds.

"Yeah she stopped by the office to give me the third degree too."

"I could try to talk to Lily and see if she can think of a way to try to get her to lay off you guys".

Emma quirks an eyebrow,

"Do you see Lily much at school Henry? She's in eighth grade after all."

"I see her sometimes, at lunch mostly. She eats alone." He hasn't told them about his discovery at the mayor's house the other day. He knows they would tell him not to go, and he agrees that he shouldn't go too much. Too much risk.

"Be careful kid, if she finds out you two are hanging out, she might-

"Might figure out we know about the curse and try to stop us?"

Emma pauses.

"I was going to say she might start treating Lily worse than she already does. But you do have a point."

She shares a glance at Neal.

"She is the Evil Queen after all, at least according to the book."

"I'll be careful, don't worry."
The next day, Henry sits next to Lily at lunch.

"School board's tonight, do you want to sneak out?"

She's said no to the last two offers, so this one surprises him.

"Why?"

"She went out last night. She goes out once a month, to put flowers on her father's grave. But she was gone nearly two hours. She's done it before too. I want to see where she went".

The school board meeting is around usual dinner time. Henry tells Emma that he's eating at a friend's house, before leaving the apartment complex on his bike.

He's waiting down the block when he sees the mayor's car leave, and a few minutes later Lily rings his number, and he does the same.

When she slides out of the basement window, he looks awkwardly at his bike.

"We'll have to walk, I don't think I can peddle if you're on the back".

"It's ok, the cemetery's only a few blocks away."

Henry stashes his bike by the side of the house, and they take off on foot.

As they get closer to the cemetery, a tiny wave of fear starts moving in Henry's gut. It's not the cemetery, which is actually lovely this time of night, but his mother's words from earlier.

"How long is she usually gone for?"

"For school board? Usually until at least seven, sometimes later. We'll be fine, it's only a five minute walk back".

Henry Mills coffin is held in some kind of a stone building. A mausoleum? Henry's not sure what to call it, but even in the setting sun light, he thinks it's creepy.

The inside is even worse. The coffin is large and pretty, but Henry has never been this close to one before, and it makes him feel strange, even though he hadn't known this man.

"Nothing seem strange," he says, "Look, there's even fresh flowers".

He wants to leave, fast, but he doesn't want Lily to know that.

She's standing beside the coffin, staring at the floor.

"Come here" Henry does so, unwillingly.

Standing beside her he asks "What do you see?"

She shuffles.

"There's a line on the floor. Like the coffin's been moved".

She reaches out and pushes, hard.

"Help me"
Henry reaches out reluctantly, and pushes.

It gives, which surprises him.

He's even more surprised when it moves almost clear across the floor quite easily.

He's downright flummoxed by the stairs that appear below. It's like something straight out of a comic book.

Lily steps in front of him and starts down immediately. Henry follows, after a minute or so of psyching himself up.

Down the stairs is a small room, empty save one wall. That wall is lined by boxes, neat rows of bronze colored pull out boxes, like at a post office.

"What in the world..."

Lily steps up to the wall, and pulls out one of the drawers. She then shrieks and shoves it back.

"What's inside?"

She takes a deep breath and pulls the drawer back out, and reaches in. When Henry sees what she pulls out, he shrieks a little too.

He's seen drawings in school, he knows that there's no reason for one to be here, and there's no reason it should be glowing, and well, non-bloody, but he knew immediately that what they had found was a human heart.

"Why- why is that down here?"

Lily's face is frozen in fear, but she still manages to check a few other drawers.

"They're labeled".

"What?"

"They've got names on them, all of these hearts belong to people."

The fear that has been balled up in Henry's stomach spreads, taking over him, and suddenly all he wants is to get out of here.

"Let's go. Now".

Lily pauses for a moment, as though in a trance, then says "Yeah" and puts the drawer back, turning to head back up the stairs.

The exit from the mausoleum and cemetery is silent, and fast. Henry's head is swimming. Somehow this part of the story had never occurred to him.

Their at the end of the street where the mayor's house is when Henry starts to as "What should we-" when Lily interrupts him, cursing loudly, and ducking behind a hedge.

"What?"

She points down the street. The mayor's car is turning onto the main road, barely a house away from
"Why is she home early, she's never early" Lily looks terrified, her eyes wide, mouth pinched shut.

"Maybe-"

Henry's then interrupted by a car pulling up beside them, his heart jumps out of his chest realizing it's the Sheriff's car.

As Henry's life starts to flash before his eyes, Graham sticks his head over to the passenger side window.

"Lily, go around the back, I'll distract your mother. Henry, go home. You're mom's probably worried sick."

He drives down the road and stops in front of the house.

Lily takes his advice and starts jumping fences without even a goodbye.

Henry walks home slowly, sweat pouring down his face and his heart pounding.

One look at him and Emma demands to know what happened. He spills his guts immediately, about everything.

After the long and thorough two-person tongue lashing was done, Emma was sitting in her chair with her head in her hands, and just says.

"A wall of human hearts? Like, actual organ hearts? What on earth..."

"I've heard of spells that involve the use of a person's heart." Neal interjects. "They've usually got to do with free will. The heart, symbolically, being what controls a person".

"Then the names on them could be important. If Regina's somehow controlling the people here..."

"I'm not going back there" Henry says, white faced, "Not ever".

"No" Neal says firmly, "And you're not getting involved in any of this if we can help it".

"And I'm going to give permission to the sheriff to yell at you if he sees fit" Emma adds.

After Henry goes to bed later that night, Emma takes the storybook and stares at it's cover.

"This is just going to keep getting weirder and weirder isn't it?"

&&

Late at night about a week later, Lily woke up hearing a noise. It sounded like a door closing.

Curious, she gets up out of bed, and slowly opens her door.

The window just across the hall looks out over the front yard. Looking out it, she just manages to see the sheriff leave in his car.

That was strange, it was awfully late. She kept going, walking down the steps to the kitchen to get a glass of water.

She was surprised to see Regina sitting at the kitchen table, wearing her robe.
"Lily, what are you doing out of bed, go back upstairs this instant!"

Lily's dulled to sharpness in her voice by this point, so she just grabs a glass from the counter and goes.

When Lily reaches the stairs it hits her that even though her robe had been tied, it had been falling off her shoulders. And she hadn't seemed to be wearing anything beneath.

Lily's glad she's reached the door of her own room before she starts to cry.

&&

The next day, Emma's out of her office getting her mid-morning cup of coffee before interrupting her morning of doing nothing with another call to Portland for any one who needed research assistance, when she hears the door to the sheriff's office open.

Graham gets up from his chair.

"Lily what are you doing here, you're supposed to be in school".

The girl is disheveled, not wearing her uniform even though she has her backpack, and looks like she hasn't slept in a week.

"I heard you leave last night".

The man briefly struck dumb, can barely open his mouth to respond when she keeps going.

"You know I almost believed that you liked having me around? I guess I should have known better. She always made people feel sorry for her having to take of me, the poor crazy girl. I thought you were different, but I guess you were just doing it because you were fucking her. You're just as heartless as she is."

Emma feels like she suddenly has a million more questions than when the girl entered.

Graham reaches out to try and touch her shoulder, but Lily jerks away.

"It doesn't matter. I'm not going to be around for anyone to pity anymore".

She then turns and runs out the same door she came in.

Graham reaches for his jacket and keys, but Emma stops him.

"Let me go after her. I've been in her shoes before, and she might listen to me more than you".

He reaches for the phone.

"I'm going to have to call the mayor."

Emma nods and goes for her own keys.

"If I catch hell for this, I'll take it when it comes."

She then leaves the office in pursuit.
Chapter 7

Lily clearly knows the town, Emma thinks, as she tries to follow her after leaving. Even in her car where she should be able to catch up with her easily. But the girl knows the back routes, she knows how to jump over islands and down side streets, and soon Emma has to stop and think where she would go.

She wouldn't go home. If she had already had a speech like that ready, she was already ready to leave.

Emma first figures that she would go straight for the town line, but something niggles in the back of my mind.

She shoots a quick text to Graham.

"Did you call the Mayor?"

"She's already coming to chew me out".

Good, Emma thinks. If Regina's at the police station, she won't be where she thinks Lily went.

And thankfully the cemetery is far in the other direction.

It only takes her a few minutes. Emma hadn’t given the town cemetery any thought, not even after Henry’s story about what he and Lily found there. It looks like any other cemetery she’s ever seen—gravestones and flowers and freshly cut grass. She gives the stone masoleum off to one side a wary glance and walks towards them when she spots Lily sitting outside of it, her bike leaning against the wall.

“Trying to make a break for it? What made you think today would be any different from all the others?”

Lily shakes her head.

“I thought maybe since you had come...I mean, the clock started to move and it's never done that before...but it was just the same, I hit the city limits on the road, and my tire went flat. So I came back here, I don’t really know why. I just couldn’t face either of them. I don’t why Regina adopted me, she doesn’t seem to want me around, and I thought the sheriff...”

Emma sighs. “Lily, I can’t pretend to understand what’s going on between the sheriff and Regina, but...”

“God, he doesn’t even seem to LIKE her”

Emma nods, this did seem true. “Adult relationships can be complicated, and messy, and love sometimes has way less to do with it than you would think. “

“What other reason could there be?”

Emma forces a small smile. Lily acts adult, but she’s still a kid in some ways that it was easy to forget. She remembers her own adolescent years, when what she was trying to describe seemed like the only thing life would ever offer her.

“Loneliness, the comfort that comes with something easy, Having something to fill a place in your
life that seems...empty. Adults don’t really have a lot more figured out about things than kids, and sometimes the choices they make are just as strange“

Lily’s still slumping. The jacket she’s wearing is too big for her thin frame. She looks like she’s lived a thousand years and could make no more sense of it than year one.

“Like I said,” Emma continues, “I can’t explain Graham’s deal with your mother. But I can say he loves you, that he cares both what happens to you and what you think of him. Whatever reason Regina had for adopting you, he cares as much for you as a parent should.”

Lily wipes her eyes. “I’m scared for him. As angry as I was earlier, I don’t know what she would…”

Emma’s eyebrows shoot up. “What makes you think-”

She gestures at the stone building beside her.

“I went in before you got here. I saw his name on one of the boxes of hearts before- I thought maybe…- but I looked today, and it’s gone”.

Emma’s stomach sinks. This can’t be good.

She claps Lily on the shoulder.

“Let’s hurry up and get back before she has time to get too mad.”

When they’re both in the car, and Lily has strapped herself in, Emma has a few other questions.

“Your parents adopted you in Minnesota right?”

Lily nods, “Minneapolis”

“What were their names?”

“James and Priscilla Page.”

“Your date of birth is supposed to be in 1983 right?”

“Yes, why? I can’t imagine they’re still looking for me.”

“Because if this town is magic, I can’t imagine anything that happens here matters to the legal system outside. If they still have legal guardianship over you, than what Regina did is kidnapping. You can’t leave town now, but if I’m right, than once this curse breaks, she will have no right to make you stay”.

“Where will I go then?”

Emma smiles. “We can figure that out later. But your life is your life, it will be up to you”.

It’s barely been an hour and a half when they get back to the station, but Regina is livid. She doesn’t spare Lily a word before ordering her into the car.

“Barely her a month, Miss Cassidy, and you’re already digging up dirt and causing trouble. Now turning my own child against me, causing her to act out…”

Emma explodes. “Me? Turn her against you? You ought talk to her sometime, because nothing she’s told me has a single thing to do with me. From what she says, you’re a pretty poor parent, if all you
wanted was something to follow your every order maybe you should have just gotten a dog instead”.

“I’ve given that girl a home, when no one else wanted her.”

Emma snorts. “I’ve had homes like yours before. Home’s where nothing is yours, no one wants you there and the best you can hope for is to not tread on anyone’s toes today. They’re no home at all”

Regina pulls back, and looks like she might actually hit Emma before Graham grabs her by the wrist.

“So home mayor. Make sure Lily’s okay. I got Emma involved today because I thought she might be able to understand where Lily was coming from. She clearly does. Now go home. “

Regina’s eyes flash with anger. “Remember your place sheriff. I’ll be having a talk with you myself later.”

Graham jerks his hand back from her, face stoic.

“No, I don’t think you will.”

When she finally leaves, Emma lets out a breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding.

“Good, I was beginning to wonder if you ever went against her at all.”

Graham’s face is still stony, his hands curled tightly into fists.

“A lot of things seem to be changing around here lately.”

After, Emma goes back into her office, she makes a few calls. Nearly an hour later, she has what she needs.

Lilith Page, born 1983, missing without a trace since 1997. Deemed a likely runaway, no signs of her had ever turned up. Though apparently an adult, the notice came with a picture.

Absolutely no records of her, or anyone for that matter, having been adopted by a Regina Mills from Maine, and no record of James and Priscilla having terminated their parental rights.

If only she knew what to do with this information.

When she leaves her office to show Graham what she’s found, she finds him stooped over his desk, sweating profusely.

“Hey are you ok?”

“Chest hurts,” he manages to muster, before collapsing.

Emma runs over, finding him barely breathing. When she pulls out her phone to call 911, niggling in the back of her head is what Lily had said earlier.

“I don’t know what she’ll do…”
“Do they know if he’ll wake up?”

Henry places the flower by the side of Graham’s hospital bed, where he lies motionless.

“The paramedics said it looked like he had had a massive heart attack, and was lucky he was still alive”.

“Is that something that just happens, or…”

Emma sighs. “Sometimes young healthy people do have heart problems…but I really doubt there was anything natural about this”.

She slips the card that Lily had smuggled to Henry during lunch onto Graham’s end table.

“Come on Henry, there are other patients to see”.

They pass the next room, where Emma notices Mary-Margaret sitting beside the patient’s bed.

After recognizing the room’s decorations, she shoos Henry to join the other kids and chaperones stringing up the holiday banner in the common room. Some of the kids were setting up for the holiday there, and Henry and some of the others had been bringing things to patients who couldn’t leave bed.

It had been good timing, it turned out, that Emma had agreed to help chaperone Henry’s class field trip to the hospital ward for community service. That morning, when she had gotten up, someone had slashed the tires on the car. She had been bemoaning what she called bad luck (and which they all agreed was probably Regina’s doing). Mary-Margaret had kindly agreed to give the two a lift when she had told her what happened, and Neal was at home calling to see about getting replacements.

It had gone on like this in the weeks following Graham’s illness. It had started with graffiti on the back windows. That had been easy enough to clean. Then Neal’s few tattoo customers dried up completely. Emma got served more parking tickets than she had ever known possible (how? The town had no other police?). The worst had been Henry telling them that other kids were avoiding him, and whispering behind his back.

All from the efforts of one woman to get rid of their family. They would just have to step up.

“Don’t mean to intrude” Emma says quietly at the door, “Just needed to make sure you can still take us both home after”.

“No problem,” Mary-Margaret replies quietly, not even looking up.

Emma’s quiet for a bit.

“I never asked you what happened”.

“It so sudden…David had been feeling ill for a few days, then one morning he just didn’t wake up. Doctors are baffled, they’ve run all kinds of scans…said all we could do is pray”.

“I can’t even imagine”.

They’re both silent for a bit longer, then Mary-Margaret starts again,
“Are you going into work tonight?”

“Have to, paperwork, them I’m on call...pretty much 24/7 now. I really should hire someone to help”.

“Don’t you need your car?”

“I can use the sheriff’s cruiser, I’m probably supposed to anyway for official business”.

It had been a shock to everyone, especially as it turned out, Emma, when they had discovered paperwork in Graham’s death naming her his replacement in case of him being unable to continue. It has seemed unusually forethinking of him to do so, but she reasoned maybe he knew that something might happen to him, and that she at least had some sort of experience with the law.

The contract had been unmistakably the work of Mr. Gold. Emma would have to pay him a visit very soon.

Regina had half-heartedly tried to get the agreement overturned and instill her own choice, but Emma thinks it must have gone to the wayside in comparison to her other attempts to drive them out of town.

Henry comes back into the room, telling Emma that they needed another tall person to hang the banner.

When Emma leaves the room, Henry turns to look at Mary-Margaret.

“You look like her, you know, both of you”.

“What do you mean Henry” Mary-Margaret asks, confused.

He just kind of shrugs, then leaves.

After Emma drops Henry off at the apartment, and leaves for the office, she’s distracted by the sight of a rabbit on the side of the road. Her brow furrows. Rabbits weren’t exactly exotic, but she hadn’t seen any in Storybrooke before. She brushes it off, and continues on her way.

The rest of the afternoon is going normally, and when she receives her only call of the day (picking up a pair of pre-teenaged shoplifters), she prepares to leave, but first stops to text Neal.

“Tires ok?”

It’s a few minutes before he answers.

“Yeah, had to replace them, couldn’t patch.”

Dammit, they had been hoping to avoid that expense.

“Cost not bad tho”

Emma slows before sending the next text.

“And the other thing I asked you to do?”

“Going now”.

The other thing, was checking out the vault of hearts in the cemetery.
Emma had worried about the possibility of him being found out, but Neal had pointed out that the kids had been in twice without tripping any sort of protection spells, and that even if Regina had added them since, she seemed far less suspicious of him than Emma.

Going into the mausoleum had been a bizarre experience. It was something that didn’t belong in either life Neal had had- the people in his village were buried plainly in the ground, and his only contact with death in this world had been of the vulgar and informal, nothing that would have led to a crypt.

He finds the stairs under the coffin easily. Easier, he assumes, to move it as an aware adult than a frightened teen.

The wall of hearts still shocks him. Magic. He thought he had left this all behind, and something of this place stunk of his father, even though he knew it was not his doing.

Slowly, he pulls and examines every heart in every drawer. Some of the drawers are empty, some only contain dust, the barest degraded remains of what must have once belonged to a person. All the ones that contain hearts also have a neatly written inscription. Neal copies them all down. He doesn’t recognize any names, he supposes he wouldn’t.

After getting the last name, he leaves the crypt to start for home.

He’d swear he passed a bunch of white rabbits on the side of the road, but figured he must be seeing things.

Emma gets home late again that night.

“Trouble at the station?” Neal asks, tossing her her plate of dinner.

“I might have met Hansel and Gretel today”.

Henry yelps with delight and goes to grab the storybook. Neal raises an eyebrow. That’s the most outright admission that Emma’s given in this place.

“Preteen twins, I got called for them shoplifting. Toothpaste and toilet paper, no kids steal those for fun. Followed them home, they’d been living in an abandoned house. “

“What happened to them?” Henry asks, flipping through the pages.

“Their mom died, and they didn’t know where their dad was. It’s a good thing this place is so damn small, it could have taken me ages to find him normally.”

“Sounds like they were lucky he wanted them”. Neal says grimly.

“There” Henry says triumphantly, showing Emma the drawing of Hansel and Gretel.

“That’s them for sure” Emma says.

“Sounds like they were lucky the witch didn’t get to them here,” Henry says, flipping through to the picture of the Blind Witch’s house.

“Witches don’t always look like witches here Henry,” Neal says gently. “There’s a lot of danger out there for a lost and hurting kid all alone, stuff that’s just as bad as a cannibalistic witch”.

Henry shrugs, and takes the book with him to his room.
Emma sits and rubs her temple.

“I see that story always pissed you off too” Neal says, sitting beside her.

‘Guy abandons his kids to their deaths, then gets them back scott-free, That never felt like a happy ending to me.”

“The stories in this book don’t always seem to match up perfectly to how they’ve come to be known in this world’.

Emma nods. “I’ve never known a story where Rumpelstiltskin had a son. This must be so strange for you, to realize you’ve read stories from your own home and never known”.

Neal shakes his head. “I’ve been gone for there so long...and it’s not like magic was an everyday occurrence in the life of a spinner’s son. I wouldn’t have been able to ever imagine half of these stories”.

Chewing her lip, Emma muses, “I should probably read the book myself too. I don’t remember most of these stories very well, not even enough to recognize people”.

She waits a bit before continuing. “And I keep thinking...we need allies. I don’t know where we’re going to get them, but- by ourselves, we’re never going to figure this out. We can’t even figure out how a curse gets broken, much less how to do it.”

Neal waggles his eyebrows. “I’ve always heard True Love’s Kiss will break any curse”

Emma slaps him lightly on the arm. “I’ve kissed you plenty, it doesn’t break shit”.

“Yeah, but I’m not the one that’s cursed”.

“Ooh, clearly I need to check out the singles scene in this tiny town populated by fairy tale characters.”

Neal’s expression turns serious again. “But there must be other ways, every broken curse can’t have a perfect love story to go with it...I’ve heard things about enchanted water and blessed rings and the like, but where would we even come by something like that here? This land has no magic”.

Emma sighs. ‘I know you don’t want to hear this, but I think we’re going to need to talk to your father.”

When Neal reacts by getting up to clear the dishes silently, Emma continues.

“I mean it, there’s all kinds of random things in his shop. Even if he doesn’t remember you, or any of this, it doesn’t mean he doesn’t have something that could help us.”

She gets up, corners Neal against the counter by the sink, and puts both her hands on his shoulders, and resting her forehead on his collarbone.

“He’s managed to keep himself alive for like three hundred years and still somehow ended up part of a huge curse like this. There has to be a reason”.

Neal doesn’t say anything after that, but he holds onto her as tight as she does.

&&

Henry was close to the school when he saw the white rabbit.
He didn’t have any homework that day, and was debating whether to go to the park, or to the library since it was open that day.

He’d just been about to make the turn to go to the library, when he saw it.

It didn’t have a pocket watch or wear a waistcoat, in fact it just looked like an ordinary pet rabbit. One of his classmates in Tallahassee had had one, even though it had been black and white, not all solid snowy white like this one. It seemed friendly, very unlike a wild rabbit too.

“Hey little guy” he says, kneeling to let it smell his hand. It didn’t touch him, in fact it almost seemed...blurry, or somehow inanimate. He leaned forward to try and touch it, when it turned and speed off toward the woods.

Later, Henry would not be able to describe what led to this decision, but he ran right after the rabbit into the woods.
By the time Henry reached the huge house in the woods, it occurred to him that this was how a lot of horror movies started. So while the white rabbit was hopping up to the front door, he pulled out his phone and sent his dad a text.

“Dad, I followed a rabbit into the woods and now I’m lost”.

After a few moments, his phone buzzed.

“...Should I even ask why? Nevermind, turn on your findfamily app.”

Henry switched on the little purple icon. He had never really thought about it when his mom had installed it a few weeks ago (“But even if we weren’t in this weird situation, it can help if you lose your phone too”) but now he was grateful to have it.

The message buzz came again.

“Stay where you are, I’ll come and find you”.

“The bunny led me to a big house in the middle of the woods, you can’t miss it. I’m going to knock and see if anyone’s home.”

The front door is ornate, with an old fashioned knocker that Henry lifts and knocks three times.

**

Neal dismisses the text before opening GPS directions.

“Please be someone normal, not a forest witch or something”.

**

Henry thought the man who opened the door was strange even before he opened his mouth.

He was tall, with short hair and pale skin, wearing a high necked shirt and vest. His eyes looked...normal, but somehow not, in a way that Henry could not put his finger on.

“I see you’ve found my rabbit” the man says.

“He was awfully far from home.”

“Please come in” the stranger says, “I should give you some tea and cookies for bringing him back home”.

Henry paid attention in school, and was well versed in the ins and outs of stranger danger.

“What’s your name?” he asks.

“Call me Jefferson”,

“My name’s Henry”, he says while tightening his grip on his backpack.

When Jefferson turns to lead him into the house, Henry stays back just long enough to hit the door with his foot and make sure it stayed open.
Neal stops to send a text to Emma before getting out by the forest.

“Having a situation, not going to be able to join you at the shop”.

He smiles as he tucks his phone back in his pocket. True, he hadn’t been looking forward to trying to talk to his father, but this had far more impossible possibilities.

He stares for a moment at the edge of the tree lines. After so many years in this world, with it’s skyscrapers and sidewalks, would Neal believe he would end up right back in the woods.

Henry had never drank tea before, and while the smell coming off the steaming cup was interesting, he only pretended to sip at the cup. The cookies felt stale when he broke one, like cookies from last year’s Christmas tin, so he avoided them too. The couch he’s sitting on has an old fashioned print, matching the rest of the room in looking like it hadn’t changed in half a century. A single wall is lined with hats, of many sizes and shapes and colors, the only detail seemingly out of place.

“Do you live up here alone?” he asks.

Jefferson nods, suddenly silent.

“Big house for just you. Don’t you have a family?”

There’s a long pause before he says “I used to”.

“What happened to them?” Henry asks, running his finger along the edge of his tea cup, wondering why Jefferson wanted to talk to him, and how long it would take his dad to get here.

Jefferson is at the window now, staring through his telescope. Which seems strange to Henry, considering it’s day time, and it’s not pointed to the sky at all.

“This town stole her from me”.

Henry stands up, and goes to the window.

“Does that mean…” He’s treading a bit lightly. Jefferson seems nice, but slightly off. While Henry’s got his hopes up for someone else to understand what his family is dealing with, he doesn’t understand the how or the why that Jefferson would. And it he didn’t know….then the man might just be crazy.

“Does that mean you know about the curse?”

Jefferson laugh bitterly.

“Know about it? I was there when the old man was just setting the seeds that would become it. That girl was practically an innocent, but so full of potential, and he exploited that...The Queen...by the time she cast the curse, she knew what she was doing, and she wanted to make me suffer, and knew exactly who she could use to do it”

He moves from the telescope, and gestures for Henry to look through it. He does, and the scope is pointed, not the the sky, but beyond the forest, right into the street in front of the elementary school. Henry knows the girl it’s pointed out, he realizes.
“Her name’s Paige here, her family runs the bakery on Main Street”

“My daughter,” he says, “her name is Grace. Her parents seem nice. The Queen would know that. Would know that worse than making me forget her would be forcing me to remember her, when she cannot remember me. Force me to watch her be happy, without me”.

Henry winces, wondering why he mentioned Paige’s adoptive parents.

“Why don’t you try and talk to her, see if you can make her…”

Jefferson laughs again.

“And say what? I’m the crazy man who lives out in the woods by himself. This whole huge house, with no one to share it with. They all remember nothing. There’s nothing I can prove about anything”.

Henry waits, before asking.

“If you know the curse is real, and you feel like you’re somehow responsible, how come you aren’t trying to break it? “

He shakes his head.

“It was neatly made. Only the destined, your mother, can break the spell. And it wasn’t terribly open about how to do that exactly”.

Henry’s starting to get angry.

“Why are you telling me this? If you don’t have any information that could help why are you even talking to me?”

Jefferson’s smile twists.

“Because despite their apparent knowledge, your parents both have their minds terribly closed to the possibilities. Neither of them would follow my rabbit”.

“So you wanted me to follow it?”

“Many good things have come to children who follow rabbits”.

Henry stops. The rabbit, all of the hats, Jefferson’s off-putting manner….

“You’re the Mad Hatter”

“I see you know a bit of my story”.

“My mom read it to me. Lots of people know that story. I think there’s a copy in the library here even”.

Jefferson’s sat down across from him, and it looking him straight in the face.

“That’s the thing. Your parents know us as stories, but stories come from somewhere. This whole land has no magic, so it tells of it in it’s stories. Your parents are still stuck thinking like this is going to follow their rules. They have to follow the stories.”

He stands at this point, and looks down at Henry.
“You ought ask your friend Lily where she came from. Really look into it.”

“Lily?” Henry asks, confused, “She’s just normal, and stuck here, she ran away.”

The corner of Jefferson’s mouth quirks.

“Did she tell you that? Than what you find out might just surprise her too.”

Before Henry can continue to interrogate him, there’s a knock at the door.

He stands abruptly.

“That’s probably my dad. I should be going.”

Jefferson smiles, a bit more genuinely now.

“I’ll show you out.”

Neal is visibly relieved when the door opens, and Henry steps out in one piece.

“Hi dad, sorry to drag you out here, but I had to return Mr. Jefferson’s rabbit”.

“If you just take the trail to the right, you’ll come out right behind Main Street in no time.”

He reaches out and touches Neal’s arm.

“You might find something out there that might interest you”.

Then he practically slams the door behind them.

“What was that all about?” Neal asks when they start into the woods.

“He’s the Mad Hatter, and he knows this town is cursed”.

“Whoa, are you serious?”

Henry nods, kicking a rock on the ground.

“He remembers who he was, and knows the Queen cast the curse. But I think all these years alone made him go a little nuts”.

“Wasn’t the Hatter already…”

“Different kind of mad. Lonely mad. His daughter’s one of my classmates.”

The two are silent for a while longer.

“Do you think there’s anyone else from Wonderland here?”

Henry shrugs,

“The book mentioned it a few times, but not anything major.”

“Copyright violation probably” Neal says, laughing.

Henry looks at him quizzically.

“Writer joke. Anyway, your mom was the one who liked Wonderland. Said Alice was the only
classic heroine whose attitude she respected”.

Henry laughs.

“I always wanted to see what a caucus race actually looked like”

“If you turn on CSPAN, you could find something just as-”

Neal’s voice breaks when his foot hits something. They’re almost to the edge of the forest, and his foot has collided with something hard.

He kneels down to take a look, and pushes some leaves off the object.

He doesn’t quite believe what he kinds.

Henry peeks over his shoulder.

“Is that...a head?”

It is, a normal sized head with a face, made entirely of wood. A face that he recognizes.

“Dammit Pinocchio”.

**

Emma sticks her phone in her pocket and takes the two envelops with the rent checks from the glove compartment. She would give Neal hell if she thought he was actually trying to ditch her, but she suspects something else strange might be going on.

She enters the shop, saying “Mr. Gold? I’m here with the rent”.

The man himself is behind the counter, and says “You can just leave it here in the box dear, I’ll post it later today”.

When Emma stands across the counter and hands him the check, she studies him.

Old sure, wizened even. One could even say impish in a way.

It was at the corner of the mouth, though not turned up in laughter, and the eyes, though without signs of a smile, that reminded her so much of Neal.

“Did you need something else?”

Emma steels herself, before asking.

“What do you know about magic?”

That definitely gets Mr. Gold’s attention, his face snapping up to look at her.

“Thinking of a career change?”

Emma steadies herself before continuing.

“Don’t joke. You’re a pretty common name around town. You must have realized by now that Storybrooke isn’t normal, not in any usual usage of the word. “

“Some would just call us quaint. Tell me Miss Swan, what lead you to specifically think of magic”.
“I don’t believe I ever told you my maiden name”.

That quiets him for a moment.

“In the stories, anything magic usually came with something trick or caveat.”

“All magic comes with a price” Mr. Gold says.

“How would someone know what that price was? If there were rules about magic being used, or how it could be undone, how would someone know what they were?”

Mr. Gold turns his back to her, Emma looks past him, and sees his eyes are fixed on an old spinning wheel draped with a white shawl.

“You are right Miss Swan, that magic in the stories are very clear with the rules. But this world has no magic, and hence the rules are not nearly so well known. In fact, one might say the best way to find them out, would be to go back to the stories themselves.”

He turns back around, and gestures to the door.

“Now if you don’t mind, I have some work that needs to be finished today, if you would mind leaving me to myself.

And with that, he practically shoos Emma out.

**

Neal and Henry reach the apartment at almost the same time as Emma does. Neal is carrying a strange looking package, and the both look quite far away.

Emma locks eyes with Neal and says,

“Please tell me your day was not as befuddling as mine”.

Chapter 10

Emma’s greeted the next morning by a trail of bloody feathers leading to a very upset bird with its foot trapped under her windshield wiper.

She makes an unsteady attempt to free it, which is only met by extremely loud squacking and pecking at her hand.

“Ouch!” She yelps, pulling her hand back.

“Not very experienced handling birds?” A voice comes from behind her.

Emma jumps, and turns to find Mary-Margaret standing, watching her.

“Can’t say I am” she says, gesturing at the injured bird.

“Here” Mary-Margaret says, smiling. She goes to her own car, and pulls a cardboard box and a towel from the trunk. In one swift movement, she places the box on top of the bird, lifts the windshield wiper trapping it’s leg, and throws the towel over the box before it can try and fly away.

“Ok, I’m impressed” Emma admits, “where did you learn to do that?”

“David used to work at the animal shelter before…” she breaks off, steadies herself, then continues, “And I still pick up shifts on weekends. They don’t have enough people, and it’s the only place in town. We got it all, birds of all kinds, foxes, rabbits. You just need to learn the right touch”.

She takes the box and puts it on the passenger seat of her car.

“I’ll drop it off before heading to school today.”

“I owe you one,” Emma replies.

Whereas Emma started off her day with an injured bird, Neal starts off his with combing the woods in search for the rest of Pinocchio’s parts.

He finds a leg, weathered, and the fingers of one hand. He wraps the pieces in newspaper and puts them in the car’s back seat, unsure of what to do with them.

When he picks Henry up from school, he suggests that they should try to put him back together.

“I’m not sure how to go about that, kid”.

“Let’s look at the library then. They make all kind of stuff out of wood, repairing it can’t be that hard.”

And so back to the library they go.

A few days later, Emma gets a text at the office.

It’s from Mary-Margaret.

“Can I call in that favor today?”

Emma eyes the clock, and the sheriff’s emergency phone, before texting back.
“OK, “

When she gets to the school, Mary-Margaret’s class is returning from a field trip after the rest of the school has gone home, and Emma is surprised to see Lily among them.

Mary-Margaret grabs her by the arm, and pulls her aside.

“She ditched class to sneak on the trip to the hospital with us. I can head off the absent call at the office if you can get her home before the mayor leaves her office. She’s usually out the door by 4:30. Don’t let her see you”.

Emma doesn’t say a word, and ushers Lily and Henry into the car before heading down to the street with the Mayor’s house as fast as she can. Lily exits with a speed Emma’s never seen her reach before, and she’s inside and upstairs so fast it was if she’d never been there.

They pass Regina’s car the next block.

“She’s been sneaking onto every class’s volunteer days so she can see Graham.” Henry confides in Emma when they reach the apartment. “She can usually convince the teacher’s to tell the office so her mom doesn’t get called. But we were late today and Mrs. Nolan didn’t get a chance and she was scared she would find out before she could.”.

“Doesn’t anyone say anything?” Emma asks.

Henry shakes his head.

“Everyone knows how badly Mayor Mills treats her. They all feel bad for her, but worry about what will happen to them if they try to help. Everyone in this town is so scared of everything, anything that might change things. I guess it’s the curse”.

“That’s a lot more regular human nature than you would think kid” Emma says quietly.

“Do your homework until Dad gets back,” she gestures at the Pinocchio remains Neal has managed to locate, “He’s out seeking woodworking tools. I’m going to go and wait for Mary-Margaret to get back.

He picks up an envelope from the table.

“Hey! Tiana wrote me, it’s been a while!”

“Read it first, but homework after ok?” Emma says, before shutting the door.

She then mutters to herself, “How does mail even work here?”

Mary-Margaret’s just getting home when Emma comes out.

“All go well?” she asks, and Emma nods.

“Good”, she sounds relieved, pulling out cups to make them both tea.

“Henry says she’s done this before. Did you know about that?”

The other woman nods.

“I don’t think any of us...I don’t think any of us had any idea of how close she was to Graham.”
“Closer to him than her so called mother any way”.

Mary-Margaret shakes her head.

“We’ve always known she was cold. But not letting her have friends, or go outside… it’s cruel, but not illegal, and even if we tried, Mayor Mills is the authority in this town.”

“We’ll see if she has any recourse for the authority outside of this town.” Emma says grimly, sipping her tea.

“Is this something you should be telling me about?” Mary-Margaret asks.

Emma sets down her cup.

“You would call us friends right?”

“Of course”.

“So can I trust that you won’t tell anyone this?”

Mary-Margaret nods, but looks apprehensive.

Emma takes a deep breath.

“I don’t know who my parents are. I grew up in foster care. None of my foster families ever wanted me, they all treated me like I was there to give them a government stipend and nothing else. When I was thirteen I finally accepted it and started running away.”

“God, you were thirteen? How…”

Emma shook her head.

“I didn’t have an easy life. But that’s not the point. I hopped a bus to Minnesota. Nearly got busted for shoplifting, but another girl got me out of the jam, and we became friends and tried to watch each other’s backs. That girl was Lily.”

“But if you were thirteen then…”

“It sounds crazy and I have no rational explanation, but it’s her. I knew the minute I saw her here, and so did she. She remembers exactly what I do. ”

Emma fixes Mary-Margaret with a stare.

“Her name is Lilith Page. She’s from Minneapolis, she was adopted as a baby by James and Priscilla Page. She disappeared without a trace when she was fourteen. There is absolutely no evidence that Regina is in any way her legal guardian “

“Oh my God.”

Emma closes her eyes.

“Lily and I…we had such similar backgrounds, it was no wonder we were friends right off the bat. I grew up. I fell in love and made my own family. She never even got the chance.”

She squeezes her fists.
“And if she stays here, something tells me she will never get the chance”.

When Mary-Margaret leans forward to put her hand atop hers, Emma can barely look her in the eye.

She returns to the apartment with a heavy heart. But whatever was on her mind then, it’s wiped from it when she sees Henry still sitting at the table, with tears dripping down his cheeks.

“Hey, hey, what happened?” Emma asks, sitting down.

He gestures at the paper in front of him.

“Tiana hasn’t written in a while because her dad died.”

“Oh” is all Emma can say. She sits down and puts a hand on his shoulder.

“It’s just, with all this stuff about curses and fairy tales, it’s easy to forget about the outside world.”

“Hey” Emma says, reaching over to give him a hug, “We’re doing our best. It’s all we can do. This place is weird, and consuming, but you haven’t forgotten her, and we haven’t forgotten each other.”

Henry wipes away some of his tears.

“Do you know when Dad’s going to be home?”

Neal was, at the moment, at the library checking out a stack of books on woodworking.

“That all for you today?” Kathryn asks, handing him the stack.

“That’ll do” Neal replies.

“Can you hang back a minute? It takes two people to close the security gate, and I don’t want to call Ms. Belacqua down from her apartment, she’s been having a pretty bad day.”

“No problem”.

When she emerges from the library, she has a large duffel bag over her shoulder.

“Packing a little heavy today?” Neal asks as he helps her pull down the gate.

“I finally applied to law school. I’m driving down to Boston tonight to drop off some documents.”

“Congratulations” Neal says, smiling despite the tiny speck of fear ruminating in his gut.

“Thanks, it was actually meeting you and Emma that gave me the push. Living in this town, it’s easy to get stuck in a rut. Anyway, I’m not actually moving out yet, I should be back on Monday.”

Neal smiles again and leaves.

In the car, he texts Emma.

“I think something’s going to happen this weekend. I guess we’ll see”.

Chapter 11

It’s Sunday night when Kathryn’s roommate calls the station, saying she hadn’t called or returned, even though she was expected back by dinner Saturday. By the time Henry gets up on Monday morning, Emma’s already gone organizing the search party. Neal drops him off at school before heading to the library to stay with Lacey and try to get any information she might know.

Even Mayor Mills turns out, claiming to be terribly worried about Kathryn, whom she claims was a close personal friend.

“OK everyone, we know she was heading for Boston, so spread out and comb the areas surrounding the roads leaving town. Don’t worry about going too far off the roads, someone injured can travel a surprisingly large distance”.

She sounds confident, but her mind is running a million miles a minute. Kathryn shouldn’t even be able to leave the town, and if she does….Emma doesn’t know what the consequences could be. That’s not even accounting for what might happen if someone searching tried to leave…Emma’s getting a feeling that they might be searching for a body.

She has the group pair off and gives them each a direction, then gets into the police cruiser and goes her own. They’re on one of the smaller roads out of town, one close to the coast.

She’d picked Ruby as her partner because she had a few more questions she’d wanted to ask the woman a few more questions. Kathryn was known by the town, but the list they had of people who were close to her was fairly short.

“She talked about leaving town a lot?”

Ruby nods.

“For as long as I’ve known her, she’s been working her ass off for this. I was a little jealous you know- no one really leaves this town. And living here, you feel like you’ve met everyone, there’s nothing new, ever. I just- I’m scared we’re going to find out that her wanting to leave got her hurt”.

Emma’s quiet. She’s heard the way Lily talks, and listening to Ruby now, it hits her how much this whole situation sucks for everyone involved. Stuck in a small town life, nothing changing, forced away from whatever they loved. Evil curse indeed.

When they reach the edge of the coast, they park and Emma says they should get out and sweep the woods until they meet the next pair.

The trees here are thinner, more spread apart than some of the other parts surround the town. But then the terrain starts to turn uphill. The forest floor turns rocky, with small ridges and cliffs before the trees end and the sea begins.

When they reach the edge of a small cliff, Ruby stops suddenly.

“What?”

“Don’t you hear that?”

“Hear-”
Ruby goes off to one side, to the steepest part of the cliff. The rocks there seem to stack, forming almost a staircase off to one side. Emma can’t see over it.

“Be careful, Ruby, we don’t want to have to deal with two victims today”.

But still she follows her down.

About five feet below the top of the rocks, the path widens, and now Emma can just see over the next pile, the shape of a body.

“Kathryn!” Ruby yells, going to touch her.

“Is she breathing?” Emma asks.

Ruby is quiet for a moment, reaching to touch her face,

“I think so.”

“Stay here, I’ll call backup to help us get her up.”

It occurs to Emma suddenly, that if Kathryn’s barely breathing, she’s not sure what Ruby was hearing. She does laugh a little. Little Red Riding Hood is a little more comfortable in the woods than one would think.

The paramedics carefully lift Kathryn back up the rocks. She begins to respond with words, but they can’t rule out brain damage. She doesn’t respond correctly to their questions, and doesn’t seem to be aware of where she is, or even who she is.

“It’s almost like she has amnesia”, Emma says, when she calls Neal at the library so that Lacey would know what happened.

“Jesus. Do they have any idea what happened? Have they found her car or anything?”

“No...they’re taking her to the hospital now, I’m going to follow.”

“Alright, see you later”.

He turns to Henry, and Lily, who both came to the library after school. Henry had approached her during lunch, and on Jefferson’s advice, asked Lily if she had any idea where she came from. When she didn’t he suggested they go to the library.

Not that it had really mattered, neither had much experience searching about this kind of thing.

“Lily, if the search party is over, your mom’s probably on her way home. I suggest you get- now”.

Lily’s out the door before he can say another word.

“I can say she was working on a school project if it would help” Lacey says.

“Thanks, but I don’t think Regina would think too much of your testimony, especially if she knew Henry and I were involved.”

Henry’s bent over on the floor.

“This fell off when she left. I should give it back to her tomorrow”.

He pulls up a necklace, a thin chain with a crescent shaped pendant.

“That’s interesting” Lacey says, looking a bit closer, “I never noticed before, it looks like a piece of shell”.

“Like a seashell?” Henry asks.

“More like an eggshell. But not a chicken egg,” Lacey clarifies. “I found a bunch of shards of shell in the old elevator ages ago. I’ve never been able to figure out what kind.”

She goes to her desk and pulls out a box. Inside it are several shards. Much larger than the one on the chair. They’re white, but a bit iridescent. Like an abalone.

“Oh wow.” Henry says, peeking over the desk. “They look…”

“Almost exactly the same”, Neal confirms. “You said you found them in the elevator? Where do you think they came from?”

“I don’t know. “ Lacey admits. “I never go into the basement, I thought it must be from something down there.”

“There’s a basement?” Henry asks.

“That’s a question for another day, Henry, we should probably get home.”

They leave the library, and Lacey casts a curious glance at the corner where the elevator is.

When they get back to the apartment, Emma’s already there.

“How’s Kathryn?” Neal asks.

“Not in good shape. Best I can guess she got in an accident and suffered head trauma and wandered into the woods. She finally was able to remember what month it is, but still has no idea who she is or where she is. She’s got some physical injuries too, so Dr. Whale says they’ll admit her for observation once a bed opens up”.

“Well that’s good at least.”

“I wonder if it’s got to do with her getting so close to the town line.” Henry says. “It can obviously be crossed- we did it, Lily did it, but nobody else does. There must be some way the curse has of preventing it.”

Emma opens her mouth to tell Henry that that’s actually a very logical conclusion, when they hear a noise coming from next door.

Emma goes outside to see what’s up. She finds Mary-Margaret, sobbing her eyes out.

“Hey, hey, what’s wrong?”

Mary-Margaret shakes her head.

“I was at the hospital. Mayor Mills showed up, she was really upset when Doctor Whale told her there was a wait to get Kathryn a bed at the hospital. Started going on about hopeless cases taking up space….she wasn’t even Kathryn’s friend, never saw them talk ever, but she always found ways to…."

She trails off. Her face is red, tear streaked. She looks every image the supposedly helpless Snow
White from the story. The woman who was supposedly her mother. Gone is the compassionate and capable woman Emma had gotten to know the past year. She wants desperately to reach out and comfort her, but for some reason can’t bring herself.

“She was talking about discontinuing David’s life support”.

Emma feels her heart sink into her chest.
Chapter 12

Lacey sits cross legged on the floor, facing the open elevator.

The camera on her old phone had been easy enough to rig. She’s still not sure what’s below her, but she wants proof whatever it is. The electric lantern too, was easy enough.

She places them in the elevator, sets the trigger to start recording, and slowly pulls the cord to close the doors and start its descent.

She counts carefully. And five minutes later, she pulls it back up.

The lantern has been knocked over, but thankfully her camera is fine. She picks it up, and slowly rewinds, not sure what she expects to see.

The light is barely a speck in the darkness, until the darkness moves, and an eye the size of a hubcap appeared, surrounded by dark purple scales.

Lacey puts the phone down, and buries her face in her hands. If she can make even herself believe what she’s saw, she’ll find them tomorrow.

**

Emma stays over that night. Mary Margaret is borderline inconsolable, and while Emma promises that she’ll help in any way she can, her knowledge of medical law is very small.

She drags over her laptop and sleeps fitfully on the couch, doing what research she can. Nothing she can find says anything about how anyone could possibly take power of attorney from a legally competent spouse.

The file she has on Lily’s kidnapping is sitting on her desk back at the apartment. Emma feels like she should have pulled the trigger on it a long time ago. But here, alone, she admits to herself that she was scared. Nothing in this town followed the laws or logic she knew. None of it played by the rules.

Well now, may she shouldn’t either.

She wakes up early to leave, but not before checking on Mary Margaret. The apartment bedroom is small, but despite the delicate and attractive furnishings, it bears the fruit of the loneliness she must have felt since her husband’s illness. His things still sit in the bathroom untouched, his shoes sit by the coat rack, and when Emma peeks in on her, she can’t help but notice one side of the bed is almost pristine.

She makes a pot of tea and leaves it on the counter with a note.

“If what I want to do works, Regina won’t be a problem anymore”.

She returns home quickly, needing to catch Neal and Henry before they leave for the school.

“Henry, I need a favor today”.

“What?”

“At lunch today, use your phone to get a video of Lily. Have her say her name, her birthday, and her
parents names. Then send it to me, and come straight home after school.”

“Okay,” he replies, and goes down to get in the car.

Emma turns to Neal. “I’m going to go see your father again.”

When he sighs, she puts both hands on his shoulders,

“I might need his help, and he knows the people in this town better than anyone.”

After a long moment, Neal says,

“I can’t help remembering what he told you before. That we’re going about this the wrong way. Going after Regina about Lily feels...real world”.

“I know,” Emma responds, eyes downcast, “But it’s all I know to do, and I feel like if I can’t fix this than someone’s going to get really hurt because of my actions.”

Neal takes both her hands in his and pulls her close.

Once Emma’s calmed down a bit, she says.

“I couldn’t even hug her. The book says she’s my mother, and I couldn’t even bring myself to hug her. It’s like something inside of me is broken.”

“Whether she is or not- and let’s be real, put on wigs and you two could pass for sisters- there’s nothing wrong with you. She may be your mother, but you didn’t grow up with her. Just because she gave birth to you doesn't mean you're going to have this amazing relationship overnight. You’re friends, good friends, and that’s what you should concentrate on being for her”.

Emma lets her muscles go slack, and allows Neal to hold her upright for just a moment.

***

Lacey stares at the video on the phone again. She thought maybe that if she slept on it, it would have changed somehow, or that she would have a better idea of what to do.

But there’s a dragon living underneath her library. And she can’t just send someone that video and expect anything good to come of it.

She’ll show them in person, as soon as she can get up the courage to leave the front door of the library.

**

Emma enters the shop without really any idea what’s going to come of it.

Mr. Gold is behind his counter again, examining something. Emma sees what he is- a small town shopkeeper with a very odd set of skills and more influence than he ought be able to have. His other identities- a man of dark magic, friggin Rumpelstiltskin, her own father in law….they all flit around in the background.

He looks up, and Emma’s not quite sure if he was expecting her or not.

“I’ve been told you do a bit of law work, Mr Gold,” she starts off, straight to the point.
“Find yourself in a bit of a pickle, Miss Swan?”

“Please cut the crap Mr. Gold. What I’m saying is, if I made certain accusations against Mayor Mills, would you be able to back me up?”

He sits on his stool, resting his hands on the counter in front of him.

“What might I ask, are you accusing her of?”

“You’ve met Lily right? The girl she adopted, well she didn’t. I knew her when we were younger, and her parents still have her reported missing. There’s nothing legal about Mayor Mills keeping her here.”

Mr. Gold sighs a bit.

“When we first came to this town, Regina asked me to find her a child. She had some kind of maternal urge that this place wasn’t satisfying. I never directly refused her of course, but even I had my doubts about the possibility of her caring for a child. “

“So it’s not just me who thinks she treats the girl badly?”

“Dig into her past, and you might find out dear mayor a bit deficient in role models. But nonetheless, I have no reason to impede your charges. I could even be convinced to testify that she didn’t seek out any proper legal channels for her adoption if you do me a favor today”.

“I thought I already owed you a favor?”

“Might be better to call this more of a solid. I have a few things which I didn’t feel comfortable storing in the shop. I gave them to one of my tenants a long time ago- they should still be somewhere in the basement of the Storybrooke library.”

“Really all you want me to do is go the library and get something?”

“It’s a small bottle, labelled with parchment, ‘essence of true love’”

“I’m not even going to ask what that means”.

He chuckles. “It may be more necessary than you could understand in the coming days.”

“Why did you keep it there? Is the librarian that trustworthy?”

“More than you could understand,” he replied solemnly.

He then reaches under the counter and hands Emma a sword.

“You may find this necessary.”

Emma looks the old man up and down.

“Uhh, thanks?”

And she leaves the store for the library, entirely unsure of what she’s getting herself into.

**

The librarian, as it was, had just managed to take her first steps outside the street for the first time in
twenty-eight years.

**

Neal hated hospitals. Modern medicine was entirely alien to him when he came to this world, and his experiences since had not improved his first impression. The cold, sterile air, the clean, bleached and starched linens and uniforms made his skin crawl.

But still, he pushed himself through the green and white painted hallways, bouquet in hand,

He finds Mary-Margaret in the bedside chair, head in her hands.

“Hey,” he says, softly. “Henry told me you didn’t make it to school today, I thought you might not want to be alone”.

He places the flowers in their plastic vase on the side table.

“Thank you,” she manages to sniff. “The doctors have already been by. They’re all so damn sorry,” the curse sounds foreign in Mary-Margaret’s mouth, but she owns it. “Emma’s right, there’s no reason the mayor should be able to do this. Everyone in this whole damn town is so scared of her, and no one seems willing to do anything about it.”

“Hopefully, Emma’s plans will distract her long enough that she’ll forget what she planned to do.”

“Is that where she is right now?”

Neal nods.

“Good- I know it’s not fair, we haven’t been neighbors that long but I couldn’t shake the feeling that Emma was avoiding me after last night”.

“Don’t take any offense at it. Emma’s not really good with feelings. She prefers try to make the problem go away to dealing with the emotions they cause. Plus, you’ve always been really motherly to all of us, and I don’t think she really knows how to deal with that.”

“Oh,” Mary-Margaret says quietly. “I know she’s mentioned that she had a really tough childhood, but I never would have thought-”

“It’s not your fault. Neither of us had good childhoods. It’s part of the reason I think why we worked so well together- we both wanted to give the other something they didn’t have. It’s why we’re both so intent on being good to Henry. But I think Emma sort of resents people caring about her sometimes, because she never had it growing up and part of her still doesn’t think she deserves it.”

Neal isn’t quite sure why he’s telling her all of this. He’s avoided speaking about his own childhood for so long that he barely recognizes the words coming out of his mouth. And the thing about Emma- he’s never told her that he recognized what she did. Why she sometimes tried to push people away. But talking to Mary-Margaret is easy to talk to, comforting and understanding. She seems like she would have been a great mom, and it sucks to know that Emma’s never going to get to have that.

Mary-Margaret gazes down at the prone figure on the bed, machines beeping steadily for the moment.

“I wish every day that he will just wake up, like nothing ever happened, and this will all go away. It all came on so suddenly, it almost feels like it’s possible”.
“I guess there’s always hope,” Neal tells her.

His phone buzzes in his pocket. It’s a message from Ruby, which reads ‘Lacey left the library, she’s at the diner now and wants to show you something.’

Confused, Neal puts it back in his pocket. It’s about time to pick up Henry from school anyway.

“I’ve gotta go,” Neal says, standing up, “We’ll come back to check on you later if you don’t come home.”

“Thank you,” she says, wiping her nose again, “But I think I’ll come home for dinner and try and get some more sleep.”

Neal reaches out and puts one hand on her shoulder and squeezes.

When he reaches the car, Neal’s phone buzzes again. It’s from Emma, this time a single line.

“Yeah, there’s a fucking dragon under the library.”

Neal sighs. This is the beginning of the end, he can tell. Nothing in their lives is going to be normal for a long time.
Emma is strangely energized when she gets back to the apartment. She gathers up all her paperwork, makes a few calls she needs to and is done with the preparation for tomorrow by the time Neal and Henry get home.

Henry immediately pelts her with questions.

“Oh my God, was there really a dragon there? Was it big and scary? Did it breathe fire? Was it more like a tower dragon or one of those Asian ones? Do you think there are more somewhere?”

“Give her a chance to breathe kid,” Neal says, sitting down at the table.

Then he immediately continues, “So the favor my dad asked you to do involved going after a dragon defenseless?”

“Not totally defenseless, he did give me this sword,” Emma says, gesturing to where she’s left it on the kitchen counter. It will need a more permanent home soon. Maybe on the wall over the bed.

“He was a little late to the party apparently”, Neal says, pulling up the picture on his phone and then passing it across to Emma.

“Lacey took this from the elevator earlier today. Things are starting to leak out. She hasn’t left the library in as long a time as she can remember.”

“Just like Mary-Margaret said that David’s been comatose as long a she can remember.” Emma replies.

“Whatever it is you’re doing, it’s changing people,” Henry guesses. “You’re helping them question and remember things.”

“I guess I have to be really careful tomorrow then,” Emma reasons, “We saw what me making people question things did to Graham.”

“We should probably be happy that Regina doesn’t seem to have her eyes set on clearing him out of his hospital bed too,” Neal replies grimly.

There’s a round of silence as Emma and Neal prepare dinner.

“So what’s the game plan?” Neal asks.

“I’m going to serve her the papers at her office after lunch. I figure a public place might be safer.”

She pauses, “Speaking of safer.”

She reaches out and touches Henry on the shoulder.

“Tomorrow, at lunch, find Lily and take her to Jefferson’s place in the woods.”

Neal raises an eyebrow.
“You said yourself he seemed to have a soft spot for children and a very good idea of what Regina is capable of. I just don’t want her to try and lash out at her if she manages to overpower me or something.”

Emma’s eyes are downcast.

“I still don’t know how this is all going to go down. This town doesn’t play by the rules, I don’t know the ending to this.”

“We’ll win,” Henry insists. “Because we’re heroes, and good always wins.”

Emma hopes deep, deep in her gut that he’s right.

Later that night in bed, Neal asks her.

“So how was fighting a dragon.”

“Surreal”, she answers. “I just kind of stabbed and ran and when I saw the bottle grabbed it and got the hell out of dodge.”

“Do you think it was a famous dragon?”

“I’ll have to ask Henry if he recognized it from the book”.

Henry carries the book in his backpack the next day, cautious of his mother’s instructions.

He finds Lily outside on the field, eating her lunch alone.

“We have to go”

She looks up,

“What?”

“My mom’s going to go an arrest your mom after lunch today. She doesn’t want you to be in danger, so we’re going to go stay at a friend’s who lives in the woods until tonight.”

“Just us?”

“Once Dad gets the OK from Mom, he’s going to come follow us.”

Lily stands up and gathers her things with almost supernatural speed.

They’ve barely crossed the street and gotten past the tree line, when Henry rummages in his pocket.

“Here, you dropped this at the library the other day. The librarian said it looks like some of the shells she found in the elevator shaft above the basement where the dragon lives.”

Lily stares. “What”

“Yeah, I have a picture on my phone I’ll show you when we get there. Mom wanted me to try to find it in the book. Maybe if we do that we can figure out what’s up with your necklace. Where did you get it anyway?”

Lily latches it back around her neck before answering.

“I don’t know. I’ve had it since I was a little kid.”
“Do you know anything about where you came from?”

“I was abandoned as a baby, like your mom.”

“Well that makes it even more possible that you’re from someplace weird and special. Cause you two were put in basically the same situation and somehow managed to meet. Didn’t you ever wonder why you got sucked into the curse and no one else was ever even able to even get into town?”

Lily is quiet. It has just occurred to her that her and Emma must be virtually the same age, but her train of thought is derailed when Henry exclaims that he’s found something.

The something turns out to be the last pieces of Pinocchio. Henry stuffs them in his backpack and they continue on their way.

When they reach the house, Jefferson acts like he was expecting them. Henry hopes it’s because one of his parents called him and not because he’s been spending all day spying through the telescope.

He makes them tea and brings out a tray of cakes.

“Don’t drink until he does.” Henry whispers, “I don’t think there’s anything wrong with it, but he’s awfully strange”.

“So your mother’s finally decided to go after Regina. She’s using the law though, that’s still so bull headed of her. “

“The law is what she knows.” Henry interjects to defend his mother. “Besides, she just found a dragon underneath the library yesterday, she’s getting a hold of the magic thing too.”

“The library,” Jefferson mutters, in thought. “That makes sense. Hide one from the rest, and her old friend in her other form.”

“Old friend?” Lily asks and Henry follows up with, “Do you know who the dragon is?”

“As her powers grew, the queen struck up a strange friendship with the fairy Maleficent.”

Henry jolts up.

“Maleficent? From Sleeping Beauty?”

“She did have a thing for sleep spells.”

Henry grabs the book from his bag and flips through it rapidly. He’s read the whole thing through multiple times, he should be able to find this quickly, but…

“There it is,” he opens the page to the illustration of Maleficent over Briar Rose’s palace.

He then pulls out his cell phone and opens the picture Dad had sent him. It’s a super close up, but the eye and the scales…

“Lacey told us your necklace looked like the remains of eggshells she found above the basement….”

Lily looks at him askew. Her brain understands to a point what he’s trying to tell her. But nothing about it makes sense. Lily would never admit it, but she’s become as tied to the rules of the Land Without Magic as Emma had.

Emma, who was currently summing up all those rules in her head, as well as all of her courage, as
she approaches the Mayor’s office on the end of Main Street.

Regina’s sitting at her desk reading something. She doesn’t even look up at first.

“I’m not seeing anyone today, you have to make an appointment.”

Emma steels herself. She takes a deep breathe.

“Regina Mills, you are under arrest for the kidnapping and false imprisonment of Lilith Page.”

Emma has approached so many criminals in her years. She has placed several under citizen’s arrest, and scores more she’s turned over to police custody. She’s seen the whole spectrum of reactions. Anger, disbelief, fear. Desperate pleas for understanding.

Nothing has ever come close to the mayor’s response of,

“No”.

Emma takes another breath, and then continues.

“You have the right to remain silent, anything you say-”

She looks up at this point. The look on her face is almost dismissive, like you would give to a small child standing in your way.

“Do you mind, I have work to do today.”

Emma moves around the back of her chair and grabs on wrist to pull her to a standing position. She snaps one cuff. Regina’s whole demeanor suddenly changes.

“Miss Cassidy, I don’t think you understand what you’re dealing with.”

“The whole magic thing? I’m starting to adjust.”

She snaps the other cuff closed

“But this is the part of this world I deal with. You had to have known someone would have been looking for her. “

“If you think you’re going to have any kind of life in this town after this, you’ve got another thing coming. “

She jerks her hand suddenly, but Emma is hardly a weakling. Emma suddenly feels something in her snap. She’ll finish the Mirandas later.

“Why did you even want a kid, Mayor? You don’t even seem to like her much.”

Suddenly Emma’s phone in her pocket buzzes. She doesn’t intend to reach for it, until she hears the mayor laugh.

“That’s probably your neighbor. I was told they’re taking her husband off life support today”.

Emma’s vision goes white. She still isn’t quite sure how she manages to get Regina in the back of the cruiser. She can practically feel her smirking against the back of her neck.

She stops at the hospital. She knows she shouldn’t- she should put her in the holding cell first, but
she can’t stop herself.

The last thing she says to her before leaving the car is,

“What could she have done to you that you want to torture her so badly?”

Neal’s already there by the time she gets into the ward. He had just enough time to collect the kids from the woods after receiving the tear-stricken phone call. The two of them had barely had time to finish their tea.

David lays in bed, still motionless, monitors beeping softly.

“Doctor Whale’s about to come in and disconnect everything,” Neal whispers.

Henry and Lily sit side by side. Henry is openly crying, Lily looks like she wants to. Neal is sitting between them and Mary-Margaret, his hand on one of her arms.

Mary-Margaret isn’t saying anything. She isn’t crying either. Her face is stony, unmoving.

Emma’s whole body suddenly seizes. The whole time they’ve been in town, this woman has been nothing but welcoming, offering them friendship and comfort. She has been motherly in a way that Emma’s never had in her life, completely unsolicited to a total stranger.

And here she is, about to have something so dear to her torn from her with nothing she can do to change it.

“There’s no way they should be able to do this”. Emma whispers. There’s conviction in her voice, however little it means.

“Thank you for being here,” Mary-Margaret replies. Grateful, always, even if this position.

They all sit together, this weird little cobbled together family, in silence. When Doctor Whale comes in, Emma wants to rage at him. Tell him how illegal this is, to go against the wishes of a patient’s family. But she knows how little it matters. How little anything resembling proper sense matters in this freakish facsimile of a town.

He reaches out, disconnecting wires and the line on the monitor suddenly goes flat. There’s a horrible silence and Mary-Margaret lets out a sob.

Emma pushes aside every misgiving she’s ever had, every inkle of mistrust. She wraps her arms around Mary-Margaret and pulls her head to her chest.

Then, with sudden emotion, Emma presses her lips softly to her forehead.

The whole room is suddenly awash with light, that comes to a point, and spreads outward.

Then there’s a gasping noise from the bed in front of them.

**

At the edge of the woods, Rumpelstiltskin sees the light, and dumps the vial into the well. Then he smiles.

**

Ruby’s been drawn to the woods since the hunt several days ago. She can’t explain it, she feels more at ease out here than anywhere else.
She doesn’t think too much of the burst of light until it’s past her.

And then her thoughts are derailed when she’s struck in the head by something falling through the trees.

Puzzled, she bends to pick them up.

It’s a pair of shoes, old fashioned with heels and bows on the buckles. And they’re a soft shade of silver, and sparkle in the sun.

Ruby looks above her,

“Now where did you come from?”

Chapter End Notes

Whew! 13 chapters to get through the first season, I never thought I’d get this far! Not to say I’m slowly down. I have a rough idea of where I want this ultimately to go, with a few divergences here and there.

Note that after this, I’m going to be playing much looser with the canon plotline, for the sake of both consistency, and some ideas I had of my own. I will however, do my damnedest to remain true to the characters.
Chapter 14

To say Emma is ill prepared for the situation in front of her is an understatement. It’s a swirl of crying and hugging, and even when she’s involved she feels like she’s apart from the rest in a daze.

Then there’s another noise from down the ward, and Lily suddenly jumps up and bolts. Emma follows her. Neal would tell her that she was always more comfortable dealing with other people’s emotions rather than her own.

The ruckus turns out to be the formerly comatose form of Sheriff Graham gasping for breath and sitting up in his cot.

Lily throws her arms around him.

“Oh God, I thought for sure you were dead”.

Graham’s eyes are uncertain, wary, a certain scared animal vibe in them that Emma has not seen before.

“It’s over, “ he says quietly, “it’s really over after all these years.”

“Save your breath, you’ve been through so much.”

Emma turns suddenly, to find Mary-Margaret and David standing behind her, David still in his hospital gown (atrophy? Not a thing here apparently, Emma thinks).

His voice is appropriately labored when he speaks.

“So what happens now?”

“I’m not exactly an expert,” Lily suddenly speaks up, “But I think you should check to make sure the mayor’s still in your cruiser”.

A goal presenting itself lights a fire in Emma’s brain and sets into action mode.

“Henry, Lily, stay here with Graham”.

She doesn’t even spare a word to the others as she bolts out the front doors of the hospital. When the others leave, Henry looks aside at Lily.

“So, you’re Maleficent’s daughter. You didn’t immediately turn back into a dragon though, got any urges to curse some princesses?”

“I’m nobody’s daughter,” Lily insists, with an unexpected ferocity. “Not Mr and Mrs’s Pages, not Regina’s, not Maleficent’s. I’m fourteen going on thirty and I don’t think I’ve ever felt at home my whole life.”

“It can be hard, “ Graham says quietly, laying back in his hospital bed and looking very tired. “But at some point you have to find your own place in the world. You don’t have to define yourself by who your parents are.”

Henry doesn’t know too much of his story, from either the book or Disney, but the man definitely seems to know what he’s talking about.
“I still think you should try the dragon thing though…”

Sure as Lily though, the back door of the police cruiser is open and Regina is nowhere to be found.

“Where do you think she would have gone?” Snow asks.

Emma’s head is swimming. She was about to say the exact thing, but she wouldn’t have expected a response.

“Do you think her….” Emma can barely make herself say the word magic still, “Has come back? Would she be able to use it again?”

“I don’t know,” Snow admits, “This land has no magic of it’s own, but for this whole curse to work, it would have had to be able to be used here.”

“You should all go into town, near Main Street,” Emma insists, to all the faces that are suddenly watching her, expecting things. “We don’t know how everyone’s reacting to the curse breaking, and if Regina tries anything, they might need someone to protect them.”

Snow’s face is borderline unreadable. She opens her mouth, and Emma isn’t sure what she’s going to say, and she’s not sure if she could handle hearing it right now, so she cuts her off.

“I’ll see if I can stop her before she gets any ideas.”

And with that, she enters the cruiser and drives off.

The others do start making their way down the road, as a newly created makeshift group.

It’s a few minutes of awkward silence before Snow finally asks.

“Who are you really Neal? I know it might seem insensitive, but considering I just found out you’re my son in law I felt like I should ask.”

“Nothing I’ve told you this year is untrue.” He insists. “It just wasn’t all the whole truth. I went into this whole thing knowing a bit more than Emma did, but this whole year was surreal for the both of us.”

“If you had asked me when I put her in that wardrobe, I would have said I never truly expected to see her again, even though there would be nothing to stop me from hoping” David admits.

“You’re going to have to go slowly with her. Emma’s pretty protective of our life, we spent quite a lot of time feeling like it would be taken away from us. If you asked her right now, I don’t think she would be able to handle the fact that she was Snow White’s daughter.”

“You clearly know who we are” David asks, “If you already had some idea of what you were getting into, would we know who you are?”

Neal dodges as best as he can. And by that time, they’ve reached the growing crowd on Main Street, and it’s as chaotic as Emma predicted.

David goes ahead and starts trying to talk down the part of the crowd near the clocktower who seem intent on starting a lynch mob, while Neal and Snow hang back. Snow soon gets distracted by hugging Granny, and they are both approached by Ruby, running up to the both of them, ignoring the crowd and clutching something in her jacket.
“Something’s happened. Uhh, aside from the obvious. “

She’s delayed by the hugging that ensues, but then continues.

“I was out walking in the woods when the...wave thing happened, and these fell out of the sky”.

Snow carefully pulls back the piece of cloth.

“They just look like shoes to me...but you might want to tuck them away. “

“It’s gone and we’re all still here though,” Ruby says, “What are we going to do now?”

Neal suddenly jumps when the conversation is interrupted by a figure approaching them.

“Has anyone seen Rumplestiltskin?”

Neal’s inside are suddenly a swirl. The figure is Lacey, the librarian. The shy, timid facade is gone from her, she stands up straight.

“What do you know of Rumplestiltskin?” he asks

“My name is Belle. I was his cleaning lady, years ago...and I would be shocked if he wasn’t somehow involved in this. He often acted very strangely, saying things about some plan. “

She fixes Neal with a very strange gaze, and he suddenly feels very vulnerable.

She starts to say something else, but then Snow suddenly grabs him by the shoulder and gestures at a cloud of purple smoke billowing in the sky above the Sheriff’s station.

“Emma might be there, we have to go help her”.

**

Emma prided herself on her ability to think on her feet. But today she had discovered that “think” did not necessarily mean “comprehend”, because she would never in a million years understand how she ended up wrestling with the Mayor in the jail cell of the Sheriff’s office surrounded by smoke and being stalked by a dollar store Dementor.

Then something that she would later acknowledge as a “portal” opens up in the middle of the room.

There’s a commotion in the corner of the room, and the last thing she feels before being sucked in and tossed head over heels is Snow racing through the chaos and grabbing onto her hand.

She has a feeling that she’s really going to come to hate the word “portal”.

***

The sky turned a deep gray before the purple smoke appeared. The figure on watch had not expected anything interesting to happen that night, and was suddenly tossed by a powerful wave shaking the ship. She regains her balance, before making a dash for the captain’s quarters.

She roughly opened the door, breathing heavily.

“Captain Milah- it’s happened.”

The woman at the desk rose and turned. She pushes aside the map she had been studying, using the
hand that had not been replaced with a metal hook, and retrieves a somewhat aged scroll.

“Alert the crew Mary. Tell them it has come time to make good on the deal we made with that unpleasant woman”.

The Jolly Roger changed her course.

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