What Would They Say

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Summary

She couldn't dwell on the way his dimples flashed when he smiled. She couldn't think of how when he grabbed her hand she felt like she could get through anything. She couldn't remind herself that she loved his son as much as she loved her own. She couldn't let herself fall in love with the husband of her dead best friend. Outlaw Queen Modern AU. Not an adultery fic. Epic Slowburn.
Chapter 1

Regina wrapped her arms around herself in an effort to battle the cold. It was late at night and the November winds were fierce. She looked around her surroundings with a grimace. The bus station looked full of unsavory characters. A light stench of urine and bus fumes wafted through the air causing her to wrinkle her nose. She supposed she and her light blue cashmere coat must stick out like a sore thumb against the dirt and grime that characterized the station. She tried to distract herself from her surroundings by keeping track of all the buses that came through. Their destinations were lit up above their windshields. Sacramento, Phoenix, Las Vegas. In a few minutes she would be on one of those buses, being carried off to the life she’d always wanted. One with her and Daniel, together. She looked down at her hand and smiled at the tiny band that currently mounted her ring finger.

Regina tried to be as quiet as possible as she clicked her back patio door shut. She had to admit it was a bit ridiculous, sneaking out of her house at her age but it was worth it to see him. She took one last look through the window before creeping around to the side of the mansion. She smiled to herself as she stealthily made her way through the moonlit rose bushes.

“Daniel!” she whispered fiercely. “Daniel!”

She let out a yelp when he tapped her on her shoulder from behind. “Looking for me,” he said with a grin and a chuckle.

She playfully smacked him in his shoulder. “That’s not funny! If one of the maids would’ve heard that scream I would be dead and you would be fired.”

He let out a laugh. “I’m sorry Gina but when you’re around I get playful.”

“Well your playfulness is dangerous,” she said with a bright smile. She wrapped her arms around his middle and hugged him tightly. She hummed happily as she breathed in his comforting scent of dirt and flowers. “I missed you.”

“How could you possibly miss me? I was here all day,” he mumbled against the top of her head. He was right. He’d spent all day tending to the rose garden just thirty yards below her bedroom balcony.

“I know,” she sighed. “But you weren’t here.” She emphasized the final word with a squeeze of his torso.

“Well I am here now,” he said softly. He leaned down and smiled as he pressed his lips against hers. Her hand went to the back of his neck to pull him closer just as his hand slid to the small of her back. She swore nothing made her feel freer than kissing him.

He pressed his forehead against her own when she finally released him. “Where’s your mother this time?”

“She is in Tokyo for the next two days,” replied Regina. “She’s staking out a new location for the hotel chain.”

Regina’s mother, Cora Mills, was the CEO of Molinari Hotels, a Fortune 500 hotel chain. She was
fierce, calculating and the only thing standing between Regina and the future she wanted with Daniel. The only time Regina would even risk being with him was when her mother was on one of her business trips.

Daniel sighed. “Gina, why don’t you just tell her about us?”

“Because she would never allow this to continue,” she answered woefully. “Daniel you have to understand. My mother has a very specific idea of what my future should be and that idea-”

“Doesn’t include a barely-breaking even head gardener,” finished Daniel dejectedly. He clenched his jaw in frustration as he sat down on the stone bench in the corner. “I know.”

She placed her hands on his shoulders. “Daniel please don’t be upset. You know how much you mean to me. I wish it was different but it’s not. She’s… not.”

He grabbed her hands and placed a kiss on her knuckles. “I do understand Gina and I’m not upset. I just… I hate that she’s right. I’m just a gardener. I’d never be able to give you the life you deserve.”

“That’s not true,” she said shaking her head. “The life I want is one with someone who loves me. As far as I can see you’re the only one capable of giving me that.”

He smiled up at her and gripped her hips as she stepped between his legs. “I just wish I had a better chance at giving it to you.”

She groaned between her teeth in frustration. “This is so ridiculous! The person I love works just outside my door and I can’t even be with him in daylight. It’s unbearable!”

“It’s difficult but not unbearable,” said Daniel. He pulled her down into his lap where she automatically laid her head against his shoulder. “If it’s the only way I can be with you then I can live with that because not being with you at all, that’s what truly unbearable to me.”

“It’s not the only way,” she whispered softly. She lifted her head from his shoulder and scrunched her eyebrows together as a thought crossed her mind. “What if we left?”

Daniel raised his eyebrows at her. “Left?”

“Yes,” she said nodding her head fervently. “What if we were to leave here and never come back? Then we could be together!”

He shook his head at her disbelief. “Regina you’re talking nonsense.”

“No Daniel I’m not!” she said swiftly standing to her feet. “I am twenty years old and I am sneaking around with the man I love because my mother won’t approve of him. That’s nonsense! Things are never going to change as long as I live under her rules and in her house. If leaving is the only way I have a chance to really be with you then I want to take it.”

Daniel stood and took her hands into his own. “Gina think about this. Think about what you’d be leaving behind. Your father, your mother, your home?”

“My home is with you,” she said stepping closer to him. “The only place where things feel right for me is in your arms. My father will understand that. And maybe after some time my mother will too.”

Even as the words left her mouth she could feel the lies on them. Her mother would never
understand this no matter how much time she was given.

“Daniel think about,” she wrapping her arms around his neck. “We could go someplace where we could hold hands and walk down the street in broad daylight. Where we could make love in a bed instead of in the dirt. No more hiding, no more secrets. Just us, together.”

He ran his fingers along her arms and thought about what she was offering. A life with Regina Mills. It was all he’d wanted since the first time he saw her. He thought back to that almost unremarkable day three years ago. He remembered the way she’d walked behind her mother swiftly and silently wearing that long red sundress. Her dark hair falling just below her shoulder blades. He only saw her for a small moment before they got in the car and drove off but he was still astounded by how a girl who could look so beautiful could look so sad at the same time. That was when he knew he wanted to do something that chase her sadness away. That day was the only reason this rose garden even existed. He’d planted it for her. He placed it right below her balcony so she could have something beautiful to look at. She’d spent many days looking down on it from her room or reading on the very bench they had just stood from. Now she was standing in it offering him a chance to do what he’d always wanted to do for her… but it still didn’t feel right.

He looked down at her and shook his head sadly. “I couldn’t ask my girlfriend to give up so much for me.”

Regina looked away from him with disappointment in her eyes.

“But maybe I could ask it of my future wife,” he added hesitantly.

She looked up at him with wide eyes. “What?”

He dug around in his pants pocket and pulled out a small golden band with a small ruby set on top. She gasped when she caught sight of it. It was beautifully simplistic.

“Daniel...” she breathed.

“I’ve been carrying this around for the past few months wondering how to give it to you,” he said nervously. “My mother told me that my great-great-grandfather won it in a poker game. Immediately after he supposedly ran to the love his life and asked her to marry him. She said yes with no hesitation. Since then this ring has been used in three generations of proposals in my family and they all lived happily together. My mother told me that if I was to use this ring the girl I asked couldn’t possibly say no. So tell me... was she wrong?”

Regina was practically shaking with emotion by the end of his speech. She could already feel the tears welling up in her eyes as she shook her head at him. “No. No she wasn’t wrong.”

A smile broke out over his face. “So you will? You’ll marry me?”

Regina grinned as she nodded her head manically. “Yes! Yes I’ll marry you!”

She leapt into his arms and they spun around in joy before toppling to the ground in a fit of laughter. As their laughter subsided Daniel grabbed her left hand and slipped the ring on her finger. “You know if you don’t like it I can always get you another...”

“No,” she whispered staring at it lovingly. “I love it.”

She turned and stared into his hazel eyes. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” he said softly as he ran his fingers through her hair.
Regina hummed contentedly as she twisted the ruby ring on her finger. It hadn’t left her hand since that night in the rose garden. Just the memory of that time filled her with warmth. It still seemed like just yesterday but in truth it was months ago. She and Daniel had agreed that leaving immediately wouldn’t be good. They needed to be smart about this. They needed a plan. Things began to fall in place when Daniel got a job offer from one of his friends in New Mexico. They were starting a landscaping business and wanted him on board. It was just the fresh start they needed. That was weeks ago and since then Daniel had been saving every penny he made so they could afford a place to stay when they reached Albuquerque. Regina had been stashing whatever small amounts of actual cash her mother allowed her to have and looking up job offers in the city online. She didn’t have much work experience but she was sure she could find something she was good at. With what she and Daniel had saved they should be good for at least few months before she found somewhere to work.

She snuck another look at her watch. 7:35. She looked up with a sigh. She was starting to get worried. Daniel was running late and their bus left at 7:50. She knew arriving separately was too much of a risk. If she and Daniel missed this bus they would have to wait for the next one and that would be dangerous. It would give her mother time to find her and drag her back home. And then they would never be together. She exited the bus station and looked out into the parking lot. She let out a relieved sigh as she saw Daniel’s beat up truck pull into a nearby parking spot. She allowed herself a smile as she saw him exit the driver’s door and give her a wave. He quickly pulled the bags from the bed of his truck and stuck the keys into the rims of one of the tires. One of his friends from work had agreed to pick it up and have it sent to him later. Daniel loved his truck but he had to admit it wasn’t up for a road trip. He knew he was running late so he threw the bags over his back and started to run toward her.

Regina smiled at him as he ran across the parking lot. In hindsight it wasn’t the smartest decision he could’ve made but she didn’t care. It was finally happening. They were leaving together. They were going to get on a bus and go to a place where they could have a future. It was just within reach. All he had to do was cross the street.

Neither of them saw the car coming.

It happened in a flash. Daniel had barely taken two steps into the road when it hit him. All she can remember was seeing the speeding black car and Daniel flying fifteen feet forward. His head knocking directly into the curb. A piercing scream ran through the air. Later on she would realize it was her screaming his name. She flew across the street without even thinking about it. The car just continued on. She could hear the screech of its tires as it teared out of the parking lot. It hardly even slowed down. She fell to her knees by his side, gasping as she stared at his limp body through tearful eyes. She pressed her head to chest praying to God there would be some semblance of heartbeat still left there. There was none. She could feel the blood soaking onto her coat as she moved him into her lap and begged him not to leave her.

“Daniel please,” she sobbed. “Please don’t go. Please don’t leave me. Please… please…”

She could hear the faint sound of approaching sirens as she felt someone grab her shoulders and force her away from Daniel’s body despite her cries of protest. She only caught a glimpse of the stranger’s face. She was an older woman with gray hair pulled back into a severe bun. She saw the paramedics swoop in and try to revive him as this random stranger held her back and tried to comfort her. The paramedics pressed down on his chest repeatedly trying to bring its rhythm back into Daniel’s body. For a moment she dared to hope. She hoped that with all their medical training and experience that somehow they would be able to bring him back. That they could shock his heart back to life. She hoped ... but only for a moment.
It wasn’t long before the first paramedic looked at the other with a disappointed sigh. “We have to call it.”

Her partner nodded grimly and looked down at his watch. “Time of death: 7:46 p.m.”

Four minutes.

It was all she could think of. They had been four minutes away from everything they had wanted. Just four minutes.

She sat on a bench wrapped in a gray security blanket the EMTs had given her. She had no idea how long she’d been sitting there. Apparently she’d collapsed a few seconds after they’d pronounced Daniel… gone. She’d never been in so much pain in her entire life. It was like she could feel everything and nothing at the same time. Inside she felt hollow but on the outside it was like she felt a burning, beating sensation on every inch of her skin. Her cheeks felt warm and tight from the tears she’d cried. She stared straight ahead at the ambulance. Daniel was in there. She had watched as they had put the man she loved in a black bag and loaded him into the back of the vehicle. She wanted to scream out that the bag was too small. They couldn’t fit all that Daniel was into one small black bag. He was more than that. He deserved more than that black bag.

She felt the bench shift as one of the EMTs sat next to her. She didn’t turn to look at her.

“Miss?” she said gently. “We’ve called someone for you. Your mother. She should be here any minute.”

Regina just blinked in response. She watched the red and white flash of the ambulance lights. Four minutes.

The EMT pressed on uncertainly. “Um, it’s too soon to tell but we think cause of death was the blow to the head he received.”

Regina painfully scrunched her eyes closed as the memory of Daniel’s head hitting the curb flashed through her mind.

“He didn’t suffer,” said the EMT softly.

Only then did she turn to face the EMT. She was blonde woman with big brown eyes and a small nose. She was pretty but the lines on her face suggested that she’d seen a lot more than she should have for her age. Regina wanted to thank her for her kindness. For letting her know that things had been quick and painless for him but she found herself incapable of speaking. She settled on jerking her head forward in awkward nod.

The EMT sighed. “Was he family?”

Regina swallowed hard before choking out “He was everything.”

The EMT nodded understandingly and gently placed a hand on her back in an attempt to comfort her. Regina shivered at her touch but allowed herself to be comforted.

“Out of my way!”

Regina cringed and closed her eyes in misery as soon as she heard that voice. Her mother had arrived. She turned her head to see her mother pushing her way through the curious bystanders and made her way up to the yellow caution tape. As always she looked perfectly put together. Despite
the late hour she was still dressed in one of her power suits like she was going to a business meeting and not picking her daughter up from witnessing a crime. Her red lipstick was perfect and not one strand of her brown hair was out of place. She moved through the crowd in her three-inch heels like a force of nature, stopping for no one, shoving anyone who dared not to move. As she went to lift up the caution tape she found herself stopped by a police officer.

“Ma’am this is a crime scene. I cannot allow you to cross that tape,” he said authoritatively.

She glared at him so forcefully he took a step back.

“That is my daughter!” she snarled pointing towards Regina. “She is clearly distraught and needs her mother. Now am I going to be allowed to comfort her or am I going to have to call Commissioner Chavez to get you fired first? Know now that I can work with either option.”

The officer risked a look at the EMT who gave him a swift nod. He reluctantly stepped out of Cora’s way. “My apologies ma’am.”

“Excellent decision,” she said in a sickly sweet voice. She gave him a superior look as she moved past him towards Regina. She quickly kneeled in front of her daughter and caressed her cheek affectionately. “Oh my sweet girl. I am so sorry you had to see that.”

It took all Regina had not to lean away from her touch. To embarrass her mother so publicly would not do her any favors right now.

The EMT stood and offered Cora her place on the bench. “We understand that this is a very difficult time for you and your daughter but this was a crime and she will need to be talked to about what she witnessed.”

Cora nodded as she took a seat next to Regina. “Of course I understand but she’s clearly in no condition to talk right now.” She brushed Regina’s hair behind her ear and then turned back to the EMT. “I would really prefer it I could just take her home so she can rest.”

“I completely understand,” said the EMT with a nod of her head. “I’ll personally make sure that you have the night to yourselves before anyone comes knocking.”

“Thank you,” said Cora giving her a grateful smile. She wrapped her arms around Regina as the EMT left. To anyone who witnessed it they were the perfect picture of a daughter receiving comfort from her mother. Only those who looked closer could see the wince of pain on Regina face as mothers fingers dug forcefully into her back.

“I will deal with you when we get home,” she whispered into Regina’s ear.

The ride home with her mother was a long one. They sat in complete silence in the back of the town car she’d arrived in. The backseat was spacious large enough to fit almost four people, if they were thin enough. But with the two of them in the backseat things just felt crowded. The rage emanating for Cora combined with the grief pouring off Regina filled the air. The effect was stifling. The only thing to be heard were the quiet sniffles Regina was incapable of holding back.

“Stop snorting over there! snapped Cora."You sound like a child!"

Despite her mother’s wishes Regina couldn’t stop. The weight of Daniel’s death and her growing trepidation of her mother’s reaction threatened to overtake her. But she tried as hard as she could to reel those emotions in. She was devastated by Daniel’s death but she still didn’t want her mother to see her this way. So fragile and breakable. When she first realized that she loved Daniel she also
realized that she never wanted her mother to know of that love. She didn’t want her to infect it with her poison. Her feelings for Daniel and her mother were two things that would never mix. And that applied to her love for him as well as her grief.

As the town car pulled up into the driveway Regina looked up at the two-story mansion she called her childhood home. The green vines that stood out against the yellow façade. The white window panes offset by blue shutters. And it all sat on fifty acres of well-managed land. She thought she would never have to see this place again. It was a beautiful prison but a prison nonetheless.

Her mother gripped her arm tight and dragged her into the house and toward the dining room. Her heels clacked against the marble floors as she shoved her into the nearest chair.

“Sit!” she barked at her.

Regina did so without complaint. She just glared at her mother as she crossed the dining room over to the mahogany bar counter in the corner. Cora grabbed a short glass and harshly set it on the counter so she could pour herself a glass of scotch. She kept her back to Regina the entire time. Whenever her mother was truly angry she would always go for the scotch. Normally she would order one of the maids to pour it for her but whenever she was this angry she couldn’t even find the patience to wait for them. She brought the glass to her lips and took a long sip. She let out a sigh as she set the glass back onto the counter. Only then did she turn to face her daughter.

“Oh Regina,” she said shaking her head disapprovingly. “Where do I even begin?”

Regina remained silent. This was not a time for her to talk. Cora stalked across the room toward her, like a tiger hunting its prey.

“How about I begin here?” she said pulling a folded piece of stationary out of her pocket. Regina shut her eyes as she realized her mother was holding her goodbye note.

“Dear mother and father,” Cora read mockingly. “I am so sorry you had to find out this way but I am leaving home. I will not be alone though. I am leaving with Daniel. We have been in love for years and know this is the only way we can truly be together. I am sorry if this comes as disappointment to you but I know I am doing what’s right for me. Love Regina.”

She let out a dark chuckle as she finished reading. She crumpled the note between her hands.

“You foolish girl,” she growled. “Did you really think it would be that easy? Did you really think that he loved you? That you would run off into the sunset with him and live happily ever after?”

Regina flinched as her mother threw the crumpled note in her direction. “I should send that driver a thank you gift because he saved you from a lifetime of misery!”

Regina glared at her mother angrily. “I loved him!”

A bang echoed through the room as Cora slammed her hand against the table. “And what… have I always… told you… about love?”

Regina’s voice trembled as she spoke. “Love… is…”

Cora leaned in closer to hear her. “I’m sorry love is what?”

“Love is weakness,” mumbled Regina.

“Clearer than that!” ordered Cora.
Regina glared at her mother defiantly as she spoke. “Love is weakness,” she said firmly.

“Exactly,” hissed Cora.

She leaned down to Regina’s eye level. “You say that you loved him dear? Tell me just how strong does that love make you feel in this moment? That emptiness that you feel inside, that pain that’s radiating off of you. That’s what love does. It turns you pathetic and weak. If you learn one thing from this Regina it will be that you’re better off without it.”

Regina tried to look away from her but Cora gripped her chin between her fingers and forced her attention back. “It doesn’t matter whether he died or not. You never would’ve been able to make him happy.”

“You don’t know that,” whispered Regina weakly.

“And now neither will you,” Cora shot back cruelly. She went back to the bar and poured herself another scotch. She grabbed the entire bottle and headed toward the stairs.

“Wipe the tears off your face,” she said without turning back. “We have a function to attend tomorrow evening and I will not have you looking all puffed up.”

For a full five minutes Regina remained at the table, as still and silent as a rock. It was like she was waiting to wake up. To realize that this was all a cruel nightmare and that everything had gone to plan and she was in Albuquerque with Daniel. It took a glance at the clock to get release her from her trance. 9:45. She should go to bed. She needed sleep. As if on autopilot she rose from the table and headed upstairs toward her room. Once she was safely behind its closed doors she fell against her bedroom wall and wrapped her arms around torso in an effort to hold herself together. It was only when she felt the fabric against her hand that she realized that she was still wearing her jacket. She looked down at the blood covering her torso and began to hyperventilate. Daniel’s blood. She brought her trembling fingers up to the buttons trying to get it off as quickly as possible. Once the buttons were undone she frantically shoved it off her arms and tossed it in her closet. She wasn’t quite ready to throw it away yet. She pulled off the rest of her clothes and kneeled next to her bed to reach for the shoe box she’d hidden underneath it. Inside was a t-shirt she’d once stolen from the back of Daniel’s truck. She doubted that he’d even realized that she’d taken it. She brought it up to her face and took a deep breath. It still smelled like him. She quickly put it on and slipped into her bed. What am I going to do now?

There was a knock on her door and she soon heard the thump of her father’s cane against the floor.

“Regina?” he called out softly before poking his head through the door. She didn’t turn to greet him. He sighed as he made his way into her room, his cane in one hand, the handle to his portable oxygen tank in the other. Henry Mills had always been sickly, ever since he was a baby. Due to complications at his birth he’d never really been able to breath on his own. He sat on the side of her bed and gently placed a hand on her shoulder.

“I’m so sorry my dear,” he said regretfully.

Regina let out one trembling breath at his words. “I feel like I’m dying Daddy. I feel everything and nothing at the same time. It hurts.”

He rubbed her back soothingly like he used to when she was sick as a child. “I know it hurts now but you will get pass this. I promise you will.”

“I’ve lost everything I’ve ever wanted,” said Regina sadly.
“Maybe you can love again,” replied Henry uncertainly. “Find someone new, someone better suited for you.”

Regina’s face contorted in agony. “There is no one better and there never will be.”

“Regina that’s just not true,” said Henry. “Daniel was a good man. I liked him… but he was just a gardener. He wouldn’t have been able to give you everything that you need.”

Regina shook her head at her father’s words. He’d never understand.

“I just needed him,” she sobbed. From a very young age Regina had recognized that her parents didn’t love each other. They tolerated each other at best. It made them incapable of understanding the pain she felt. Even though he was trying to make her feel better her father was only making her feel more isolated.

“Please go,” she pleaded.

Her father didn’t argue with her. He just pressed a kiss to her forehead and left. Once he was gone she was brought up her hand to wipe the tears from her cheek. She went still as she felt the cool metal against her skin. Daniel’s ring. She slipped it off her finger and stared at it. She could hear Daniel’s voice in her head. And they all lived happily together. She used to be able to look at this ring and feel hope for the future. Now it only reminded her everything that will never be. She rubbed her fingers over the ruby as she let her sobs overtake her. That was the last thing she remembered before she let herself drift to sleep.
Chapter 2

Her hands clutched the porcelain rim of her toilet as her stomach flipped and twisted forcing her meager lunch up her throat. Regina hadn’t thrown up like this since she’d gotten the stomach flu when she was in the sixth grade. She’d forgotten how painful it was. When she finally finished emptying her stomach she lowered the toilet lid and laid her head against it. This wasn’t the stomach flu. She knew it wasn’t.

It had been a little more than two months since Daniel’s death and she still hadn’t received her period. The first time she noticed its absence she tried to pin it on stress. Daniel’s death had overwhelmed her. There were nights where she still woke up screaming his name. It was like she was reliving his death every time she closed her eyes. Her mother had moved them away from their home and into a penthouse above one of their hotels in the city. Security stationed on the ground floor and outside their door. They all knew her face. They kept track of her at all times. She was never alone. According to Cora Regina had proven herself untrustworthy. She couldn’t even leave the house without a “personal escort.” She’d never felt more trapped in her life. So yes, for the first week she’d tried to blame her missed period on stress but even then she knew that wasn’t true. The horrific amount of vomiting she’d been doing lately just confirmed her suspicions. She was pregnant with Daniel’s child.

She stood up and walked over to the sink to rinse out her mouth. She’d known for weeks now and she still couldn’t wrap her head around it. She was going to be a mother. There was going to be a baby. How was she going to do this without him? This probably… happened a little while before that night at the bus station. She and Daniel were usually so careful. They made sure to be. But that night… that night was different. They had finally bought their bus tickets. The future they wanted wasn’t just a dream anymore. It was real. They were going to make it real. Their excitement had made them careless. And in a few months from now the result of that carelessness would be forcing its way out of her body.

She pressed a hand to her stomach. She knew that given her situation she should feel more apprehensive but she couldn’t be. When Daniel had died she thought that the only thing she’d had left of him was her memories. Her mother had moved them from the place where they’d loved each other. She’d even had his rose garden ripped up. They rarely got the chance to take pictures together and the ones they had she’d given to him for safe-keeping. She thought that she’d never have another piece of him again. Until she’d discovered the baby. Now she had a part of him that could never be replaced. She couldn’t help but imagine a baby girl with her black hair and his crooked smile or a baby boy with his hazel eyes and her nose. She didn’t know what was going to happen next but she did know one thing. She wanted this baby. And there was only one person who could take it from her.

Regina shuddered to think of what her mother would do if she found out about the baby. To say she would be displeased would be the kind way of putting things. She’d never allow her to keep it. Thankfully hiding her pregnancy from her mother wasn’t as hard as Regina had thought it would be. Despite her desire to keep her daughter under constant surveillance Cora still had a company to run. She didn’t waste much of her time in the penthouse. Her time was usually spent in board meetings, traveling to new hotel sites or attending fundraisers. She was normally gone by the time Regina woke up and Regina made sure to be in bed by the time she got home. They barely saw each other. The real trouble laid with her mother’s staff. The maids and security guards. They always seemed to be around and she had no doubt they were reporting her activities to her mother. Her mother took extra care to make sure that they people she hired were loyal to her. Actually loyal is the wrong word. Indebted was more accurate. Regina had heard more than a few stories of how
she’d sent children to college or made sure that spouses had access to better medical care. Her mother had always told her that when used correctly false kindness could yield real loyalty. It was manipulative but effective.

Regina was doing everything in her power to make sure that none of the staff suspected a thing. She forced herself to eat despite her nausea. She tried to make sure that she only threw up in her own private bathroom away from prying eyes. Luckily it was still cold out so she was able to bundle herself up under sweaters without much suspicion. She told herself that it wasn’t forever. Just until she reached a point where her mother could no longer do anything to prevent her baby’s birth. By her calculations she should only be a little over 12 weeks pregnant. She just had to make it to the five month mark and then her mother would have no choice but to let her go through with the pregnancy. At least that’s what she kept telling herself.

She turned sideways to examine herself in the mirror. Regina had always been naturally thin and usually she would count that as a blessing but now it was just a challenge. Despite how early it was she could already see her belly starting to round itself out. It was hardly noticeable when she was in her thick sweaters but it was starting to stick out against the rest of her slender form. She sighed. Looks like she wouldn’t be wearing a t-shirt anytime soon. Still a small tugged at her lips. Her baby was growing and that was good. Her smile disappeared when she saw a vomit stain residing right under her neckline. Gross.

She walked into her room and lifted her sweater over her head. It was still covering her eyes when one of the maid walked in.

“Miss Mills? I- Oh!” she quickly turned around her hand still on the door knob. “I’m sorry Miss Mills! I should’ve knocked first.”

Oh no! Regina turned and fumbled to pull her sweater down as quickly as possible. She couldn’t let the maid see her stomach.

“It’s fine,” she said quickly. “I should’ve locked my door if I was changing.”

Yeah you should’ve you idiot, she thought silently. What if she saw something?

The maid giggled nervously. She was a tiny thing. Probably no taller than five-foot-three. Her red hair was stylishly cut short, just above her ears. It stood out against her freckles and green eyes. Regina had seen her around the penthouse a few times. She thought her name was something along the lines of Krista. “I’m sorry,” she apologized. “Your father just wanted me to ask if you would be joining him for dinner tonight and what would you like to eat?”

Regina took a minute to get her bearings before speaking. “Um yes, tell him I will see him then. I’d love it if we kept it simple though. Some soup would be nice. It’s kind of chilly out.”

“Alright I will let him know,” said Krista with a smile. She turned to leave. For a second Regina thought she might be in the clear. Maybe she hadn’t seen anything. But at the last second Krista turned back to give her one last nod. It happened quickly but Regina saw her eyes flicker down toward her stomach before leaving.

Her bedroom door shut with a click and Regina placed her hand on her stomach worriedly. This wouldn’t be good.

For the rest of the night Regina felt like she couldn’t breathe. The maid had most definitely seen
her bump and she knew it wouldn’t be long before her mother found out. Every time she left her room she felt like her mother could pop out of some shady corner and attack her. It was unlikely though. Her mother was currently in Spain meeting with new possible investors for their new European branch. According to her father, her mother had been working tirelessly to make sure that they got at least ten European hotels off the ground this year. It had always been her dream to take the company global. Regina didn’t really care though. All that mattered to her was that her mother was out of the country for a few more days. That meant she had time to search for Krista and beg for her silence. The next day she paced the library floor with her arms folded across her chest. Her mother demanded that the library be dusted daily. That meant Krista had to come through the room sometime. She just had to intercept her before it was too late.

She stayed there all day pacing and wringing her hands waiting for the tiny redhead to show her face but she never showed. Regina snuck another look at the clock on the wall. 8:30. She let out a sigh. If Krista hadn’t shown up yet there was little chance of her showing up at all. Maybe she had the day off? Or maybe she quit? In any case Regina wasn’t going to see her today. She shuffled off to her room. She would get some sleep and search for her again tomorrow. She closed the door behind her as she entered her room. Maybe a warm bath would calm her nerves.

“You know I still find it interesting…”

She jumped nearly ten feet in the air at the sound of her mother’s voice. Her eyes frantically focused on the dark corner of her room. Her mother was perched against her vanity critically eyeing the Russian snow globe she’d had since she was a child. She tapped the glass with her nails making the snow flurry.

“…just how fast news can travel in this day and age.” She finished. She looked up at Regina with a piercing glare.

Regina swallowed hard before speaking. “Mother? I- I thought you were still in Spain for the week.”

Cora set down the snow globe with a thud. “My plans changed.”

“Oh,” said Regina meekly.

“But I do have news,” said Cora standing from the vanity. She stalked her way toward her daughter. Every step she took more deliberate than the last. “We got the investors for the new Spain branch. They signed on quicker than I thought they would. It allowed me to come home earlier than expected.”

For every step Cora took toward her Regina took a small one back. The closer her mother got the less safe she felt. “That’s excellent mother.”

Cora gave her a calculated smile and nod. “Yes it is. But what is even more excellent is what I have just done with you.”

When Regina raised an eyebrow at her she continued. “You see I have shared my news with you. I have communicated what new things have arisen in my life.”

Regina tried to take one more step back but felt her bed at the back of her knees. There was nowhere else for her to go.

Cora continued to advance upon her until Regina’s face was only a few inches from her own. “Now what about you my dear? Is there any news that you would like to share with me?”
Regina shuddered at the stench of scotch on her breath. She looked down at her toes.

“No,” she answered in a trembling voice.

Cora glared at her venomously. “I don’t believe you,” she whispered fiercely.

She let her eyes rake over Regina’s body. “Lift up your shirt for me.”

Regina just shook her head silently.

“I said lift up your shirt. Now!” growled Cora.

Regina brought her trembling hands to the hemline of her sweater. A tear went down her cheek as she slowly lifted it above her stomach.

Cora let out a strangled gasp as she saw Regina’s rounded belly. She lifted her gaze from her daughter’s stomach to her eyes. “Just when I thought you couldn’t disappoint me more.”

Regina’s chin began to wobble as she quickly pulled her shirt down over her stomach. “I’m sorry,” she whispered.

Cora saw Regina’s misery and felt her anger change direction. Despite her fury at her daughter’s stupidity she wasn’t to blame here. This was because of that gardener. Even from beyond the grave he’d managed to destroy her daughter. She gently took Regina’s face in her hands. “Oh my darling. This is not your fault. It’s that boy’s fault. He ruined you.”

Regina just looked up at her with wide eyes. She was so shocked she couldn’t even say anything in Daniel defense.

Cora tucked Regina’s hair behind her ears. “I only wish you’d told me sooner. Mistakes like this can always be handled.”

Regina found herself frantically shaking her head at her mother’s words. “No. No please. I don’t want this handled.”

Cora’s hands dropped from Regina’s face. “What?” she asked in a low voice.

“I- I want to keep it,” said Regina desperately. “Please…”

A spark of rage lit behind Cora’s eyes. Before Regina could even flinch her mother struck her hard across the face. She gasped and cradled her cheek in her hand as her mother gripped her shoulders tight.

“Now you listen to me you naïve little girl,” she snarled. “I have spent years making this company into something worth having and I will not have the sacrifices that I have made tarnished by your idiotic sentimentality! This is not a child you are carrying. It is a disgrace! And I will not let it tear down the future I have worked so hard to build for you! You will get rid of it! Tomorrow!”

“No!” cried Regina. “I won’t do that!”

Cora gripped her chin in her hand. “I am your mother. And you will do as I say! Whether you like it or not.”

She spun on her heel and slammed Regina’s door behind her. She motioned for her two security guards to stand next to the door. “Watch her,” she growled. “She does not leave that room unless I say so!”
Regina fell to her knees as she heard her mother stomp down the hallway. She wrapped her arms around her middle and sobbed.

Cora grumbled as she marched her way into her office. That stupid girl! Always so willing to throw away every opportunity she got. First that gardener and now this! It was unacceptable. She poured herself another glass of scotch. She’d had at least two on the way over here but when she was this stressed who gave a damn. Hell she deserved it now that she had to clean up yet another one of Regina’s messes. She relished the feel of the alcohol going down her throat before she set the glass back down on her desk. She sighed as she pulled out her cell phone and scrolled through her contacts. Where the hell was that Dr. Whale?

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

She looked up from her phone and let out a scoff as she saw her husband amble in on his cane. He trailed his oxygen tank in behind him like always. She brought her eyes back to the screen in her hand. “If I wanted your opinion Henry I would ask for it but then again that I would never be that desperate.”

The presence of her husband in her study made her skin crawl. Once upon a time Henry had been useful to her. A very specific means to an end. But now he was just dead weight. There were a lot of things that Cora could not tolerate but weakness was the thing she hated the most. And with his cane and oxygen tank Henry was weakness personified.

“What do you want?” she spat.

“I wanted to make sure you weren’t making rash decisions,” replied Henry, taking a seat in front of her desk.

She tilted her head at him suspiciously. “You knew…”

“I suspected,” he answered in an even tone. “After what she’d been through I saw no reason to ask and add any more stress to her life.”

Cora let out a dark chuckle at that. “Well congratulations dear. You’ve now crossed the line into completely useless. Thanks to your inaction I have to clean up yet another one of her mistakes.”

Henry sighed. “I don’t suppose you’ve taken her feelings into consideration here.”

She gave him a disbelieving look. “It doesn’t matter what she feels. I am her mother. I know what’s best for her future even if she doesn’t.”

Henry glared at his wife. There was once a time where he thought he would love her for the rest of his days but that time was long gone. It took him longer than he’d admit but he now knew that the shy secretary that he’d fallen in love with had never been real. It was just a mask to hide the cunning woman who now stood before him. She’d wormed her way into his heart and to the head of his family’s company. He could no longer protect himself from her but he could still protect his daughter. At least this time.

“You’ve never been able to see her side. You don’t realize how much it breaks her heart,” he said sadly. “Perhaps if you were more understanding of her she wouldn’t have run off with the gardener in the first place.”
Cora turned and leveled her fierce gaze at her husband. “Are you saying this situation is my fault?”

“I’m saying your heavy-handed tactics nearly cost us our daughter once and perhaps it’s time you changed them,” he replied calmly. “Let her keep the child.”

Cora’s jaw dropped at his words. “You expect me to let her keep that little bastard?!”

“I expect you to be smart and not let your anger cloud your judgement!” snapped Henry. “She already loves the child. She’s already begun to protect and care for it. Just as she did the gardener. She ran for him and she will run for this baby. She’s probably already plotting her escape right now.”

Cora turned from him with a huff. Henry might be weak but unobservant he was not. “I have guards at her door. She’s not going anywhere.”

“Maybe not today,” said Henry nonchalantly. “But tell me dear, if you do go through with this how long do you think it’ll be before she tries to take off again? A week? A month?”

Cora leaned forward and gripped the edge of her desk so tightly her knuckles grew white. Damn it he was right. Her daughter had always been run by her emotions. It was the one habit Cora was unable to break her of. “And just what would you have me do Henry?”

Henry settled his hands on top of his cane. “Instead of giving her a reason to run make sure she has a reason to stay. Let this baby be her incentive. Let her keep it, raise it. You already control all her finances. If you’re the one holding the purse strings over her child then perhaps she’ll be more… receptive to your requests from her. All she wants is to keep her child safe. Make it so that you are the only safe place she has to go.”

Cora raised her eyebrows at his reasoning. He could see that he had her intrigued so he pressed on. “Cora you’ve been fighting her for so long. Wouldn’t it feel nice if she had one more reason to love you instead of hate you?”

Cora crossed her arms in response and Henry knew that he had her. Despite her steel exterior Regina’s constant rejection of her values still stung.

“And just how am I supposed to explain this child to the shareholders?” asked Cora coolly.

“Cora please,” said Henry rising from his seat. “You and I both know this wouldn’t be the first pregnancy you’ve managed to cover up.”

She glared at his back as he shuffled out of the room. Damn him.

Regina paced her room and ran her fingers through her hair fretfully. She had to get out of this place. But how was she supposed to do that? There were guards at her door. Both more than six feet tall and 200 pounds. There was no way she was going to be able fight them off as small and pregnant as she was. She walked over to her window and looked down at the street. Or what she could see of it from this height. She was thirty floors up. There was no way she could jump. Maybe she could signal someone? She let out a frustrated sigh. No. Even if she did have a flashlight, the penthouse covered the entire floor and she couldn’t reach anyone below. She leaned against the window sill and buried her face in her hands. She couldn’t lose this baby. It was all she had left.

She looked up when she heard a knock on her door.
“Regina,” called Cora. “May I… come in?”

Regina scoffed to herself. As if she could stop her. It didn’t matter anyway. Her mother entered without any sort of answer. Regina eyed her curiously. Her hair was down and she was no longer in her usual power suit. She was actually in one of her silk robes. She’d even removed almost all her makeup. All that was left was her signature red lipstick. She looked… almost non-threatening.

“Regina I… I would like to apologize for my behavior earlier tonight,” she choked out.

Regina tilted her head suspiciously. “You would?”

“Yes,” said Cora earnestly. “I was just… I was upset that you hadn’t come to me. Like you should’ve.”

She took a seat on the edge of the bed and rubbed the sheets absentmindedly. “Regina I’ve always regretted the way our relationship has turned out. The way we talk and behave around one another… it’s not the way a mother and daughter should act.”

Regina just folded her arms across her chest and continued to watch her cautiously. What was this about? It felt like a trap.

“Most of the problems between us have been my fault,” continued Cora. “I’ll admit that I haven’t been listening to you like I should have been. And I made you feel like you had no choice but to pull away from me. I want that to change. I’m ready to listen now.”

She crossed her legs and placed her folded hands on top of her knees. “Regina… would you really like to keep your baby?”

Regina nodded slowly with tearful eyes. “Yes,” she whispered.

Cora nodded her head with a resigned sigh and smile. “Then I suppose you can have it.”

“I can?” asked Regina her voice breaking with hope.

“Of course,” said Cora with a grin. “If this baby is what you want then you can keep it.”

“Thank you,” said Regina with grateful tears.

“But there will have to be changes and conditions,” added Cora. She patted a spot next to her on the bed. Regina obediently sat by her side.

“If you are to keep this child no one can know of its existence,” said Cora sternly. “It wouldn’t look good for you or the company. It’ll have to be our little secret for now.”

Regina nodded in response. She could understand that and to be honest she didn’t really care. All that mattered was that her baby was staying with her.

“In addition to that,” continued Cora, “Once the child is born you will have to be more responsible. And that means coming to work for me at the company.”

Regina eyes widened at that. She’d always told her mother that running the hotel chain wasn’t what she wanted to do with her life. It was always at the heart of all their conflicts. “But mother I…”

“Don’t want to work for me,” finished Cora. “I know that you have always said that Regina but things are different now. You have to consider not just your future but the future of your child. Now do you really want to waste any more time searching for what feels right when you already
have a solid career path lined up for you? Is that what a good mother would do?”

Regina shamefully lowered her eyes at her mother’s words. “No… I suppose not.”

“Exactly,” said Cora in a kind voice. “You have to do what’s best for your child now. And what’s best is for you to work with me. As you were always meant to.”

“Okay,” said Regina softly.

“Good,” said Cora with a smile. “You’ll see that I am right Regina. With this arrangement everything will be fine. You and your child will be safe at home. With me.”

Regina forced a smile to her lips. She leaned in as her mother moved to hug her and reciprocated appropriately. Her mother had just offered her everything that she wanted. So why did she feel like she just made a deal with the devil?

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6 months later…

She was exhausted. Really. She was so tired. But she had never been this happy in her life.

Giving birth had been excruciating. The worst physical pain she’d ever felt in her life. Her hair still stuck to her forehead with sweat. Her face was probably still flushed. Every inch of her was sore. She was sure the lack of epidural had been her mother’s own form of punishment. But it was all worth it because now he was here.

Her son.

She’d been staring at him in awe as he lay in her arms for the past hour. He was so perfect. He was just so utterly perfect she couldn’t believe it. He had all his fingers and toes. Barely any hair but what few strands he had looked like they would be as dark as her own. His eyes appeared to be a light blue but the doctor had told her that could change. She hoped with all her heart that wasn't true, that his eyes would remain just as blue as his father's. She leaned back in her hospital bed and rubbed his tiny tummy with a smile. Oh she loved him. She loved him so completely and unconditionally it baffled her. She’d never felt this way for anyone. Not even Daniel. She pressed a kiss to his forehead and breathed in his scent. “I love you,” she whispered.

“Regina?”

She tore eyes away from her son to see her father standing in the doorway of her room. “Daddy.” She greeted him with a bright smile.

“I thought it was time I meet my grandson,” he said settling into the chair next to her bed. He peered into her arms at the tiny baby. “Ah darling, he looks positively magnificent.”

“He’s perfect,” she said beaming down at her son.

He stood to give her a kiss on the forehead. “You did marvelously.”

He reached behind the chair to pull up a brown stuffed bear with a blue bow tied around his neck. She chuckled at the sight of it. “A brown bear?”

Her father nodded his head sheepishly. “Yes I know it’s a bit generic but…”
“I love it,” she said with a grin. “And so will he.”

She shuffled the baby in her arms as her son began to squirm. “Do you want to hold him?”

“Of course,” said her father. She carefully relinquished her son to her father’s arms.

“Oh I remember when you were this tiny. It felt like I could carry you around in my pocket.” He let out a happy sigh as he stared down at his grandson. “Your mother told me to tell you that she regrets that she couldn’t find a flight out on such short notice.”

At the mention of her mother Regina felt a swift spark of annoyance puncture her joy. Despite her assurances that she wanted to repair her relationship with her daughter Cora had been a rare sight during her pregnancy. She had chosen to remain in the penthouse while she had Regina sent out of sight back to her childhood home where there was less of a chance of her being seen. She’d hardly visited or checked in. She was distant, in every sense of the word. “You know you can tell me that she just didn’t want to come.”

Henry frowned in response. “Regina…”

“It’s fine,” she said quickly. “It doesn’t matter. I don’t want her here for this.”

She forced a smile back on her face. “This is a happy occasion and I wouldn’t want her poison to seep into it.”

“Regina you know that your mother loves you. She just… doesn’t know how to do it well,” said Henry sadly.

Regina let out a sigh. “You know I’ve gone over it my head a dozen times and I could never figure out what made her change her mind so quickly. Then I realized there was only one person who had a chance of convincing her to let me keep this baby. You. Daddy did you… ask her for me?”

Henry looked up from his grandson to his daughter. “You’d lost so much Regina. I didn’t want you to lose anything else.”

She let out a breath as a tear went down her cheek. “Thank you.”

“I just want you to be happy,” Henry replied sincerely. “That’s all I have ever wanted for you.”

“I’m happy now,” said Regina bringing a hand to her son’s head. “Now that he’s here I can say that and mean it.”

Henry took another look at the baby boy in his arms. “Have you decided on a name yet?”

“Yes I have,” said Regina with a nod. “His name is… Henry Daniel Mills.”

Her father looked up at her with shock in his eyes. “Really? Are you certain?”

“Yes,” she answered firmly. “He wouldn’t be here without either one of you.”

Her father beamed down at his grandson with tearful eyes. “Well then, welcome to the world Henry Daniel Mills… the second.”
Chapter 3

The art museum usually wasn’t such a noisy place. Filled with some of the most expensive pieces of artwork in the world the noise level hardly rose above the fevered whispers of artistic scholars as they analyzed every brushstroke or chisel mark of the great artists whose works now filled these halls. However an exception was made for this night, the night of the Blanchard Charity Ball. Elegant big band music swelled through the air as movers and shakers from all over the country showed up to display their generosity.

Regina let out a fierce yawn as she hid behind a giant pillar away from the crowd. This was her third gala this week and she was beginning to feel drained. Cora had been putting her on display for every eligible bachelor in the room. Since she’d started working for her mother she’d met more men than she could possibly be expected to remember. She knew it was her mother’s own unsubtle way of searching for a husband for her. The idea of being with someone so soon after Daniel’s death made her sick to her stomach. In any other case she would find being paraded around a like prize horse for every wealthy bachelor in the country purely intolerable. However, she would put up with it. She had to for Henry.

Regina held her son close to her chest as she rocked him back and forth while watching the clock with growing desperation. 2:10 am. She had less than eight hours left with her son.

The past three months since Henry’s birth had been the greatest she’d ever known. As a show of good faith her mother had allowed them to remain at the country house with her father. She’d even been generous enough to replant Daniel’s rose garden. It wasn’t as beautiful as when he had been alive to care for it but it was still the place she felt most connected to him. She spent many mornings walking through the garden with Henry, whispering to him stories of the father he would never know.

In the weeks since his birth Regina was still astounded by how much love she had for her son. Looking at his face she had already begun to see Daniel’s features take form and mix with her own. Like she’d noticed at his birth his hair was just as dark as her own but not as thick. His nose and ears, were Daniel’s but his lips appeared to be hers. His eyes hadn’t turned into Daniel’s blue like she’d hoped they would but instead had turned into a magnificent shade of hazel. At any rate, she found him to be the most precious thing in the entire world.

With the help of her father and some of the staff, she’d devoted every minute to loving and caring for him. It wasn’t easy. She hardly got sleep some nights and there were times where she was sure she was doing everything wrong. Still if she had a choice she wouldn’t give it up for anything in the world. Except that she didn’t have a choice.

She looked up as she heard a creak in the floorboards. Her father entered Henry’s nursery with a concerned look on his face.

“Daddy, what are you doing up?” she asked softly. She didn’t want to wake Henry.

“I could ask you the same thing,” he replied settling on the daybed across from her rocking chair. “Henry stopped crying nearly half an hour ago. You should get some rest. Tomorrow is a big day.”

She shook her head at him as she clutched Henry closer to her chest. “Daddy I don’t think I can do this. I don’t think I can leave him.”
He sighed and gave her a sympathetic look. “Regina… this was always the deal. You can’t back out now.”

Keeping Henry had come with conditions. In order to keep her mother happy she was expected to start working with her at the company. In a few hours she was supposed to be heading for Paris to help her mother gain signatures for a new hotel in the city. Given that his entire existence was a secret she would be forced to leave Henry behind.

She looked down at her arms where her son slept soundly. “Maybe I can convince her to give me a few more days.”

“You know she won’t allow it,” said Henry Sr. sadly. “You’ve already put this off for far too long in her eyes. If you want to keep Henry…”

“Then I have to do it by her rules,” finished Regina angrily. Henry squirmed in his sleep at the harshness of her words. She gently patted him on the back to soothe him back to sleep. “I know.”

Henry Sr. grimaced at his daughter’s distress. He had hoped that maybe a grandchild might soften Cora’s disposition but she remained as cold as ever. She hadn’t even come to see Henry yet despite his assurances that Regina was eager for them to meet. She claimed that providing for Henry was all that she’d agreed to do. Still his daughter had her child and that made him feel good. At least for now.

“It’s only for a few days,” he reasoned. “Many mothers leave their children to go to work.”

Regina scoffed. “Most mothers don’t leave the country when their child is just a few months old.”

“I’ll be sending you videos and pictures every day,” Henry Sr. promised. “It’ll be like you haven’t missed a moment.”

“What will you even do with him while I’m gone?” questioned Regina. It was an irrational thing to ask given the amount of time Henry Sr. spent with his grandson. If Henry wasn’t in her arms then he was in her father’s. He read to him nightly and fed him every day. Regina was sure that her father had loved nothing more than he loved his grandson. She trusted him with Henry more than anyone else.

“I’m sure we’ll find plenty of manly things to do together,” answered Henry Sr. brightly. “I’ll teach him to box and smoke cigars.”

Regina snorted at her father’s facetiousness. Given his health problems and Henry’s distinct lack of mobility neither of those things would be happening.

“He will be fine here with me,” her father promised. “Just remember that everything you do, you do for Henry.”

Everything I do, I do for Henry, Regina thought to herself. The phrase had become her mantra lately and it was the only thing getting her through her work.

Technically she was on the company payroll as an intern but she had basically become her mother’s second in command these days. She attended all the meetings, chatted with all the investors and traveled to every groundbreaking with her. It was the most amount of time she’d spent with her mother since she was a girl and if she was perfectly honest, she would admit that she was quite impressed. Her mother seemed to be completely in her element when it came to the business. Less like a monster and more like an efficient force of nature. It was easy to see how her
grandfather had chosen her to take over the company after his death instead of his own son.

However, despite her mother’s shining example she still found herself utterly disinterested in taking over when her mother chose to retire. If she chose to retire. While she forced herself to work she only lived for the days when she could return home to Henry. Working with her mother meant spending five days a week in the city or wherever her mother needed her. She was only able to spend time with Henry on the weekends. And that had been her condition when she agreed to work with her mother. She would never be forced to spend more than a week away from her child. After she made it through tonight, she would only have one more day left. Then she’d be back at home where she belonged.

“Not hiding away are you?” asked Cora appearing at her side. She looked radiant in her red floor length dress. It was off-the-shoulder with shiny embroidered beads descending from the scalloped neckline and rising from the hemline. It was a dress that required all eyes to be on her.

Regina herself had gone for a more demure look. She was in a simple dark purple floor length gown with a criss-cross chiffon bodice. Her hair was up in a fancy bun to show off her diamond earrings and necklace. She looked beautiful but not attention grabbing. She didn’t really need to be. Cora would grab all the attention for her.

“Of course not mother,” she answered quickly. “I just needed a moment to clear my head.”

“Good,” said Cora firmly. “Remember your actions here affect not just you but me as well.”

Regina fought the instinct to roll her eyes. Her mother was always quick to remind her of how easily she could embarrass her. “I’m trying my best mother.”

“I know,” said Cora, pointedly. She let her disappointment hang in the air unspoken.

Regina felt a frown tug at her lips. Her mother always knew just how to attack her self-esteem.

“Come along dear,” said Cora placing a guiding hand on the small of her back. “I have more people for you to meet.”

“Of course you do,” Regina muttered to herself.

Over the next hour her mother had introduced her to two up and coming politicians, three CEOs and one heir to a billion-dollar fortune. All within her age bracket. She played her part as best she could. For her mother and son’s sake she flirted when they flirted and pretended to be intrigued by their lives. They were all charming and handsome but not one of them seemed to be sincere. It would never take her more than five minutes to tell that none of them would be interested in starting anything long-term with her. And why would they? They were young, rich, and successful. It wasn’t surprising that settling down wasn’t the first thing on their mind. Her mother just didn’t seem to understand that.

Somehow in between two “aren’t I so great” monologues she managed to sneak off to the bathroom. She wasn’t hiding. Honestly she wasn’t. It was just so exhausting pretending to care about whose yacht was biggest. She needed a short break before heading back out. She sighed as she sat down on a leather couch in the bathroom’s sitting area. She reached into her clutch to check her cell phone. She smiled as she saw her father had just sent her a new photograph of Henry. He was in his crib, tucked in for the night, sleeping soundly on his back. She wished she could be there more than anything.

She quickly shoved the cell phone back into her purse as she heard the bathroom door bang open.
She looked up to see a young girl, probably no more than sixteen or fifteen rush into the bathroom and head straight for the mirror. She took a look at her side in the mirror and her jaw dropped.

“Oh no!” she gasped frantically tugging at her dress.

She appeared so distressed that Regina doubted she even noticed that she wasn’t alone. Part of her wanted to slip out and leave her to her hysterics but the tears welling up in the girls eyes wouldn’t allow her. She hesitantly approached her at the counter. “Are you alright?”

The girl looked up at her with sad green eyes. “I’m sorry I didn’t mean to disturb you. It’s just my dress is ripped.”

Regina looked down at the seam of her pink dress and saw that it was indeed ripped open. A hole about the length of her pointer finger had formed right at her waistline. It was actually quite noticeable.

“I’m supposed to present the winners of the auction for my father in twenty minutes! I can’t go up there like this!” she cried tearfully.

“It’s okay,” said Regina soothingly. “We can fix this.”

She reached into her clutch and pulled out her emergency sewing kit. “When I was a little girl my maid used to patch up all our clothes and dresses. I watched her constantly until she finally taught me to do it myself. I can fix this up in no time.”

“You can?” asked the girl hopefully.

“Yes I can,” she said firmly nodding her head. She held out her hand to the girl. “My name is Regina Mills.”

The girl shook her hand gratefully. “I’m Mary-Margaret Blanchard but everyone just calls me Snow.”

In less than fifteen minutes Regina had Snow’s dress patched up.

“You can hardly tell the difference!” Snow said happily. She thanked Regina profusely before exiting the bathroom in just as big a rush as she came in. Regina reluctantly followed her out. She grabbed a glass of champagne from the first waiter she saw.

“Back into the fray,” she muttered to herself.

She tried to watch Snow present the auction winners with their prizes from the back of the crowd but it wasn’t long before her mother found her. Cora kept a smile on her face as she gripped her daughter’s elbow tight. “And just where have you been all this time?”

Regina clenched her jaw and tried not to let the pain show. “I was dealing with a wardrobe malfunction.”

Cora let her eyes roam over her daughter’s dress. “You look perfectly fine to me.”

“It wasn’t my wardrobe that was malfunctioning,” she whispered through her teeth. She kept a smile on her face as she applauded with the crowd as Snow thanked the attendees for their generosity. She could feel the fire behind her mother’s eyes as she too clapped for the girl. Regina was sure to get a winded lecture from her on the ride back to the penthouse. After a few more minutes Cora began to lead Regina to the exit with the full intention of scolding her for her
wallflower tendencies. They were stopped by Snow’s enthusiastic shouts. “Look father there she is!”

Like a pink flash Snow appeared and launched herself forward as she wrapped her arms around Regina’s neck. A surprised chuckle escaped her as she stumbled back on her heels.

“Thank you so much Regina! No one could even tell my dress had been ripped,” gushed Snow.

“It was really no problem Snow,” said Regina awkwardly. Public displays of affection weren’t something she was used to and Snow wasn’t really holding back.

“You have to meet my father!” insisted Snow, her face lit up with excitement. “He’ll be so grateful that you helped me.”

Before Regina could even protest Snow had already began to drag her through the crowd. She was a lot stronger than her small frame suggested. Regina looked back at her mother desperately but Cora just shrugged her shoulders with a bemused look on her face.

Snow continued to pull her along until they reached a tall, portly man gazing at a painting. He turned as Snow practically leapt onto his arm.

“Daddy this is the woman I was talking about,” she said excitedly gesturing toward Regina.

He let his eyes sleazily roam over her body as he reached out to shake out. “You must be the famous bathroom tailor. It’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m-”

“Leopold Blanchard,” supplied Regina, giving his hand a firm shake. “Obviously I know who you are.”

Anyone who was anyone in business knew who Leopold Blanchard was. He was one of the most successful investors in the country. He was practically on the same level as Warren Buffet who, if you believed the rumors, he had lunch with every Wednesday. This entire charity ball had been his doing.

“Please call me Leo,” he said with a smile. “It’s only natural I should be on a first name basis with the woman who spared my daughter so much humiliation.”

Regina nervously chuckled as she removed her hand from his grip. “It really wasn’t anything special,” she insisted. “And I was happy to help Snow. She seems like such a nice girl.”

Snow beamed at Regina’s response. “Daddy you should ask her to dance.”

Regina started to shake her head. “Oh that’s really not necessary. It’s so late the band is probably ending their set as we speak.”

“Then allow me to honor you with the last dance of the night,” replied Leopold smoothly. Despite Regina’s faint protests he placed a hand dangerously low on her back and guided to her to the dance floor. As they danced he asked her about her personal and work life and she tried to engage in the conversations as best as she could. The Blanchard Fund was a major player when it came to investments for companies like her family’s hotel chain. Her mother would be furious if she were to upset its head of operations. So she swayed with the music and smiled up at Leo as she tried not to focus on the fact that he was holding her far too close and his hands were wandering far too often. Luckily for her the dance only lasted a few minutes before she politely excused herself and went to join her mother. The silver lining of the night was that seeing her daughter with such a powerful player had calmed Cora’s temper. Regina managed to avoid a lecture for the evening.
Still, when she crawled into bed and tried to sleep she couldn’t help but shudder at the memory of his hands on her.

The next day Regina found herself nearly giddy with energy. It was her last day in the city and immediately after work she’d be in a car headed back home to Henry. She’d worked all through lunch so she could leave earlier than usual. By 4pm she only had one task left. Getting her mother’s signatures on a budget for a new hotel. She practically had a skip in her step as she walked down the hall to her mother’s office. A confused look grew on her face when she saw that the door was already ajar. That wasn’t like her mother to leave the door open. She slowed her step when she heard voices coming from inside the room. Normally, she’d leave but something told her to stay that day.

“Well, I have to say I never expected to see you here,” she heard her mother say.

Leopold? Regina furrowed her eyebrows in surprise. What was he doing here? She softly pushed the door open just enough to peer inside. She saw her mother perched against her desk with a seductive smile on her face as Leopold leaned back into a leather chair in front her, his left ankle laying atop his right knee.

“I’ll get right to the point then,” he said. “There’s a dinner tonight with the Blanchard Fund board members and I would like for your daughter to accompany me.”

Regina shuddered while Cora just raised her eyebrows. “Regina?”

Leopold nodded. “Yes I’m short a plus one and when I met her at the charity auction last night she seemed intelligent enough to bring around the board.”

Cora scoffed at him as she stepped away from her desk. “My daughter has a previous engagement.”

Regina released a quiet breath, thankful that she wouldn’t have to postpone her weekend with Henry.

Leopold sat straighter in his chair. “I don’t think you understand Cora. I know how important it is to you to get those European hotels off the ground this year. And I am willing to invest quite handsomely for your daughter’s company.”

“Excuse me?” said Cora sending him an amused look.

“For every event your daughter attends with me I am willing to invest in a new hotel with you,” he explained smugly. “I won’t be footing the whole bill of course but my initial investments will be large enough to attract the wallets of other investors in my position. You’d never have to troll for money again.”

Regina brought a hand to her mouth as she felt bile rise up in her throat. Was he actually trying to buy her? Was her mother actually listening? She saw Cora’s mouth go into a thin line as she crossed her arms and stared down at the man in front of her. “Leo my daughter is a beautiful, intelligent young woman with a bright future. I won’t have her treated like some corner avenue whore who you can rent for the night.”

Regina felt relief flood her body at her mother’s words. It looked like she wouldn’t be playing along.
Cora shrugged her shoulders as she observed Leopold’s seething disappointment. “If you’re so desperate for her to become your arm candy… then you’ll have to marry her.”

Regina’s knees almost failed her as she processed what her mother had just told her. She always knew her mother was desperate for her to find a wealthy husband but she never expected this. Leopold nearly burst into laughter at the absurdity of Cora’s request.

“You can’t be serious,” he chortled. “You actually want me to marry her?”

“Of course,” said Cora nonchalantly as she took a seat behind her desk. “And why wouldn’t I? You’re well-off, stable and perfectly capable of giving her anything she could possibly desire. Like I said before my daughter has a bright future but it will be that much brighter if she has your name to back her.”

“And what makes you think I’m willing to give her my name?” Leopold asked with a smirk.

Cora returned his smirk with an added snicker. “Don’t think for one second that I don’t see through you Leo. You’re nearly halfway through your fifties already. I bet you’ve already begun getting the looks from the board members. The little jokes about how much free time you’ll have when you retire. You’re getting old Leo and they’ve started to take notice. You know it won’t be long before they start to push you out. That’s the real reason you want my daughter on your arm. You need a fresh young face to remind them that you’re not dead yet.”

Leopold clenched his jaw and balled his hands into fist as he glared at her from across the desk. She noticed his anger and let out a tiny laugh. “There’s no need to get upset dear. I’m only stating facts.”

She leaned forward in her seat. “And here’s another fact. It’s going to take more than a few high profile appearances with my daughter to convince them you’ve still got some fire in your veins. A marriage is a symbol of vitality, of new beginnings. It’s a young man’s game and you should remind everyone that you’re not too old to play it.”

Leopold nodded to himself as he considered her words. “And what, pray tell, will you be getting out of this deal Cora. I’m not stupid enough to think you’re doing this just for your daughter’s benefit.”

She sent him a devious grin. “Well I’ll be getting everything that you promised before with the added bonus of insurance. I imagine you’ll be less willing to run out on me if you’re family.”

Leopold rolled his eyes and scoffed at her use of the word family.

Cora dropped her smirk and gave him the most sincere look of concern she could muster. “And you’re right. I’m not just doing this for my daughter’s benefit. I’m doing it for your daughter’s benefit as well.”

He raised an eyebrow at her. “In what possible way would this farce of a marriage benefit my Snow?”

“By giving her something she’s always needed,” said Cora with a straight face. “A mother.”

Regina saw a dark look come across Leopold’s face. “Snow has a mother.”

“She had a mother,” corrected Cora flatly. “How old was she when Eva died. 11? 10?”

“Eight,” Leopold gritted out as his fingers dug into the chair’s arms. “And if you value your life as
it is you would be wise enough to never speak my wife’s name again.”

Cora leaned back in her chair. “Whether I speak it or not the chances of your daughter actually remembering her are very slim. She’s a young teenager now Leo. This is the time where she’ll need a mother the most.”

“And you think your daughter is the woman to fill that role?” said Leopold dubiously. “She’s only a few years older than Snow herself. She’s completely unprepared to be a mother.”

“My daughter already is a mother,” replied Cora automatically.

Regina’s jaw dropped in horror. Her mother was using her son as leverage in this sick deal.

Leopold raised his eyebrows in surprise. “She has a child?”

“Yes,” Cora said, nodding with a smile. “She has a son. One she loves quite dearly.”

“You’re a grandmother?” chuckled Leopold in a disbelieving tone.

Cora glared at him. “He’s no grandson of mine. I prefer to think of him as my daughter’s favorite mistake.”

Regina felt her heart shatter. How could her mother speak about her son, her Henry, so cruelly?

“Though I suppose in this case he would be her greatest asset,” Cora continued. “You see, once that maternal instinct kicks in it can be applied to all creatures, regardless of age. I have no doubt that my daughter could care for Snow just as much as she cares for Henry. She’s already demonstrated her maternal affection last night, right? Helping your daughter escape humiliation.”

“Snow did seem quite fond of her,” said Leopold softly. “I suppose having a feminine role model present wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world for her.”

He looked at Cora curiously when another thought crossed his mind. “And what of Regina’s child? Will I be expected to take in her bastard as well?”

“Of course you will,” said Cora practically. “My daughter won’t stand to be separated from her son but that can be used to your advantage. A new wife along with a new child will make you seem positively youthful in the board’s eyes. Besides, there’s nothing my daughter wants more than the safety of her child. As long as you control that she’ll do anything you say.”

Leopold drummed his fingers against the chair as he thought over Cora’s arguments. He had to admit her points were quite persuasive and the deal seemed unnaturally tipped in his favor. “I suppose we have a deal then.”

Cora grinned at him deviously. “Well then… congratulations on your upcoming nuptials.”

Regina stood in the doorway, stunned, as she watched her mother and Leopold shake hands. She couldn’t breathe. Her mother had just sold her to a man nearly three times her age. Not just her but her son as well. She rigidly moved away from the door and placed the file she’d brought on the receptionist’s desk. This couldn’t be happening. She walked robotically to elevator replaying the whole conversation in her head. It went over and over in her head even as she was driven home to her son. Even as she lifted him into her arms and clutched him to her chest.

Henry Mills hated the city. The noise, the people, the smoggy air. He much preferred to stay in his
house in the countryside where it was a calm and peaceful. Well it hadn’t been as peaceful lately.
The birth of his grandson had added a dash of chaos to his once serene paradise but it was a change
that he was always thankful for. He spent all his time with the boy ever since his daughter went to
work. He’d read to him, sung to him, fed him. The only thing that came close to his love for his
grandson was the love he felt for his daughter. Regina and Henry were the two most important
things in his life. They were also the reasons he’d even ventured into the city that day.

He sat in the living room of the penthouse rubbing his hand against his cane nervously. When
Regina had cried to him about what she’d heard he couldn’t believe it. Cora might be cold but there
was no she was capable of something so cruel, especially against her own daughter. If this was
true, and he hoped it wasn’t, he needed to hear it directly from his wife.

He looked up at the sound of her heels against the floor. Cora frowned as she saw him on the couch
waiting for her. The only time Henry ever dared to leave the country house was to annoy her with
something. “I have to be on a plane to Moscow in less than two hours so if you want something
make it quick,” she snapped.

“Fine,” he sighed. “I want to know why our daughter is convinced that she heard you sell her to
Leopold Blanchard for hotel investments.”

Cora shook her head as she rolled her eyes to the ceiling. “I have always told her that people who
eavesdrop rarely hear good things.”

Henry stood and stared at her in shock. “Cora… tell me you didn’t promise our only daughter to a
man who’s nearly forty years older than her.”

Cora scoffed at him. “You frame it like it’s such a tragedy Henry and it isn’t. You have to see that.”

He shook his head at her in horror. “How could you do this to her? She’s our daughter!”

“That’s exactly why I’m doing this for her!” declared Cora explosively as she stepped toward him.
“I’m trying to make sure that she never has the experience that I had. That she never has to beg for
scraps or worry for her future. Leopold Blanchard will make sure that she never wants for anything
in her life. He’s a billionaire! She should be flattered!”

“You’re delusional,” whispered Henry staring at her with hard eyes. “And you must be utterly out
of your mind if you think I’m going to let you-”

Before he could even react she swiftly reached down and twisted off his oxygen tank. She watched
as he began to gasp for air. He fell to his knees as his face started to red.

She kneeled down and observed him with blank cold eyes. “Now Henry I know this might be hard
for you to hear over your wheezing but try to pay attention. You… do not allow me to do anything.
You have no power in this situation and I won’t have you thinking that you do. I am in charge here.
I am her mother and I know what’s best. This marriage is for her own good and it will be
happening. So before you continue to fight it just know that I can get rid of you just as easily as I
got rid of the gardener. Now nod your head if you understand.”

He glared at her defiantly before bowing his head to give her a small nod.

She smiled down at him evilly. “Good.”

She twisted on his oxygen and walked away from him as he took a deep breath trying to fill his
lungs. “I have to pack for Moscow now but feel free to stay the night.”
He watched her go with angry eyes before standing to his feet. He’d never seen his wife so viciously out of control before. She had to be stopped.

He took a moment to regain his breath before heading for his study. He picked up the phone and dialed a number he’d hoped he never have to use again.

“Eli,” he said when the ringing stopped. “It’s Henry Mills. Yes I know that it has been a long time. I need another favor…”
Chapter 4

2 months later

Regina stared down at her son as he slept in his crib beside her bed. She envied him. She hadn’t been able to sleep for weeks. Every time she closed her eyes she was haunted by images of Leo and her mother and Daniel. Ever since that night at the charity ball her life had become hell. As soon as her weekend with Henry was over her mother told her she’d be marrying Leopold Blanchard. She’d cried and screamed that she wouldn’t go through with it but Cora calmly reminded her of how thoroughly she’d managed to sweep Henry’s birth under the rug and how easy that made it for him to be taken from her. Regina knew she couldn’t lose her son. She wouldn’t survive that.

Since that day she’d been on Leo’s arm almost every night. They attended fundraisers, shows and dinners. He showed her off every chance he got. Every time he touched her she felt a ball of disgust swell up in the pit of her stomach but years of training with her mother prevented her from showing it. On the outside she smiled and laughed like the perfect girlfriend he’d paid for. She supposed she should say fiancé. Just last night they’d announced their engagement at a dinner party. Tonight would be her and Henry’s last night at the country house. Tomorrow they would be moved to the penthouse in the city for a week until Leo made room for them in his home. This was the last night she’d ever feel safe with her baby.

She never should’ve sewed up Snow’s dress. She should’ve let her cry that night. Now she and her son would be trapped in the marriage with that perverted bastard. She felt a tear roll down her face as she rubbed her thumb over Henry’s tiny hand. She’d failed him. She’d failed Daniel. Their child was doomed because of her. She should’ve given him up when he was born, she should’ve given him a chance to find happiness without her. But instead she’d selfishly kept him for herself because she was too weak to let him go. Now he was stuck with her… and Leopold.

She heard her door creak open and she knew her father had come to check on her. She didn’t turn to greet him. She felt guilty for alienating her father like she had these past few weeks. She knew that he’d tried his best to save her but she still couldn’t help but blame him for not being more successful. It made it hard to look at him.

She kept her eyes on Henry as her father moved to stand next to her. “I’m so sorry Regina.”

She remained silent, her eyes focused on her son.

Henry Sr. sighed before continuing. “I have something for you. I suppose you could call it an engagement present.”

She angrily turned to him. “I don’t want anything that celebrates this…atrocity.”

He frowned at her with sad eyes and looked down at his hands. It was then that she noticed what he was carrying. It was a wooden keepsake box. Rather large, about a square foot. And it was monogrammed with the initial L.M. in fancy lettering with a golden lock.

“This was your grandmother’s,” her father said solemnly. “She was given it at her wedding by her mother. She told me that her mother gave it to her as a reminder that whether she was a wife or not a woman is always entitled to her secrets.”

Regina just stared at her father as he continued his story. Regina didn’t know that much about her grandparents because they both had died when she was just a child. She only knew that her
grandfather, Xavier, was responsible for most of the company’s success and that her grandmother, Luisa, had always been a great beauty. Nothing more.

Henry Sr. ran his hand over the top of the box. “My mother said that she chose not to use this for storing secrets but rather for storing memories. She used this box to hold everything that reminded her of the things she held dear. Photographs, letters, some jewelry. I want you to have this box and I hope you will use it hold whatever you deem special close.”

He held out the box to her but she only glared at it. He reluctantly set it on her bed. “I’m sorry Regina. I truly am.”

He took one last look at her before leaving the room. When she heard the door click she let out a trembling breath and tried to blink back her tears. A box? She and her son were being sold off as place holders and he gives her a box? She glanced at the offending item on her bed and felt a flash of rage. She angrily grabbed it and threw it against the wall as hard as she could. It hit the wall and clattered as it fell to the floor. She ran her fingers through her hair as tears fell down her cheeks. She plopped down at the foot of her bed and cried. How could he let this happen to her?

As she wiped her tears away from her face she looked at box where it lay dejectedly on the floor, its top lifted revealing its velvet interior. She narrowed her eyes as she saw a break in the bottom of its lining. She crawled over to the box and ran her fingers along its interior. She felt along the break of the lining and felt the bottom panel move against her fingers. She grunted as she ripped up the velvet lining to reveal a false bottom. She lifted up the panel to find various pieces of paper and three laminated cards hidden beneath it. She picked up one of the cards and narrowed her eyes at it. It was an id for her. Or at least it looked like it. It had her picture on it but the information was all wrong. The name read Regina Gardiner. She dropped the card and began looking through the rest of the stuff. There were two social security cards, two birth certificates along with matching passports. They all read Regina Caroline Gardiner or Henry Daniel Gardiner. Two whole new identities. One for her and one for her son. She looked back into the box and found a thick stack of 20 dollar bills. According to the band around it, it came up to $2000 dollars. It wasn’t enough to live off of but it was enough to get away with. The stack of bills rested atop a folded piece of stationary. She opened it and found a letter from her father.

My dearest Regina,
I am so sorry that it has come to this. As you know I have never been a strong man. I thought it was something that I could live with but now I see it has lead me to fail you. I wish I was strong enough to protect you from your mother, like a father should but I’m not. I’m afraid the only one who can rescue you from this situation is yourself. In this box I’ve included everything you should need to start a life far away from here. You’ll have to wait for the right moment to escape with Henry. I will do my best to buy you time once you’ve left. I know how frightening this must seem but I know you’ll succeed because all the strength I lack in myself I have always seen in you. Be brave, my dear. Have courage and know that I will love you and Henry always.
Love,
Your father.

Regina’s chin trembled as she read through the letter. She read it over and over. He wanted her to escape. He was actually helping her. Could she do it though? Could she actually take her son and run away from this misery?

She looked up from the letter when she heard Henry cry from his crib. As she walked over and scooped him up into her arms she decided that she could. She had to for his sake.

Regina didn’t sleep a wink that night. She was too worried about what was going to happen the
next day. She knew that if she wanted the best chance of leaving with Henry she would have to make her escape during her time in the penthouse. Once they were moved into Leopold’s home she wouldn’t know what to expect in terms of security. That was too big of a risk. She would take her chances with her mother’s guards. At least she knew their habits.

When she got dressed that morning she made sure to put on a pair of diamond earrings and match it with an equally expensive diamond bracelet. Her father had given her a decent amount of money but she knew it wouldn’t last long once she and Henry were on the run. If she pawned the jewelry it would give her an extra cushion until she was able to find a job.

The ride to the penthouse with her father and son was the longest that it had ever been. The closer they got the more afraid she felt. Her heart felt like it was about to explode out of her chest. She tried to catch her father’s eye on the ride over but his gaze remained fixed out of the window. She focused her attention on Henry instead. He gurgled happily at her. He seemed to be enjoying his first car ride. She smiled down at him. He was totally oblivious of the risk she would soon be taking.

To her surprise Cora greeted them as they arrived at the penthouse. She didn’t expect her to be there and she had to admit her mother’s presence made her that much more frightened. She couldn’t help but remember the last time she’d tried to escape her and how horribly that night had turned out.

Cora smiled at Regina before dropping her gaze to the car seat in her hand where Henry remained strapped. She frowned. “So that’s him?”

“This is him,” Regina replied dryly.

Cora regarded her grandson coolly. “I suppose he could’ve ended up worse.”

And with that she turned on her heels and left. Regina let out a breath she didn’t realize she’d been holding. She took Henry to her room and placed him on the bed. She had to leave today. She couldn’t stand the tension in her chest any longer. She just needed an excuse to leave the penthouse. She couldn’t do it immediately. That would raise too much suspicion from her mother. She eyed her son as he lay on her bed. She realized she would have to do something involving Henry, something that gave her reason to take him with her instead of going alone. Maybe she could fake that he’s sick? No that won’t work, she thought to herself. Her mother would just call a doctor up here. Maybe a trip to the park? No her mother would never allow that. She would if she was irritated enough, she thought to herself. She waited until the afternoon and then looked at her son guiltily.

“I’m so sorry for this baby,” she whispered.

She gave him a tiny pinch on his arm. He instantly began to cry out. And she let him. It broke her heart but she needed to do this if she wanted to save him. Henry’s wails quickly filled the penthouse and it wasn’t long before her mother angrily barged in her room.

“Is it too much to ask that you control your child?” she growled at her daughter.

“I’m sorry mother,” said Regina, innocently lifting Henry into her arms. “He’s just restless. He’s not used to being so cooped up.”

“He misses being at the country house,” said Henry Sr., appearing in the doorway. He locked eyes with Regina and she felt a wave of sorrow wash over her. Her father cleared his throat before continuing. “He just needs to spend some time outside in the sun.”
“There’s a park not far from here,” suggested Regina, as Henry continued to cry into her ear. “If I took him there for an hour or two he’d probably sleep until his night time feeding.”

Cora scoffed at her daughter’s suggestion. “I’m not letting you go the park. There’s too big a risk that someone would see you. If he misses the sun so much he can play on the balcony.”

“You want to put a six-month old out on a thirty-floor up balcony?” Henry said incredulously. “Not the safest idea you’ve had is it dear?”
Cora only glared at him in response.

“Let them go to the park,” said Henry practically. “The fresh air will do him some good and we need happy photos of Regina and Henry together. She and Leopold will be announcing Henry’s false adoption in a few days and we need something to show the press.”

Regina saw her mother thinking over her father’s and stealthily gave Henry a tiny pinch on the back of his leg. Cora cringed as his wails grew louder. “Fine but you’re taking two of my personal security guards with you. Just get him out of here.”

“Thank you,” said Regina gratefully.

As soon as her mother left the room Regina quickly prepared to leave. She loaded Henry’s diaper bag with the documents and money her father had given her, a shirt for her to change into once she escaped the guards, and of course extra food and clothes for Henry. By the time she was through the bag looked positively stuffed. She slipped it over her shoulder and loaded Henry’s car seat onto its compatible stroller. She pushed him toward the door nervously. She nearly jumped out of her skin as she heard her father’s footsteps behind her.

He gave her a pat on the shoulder and bent down to smile at his grandson. He gently placed Henry’s brown bear, the one he’d given him the day he was born, with him in the stroller. “We wouldn’t want to forget this now would we Henry?”

He forced a chuckle to his lips and placed a quick kiss on the top of his grandson’s head. He righted himself and looked at his daughter. Regina gripped the handle on Henry’s stroller tighter as she looked into her father’s sad eyes. It was the only thing keeping her from throwing her arms around him. She couldn’t do that. It would look too suspicious. This was quite possibly the last time she would see her father. There was so much that she wanted to say to him. And she could tell there was so much that he wanted to say to her. Instead he just placed his hand on top of hers.

“Make sure to be careful at park,” he said softly. Stay safe please.

“I will,” she replied, nodding her head earnestly. Thank you so much.

He gave her hand one last squeeze before letting her go. She didn’t let herself look back at him as she walked out the door her two guards trailing behind her.

Regina felt she could breathe easier as she pushed Henry on the swing set at the park. He giggled happily as he swung back in forth in his seat. Her heart felt lighter seeing him enjoy himself. Hurting him like she did earlier was the hardest thing she’d ever had to do but it had gotten them out of the penthouse and that was half the battle. The other half was ditching the security her mother had assigned to her. She eyed the two men warily. They’d hardly taken their eyes off of her. They were both pretty tall and in very good shape. She doubted that she could outrun them. Not with Henry. She’d have to give them the slip some other way.

She took in her surroundings as stealthily as she could. There were a couple of shops close by. A
clothing store on the corner, a pottery store next to that and a coffee shop across the street. The coffee shop was probably her best bet. If she feigned thirst and they’d have to let her get something to drink. She lifted Henry from the swing and walked over to the men.

“I want to go to the coffee shop,” she said putting as much authority in her voice as she could muster.

The two men looked at each other nervously. The taller man spoke first. “Miss were told only to let you go to the park and nowhere else.”

“It’s right across the street,” she said exasperatedly. “I’m thirsty so I don’t care if you have to follow me in there I will be getting something to drink.”

The shorter of the two men shrugged his shoulders and looked at his partner. “It is just across the street.”

The taller man rolled his eyes and let out a frustrated breath. “Fine but we keep eyes on her the entire time.”

As she walked into the coffee shop with Henry and her guards she tried to take in as much as she could to form an escape plan. She couldn’t exactly run out the front door. There didn’t seem to be another exit though. As she ordered an iced tea for herself she spotted a door that she guessed would lead to a back storage room. Useless. As she sat down at a table, the guards on either side of her, she began to think that she maybe she’d picked the wrong location for her daring escape. Then she noticed one of the waitresses come out of the bathroom. As she walked passed one of the baristas he wrinkled his nose at her.

“Really Kelly? Smoking in the bathroom again?” he criticized in a hushed tone.

The waitress turned and smirked at him deviously. “I’ll stop doing it when they start giving me longer breaks. Besides as long as I lean out the window it doesn’t stink up the room.”

Window, thought Regina perking up. Maybe it was big enough for her to slip through with Henry.

She reached over and pretended to check Henry’s diaper. “It looks like he needs to be changed. I’m taking him to the bathroom.”

She moved to stand when the taller guard firmly gripped her arm and pulled her back into the seat. “I don’t think so.”

She felt her heart race and she took a deep breath. All the strength I lack in myself I have always seen in you. She looked down at his hand and then back into his eyes and glared. “I need to change my son,” she seethed. “Get your hands off me and let me take care of him.”

The shorter guard cleared his throat. “Public place Jon,” he whispered. “Public place.”

The taller guard reluctantly released his grip and stared down at her. “Fine but you have ten minutes then we leave.”

“Fine,” Regina bit out. She hoped to god those ten minutes would be enough.

She unclipped Henry’s car seat from the stroller and carried him into the bathroom with his diaper bag on her shoulder. As soon as she was in the bathroom she locked the door behind her and fell against it. She let out a relieved breath when she spotted the window and realized that it was indeed big enough for her and Henry to fit through.
She quickly took off her red maxi dress, revealing the leggings she’d been wearing underneath it and put on the t-shirt she’d packed into Henry’s diaper bag. She walked over to the window and tried to open it. It was jammed. She banged against the handle as hard as she could until it finally gave way and slid open. She leaned out the window and looked down. It was only a four or five-foot drop to the ground in the alley. Certainly less daunting than a thirty-floor up balcony. She sat on the edge of the window and threw the diaper bag out first before placing Henry’s car seat in her lap and swinging her legs over. She looked down at her baby boy and he smiled up at her. “Here we go baby,” she whispered before jumping down to the alley.

She stumbled as she landed and she nearly ended up dropping Henry’s car seat but the minute her feet touched the ground Regina felt a weight lift off her chest. She let out a breathy laugh as she made checked to make sure that Henry hadn’t been hurt.

“We’re okay,” she said grinning down at him.

She quickly grabbed the diaper bag and slipped it over her shoulder as she hung the car seat from the crook of her arm. By her estimate she still had five minutes left before the guards came looking for her. She ran. She ran as fast as she could down the alleyway and onto the street behind the coffee house. The diaper bag dug into her shoulder and car seat handle dug into her arm as she turned corner after corner, trying to take the most confusing route as possible. She must’ve run at least ten blocks before her burning lungs forced her to stop and catch her breath. Henry had begun to squirm and whimper in his car seat. He didn’t seem to care for being jostled around like he had during her run.

As she took a moment to soothe him Regina looked around her surroundings and realized that they were actually quite familiar. She gasped as she realized just where she was. She was a block away from the bus station. She quickly turned the corner and there it stood, just as rundown and grimy as it had been the night of Daniel’s death. She felt a lump form in her throat as the memory of the hit-and-run flashed in her mind. Just 14 months ago she’d come to this very place with the hopes of escaping with the person she loved the most and it had ended horribly for her. They’d never even made it on the bus. As she looked down at Henry she decided that this time they would.

She crossed the street as carefully as possible and headed toward the ticket station. An older woman with dark skin and peppery gray hair looked up at her with boredom as she approached the desk.

“May I help you?” she drawled.

“Yes,” replied Regina uncertainly. “When is the next bus leaving and where is it headed?”

The woman lazily dragged her eyes over the schedule. “A bus to Santa Barbara leaves in thirty minutes.”

*Santa Barbara,* thought Regina. It wasn’t as far as she would like but it was as good a place as any for her to disappear. “How much would a ticket be?”

The woman frowned at her through the bulletproof glass. Her eyes flickered down to Henry and back up to Regina. “Is it husband or boyfriend?”

Regina furrowed her brow in confusion. “Sorry?”

The ticket handler sighed. “You show up here with no idea where to go asking for a ticket on a random bus. You have a baby, a diaper bag but no other luggage. You’re sweating like your heart is racing and you’ve looked over your shoulder twice in ten seconds. I have worked at this station
for ten years. I know a runner when I see one. So I ask again, boyfriend or husband?"


The older woman nodded her head understandingly before digging through her drawer. “Then I suppose this ticket to Santa Barbara will be on the house.”

Regina stared at her with grateful eyes as she slid the paper through the ticket slip. “Thank you,” she said in a trembling voice.

“Take care of yourself sweetheart,” said the ticket handler in a wise voice.

The thirty minutes she waited on the bus were the longest of Regina’s life. As she and Henry were in their seats at the back of the bus she felt every torturous minute go by. She kept thinking that at any second she would be caught. That the guards would arrive and drag her back to her mother. That she would steal Henry from her as punishment for her defiance. Every awful scenario played on a loop in her mind. Only when she felt the vibrations of the engine and heard the last call from the driver did she finally start to believe in her heart that she was safe. A smile broke out across her face as the bus began to pull away from the station. Tears of relief rolled down her cheeks as she pressed her forehead against Henry’s.

“We made it,” she whispered.
Chapter 5

Regina relished the warmth of the local bodega as she stood in the cashier line with Henry. She stretched out her neck as his diaper bag dug into her shoulder.

It had been close to eight weeks since she’d escaped her mother and things were looking pretty bleak. For a while she had been very optimistic. Upon arriving in Santa Barbara she’d found a cheap motel for she and Henry to stay at until she could afford an apartment. It was dirty and the manager was a little creepy but for the moment it was safe. She’d never felt freer. She and Henry were away from her mother and Leopold and she reveled in the fact that no one could take her son from her. But her joy didn’t last long.

She hadn’t been able to find a job as quickly as she expected. While Regina Mills had gone to a top notch private school and worked at a Fortune 500 company, Regina Gardiner had barely graduated high school and hadn’t held a job in her life. Her history was practically blank besides Henry’s birth. Her son was actually another reason it was difficult for her to find work. Despite how desperate she was no one wanted to give a job to a woman who had to bring her baby to an interview.

She’d pawned off the jewelry she’d been wearing but hadn’t gotten nearly as much as she thought she would. The shop owners had sensed her desperation and undoubtedly shorted her. It wasn’t long before she realized she’d have start to cutting back. She walked instead of taking the bus. She only allowed herself to eat a full meal every other day. Anything to stretch what little she had. The same rules didn’t apply to Henry though. She spared almost no expense when it came to taking care of him. He ate every day and she always made sure his clothes and diapers were clean. She did everything she could to make sure he didn’t suffer because of her lack of employment.

Without work her expenses soon began to add up and about a week ago they’d been kicked out of the motel. She was now down to her last thirty dollars.

The knowledge of how little she had made her feel especially powerless as she stood in the local bodega. She’d just used Henry’s last diaper and she knew it wouldn’t be long before he needed a new one. A new pack of diapers was going to cost her half of her money. Luckily for her they were on sale today or she wouldn’t have enough left for the food she was sure she’d need to buy at the end of the week. What she’d do then… she didn’t know.

“Will that be all?” said the cashier in a bored voice. Regina nodded as he rang up the diapers. He was a younger than her. Probably no more than eighteen and clearly not at all thrilled to be working. She hated that she was envious of him.

“That’ll be 20 dollars,” he said expectantly.

Regina’s eyes widened. “What? The diapers are supposed to be on sale for 15 dollars.”

“That’s the wrong brand,” sighed the cashier. “You want the generic brand.”

“I looked for the generic brand. They weren’t there.”

“Then I guess we’re out of stock,” he deadpanned hostilely. “Do you want these diapers or not?”

Regina brought her hand to her forehead in frustration. She needed these diapers. But if she got them she might not have enough left to feed Henry. It was a complete catch-22. Her indecision was clearly irritating the cashier.
“Do you want them or not?” he repeated crabbily.

Regina held up her hand to him. “Can you just give me a second? It’s kind of an important decision.”

“Probably the sort of decision you should’ve considered before you popped out the kid right?” he replied rudely.

The words were like a knife to her heart. Before she could even respond a debit card landed on the counter in front of her. “She’s getting the diapers.”

She turned to face her savior and saw a dark-skinned woman not much older than herself glaring at the cashier fiercely. “And along with those she’s gonna need about three jars of the Gerber’s organic baby food as well.”

“We ran out of those this morning,” said the boy in a smug voice.

“No you forgot to restock them this morning,” said the woman accusingly, with one hand on her hip as she leaned against the counter. “I used to work in a grocery store. I know what back stock is. Now you can either run and get them for me or I can tell your manager just how rude you are to your customers. Your choice.”

Her brown eyes flashed with fury as she glared at teenage boy. He glared back at her venomously before heading towards the back of the store. As he shuffled away from the counter Regina started to shake her head at the woman. “You don’t have to-”

The woman just sheepishly raised a hand to silence her. “Oh please don’t worry about it. Consider it payment for my outburst. It’s just that I come here so often and he’s always so rude. This was a long time coming I promise you.”

Regina let out a forced chuckle. “Thank you.”

“No problem,” said the woman giving her warm smile. She looked down at Henry with affection. “I’ve done things twice as mean for people half as cute.”

Regina seriously doubted that as she watched the woman lean down and tickle Henry’s tummy. She cooed at him and Henry laughed and wiggled at her appreciatively. “What’s his name?”

“Henry,” answered Regina quickly. “I’m Regina. Regina…Gardiner.” She’d said her new name more than a few times but it still felt foreign on her tongue.

“I’m Marian Locksely,” she said reaching out her hand.

Marian Locksely was never one to tolerate abuse. Especially not when it was directed at someone so helpless. She eyed Regina as they walked out of the store together. It didn’t take a genius to know that she was struggling. The way her clothes hung off her body. The dark circles under her desperate eyes. She showed all the signs of a woman in trouble. Not one who deserved to be berated by a teenage cashier.

“Thank you so much for all your help,” Regina said. She couldn’t thank Marian enough for getting Henry his food and diapers. “It’s just been a tight week for us. If you give me your number I can pay you back once I have the money.”

Marian shook her head. “It’s really not necessary. It was all worth it to see his angry face.”
Regina smiled at her. This woman had no idea how much she owed her. “Okay well thanks again.”

As she turned to leave Marian called out to her. “You know my car is right there, do you need a ride anywhere?”

“Um… no,” said Regina. “We live just around the block. We can make it home on foot.”

As thankful as she was to Marian for her generosity in the bodega Regina couldn’t let her know how much she was struggling. For one the sheer amount of shame she felt would crippling. Secondly, she couldn’t risk telling someone about her and Henry’s situation. They might call child protective services and have Henry taken away from her.

“We’ll be fine,” she lied.

“Okay,” said Marian reluctantly. She moved to walk away but spun back on her heel. “You’re a mother who’s trying her best Regina. Don’t let anyone shame you for that.”

Regina just gave her an awkward nod before walking away. Marian watched her leave with a frown on her face and a worried look in her eyes. As soon as they turned the corner she started to walk back to her car.

“You can’t help people who don’t want to be helped Marian,” she reminded herself.

Night had fallen by the time Regina reached the park that she and Henry now called home. She’d discovered it the day they’d been kicked out the motel. She thought a day at the park with Henry would help clear her head and figure out what to do. They’d ended up sleeping there.

She climbed up the wooden stairs to the plastic play castle where she slept. It had a roof to keep out the rain and three walls that would block out most of the wind. It wasn’t perfect but it was shelter. It was late February and even though the days were heating up the night still brought a chill. She thanked her lucky stars that she’d been smart enough to pack Henry a jacket, hat and extra blanket. He was able to stay warm despite the chill. She was not so lucky. Her worn leggings, t-shirt and thin plaid over shirt were fine during the day but offered her little resistance at night. Her slip on flats weren’t doing much to keep her feet warm either. She rubbed her hands together and pressed them on her toes in an effort to heat them up. She wished she had a blanket like Henry. As she looked at her son, snuggled up in his car seat and unaware of their struggles, she couldn’t get Marian’s words out of her head.

“You’re a mother who’s trying her best

It was true. She looked for work every day but every day she got turned away. It seemed like no employer was willing to take a chance on her. Marian had saved her today but she was still broke. It wouldn’t be long before she couldn’t afford to feed herself or her son. Yes she was trying her best … but her best was not enough. Not for Henry. She blinked back tears as she ran her hand over his stomach. His onesie still fit but it was starting to grow tight around his arms. She’d ripped at the sleeves so they wouldn’t bite into his skin. In a few weeks he’d outgrow it completely and she wouldn’t be able to get him another. She couldn’t take care of her son. And it was killing her.

You’re a mother who’s trying her best

That was her mantra, her guiding purpose. And thinking of it now made her realize that keeping Henry was not something she was doing for him. It was for her. He was the only bright spot left in her life. He gave her a reason to continue but keeping him was selfish.
She rubbed her thumb over his cheek and felt a tear go down her own. “You deserve so much better than me.”

Sobs racked through her body as she realized she had to give him up. She couldn’t give him what he needed. Not food. Not clothes. Not a home. He needed someone better than her to take care of him. Someone who knew what they were doing.

She tried to take deep breaths to reign in her tears. Knowing what she had to do was crushing her heart. She reached up to her chest and rubbed her thumb over her engagement ring. She wore it around her neck on a string now. When the money had started running low she’d thought about selling it but could never bring herself to do so. Daniel, and a lot of the men in his family before him, had used it hoping to receive a chance of happiness with the woman they loved. This ring didn’t belong to her. It belonged to Henry. It was all he had left of his father.

Thinking of Daniel helped calm her down. His laugh and his smile. Imagining him and how he’d hold their son, how he’d love him. It should make her sad but instead it gave her a sense of peace. She knew if Daniel was here he’d do whatever was necessary to keep them safe. No matter what it cost him. Giving up their son would be the hardest thing she’d ever have to do but it was a price she’d pay if it meant he would be cared for properly.

She pressed a kiss to the top of Henry’s head. “I love you,” she whispered, tearfully.

She ran her thumb over his tiny hand. Tomorrow she would give up her son but for tonight she just wanted to hold him.

Marian let out a yawn as she drove down the street. Her meeting with the meat dealer had run a lot longer than she thought it would. It didn’t help that she could hardly focus the entire time she was there. She couldn’t get Regina and Henry out of her head. The way she’d thanked her and the way her baby smiled. She could tell those two didn't deserve the struggles they had. They needed help.

She tried to clear her head by turning up her radio. Her mom used to tell her it was never good to dwell on things she couldn’t change. Her mom...

She shook her head furiously. Oh god Marian don’t fall down that rabbit hole again.

She sighed as she pulled up to a stoplight. Her thoughts would just have to wait until she got home. Well until Robin got home. Marian could always count on her husband to help her sort through things when she would let him. She glanced at the clock. 8:45. He should still be at the bar by now. Serving drinks to the few stragglers who were brave enough to test the ocean water.

Her hands tapped on the driver’s wheel impatiently as she waited for the light to change. She let her gaze wander toward her driver’s hand window. There was a small park at the end of the crosswalk. It was just a few swings, some monkey bars and a small plastic castle. Wait…

She sat forward and narrowed her eyes at the castle. There was someone inside of it. It couldn’t be…

Plaid shirt and car seat. Marian let out a disbelieving breath as she realized just who she was looking at. Regina and Henry.

She’d said she’d had a place to go. C’mon Marian did you really believe that? She had to admit that the answer was no. Oh god, how long had they been sleeping in that play castle?

HONK!
Marian jumped so high at the car horn she nearly hit her head on the ceiling. She looked up at the stoplight and saw it had turned green. If she went straight she could head home. Maybe crawl into bed with her husband and forget about the woman and her son in a few days.

*It’s not good to dwell on the things you can’t change baby*

Marian set her jaw and gripped the steering wheel tight as she quickly made a U-turn.

*Shut up Mom.*

As she looked down at her son Regina sadly wondered just where she was going to give him up. There was a church down the street. Maybe she could leave him there? No. It made the chances of her finding him again slim. And she wanted to find him again. She tried to convince herself that giving up Henry was only temporary. A way to make sure that he’d be cared for while she built a life for him. It was a desperate hope but one she would cling to.

She was so deep in her thoughts that she didn’t notice a figure approach the play castle.

The knock on the wooden stairs caused her to jump in surprise. She laid her arm across Henry protectively as her eyes turned toward its source. “Marian?”

Her bodega savior stood next to the wooden steps staring at her with her arms folded across her chest. “I thought you said you had someplace to go.”

“What?” said Regina confusedly. She glanced back at Henry to make sure he was still asleep.

“At the bodega,” clarified Marian. “I asked you if you needed a ride somewhere and you said you lived down the block.”

Regina looked at her suspiciously. “Did you follow me here?”

“No and that’s not the point!”

“Of course the one nice person I run into is a stalker,” sighed Regina, rolling her eyes to the sky.

Marian scoffed at her. “You know what I might be a stalker but you are definitely a liar. Why didn’t you just tell me that you didn’t have a place to stay?”

Regina ran her fingers through her hair and pressed her lips together as the all the pain of the day rushed back to her. She’d been ridiculed by a store cashier, left in the cold and just decided to give up the person she loved the most. This woman demanding her honesty just the last straw for her. “What was I supposed to say to you, huh? That I am so inept that I can’t find a job despite the fact that I’ve been looking for weeks? That I can’t afford to keep a roof over my son’s head? That I struggle every day to make sure that he can get what he needs to eat?! Was that what I was supposed to tell you? Excuse me for wanting to keep my failures to myself. I’m so sorry it has offended you!”

By the time she was finished with her rant her hands were trembling and her eyes were welling over with tears. “I appreciate everything you did for me today, I really do, but that doesn’t mean I owe you the history of all my failures.”

Marian looked at her sympathetically. Robin did say that she had a tendency to be pushy.
“Okay,” she sighed, dropping her arms. “I’m sorry if I came on strong but really, and this time no lies, do you have a place to go?”

Regina wrapped her arms around herself and dropped her eyes to her feet as she shook her head. “No. No we don’t.”

Marian bit her lip and took a deep breath before speaking. “Well… what if I told you that for tonight you did?”

The apartment Marian shared with her husband was not large. Just one bedroom and one bath. A tiny living area next to the kitchen. But Regina could tell it was a home for them. The pillows on the couch, the shoes piled by the door and the pictures on the wall told her so.

It had taken some convincing but Marian had gotten her to agree to spend the night at her house. She didn’t need to try so hard though. A night out of the cold couldn’t be anything but good for Henry. She stood next to the door awkwardly wondering if she should set Henry’s car seat on the coffee table or the floor.

“Are you sure your husband won’t mind me staying here?” Regina asked timidly. Marian looked back at her as she lazily threw her coat on the couch. “Robin? No. He’ll be okay with it I promise. It’s just for tonight anyway.”

“Right,” said Regina softly. Then I will be back in the cold. Alone.

An awkward silence filled the room as the two women looked at each other, clearly uncomfortable. Marian nervously wiped her palms on her jeans and shrugged. What now?

“You probably want a shower,” she said quickly, as if the idea just came to her.

Actually food was more at the top of Regina’s list but a shower did sound nice. “Would you mind?”

“Of course not.” Marian replied earnestly. “Just let me grab you a towel.”

Regina set down Henry’s car seat next to the couch and leaned down to check on him. He was still asleep but somehow she didn’t think that would last long. She stood and examined the photos on the wall above the couch. There were a couple of them, all featuring Marian and a blonde man she could only assume was her husband. Regina had to admit he was cute. Warm smile, square jaw covered in scruff. His eyes were light blue. Similar to the sky on a sunny day.

Not like Daniel’s, she thought to herself. No Daniel’s eyes were blue like the Mediterranean Sea. Dark even when the light shined through them.

Her eyes fell to a picture of Marian and her husband with another man. They were all in front of the steps of some official building. Marian in a simple white lace dress and Robin in a suit with his hand around her waist. The man next to them was just as dressed up. He was clearly older than them. He had a receding hairline and a bit of a beer belly but his smile was bright. They all looked so happy.

“That was our wedding day.”

Regina turned her head to see Marian watching her from a spot next to the hallway.

“It was just a courthouse ceremony but it was still perfect,” she said with a wistful smile.
“You look beautiful,” complimented Regina with a sad smile. Her hand subconsciously went to the ring around her neck. Sometimes she still thought of what her wedding day with Daniel would’ve been like. She tried to escape her fantasies with a small shake of her head. She pointed to the man in the photograph. “Is this your father?”

Marian let out soft chuckle and shook her head. “No but he was family.”

She patted the pile of clothes in her hands. “I brought you a towel and some pajamas.”

“Thanks,” said Regina taking them from her. She glanced down at Henry worriedly. “Um…”

“I can watch him while you take a shower,” said Marian quickly. “I’m about to cook some dinner anyway. He can hang out with me in the kitchen.”

Regina looked at her with eyes full of hesitation. “I…”

“He’ll be fine. I promise.”

Regina took one last look at Henry before nodding. “Okay.”

“Good,” said Marian with a smile. “The bathroom’s just down the hall.”

If Regina could use two words to describe Marian’s bathroom they would have to be “small” and “eccentric.” The toilet seat was had a furry electric blue cover with white polka dots and the shower curtain had an under the sea mural on it. The towels hanging from the rack appeared to be comic book themed with bright shapes that had words like BOOM! or POW! written on them. The towel Marian had given Regina seemed to be superhero themed as well. As she looked around at the odd little bathroom Regina couldn’t help but think that it would make her mother cringe. The thought made her smile.

She started to get undressed as she let the water in the shower start to heat up. As she stripped down she watched herself in the mirror on the back of the door. She could hardly even recognize the person reflected back at her. Her long thick hair had gone stringy and thin with grease. The dark circles under her eyes made her face seem especially hollow. The outlines of her ribcage had begun to peek through her skin as well. It was like she was a ghost of her former self.

She quickly turned away from the mirror and stepped into the shower. As the warm water hit her skin she let out a soft moan. She stood under the stream and tried to let the water wash away her troubles.

Marian absentmindedly stirred the macaroni as she watched Henry from over the stove. He’d woken up only seconds after Regina had left. She’d set him up on a blanket in the center of the living room floor. He didn’t appear to be underweight or sickly. On the contrary, his belly was full and his cheeks were appropriately chubby and red. He laughed up at Marian as he sat on the floor. She smiled down at him sadly. Everything Regina has must go into keeping him healthy, she thought to herself.

She turned away from him to open the fridge. As she looked around at its sparse contents she let out a defeated groan. In the heat of moment she’d forgotten to buy the milk at the bodega.

Guess I’ll have to take a trip to Mrs. Connelly, she thought to herself. She felt herself cringe at the idea of going across the hall. She liked Mrs. Connelly. She really did but the older woman had a habit of rambling. Marian suspected she could hold a one-sided conversation for hours if no one
stopped her. Still she would let her borrow the milk. She moved toward the door before looking back at Henry and sighing. She couldn’t leave him by himself. Still it didn’t seem right to take him without Regina’s permission. But she needed that milk for the mac and cheese. She didn’t want it to burn. Henry reached up at her with wide eyes.

“What the hell,” she muttered, picking him up and resting him on her hip. “It’s just one quick jaunt across the hall, right?”

Henry patted her collarbone and gave her a toothless smile.

She smiled back at him. “Okay. Real quick.”

Marian left the apartment and knocked on the door across the hall. Almost instantly the door opened to reveal an old lady in a night robe and large glasses. A wide smile broke out on her face as she saw them.

“Marian!”

“Hi Mrs. Connelly!” said Marian brightly. “Sorry to bother you. I just-”

“Oh it’s so good to see you dear,” the older woman interrupted happily. “I didn’t know you had a baby now.”

Marian quickly shook her head. “Oh he’s not mine. I just-”

“Oh I thought so. I didn’t want to be rude but he looks nothing like you. Though I suppose he could’ve taken after his father. They usually do at this age. That’s why I didn’t say anything. I remember when my kids were babies-”

“Mrs. Connelly!” Marian interrupted. “I just need to borrow a glass of milk. Do you have any?”

“Why of course I do!” she said stepping aside so Marian could enter. “I’m so glad you came to me first. It feels like so long since you’ve come to visit.”

*It was just last week,* thought Marian wryly.

Mrs. Connelly quickly guided them into the apartment and shut the door behind them. As soon as the lock clicked the elevator bell rung.

Robin rolled his neck as he stepped out of the elevator. It had been a long day at the bar. He checked his watch. 10:17. He’d made pretty good time actually. Usually he wouldn’t be home until well after eleven. Thank god Lani had offered to stay behind and help with the cleanup. He really just wanted to eat whatever was in the fridge and crawl into bed with his wife.

“What Marian?” he called out as he entered their apartment. He lazily threw his hoodie on the couch next to her jacket. She was definitely home. He heard the shower running from the bathroom. A smile grew on his face. A shower with Marian sounded quite nice right about now.

He quickly stripped off his clothes and grabbed a towel before heading to bathroom. The steam from the shower hit him in the face as he opened the door. He could see Marian’s silhouette as she stood under the water. An eager grin was settled on his face as he pulled back the shower curtain. It dropped when he saw the woman in the shower wasn’t actually his wife.
He was greeted with a piercing scream and a punch in the nose.
Marian sighed as she shut the door to the apartment behind her.

She gave Henry a wry smile as she set the milk on the kitchen counter. “I swear it would’ve taken less time to actually drive to the supermarket.”

Henry cooed at her but his noises were drowned out by a piercing scream and thud from the hallway.

“What the hell?” Marian breathed softly. Her eyes widened as they flickered to couch and noticed Robin’s hoodie next to her jacket.

She shook her head frantically as she rushed to deposit Henry on the living room floor. “Oh no no no! Crap!”

As soon as she set Henry on the ground she raced toward the increasingly loud voices.

Robin cradled his nose and let out a groan as he was knocked back into sink counter. “Fucking hell!”

“What are you doing in here?!” Regina screamed hysterically as she frantically tried to wrap the shower curtain around herself. She took in his blue eyes and scruffy beard and recognized him as Marian’s husband.

Robin glared at her as he quickly grabbed a towel to cover himself. “What am I doing here?! I live here! What the hell are you doing here?”

They both swiveled their heads toward the bathroom door as Marian rushed inside. She saw her husband in nothing but a towel and gave him a strange look. “Robin what are you doing in here?”

He sent her an incredulous look. “I live here!!” he repeated angrily. “This is my bathroom! Why are you not asking the stranger what she’s doing here?”

“I brought her here,” said Marian stepping in between them.

“Oh my god! Is this why you brought me here?” yelled Regina, wrapping the curtain tighter around her body. “To serve me up to your sex crazed husband?”

“What? No!” she said swiveling her head back at Regina. “This is just a crazy misunderstanding and for the love of god Robin can you please leave the bathroom!”

“Fine,” he growled at her. “But we will be having a conversation about this.”

“I don’t doubt that,” she called after him.

He angrily stomped to the living room and stopped in his tracks when he saw Henry staring up at him from a blanket. “What the hell is going on?!”
Marian handed Regina her towel with an apologetic look. “I want to start off by saying that I am SO sorry that happened. I really didn’t expect him home so early. I went across the hall for one second. I’m sorry.”

Regina took the towel from her with a frown. “Where’s Henry?”

“He’s fine,” said Marian quickly. “He’s out in the living room just waiting for you.”

“I think I want to go,” said Regina softly, as she stepped out of the shower.

“Oh please don’t,” said Marian shaking her head. “I know this wasn’t the most pleasant way for you to meet but my husband is actually a decent person when he’s not shocked… and wounded.”

Regina scoffed as she turned away from her. Her cheeks still felt warm with embarrassment.

“It’s so late and you’re already here,” Marian insisted. “I hate the idea of you and Henry going back to that castle. Please just let me talk to Robin. I’m sure he’s fine with it. So please stay.”

Regina closed her eyes and sighed. She could really use the night indoors and the warm meal.

“Fine. I’ll stay.”

Marian let out a sigh of relief. “Good. Why don’t you get changed? Dinner will be ready soon.”

She shut the bathroom door behind her as she left. Now to face my certainly irate husband, she thought to herself. She found Robin in the living room watching over Henry, still in nothing but a towel. He folded his arms and glared at her as she walked toward him. “I believed I am owed an explanation for my sore nose.”

Robin Locksely had had a rough night. He’d been working since 10 am this morning. He’d had to deal with the belligerent drunk surfers all night while he was bartending. One of his bar hands hadn’t shown up so his back was sore from lifting all ten cases of alcohol into the storage room by himself. And to top it all off he’d come home to be assaulted by a woman his wife had let into the apartment. Still he couldn’t complain. Not when Marian told her all the woman had been through.

“The cashier actually said that to her face?” he asked incredulously. He was feeling a little better now that he had on pajamas and the pain in his nose had subsided. He and Marian had set Regina and Henry up with a few blankets and pillows in the living room before heading to bed.

Marian groaned under breath as she handed him a pillow. “Yeah. It was absolutely hideous Robin.”

“What a perfect asshole,” he said shaking his head as he slid into bed next to her. “So you just brought them home with you?”

“I know it was insane Robin but I just couldn’t leave them in that plastic castle at the park,” she explained sadly. “So I told them they could stay the night.”

Robin smiled at that. Marian’s heart had always been the most beautiful part of her. She always wanted the best for people. It was probably the only reason he’d even had a sliver of a chance with
her when they were younger. He wrapped an arm around her and pressed a kiss to her forehead. “I think that was incredibly kind of you.”

“Thank you,” she said patting the hand he’d placed on her shoulder.

“However…” he started.

“There it is,” she said rolling her eyes. “The logic.”

“It doesn’t hurt to think of the logic,” he said practically. “Marian what’s supposed to happen with them after tonight? You know I’d love to help her but we can’t really afford two more mouths to feed and the apartment is small enough with just the two of us.”

“I know we can’t afford to take care of them but maybe the bar can,” she said thoughtfully. “Kara’s leaving at the end of month and we’ll need a new waitress. Why not her?”

“Regina?” said Robin raising his eyebrows. “Does she have any experience at all?”

Marian shook her head. “Probably not but Robin you saw how badly she needs this job. No one’s going to work harder than her to keep it.”

Robin scratched his beard apprehensively. “Well you’re the bar manager what do the books say?”

Marian blew out a breath as she thought over the bar’s finances. “It’ll be tight paying both her and Kara to work but if we bring Regina in for reduced training hours until Kara leaves we should be able to scrape by. We’ll just have to take the hit on bar’s savings.”

“Alright,” said Robin nodding his head. “I could be okay with that but we still need a place for her and Henry to stay. The closest woman’s shelter is miles from here and I’m not exactly comfortable with dropping off a woman and her baby in that sort of neighborhood.”

Marian shuddered at the thought of Henry and Regina in a shelter. The memory of the few nights she’d spent there still made her skin crawl.

“You’re right,” she said. “I don’t want them to have to go there.”

“Do you think Tink might be willing to let them stay with her?” asked Robin. “She’s got the extra room.”

“She probably would but I don’t want to force this on her. Plus there’s all the tools and sharp objects she has around her apartment. It’s not exactly the best place for a crawling baby,” reasoned Marian. She drummed her fingers across her knee before turning to her husband. “What if we give her Tuck’s old place? Just until she gets on her feet?”

“Above the bar?” said Robin raising his eyebrows at her. “Marian you were going to use it as an office space. You’ve been planning on redecorating that place for weeks.”

She looked him in the eye with a tilted head. “Robin do you really think I need an office more than those two need a home?”

She grabbed his hand. “Tuck did it for us. Maybe it’s time we start paying it forward.”

Robin smiled at the memory of the kind old man who’d been like a father to them. He’d practically saved their lives. There was certainly no better way to honor his legacy. “For Tuck then.”
Regina woke up the next morning to complete silence. She’d formed a habit of rising early these last few days so it wasn’t surprising that she was the only one awake. Despite the fact that she was on the floor she’d ended up sleeping pretty well. It was the first night she’d been warm since the motel. She looked over at Henry found him sleeping soundly beside her. It was good to see him stretched out on his back. She knew sleeping in the car seat every night couldn’t be good for him. Though she supposed he wouldn’t have to do that anymore once she gave him up.

She sighed as she rubbed her hand over his tummy. A warm blanket and a full belly hadn’t changed her resolve. Tonight she would be back out in the cold and she couldn’t allow Henry to be there with her. She had to do what was best for him and that meant giving him up.

She got up as silently as she could and grabbed her clothes off the couch. Marian had insisted on washing them last night so they were cleaner than they’d been for a while. She went into the bathroom to change and made sure to lock the door behind her. She didn’t want a repeat of last night. Her cheeks went red at the memory of Robin catching her in the shower. Yet another reason to sneak out of this apartment and never see these people again. As soon as the thought flitted through her head sadness followed on its heels.

It’d been a long time since anyone had been this nice to her. Marian and Robin had been really hospitable to her and Henry last night. They’d made sure that she ate enough and that she and Henry had enough blankets to stay warm. Truly concerned is how she’d describe them. Regina had no doubt that in another life she would’ve been honored to call them friends but this was the only life she had. She was struggling too much right now and she shouldn’t get attached to anyone. No matter how kind.

She folded Marian’s clothes and set them on the bathroom counter before heading down the hall. She’d just entered the living room when the kitchen light flicked on. Her hands flew to her mouth as a small yelp escaped her lips. She turned to see Robin staring at her oddly from behind the kitchen counter.

“I’m sorry,” he said with a smile. “Did I frighten you?”

“A little,” she replied hostilely. Despite his kindness Regina still found it a little hard to warm up to Robin. It probably had something to do with the fact that he was the only man, besides Daniel, to see her naked. Her arms instinctively folded across her chest. “What are you doing up so early?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “I always jog in the mornings.”

She eyed his worn sneakers, sweatpants and hoodie. He was dressed to run. “Right,” she said with a tight-lipped smile.

“The question is what are you doing up?” he asked curiously.

She hesitated before answering snarkily, “I’m homeless. I tend to rise with the sun.”

He smirked at her sarcasm. “Looks like I’m not the only one running.”

“Excuse me?”

“C’mon you’re creeping around this apartment fully dressed and it’s not even six,” reasoned Robin. “If you were staying you would’ve at least lounged around until breakfast.”

Regina turned away from him and focused on packing up Henry’s diaper bag. “I have places I need
He frowned at her back. “Seriously though? Not even a goodbye?”

“I was going to leave a note,” she lied.

“No you weren’t,” he replied walking over to her. He kneeled down next to her as he double knotted his shoe laces. “I know because I didn’t leave notes either.”

She stilled her motions as he continued to talk.

“I used to be homeless when I was a teenager,” he said softly. “Most of the time I would sleep in my car but sometimes I had friends who would let me stay over. Every time I would get up before they woke and I would slip out of whichever door was quietest. I’d make up some emergency for when they next saw me. Some reason I had to leave. I thought it would seem less shameful if I left before they could see the look on my face when they forced me out.”

She didn’t look at him as he opened up about his past. She just stared down at her hands and pretended not to listen.

“I know how important it is to hold onto your dignity when you feel like there’s no reason to have any. It sometimes feels like the only thing you have left,” he said sadly. “However, my wife would be devastated if she woke up to find you gone. So I am asking you to do me a favor and not break my wife’s heart. At least not first thing in the morning.”

Regina sighed as she shook her head and set Henry’s diaper bag back on the floor. “I suppose breakfast wouldn’t be so bad.”

He smiled at her as he stood up and opened the door. “You’ll be glad you stayed. Marian will make you the best eggs you’ve ever had.”

She let out a disbelieving chuckle as the door shut behind him. Truly concerned indeed.

She had to admit that Robin was right about the eggs. Marian had shoveled a decent amount on both their plates when she’d woken up. They were able to talk more openly at breakfast than at dinner. It probably helped that they didn’t have the awkwardness of Robin’s presence looming over them. She found out that she and Robin were only a few years older than herself but had been together since they were teenagers. A true Romeo and Juliet story seeing as how her parents didn’t approve. She wouldn’t say exactly why but when she mentioned her parents Regina saw Marian’s smile falter and the light behind her eyes dim a little. When asked about her history Regina stuck to the story she’d crafted for herself. She was engaged to a man she loved but he died before they could get married. She found out she was pregnant shortly after but things went downhill after Henry’s birth. It was as close to the truth that she could get without revealing herself.

After breakfast Marian persuaded Regina to take a ride with her to her work near the beach. She wrung her hands nervously as Marian pulled up to a bar less than one block away from the ocean. The bricks on the outside of the building were faded with age and the striped awning above the patio had one good rip in it. Regina squinted as she looked up to read the sign. “The Drunken Monk?”

Marian chuckled as she undid her seatbelt. “Yeah the name was not our decision.”
Regina quickly gathered Henry from the backseat as Marian unlocked the bar doors.

“You remember the old man from my wedding photo?” she said as she held open the door for them. “His name was Tuck Johnson and this used to be his bar. When he died last year he left it to me and Robin.”

Regina looked around the old bar. It was dark but she could only assume it looked better with all the overhead lamps turned on. There were plenty of tables and booths with a small stage and dance area. It wasn’t terrible updated but it had character.

“It’s nice,” she said nodding her head. It certainly wasn’t a place her mother would ever go but that was a plus in her book.

“Thanks,” said Marian with a smile. “Um, come upstairs there’s a place I want to show you.”

She followed Marian up the staircase behind the bar counter to a dingy hall with a door at the end of it. When Marian opened the door it revealed what appeared to be a tiny studio apartment. There was a small kitchen stove and bathtub that was hidden by a flimsy room divider. A red dusty pullout couch was under the window and there was a desk and filing cabinet by the door. Two years ago Regina wouldn’t believe that someone could live in a place so small. “What is this place?”

“It used to be Tuck’s apartment,” said Marian. “He loved the bar so much he thought why not live above it.”

Regina sighed as she looked around the small space. Despite its small size it had a sort of charm to it. “I think it’s kind of nice.”

Marian shrugged her shoulders nervously. “Well if you want it, it’s yours.”

Regina widened her eyes at her and laughed. “What?”

“I’m serious,” said Marian earnestly. “If you want a place to stay. You can have this one.”

Regina shook her head. “Marian I can’t afford to rent a place right now. I’m unemployed remember?”

“It’s not for rent. It’s more for… until you can get on your feet,” clarified Marian. “And as far as your unemployment goes Robin and I are losing a waitress at the end of the month. We’d like for you to take her place. If you want you can start training tomorrow.”

Regina felt a lump form in the back of her throat. They would let her stay here and work for them. She could keep Henry. This felt too good to be to true. In her experience that probably meant that it usually was. “Why do you care so much what happens to me?”

Marian hesitated before speaking. “I met Robin when I was sixteen. He swept me off my feet when he wasn’t even trying. My parents hated him. I mean really hated him. He was homeless. He was foreign. He was… white.”

“Oh!” said Regina raising her eyebrows in shock.

“Yeah,” breathed Marian looking down at her feet. “Anyway we snuck around for two years before they just lost all tolerance and gave me a choice. I could either leave Robin and stay under their roof with all its benefits. Or they would cut me off. No college, no shelter, no contact.”
“They made you choose?” asked Regina softly. She knew it was self-centered but she couldn’t help but think that Marian was lucky. If her mother had given her the choice she knew she’d choose Daniel a thousand times over.

Marian nodded her head. “And to everyone’s surprise, including mine, I chose Robin. I just knew that I’d rather be in a cold car with him than a warm house without him.”

A smile grew on her face. “I’ve never regretted that choice for a second.”

Regina smiled back at her. *Love over security*, thought Regina to herself. She could relate to that.

“However, just because I didn’t regret my decision doesn’t mean that things weren’t hard,” continued Marian. “There were a lot of nights where Robin and I went to sleep hungry and cold. It was tough. I felt looked down on a lot. Like there was no one who was willing to take a chance on us. Until Robin met Tuck. He was a really good man. He gave us jobs in his bar and convinced a friend to let us stay their basement until we could afford a place. He saved us. So now I’m going to save you. Because Robin and I didn’t deserve to be in the cold and neither do you and Henry.”

Regina glanced down at Henry in his car seat. She felt a tear go down her cheek as she realized she had a chance to keep him. In a split second decision she wrapped her arms around Marian and hugged her tight. “Thank you so much.”

Marian returned her hug warmly. “Don’t thank me until after your first day. Our customers tend to be jerks.”

Regina giggled happily as she let her go. “I don’t care. This means so much to me.”

Marian quickly wiped a tear from her own cheek as she let out a chuckle. “I have some stuff in the car to make things more comfortable here. Why don’t you take a look around while I go grab it?”

As soon as she left Regina lifted Henry from his car seat and pressed him close to her chest. “It looks like Mommy gets to stay with you.”
Chapter 7

Her first night in the studio apartment was the first night Regina felt like she could breathe in weeks. Marian had spent the whole day helping her set it up. She gave her a nice blanket and an electric heater to help with the cold until the A/C unit could be fixed. There was a bathtub and shower upstairs which was nice but she’d have to go down to the bar to use the actual bathroom. Marian gave her the spare key to the ladies room. They also spent a decent amount of time filling out the paper work Regina needed to work in the bar. She was relieved to find that the papers her father had given her didn’t raise any red flags.

That night as she laid down to sleep with her son beside her Regina silently thanked God that she’d run into Marian at that bodega. She could hear the bustle of the bar downstairs but it didn’t bother her or Henry. It felt too good to have a roof over their heads again.

She woke up to a loud metal banging outside her window. She quickly checked to make sure that Henry was sleeping through it before eyeing the clock on the desk. 8:10. She yawned as she stumbled out of bed. As the sun streamed in through the windows she could see the shadow of a person out on the fire escape. She cautiously stuck her head through the window to see a young woman in gray coveralls messing with her A/C unit.

“Um… hello?”

The woman turned to her with a confused smile. “Hi?”

She was tiny, even shorter than Regina herself. Her curly blonde hair was pulled up into a bun on top of her head and the tips of her fingers were stained with black oil. She and Regina stared at each other awkwardly.

“Why are you on the fire escape?”

“I’m fixing the A/C unit,” she said pointing toward her toolbox. “Do you mind me asking why you’re in the office so early?”

“I’m a new waitress. Marian and Robin are letting me stay here with my son for a while.”

At the mention of Marian and Robin the woman gave her a bright smile. “Oh! Okay that makes so much more sense then what I thought!”

“Wait what did you think?” asked Regina with a tilted head.

“Something along the lines of you being Robin’s secret mistress,” she admitted freely.

“Oh…” Well he has seen me naked.

“I’m Isabella. The resident handyman. You can just call me Tink!”

Regina hesitated before shaking her stained hands. “Tink? Really?”

The girl rolled her eyes and shrugged. “Yeah well I’ve been ‘tinkering’ with things for as long as I can remember. I got the nickname when I was a kid and I’ve never been able to shake it.”

Regina tried to stealthily wipe her hands as she let out a shaky laugh. “I’m Regina Gardiner. Just Regina.”
“I’m sorry for waking you so early,” said Tink. “I didn’t expect anyone to be here.”

Her apology was cut short by the sound of a knock on the door. When she opened the door she found a bright-eyed Marian in her hallway with a stack of clothes. She quickly let her into the studio.

“Hi I hope I didn’t wake you,” she said softly.

“No I already did that.”

Regina turned to see Tink standing right behind her. She stared at her with wide eyes. “Did you climb in through the window?”

“Yeah that’s usually how I get in,” she said shrugging her shoulders.

_Well that’s disturbing_, thought Regina. She reminded herself to check the windows for locks the next time she was alone.

Marian frowned at the tiny blonde. “Tink that’s incredibly rude. She lives here now. We need to learn to respect her space. What are you doing here anyway?”

“I’m fixing the air conditioner like you asked me to.”

Marian’s eyes widened. “That was today? I completely forgot.”

“Yeah well you’re lucky I remembered,” said Tink. “I can’t believe you had your waitress and her baby sleeping in this place last night. The weather is frigid.”

She turned to Regina with a smile. “He’s really cute by the way.”

Regina’s eyes flickered back to her son. He was still sleeping soundly on the pullout couch. “Thank you. And we were fine. The heater helped a lot.”

To be honest it had been a little cold but not as cold as it was outside. She’d take the chilly apartment over a plastic castle any day.

“I thought about calling you Tink,” said Marian. “But it was such short notice I just figured that you were already busy.”

Tink tilted her head at her. “On a Wednesday night? You really overestimate how social I am.”

Marian rolled her eyes at her. “Well since you’re already here, can you fix the unit?”

“Sure. It’s just a blown fuse. I should have it replaced and ready in no time,” she said heading back toward the window nonchalantly.

Marian let out a relieved sigh. “Thank you Tink. You’re a goddess.”

“I know,” she yelled climbing back onto the fire escape.

Regina quickly shut the window behind her. “Not that I’m complaining but does she pop in like that often?”

“I’m sorry,” said Marian. “Tink’s social skills are a little… unrefined. She’s used to this being my work space and Tuck’s home. I promise I’ll teach her some boundaries.”
“It’s fine,” said Regina passively. “To be honest I kind of appreciated her bluntness.”

She didn’t realize how true the statement was until she said it. When she’d worked with her mother it seemed like every person she’d met had an ulterior motive. Something they wanted from her or her mother that they would never say aloud. Tink seemed freer than that. Perfectly capable and content of saying or doing whatever came to mind.

“That’s one way to describe her,” said Marian with a smile. “Anyway I just came to drop of your new uniform before you got started.”

She handed Regina a pair of black jeans and a short-sleeved shirt with the bar’s logo across the chest.

“The opening shift starts at ten,” continued Marian. “Once you get better hours you’ll rarely have to work this early but since you’re in training we’ll be using it as a chance to make sure some of our older employees get to know your face. They’ll be real helpful.”

Regina nodded and tried to put on her bravest face. On the inside she was screaming though. She’d never really done manual labor before. The only thing she’d learned to do for herself was sew and her mother had fought her on that for years. What if she was awful at it? What if Robin and Marian had to fire her because she was so terrible? Oh god, what would happen to her and Henry then?

Somehow Marian noticed her inner distress and put a reassuring hand on her shoulder. “Hey, you’ll do great. I promise.”

The rest of the morning went pretty quickly after Marian left. Henry woke up and she fed him before getting ready for work. She still couldn’t believe how close she’d come to losing him. She vowed never to let that become a possibility again. Running into Marian had been an amazing stroke of luck but she couldn’t rely on that anymore. It was time for her to truly start making a life for her and Henry. And the first step was making sure that she didn’t fail on her first day of work.

As she pulled on her new black jeans and tee she tried to figure out just what she could expect from this job. She’d been to plenty of restaurants before, eaten at really fancy places but she’d never considered her experience from the servers point of view. They’d always seemed very polished and sometimes a little standoffish. Somehow she didn’t think that demeanor would for work for her at the Drunken Monk. As she stared at the fat monk on the logo across her chest she realized that she’d never been in a bar like the one downstairs. Her uniform was so different from the anonymous black slacks and white button down shirt she’d been so used to seeing on her waiters. She suddenly felt very out of her world.

Regina Mills’ world, she reminded herself silently. She took a deep breath and put on a determined face. There were times where Regina missed her old life but it was time to let go. She wasn’t a part of that world anymore. She didn’t have to live by its rules or customs anymore. Regina Mills had been a miserable pampered socialite but that wasn’t who she was anymore. She’d stopped being her the minute she’d jumped out of that bathroom window. She was Regina Gardiner now. And Regina Gardiner had survived starvation, homelessness and poverty. She could handle working in a bar.

As she took another look in the mirror next to her refrigerator she thought about just how much her life had changed in the past two months. When she saw her reflection it felt like there should be a
completely different face staring back at her. The thing that stuck out most was her long hair. It was almost down to the middle of her back now. Her shower at Marian’s had gone a long way to restoring it to its former glory. It was back to being thick, shiny and long. She’d always gotten compliments on it from the men her mother had forced her to meet. Looking back it was actually the only thing she could ever remember her mother complimenting her on.

As she ran her fingers through her hair she suddenly felt very resentful of it. It was a relic. A reminder of the person she never could nor wanted to be again. In a flash she was at the desk rooting through the drawers until she found was she was looking for. A pair of scissors.

She took two fingers and placed them around a section of her hair just below her chin. Before she could talk herself out of it she snipped just below them. A tiny gasp escaped her as her hair fell to her feet.

*Goodbye Regina Mills*

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It was tougher than she’d hoped to leave Henry. Marian had agreed to take care of him until Regina could afford better childcare. She’d be using the studio as her office while she watched him and it made Regina feel better to know that Henry wasn’t that far from her. After a promise from Marian to bring him down during lunch she finally made her way downstairs for her first shift.

Robin was already behind the bar when she came downstairs. He did a double take as she appeared at the bottom of the staircase. “You cut your hair.”

She nodded and shrugged her shoulders. “It’s less for Henry to pull on and it helps save on shampoo.”

By the time she was done with her impromptu styling session her back-length hair had been reduced to a short chin-length bob. She was pretty pleased with results. It was just a haircut but it made her feel more like an adult instead of a lost little princess.

“Well it looks good,” he said. “How’s the studio treating you?”

“It’s nice to have a roof over my head,” she said gratefully. “Thanks again.”

“It’s no problem really. I’m just glad you and Henry have a safe place to stay now.”

She looked around the bar curiously. She had been right in thinking that the bar would look better when the overhead lighting was on. She could now see a jukebox in the corner of the bar and the rich color in laminate floor. There were pictures on the wall behind the bar. Mostly of Tuck and what appeared to be other bar employees. She could even see Robin and Marian in a few frames. She drummed her fingers against the bar counter and eyed Robin nervously. “So what can I expect for my first day?”

“Nothing too amazing,” he admitted. “We’re a rundown beach bar. The customers will be surly and the tips will be awful but you’ll love your coworkers.”

“What are they like?”

Robin blew out a breath as he looked for the words to describe his employees. “Well Lani and Hook are great. They’re around our age. Lani is a brilliant waitress. She’s a bit of a dragon though. So just make sure you don’t take her attitude personally. She’s nothing to be afraid of. Hook on the
other hand…”

“Did I hear my name?”

They looked toward the doorway at the sound of the new voice. A black-haired man had swaggered through the front door. He pulled off his sunglasses to reveal his sea blue eyes. “You’re not bad-mouthing me to the new girl are you Locksely?”

Robin smirked at him. “I’ve told you Hook, it’s only bad-mouthing if it’s not true.”

“Fair point,” he admitted walking up to the bar. He reached out to shake Regina’s hand. “I’m Killian Jones, the bartender.

“I’m Regina Gardiner,” she replied automatically. She took a moment to observe her new coworker. He was good-looking enough she supposed. Black hair, blue eyes and bright smile. Certainly enough to turn any girls head. He was around the same height as Robin and she could tell from his accent that he was English as well.

He hung his leather jacket up behind the bar counter and sent her a mischievous smile. “Well it’s good to have you on board Miss Gardiner.”

Robin rolled his eyes. “For your own well-being I should warn you that there will be a moment that he hits on you and when it comes I advise you to walk away.”

“Hey some of us aren’t lucky enough to find true love at 16,” quipped Hook. “All we can do is search until we find it. And search I shall.”

He winked at Regina and she scoffed at him. “Well you can skip over me in your search. I’ve already found my true love.”

An exaggerated look of disappointment crossed Hook’s face. “Well damn my bad luck. Who is he? Is he as devilishly handsome as I am?”

“Even more so,” she responded cheekily. “Looks cute even with drool running down his face.”

Robin chuckled at Hook’s look of confusion. “She has a son, you ass.”

“Oh!” he said clearly surprised. “Um, how young?”

“Young enough to require all my attention,” replied Regina strictly. “So you’ll excuse me if I’m not interested in… searching with you.”

He nodded his head respectfully. “Can’t blame me for trying though, right?”

“I could but I think I’ll let it go just this once,” she said mercifully. She had to admit it felt good to be able to tell a guy no for once. It also felt really good to know that he’d actually back off. She’d never gotten either experience while she worked for her mother.

Seconds later a young Asian woman walked through the door. She rushed to counter and gave Robin an apologetic look. “Sorry I’m late. My mom was having a rough morning. I wanted to make sure she was okay.”

“It’s quite alright Mulan.” He gestured toward Regina. “Meet our new waitress.”

Mulan gave her a passing glance before focusing on pulling her hair back into a ponytail. “Hey.”
Robin sent her a disapproving look. “Mulan it’s her first day. I’d appreciate it if you gave her more than three letters.”

She let out an annoyed groan before turning to Regina with a mockingly cheerful smile. “Hi. I’m Mulan Wu. I’ve worked here for two years. I’m the bar’s headwaitress so when Robin’s not bossing you around I probably will be. Any questions?”

“Why did your parents name you after a Disney character?” asked Regina flatly.

Both Robin and Hook grimaced as the words came out of her mouth. The name had always been a sore spot for her.

Mulan clenched her jaw and glared at the short brunette. “My parents did not name me after a Disney character. They named me after a legendary Chinese warrior who was so fierce she could ride into battle with a baby strapped to her back and still take down anyone in her way. My parents gave me the name to make sure I would grow with the spirit of a warrior. Tell me what significant meaning does your name carry Regina?”

Regina looked at her with a smirk. “My full name is Regina Caroline. If you take some time and brush up on your Latin you’ll find it literally translates into ‘strength of a queen.’”

Hook let out an impressed chuckle. “Wow. Warrior vs. Queen. Lani think she just pulled rank on you.”

“This is all very educational,” said Robin quickly. “But I’d prefer if you all actually did what I pay you to do and work. Regina get stared setting up the chairs. Hook set up the patio and Mulan you can come with me to storeroom for a little chat.”

Hook raised his hand in a mock salute. “Aye aye captain.”

Robin rolled his eyes at him before following Mulan into the storage room behind the kitchen. Once inside he turned to her with a critical eye. “What did you think of her?”

“She’s got bite,” said Mulan with a half-smile. “That’s good. She’ll need it for the customers.”

“Well she is fighter,” said Robin subconsciously touching his nose. “Do me a favor though and look after her with some of our more rowdy regulars. She’s putting on a brave face but I thinks she gets shaken more easily than she wants to let on.”

“Alright I’ll keep an eye out,” said Mulan. She gave him a curious look. “Kara barely handed in her resignation three days ago. How’d you find a replacement so quickly?”

“Marian found her,” he said.

Mulan crossed her arms and let out a chuckle at that. “So that’s why she didn’t need my seal of approval first. She already had Marian’s.”

“I know you’re still upset I hired her without talking to you first but trust me she needs the work,” said Robin. “And as for Marian giving her a seal of approval when has Marian ever been wrong about a person?”

“Almost never,” admitted Mulan softly.

“Just promise me you won’t let the fact that you weren’t consulted influence your opinion of her.”
“Fine,” huffed Mulan. “I promise won’t let your professional betrayal color my treatment of her.”

“Thank you,” said Robin gratefully. Mulan was the bars head waitress and practically his second in command downstairs. He knew if Regina wanted to do well here it was best she get on her good side. After this morning he wasn’t sure if she’d gotten off to a good start on that.

Soon after the bar opened Regina realized why Marian and Robin had given her the opening shift for her first day. Things started off pretty slow. For the first two hours there were only a few customers in the bar. It gave her a chance to get over her nerves and get it into the swing of things. Surprisingly she wasn’t that bad of a waitress. Due to her mother’s constant need for things to be to be just so her memory was practically a steel trap. It made taking lunch orders relatively easy. The hardest part was staying on her feet for so long. When she’d worked with Cora most of their business took place in the office, or sometimes at sit down dinners. She wasn’t used to her work being so laborious.

As she slipped another order to the cook behind the counter she took a moment to lean against the wall and relieve a tiny bit of the pressure on her feet. Hook noticed her from behind the bar and gave her an understanding look. “Feet killing you?”

She stood a little straighter at his comment. “I’m fine.”

He leaned against the bar counter and gave her a disbelieving look. “You might want to try losing the slippers next time.”

She looked down at her old worn slip on flats and shrugged her shoulders dejectedly. “They’re kind of the only shoes I’ve got right now.”

“Well I advise you to invest in a pair of new shoes as soon as possible,” he said. “It might be a pain to spend the extra money but you always want to be wearing the right shoes for the job. That’s a lesson I learned on my trip up Mt. Kilimanjaro.”

She raised an eyebrow at him. “You’ve been to Tanzania?”

“Among other places,” he added nonchalantly. “You tend to travel a lot when you grow up on a shipping freighter.”

“How did that happen?”

He shook his head at her with a mischievous smile. “I’m a bartender love. I listen to life stories. I don’t tell them.”

“Not until you take off at least one layer of clothing,” said Mulan making her way to the cook’s window. She turned to Hook with a smirk. “What story did you tell the last girl to get her into bed? The one about the Habu Sake in Okinawa or the hurricane off the coast of Peru?”

“I went with Peru. It made me sound more heroic.” He replied flatly.

“Oh course,” she said rolling her eyes. She turned to Regina. “You might want to head out Newbie. A group just sat in your section.”

Regina looked over her shoulder to see a group of three young men seated at a table in her area. She tried not to groan as she lifted herself from the wall. “Back into the fray I guess.”
She headed over to the table and forced herself to give the men a bright smile. “Hi I’m Regina. I’ll be serving you today. Can I start you off with drinks?”

A tan dark-haired man at the table looked her over with a sleazy grin. “I’d rather start off with you.”

As the other men whooped at his innuendo Regina forced a chuckle from her throat and gave him a stern look. “That’s sweet but I’m not exactly on the menu.”

“I’m more of a made-to-order type of man.”

She internally groaned. These guys reminded her of the men she used to run into when she worked with her mother. Always leering and touching without asking. Completely gross and entitled. It was always best to just suck in your disgust and get the work done. She set the menus on the table tight-lipped smile. “I’ll give you a minute to look it over.”

She’d hoped that would be the last of it but a small gasp escaped her when she felt one of them smack her on the ass. She felt a ball of disgust form in her stomach as she flashes back to every time she’d been forced to allow Leo to put his hands on her. Before she could even get her bearings Mulan had stomped over and put the man’s hand in a painful wrist lock. She glared down at him as he let out a painful grunt. “What the hell!”

“Do you know what happens to men who harass the waitresses here? They get banned,” she growled fiercely. She tightened the grip on his wrist and a whine flew from his throat. “You know what happens to men who touch the waitress here? They get hurt. Now you can be respectful or you can get out. What is your choice?”

“Fine! Respect damn it!” he gritted out.

Mulan released his wrist with a smirk. “That’s what I thought. My name’s Mulan and now I’ll be your server. I’ll be right back to take your order.”

She put a guiding hand on Regina’s shoulder and pushed her toward the kitchen. “This is why I don’t date men,” she muttered. “Well that and the total lack of attraction.”

The entire exchange had left Regina totally speechless. She only found her words halfway towards the cook’s window. “Um thank you?”

“Forget about it,” said Mulan absentmindedly loading up a tray. “I end up doing it more often than you think.”

“Don’t you ever get in trouble for it?”

Mulan shook her head with a small laugh. “No. Robin doesn’t really care. He says that gropers aren’t his preferred clientele anyway.”

She looked her up and down with a tilted head. A frown fell on her lips as she landed on her slippers. “Are those the only shoes you have?”

“Yes,” said Regina softly. She didn’t realize footwear would be such a big deal in this place.

Mulan rolled her eyes and sighed. “Hang on a minute.”

She quickly disappeared out the back door and returned with a pair of well-worn sneakers and fresh socks. “I keep an extra pair in my car in case I feel going to the gym. You can work with a size 9
right?"

"Um yeah," said Regina gratefully. *Anything to get out of these flats,* she thought silently.

"Take a minute to put those on and then bring that order to table six," ordered Mulan. "I’m going to go check on those idiots in your section."

She passed Robin on the way to the table and he gave her a smug smile. "Careful Lani your kindness is shining through."

"Shut up Locksely," she scoffed.

The rest of Regina’s day went pretty quickly after that. Her borrowed shoes provided her with tremendous relief and luckily the rest of her customers were fairly civil. By the end of her shift her feet were pretty sore and her shoulders were aching from carrying trays of food but she felt more accomplished than she had in a long time. Once she clocked out she took a seat on a barstool and let out a sigh of relief.

Robin smirked at her from behind the bar. "Not as easy as it looks is it?"

“I suddenly feel the desire to tip better if that’s what you mean,” she replied with a small smile. “Is it always like this?”

“It gets easier as time goes by,” Robin answered wisely. “And you did better than Marian. She broke six plates on her first day.”

“Will you never let that go?” yelled Marian playfully as she descended the staircase with Henry in her arms.

“Not until the day I die,” Robin shot back with a smile.

“So good to know,” replied Marian dryly. She leaned over the bar counter to give her husband a kiss before handing Henry over to his mother.

Regina’s face lit up as she placed her son into her lap. “Hi there, sweetheart. I missed you.”

It took everything Regina had not to check up on Henry every twenty minutes during her shift. For the past two months she’d spent all her time with him. It was nerve-wracking not having him in her sights at every moment. She covered the top of his head with kisses before looking back at Marian. “How was he?”

“He was an angel,” she answered with a bright smile. “Barely cried and only left one stain on my shirt.”

Regina grimaced as she noticed an oddly shaped spit up stain on Marian’s right shoulder. “I’m sorry.”

Marian’s waved her off as she took a seat in the barstool next to her. “Don’t worry about it. I was happy to watch him. Tell me how your first day went.”

Regina shrugged her shoulders as she thought of the words to describe her first day. “It was harder than I expected but I think it went pretty well. I made about 55 dollars.”
“That’s pretty good for a six-hour shift,” said Marian brightly. “Definitely worth celebrating. Robin you want to grab her some celebratory wings on us?”

“Absolutely! First shift is always worth celebrating,” he said heading back to the kitchen.

Marian leaned over the counter and grabbed them two cans of coke. She snapped open hers before raising it in a mock toast. “Here’s to new friends and new beginnings.”

Regina gamely clinked cans with Marian. Here’s to Regina Gardiner, she thought silently. Long may she live.
Regina frowned as she walked into the bar after yet another unsuccessful day of apartment searching. It'd been six months since she started working at the Drunken Monk and she finally felt stable enough to look for a new place for her and Henry. He was getting so big now. She still couldn’t believe he’d started taking his first steps. The look of joy and uncertainty on his face as he tottered across the floor would be forever etched in her memory. Living in the studio was great but it didn’t leave him much room to practice. He needed more space.

She saw Marian at the bar counter and quickly took a seat next to her. The other woman noticed the frown on Regina’s face and sent her a concerned look. “I take it the apartment hunting didn’t go too well.”

“The words leaky and moldy could be used,” she groaned.

Marian gave her sympathetic look and patted her on the shoulder. “I’m sorry sweetie. I’m sure the next one will be better.”

Regina dejectedly placed her chin in her hand. “It’s just so frustrating. I’m finally in a place where I can afford to move out but I can only afford to move into horrible places.”

“Well maybe getting a roommate would help?”

“I tried but whenever I mention Henry no one wants to commit.” She sighed. “I don’t blame them either. I love Henry but he’s not exactly the quietest roommate these days.”

Henry had begun teething shortly after they’d moved into the studio. His fits of distress usually came and went on a daily basis. Luckily his cries never reached past the bottom of the bar’s staircase but they would be inescapable in a small apartment.

“Just give it time Regina,” said Marian. “If you save up more you might be able to afford a better place.”

“I don’t know if I have time to wait. Henry’s starting to walk now and soon he’ll need more space,” she said desperately. She drummed her fingers against the counter thoughtfully. “Maybe I should look into getting a second job.”

Marian gaped at her. “Another job? Are you kidding me? You’re already a full-time waitress and mother!”

“I know but what can I do?” said Regina exasperatedly.

“You don’t need another job,” said Mulan jumping into the conversation. She rolled her eyes at them as she stuffed a couple bills into the tip jar. “What you need is a side hustle.”

Regina gave her a quizzical look. “A what?”

“A side hustle,” she repeated. “It’s basically a skill or talent you can use to make money on the side. I’ve got one.”

“You do?” said Marian in surprise.

“Yeah. Most of my money from here goes to helping my mom with her medical bills so I teach a
women’s self-defense class in the park to fill the gaps in my budget,” she explained.

“I suppose that’s one way to use your military training,” said Marian with a smile.

“It helps pay for the little extras,” said Mulan with a shrug.

“Well that’s great for you,” said Regina. “But I don’t exactly have a talent I can exploit.”

“Everyone’s got a talent,” Mulan declared decisively. “I advise you take some time and figure out what yours is.”

The two women at the bar watched as she then sauntered back to the restaurant floor to wait on her customers.

“Do you also get the feeling of being completely inadequate when she comes around?” asked Regina.

“Every single time,” Marian deadpanned. She turned to Regina with a sigh. She hated seeing her friend so dejected. “Hey Henry’s down for his afternoon nap upstairs. Why don’t you take a break and come with me to the mall? I need a new dress for my anniversary and I could use a friend’s advice.”

“I’d love to Marian but who would watch Henry while I’m gone?”

“Robin will.”

“Robin will do what?” said her husband walking over to the bar.

“Watch Henry while we go the mall,” said Marian tossing him the baby monitor. “Regina could use a break and I need a dress for our anniversary.”

Robin sighed as he eyed the monitor in his hands. “If I refused would you accept it?”

“No I would not,” said Marian shaking her head.

“Well then I would be delighted to watch him,” he said cheerfully.


He waved her off as he headed up the staircase to check on Henry.

Marian wrapped her arms around Regina’s shoulders and guided her toward the door. “See he’s got everything covered here. Now let’s go lust over things we can’t afford and reluctantly purchase the things we can.”

“Well that just sounds like the best day ever,” laughed Regina.

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After eight months of living as Regina Gardiner, Regina was pleased to say that she thought of her old life less and less with each day. However shopping was always the one activity that would bring life as Regina Mills back to the forefront. Before she’d escaped with Henry money wasn’t something she’d had to think about much. It was always there and she knew her family had a lot of it but it was never something she thought of as special. Everyone around her had money. It was just a way of life. Now she could see just how spoiled her family was.
As she walked around the mall with Marian looking at dress after dress she couldn’t help but think that two years ago she could’ve afforded to buy all of them a dozen times over. They would’ve been dresses and nothing more to her. Now she looked at them and all she saw was food she wouldn’t be able to buy or bus fare that she might need later. Not worth it.

“I never knew dress shopping could be so severe,” she commented to Marian. They were on their third store of the day and Marian had just rejected her tenth dress. A light blue number with a silk hem.

The older woman looked over at her sheepishly. “I know I’m being picky. It’s just that Robin and I don’t go out much since we started trying to save for a house. And our anniversary has always been sort of special for us.”

“Do you have a special tradition or something like that?”

Marian smiled as she thought of all her previous anniversaries with Robin. “We do actually. It started after my parents had kicked me out. Every year before I met Robin my parents would take me to go see a summer ballet. Nothing specific. Just whatever was playing that year. I used to love seeing the ballerinas dance around on stage. Anyway it was the year after they kicked me out and I was pretty depressed that there would be no ballerinas… or parents. So one night Robin surprised me and took me to this elementary school auditorium for a surprise. Turns out one of his friends had a little sister who was learning ballet and Robin convinced him to let us come see her recital.”

“That’s the cutest thing I’ve ever heard,” said Regina with a chuckle. “He got you to the ballet.”

Marian nodded her head wistfully. “Yes he did. The girls couldn’t have been more than 10 years old. Not exactly professionals but it’s still my favorite ballet memory ever. Robin hated it though. He would never say it but he did. Poor guy was bored out of his mind the entire time. I felt so guilty for it afterwards that the next I dragged him across town to this free concert for one of his favorite local bands. They weren’t exactly my sort of music but seeing him so happy it was enough for me to have a good time. So every year on our anniversary we recreate the memory.”

“Ballet and rock band?”

“Ballet and rock band without fail.”

“That’s so sweet,” said Regina with a smile. She’d watched Marian and Robin a lot over the past few months. A blind man could see how in love they were with each other. Thinking of their story and all they’d been through made her wistful. She couldn’t help but look at them and wonder if what they had was what she could’ve had with Daniel.

“This year we’re actually going to go see a professional ballet in the city so I kind of want to look extra special,” said Marian. “It’s why I’m being so picky about the dress.”

“Well we will search this entire mall until you find the one dress that makes you feel as special as you want to be,” promised Regina.

Marian sent her a mischievous. “Be careful what you say because I am absolutely willing to try on all the dresses in this mall.”

“And I am absolutely willing to watch,” said Regina with a grin. As she looped her arm through Marian’s Regina realized that the older woman was actually the first friend she ever had besides Daniel. It was nice.
After another hour of unsuccessfully trying on dresses the women took refuge in the food court. As they were chomping on their subpar salads Regina spied a thrift shop for baby items close by. She turned to Marian with an apologetic look. “Would you mind? Henry could use some new clothes.”

Marian felt her heart clench as Regina pointed out the baby store but she forced a smile to her lips. “Sure.”

She did her best not to grimace as they crossed the store threshold. The store was covered in shades of light blue and light pink. Everywhere Marian looked there was a stork with a baby bundle hanging from its mouth. It was particularly overbearing. When they entered the store Regina headed for the baby clothes. There were dozens of used onesies and t-shirts covering brightly covered tables. Marian tried her best to cheerfully help her friend pick out clothes for her son but it was hard for her to keep a smile on her face.

While Regina was at the counter getting Henry’s new clothes Marian found herself drawn to the crib section. As she ran her hands over the bars of an old wooden crib she felt a familiar ball of despair swell up in her stomach. Before she could stop it the number ran through her head again. 12 percent.

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Five Years Ago

Marian anxiously tapped her foot as she and Robin waited in the doctor’s office. She could tell by the way he was drumming his fingers against his thigh that he was just as nervous as she was.

“Robin what if they got my test results wrong?”

“I’m sure that’s not what happened,” he said in what she was sure he meant to be a reassuring voice. He’d still been wearing his bar work shirt when he met her there. Luckily it was the one without any stains on it. Normally she would find the Drunken Monk logo a little comforting. It was a reminder of the stability they’d reached. They had jobs now. They were relatively comfortable. Not rich by any standards but doing okay. Certainly better than they had been a while ago. But looking at the potbellied monk across Robin’s chest did nothing for her now. Nothing except remind her that the jobs they had now were not enough to support a family of three.

“What other reason could they have for telling me to bring you along,” she reasoned. She ran her fingers through her hair nervously. “Robin if I am pregnant-”

“Then we will figure it out,” he said grabbing her hand.

Marian could only sigh in response. She knew he was trying to be supportive but the thought of being pregnant right now terrified her. They’d only been married for less than a year and they’d just now moved into the new apartment. Having a baby was so expensive and they were nowhere near ready for the responsibilities that came with a child. All the uncertainty was nearly making her burst out in hives.

They both looked up as Marian’s doctor walked into the room. She was young with vibrant red hair and bright green eyes. She was an experienced doctor but the way she talked to her patients never came off as condescending. Marian usually loved coming to Dr. Montgomery but she could tell by the look on her face that it wasn’t going to be a pleasant visit.

She greeted them with a forced smile. “Hi. I’m glad you both could make it down to see me today.”
“Was there a problem with my test results?” asked Marian bluntly. She couldn’t take any more of the uncertainty.

The doctor shook her head as she sat behind her desk. “Not exactly. Your bloodwork went through fine and like I said before you’re not pregnant.”

Marian breathed a sigh of relief and she felt Robin squeeze her hand reassuringly. Well that was good news. It should’ve made her feel calm to have that answered but instead it only made her more nervous. If she wasn’t pregnant then why was she here?

“However there were other things that came up,” continued Dr. Montgomery.

“Other things like what?” asked Marian softly.

The older woman sighed before answering her. “Well during your exam I found some abnormalities in your uterine structure. Now it’s nothing life threatening mind you but it does come with some complications.”

Robin leaned forward in his seat. “What type of complications?”

The doctor wrung her hands. “Because of the abnormalities the chances of you ever getting pregnant are lower than they would be for another woman of your age.”

“Lower?” said Marian.

“Drastically so,” said Dr. Montgomery sadly. “I’ve double checked with the others doctors on staff to be sure but there’s a very strong chance that you won’t be able to have biological children on your own.”

Marian couldn’t breathe. She felt completely numb. For a moment it was like she floating above her own head. Just watching the scene not being a part of it. And then it was like everything in the world crashed into her at once. The florescent lights suddenly became brighter than the sun. The tick of the clock sounded like thunder as it echoed in her ears. The little itches from the fabric on the seat on her chair suddenly felt the edge of a razor running against her bare skin. Everything became too much. “Wait are you saying that I can never get pregnant?”

“I’m saying that is unlikely,” clarified Dr. Montgomery shaking her head.

“Well that can’t be right,” cried Marian. “I should be able to get pregnant anytime I want! I’m only twenty-one!”

She shivered as Robin placed his hand on her back to calm her down. Somewhere in her brain she registered that he’d tensed up around the same time that she had.

“It’s not a matter of age Marian. It’s a just matter of biology,” said the doctor gently. “Because of the way your reproductive system is built your chances of conceiving and carrying a child to term are slimmer than most.”

“How slim?” asked Robin in a low voice.

Dr. Montgomery shook her head slightly. “I’d prefer not to speak in absolute terms.”

“Can I just have a number please?” asked Marian desperately.

“Marian…”
“Please!” she begged.

“12 percent,” answered the doctor softly. “Possibly less.”

Marian felt her jaw drop. Only 12 percent. This couldn’t be real.

Next thing she knew she was leaning over a toilet puking her guts out. She supposed she must’ve stormed out of the office at some point. She couldn’t get up once she was done. She just didn’t have the strength. Her hands fell over her stomach and her chin began to tremble. She would never feel anything there. No kicks or movements ever. No signs of life. She’d come here hoping to be told that she wasn’t pregnant, not that she never could be. Tears ran down her cheeks as she mourned the loss of something she wasn’t even sure she wanted.

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Marian blinked back tears as the memory of that day in the doctor’s office flashed in her mind. She jumped a little when she felt Regina’s hand on her back. Her friend was staring at her with concerned eyes. “Marian I’m sorry. I didn’t think that being here…”

It was only after a few months of working at the bar that Regina learned of Marian’s fertility issues. It was brought on by a night of babysitting and two glasses of cheap wine. She’d been shocked to say the least but Marian assured her that she and Robin were looking into other ways of starting their family now that they were ready.

“I’m fine,” said Marian quickly. “I’m just a little tired of waiting.”

Regina squeezed Marian’s shoulder sympathetically. “Have you looked into other adoption agencies?”

“There’d really be no point,” said Marian sadly. “Until Robin and I move into an actual house with room for a baby none of them will even look at us as an option.”

She and Robin had been saving for the past year to buy their own home but it was difficult. California realty wasn’t exactly known for its affordability. And as if their options weren’t limited enough they were both set on looking only at actual houses. As desperate as they were for a child they agreed that they didn’t want to raise that child in a place where they didn’t even have a yard. They were trying to be patient but it was becoming a little tiresome.

Regina always felt a little guilty when she thought of their situation. She been gifted with Henry when she hadn’t even been able to take care of him. The only reason she’d been able to keep him was because of Marian and Robin. She couldn’t help but think that if she had been forced to give him up they were exactly the people she’d want for his parents.

She wrapped her arm around Marian and rested her chin on her shoulder. “Somewhere out there is a child who can’t wait to have you as their mom.”

Marian sighed as she leaned her head against Regina’s. “I just hope they’re more patient than I am.”

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Marian was a little shaken up after her their time in the baby store but Regina made sure to lift her spirits. She tried to make sure that all of Marian’s attention was on finding the perfect dress for her anniversary. They had checked every store in their price range and still come up empty. Marian had just about given up when Regina pulled her into one of the mall’s more upscale stores.
“Are you crazy?” whispered Marian with wide eyes. “I probably couldn’t even afford a pair of socks from this place.” She’d never even been in a store as fancy as the one Regina just pulled her into. All the salespeople seemed severe and judgmental. They looked at her as if they had a copy of her last bank statement and were clearly not impressed. Strangely Regina seemed unaffected by their cold stares.

“Well not full price obviously,” she said softly. “But maybe there are some deals in the clearance area.”

It took some convincing but Marian finally agreed to a quick look through the dresses on sale. It wasn’t long before Regina found her a simple one shoulder dress in a beautiful shade of navy purple. Marian reluctantly tried it on but quickly fell in love with it as she looked at herself in the mirror.

“Oh it’s beautiful,” she said in an awe-filled voice. The dress was floor-length reaching just below her ankles. The color complimented her caramel skin and dark hair beautifully.

Regina beamed at her as she admired herself in a mirror. “With this dress Robin might be forced to actually rent a tux for the night.”

Marian chuckled at her joke. “Nothing could get Robin in a tux.”

She took one last look in the mirror before closing her eyes in fear. “Regina I’m afraid to look at the price tag. You’ve got to look for me.”

Regina grabbed the tag from the back of the dress and winced when she saw the number next to the dollar sign. “Marian… this dress is 300 dollars.”

Marian’s eyes practically popped from their sockets. “300 dollars?!?”

Regina shrugged her shoulders apologetically. “Well it’s kind of a steal seeing as how it started out as 1500.”

Marian groaned. “Even if we weren’t saving for a house Robin would kill me if I spent that much money on one dress. I would kill me if I spent that much money on two dresses.”

*I’ve spent three times that much money on one dress. Repeatedly,* Regina thought sullenly. “I’m sorry Marian.”

The other woman huffed as she looked in the mirror with disappointed. “I suppose it just wasn’t meant to be.”

Regina watched as her friend shuffled back to the fitting room dejectedly. All she could think was that it wasn’t fair. If anyone deserved a night of feeling pretty it was Marian. By the time they got into the car to leave a plan had already started to form in her head.

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It’d been two weeks since their visit to the mall and Regina tapped her foot impatiently as she waited for Marian to show up at the studio before her shift started. Henry watched her from his play pen. He gnawed on the ear of his brown bear as he looked up at her curiously. Regina sighed at him. “What? I can’t help it if I’m a little nervous. It’s a big surprise.”

He cooed at her appreciatively. She’d made a point of talking to him more often now that he was nearing the age of speaking. She wanted to make sure that he had a good vocabulary when he
started school. Marian had been helping out as well. She’d made sure to use extra small words whenever he was near. Yet another reason Regina thought she deserved this surprise.

She looked up when she heard a knock on her door. Marian opened the door to the studio with a smile. “Hey guys. How’s it going?”

“Good,” said Regina wiping her hands on her jeans nervously. She watched as Marian leaned over to give Henry a good morning kiss.

She eyed Regina curiously as she stood back up. “Why’d you have me come over so early? Your shift doesn’t start for at least an hour.”

“Well,” started Regina. “I have a surprise for you. I guess you could call it an anniversary gift.”

Marian raised an eyebrow at her. “You know those are usually between husbands and wives only.”

“Well then I guess you can just call it a thank you present. For all you’ve done for me and Henry,” she said as she walked over to the closet.

Marian’s jaw dropped as she pulled out the dress she’d tried on at the mall. It was just as beautiful as she remembered. She immediately began to shake her head. “Regina I can’t accept this. There’s no way you could afford it.”

Regina chuckled at her. “Well you’re right about that. There’s no way I could afford to buy this dress from the mall… so I made it instead.”

Marian looked at her incredulously. “You made this?! From scratch?”

“Every stitch,” said Regina with a small smile. “I took a home economics class in high school and learned to sew.”

It was almost the truth. In actuality Regina had learned to sew from one of the maids she’d had as a kid. She fell in love with it. With fashion actually. She used to rip up her old shirts and dresses and make new ones for her dolls. Cora had hated it. She called it a menial skill. Not suitable for the future CEO of a Fortune 500 company. Still Regina found ways to pursue the skill behind her back. She had no idea it would lead to her downfall.

“Where did you even get the fabric for this?” asked Marian. Her eyes were still wide with surprise as she ran her hands over the dress. She couldn’t even tell the difference between this one and the one she’d tried on at the store.

“You know all those trips I’ve been taking the park with Henry the past few days?” she asked. Marian nodded her head. “Well we’ve actually been going to the fabric store on Fifth Street. The owner is really nice. She actually let me barter for the fabric and use her backroom as a sewing room so you wouldn’t find the dress. Don’t tell Robin but I’ll be keeping her golden retriever puppy up here while she’s on a cruise next week. You’re not allergic are you?”

“Deathly,” replied Marian. “But I don’t even care as long as I get this dress.”

“Well it’s yours for your anniversary date but afterwards I’ll need it back,” clarified Regina. “The lady at the fabric store wants to put in the store window to show off the fabric. It was part of the deal.”

A bright smile lit up Marian’s face as she pulled Regina into a hug. “Thank you so much. I think this might be one of the nicest things anyone has ever done for me.”
“Well you’re one of the nicest people I’ve ever met so…” Regina said with a shrug.

She watched with a smile as Marian tried on the dress and was pleased to see that it fit just as perfectly as it had in the store. She owed a lot more to her than she realized. Making sure that she had this dress hardly covered the tip of the iceberg.

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Marian and Robin’s anniversary went off without a hitch. They went to see the ballet and Marian looked beautiful in the dress Regina had made for her. They’d been sure to get a picture taken and Regina was pleased to see that it had made its way onto the wall behind the bar counter. Marian had gushed to anyone who asked about the dress her friend had made for her special night. Knowing that she’d given Marian something to be happy about made Regina feel particularly warm inside. She’d spent a long time feeling helpless so doing some good, making someone else’s day, was a good feeling. She hadn’t realized how much she missed it.

She was wiping down the bar counter during her lunch shift when she felt someone tap on her shoulder. She turned to see a middle-aged blonde woman eyeing her nervously.

“Are you Regina Gardiner?” she asked.

Regina tried to calm the fight-or-flight instinct taking over her body. It’d been months since she’d escaped her mother but she still felt a bit of anxiety every time someone asked her name. Like they were waiting to call her a liar and drag her back home. “Yes that’s me.”

“Hi,” the woman gave her an anxious smile. “I saw your dress at the fabric store and the owner told me I could find you here. I was hoping to ask for your help.”

She handed her a folded page of a magazine. “My daughter wants this dress for her homecoming in a few weeks.”

Regina looked at the glossy image in her hands. It was a rosebud pink cocktail dress with a criss-cross bodice and an A-line skirt. It was beautiful and according to the page it 600 dollars.

“I can’t afford it,” said the woman exhaustedly. “I saw your dress at the store and I was hoping that you might be able to make a knockoff version of it for me. I would be willing to pay you a third of what the original cost and the fabric of course.”

Regina felt her breath get caught in her throat. “That’s sweet but I don’t…”

She suddenly felt two hands clamp down on her shoulders. Mulan had suddenly appeared behind her.

“What are you doing?” Regina whispered fiercely.

“What are you doing?” Mulan shot back. “That woman is willing to pay you 200 dollars to make one dress and you’re going to say no?”

“Well it’s not something I do.”

“You made that dress for Marian.”

“Well that was for a friend,” argued Regina. “This would be for money and I’m not exactly a
“No professional was a professional when they started,” said Mulan exasperatedly. “Look a few weeks ago you told me that you didn’t have a talent but you do. Apparently it’s dressmaking. Now you can either use it to help you get to better places in life or you can ignore it and allow for you and Henry to be stuck in that cramped studio until he’s speaking in full sentences. It’s your choice.”

Regina bit her lip as she thought over Mulan’s words. She walked back over to the woman with a smile. “When exactly is your daughter’s homecoming?”

“In three weeks,” she replied.

Regina sighed as she went over the math in her head. “I can make the dress. Just bring her down to the bar tomorrow and I’ll take her measurements upstairs.”

“Thank you,” said the woman gratefully.

As she watched her walk out of the bar Regina sighed and put her hands into her back pockets. This could either be the start of something really great or something really disastrous.
ONE YEAR LATER

“A little to the left.”

Regina did her best to slide the painting on the wall according to Marian’s instructions. “Like that?”

Marian gave its position one last look before giving her a thumbs up. “Perfect.”

“Really?” she said releasing the frame and stepping down from the couch. She stood by Marian’s side and eyed the painting critically. It was a small landscape of several trees with amber leaves. She’d found it at a yard sale with Marian and Tink a few days ago. It was cheap and the frame could use a good polishing but she thought it might look good above her couch.

“It looks great,” she said with a satisfied smile. She put her hands on her hips and looked around her living room. “You know what? I think I’m finally done.”

“Finally done with what?” asked Marian.

“Decorating the apartment,” said Regina like it should be obvious. “Now that I have that painting I finally feel settled.”

“Well I should hope so,” chuckled Marian, plopping down on the couch. “You’ve lived here for nearly eight months.”

“I know,” said Regina sitting next to her. “But now it finally looks like a home.”

Thanks to the tailoring business that Mulan had convinced her to start Regina had finally been able move out of the studio above the Drunken Monk. She now resided in a one bedroom apartment a few miles away from the bar. A part of her had been sad to leave the studio behind. It was the first place she and Henry called home when they started this new life. He took his first steps in that studio and she’d always smile at the memory of the late night girl talks she’d have with Marian as she waited for Robin to finish his shifts. The studio would always have a place in her heart but she was glad to have a home that was all her own now. Particularly one where the shower wasn’t two feet from the kitchen.

“I remember how happy Robin and I were when we got our first apartment,” said Marian with a small smile. “I can’t wait to feel that sense of pride again.”

“Still no luck on the home front?”

Marian shook her head. “Nope. We’ve had a couple of good leads these past few months but we keep getting out bid by people with bigger checkbooks. It’s… frustrating.”

Regina tilted her head in concern. “I’m sorry Marian. You’ll find a home soon. And once you do you’ll finally be able to get on the adoption list. I just know it.”

Marian bit her lip at the mention of the adoption list. “Yeah…”

Regina hated seeing her friend so dejected. She stood from the couch and gestured toward the bedroom. “Hey follow me to Henry’s closet. I’ve got something I want to show you.”
“New dress?” asked Marian with a smile.

“Yep,” said Regina with a nod.

Marian giggled with excitement as she rose from the couch but she suddenly felt herself go dizzy as she stood up straight. Regina reached out to steady her as she tilted to the side. “Marian?”

“I’m fine,” she said quickly. “Just have a bit of a headache.”

Regina sent her a concerned look but continued to lead her into the bedroom. Since she could only afford a one bedroom apartment Regina had chosen to let Henry have the room to himself while she slept on a pullout couch in the living room. Her side job as a tailor-slash-dressmaker had been really lucrative. Ever since that first dress she’d made for Marian she’d been getting three to five orders a month for dresses or adjustments. Sadly keeping up with orders along with her work at the bar didn’t leave her much time for Henry. So she’d set up so her sewing station in his closet so she could be close to him while she worked. It was strange but it worked for them.

Marian gasped as Regina showed her the dress she’d been working on. It was a tea-length formal gown with a champagne bodice and tulle skirt. The spaghetti straps were made of a velvet navy blue ribbon and they extended pass the shoulders to criss-cross around the torso and tie into a bow around the waist.

“Regina it’s beautiful,” said Marian breathlessly.

“Well it’s not finished,” said Regina modestly. “I’m planning on adding some applique flowers to the skirt and bodice.”

Marian gently ran her fingers over the straps. “It looks like something out of a fairytale. Is this a knock off or an adjustment?”

“Actually it’s an original,” mumbled Regina.

Marian’s eyes widened. “This is one of your designs Regina? Why didn’t you tell me you were working on it?”

“I was just a little nervous about how it’d turn out I guess,” she said with a shrug. A few months ago she’d shown Marian a few designs she’d drawn and ever since she’d encouraged her to start bringing them to life. Regina was reluctant at first but eventually she relented and made herself a couple sundresses. This, however, was her first formal dress.

“Well it’s amazing,” complimented Marian. “Amazing enough to gift to a dear friend…”

“Nice try,” said Regina with a smirk. “But the dress is already claimed. My fabric supplier is donating it to a fundraising auction for a local church.”

Marian frowned at her explanation. She opened her mouth to object but felt bile run up her throat. She quickly clamped her hand over her mouth and rushed to the kitchen sink. She gripped the edge of the stainless steel as she spilled her breakfast down the drain. Regina was by her side in a flash to pull back her hair.

“If you want the dress that bad I’m sure I can make another one,” she joked nervously.

To her surprise, Marian felt herself chuckle as she wiped off her mouth with a paper tower. “That’s not necessary. I’m okay now, I promise.”
Regina eyed her suspiciously as she leaned against the kitchen counter. “Marian I know… that you and Robin were told that it wasn’t possible but… with the way you’ve been acting lately… the vomiting and the fatigue… Well I’m starting to think that maybe you might be…”

“Pregnant,” finished Marian softly. She turned away from her guiltily. “Congratulations you’re the only one who’s noticed.”

A bright smile broke out on Regina’s face. “Really? You’re pregnant?”

Tears started to well up in Marian’s eyes as she nodded her head. “Yeah.”

Regina’s smile fell as she saw a tear begin to fall down her friend’s cheek. She quickly moved to pull her into a hug. “Sweetie what’s wrong? Why aren’t you happy about this?”

“Because I’m too afraid to be,” she sobbed into her shoulder. “All the doctors said that my chances of carrying a baby to term were so small I shouldn’t get my hopes up. I just can’t help feeling like it’s not going to last.”

Regina guided her over to the couch. “Marian you can’t let thoughts like that get into your head. Especially not now.”

“But the doctors said-”

“Doctors are not always right,” said Regina firmly. She’d always been taught to take a doctor’s word with a grain of salt. Doctors had told her grandparents that her father wouldn’t make it past his twentieth birthday. He would be having his fiftieth in a few months. Not that she would be there for it. She squashed down the guilt in her chest and grabbed Marian’s hand. “It’s alright to be afraid. Pregnancy can be scary. Especially since this is your first-”

“It’s not my first,” Marian interrupted sadly.

Regina felt her whole body go cold at Marian’s words. “It’s not?”

Marian shook her head. “I was pregnant before. It was about a year before I met you and Henry. Robin and I found out and we were just… ecstatic. We made all these plans and had all these hopes. And then one day I didn’t feel well so we went to the doctor… and they told me I lost it. It only lasted ten days.”

A tears welled up in Regina’s eyes as Marian opened up about her past. She didn’t know what to say. Nothing seemed capable of giving her the comfort she deserved. So she settled for an apology. “I’m so sorry.”

“I had never felt pain like that before. Not in my entire life,” whispered Marian. “Nothing compared to it. Not leaving my parents. Not Tuck dying. I was just hurt all the time. But it wasn’t just about me. Robin and I both felt the loss of our baby. He took it so hard. When we found out that I couldn’t have children he bought me this pair of red baby shoes. He said they were a promise that no matter how it happened we would find a way to start our family when the time was right. After we lost the baby he tried to be strong for me but sometimes I would catch him just staring at them for hours. Just silently thinking about how they came so close to being used. I can’t put him through that again.”

Regina furrowed her brow at her last sentence. “Marian… does Robin know that you’re pregnant?”

“No,” said Marian in a trembling voice. “I just can’t find it in me to tell him. Not after what happened last time.”
“Marian you have to be tell him. This is something he deserves to know,” said Regina gently.

“And possibly put him through the pain of losing another child?” cried Marian hysterically. “I can’t do that to him.”

“You don’t know that’s going to happen,” said Regina shaking her head.

“But until I’m sure it won’t I’m not going to risk it,” said Marian firmly. “I won’t force him to go through that pain with me again.”

“And what about you?” asked Regina. “What about your pain?”

“I suppose I’ll have to find a way to get through it on my own,” she said with a sad shrug. “If I am wrong and this baby actually does end up making it then I’ll be overjoyed to tell him. But until then… I just won’t. And neither will you.”

Regina widened her eyes at Marian. She was her best friend but she didn’t know how she felt about keeping such a huge secret from Robin. She ran her fingers through her hair nervously. “Marian I…”

“Please,” she begged. “I know it’s a big secret but please just let me keep it. For his sake.”

Regina sighed. She knew was it was like to keep a secret for the sake of a loved one. She did it every day for Henry. It pained her to think of Marian carrying such a burden but she couldn’t force her to come clean. Not with something like this. “Okay. I promise I won’t tell.”

“Thank you,” said Marian gratefully squeezing her hand.

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The past few days had been hell for Marian. Keeping her pregnancy a secret from Robin was tearing her apart. She didn’t like keeping him in the dark but it was for his own good. Once she was more certain about the baby’s future then she would share her news. Until then it would be her burden and her burden alone.

She sighed as she walked into the bar for her morning shift. Regina had the day off so she wouldn’t be working today. It made her feel a little nervous. Her best friend had become a rock for her ever since she’d revealed her pregnancy. Having someone to talk and share her fears with made it all a little less scary. She felt calmer when Regina was around and that was good for her baby. But today it would be just be her and the boys.

She could already see Hook leaned over the bar counter reading the local newspaper. Robin came over and snatched it out of his hands.

“No distractions while on the job mate,” he said with a smirk.

Hook frowned at him in annoyance. “How am I supposed to spark interesting conversation with our customers if I can’t even keep up on current events?”

“You’re reading the travel section,” Robin replied flatly. “What are you trolling for new vacation spots?”

“Not exactly,” said Hook sheepishly. “They actually printed one of my blog posts about my trip to Laos last summer.”
“Really?” said Marian with a surprised smile. She snatched the newspaper from Robin’s hands and grinned when she saw Hook’s byline. “Killian that’s amazing!”

Everyone knew that Hook loved traveling. He’d been doing it ever since he was a kid. Nearly every cent he had was put toward trips to exotic places. Hell for three months out of the year he wasn’t even around. Ever since Tuck had left him his old boat, the Jolly Roger, he took off sailing whenever he could. It was nice to see him getting recognition for his passion.

“This deserves a spot on the wall,” declared Marian.

“I agree,” said Robin. He moved to mockingly pinch Hook’s cheek. “That way everyone can know how proud we are of you.”

“Stop it,” growled Hook, batting his hand away. He made a face at Robin before leaning in to give Marian a kiss on the cheek. “Thank you darling. Nothing would make me happier.”

“That says so much about your life,” quipped Robin.

Marian rolled her eyes as Killian threw a dishtowel at Robin’s head. Boys, she thought to herself. She made her way up to her studio-turned-office. It had gone through a few major changes since Regina had moved out. The dusty red pullout couch had been replaced with a cream modern midcentury sofa. The bathtub and shower had been ripped out as well. Only an unattractive patch of ripped up linoleum remained where it once stood. Marian planned to replace it with a ceramic tile once some space opened up in the budget. Until then she covered it with an old blue rug.

She cut out Killian’s article and placed it in an old frame as she sat at her old rickety desk. She would hang it up behind the bar later. Right now she wanted to lose herself in the business section of the newspaper. Perhaps all the facts and figures would help her distract her from her thoughts. As she looked over all the articles about the stock market and emerging articles a profile caught her eye. One on an investor named Leopold Blanchard. Apparently he had been pulling all his support from a certain hotel chain since ending his engagement with the CEO’s daughter. A much younger woman photographed with her mother…

Marian went still as her eyes fell to the picture below.

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Regina shook her head as she attempted to clear her thoughts. She tried to focus on dabbing another cloth flower with fabric glue. She’d been working on her dress all morning. It was the only thing keeping her from growing crazy with guilt.

She was actually quite glad to have day off from the bar. It was harder than she’d expected to keep Marian’s secret when Robin was nearby. The pressure she had in her chest, that pit of guilt that grew larger every time she looked at him or Marian, it was ripping her apart. She’d been lying to them both from the day she met them. For her sake and for Henry’s but this was different. Now she was helping one of them lie to the other and that just wasn’t sitting right with her.

Her concentration was broken when she heard a harsh knocking on her door. She opened it to find Marian standing on the other side looking positively distraught. Concern washed over her.

“Marian are you okay? Is it the baby?”

Marian just walked into her apartment and wordlessly held up a newspaper article.

“Is this you?” she asked in a broken voice.
With those three words the earth stopped moving. At least it did for them.

Regina felt everything go still as her eyes fell to the photograph in Marian’s hands. It was one of her and her mother at the groundbreaking of a new hotel. For a moment all she could feel was the beat of her own heart and the trembling of her hands. She had to remind herself to keep breathing. It felt like the ground had been ripped from under her. Like a black hole had formed beneath her feet and threatened to swallow her whole. She half-wished that it would. As Marian stared at her with tearful expectant eyes she searched for the right words to say. “I… Where did you get that?”

Marian angrily narrowed her eyes at her. “Does it matter? Is this you or not?!”

Regina swallowed hard before answering her. “Yes it is.”

Marian let out a sad gasp as Regina’s confirmation echoed in her mind. She could only stare at the person in front of her. Twelve hours ago she would’ve been looking at her best friend. Someone she’d laughed with, cried with, worked with. Every memory she had with her flashed before her eyes. And one by one they shattered. And so did Regina.

She could no longer see her best friend. All she saw was a stranger.

With one hand on her stomach, she turned away from her and painfully tried to blink back to the tears in her eyes. She jumped when she felt Regina place a hand on her back. “Don’t touch me!”

Tears welled up in Regina’s eyes at Marian’s rejection. She raised her hands in a pleading gesture. “Marian please… just let me explain.”

“Explain what exactly?” choked out Marian. “How you’ve lied to me since the moment I met you? How for two years you let me bare my soul to you while not even telling me your real name? God, everything about you is a lie.”

“That’s not true!” cried Regina.

“Really?” yelled Marian frantically. “Because you have always told me that you were an orphan. That you were raised up by your poor aunt who died a few years ago. But according to this”— she held up the article— “your parents are alive and well. Living an extravagant life that they’re more than happy to share with their daughter.”

Regina flinched as she slammed the article down on the kitchen counter. “That article is a lie. My mother is not who she makes herself out to be.”

Marian just shook her head pitifully. “I can’t believe that I fell for your lies. I thought I was helping a single mother get back on her feet when the truth was you could’ve saved yourself and Henry at any time. Tell me what was the point of it all? The homelessness and the struggling and the lies. What was so bad about living in your ten bedroom house with your millions of dollars? Was it just too simple and easy?”

Regina felt a fire light under her at Marian words. “I can’t believe that I fell for your lies. I thought I was helping a single mother get back on her feet when the truth was you could’ve saved yourself and Henry at any time. Tell me what was the point of it all? The homelessness and the struggling and the lies. What was so bad about living in your ten bedroom house with your millions of dollars? Was it just too simple and easy?”

Regina felt a fire light under her at Marian words. “So what you think because you read one short article that you know everything about that life? You have no idea the pain I suffered in that house! You have no idea the life Regina Mills had!”

“The life that YOU had!” screamed Marian. “This was YOUR real life! And you hid it from me! How could you do that?”

“You’ve got some nerve judging me considering the fact that you’re hiding a whole pregnancy from your husband,” snarled Regina. As soon as the words flew out of her mouth she wanted
nothing more than to shove them back in.

Marian reared back as if Regina had slapped her and pointed an accusing finger in her face. “Don’t you dare! Don’t you dare compare the lies you’ve told me to the secret I’m keeping from Robin! I am doing this to protect him!”

“And I’m doing this to protect Henry!” yelled Regina. “Keeping this secret was the only way to make sure I could raise him safely! How is it any different from what you’re doing to Robin?”

“Because I actually plan on telling him one day!” cried Marian. “My secret isn’t meant to last forever! Now you tell me: if I hadn’t found this article would you have ever come clean about who you were?”

Regina hesitated before answering her. She wanted so badly to say yes. To say that yes she would’ve found a way to be honest. That she would’ve one day been secure enough to reveal everything to her. But as she stared at Marian’s eyes she knew that wasn’t true. And she knew she could lie about it anymore.

“No,” she choked out tearfully. “I never would’ve told you.”

Her words were like a pin in Marian’s heart. She felt a tear roll down her cheek. “I thought you were my friend,” she whispered.

“I am your friend,” said Regina desperately. “It’s just… complicated.”

“No it’s not,” said Marian shaking her head. “The simple truth is I told you everything while you fed me lies over and over again. That’s not what friends do.”

Regina couldn’t even find it in her to refute Marian’s claim. Nothing she said was untrue and there was nothing she could say that would change that fact. So she watched with a heavy heart and tear-filled eyes as her best friend walked out of her apartment and slammed the door behind her. She leaned against the kitchen counter as the sobs began to take over her body.

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Marian took a deep breath as she leaned back in her car seat. She’d been showing up to work thirty minutes early for the past few days in order to take twenty minutes to prepare herself just to walk in.

Since the confrontation with Regina things had grown increasingly numb for Marian. Keeping her pregnancy and Regina’s double life from Robin, along with everyone else at the bar, began to weigh on her heavily. She’d never felt more isolated in her life and she had no one to talk to about it. The person she’d usually go talk with had just become a stranger to her. She still couldn’t believe that Regina had been lying to her for the past two years. She knew she should be angrier about it but after all the fury she’d released in Regina’s apartment she couldn’t feel that way anymore. What she felt was betrayal, sadness and above all else loss. She missed her best friend. She wanted her back but she couldn’t silence the small voice in her head that told her that she had never existed. Regina Gardiner had been a lie and she wasn’t sure that she was ready to know Regina Mills. Or if she even wanted to.

She jumped in her seat when she heard the car door open. Tink smiled at her as she slid into the passenger.

“Good morning,” she said brightly.
Marian forced a smile to her lips. “Good morning to you Tink. What are you doing here?”

“Well I’m supposed to be ripping the old linoleum from your upstairs office but I thought I’d much rather sit here in melancholy contemplation with you.”

Marian let out a frustrated chuckle. “Am I that obvious?”

“A little bit,” admitted Tink. “I’m not gonna lie I fully expected you to be listening to teenage angst music when I saw you in here.”

_I had actually considered throwing on some Alanis Morissette_, Marian thought to herself.

Tink tilted her head at her curiously. “Is this about the fight you’re having with Regina?”

Marian raised an eyebrow at her. “You know about that?”

“It wasn’t that hard to figure out,” replied Tink, shrugging her shoulders. “I mean she switched to the night shift which makes no sense considering her daycare doesn’t do night service. And she’s started asking me to watch Henry when everyone knows that she trusts him with you more than anyone. It’s pretty clear that she’s avoiding you.”

“Yeah well I haven’t exactly been in the mood to reach out to her,” said Marian, dryly.

“What happened between you two?”

Marian hesitated before answering her. Despite her reaction to Regina’s secret she still found herself unwilling to reveal it to anyone. She didn’t know why that was.

“The most I can tell you is that she kept something from me and it’s changed the way I see her,” answered Marian cryptically.

Tink pursed her lips and nodded her head. “Well secret keeping can destroy relationships.”

“Yes they can,” said Marian flatly.

They sat in silence for a moment before Tink spoke again. “Did I ever tell you that I had a pet bunny when I was younger?”

Marian just sent her a quizzical look as she continued her story.

“His name was Mr. Magic because he was all white with red eyes like the rabbits magicians would pull out of their hats. I had him for ten years, up until my junior year of high school, and I loved him dearly. When he died I was devastated. I was just starting to get over his death when my oldest brother let it slip that for the past seven years what I thought was Mr. Magic was actually Mr. Magic the second.”

Marian widened her eyes at that. “What?!?”

“When I was around ten years old I became obsessed with the idea of independence. I used to let him roam free all over the back yard. One day he escaped while I was at school. My brothers came home found him missing and convinced my parents to keep me busy after soccer practice while they went out and bought a replacement rabbit.”

“Oh my god,” laughed Marian. “And you had no idea that they switched rabbits?”

“None whatsoever,” giggled Tink. “And when I found out I was furious. I wouldn’t speak with my
brothers for days. They’d let me cuddle up with an imposter rabbit for years. I couldn’t believe they’d kept that secret from me. One day my mom pulled me aside and explained that people only keep secrets for five reasons: to avoid disapproval, because they fear the consequences of the truth, because they can’t correct the problem, to cover up poor choices and lastly, to protect others.”

Marian pressed her lips together as Tink listed of the reasons for secrets.

“It took me awhile but I finally realized that my brothers didn’t keep the secret for any other reason than to protect my feelings,” continued Tink. “They weren’t trying to hurt me in any way.”

“That might be true Tink but Regina’s secret is far more complicated than a swapped rabbit,” said Marian gently.

“I can understand that,” said Tink. “But you and Regina, well you’re best friends and I can tell that you miss her. So before you throw away everything you have with her over this secret, you need to ask yourself why she was keeping it in the first place. And do you really think she was doing it just to hurt you?”

Marian brought a hand to her forehead as she let Tink’s words wash over her. Did she really want to lose her best friend over her past? A past that, honestly, she didn’t think she fully understood?

Tink gave her a gentle pat on the shoulder. “Well this was fun but I should probably go destroy that linoleum. I’ll see you upstairs.”

Marian watched her as she made her way up the fire escape to the office. Who would’ve thought Isabella “Tink” Harris would’ve been her advice angel that day?

She sighed as she climbed out of her car and headed into work. She didn’t know why she even bothered going in anymore. It wasn’t like she could get any work done while all these secrets were flitting around in her head.

Robin gave her a nod of acknowledgement as she walked in the front door. She forced herself to smile at him.

“Hello, darling,” he said giving her a kiss on the cheek.

“Hey,” she sighed. “How are things going?”

“Pretty busy,” he said nonchalantly. “I mean between helping the three customers who came in and wondering what’s going on with you I haven’t had a moment to rest.”

She groaned at his sarcasm. “Robin…”

“Marian,” he drawled in response. “We’ve been married for eight years, together for twelve. You think I haven’t learned to recognize when something’s bothering you?”

There were times when Marian loved just how well Robin knew her and there were times when she hated it. This was the latter.

He raised his eyebrows at her. “Anything you’d like to share with me?”

She stared into his eyes and felt her resolve crumble. “Actually there is.”

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Regina bit her lip in concentration as she looked through the wanted ads during her bus ride to the
bar. She needed to find a new job as soon as possible.

She hadn’t slept in days. She’d tossed and turned every night going over her fight with Marian. She’d been so careful with everything. She couldn’t believe that it had taken just one newspaper article to blow her cover. After Marian had left day she’d spent a whole two hours curled up on her couch fretting over what would happen to her and Henry now that her secret was out. But was it out really?

Marian had been more than upset with her but she didn’t think that she would tell her secret to everyone. Maybe Robin but not anyone else. She wonders what they’ll do with her. They’d hadn’t fired her yet but she was sure it was coming. No one wants a fraud as their employee. She could understand that but she was afraid of what it would mean for her and Henry. She couldn’t survive on dressmaking alone. She’d started thinking back to plastic play castle Marian had found her in. She didn’t want to go back to that. She didn’t want Henry to have to.

When her stop came up she climbed out of the bus and squinted as her eyes readjusted to the sunlight. It was after four and the sun was being particularly harsh that day. She’d normally refrain from riding out during this time of day but it was payday, possibly her last payday, and she wanted to pick up her check while Marian wasn’t there. She’d been avoiding her ever since that day in the apartment and Marian hadn’t exactly fought to regain her attention.

She missed her.

Ever since Daniel had died Regina had felt very alone in the world. She’d had her father for a short time and she had Henry but there was never anyone to talk to. Someone she could just be around without feeling pitied or used by. No friends. Until she met Marian. She was her first, best and, for a short while, only friend. She’d welcomed her into her home, got her a job and did it all with a kindness and supportiveness that honestly Regina had never felt before. She couldn’t believe she was losing that.

As much as that pained her as she walked into the Drunken Monk she realized she was losing so much more. She ran her hands over the bar counter as she made her way towards the stairs. A lump formed in her throat as she realized just how much she would miss this place. The Drunken Monk was more than just a bar or a job to her now. It was the place where she’d found a family. Robin had been right when he told her that she’d love her coworkers. Mulan, Robin, Tink, even Killian had come to mean so much to her. The way they’d rallied around her when she first started working here. They’d helped her learn how to be a waitress. Taught her to rely on her skills. They’d even thrown Henry a party for his first birthday when they learned that she couldn’t. She loved them and it pained her to think that she might lose them.

“Rough day?”

She looked up at the sound of Killian’s voice.

“You know as a bartender I’m perfectly qualified to hear you bitch about it?” he said cheekily.

She forced a chuckle from her throat. “No I’m fine. Just the bus ride over here killed me.”

He leaned against the bar counter and observed her with an unwavering gaze. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” she said as firmly as she could. He only raised an eyebrow at her in response. It was clear he didn’t believe her. She cleared her throat and straightened her back, trying not to crumble under the weight of his stare. “I just came in to pick up my check for the week. Are they in?”
“Yeah,” he nodded. “Robin said we could just pick them up off the desk upstairs.”

“Thanks,” she mumbled making her way to the staircase.

As soon as she was gone Mulan replaced her at the bar. She leaned over the counter, curiosity blazing in her eyes. “Did you get any details about what’s going on with her and Marian?”

He shook his head at her. “None at all. She just came to pick up her check so I told her they were upstairs.”

“Did you tell her Marian was up there as well?”

He shrugged his shoulders in mock innocence. “Must’ve slipped my mind.”

Mulan smirked up at him. “Killian Jones, you manipulative minx.”

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As Regina opened as the office door she hoped that she would be able to grab her check and leave before either Marian or Robin saw her. Her hopes were dashed when she saw Marian laid out on the office sofa. The brunette straightened up as soon as she saw Regina enter the room. “Hi.”

“Hi.”

For a moment they both tried to look anywhere but at each other. It was the first time they’d been alone together since Regina’s apartment. Tension quickly filled the space between them. The only sound to be heard was the obnoxious ticking of the wall clock above the sofa. Marian was the first to break the silence. “What are you doing here?”

“I just came to pick up my check for the week,” Regina replied hesitantly.

“Oh,” said Marian softly. She awkwardly gestured toward the corner. “It’s on the desk.”

“Thanks.”

She could feel Marian’s eyes on her back as she flipped through the envelopes. She quickly found the one with her name on it and moved toward the door.

“I told Robin I’m pregnant.”

Marian’s sudden statement made Regina spin on her heel. “Really?”

“Yeah,” breathed Marian with a nod. “He’s now as cautiously optimistic as I am.”

Despite everything Regina felt a smile tug on her lips. “What made you feel ready?”

“Honestly I wasn’t,” admitted Marian folding her arms. “But all the secrets were getting cramped in my mind so I let go of mine to free up space for yours.”

Regina furrowed her eyebrow at her. “You’re not going to tell Robin about everything?”

“No,” sighed Marian. “I wanted to. Badly actually. But that’s not my right or my place to do such a thing.”

“So I can keep working here?” she asked in small voice.
“Of course,” said Marian in shocked voice. “I’m not going to fire you. I wouldn’t do that to you and Henry. I know how much you need to support him.”

“Thank you.” Regina felt relief flow through her at Marian’s words.

Marian cleared her throat awkwardly. “I looked you up, you know? On the internet trying to find out what I could. And there’s no mention of Henry anywhere. Why?”

Regina hesitated before answering her. “Because my mother hid him from everyone. Only she and my father knew he existed.”

Marian nodded slowly as she took in what Regina said. “That day at the apartment, you said you were doing this to protect Henry. Was it to protect him from her?”

“Yes,” said Regina giving her a small nod.

Tears welled up in Marian’s eyes as she shook her head at Regina. “Why didn’t you just tell me? Were you afraid that I was going to sell you out or something?”

“No,” said Regina quickly. “It wasn’t about you. It was about me. It’s just hard to explain.”

“Try,” said Marian softly.

Regina let out a breath before walking over to lock the office door. She didn’t want anyone walking in on this. She took a seat on the sofa next to Marian and tried to find the right words for what she needed to say.

“The life I lived as Regina Mills was miserable,” she started softly. “I was forced to lie about my son. I wasn’t allowed to grieve over the death of his father and I had no freedom because of my mother. I was just… alone. When I got the chance to escape, to run away and become Regina Gardiner I knew there was no way I could ever let myself go back to that life. For my sake and for Henry’s. It was hard to adjust but when I met you and I started working here things got easier. And it wasn’t just you it was everyone. Hook and Mulan and Robin. Because of you guys I felt like I had an anchor. The bonds I built with you… they made it easier to feel like this life was the real one and my old life was the lie. Because of you Regina Gardiner was ten times happier in two years than Regina Mills was in twenty. So the thought of you, any of you, finding out about that life, becoming a part of it… it would be a reminder that this life that I’ve built is fragile and that it can be shattered at any moment. And that terrifies me more than anything in the world.”

Marian took a deep breath as she let the sincerity of Regina’s confession wash over her. “So our friendship was real?”

“Yes,” replied Regina earnestly. “You were the first friend I ever made. And I’m really afraid that I’ve lost you over this.”

Marian pressed her lips together.

“You lied Regina. You lied about a lot,” she whispered. “And I feel like I should be angrier at you for that… but I’m not. Because you’re my best friend and I don’t care what your last name is or where you came from I’m just damn glad that you’re here now.”

Tears fell from Regina’s eyes as she leaned in to give her a hug. She felt Marian cry softly into her shoulder. “I’m still afraid for my baby,” she whispered. “I’ve been so afraid because I wasn’t able to talk to you.”
“Well you don’t have to be afraid now,” said Regina, hugging her tighter. “Because I’m here now and I promise I’m not going anywhere.”
Chapter 10

6 Months Later

Classical music flowed radio in the Locksely apartment as Marian took another bite of the banana bread in her hand. She sighed in content as she listened to the violins play complicated notes of Mozart. She’d always loved classical music. It helped her feel calm. Her peace was only marred by the storm brewing within her husband. Robin grumbled as he ripped a shirt from its hanger as he stood next to the closet. The hanger rocked back and forth as he haphazardly folded the button-down shirt in his hands. He kicked a small box of diapers out of his way as he crouched next to the bed to grab his duffle bag from its usual place. He sighed as he threw it on top of the dresser. “I still don’t want to go.”

Marian sighed from her seat on the bed where she sat cross legged folding up the tiny clothes she’d received at her baby shower. She rubbed her hands over her eight-month-pregnant belly as she looked over at her husband with sympathetic eyes. “Robin we’ve already decided that you have to go. We agreed on this.”

Robin groaned at her as he stuffed the shirt and a pair of pants into his duffle bag. He’d been pitching a fit all morning about his imminent business trip. “I don’t like the idea of leaving you alone for so long.”

“I won’t be alone the entire time,” Marian reminded him. “Mrs. Connelly agreed to check on me every hour.”

Robin scoffed at the mention of their eighty-year-old neighbor and Marian glared at him. “Don’t scoff at Mrs. Connelly. She’s been really helpful these past few months.”

He shook his head and narrowed his eyes at her skeptically. “You just like her because she keeps baking you banana bread.”

Marian chuckled at him. Banana bread had been her number one pregnancy craving ever since Mrs. Connelly had surprised her with it a few months ago. Once she expressed her love of the treat their kindly doting neighbor had been sure to bake her a loaf every week. It had made her one of Marian’s favorite people.

“Okay bread aside she was a nurse for nearly forty years,” she argued.

“She’s been retired for fifteen!” Robin pointed out dramatically. “Everything she knows has probably been outdated for years.”

“Pregnancy hasn’t changed,” said Marian gently. “If I let her know that I’m uncomfortable she’ll be able to tell if it’s serious or not.”

“What if you go into labor?” Robin questioned. “How are you going to get to the hospital? You know they took away her driver’s license last year, right?”

“I’m not going to go into labor,” said Marian calmly. “You heard what Dr. Montgomery said. I’m not due for another four weeks and we don’t really have to be on the lookout for labor until I’m in the two week range.”

Robin sighed at her serene logic. “I just don’t like the idea of leaving you and the baby behind.”
“Robin,” she sighed taking his hand and pulling him onto the bed next to her. “We’ll be fine. Remember what the doctor said. We’re past the 28 week mark. And that means…”

“No matter what he’s coming,” Robin finished for her. He placed a gentle hand on her stomach. The phrase had been their mantra for the past month, ever since the doctor had told them that she was far enough along in her pregnancy that the chances of a spontaneous miscarriage were practically non-existent. The knowledge that their baby boy was surely going to be born was a relief to them both. It’d allowed Marian to reach a place of peace and security with her pregnancy but the same couldn’t be said for Robin. He was still extremely cautious when it came to the health and welfare of his wife and unborn child.

“Are you sure we can’t put this off any longer?” he asked desperately.

She shook her head at him. “Mickey’s retiring next month. If we don’t find a new booze dealer before then we’re going to be a bar with no liquor. Meeting with the new guy now makes sure that we’ll have the business secured so the transition will be smooth."

She placed her hand on top of his. “It’s just a four hour drive there. A quick motel nap. Meeting. And then you’re on your way back to me. I’ll probably be sleep the entire time.”

Robin sighed as he gazed at his wife. Despite her complaints he thought that pregnancy suited her quite well. Her curly hair was pulled into two braids and her cheeks were a healthy red. She was truly glowing. “Alright but as soon as the meeting is over I’m ditching Hook and taking the train back down.”

She rolled her eyes at him. “If the one hour difference will make you feel better then I support your decision.”

He pressed a kiss to her forehead. “I promise to be back as soon as I can.”

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Eighties rock music blared through the Drunken Monk as Regina loaded up her tray with another round of beers. The sun had begun to set and the bar was slowly but surely beginning to fill up with the night crowd. A couple of college kids had started a dart throwing competition and were starting to get more rambunctious with every throw. She could see a couple of post-work regulars having their daily drink at the bar counter. Probably chatting to Killian about their terrible bosses. Just the usual customers.

Regina quickly dropped off the beers at her table with a smile and headed toward the kitchen window. She let out a breath as she as she leaned against the wall and waited for her order to be filled. It was five hours into her shift and she was beginning to feel the familiar wear in her joints. Over two years of waitressing and it had only gotten marginally easier. Mulan noticed her discomfort as she walked over to place her orders and scoffed, “I don’t want to hear any complaints from you. I told you you didn’t have to come in today.”

Regina raised an eyebrow at her. “Didn’t I?”

She had already worked a night shift the previous day and had really been looking forward to a day off with her and Henry. However when she’d stopped by the bar for her check that morning it turned out that one of their waitresses, Chloe, had gotten a touch of food poisoning and called in sick at the last minute. It was more than inconvenient considering she was one of the few waitresses who could handle their midday crowd. Though she desperately wanted to spend the day with her son she didn’t like seeing her coworkers flounder. So she’d volunteered to stick around for
the lunch rush. She’d only expected to stay three hours at most but her shift had dragged on. Thankfully Robin had agreed to entertain Henry upstairs while she worked.

Mulan rolled her eyes. “I could’ve handled things without you.”

“Keep telling yourself that,” Regina responded cheekily, joining her at the bar counter. “Besides I could use the extra tips if I’m going to pay my share for the stroller.”

“Right,” said Mulan, nodding her head. “Remind me to give you my fifty before you go.”

“Will do.”

When Robin and Marian had announced their pregnancy to everyone at the bar baby fever had quickly swept through them all. Within a day a betting pool had been started to guess the gender of the baby (with Regina, Mulan and Robin winning for their choice of boy). Robin and Killian had put a two gallon baby name jar at the end of the table so the customers could give their suggestions a name. Every night the waitresses and bartenders would read the options and keep a tally of the more popular names on a chalkboard next to the stage. The top five currently consisted of Christopher, Marcus, James, Tyler and Andrew. All good choices but none Robin and Marian were particularly thrilled about. Everyone was excited for their arrival of their baby, especially Regina. She knew no one deserved this joy more than them. A few weeks ago she’d gotten together with all the bar employees and set up a fund for a new stroller for the baby. Everyone was chipping in fifty bucks.

“Have you ordered the stroller yet?” asked Mulan.

“I’ve put it on reserve at the store,” sighed Regina, “but I can’t buy it until I have the cash on hand.”

“How many people are you waiting on?”

“Just you and Killian.”

“Are you kidding me?” said Mulan incredulously widening her eyes. She whistled down the bar to get Hook’s attention and waved him over toward them. “What’s this I hear about you crapping out on the stroller fund?”

He glared at her. “I’m not crapping out on the stroller fund. I’ve got the money in my wallet was going to give it to her before I left on the trip with Robin tonight.”

“Thank you Killian,” said Regina with a smile. “Now just make sure you don’t say a word about this on the drive up there.”

“Lass, you’ll find I am more than capable of keeping a secret,” he replied with a wink.

“And cue the collective sigh of relief from the girls who have woken up in your bed,” quipped Mulan.

“Oh you’re just mad ‘cause they’re not in yours,” he shot back with a grin.

“Whoa!” cried Regina. “Not the time or the place guys.”

After two years of working with them she’d grown more than accustomed to Mulan and Hook’s banter. They’d been working together for more than three years so they’d long since given up on politeness. Their crass barbs and insults was just the way they communicated with each other.
Sometimes Regina wished she could join in on their little language but more than twenty years under her mother’s watchful eye had left her more proper than she liked.

“Can I just say that I think this whole stroller thing is ridiculous?” complained Hook. “I mean I’m not exactly a parent but 400 dollars for a stroller seems pretty steep.”

“It’s more than just a stroller,” insisted Regina. “It’s a Graco travel convertible that comes with a compatible car seat. It’s very maneuverable so Robin can take it jogging and it’s spacious enough that they won’t have to get a new one when the baby grows up.”

“I checked it out online, it’s actually pretty awesome,” said Mulan with a grin. “And it’s ten times better than that death trap they were forced to buy from the secondhand store.”

Regina grimaced at the thought of the rickety stroller Marian shown her a few weeks ago. It was at least five years old and nearly coming apart. Robin and Tink were doing their best to fix it up but neither were optimistic. It pained her to think of her best friend placing her child in such an unreliable stroller.

“We just want to give their baby one luxury item,” she said. “You know they deserve it.”

Hook let out a sigh at that. It was no secret that Robin and Marian had spared no expense in making sure that her pregnancy went as smoothly as possible. The specialist they’d been seeing was costing them a fortune and she wasn’t even covered by insurance. It was starting to eat into their savings.

“Well you’re the mother of the group so I’ll assume you know best,” said Hook. He folded his arms across his chest smugly. “Besides I have no problem giving up fifty bucks for my godson.”

Both Regina and Mulan rolled their eyes at him. Ever since Robin and Marian announced their pregnancy Hook hadn’t been shy about the fact that he was gunning for the title of godfather.

“Are you really still obsessing over that?” asked Mulan, with a smirk. “There’s no way they’re going to pick you.”

“Why wouldn’t they?” he asked in an offended tone. “I’m worldly, handsome, loving…”

“You live on a boat,” Regina pointed out flatly.

“I live on a ship!” he corrected, angrily pointing a finger at her. “The Jolly Roger is a ship.”

“You calling it that won’t make it true,” giggled Mulan.

Hook only glared at her in response. When Tuck, the previous owner of the bar had died, he’d left Hook his old cruising sailboat, The Jolly Roger. Despite its small size he was particularly defensive about it. The boat was his home, his passion and his main method of travel. He probably loved it more than his own life.

“Why are you all loitering about?”

They turned to see Robin staring at them from the bar counter. He made a sweeping gesture toward the bar floor. “It’s starting to look like a packed house. Let’s get to work guys.”

Robin had been in more than a bit of a mood due to his trip later that night. Knowing he’d be leaving Marian behind had made him downright irritable and the staff had taken notice. As Hook and Mulan quickly dispersed Regina approached him. “How’s Henry?”
“He’s fine. He’s working on a coloring book while pick up some fries from the kitchen,” he answered.

“Thanks for watching him,” said Regina gratefully. “I really hadn’t planned on staying so long.”

“It’s no problem Regina. I’m going to need the practice anyway,” he replied with a grin.

She smiled up at him. “How much longer until the baby arrives? Five weeks?”

“Four,” he corrected.

“Are you getting nervous yet?”

“Only as much as expected,” said Robin quickly. “Marian’s been a rock though. She’s actually been calming me down these last few weeks.”

“That’s good,” said Regina earnestly. “I know how tough it was for her in the beginning.”

“Yeah,” said Robin, nodding his head. “Thanks for helping her get through that.”

During the early days of her pregnancy Marian had more than leaned on Regina. Confessing her fears and worries about the baby. Anything that she felt she couldn’t tell Robin she’d told her. And when she’d had a bout of round ligament pain during work one day Regina had been the one to ride with her to the doctor and calm her down until Robin got there. She’d even stayed with Marian for the night to make her feel better. A part of Robin had been jealous of how much his wife depended on her friend but it was blocked out by the part that was just grateful she was there. To be honest he was glad that his wife had Regina’s experience to help guide her through the pregnancy. It’d been really helpful for Marian to have someone help her determine what was normal.

“It meant a lot to her to have you around,” he added, sincerely. “To both of us actually.”

She shook her head at him. “It was nothing. You both have gotten me through so much worse.”

In Regina’s heart there was so much she still owed Marian and Robin for all they’d done for her. In her eyes they were the only reason she’d been able to keep her son. She’d never be able to pay them back for that. As she looked over at her serving section she saw another group of coeds take over a corner booth. She sighed before tightening her apron around her waist. “I should get back out there.”

Before she could reach her section an idea formed in Robin’s head and he lightly reached for her arm. “You know after the baby’s born you and Marian might not be able to spend as much time together.”

Regina chuckled as she turned to face him. “Robin I’m well aware of how much time and energy a newborn requires. Don’t worry. I’ll be sure to release your wife from my clutches once your son arrives.”

He let out a small laugh at that. “Trust me I’m not concerned about that but your shift is almost over right?”

“Yes,” she drawled, suspiciously. “Amanda is coming in early so I can leave with Henry.”

“Okay,” he said. He scratched the back of his head and shrugged his shoulders nervously. “You know, why don’t you and Henry head over to our place for the night?”
Regina raised an eyebrow at him, skeptically. “Your place?”

“Yeah,” he insisted. “Henry’s so disappointed you weren’t able to make it to the park today I figure he’s due a movie marathon on our television.”

Regina couldn’t afford a television at her apartment yet, so Henry’s favorite activity was to watch movies at Robin and Marian’s. It was the reason they were his favorite babysitters.

“Besides I know Marian would love to see you both,” he added. “You could have yourselves a good old-fashioned hen party once Henry goes to sleep. Make some memories before the baby’s born.”

She put a hand on her hip and scoffed at him. She wasn’t nearly as close to Robin as she was to Marian but she had gotten pretty good at reading him over the years. And it was obvious was he wanted something from her. “Okay Robin I know what you’re asking and if you want me to do it you’re going to have to be a big boy and actually say the words.”

Robin let out a sigh as he realized she’d seen through him. He tucked his hands in his pockets and gave her a nervous look. “Would you please babysit my pregnant wife while I go on this overnight trip?”

“Now was that so hard to ask?” she said with a smile. “Of course I’ll stay with her for the night.”

He flashed his dimples at her as a relieved smile grew on his face. “Thank you.”

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Marian shuffled around the kitchen as she waited for the microwave to finish heating up her hot chocolate. She rubbed her hand against the small of her back and sighed at the minimal relief it gave to the persistent ache she’d had for the past few months. Being pregnant was no picnic but still she wouldn’t give up the experience for anything in the world. A small smile was on her face as she laid a hand on her still-growing stomach. She could feel her tiny son move against her palm. The best feeling in the entire world.

She looked over her shoulder as she heard a rapid knock against her door.

“Coming!” she quickly yelled out as she waddled her way across the living room floor. Ugh, cannot move as fast as I used to, she thought to herself. She opened the door to find Henry and Regina standing on the other side. A grin broke out on Henry’s face as he caught sight of her.

“Aunt Mari!” he cried.

A giggle flew from her throat as he happily wrapped his arms around the bottom of her legs. “Henry!” she greeted him with an exaggerated smile as she bent down as much her swollen middle would allow to place a hand on his back and pull him closer. He’d grown up so much since being the little baby she’d brought home the night they’d first met. He was three years old now. Nearly tall enough to reach the kitchen counters and she was understanding his words better every day. Every time he called her Aunt Mari she felt her heart swell with pride. “It’s so good to see you my sweet boy.”

She looked up at Regina, and tilted her head in confusion when she saw Regina wearing her Drunken Monk t-shirt. “Did you just come from work? I thought it was your day off.”

“It was,” said Regina exhaustedly stepping into the apartment. She stretched out her neck as she shut the door behind her. “Chloe got too sick to make it in for her shift so I had to step in.”
“What about your day at the park?”

“Canceled,” said Regina, shrugging her shoulders. She then sent Marian a mischievous smile. “However because I am such a selfless employee ‘Uncle Robin’ promised us repayment in the form of cartoons.”

“I wanna watch Nemo!” said Henry, excitedly bouncing on his heels.

Marian let out a disbelieving chuckle as she folded her arms across her chest. “Oh I see. He asked you to come over here to watch me for the night.”

“You know he did,” replied Regina, not even bothering to cover up Robin’s intentions. “I think it’s kind of sweet.”

“Maybe just a little,” said Marian with a small smile. Though it was a bit overwhelming at times, she had to admit it comforted her to have Robin so concerned with her and the baby’s welfare. It made her feel that much safer with her pregnancy.

“Besides it’s not like I didn’t see it coming a mile away,” she added with a smirk. “Nemo’s already in the DVD player and popcorn is in the pantry.”

“Yayy!” cheered Henry running to jump on the couch. “Sleepover!”

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Regina and Marian took up residence on the couch while Henry quickly laid out a blanket for himself on the living room floor. In less than ten minutes he was in his favorite blue Spongebob pajamas, with his feet in the air and his chin in his hands, fully immersed in Finding Nemo. Every so often he’d dip his hand into the large bowl of popcorn by his side, his eyes never leaving the screen as the clownfish and his blue friend searched for his lost son. As Henry enjoyed his movie Regina and Marian were lost in a task of their own. They sat on opposite sides of the couch with the bar’s baby name jar between them, both checking each slip of paper for inspiration.

“How do you feel about Ethan?” asked Regina looking up from the slip in her hand.

“Ugh,” responded Marian, sticking out her tongue. “It sounds like a name that carries arrogance and judgement with it.” She crumpled the slip and threw it toward the trash can.

Regina burst out in laughter at her friend’s reaction. “Well that’s a lot of meaning to gather from five letters.”

“Well excuse me for being picky,” said Marian playfully. “It’s my son’s name. He’s going to carry it for the rest of his life. I want it to be good.”

“Well what did you have in mind?” asked Regina curiously.

“I don’t know,” said Marian shrugging her shoulders. “I guess I want something classic. A name he can grow old with.”

She grabbed another slip from the jar. “Tristan? I don’t know maybe that could be good.”

Regina quickly shook her head. “Oh no, not Tristan. I knew a Tristan in high school. He couldn’t take two steps without groping the nearest girl. A total sleaze.”

Marian hissed guilty as she folded up the paper. “It actually said Patrick on here. Tristan was one
of my top ten and I just wanted to know what you honestly thought.”

Regina chuckled at her. “Well I certainly didn’t hold back did I?”

“It’s okay,” said Marian shaking her head. “Robin wasn’t a fan of it either. He said kids named Tristan get punched in the face.”

“He’s not wrong,” said Regina grimacing down at another suggestion. “It’s nice to know Robin didn’t waste all his good taste on you.”

Marian hummed happily at her comment as she dug through the jar. She blew out a disappointed breath as she grabbed a slip only to find another “Marcus” written in crude handwriting. “Is it too late for me to steal Henry’s name?”

“I’m afraid so,” replied Regina flatly. She looked over at her son with a small smile. He was still splayed out on his stomach watching his movie. Practically oblivious to the two woman who sat behind him. A spark of wistfulness crept into his mother’s heart as she remembered the day he was born.

“Henry Daniel. I named him after my father and his,” she said softly. Her eyes dropped to her hands. “It’s a shame he’ll never know either.”

Marian reached out to squeeze her friend’s hand in comfort. The moments were few and far between but since she’d learned of Regina’s secret the other woman had started to open up about her former life in small doses. She’d told Marian of her mother, the woman who’d tried so fiercely and unapologetically to mold her life into something she’d never wanted, of Daniel, the young gardener with open heart and blue eyes, the man she’d loved more than she’d ever loved anything before, taken from her by an unknown drunk driver but the person she’d spoke of the most was her father Henry, the frail, aging man who had loved her as best as he could and helped saved her when no one else would. Sometimes she spoke of him with a smile on her face, basking in the few good memories he’d given her before she’d left, and other times she’d speak of him with tears in her eyes, going over all the memories they’d never have together. Christmases and birthdays and graduations he’d never get the chance to spend with his namesake. Regina didn’t open up much about her past life but when she did one thing remained crystal clear: her father was the only part of it she missed.

“Are you sure there’s no way you can see him again?” asked Marian, with sympathy tears welling up in her eyes.

Regina shook her head sadly. “No. I can’t risk Henry’s safety like that. If my mother were to find us again…”

She trailed off, letting all the possibilities hang in the air unspoken. Even after years away the thought of her mother finding her and her son still gave her nightmares. She’d do anything if it meant preventing them from becoming realities.

“What if I saw him instead of you? She doesn’t know me,” suggested Marian in a hushed voice. “I could let him know that you’re okay.”

“You can’t do that Marian and I couldn’t possibly let you take such a risk. If my mother knew you were harboring me she would destroy you,” insisted Regina. She placed her hand on top of Marian’s and nodded sadly. “My father and I both knew the price of me escaping that place. We can’t risk seeing one another again. Not if Henry is going to stay safe.”
She glanced over at her son who remained distracted by the bright colors on the tv screen. “It’s a harsh price but one I’d pay again without hesitation.”

She turned back to Marian and nodded at her baby bump. “You’ll understand once you hold your son in your arms.”

A smile tugged on Marian’s lips as she ran her hands over stomach. “I think I understand now. In the beginning, when I was so afraid of losing him, I would’ve given up anything to make sure he was born safely. I still would. I’ve been keeping calm for these past few weeks but there’s still a small part of me that worries something will go wrong.”

“Nothing’s going to go wrong,” Regina promised. “You remember what the doctor told you. You’re past the twenty-eight week. And that means that no matter what…”

“He’s coming,” Marian finished with a cautious smile. “I know.”

The two women shared hopeful smiles before returning to the jar of baby names between them. They tried to stay playful as they read off name after name but both were distracted with by thoughts of the other. Regina, desperately praying that her friend made it through the rest of her pregnancy with no complications. And Marian, refusing to give up hope that one day Regina will find a way to be both safe and reunited with her father.

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The trio’s sleepover didn’t carry over into the night like Henry had hoped. Given that one of the participants was a three year-old and another was eight months pregnant things petered out very quickly. Henry was the first to go down, making it to the end of Finding Nemo but only halfway through The Lion King. He crawled into one of Robin’s old sleeping bags and was sleeping soundly on the floor in a heartbeat. After Henry dropped, Marian was next choosing to head to sleep after a call with Robin to confirm that he had made it to the motel. After a short while Regina was the only one awake in the apartment. She settled on the couch, took out her sketch pad and tried to work on some new dress designs but could hardly focus. It wasn’t long before she found herself nodding off and falling asleep, pencil still held upright in her hand.

Visions of Henry and Daniel and her father played behind her lids as she fell deeper and deeper into sleep. She dreamed they were together and they were safe, Daniel’s ring firmly on her finger instead of around her neck. Marian pushing Henry on a swing set while Robin chatted with Daniel and her father. It was blissful. And it wasn’t meant to last. She was torn from her fantasy when she woke to find Marian frantically clutching her shoulder to shake her awake.

She stood in her pajamas looking down at her with a worried look in her wide eyes. “Regina I think I’m in labor.”
ROBIN’S MOTEL, 12:30AM

Robin sat on the creaky mattress in his motel room staring at his cell phone screen. A picture of Marian holding her baby bump stared back at him. No new messages. He leaned back on the bed and sighed, his eyes never leaving the screen. He had already showered and dressed for bed but he found it hard to sleep without his wife safe beside him. It was well past midnight and he had no doubts that she was probably fast asleep by now but that did nothing to quell the fears that had taken over his every thought. He should be back with his wife and unborn son, not on this ridiculous booze quest.

Killian stepped out of the bathroom in his pajamas, his hair still wet from his brief shower, and frowned when he saw Robin’s eyes firmly fixed upon his phone. “You know if you stare long enough at a screen that small you will actually go blind.”

“Small price to pay to make sure I don’t miss a call from my pregnant wife,” Robin responded without hesitation.

Before he could stop him Killian stomped over and ripped the cell phone from his hands. “Hey!” he shouted reaching for the phone. “Give it back!”

“No,” said Killian calmly keeping the phone out of his reach. “You know why your phone hasn’t rung in ten seconds since you last checked? Because your wife hasn’t called you. And you want to know why your wife hasn’t called you? It’s because there is nothing wrong with her. She is fine and you need to stop worrying.”

Robin scowled at him. “That easy for you to say. You’re not married to her and she’s not carrying your child.”

“I assure you that can quickly change,” said Hook, not missing a beat. He took a step back as Robin advanced on him with an angrily clenched jaw. “However, it won’t because she clearly loves you and I respect your marriage.”

He sighed. “You have to relax, mate. You’re stressing yourself out beyond repair.”

Robin only rolled his eyes in response. It was really all he could do. He knew Killian had a point. These past few weeks he felt like he’d been wound tighter than a rubber band. With Marian’s pregnancy and running the bar in her absence he’d really been stretching himself thin.

“Look,” said Killian walking over to the nightstand. “I’m going to place your phone right here next to the outlet so it can charge. It’ll be on all night with the ringer on high so you can hear it but you have to go to go to sleep. We’re meeting with that booze dealer tomorrow morning and you need to be sharp. Or at least better than you’ve been the past few weeks.”

Robin eyed him strangely from his spot beside his bed. “Since when do you care so much about my stress levels?”

“Since they’ve started taking a toll on your appearance,” admitted Killian, as he crouched down to plug in the phone’s charger. In his preparation and stress over the baby, Robin had grown rather careless with his appearance these past few months. The usual scruff that grew on his chin was closing in on beard territory. His forehead was beginning to line with wrinkles due to his ever
furrowed brow. His bright blue eyes were starting to become overshadowed by the dark circles caused by his lack of sleep.

“Seriously, you look like death, mate,” said Killian.

Robin sucked his teeth at him. “I really don’t appreciate your honesty.”

“I know,” said Killian, a sly smile gracing his face as he climbed onto his motel bed. “Yet I continue to offer it unsolicited.”

Robin raised an eyebrow at him. “Remind me again why I even brought you along?”

“So the new guy knows who to deal with when you’re not around,” replied Killian. “Which will be often seeing as how you plan on spending as much time as possible with your future bundle of joy.”

Robin reluctantly laid out on his own bed. He crossed his hands behind his head and tried to clear his mind of its stressful thoughts. “Honestly Hook, I don’t think I’m going to relax until my son is actually in my arms.”

Killian frowned at his admission. “Well try and rest easy for now because it’s not like he’s going to be born tonight.”

He reached over to switch off the room light.

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MARIAN AND ROBIN’S APARTMENT, 4AM

Regina flipped on the living room light as she led Marian over to a chair by the kitchen table. Marian let out a nervous breath as she lowered herself into her seat.

“Okay calm down sweetie,” whispered Regina gently. “Why do you think you’re in labor? What are you feeling?”

Marian swallowed hard before answering her. “It’s this shooting pain in my back that spreads forward. It started earlier but it wasn’t that bad. I thought it was just Braxton-Hicks but it’s getting worse. And it’s not stopping.”

She was practically in tears with worry as she explained the sensations going through her body. “I’m barely at the end of my eighth month Regina. It’s too early!”

“Okay okay calm down,” urged Regina rubbing her shoulders for comfort. “We don’t know that it’s labor yet. So we’re not going to worry about it until we know that it is. Okay Mrs. Connelly is just across the hall. I’m going to get her and she’s going to check you out. Okay?”

She wrenched her hands from Marian’s and stepped over her son to head out into the hallway. As the apartment door shut behind her she leaned against it and took a deep breath. She really hoped Marian wasn’t in labor. She didn’t think she’d be able to get through it without Robin there to hold her hand. She shook those thoughts from her head as she relentlessly knocked on the door across the hall. “Mrs. Connelly! Mrs. Connelly are you awake?! We need your help!”

It wasn’t long before she heard the clinking and clattering of the older woman’s various locks. The door opened to reveal Mrs. Connelly, wiping her glasses against her nightgown and squinting up at Regina as her eyes adjusted to the light. Her hair was still tucked into her bonnet as she wrapped
her hot pink terry cloth robe tighter around her frail body. “Why Regina you’re making such a fuss for it to be so early. What’s the matter dear?”

“We think Marian might be in labor,” she answered desperately. “Could you please come and take a look at her?”

“Goodness!” exclaimed Mrs.Connelly. “I had no idea she was so far along! Well I’ll be right there! I just need to pick up one thing first.”

Regina let out a frustrated sigh as the tiny woman disappeared into her apartment only to quickly return with a small covered bread pan. “It’s more banana bread,” she said with a bright smile. “I figured I might as well bring it over while I’m there.”

Regina bit her tongue and resisted the urge to smack the banana bread out of her hands. Instead she just placed a guiding hand on the old woman’s shoulders and led her across the hall to where Marian sat. Mrs. Connelly tiptoed passed a sleeping Henry and set the bread on the counter before turning to Marian with a comforting smile. “Hello sweetheart. How are you feeling?”

“No so great,” said Marian, shaking her head frantically. “This pain keeps shooting through my back.”

She suddenly gritted her teeth and gripped the edge of the table. “It’s happening again.”

Mrs. Connelly quickly took both her hands in her own. “Okay Marian just breathe through it and you can squeeze my hands as hard as you like.”

Marian moaned and slammed her eyes shut as the pain rippled from her spine. She was sure she was crushing her neighbor’s hands but she couldn’t find it in her to care at the moment. For her part, Mrs. Connelly remained completely nonplussed. She didn’t seem to be affected by Marian’s death grip at all. Regina watched them both as she paced the living room floor, wringing her hands. She had always seen Mrs. Connelly as her best friend’s kooky neighbor, not really someone to be taken seriously, but as she watched her help Marian through a possible contraction it was like she transformed before Regina’s eyes. She was no longer just a chatty next door neighbor, she was a medical professional with more than forty years of experience under her belt and every word she said was meant to be taken as gospel.

Marian took a deep breath as the pain finally began to subside. “I think it’s over now.”

Mrs. Connelly looked over at the clock on the kitchen stove. “Okay that lasted a little over a minute. How often has the pain been coming and going?”

Marian looked up to the ceiling and shrugged her shoulders in uncertainty. “I’m not sure. When it first started it was about every twenty minutes but it’s been happening more often now.”

“And is the pain getting worse?”

“Yes,” Marian breathed softly.

Mrs. Connelly clasped her hands together in delight and let out a short giggle. “Well Honey, you are definitely in labor.”

Marian shook her head frantically. “No- No I can’t be in labor yet. I’m only in my eighth month and the crib isn’t built and Robin isn’t here! I can’t do this without him!”

Regina shut her eyes as she remembered going into labor with Henry. She’d said the very same
thing about Daniel.

Mrs. Connelly gently took Marian’s face in her hands. “Hey now you listen to me sweetheart. I was a nurse for more than three decades. I helped deliver hundreds of babies and plenty of them were born in their eight month. And guess what? I didn’t lose one. They were all fine and they were all healthy. They grew up to be beautiful children just like yours will. You can do this. I promise.”

“Okay,” said Marian softly, as she nodded her head.

Mrs. Connelly turned back to Regina. “You’re going to want to head into the hospital.”

“Right,” said Regina nodding her head. She swiftly walked over to Henry and gathered him in her arms, being careful not to wake him.

“I’m going put him in your bed,” she whispered to Marian. “Your overnight bag is in the closet, right?”

“Yes,” Marian answered automatically. She appeared to still be in shock.

Regina made her way down the hall and gently laid Henry in Marian and Robin’s bed. He was still sound asleep, unaware of just how much was happening. Regina smiled to herself as she lightly brushed his hair out of his eyes. Hopefully in a few hours Marian would have a beautiful son just like she did. She pressed a kiss to his forehead before grabbing the overnight bag and returning to Marian. Mrs. Connelly had helped her into her jacket and shoes. She looked at Regina with worried eyes. “Robin…”

“I will call him as soon as we get to hospital. I promise,” said Regina earnestly. She turned to Mrs. Connelly. “Would you mind staying with my son for the night? I’ll be back to drop him off at daycare as soon as possible.”

“Oh take your time dear,” replied Mrs. Connelly. “It’s never a burden for me to spend time with children. I can’t wait to get my hands on this one’s bundle of joy.”

Regina nodded at her gratefully before grabbing Marian’s hand. “Okay let’s go to the hospital.”

**AT THE HOSPITAL, 5:30 AM**

The rubber bottoms of Regina’s sneakers squeaked against the sterile tile beneath her as she turned on her heel. The glow of the florescent lights caused dark circles to appear under her eyes and her bed-ridden hair had been pulled back into a haphazard ponytail. She was still in nothing but a pair of flannel pajama pants and a grey tee she’d borrowed from Marian. A nurse eyed her warily as she walked past the desk for the fifth time, her phone permanently glued to her ear.

“Okay Robin this is the fifth message I am leaving you. I cannot believe you’re not picking up,” she growled under her breath. “So I will repeat it again. Your wife has gone into labor and she needs you. We are at the hospital and desperately waiting for your appearance so just get here!”

A guttural sound flew from her throat as she hung up the phone. She ran her hands over her face in frustration. It had been over an hour and she still wasn’t able to get a hold of Robin. She was doing her best to reassure Marian but she was beginning to grow anxious. Why wasn’t he picking up her calls? Robin’s phone had practically been embedded in his hand for the past few months. Ringer always on high and vibrate. Chargers always close by just in case. There was no way he wasn’t getting her calls. She was torn between a vicious anger and unsettling worry. What if something had happened to them? Killian wasn’t answering his phone either and that couldn’t be good. She
quickly shook the thought from her head. Robin had called Marian last night and said that they had made it safely to the motel. So why isn’t he answering my calls now?

“Maybe his phone is dead?”

Regina dropped her hands in confusion before realizing the meek voice belonged to a timid brunette sitting behind the nurses’ desk.

“What?” she asked in an exhausted voice.

The woman wiped her hands on her scrubs nervously. “Well you said you’ve called him five times now. Maybe he’s not ignoring you. It’s pretty early. Maybe his phone died overnight.”

Regina groaned at her suggestion. “Well as helpful as that scenario is it doesn’t exactly give me a way to get in contact with him, now does it?”

The nurse shrugged her shoulders sympathetically. “I’m sorry.”

“No don’t apologize,” said Regina shaking her head. “I’m just a little stressed out is all.”

She sighed as she put her hands on her hips and thought over the nurse’s words. If she was right and Robin’s phone was dead or broken, then she was pretty much screwed. There was no other way to get in contact with him. It would be a while before he had to wake up for his meeting and she didn’t think Marian could wait much longer to hear from him. She arched one of her eyebrows as an idea formed in her head. Maybe she didn’t need to get in contact with him, just somebody near him.

She turned to the nurse. “Can I use your computer for just one second? I need to look up a phone number.”

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ROBIN’S MOTEL, 5:45 AM

Robin was sleeping semi-soundly on his bed when he heard a banging on the room door. He groaned as he forced his eyes open. The sun had barely risen and he squinted as he adjusted to light pouring in through the window. He could hear Killian snoring rhythmically on the other side of the room, not the least bit disturbed by the knocking on their door. His eyes flew to the wall clock above the motel television. It wasn’t even six yet. He threw back the scratchy motel blanket and stumbled out of bed toward the door. He opened it to find a rather irritated motel clerk glaring at him from his spot on the balcony. A toothpick hung out of his mouth as he regarded him coolly.

“Robin Locksely?” he asked in a clipped tone.

Robin eyed him suspiciously. “Yes.”

The clerk tossed a clunky phone at his chest. “There’s a shrill woman on the phone for you.”

Robin barely had time to react before the clerk was heading back to the office grumbling about how early it was. A confused look crossed his face as he brought the phone up to his ear. “Hello?”

“WHERE THE HELL HAVE YOU BEEN?!”

Robin pulled the phone away from his ear as Regina’s voice screeched through the speaker.

“Regina?”
“No it’s the tooth fairy,” she replied sarcastically. “Of course it’s me! Why the hell haven’t you been picking up your phone? I have been calling you for hours!”

Robin rushed over to the night stand and grabbed his phone. He pressed furiously at the power button but let out a frustrated groan when he only got a battery alert in response. It hadn’t been charging all night. He made a mental note to dig Killian a grave.

“My phone died,” he gritted out angrily. “What’s going on? Are Marian and the baby okay?”

“Yes,” Regina sighed irritantly. “But she went into labor two hours ago and she needs you here.”

Robin felt a rock fall into his stomach. He leaned against the wall for support as her words registered in his brain. “She went into labor?” he breathed softly. “While I was sleeping?”

Regina scrunched her eyes closed as she felt Robin’s guilt flow through her speaker. “Look Robin it’s still early. You haven’t missed much. You just need to get here as soon as possible.”

“As soon as possible,” he parroted. It was like he couldn’t even think straight. His wife had gone into labor and he had been selfishly sleeping next to an uncharged phone. He couldn’t stop the rush of horrific scenarios from flowing through his mind.

Regina sensed his distress and called out to him. “Robin! Listen to me. You need to get dressed now. Hand Killian the phone.”

The mention of his idiotic travel partner was enough to shake Robin out of his stupor. It was his fault he’d missed Marian’s calls and the fury he felt towards him overcame his fears for the moment. He stomped over to the other bed and stuck his hand under the mattress. Killian’s body landed on the ground with a thud as Robin flipped him out of bed.

He groaned in pain as the impact knocked him out of his slumber. He glared up at Robin from his spot on the floor. “What the hell Robin?!”

“Marian is the hell you idiot!” shouted Robin. “She went into labor and I didn’t get the call because you”- he pointed a finger at him accusingly-“didn’t charge the phones correctly!”

Kilian blinked rapidly at the flood of information that just came at him. “What?”

Robin shoved the phone in his hands. “Here. Regina’s on the line. Do as she says!”

And with that he walked over to his duffel bag and rapidly began to get dressed. Killian watched him warily as he brought the phone to his ear. “Regina?”

“You listen to me Killian Jones.” She didn’t even pause to say hello. “My best friend is about to give birth to her first child and she will not do it without her husband there. So I need you to get your act together and make sure that Robin gets to this hospital as soon as possible. Now is he getting dressed?”

Kilian glanced over at his friend who was putting on clothes faster than what appeared to be humanly possible. “Like a bat out of hell,” he relied softly.

“Good,” said Regina. “The next train heading for Ventura leaves your town in 30 minutes. You better make damn sure that he is on it!”

Kilian stood to search for his car keys. “What am I supposed to do about the meeting then?”
“Do you think anyone gives a damn about that right now?!” responded Regina. “Go to the meeting by yourself. You know more than enough about the bar to get the contract signed. Now give Robin the phone back. Marian needs to talk to him.”

Killian handed the phone back to his friend who quickly snatched it out of his grasp. He could hear Robin trying to soothe his wife over the phone while he struggled to get into his pants. Killian let out a triumphant bark of laughter when he found the keys to car on the bathroom counter where he’d left them. Robin was hanging up the phone when he stepped back in the room.

“Found the car keys,” he said with a small smile.

“Good,” Robin nodded at him and swallowed hard as he tried to get his bearings.

Killian raised an eyebrow at his reaction. “Are you ready for this, mate?”

“No,” answered Robin shaking his head. “But I’ll be damned if I’m going to let that stop me.”

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THE HOSPITAL, 7AM

Regina stretched out her neck as she stood in line at the hospital cafeteria. It seemed like forever had passed since she’d been asleep in Marian’s apartment. Her friend was currently resting in her hospital bed as she went to get a cup of Jello for her. She’d promised Robin that she’d stay with Marian until he arrived and it wasn’t something that she regretted but it was pretty tiring.

As soon as her Jello was paid for she headed back towards Marian’s room. As she walked through the maternity ward she took small peeks at all the people in their various rooms. There were some that were filled to the brim with people, all eager to be there when the new family member made their appearance. Some only had a person or two waiting with them, holding their hand making sure they were comfortable. She didn’t see anyone who was alone. She could only assume they were behind the few closed doors in the ward. Her door had been closed when she had Henry. But that was mostly so no one would see her.

She couldn’t help but think of the night she’d given birth to her son as she walked through the ward. It was literally a lifetime ago but every detail still felt as present and clear as the brightly colored desert in her hand.

Regina stepped into Marian’s room to find her friend pacing around the floor with one hand on her back. The look of exhaustion on her face was more than familiar to Regina. She’d had the same one when she was three hours into her labor with Henry. She gave Marian a sympathetic look as she set the Jello on the tray attached to her bed.

“Another contraction?” she asked, grabbing Marian’s hand to help her around the room.

Despite everything a chuckle escaped Marian’s throat as she leaned against Regina for support. “Trust me if I was having another contraction I’d be letting you know.”

A small smile grew on Regina’s face. “How far apart are they now?”

“About every six minutes,” replied Marian.

“You know no one would blame you if wanted to get the epidural, right?”

Marian shook her head. “No. I don’t want to risk or complicate anything. It’s better for him if I do
this naturally.”

Regina rubbed a hand up and down Marian’s back soothingly. She’d begged for an epidural when Henry was born but the doctor had refused. Said it was better for her. She still believed it was an order from her mother meant to punish her. “You should get back into bed. You’ll want to be rested for the next round.”

Marian nodded at her slightly. She held her belly as Regina helped her settle back into her hospital bed. She was eternally grateful that her friend had chosen to stay with her until her husband arrived. Just the idea of doing this alone terrified her. She smiled gratefully as she was handed her red Jello. The two of them ate in silence for a moment before Marian awkwardly cleared her throat. “Did you, um, get the chance to call the number I gave you?”

Regina’s spoon paused halfway to her mouth. Earlier Marian had given her the number to her parents. She’d wanted them to know that she’d gone into labor with their first, and possibly only, grandchild. As soon as she’d gotten the chance Regina had called them up but it hadn’t gone well. She’d barely gotten through saying Marian’s name and explaining the situation before they’d hung up on her. The silence she’d heard after they ended the call was still haunting her.

She set her Jello down in front of her and wrung her hands nervously. “You know Marian I did but, um, the number had actually been disconnected. I think they changed it.”

“Oh,” breathed Marian, as she hung her head. She lightly ran her hands over her stomach gently. “I guess that’s to be expected when you don’t speak with family for years. You miss little things like that.”

Regina reached out to squeeze her shoulder sympathetically. “Hey you’re not alone. Robin’s on the train down right now. And I’m here.”

“I know,” said Marian, forcing a smile and placing her hand atop Regina’s. “I just always thought that they would be here too.”

She suddenly clamped down on Regina’s hand and gritted her teeth. “Here comes another contraction.”

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ON THE TRAIN, 8AM

Robin tapped his foot nervously as he looked out the train window. It helped him to watch the scenery go by. It was a reminder that he was moving forward, heading to Marian. Soon he would be there with her and they would have their son. He blew out an impatient breath as the train pulled into a stop at Goleta. He was only three short stops away from Ventura. And Marian. He ran his hands over his chin anxiously. He’d shaved in the train bathroom. Killian’s comments earlier had convinced him that he didn’t want to meet his son looking like a hobo. The smooth skin still felt strange against his palm.

He anxiously checked his watch as he realized the train had been stationary for quite a while now. Suddenly there was loud screeching noise as the train vibrated violently beneath his feat. As soon as the noise and trembling subsided, he heard the conductor get on the intercom.

“Attention passengers. We appear to be having some engine trouble so this train is out of order. Please leave through the nearest exit and we encourage you to wait for the next train which will be heading through in three or so hours. We are sorry for the inconvenience.”
Robin’s jaw dropped as the intercom above him clicked off. Another three hours! He angrily stomped his foot on the ground. “Son of a bitch!”

As he climbed out of the train he reached for the cell phone in his pocket and was dismayed to find that in his haste to make it on the train he still hadn’t charged it. He ran his hand over his head in frustration before spying an old telephone booth. He wasn’t that far out from Ventura. Perhaps he could have a taxi come and pick him up.

He stepped over to the counter at the visitor’s booth to talk to one of the aides. “Hello, I could use some assistance.”

A young girl, probably no older than twenty, looked up at from behind the bullet proof glass. Her hair was dyed multiple shades of pink and blue and it was pulled into two crimped pigtails. She regarded him with warm eyes as she snapped the bubble gum she chewed behind her black-painted lips. “What can I help you with?”

“I need the number of a local taxi service. I’m trying to get out of town.”

“Where are you headed?”

“To Ventura. I need to see my wife in the hospital.”

She hissed at him apologetically. “I’m sorry sir. All the cab companies that service our station are strictly local. They don’t leave city limits.”

He clenched his fists in frustration. “Are you sure there’s no one willing to take me that far?”

She nodded at him sadly. “I’m sorry but there isn’t.”

“Of course there’s not,” said Robin dejectedly. “Thank you for all your help.”

As he moved to step away she called out to him hopefully, “Maybe one of your friends could come and pick you up?”

He sighed as he realized that it wasn’t the worst idea but it’s not like he had any way of getting in contact with them. All their numbers were stored in his dead phone and he didn’t remember any of them off hand. A defeated groan escaped his lips as he realized he did actually remember one.
Chapter 12

AT THE HOSPITAL, 8:15 AM

Regina sighed as she dug her vibrating phone out of her pocket. She hoped it wasn’t Mrs. Connelly calling to tell her Henry had woken up. She was still hoping she had an hour or two before she had to take him to daycare. That should at least be enough time for Robin to show up. She frowned as she glanced at her screen and realized it was actually Mulan who was calling. She leaned against the nurse’s desk and brought her phone up to her ear. “Hello?”

“Do you want to explain to me why I am the only one here for the opening shift?”

Regina scrunched her eyes closed and let out a moan. “Damn it! I’m sorry Lani. I forgot.”

She’d been scheduled to open the bar this morning with Mulan but in the chaos of Marian’s labor she hadn’t even called to say she wouldn’t be able to make it.

“I don’t care if you forgot,” Mulan bit out. “Just get here so we can clean up the mess the closing crew left behind.”

“I can’t,” sighed Regina. “Marian went into labor last night and I promised Robin I wouldn’t leave her until he got here.”

“Are you kidding me?” replied Mulan in an exasperated voice. “Just what am I supposed to do then? I can’t open the bar by myself.”

Mulan truly understood how important it was that Marian not be alone in the hospital but she also knew how important it was the bar remain on schedule. They had an office party coming in at 11am and in the bar’s current state she knew she wouldn’t be able to handle the cleaning on her own.

Regina brought a hand to her forehead. She was thinking over all her options when she was interrupted by her cellphone beeping. “Okay hold on Mulan. I have another call coming in and it might be Robin.”

She quickly put Mulan on hold and switched over to the new number.

“Hello?” she said tiredly.

“Well you don’t you sound positively knackered?”

She rolled her eyes as she recognized Hook’s accent. “You better be calling me with good news.”

“Alas I’m afraid that’s not the case, love,” responded Hook. “I just got a call from Robin. The train broke down he’s stuck in Goleta for at least another three hours unless one of you can go and get him.”

Regina stomped her foot on the ground in frustration. “You have got to be kidding me right now! Why can’t you go and get him?”

“I am an hour away from meeting with new booze dealer,” Killian reminded her. “He’s at least two hours away from me. I can’t make the round trip in time to get to the meeting. It has to be one of you guys.”
Regina let out a deep breath clearly irritated by the sudden turn of events. Do I have to do everything myself today, she thought to herself. She drummed her fingers against the counter as she tried to think up a solution.

“Hang on,” she said, before quickly putting Killian on hold. She switched back over to her call with Mulan. “Hey Mulan. Look I clearly can’t make it there but you can call Chloe and tell her to come in for the day. It’s been more than 24 hours so she should be over her food poisoning by now.”

Mulan sighed apprehensively. “What if she says she can’t do it?”

“Then remind her that I came in on my day off with my three-year-old to cover her ass yesterday,” growled Regina lightly. “I’d love to see her argue her way out of that one. She owes me.”

Mulan laughed at the venom in her voice. “Alright I’ll call her in. Bye.”

As Mulan hung up on her she quickly switched over to Killian on hold. “Listen. Tell Robin to hold on. I’m going to send someone to come for him.”

“Who are you going to send?” asked Killian curiously.

“Someone he’s fond of,” she replied.

AT THE GOLETA TRAIN STATION, 9:30 AM

Robin paced back on forth on the steps of the train running his hands over his face in desperation. He just wanted to see his son being born. Was that too much to ask? Hadn’t he earned that right? He sat down on the stone steps and dejectedly put his head in his hands. He knew this trip was a foolish idea. He couldn’t believe he’d let Marian talk him into going. Now she was at the hospital giving birth to their child while he was dozens of miles away. The only silver lining in the whole situation was that he had been smart enough to ask Regina to stay with her last night. She’d been helping as much as she could and he knew she was doing everything in her power to make sure that Marian was comfortable. When he’d last talked to Killian, he still clenched his jaw at the thought of his name, he’d said that Regina was arranging for someone to come and pick him up. Yet another thing she’d done to help his family. He swore he’d give her medal once this day was done.

He lifted his head from his hands as the sound of a rapidly approaching police siren reached his ears. He narrowed his eyes to see a 1980’s station wagon barreling toward the train station with a flashing police light on its roof. For a second he thought the driver was losing control of the car as they pulled up to station nearly going over the curb as they skidded to a stop. His jaw dropped as he saw Tink step out of the driver side and wave him over with a bright smile.

“Get in!” she yelled.

Despite his shock he quickly ran over to passenger door and hopped into the car. “Tink what the hell are you doing?”

“Coming to get you,” she answered like it was the most obvious thing in the world. “Regina called and said you needed a ride to Marian at the hospital.”

He shook his head at her confusedly. “No I know that. I mean what the hell are you doing with a police siren?”

Her eyes widened as she realized what he meant. “Oh that? It’s my brother’s. You know Rory, the cop? I told him what was going on and he gave it to me. This way I can break all the speeding laws I want.”
Robin gave her a long hard look. “Tink did he actually give it to you? Or did you take it without his knowledge?”

She shrugged her shoulders nonchalantly. “Robin your wife’s in labor at the hospital. Do you really care how I got this siren?”

He turned his eyes to the road and sighed. “You know… I really don’t. Just floor it, okay?”

She grinned at him with a mischievous glint in her eyes. “Yeah you’re gonna want to put your seat belt on.”

The tires of her station wagon screeched against the road as she tore away from the curb.

AT THE HOSPITAL, 10:45 AM

Regina held Marian’s hand as the doctor examined her for the fifth time. She tried to rub her hand as comforting as possible. Marian was looking pretty exhausted. Her face was still red from the pain of the previous contraction and she’d had Regina pull her hair back into simple braid but the tiny strands around her face had begun to stick to her skin. Regina sympathized with her. She knew how taxing giving birth could be. It didn’t help that Marian was still filled with anxiety over the absence of her husband. Her contractions were barely two minutes apart now and soon she’d be ready to give birth. If he didn’t get here soon he’d miss it.

Dr. Montgomery stood from where she’d been examining Marian and gave her a smile. “Well Mrs. Locksely it looks like you are finally fully dilated. We should start prepping you for the delivery room.”

Marian eyes flitted between Regina and the doctor. She shook her head frantically. “No. No I want to wait for my husband. I can do that right? I can wait for him. He has to be here.”

The doctor sent her a sympathetic look. “I’m sorry Marian but that’s how it works. Your baby is ready to come now and we cannot make him wait.”

Marian turned to her friend with worried eyes. “Regina…”

“It’s okay Marian,” she said quickly, squeezing her hand. “I’ll stay with you. I’ll be here the whole-”

She was cut off by a bang against the door frame. They all looked over to see Robin clutching his shoulder where he’d run into the frame. “Ow fuck! I’m here!”

“Robin!” Marian’s face lit up as she saw her husband step into the room.

“Thank god,” Regina mumbled under her breath as she let Robin replace her by Marian’s side. Robin quickly peppered kisses across his wife’s forehead. “I made it. I’m here,” he breathed. Marian smile faded as she looked up at him with narrowed eyes. “Did you shave?”

Robin’s hand flew to his freshly bare chin. “Well yes…”

“I was here in labor and you STOPPED TO SHAVE!!” cried Marian.

Regina covered her mouth to try and stifle her laughter.

“Well I didn’t stop exactly…” he tried to explain. He was interrupted by the snapping of the
doctor’s fingers.

“As domestic as this all is we do actually have a baby to deliver,” she said sternly. “I assume the father will be joining us in the delivery room.”

“Yes he will,” said Robin proudly.

He turned to Regina and quickly pulled her into an embrace. “Thank you so much for staying with her,” he whispered gratefully.

She returned his hug warmly. “Like I was ever going to leave. You take care of her in there.”

“I will,” he promised as he released her.

As Robin went to get his scrubs from the nurse Regina turned back to Marian with a smile. “This is it,” she said with a nervous smile. “After this you'll have your baby.”

Marian looked up at her, clearly frightened by the prospect of delivery. “What’ll it be like?”

Regina gave her a tearful smile. “It’ll be the hardest, most exhausting, rewarding and surreal experience of your life. It’ll end in tears but they’ll be the happiest tears you’ve ever shed. I promise.”

Marian gave her a hopeful smile. “Thank you.”

Regina gave Marian a quick kiss on the cheek before the nurses began to wheel her bed toward the delivery room. As she watched Robin and Marian head away from her she placed a hand over her heart and sent up a silent prayer for the safety of her friend and her baby. She asked for Daniel to watch over them both as she headed for the hospital elevator.

“God, I need a shower,” she mumbled to herself.

MARIAN’S HOSPITAL ROOM, 1PM

There was a still silence in Marian’s hospital room as she Robin both laid on her hospital bed. Neither of them speaking, making sure to breathe as silently as possible. She held her newborn son in her arms and they both basked in his perfection. All ten fingers and all ten toes. Perhaps a little small for a newborn but perfectly healthy. He was here. He was finally here.

“We did it,” Marian whispered happily, as tear rolled down her cheek. As she looked down at her son her smile could light up the darkest cave. “We’re a family now.”

“Yes we are,” said whispered Robin, pressing a kiss to the side of her head. He ran his thumb over the baby’s cheek. They had a son. He was a father. Marian was a mother. It still didn’t feel real to him. He felt like he could wake from his bliss at any moment.

They stayed like that for a while, in a silent cocoon of joy and love but it was pierced when Robin felt the need to ask his wife a very important question. “Were you able to get in contact with your parents?”

A drop of sadness sullied Marian’s joy as she thought of her parents. “I asked Regina to call them. She said the line had been disconnected.”

“Well that’s a bit of bad luck then,” said Robin in a disappointed voice.

Marian shook her head at her husband. “Robin… I called that number two days ago. It’s still
He raised his eyebrows at her in surprise. “You actually spoke to them?”

“No,” she said sadly. “I heard my father’s voice and I hung up without saying a word. That’s why I had Regina call this time. I thought she’d be braver than me.”

“But she said the line was disconnected,” breathed Robin sadly. He shut his eyes as the realization of why she would say such a thing washed over him.

“They didn’t want to see me,” said Marian, her voice dripping with sorrow. “Or him.”

Robin ran his hands over her shoulders in effort to comfort her. “I’m sorry, love.”

She blinked back her tears as she shrugged her shoulders. “It doesn’t matter. Our son has more than enough family. He doesn’t need them.”

Their discussion was interrupted by a knock on the room door. They both looked over to see Regina poke her head into the room with a smile. “Hi,” she said softly. “Are you up for visitors?”

A bright smile grew on Marian’s face as she laid eyes on her best friend. She looked a lot better now that she had taken a shower and changed into a maroon tee and a fresh pair of jeans. She felt her heart swell as she remembered just how much Regina had done for her in the past 12 hours. Driving her to the hospital, staying with her during her labor, making sure Robin got to the hospital in time. She might not have had her parents but she did have Regina, the woman she’d come to see as practically a sister.

“We’re always up to see family,” she answered happily.

“Good,” replied Regina. “Because I have someone who is dying to see you.” She reached behind her and pulled Henry into the hospital room. He waved at Marian and Robin shyly as he clutched a tiny stuffed monkey in his hand.

“Hi!” he whispered enthusiastically. “Mama says I need be quiet.”

“Need to be,” Regina corrected softly. A grin was planted firmly on her face as she eyed the small bundle in Marian’s hands. She patted her son on the shoulder encouragingly. “Why don’t you show Aunt Marian and Uncle Robin what you brought for the new baby?”

Henry shuffled over to Robin shyly and held up his stuffed animal. “It’s a monkey!” he said proudly.

Both Marian and Robin chuckled as they eyed the fluffy gray monkey the young boy had clearly picked out from the gift shop. “Oh he’s going to love that,” whispered Marian, with a small smile.

“Do you want to see the new baby, Henry?” asked Robin softly. He carefully lifted the small boy into his lap so he get a better view of his son. Henry stared at the baby with the curiosity only found in a child who’d never seen one up close.

“He’s tiny,” he commented. “And wrinkly.”

A giggle flew from Regina’s throat at her son’s assessment. “Believe it or not mister but you used to be just as tiny and wrinkly.”

“No I didn’t,” he protested fiercely.
The adults all laughed at Henry’s indignation. As their laughter subsided they heard another knock at the door and were surprised to see Mulan step in the room with a vase full of artificial blue daisies.

“Lani?” said Robin in surprise. He stood to give her a quick hug. “What are you doing here? I thought you were watching the bar.”

“I am,” she replied patting him on the back. “But I do occasionally get a lunch break, don’t I boss?”

She stepped walked over to Marian’s side. “Figured I’d use it to get a look at the newest Drunken Monk crew member.”

She stared down at the new baby, her lips parted in awe. “He looks amazing you two. Congratulations.”

“Thank you,” Marian responded, looking up at her. “And thanks for taking care of bar.”

Mulan rolled her eyes at her. “Please. That is literally my job.”

Another knock at the door signified the arrival of Killian. He stepped into the room with a cautious look on his face and six balloons in his hand. “Is it safe for me to come in?”

Robin chuckled at his friend’s apprehension. He happily waved him in. “Trust me Killian I am far too happy to hurt you right now.”

Killian quickly released the balloons to give his friend a joyful hug. “I’m pleased for you, mate.”

“Thank you,” said Robin, releasing him from the hug. “But you should know as soon as the haze of my newfound fatherhood subsides I will be coming for you with a pair of rusty knives.”

Killian chuckled at his Robin’s threat. “Well perhaps it would dull your knives to find out that I was successful in our meeting with the new booze dealer. You can rest easy on your time off knowing that the bar will be properly stocked with liquor.”

“That is actually a relief,” said Marian from her spot on the bed. “Thank you Killian.”

“Anything for a new mother,” he responded with smile. He moved over to her side of the bed. “Now let’s a get a good look at this little lad.”

A smile grew on his face as he stared down at the baby. “Well he’s a cute little bugger, isn’t he?”

“Just like his father,” replied Marian, cheekily.

Killian rubbed his hands together in anticipation. “Would it be presumptuous of me to ask for a chance to hold him?”

Robin shook his head at him. “No the first hold is actually going to be given to his godmother.”

Marian nodded at her best friend expectantly. “Regina.”

Regina felt her jaw drop in surprise as all eyes turned on her. “What, me?”

“Of course we choose you,” said Robin, like it was the most obvious thing in the world. “After all you’ve done today how could we choose anyone else?”
“We love you Regina,” added Marian. “And I think we’ll both rest easier knowing that you’ll always be in our son’s life. Do you accept?”

“Of course,” breathed Regina, her voice overflowing with joy. She quickly wiped a happy tear from her cheek. “Can I hold my godson now?”

“Yes,” said Marian nodding her head. She carefully transferred her son into her best friend’s arms. Regina looked down on him with a watery smile on her face. She watched his small chest fall up and down as she rocked him slowly in her arms. “Hello there you precious thing.”

Killian cleared his throat. “So what I’m hearing is that the position of godfather is still open?”

Mulan smacked him in his chest. “Hook let it go.”

She turned toward the new parents. “So have you decided on a name yet?”

Marian rolled her eyes and shrugged her shoulders exasperatedly. “Not even close. We’ve got a middle name picked out but nothing seems right when it comes to his first.”

As Regina ran her thumb across the baby’s tiny hand a name popped into her head. She lifted her head to look over at his parents. “How do you feel about the name Roland?”

Robin tilted his head curiously. “Roland?”

Regina shrugged her shoulders. “When I was a little girl my father used to read to me about Arthurian legends. There was this one knight I was really fond of, Sir Roland. I always thought he was the noblest.”

Marian nodded her head as she thought over the name. “Roland? I like it. It’s classic.”

“And English, which I can certainly get behind,” added Robin with a grin. He pulled his son back into his arms and walked over to his wife. “Well then I guess I can formally introduce you all to my son, Roland Tucker Locksely.”

As they all hummed in appreciation of the name Marian placed a gentle hand to her son’s head. “Roland Tucker Locksely. Welcome to the family.”

AT THE DRUNKEN MONK, THREE MONTHS LATER

A Beach Boys song played softly through the jukebox as Regina wiped down another table in her section. She checked the watch on her wrist hoping that time had magically jumped to the end of her. Sadly it had not. She still had an hour left before she could head home.

“Anxious are we?” said Killian as he walked past her table.

She smirked over at him. “Just missing my son is all.”

“Well hang in there lass. You’re almost at the end of your shift,” he replied heading back toward the bar.

Ever since Robin and Marian had taken time off to spend with their new baby, Killian had taken his role as bar manager rather seriously. He’d been very attentive to all the employees, making sure that everyone had what they needed and was satisfied with the schedule. Regina had never seen him so… well, responsible. She was almost sure he was trying to make up for the fiasco that had been Roland’s birth. She smiled to herself at the thought of her new godson. He was growing
happy and healthily and Robin and Marian couldn’t be more thrilled.

As if she’d summoned them up by the power of her thoughts she saw Robin walk through the door with Roland in his car seat. She quickly rushed over to greet them.

“Hello Regina,” said Robin with a smile as he set his son on the bar counter.

“Hey Robin,” she responded brightly. “And hello there Roland!”

She reached into his car seat to tickle his tummy and was pleased when he smiled back up at her. He kicked up at her happily as he squirmed in his seat. “What are you guys doing here today?”

“That’s exactly what I’d like to know,” said Killian walking over to them. He gently patted Roland on the head before turning to Robin with an accusing eye. “You’re not checking up on me are you?”

“No that’s exactly what I’m doing,” replied Robin with a smug smile. “Marian needed to take a trip to the store so I had her drop us off here to make sure you weren’t running my bar into the ground.”

“Your lack of faith is so disturbing,” said Killian, shaking his head at him.

Robin chuckled at his reaction. “Seriously though I’m just here to check the books and make sure they’re in order.”

He turned to Regina. “Would you mind watching Roland for me while I head upstairs?”

“Not at all,” she said taking a seat at the bar. “I’m due for a break anyway.”

“Thank you,” Robin called back as he made his way up to the office.

Killian shook his head as he watched Robin head up the stairs. “Three months running this place at they still don’t trust me.”

“Yes they do,” responded Regina. “They just love to double check your work.”

“Well doesn’t that make me feel all warm and fuzzy inside?” Killian rolled his eyes at her as he headed back towards the end of the bar.

She laughed at him as she continued to play with Roland’s feet.

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Marian rolled her cart down the dairy aisle of the grocery mart looking for the familiar brand of milk she and Robin were accustomed to. The past few months had been blissful for her. She had everything she could ever want. A beautiful son, a loving husband and amazing friends. Things would be perfect if it wasn’t for this blinding headache that had been irritating her for the past few days. As she rubbed her palm against her forehead she made a mental note to go to the medicine aisle and pick up some pain killers.

She quickly grabbed a jug of milk when she spotted her favorite. Spots of lights began to dance before her eyes as she dropped it into the cart. She suddenly felt a rush of heat flow through her head as she dropped to her knees. Then all she could see was darkness.

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Regina checked her watch again as she ran her thumb over Roland’s tiny hand. It’d been half an
hour since Robin had left him with her.

“Robin’s been up there for a while now hasn’t he?” she yelled over to Killian.

He shrugged his shoulders at her from behind the bar. “He’s probably just double-checking the pay stubs like you said.”

It was a perfectly reasonable explanation but it still wasn’t enough to lift the unsettling feeling Regina had in her gut. “Hey watch Roland for me. I’m going to head up there really quick.”

She didn’t even wait for his response before heading up the stairs to the office. The studio had gone through a renovation or two since Marian had reclaimed it as her office. The linoleum had finally been ripped up and replaced with elegant bamboo flooring. She’d replaced the old wobbly desk with a vintage mahogany one she’d found at a yard sale and she’d paired it with a comfy swivel chair. The kitchen still remained but the studio had come a long way from the place Regina had once called home.

As she opened the door she was surprised to find that Robin was situated behind the desk like usual. He was on the floor with his back against the corner. His mouth was open in shock and his eyes only held a blank stare. Regina quickly rushed to his side and forced him to look at her.

“Robin?” She called his name desperately. “Robin what happened? What’s wrong?”

He didn’t respond to her in the slightest. From the way he was acting Regina was sure he was looking straight through her.

“Hello?”

She looked down to see that Robin’s cell phone was still in his hand. She could hear someone’s voice speaking. A call must still be active. She slipped the phone from his hand and eyed him warily as she brought it up to her. “Hello?”

“Yes but he can’t speak right now,” she replied softly. “Who is this?”

“My name is Michael. I am an EMT,” he answered. “It’s very important that I speak to Mr. Locksely. It’s about his wife.”

Regina felt her clench and her throat close up. “Marian? What happened to her?”

The man hesitated before speaking. “It’s very important that I only speak to a relative Ma’am. If I could just speak to her husband please-”

“He can’t speak right now!” shouted Regina anxiously. “He’s not going to come to phone right now. So just tell me what happened to her!”

She heard the man sigh over the phone and she took a deep breath to try and rein in her emotions.

“Please she’s my sister,” she lied softly.

“She collapsed in the grocery mart,” said the EMT sadly. “We did all we could but… she didn’t make it.”
Chapter 13

Regina laid in bed wide awake as her alarm clock went off on the kitchen counter. She’d been staring up at the ceiling fan all night. Watching its panels as it steadily spun. If she’d slept for even a minute it was news to her.

She robotically climbed off her pullout bed and headed over to the still ringing alarm. After turning it off, she walked over to the coffee maker and set up a small amount of coffee like always. She continued with her morning ritual by checking in on Henry. For once he hadn’t crept onto the pullout couch with her like usual. He was still sound asleep in his own bed, limbs sprawled across his sheets, mouth agape and drool seeping its way into his pillow. She leaned against the door frame and observed him enviously. If only she’d been able to sleep so soundly.

The scent of fresh coffee began to fill the apartment as Regina folded up her bed and transformed it back into a dusty old couch. She poured herself a small cup and went to stand out on her balcony. It was gorgeous out. The sun was bright and the clouds were fluffy. She could already see people on the street beginning to start their day. A few joggers running down the side walk. A store owner flipping his closed sign to open. And a group of small children heading for the bus stop, grins of their faces and a hop in their step. It was a beautiful day and if she were so inclined she could almost pretend it was a normal one.

But it wasn’t. The simple black dress hanging in her closet told her so.

Despite the sun and the clouds and the children, today was the day she would bury her best friend. And there was no beauty in it. Not for her at least. Regina stared at the coffee in her hands, unable to force herself to take even a small sip. She went back into the apartment and set it down on the kitchen counter, untouched. She should start getting ready. There was much that needed to be done.

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For a moment all Regina could hear was her own heartbeat. The floor could’ve been ripped from under her and she wouldn’t notice. The entire world had stopped moving and all that existed was the never-ending echo of the EMT’s words.

She didn’t make it. She didn’t make it. She didn’t make it.

It was all she could do just to continue breathing. Just like that all the pain she’d fought for the past three years came roaring back. The hole in her heart, the one that she’d worked so hard to repair, it was suddenly ripped anew. This couldn’t be happening. She couldn’t have lost someone else. It was the incessant blabbering of the EMT that brought her back to earth.

“What?” she breathed out.

“We need for someone to identify her body,” the EMT repeated gently. “For legal purposes.”

Regina could only clear her throat in response. Before she could stop herself her mind flitted back to Daniel’s death. She longed for the EMT that had been so kind to her. This one lacked her tact. She took a deep breath and focused on returning to her reality, as painful as it was. One look at Robin told her he was handling this even worse than she was. Still leaned against the wall he was unmoving, and unseeing. The shock and disbelief still hadn’t left his eyes as his stare burned a hole into the floor. She grabbed his hand trying pull him back to life. She was not successful. Robin
Locksely was a husk.

“Um, I’ll do it,” she told the EMT softly. “Just tell me where to go.”

As if on autopilot she headed over to the desk that just a few minutes ago had been her best friend’s workplace. The pen trembled in her hand as she wrote down the address the EMT told her to arrive at. She didn’t even say thank you before hanging up on him. Who would really? Instead she turned back to Robin, who still sat dormant on the floor. She dropped to her knees beside him and called his name.

“Robin? Robin?” She said it again and again her desperation growing with each reiteration. Still he refused to look at her or even register her presence.

After the fifth time she called out to his name she placed his head between her hands and forced him to face her. “Robin, look at me,” she begged in a desperate voice.

The abruptness of her touch, and the pleading tone of her voice was nearly enough to break him out of his stupor. He remained silent and still but for the first time since she’d arrived she could tell that Robin was actually seeing her. His blue eyes locked upon her brown and her heart clenched at the pain she saw in them. They seemed to be asking “why?” She blinked back tears and tried to put a look of determination on her face. She didn’t know if she was succeeding or not.

“Listen to me,” she whispered as fiercely as she could. “I will handle this. All of it. Okay?”

He only responded by lightly placing his hand on top of hers.

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Robin was jolted out of sleep by the sound of Tink banging around his kitchen. The first thing he saw upon opening his eyes was a plain black suit laid atop his dresser. And just like that it all returned. He flipped onto his back and shut his eyes trying desperately to return to sleep.

The worst part of dealing with death was waking up. The repeated experience of having a moment of pure ignorant bliss, then being hit with a jarring wall of misery when you remember just how much you’ve lost was torturous. Despite this Robin slept more in the past few days than he did in his entire life. It was his only respite from the never-ending stream of pain that seemed to fill his every waking moment.

As the sound of Tink clattering around in the kitchen filled the apartment he realized that he wouldn’t be getting back to sleep. He turned onto his side and faced the empty half of his bed. The clock on his night stand read 10:00. Marian would’ve been wide awake by this time. Perhaps reading the paper if she could. More likely preparing Roland’s bottles for the day. He reached for the unused pillow next to his head and buried his face in it. The faint scent of her provided him with a bittersweet comfort. The entire apartment reminded him of Marian. The pictures of her smiling at him from the wall, the leftovers that she’d cooked still in their place in the fridge, the radio still tuned to her favorite station. It was all an assault on his senses.

A cackling wail began to sound off from next to his bed.

Roland. His biggest reminder.

As he listened to his son cry in his crib he was haunted by the ghost of unfulfilled dreams. Of a house that they would never live in as a family. Of milestones that his wife would never be there to witness. Of parts of Marian that his son would never know. All their dreams and all their hopes of being a family were just gone.
Tink would hear Roland’s cries any second now and she would be making her way in to check on him. Robin internally cringed at the thought of the pitying look that would be on her face. He forced himself out of bed into the bathroom. He didn’t even turn to look at his son as he walked past his crib.

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Mulan crinkled her nose as the smell of the ocean rode on the wind into her face. She heard a seagull caw as she made her way down the docks being extra careful not to trip in her two inch heels. It was more difficult than she remembered. The wet wood creaked beneath her feet as she slowed to a stop in front of an old 30 ft. Catalina sail boat. Written across the rear in bold, old English letters were the words: THE JOLLY ROGER.

Putting her fingers in her mouth she blew out a sharp two note whistle. At the sound of her signal she saw a shirtless Killian pop up from below deck. His eyes were bloodshot and a five o’clock shadow graced his chin. She had no doubt that he felt as good as he looked. Still a smirk grew on his face when he took in her appearance. “Well now… don’t you look all dolled up?”

Mulan rolled her eyes at his observation. She knew that if it weren’t for the occasion she’d be getting comments like that all day. Her brown hair, which she’d usually pull into a tight ponytail, fell to her shoulders with every strand curled to perfection. Her usual sneakers had been replaced with a pair of strappy pointed heels and her outfit, which normally amounted to nothing more spectacular than a clean tee with a pair of jeans, was now a fitted black dress that fell just above her knees, with lace sleeves that didn’t go beyond her elbows. More striking than all than this was her face. She’d always preferred to keep it bare, with not a drop of product ever having the privilege to grace her skin. But today a layer of red lipstick covered her mouth and a strict boundary of black eyeliner traced the edges of her eyelids. She looked utterly stunning… but Killian had no doubt that she didn’t feel that way.

She shrugged her shoulders up at him as she approached the edge of the dock. “It seemed fitting for the occasion.”

A lump formed in her throat as she looked down to her feet. “She always wanted to see me dressed up.”

Killian gripped the edge of the railing tighter as Mulan’s words hit him square in the chest. He had more than a few memories of Marian teasing Lani about her refusal to wear dresses. It had been a bit of a running gag between the two of them.

Mulan sighed as she looked back up at him. “Hook… you know why I’m here.”

He shook his head at her. “Lani I’ve told you I’m not going to the funeral.”

“She needs to be there,” she insisted softly.

“No I don’t,” he responded with venom. “I’ve seen my share of send offs. Both with my parents and with my brother. They all end the same way. With someone I love being put in the ground. I don’t need to see that again. I don’t need to see them do that to her!”

She could see the tears well up in his eyes as he took a deep breath to reel in his emotions.

“I’m not going to that funeral,” he repeated strongly. “And that’s not going to change no matter how much you scream or yell-”

“Hook please!” she cried up at him. His rant was cut off by the sight of tears running down her
face. Her chin trembled as she looked up at him. “Please don’t make me go by myself. Please…”

He had to turn away from her as the guilt began to fill in his chest. His eyes scrunched closed as he felt the weight of her request wash over him like an ice cold bucket of water.

“Okay,” he said softly nodding his head. “Just let me get dressed.”

Every step Regina took down to the bar felt heavier than the last. She’d left Robin up in the office while she went to break the news to Killian. The weight of her task fell like a boulder into her stomach. How could she do this? Was she strong enough? She didn’t feel like it.

When she rounded the end of the staircase she found Mulan had replaced her at Roland’s side. In the midst of everything she’d forgotten that Lani had taken the shift after hers. She watched as she and Killian grinned down at the baby in the car seat. It was cute scene but the knowledge of what she would reveal to them made her sick to her stomach. She tried to the swallow the lump in her throat as she approached them at the bar.

“I need to talk to you both,” she choked out.

Mulan took one look at her face and narrowed her eyes in worry. “What’s going on?”

“I just- I need to speak to you both in private now,” she whispered desperately. “Please!”

Roland cooed in his car seat atop the bar counter and she felt her heart shatter as she turned to look at him. All she could see was Marian’s eyes staring back at her. The poor baby didn’t know how much he’d lost today.

Killian noticed her distress and nodded his head. “We can talk in the storage room.”

The storage room was the bar’s go to place when you wanted to have a quick private conversation. It was just off the stage and could usually fit no more than two or three people at once. As Regina led them both into the tiny space she tried to think of the best way to break the news to them. She wanted to be as gentle and comforting as possible but as she saw Mulan set Roland’s car seat down on the storage floor she knew it wasn’t worth it to focus on such things. Their friend had just lost their wife. A baby had just lost his mother. There was no good way to tell anyone that. No way that would leave their hearts unscathed.

“So what’s going on?” asked Killian folding his arms across his chest.

Regina wrung her hands together nervously. “Um… while Robin was upstairs… he got a phone call from some local EMTs. There was… an incident at the grocery store and Marian…”

Her throat began to tighten as she neared the end of her sentence. “She collapsed and… they couldn’t save her.”

She watched as the realization of what she was saying play out on their faces. She saw Hook’s hands begin to tighten around his arms and his jaw begin to clench. She could see Mulan’s jaw drop as she put a hand against the wall for support.

“No Marian… died?” she said in disbelief.

“No she didn’t!” replied Killian automatically. “That’s impossible.”
Regina hung her head at his denial. “Killian…”

“Don’t say my name like that,” he spat. “There’s no way she can be gone. I just saw her yesterday and she was perfectly healthy. Perfectly healthy people don’t just die!”

“Hook… please stop,” said Mulan in a trembling voice. “Just stop…”

She placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. Her time in the military hadn’t been long but she’d learned one important thing from it. Refusing to accept a death was never a good thing. A best it just wastes time. No they couldn’t focus on trying to explain why this would happen. There were no good reasons. They just has to accept that it had and focus on dealing with that.

She took a deep breath and turned to Regina as she blinked back tears. “Where’s Robin?”

“He’s upstairs,” said Regina softly. “He can’t move, he can’t speak. He’s just sitting there.”

“We have to get him home,” said Mulan in a grave voice. She turned to Killian. “Hook… could you please take Roland out to your car and then grab Robin and help him downstairs. Then stay with them for the night.”

He pressed his lips together as he nodded his head slowly. “Yeah… yeah I’ll do that.”

He tried to clear his throat as he reached down to lift up Roland’s car seat. A tear dropped down his cheek as he locked eyes with the small boy. Poor lad.

Regina eyes never left Roland’s car seat as she watched Killian carry him out of the storage room. She was his godmother and that role weighed on her more heavily than ever now. She turned back to Mulan as Hook shut the door behind him. “I need to, um, I need to get downtown.”

Mulan tilted her head at her curiously.

“They need me to… identify her,” Regina explained.

Mulan nodded her head understandingly as she dug into her pockets. She pulled out her car keys and handed them over to Regina. “Take my car for the night. You can use it to head downtown and pick up Henry from daycare so you’re not late.”

Regina squeezed her hand appreciatively. “Thank you. What are you…?”

“I’m going to stay here,” Mulan said quickly. “Close up the bar for the day. Deal with the last of our current customers. And… I guess notify the staff. I’ll take care of things.”

Regina only nodded her head in response. She felt a tiny bit of relief in knowing that Lani would be handling things at the bar. She knew Robin would trust her would that. As would Marian.

She sniffed her nose as she wiped the remaining tears out of her eyes. “I should get going.”

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There’s no such thing as a pleasant funeral. No matter how it’s planned each one is leveled with its own brand of sadness. However, it can be said that some funerals are less unpleasant than others. This all depends on the people in attendance. On such a somber occasion the only thing any one person can do is make sure that things run as smoothly as possible. Mourners do this by helping as best as they can, comforting each other to the fullest and doing their best to give attention to those who need it most. In this sense Marian’s funeral was the least unpleasant funeral ever.
The Drunken Monk was a sea of black. After Marian’s burial everyone had gathered at the bar for a short luncheon. Not that anyone really felt like eating. Soft classical music played in the background as Killian loosened his tie at the bar counter with Mulan at his side.

“Bloody noose!” he growled softly. “I hate funerals.”

“Yes you made that perfectly clear on your third glass of rum,” Mulan mumbled, as she took another sip of her scotch on the rocks. Hell, she needed it to get through today. The funeral had been rough on them all. No one made it through it without shedding more than a few tears, her included. She couldn’t get the image of Robin out of her head. The look on his face when they lowered Marian into the ground. It was indescribable. She sighed as she brought the glass to her lips once more.

They turned at the sound of heels approaching from behind. Regina walked up to them with a melancholy twinge to her gait. “Hey, room for one more?”

“Of course,” said Killian gesturing to the seat on his other side. “We’ve barely seen you all day, love.”

“Yes well, there was a lot to be done,” she said settling on the stool.

“It was a lovely service Regina,” said Mulan. “She would’ve proud of how you put things together.”

Regina snorted as she poured herself a small glass of seltzer. She’d been hearing those words all day and they grew more and more meaningless with each reiteration. So what if she could throw a decent funeral? It did nothing to dull the ache in her heart.

“Where’s Henry?” asked Killian curiously. It didn’t escape his notice that the little boy wasn’t present at the service.

“He’s at daycare,” answered Regina with a sad sigh. “I thought it best he not be here for this. He’s too young.”

She pressed her lips together as she rolled her glass between her two palms. “He keeps asking me where his Aunt Mari is.”

Mulan and Killian looked over at her with sad eyes and she shrugged her shoulders at them. “I keep explaining it to him but I don’t think he understands.”

The three of them sat in silence as their hearts ached for Henry’s innocence. How do you explain such a loss to someone who’s never experienced it before?

“It breaks my heart to know that someday Robin will have to do the same for Roland,” said Killian softly. “Where is he now?”

“I gave him to Mrs. Connelly for a minute,” said Regina pointing out a booth in the corner. Mrs. Connelly sat with Roland, no doubt telling him a long-winded story about his late mother. Regina sighed as she watched the old lady gently bounce the baby in her lap. She’d made sure that Tink had dressed him in a dark blue onesie for the day. She couldn’t bear to see him in black and the dark blue footsie outfit had always been one of Marian’s favorites. He was the only spot of color in the whole bar. More than a few people had wanted the chance to spend time with him but he’d barely left Regina’s arms since before the wake. She’d been taking care of him as much as possible since Marian no longer could. She owed it to him and she owed it to Marian.
Regina set down her half empty glass of seltzer and surveyed the bar. It was nearly at capacity. She didn’t know everyone there but she was familiar with more than a few of them. Mickey, their old booze dealer, sat a few seats down from them at the bar reminiscing with a few other shop keepers about his dealings with Marian. Every once in a while a roar of laughter would arise from his group. There was Deana, Marian’s hairstylist, sitting in a booth with a few of her stylist friends telling a story of how Marian had helped her set up her new shop last year. There was even a group of Marian’s old high school friends telling tales of her as their class valedictorian and student council president. Regina’s eyes didn’t fall to them however. Instead they fell to a woman who sat alone in a dark booth away from everyone else. She appeared to be in her late fifties and was fully decked out in funeral wear. A large black sunhat covered her curly hair which was pulled back in a bun. A vodka martini sat in front of her and she ran her hands up and down the stem of the glass absentmindedly. She could’ve gone completely unnoticed if it hadn’t been for that curly dark hair Regina had been so used to seeing on her best friend. And the dark round eyes she could now see on her godson.

Regina tapped Killian on the arm and pointed out the woman to him. “Is that who I think it is?”

Mulan’s jaw dropped as she spotted her. “Holy crap… that’s Marian’s mother.”

“Indeed it is,” confirmed Killian. “Monica Calhoun.”

The three of them openly stared at the older woman as she sat in the booth completely oblivious to their shock. She appeared to only have eyes for her grandson who sat just two booths away from her on another woman’s lap.

Killian scoffed before he downed the rest of his rum. “So she can show up to a funeral but not a wedding.”

“Hook!” Mulan scolded him in a fierce whisper. “Back off her. She saw her only child buried today. It’s not the time to hold old grudges.”

“Yeah you didn’t have her hang up on you when you tried to tell her of her grandson’s birth,” Regina muttered bitterly. She took another sip of her seltzer before letting out a sigh. “It doesn’t matter anyway. No one’s going to punish that woman more than she’s punishing herself right now. I guarantee you that.”

Regina couldn’t imagine being estranged from Henry for so long only to wake up one morning and discover he’d died. She wouldn’t wish such a pain on anyone. Except perhaps her own mother…

Her thoughts were cut off when she caught sight of the buffet table. They were almost out of salad. “I should go talk to the caterers,” she said lifting herself off her stool.

Mulan shook her head at her. “Regina whatever’s so important I’m sure they can handle it without you.”

“I know but I’d rather make sure,” she insisted. “I just came here to check up on you two anyway. I mean you knew Marian longer than I did.”

“And yet not half as well,” replied Hook gently. He stared down at her with sorrowful eyes. He’d seen her flit from place to place nearly all day taking care of every detail. The illusion of determination on her face was only broken by the tears that could be seen welling up in her eyes. Still she continued to talk to drivers, funeral directors and caterers. He didn’t think she taken a minute to stop since she’d woken up.
“You were her best friend Regina and you’ve spent this whole day working. Making sure everything is just so. Perhaps you should just take a moment…”

“And do what?” she snapped at him. “Fall apart? Pretty sure Robin’s got that option monopolized.”

She saw them both cringe at her words and she ran her hands through her hair to calm herself. “I’m sorry. You know I didn’t mean it like that. I just- I promised him that I would take care of things. So I am. Okay?”

“Okay,” sighed Killian reluctantly. He watched her as she cantered her way into the kitchen and disappeared behind the door. Poor lass, he thought to himself.

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Regina’s footsteps echoed around her as she made her way down the underground hallway. This place could use some color, she thought to herself absentmindedly. Even if she hadn’t just been crippled by the unexpected loss of her best friend she was sure the blank white walls and gray tile floors would drive her to insanity. The flickering florescent lights were especially giving off a horror movie vibe.

She finally saw the door for the coroner’s office at the end of the hallway. Her heart beat faster in her chest as she reached with a shaking hand for the door knob. As she opened the door a middle-aged woman in a lab coat looked up at her from a desk. “May I help you?”

Regina pressed her lips together nervously as her grip on the handle tightened. “I was told I had to… identify my friend here.”

The woman gave her a sympathetic look from behind her glasses.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” she said solemnly. She stood and pulled out a blue paper from a drawer in her desk. “I’ll just need you to fill out this form before we get started.”

Regina silently took the form from her and grabbed a pen from the counter. As if on autopilot she filled out the sections on her name, address and occupation. Her hand trembled the entire time.

She cleared her throat as she handed the form back to woman behind the desk. The medical examiner sighed as she looked over the form and filed it in the proper spot.

Once finished she turned back to Regina with concern in her eyes. “Now that everything is in order I’m going to lead you to the back room. Your friend will be laid out on a table under a white sheet. I’m going to ask you if you’re ready and when you say that you are I’m going to pull back the sheet and show you her face. I just need you tell me if you know her and say her name. Do you think you can do that now?”

Regina swallowed hard as the examiner went through the procedure. Every step seemed impossible but she still silently nodded her head.

“Are you sure?” asked the examiner gently. “It would be perfectly fine if you’d prefer to wait for someone to do this with you. There’s no rush.”

Regina thought back to Robin leaning lifelessly against the wall in the bar. Then to Mulan, who was probably only halfway through contacting all the bars employees and telling them the news. And then to Killian, who was most likely taking care of Roland while he tried to pull Robin out of his stupor. She shook her head at the examiner. “No it’s fine. I can do it by myself.”
Her voice was thick with sorrow but the examiner just nodded at her encouragingly and placed guiding hand between her shoulders. As they moved closer to the backroom’s swinging door every step Regina took made her feel like she was knee-deep in water. Her throat tightened up as she walked through the door to see a single body covered with a white sheet a table in the center of the room. The medical examiner guided her to the side of the table as she reminded herself to keep breathing.

She reached for the edge of the sheet before turning back to Regina. “Are you ready?”

In and out. In and out. Regina slowly nodded her head at her. “Yes.”

The examiner pulled back the sheet and a heartbroken gasp escaped from Regina’s throat as her hands flew to her mouth. She spun away from the body as quickly as she could, determined not to lay eyes on it for a moment longer. Her arms wrapped around herself as she scrunched her eyes closed causing a few tears to fall.

“Miss do you know who this is?” she heard the Examiner ask from behind her back. “I know this is difficult but I need to hear you say so.”

Regina panted as she tried to stop the sobs from taking over her body. “Yes I do. That’s my best friend. Her name is Marian Locksely.”

The words felt like acid on her tongue. Her best friend was gone. Her caramel skin, which glowed in the sun, was now sallow with blood gone cold. Her hair, which used to bounce with curls as she walked, was now hanging limp around her face. And her brown eyes, which used to sparkle with love and excitement, were shut. And they would never open again. The woman on the table might carry her name but she would never be Marian. Not anymore.

The medical examiner quickly replaced the sheet over her face. She walked over to Regina and squeezed her shoulder comforting. “I’m sorry. I know this must be hard.”

Regina just turned to her with watery eyes. “Is there a bathroom nearby?”

“In the hall. It’ll be the second door on your right,” she replied automatically.

Like a blur Regina rushed from the office and headed for the bathroom. She’d barely gotten on her knees in front of the toilet before the vomit started to escape. Her hand gripped the seat for leverage as the nausea overtook her. Tears ran down her face the entire time. Once finished she leaned against the stall doors and let the sobs rack her body. How could this have happened? How could her beautiful, kind best friend just be taken like this? From her life, from her husband and child? How could that possibly be fair? Another wave of sorrow ran over her heart as she thought of Robin and Roland. The pain they must be feeling and the pain they would feel as time went on.

As her sobs finally subsided, she exited her stall and went to the mirror to clean herself up. Her reflection at the sink was a mess. Her face was still red from her crying and her eyes were now puffy and bloodshot. The vomit on the corner of her mouth didn’t do her any favors either. She quickly turned on the sink and washed her face. The cool water offered a little relief against her burning cheeks. She could hear her mother’s voice in the back of her head scolding her. Never let them see you cry Regina. Tears are a sign of weakness.

She put on a look of determination as she stared back at her reflection. Breakdowns like the one she’d just had were no longer an option. She owed it to her best friend to make sure that her family was okay. Robin and Roland were the true victims here. They’d lost one third of their family today and after what she saw in the bar Robin was in no way prepared to deal with it yet. So she would. Nothing mattered more to Marian than her son and husband. And now that she was no longer around to take care of them herself Regina
made a promise that she would do so for her.
Chapter 14

Regina grimaced as she walked up the stairs toward the bar office. She hadn’t been there since the day Marian died. If she had her way she’d never have to walk in that room again. However, the caterer somehow managed to break the can opener downstairs and she distinctly remembered leaving a manual one behind when she’d moved from the studio. It would probably still be in the kitchen drawers.

As she opened the office door her eyes flew to the corner next to the window. For a brief moment she remembered seeing Robin there on ground, stunned by the death of his wife. She quickly shook the memory from her head and walked over to the kitchen. Robin had told once told Marian that it seemed unprofessional to have a whole kitchen in a personal office. She’d only smirked at him and replied that she would hang a curtain if it bothered him so much. A small smile grew on Regina’s face as she rubbed the auburn velvet curtain between her fingers. When her best friend said she was going to do something she did it. Regina was going to miss that about Marian.

She sighed as she headed over to the kitchen counter and began searching through the old wooden drawers. Her breath caught in her throat as she opened the last drawer and her eyes fell to a small box of birthday candles.

“Marian I only have a fifteen minute break so what you’re showing me better be important,” said Regina as she made her way up the stairs.

Marian turned back to her with a mischievous look on her face. “I promise you’ll want to see this. Or better yet you’ll need to.”

Regina rolled her eyes as she followed her up the stairs. To be honest she didn’t care what Marian was showing her. She was only glad that it was something with the ability to help her forget her worries. At least for a while. Marian was around four months pregnant now and Regina was sure they’d have to announce her pregnancy soon. Her stomach was just beginning to round itself out and form a tiny bump. She was glowing but her fears over the pregnancy were still swarming around in her head. For the past few weeks she’d been more than a little withdrawn. So when Regina saw her practically bouncing in excitement over whatever surprise she was hiding in the bar office she couldn’t help but feel a little relieved.

As they walked into the office Marian locked the door behind her and pulled Regina over to the kitchen counter. Regina watched with a quizzical look on her face as Marian rooted through the refrigerator and pulled out a small pink box. She raised an eyebrow at it questioningly. “Okay a box containing… what? The world’s most delicious cream puff?”

Marian scoffed at her as she rolled her eyes. “Not exactly.”

She opened it to reveal a tiny chocolate cupcake. Regina pressed her lips together as she watched her friend reach into a drawer and pull out a small pack of birthday candles. “Marian…”

“For February 21st,” said Marian softly. “I know you know what this day means and thanks to the internet so do I.”

Regina gave her head a small shake. “My birthday is in April now. The 17th.”

“I know,” said Marian. “I know Regina Gardiner was born in April. But Regina Mills was born on
February 21st. And I think her birth is definitely something worth celebrating.”

“You wouldn’t think that if you knew what life she lived,” replied Regina sadly.

“I absolutely would,” said Marian in a firm voice. “Because even though I don’t know all of her tragedies I do know all of her strength. Regina Mills is the one who took the opportunity to jump out a bathroom window and run to something better. She saved the life of my best friend and her son. I know you’d prefer to forget her but I think you should thank her.”

“By blowing out a candle?”

“By never letting yourself forget the strength that she carried with her,” said Marian. She lit the candle and handed the cupcake over to Regina. “Make a wish for her. It seems to me like she was too afraid to make one for herself.”

Regina took the cupcake in her and stared down at the tiny flame tearfully. I wish that one day you’ll no longer have to hide yourself away, she thought to herself silently. That one day you can live the life you want without fear of it being taken away from you. She shut her eyes as she softly blew out the candle.

Marian smiled at her as she watched the tiny wisps of smoke disappear into the air. “Happy 25th birthday Regina Mills.”

“Thank you,” said Regina tearfully. A tiny giggle escaped her as she swiped off a tiny bit of frosting and brought it to her mouth. She looked over at Marian with a smile. “Split it with me?”

“I’m four months pregnant Regina. There was no way I’m not taking at least half,” Marian chuckled. They laughed together as they shared her cupcake and celebrated a life that even though it no longer existed still deserved recognition.

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Regina was never more grateful for the kitchen curtain than when the tears began to silently stream down her face. She leaned against the counter for support as inaudible sobs began to shake her shoulders. Marian was the only one who knew her secret and like she’d always promised she took it to her grave. There was no one left for her to talk to.

She straightened up as she heard the office door open. Thankfully the curtain hid her from whoever had come in.

“Yes I know he’s never spent time with us more before but what should that matter? He’s only a few months old.”

Regina knitted her eyebrows together in confusion. Who was that? She gently pulled back the curtain an inch so she could stealthily look into the office. Her eyes widened as she saw Marian’s mother pacing the office floor with a cell phone glued to her ear.

“Yes the father is still in the picture but I don’t see how that could be a problem,” she barked into the phone. “He’s just a bartender or something like that. George is a lawyer and I’m a doctor. He’d be much better off with us…Exactly…. Well how soon can you get the custody papers drawn up? I want my grandson as soon as possible.”

Listening to Monica’s words lit a spark inside Regina. It was her only daughter’s funeral and she was upstairs scheming of ways to steal her grandchild. It was despicable. For the first time in days Regina finally felt something other than despair and emptiness. At this moment all she could feel
was an uncontrollable rage.

Before she stop herself she’d ripped back the curtain, stomped over to Monica and snatched the phone out of her hands. She brought to her ear while Marian’s mother watched her in shock. “Hello whoever the hell this is. I’m Roland’s godmother and you should know that Mrs. Calhoun will not be requiring your services ever!”

She angrily hung up the phone as Monica glared at her with fury in her eyes. “How dare you!”

“No how dare you!” yelled Regina pointing an accusing finger at her. “You daughter died barely a week ago and you’re already plotting to steal your grandson away from his father?! At her funeral?! What kind of a person does that?! You know what? It doesn’t matter because it’s not going to happen. Roland is staying with his father.”

“My grandson belongs with me!” Monica said venomously. “I am not letting that man destroy him like he destroyed my daughter. Marian had a bright future until he slithered his way into her life! And look what happened to her! She died working in this miserable little bar, never having done anything important with her talents. And it is all his fault!”

Regina shook her head at her angrily. “Marian CHOSE to be with Robin! If she gave up a certain future it’s because YOU forced her to! He did not slither his way anywhere! He loved her more than anything and he loves Roland more than his own life! He was a damn good husband and he will continue to be an amazing father! I am not going to let you steal that away from him.”

Monica folded her arms across her chest and chuckled at Regina joylessly. “Wow! Well doesn’t he move on quick?”

Regina narrowed her eyes at her in anger. “Excuse me?”

“How long did you wait before hopping into bed with him? Was it before my daughter died or after?” she sneered.

Regina brought her hands to her forehead as her jaw dropped in shock. “Oh my god. You’re completely delusional.”

“Am I?” replied Monica raising an eyebrow. “You don’t think I’ve seen you all day? Strutting around with my daughter’s son attached to your hip. Being oh so comforting to her husband. Never leaving his side, always checking in. You probably couldn’t wait to take her place, could you?”

Regina put her hands on her hips and stared down Monica. “Your daughter was my best friend. She saved my life and my son’s life and I will owe her more than I can ever repay. So don’t you dare walk in here and accuse me of disgracing her memory in such a way! If I have attached myself to Robin and Roland in any way it’s because I made a promise to her that I would always look out for them if she couldn’t! A task that you seem utterly unconcerned with! She loved them both more than anything in the world! There was nothing she wanted more than for them to be a family together! And yet here you are on a day where we should be honoring her wishes and desires, plotting to rip them apart! Well you can just forget it because there is no way I am going to let you destroy her family to assuage your own guilt.”

“Well we’ll just see what the courts have to say about that,” Monica replied in a low voice.

Regina took a step closer to her. “If you so much as file for custody I promise I will take your dirty laundry and I will show it to the world. If this goes to court I will get on that stand and reveal to everyone how you kicked your only daughter out of the house for daring to fall in love with
someone you didn’t approve of. How she spent winter nights in a beat up mustang by the beach because you wouldn’t let her back in. I will tell everyone how when I called you to inform you and your husband –who by the way isn’t even present at her funeral- that your daughter had given you a grandson you said you wanted no part in the life of any child who belonged to ‘that man.’ I will take every parental mistake you ever made and I will make them public record. And I promise by the time I am finished you won’t be able to adopt a puppy from the pound, let alone get custody of Roland.”

Monica glared at her. “You wouldn’t dare.”

“Try me,” replied Regina in a warning voice. “I am sorry you lost your daughter Mrs. Calhoun, I truly am, but I am not going to let you steal her son.”

The two women stared each other down, the fury they felt visible behind their eyes. Finally Monica scoffed before turning on her heel and headed out of the office. As soon as she door shut behind her Regina felt her rage evaporate. She let out a deep breath and brought her hand to her chest.

“Well that was rather dramatic.”

Her head whipped toward the window to see Tink looking in from the fire escape. She was dressed in a black pencil skirt and white shirt with black suspenders. Regina quickly walked over to help her in the office. “Tink what are you doing out there?”

“I went out there after the funeral,” she said. “Sometimes after I finished fixing stuff around the bar Marian and I would sit out on the fire escape and have a Coke together. Talk about our days and stuff. After today I just…”

“You wanted to be near her,” finished Regina understandingly. “How long were you out there?”

“Long enough to hear your explosive battle with Mrs. Calhoun,” Tink answered softly.

“God I really hope no one else heard that,” sighed Regina.

“I can’t believe she accused you of sleeping with Robin.”

“Well she’s not the first person to think I’m his mistress, remember?”

A smile grew on Tink’s face as she thought back to the day she’d first met Regina. “You were in your pajamas sleeping in his studio. What else was I supposed to think?”

Regina chuckled at her as she looked around the office space. A lot of it had changed in the past three years but she would still think of it as her first home. The home that Marian gave her.

“It’s been so long since she first brought me here,” she whispered sadly. “I’ve always thought that I was really unlucky but I guess that can’t be true seeing as how I got the chance to meet her.”

“We were all lucky to know Marian,” said Tink. She wrapped her arms around herself and shrugged her shoulders. “You know I’ve always known that I was… strange.”

Regina sent her a small smile. “I think the term quirky is more befitting of your character Tink.”

She nodded concedingly. “Yeah well I’ve come across more than a few people who weren’t so accepting of my quirks. Marian was never one of them. No matter how weird I was she never once told me to change. I’ll always love her for that.”
Regina sighed. “You know I used to think that because of the way that she saved me, how she changed my life that she must’ve seen me as special or something.”

She shrugged her shoulders. “But after today I don’t think that’s true anymore. Everyone downstairs has some story of how she affected their lives and helped steer them toward a better path. She didn’t save me because of who I was. She did it because of who she was. She was just so kind.”

“Well that’s true,” said Tink. “Marian was the kindest person I’ve ever met and a lot of people were fortunate enough to call her a good friend but you’re the only person she was able to call her best friend.”

Regina scoffed at her but Tink only continued.

“I’m serious,” she insisted. “The way you helped her with her pregnancy and Roland’s delivery. You saved her as much as she saved you. And I think she would’ve been so grateful for the way you defended her family today.”

Tears welled up in Regina’s eyes. “I miss her… so much.”

“I know,” said Tink, wrapping her arms around her. “We all do.”

Regina returned Tink’s hug and let a few of her tears fall onto her shoulder. She rubbed her back just before releasing her. “We should head back downstairs.”

Regina took a moment to wipe the tears from her face before looping her arm through Tink’s. Together they headed for the stairs shutting the office door behind them. Can opener forgotten.

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Robin tugged at the edges of his suit as he sat a bar table listening to yet another person express their condolences. Just the same words over and over again. We’re sorry she’s gone. She was such a good person. If there’s anything we can do…. It was becoming tiresome. He’d just seen Marian’s mother rush her way out of the bar and he couldn’t say he wasn’t relieved that she was gone. Her presence hadn’t made this day any easier. Not that she’d spoken to him.

He sighed as he pulled at the tie around his neck. No matter how much he loosened it he still felt like he couldn’t breathe. He quickly excused himself and went to take a seat at one of the open booths. He just needed a moment alone away from everything. It still didn’t feel real. None of it did.

He ran his thumb over the thin gold band on his opposite ring finger. This wedding band was supposed to be a symbol of his eternal commitment to his wife. What did it represent now that she was gone? His loss? Unfulfilled dreams? Despite the lack of satisfying options he knew he wouldn’t be able to take it off even if he tried. He still remembered the day when he’d bought their rings. A simple gold band for him and thin white gold band for Marian. They’d spent no more than three hundred bucks on them combined. He’d always promised her that when he could finally afford it he’d get her a diamond. Yet another dream that would go unaccomplished.

He looked over when he felt a gentle tap on his shoulder. It was Mrs. Connelly staring down at him with caring eyes. She held Roland on her hip as she swayed back and forth keeping him calm. Robin felt his heart clench as his eyes fell to his son. Despite the dimples on both of his cheeks all he could see was Marian’s face staring back at him.

“Hello dear,” said Mrs. Connelly gently. “I fed Roland a few minutes ago. He seems pretty settled
if you’d like to spend some time with him?”

Robin swallowed hard as he stared at his son. No matter how hard he tried he couldn’t stop the pain that pierced his heart whenever he looked at him.

“I actually have some matters to attend to with the funeral director,” he lied, as he stood to his feet. “If you don’t mind could you take him to Regina? She plans to take him home for the night anyway.”

“Of course,” said Mrs. Connelly in a hushed voice. As Roland cooed in her arms she watched Robin walk away from her with a frown on her face.

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Regina and Tink separated soon after they returned downstairs. Tink headed over to the bar counter with Mulan and Killian to toast to Marian’s memory. Regina instead headed for over to the table where everyone was storing their coats and purses. She needed to call the daycare and let them know she would be late picking up Henry.

As she made her way across the bar she was intercepted by Mrs. Connelly and Roland.

“Hi dear I hope I’m not bothering you,” said the tiny woman. “It’s just that my cab is here and I have to get going.”

“Oh it’s no problem at all Mrs. Connelly,” said Regina lifting Roland from her arms. “Thank you for watching him.”

“I didn’t mind at all sweetheart,” she said reaching out to stroke Roland’s cheek. “He reminds me so much of his mother.

“Well thanks again for all your help,” said Regina moving to walk away from her. Mrs. Connelly quickly reached out to grab her arm.

“Actually dear, I wanted to talk to you… about Robin,” she said in a hushed voice.

Regina gave her a quizzical look. “What is it?”

“It’s just… he doesn’t seem like himself.”

“He’s gone through a lot Mrs. Connelly. That’s to be expected,” she replied.

“No it was more than that,” insisted Mrs. Connelly. “When I took Roland over to him it was like he couldn’t even look at him.”

Regina sighed as adjusted Roland on her hip. “He’s probably just tired from everything that’s happened today. If we give him some time he’ll find his way again. I’m sure of it.”

“Well as long as you’re sure dear,” conceded Mrs. Connelly. “I’d keep a close eye on him though.”

“Of course,” said Regina nodding her head. “Have a safe trip home.”

She tried to shake the older woman’s comments from her head as she headed over to the pile of jackets and searched for her purse. It wasn’t surprising that Robin had taken Marian’s death hard. She of all people knew the pain that comes with losing someone you love. Robin needed time to mourn and she fully intended to give it to him. She quickly found her purse and began to dig through it for her cell phone. As she lifted it to her ear her eyes fell to the bar counter where she
saw Robin reach behind the barrier and pull up a bottle of whiskey. She watched as he made his way up the stairs with the bottle in hand tugging at the tie around his neck. She held Roland tighter as a heavy layer of dread settled over her heart.
Chapter 15

“Listen Tony I don’t care if you sent the case of vodka, I care that it was smashed on the way over.”

Regina held the phone between her ear and shoulder as she dug through the file cabinet for the bar’s monthly budget. Taking over management of the bar was more stressful than she’d expected. Luckily years under her mother’s tutelage had left her prepared.

It had been a few weeks since Marian’s death and everyone was trying to get back on their feet. Smiles had started to return and every once in a while there was a little laughter. It was hard but everyone was trying to regain some sense of normalcy. Well almost everyone…

She looked up from the file in her hand when she saw Killian poke his head into the office. He held up a small clipboard and she quickly waved him in.

“Look I’m not asking for a whole refund, just a reduced price for the liquor that was lost,” she argued. “I’m not paying for booze I never even got the chance to sell because your delivery boy was clumsy.”

Killian watched her with an amused look as she worked. After the funeral it didn’t take him long to realize that Regina was more fit to run the bar than he was. She was better with the numbers and budgets and she was clearly more than capable of dealing with all the bar’s vendors. He was better off downstairs. Dealing with the employees and customers was more his speed.

“Yes I do know that you’re running a business,” sighed Regina rolling her eyes. “I also know that your business is relying heavily on word of mouth right now. And I don’t think that future clients would be too pleased to hear how you’ve screwed my bar… Just take the case off the bill and give me five percent of my next order and I’ll consider us good. Okay? … Thanks for seeing it my way. The check will be in the mail.”

She groaned as she hung up the phone. “The lack of common sense and sympathy is astounding today.”

“Rough morning?” asked Killian handing her the clipboard.

“More like few days,” she replied taking it from him. “What’s this?”

“The napkin order came in. Needs your signature,” he answered.

“Yes I do know that you’re running a business,” sighed Regina rolling her eyes. “I also know that your business is relying heavily on word of mouth right now. And I don’t think that future clients would be too pleased to hear how you’ve screwed my bar… Just take the case off the bill and give me five percent of my next order and I’ll consider us good. Okay? … Thanks for seeing it my way. The check will be in the mail.”

She groaned as she hung up the phone. “The lack of common sense and sympathy is astounding today.”

“Rough morning?” asked Killian handing her the clipboard.

“More like few days,” she replied taking it from him. “What’s this?”

“The napkin order came in. Needs your signature,” he answered.

“Of course,” she said writing her name on the bottom line. “How Marian dealt with all this and kept a smile on her face I will never know.”

She handed him back the clipboard with a sigh. It had gotten a little easier to talk about Marian these days. It was still painful but Regina could now think of her and smile instead of crying.

“Did you check in with Mulan?” she asked.

“Yeah,” said Killian softly. “She looked in on Robin this morning.”

Regina hesitated before asking, “How was he?”

“He was better,” said Killian.
“Was he sober?” she questioned bluntly.

“Yes,” answered Killian, a little defensively.

“Huh,” breathed Regina, passing back the clipboard. “Well that’s gotta be the first time in at least a week.”

Killian groaned. “Regina…”

She rolled her eyes at him. It was no secret that Robin hadn’t taken the loss of Marian well. He’d sunk into a deep depression only worsened by his growing dependency on alcohol. Regina hadn’t seen him completely sober since the funeral. As if that wasn’t worrying enough he seemed to be pulling away from Roland as well. He’d barely held him in weeks. Regina and everyone else at the bar had been taking turns caring for them both. It was all very troubling.

“He’s just going through a rough time right now,” argued Killian.

“No Killian,” said Regina. “For him to go through something he’d have to be moving forward. What he’s doing is staying completely still.”

“The man just lost his wife. Let’s cut him some slack,” said Killian. “Besides Mulan said he was better this morning. He’s even watching Roland by himself today.”

Regina narrowed her eyes at him. “She left them alone?”

“She had to go pick up her mom for her final checkup. Robin was completely sober when she left. They’ll be fine.”

“He hasn’t spent a lot of time alone with Roland since Marian died,” pointed out Regina sadly.

“Then maybe this is what he needs. A reminder he has something to live for,” said Killian gently. “If you’re still worried you can check up on him after work but I think you should give them some time together.”

Regina sighed as she thought over Killian’s words. She knew the pain that Robin must be feeling. She felt it when she’d lost Daniel. It was only the thought of protecting Henry that got her through those first few months after his death. Maybe Roland could do the same for Robin if given the chance?

“Fine,” she agreed reluctantly. “I’ll give them some space and check up on them later this afternoon.”

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That day was the longest day Regina had ever worked. She could hardly focus on anything in front of her. All she could think of was Robin and Roland and how much she wanted to rush over to them. She tried her best to rein in her apprehension but she couldn’t stop the gut feeling that something was going wrong. Only by sheer force of will was she able to stay at the bar but as soon as the clock struck four she was out of the office and rushing over to Robin’s apartment.

It wasn’t a good sign when she got there to see Mrs. Connelly knocking on the apartment door, rather relentlessly. As she got closer she could hear Roland’s cries pouring through the walls. “Mrs. Connelly?”

The older woman turned her head, her gray hair going over her shoulder. “Oh Regina! Thank god, I
was just about to call the super!”

“What’s going on?” she said rushing to her side.

“Well I was in my apartment and I heard Roland start crying. At first I wasn’t worried but then it went on and on. It just didn’t stop. I thought I’d come over and help out but I’ve been knocking on the door for the past ten minutes and there’s been no answer! I thought I was going to have to break the door down,” she babbled.

If she wasn’t so worried Regina would’ve laughed at the idea of the tiny woman in front of her breaking down the apartment door. With Roland’s cries filling the hallway she doubted she could find the humor in anything. She quickly guided Mrs. Connelly back towards her apartment. “It’s alright Mrs. Connelly I’ll use my key and check in on everything.”

“Ok dear you call me if you need anything,” she said before disappearing into her apartment. Regina let out a deep breath as she heard all her locks click in place. She tried to calm herself as she dug into her purse for her spare key. She hadn’t been to visit in almost two days. If Roland had been crying for as long as Mrs. Connelly said then who knows what she would find in that apartment.

As soon as she cracked open the door she was hit with the stench of alcohol and body odor. It was like entering an alcoholic’s locker room. She stumbled as she shut the door behind her, tripping over Robin’s old jogging shoes. They hadn’t been used since before Roland’s birth. She clenched her jaw as she found Robin passed out on the couch in living room. He was still in nothing but a pair of sweatpants and a ratty old wife beater. The same outfit she’d seen him in on her last visit. The hair on his chin was yet again closing in on beard territory and with one breath she could already tell that he hadn’t showered in days. If it wasn’t for the steady rising and falling of his chest she would swear that he was dead.

Regina wrinkled her nose in disgust as she made her way back to the bedroom. The apartment seemed to be a wreck. She could see dirty dishes piled in the sink and empty beer bottles crowded around the bottom of the couch. A group of flies was hovering over an uneaten pizza sitting on the kitchen table and she swore she saw a cockroach scramble under the fridge. A few months ago this was a home filled with warmth and love but now it was just rotting. Regina couldn’t help but feel that Marian would be horrified to see her family living in such a state.

She found Roland in the bedroom, laying in his crib with his face red from crying out for attention. She quickly gathered him in her arms and shushed him soothingly as she rocked him from side to side. Poor baby. His cries began to subside as she rubbed his back in comforting circles. After a quick check she could see nothing wrong with him. No dirty diaper or injuries. It seemed that Roland had only wanted a little affection. *Something he should be getting from his father,* she thought to herself. Her eyes fell to the picture of Marian and Roland on the nightstand. It was one taken not long after Roland’s birth. Most likely within their first week home. The smile on Marian’s face as she looked down at her newborn son was brighter than any star on a clear night. As Regina ran her fingers over the frame she was reminded of how the tiny baby in her arms was thing her best friend cared about the most. And just like that his neglect became unacceptable.

She placed Roland back into his crib before angrily stomping back into the living room. “Robin!”

She yelled out his name before he was even in sight. As she rounded the corner she could see him still passed out on the couch, utterly undisturbed by her outburst. “Robin!”

Despite her voice shrill screech he remained deep in slumber. His lack of response lit a fire under her. Before she could stop herself she reached out and slapped him on his cheek. “Get up!” she
Robin’s eyes flew open as the sting of her hand burned through his face. He looked up at her startled and confused. As soon as her got his bearings he narrowed his eyes at her in anger. “What the hell are you doing??!”

“Getting you up the only way I know how apparently.” She angrily threw her purse on the coffee table as she glared down at him. “Robin enough is enough. You have to stop this!”

“Stop what?” he growled up at her as he rose to a sitting position. “Getting assaulted in my own home?”

“No Robin you have to stop this!” She waved her hand around at the apartment. “This drinking, neglectful phase of yours has to end! You can’t live like this anymore!”

“And just how am I supposed to live?” he snapped at her. “Please tell me because I’m having a hard time trying to figure out!”

“Well maybe it would help if you actually started putting in a little effort instead of getting black out drunk before five,” she retorted angrily.

He only glared at her in response. She took a deep breath and tried to reel in her anger. “Robin I understand that things are difficult for you right now. Losing Marian—”

“No don’t do that!” he interrupted venomously, as he stood up to face her. “Don’t pretend like you know how it feels to lose her! Let’s make one thing clear! You popped up three years ago. She was in my life for more than a decade. I have loved her since I was a teenager. She has always been at my side and now she’s gone! So you might have been close to her but you have no idea what it’s like to lose her! Not like I do!”

“And what, do you think Marian was the first loss I ever experienced in my life?” she snarled at him. “Do you think you’re the first person to lose someone who was so much a part of you, you feel like you died with them? You’re not! I lost someone who was my entire world and it almost broke me! The only reason it didn’t was because I had something worth living for. My son!”

She saw Robin’s anger waver as she mentioned her son.

“Henry was the only reason I had to go on,” she said, tears welling up in her eyes. “Loving him, protecting him, being what he needed was what helped pull me out of my despair over his father. Now you tell me Robin, why can’t you let Roland do the same for you?”

Robin shut his eyes and let out a sad breath as he felt the fight in him disappear. “Regina…”

“No tell me now!” she asked desperately. “Because since Marian died you’ve barely been able to look at him and I want to know why!”

“Because it hurts me!” he cried. “It hurts me to look at him and see her face! Every time I see him or hear him it reminds me that he’s going to grow up without her. That he’s going to walk and she won’t see it. He’s going to talk and she’ll never hear his voice. Being reminded of that hurts me.”

He turned away from her with shame on his face. Regina shook her head at him pitifully, a tear running down her cheek. The despair in his eyes and the slump of his shoulders told her that he was more than broken, he was shattered.

“He’s already lost his mother,” she choked out. “Don’t let him lose his father too.”
“He hasn’t lost me,” mumbled Robin.

“Well he’s going to,” said Regina. “Because Marian’s mother wants to sue you for custody.”

He whipped his head back to face her in shock. “What?”

“I overheard her at the funeral,” she explained tiredly. “She thinks Roland will be better off with her and Marian’s father. She’s going to take him away from you.”

“No,” said Robin, shaking his head frantically. “No she can’t do that!”

“Yes Robin she can,” said Regina bluntly. “She can do that because this shattered, shell of a man in front of me can barely seem to take care of himself, let alone his four-month old. If you want to keep your son Robin then things have to change. You have to start being his father again.”

“I am his father!” said Robin, raising his voice. “That hasn’t changed!”

“Then prove it!” ordered Regina. She pointed down the hallway towards the bedroom. “If you are still his father, then you will go to your son, pick him up and let him know that things are going to be okay.”

As he stared down the hallway Robin’s feet suddenly felt full of lead. He turned to see Regina leveling a harsh gaze upon him.

“Robin…” she urged. “Go.”

He shuffled down the hallway under the weight of her unwavering stare. As he shut the door to the bedroom behind him he reminded himself to breathe. The pressure in his chest grew heavier as he looked over at Roland’s crib. His son laid on his back cooing to himself as he sucked on one of his hands. He wiggled with excitement as he saw his father approach his crib. Robin swallowed hard as he lifted his son into his arms and pressed a kiss to his forehead. He ran his thumb along Roland’s cheek and stared into the brown eyes that were an exact match to his wife’s.

“Hey there son,” he whispered. “I’m here now. And I promise I will never leave again.”

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Robin stayed in the bedroom with Roland for quite a while. He didn’t know exactly how long. He just knew that he was only able to set his son down when he fell asleep against his chest. When he finally left the bedroom he found Regina standing in the kitchen, cooking a small piece of chicken in a frying pan. She looked over as he emerged from the hallway but didn’t say anything to him.

One look around the apartment told him that she’d cleaned up while he was with Roland. He cleared his throat awkwardly as he settled onto a bar stool by the kitchen counter. “You know you didn’t have to clean up.”

“Well someone had to,” she mumbled. She finished cooking and put the chicken on a small plate which she set in front of him.

“Eat,” she ordered.

“What if I’m not hungry?” replied Robin raising an eyebrow at her.

She folded her arms across her chest. “I have a three-year-old Robin. You are not going to win that game. Trust me.”
He sighed before taking a small bite. He hadn’t really eaten properly in days. In his drunken haze it hadn’t really been a priority. An awkward silence filled the kitchen as Robin ate and Regina loaded the frying pan into the dishwasher. After she switched it onto a light rinse she turned to him with her lips pressed together nervously. “How’s your cheek?”

He swallowed before answering her. “It stings less.”

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, her voice tainted with embarrassment over her outburst.

“Don’t be,” responded Robin softly. “I have been a crap boss and a crap father lately, so that slap was actually a long time coming.”

He hesitated before speaking again. “I’m sorry that I said that you couldn’t know how I felt. That was… mean-spirited and arrogant of me.”

She shrugged her shoulders at him. “Well it’s not like I wave my pain around like a flag. How could you have known how I felt?”

“The ring was a pretty big tip off.”

Regina’s hand flew to the ruby engagement ring that still hung around her neck.

“Starving homeless single mom doing all she can to survive… yet she won’t sell the piece of jewelry that hangs around her neck,” mused Robin. “That has to mean something.”

She sighed before answering him. “This was my engagement ring. When Daniel died in the fire this was all I had left of him. No pictures, no letters. Just this ring.”

“I can see how that would mean a lot to you,” he said softly.

She nodded at him as she leaned against the counter. “Robin I know how it feels to come so close to having everything you ever wanted and then having it ripped away from you with no warning. I felt that pain when Daniel died.”

“Maybe,” said Robin. “But as far as I can tell you didn’t have to become a drunk to deal with the pain.”

“I was pregnant at the time. It wasn’t an option,” she replied bluntly. She gave him a serious look as she stared at him from across the counter. “If it was just you Robin, I would say that the universe owed you a little self-destruction. After what you’ve been through how could it not. But it’s not just you anymore. You have a son now. You’re a single parent now and that means he depends on you for everything. So when you choose to waste your time destroying yourself it means you’re destroying him too.”

He sighed as he leaned back in his seat and shook his head sadly. “We waited so long for him. We wanted so badly to be a family together that I just- I never once thought about doing it on my own. She was always supposed to be here with us and now that she’s not… I just don’t know how I’m going to raise him alone.”

Regina tilted her head at him. “Do you really think you’re that alone? Robin we all want to help you. Mulan, Killian, Tink, me. We all want to be there for you both. Do you really think that if you needed something from us you’d have to do anything more than just ask for it?”

“I know,” he sighed, rubbing his hands over his face. “I know you all want to see me get back on my feet but the truth is I don’t even know where to start.”
“You can start by showing up to work tomorrow,” she said.

At the mention of work a look of apprehension flashed across Robin’s face. At the sight of it Regina reached over and grabbed his hand. “You know when Marian was pregnant she was afraid of a lot of things. Whether Roland would survive, whether she would be a good mother, if she was cut out for it? But one of the things she never doubted was whether you’d be a good dad. She knew in her heart that no matter what you would be a fantastic father. That’s how much faith she had in you.”

“I miss her,” breathed Robin.

“I know,” said Regina squeezing his hand comfortingly. “But it’s time for you to start learning how to live without her. We have the semi-annual meeting with the bar accountant tomorrow at nine. If you’re half the man she thought you were you will get up, get dressed and show up for it. You don’t have to be happy about it, you don’t feel okay with it. You just have to do it. That’s where you start.”

She looked over at the clock as she released his hand. “I have to pick Henry up from daycare.”

She walked over to the living room, picked up her purse and headed for the door. As her hand wrapped around the door knob, she turned to back to him with a pleading look on her face. “Marian always believed in you. Please don’t disappoint her.”

Her words washed over him like a bucket of ice water. He only nodded slightly before she walked out the door.

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The next morning, Regina drummed her fingers against the bar counter as she watched the clock above the door. It was already 8:50. With every passing minute she grew more and more nervous that Robin wouldn’t show up for the meeting. She’d really thought that she’d gotten through to him the day before.

“It doesn’t look like he’s going to show, love.”

She sighed as she felt Killian walk up behind her. She turned to him with a sad look in her eyes. “I just really thought he was ready to move forward, you know?”

“I know,” said Killian nodding his head at her. “But Lani’s taking care of set up, so we should prepare for the meeting.”

“Right,” she agreed, reluctantly. They both began to head for the stairs but stopped in their tracks when they heard the bell above the door ring. Robin stepped into the bar with Roland’s car seat in his hands and a nervous look on his face. “Sorry I’m late. Had a little trouble with the seat belt.”

Lani strode out of the storage room but slowed to a stop when she saw Robin standing near the door. Shock colored her face as she observed him. He looked better than he had in weeks. His beard was gone. He’d clearly showered and for the first time in weeks he was fully dressed.

“Robin? What are you doing here?”

“I came for the meeting with the accountant,” he said setting Roland’s car seat on the counter. The baby boy was still sound asleep in his carrier.

“Are you sure you want to stay for it?” asked Killian gently. “We don’t mind taking the bullet if you don’t feel like it.”
“No,” said Robin shaking his head. “I think its best that I go but I’ll need some help going over the books for the past few months.”

“I’ll help you,” said Regina with a small smile. “I’ve been taking care of them for the past few weeks. I should be able to get you up to speed.”

“Thanks,” he said nodding at her. He hesitated before addressing them all. “Look, I know that I have been… down for the past few weeks. Your patience with that has meant so much to me but I think it’s time for me to start getting back on my feet here. So I’m going to ask for a little bit more understanding from you while I get readjusted to everything.”

“Of course,” said Killian, nodding his head. “We’ll help you keep things together. Just glad to have you back.”

“We’re also glad to see Roland here with you,” said Mulan, smiling at the baby. “I guess he’ll be coming to work with you from now on?”

“Yes,” sighed Robin. “At least until I can find some reliable childcare. Anybody mind?”

“Not at all,” said Killian shaking head. “Do you want us to watch the lad as Regina gets you all caught up?”

Robin nodded at him. “Yeah that’s probably best.”

He watched as Mulan and Hook fawned over Roland while Regina approached him with a nervous smile. “I’m glad you showed up. How are you feeling?”

“Not that great,” he answered honestly. “I think coming here today just might be one of the hardest things I’ve ever done.”

“Yeah that sounds about right,” said Regina nodding her head, as she looked down at her shoes. They were headed for the staircase when Robin hesitantly asked. “Is it always going to be this hard?”

She shrugged as she turned back to face him. “It gets easier as time goes by.”
Chapter 16

EIGHT MONTHS LATER

Robin still couldn’t believe that his son was actually a year old. Where did the time go?

Their celebration wasn’t a large affair. Just a small party with the people who meant the most. Regina, Henry, Killian, Mulan and Tink. All in their swimsuits they’d huddled at a table under a large yellow beach umbrella near a splash pad that Robin and Regina frequented with their boys. It wasn’t fancy but at least his son seemed to be enjoying himself. The one year-old baby boy bounced happily in his father’s lap as everyone around him sang. He clapped his hands in excitement as his godmother set a small cupcake and lit candle in front of him. Presents were stuffed under the table as everyone gathered around to watch Roland blow out his candle.

“Happy Birthday to you! Happy Birthday to you! Happy Birthday dear Roland! Happy Birthday to you!”

“Come on sweetie, make a wish,” urged Regina with a grin.

Robin chuckled at his son’s indifference to the candle atop his birthday cupcake. “It doesn’t look like this is a year for wishes,” he said snuffing out the candle.

“I’ll blow out the candle!!” cried Henry eagerly.

“No,” giggled Regina. “You blew out the candle at your birthday and you made a wonderful wish then.”

Henry crossed his arms and pouted in response. All the adults laughed at his reaction. He’d grown a lot in the past few months and Regina swore he looked more like Daniel every day. She could see it in the slant of his nose and the shape of his ears. Even in the way he pouted. At a little over three feet he was one of the tallest kids in his daycare class and definitely the most imaginative. The only time he wasn’t lost in his own world was when he was with their friends from the bar.

“I wanna play on the pad with Roland,” he said.

“Alright,” said Robin with a smile, as he lifted his son from his lap. “Hold hands and make sure he doesn’t fall.”

“Okay,” drawled Henry. Robin watched them carefully as the four-year-old, in his tropical swim tee and matching shorts, guided his waddling son over to the splash pad. The fact that Roland was walking was still incomprehensible to him.

“Tink would you mind watching the boys on the splash pad and making sure they don’t drink the water?” asked Regina.

Tink looked up from her Coke with wide eyes. “But I was gonna make a sand castle on the beach!”

Mulan rolled her eyes at her. “Go and play with your sand Tink. I will watch the boys on the pad.”

“Thank you,” said Regina gratefully taking a seat next to Robin at the table. She softly hissed as she lowered herself into a sun-heated chair. For at least the second time that day she regretted not bringing an extra beach towel for her seat. Her halter bikini top did very little to protect her bare skin from the burning plastic.
“I’m actually more concerned with grabbing another a cupcake,” said Killian, rising from his seat at the table. “Are there more in the car?”

Robin raised an eyebrow at him as he leaned back in his chair. “Wouldn’t that be your third one? Might want to slow down, mate, before you gain a gut.”

Regina let out a deep throated chuckle at Robin’s quip while Killian just glared at him. “Well unlike you, Mr-gets-up-at-six-to-run, I’m not in the business of denying myself small pleasures.”

Regina rolled her eyes at him. “There are more in the cooler Killian. Just check the trunk.”

“Thank you,” he said pointedly nodding his head at her before taking off in the direction of the car.

Once Killian was gone, Robin sighed as he directed his attention back to the boys. He watched as Mulan and Henry guided a happily squealing Roland through the splash pad. The dimples in his cheeks flashed as he ran his hands through the spouts of rushing water. His son appeared to be having the time of his life.

“Goes by quick doesn’t it?”

He turned his head back to Regina who gave him a sympathetic look.

“The first year,” she clarified. “I swear Henry’s happened in the blink of an eye.”

“Yes, it’s been one hell of a ride,” agreed Robin. “There wasn’t a single moment that wasn’t unforgettable.” He sighed to himself as he thought over the past year. It’d been quite a rollercoaster. Gaining a son, losing a wife, trying to find his footing again. Learning to live without Marian was quite possibly one of the hardest things he’d ever done but somehow he’d made it work. He hadn’t touched a drop of liquor in months and caring for Roland had gotten slightly easier now that he had begun sleeping through the night. The bar had become a bit of an escape for him. Working on keeping things together there gave his mind something to focus on. Though sometimes he focused a little too hard. He’d nearly forgotten to set up something for Roland’s birthday. The splash pad had really been Regina’s doing.

“Hey thanks again for the birthday party,” he said gratefully.

She waved him off with a scoff. “Robin, please. All I did was bring cupcakes and find an empty table. It was the least I could do. Remember when you surprised me with Henry’s first birthday party?”

“Oh yes,” said Robin, grinning at the memory. “I remember Marian sending me back to the store twice because I kept picking up the wrong ice cream cake.”

“You have no one to blame but yourself for that,” laughed Regina. “Who doesn’t check the written icing before leaving the store? Twice?”

“I’m so sorry that I decided to have faith in the store owner’s record keeping,” he said shrugging his shoulders. “He seemed like he knew what he was doing.”

Regina rested her head on the back of her chair. “I don’t think I’d ever seen Marian so frustrated with you before.”

“Trust me I didn’t hear the end of that for weeks,” said Robin in a nostalgic tone. He wistfully ran his thumb over the wedding band that still graced his right ring finger. “I only wish she was here to see this.”
Regina gave him a sympathetic look. “She sees it.”

He raised an eyebrow at her. “Do you really believe that?”

“Yes,” she said nodding her head without hesitation. “I have to. Believing in the alternative isn’t that appealing.”

He nodded his head in agreement. “Well you’re right about that.”

Some days it still haunted Robin how much of Roland’s life Marian had lost the chance to be a part of. Birthdays, graduations and school days she’d never get to experience. He supposed believing that she was watching over them from a distance was better than believing she wasn’t watching at all.

“I know she’s proud of you for how you’ve stepped up to take care of Roland,” Regina said softly.

“Yes well I had help,” he said sending her a small smile. “You know I don’t know how I would’ve gotten through these past few months without you.”

“You would’ve found a way,” she insisted. “Good parents always do.”

“Well thankfully I learned from the best,” he said gratefully.

Regina had been a godsend for Robin in the last few months. She’d helped him learn to care for Roland by himself while more often than not lending a hand. His son spent nearly as much time with her as he did with him and he doubted that he would’ve been able to adjust as well without her to guide him.

“I’ve actually been meaning to talk to you about something,” she said nervously swiping her palms on her thighs.

He observed her with a tilted head. “Is this as my friend or my employee?”

“Employee,” she answered with an anxious smile. “I’m gonna need some more time off.”

Robin groaned at her request. “Again?”

“It’s prom season,” she explained shrugging her shoulders. “I’m already backed up and I just had three more adjustment orders come in.”

Robin shook his head at her in confusion. Her side business sewing and designing dresses had grown larger than she’d expected. Sometimes working at the bar and taking care of Henry made it hard for her to keep up. This was the third time she’d asked for time off in four months.

“I know you could support yourself just fine from the dresses,” Robin pointed out. “Why do you even still work at the bar?”

“I enjoy the company,” she said in a strong voice. “You know you guys are like family to me. I’d miss you if I left.”

“It’s not like you’d lose us,” he insisted. “You come to work dead tired anyway. Why do you think I keep you up in the office with me and Roland for the first hour?”

She smirked at him. “And to think I thought you were just terrible at numbers.”

Robin narrowed his eyes at her. Math wasn’t exactly his strong suit. Ever since he’d returned to be
the bar manager Regina had been helping out with the budgeting side of the business. It was also nice to have a second pair of hands around to help with Roland, seeing as how he spent every day in the office with his father.

“You’ve been an incredible help Regina but whenever you come in I can already tell you need a break.”

She gave him a long serious look. “I’m not quitting Robin.”

“I’m not saying you have to quit but cutting back might not be such a bad idea.”

She threw her head back and let out a groan. “Fine. I’ll only work three days a week.”

“Two.”

“Two?” she said raising her eyebrows at him in shock.

“Two,” he insisted. “Tuesdays and Wednesdays. You can come in for the night shift. I’ll take care of Henry while you work.”

“I’ll give you two days a week but they’ll be Friday and Saturday. Not weekdays,” she bartered, leaning forward in her seat.

“Fine but you’re working the lunch shift, not the night shift. Final offer,” he said offering her his hand.

After a moment’s hesitation she shook it firmly. “Deal but only until prom season is over.”

“We’ll see,” said Robin with a smirk.

Their conversation was cut off by the return of their sons. Henry, demanding more excitement, pulled them both toward the beach to search for sea shells and starfish. As Robin dug through the sand with his son, his friend and her son he couldn’t help but think this wasn’t how he thought he’d be spending Roland’s first birthday. He’d always thought that Marian would be with him. But as Henry proudly held up a conch shell to his mother and she marveled at it appropriately, he thought that if she couldn’t be here he was glad that they were.

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Regina let out a deep breath as she eyed the dressed up mannequin in the middle of her living room. Hands on her hips and hair tucked behind her ears she circled it critically. She always felt nervous when she was finishing up one of her designs. Constantly wondering if she had overlooked or left out something that could make it better. The dress she was currently working on was a night sky blue, formal length number. Strapless with a sweetheart neckline, the bodice was overlaid with a thin gossamer fabric while the skirt was made of more than three layers of dark organza. It was beautiful but she still thought it needed a little something extra to take it over the top. Her train of thought was broken when Henry ran up to her side.

“Is Uncle Robin here yet?” he asked for the fourth time that hour.

Regina kneeled down to his eye level with a chuckle. “I told you Henry. Uncle Robin will be here when you hear him knock on the door. Now did you get all your books together for our library visit tomorrow?”

He looked away and lied softly, “Yes.”
Regina narrowed her eyes at him. “Henry…”

“I don’t know where the elephant book is,” he admitted with a shrug of his shoulders.

“Well go look through your shelves. I’m sure it’s there,” she said giving him a guiding pat between his shoulders. “Go on.”

She let out a contented sigh as she watched him shuffle off to his room. Regina hated to admit it but cutting back at work had done her a world good. Trying to keep up with Henry and the bar and her dresses had been wearing her thinner than she realized. Now that she was only working two days a week at the Drunken Monk she felt more refreshed than she had in months. Waking up was no longer painful and Henry was certainly happy to be spending more time with her now that she worked from home. Tonight, however, he would be spending time with his favorite uncle. Robin had agreed to take Henry out to see the new Avengers film while she finished hemming some of her dress orders. The two of them had really bonded over their mutual love of superheroes and Robin had read him more comic books than she could keep up with.

She looked over at the door when she heard a knock. Robin stood on the other side with his hands in the pockets of his hoodie. “Is my sidekick ready to go?”

“He should be out momentarily,” she answered, letting him in the apartment.

Like a flash Henry ran out of his room and jumped into Robin’s arms. “Uncle Robin’s here!”

Robin laughed and thanked his good reflexes as he lifted Henry into his arms. “Yes I am and I promise we are going to have an explosive time watching this movie!”

“And will we get pizza after?”

“It wouldn’t be a movie night if we didn’t,” said Robin with a grin.

Regina laughed as she watched them plan out their evening. “Where’s Roland?”

“I left him with Mrs.Connelly for the night,” answered Robin. “She was more than eager to take him off my hands.”

Regina hummed in understanding before narrowing her eyes at her son. “Honey, where’s your Hulk shirt? I thought you wanted to wear it.”

“I couldn’t find it,” mumbled Henry, shrugging his shoulders.

“I laid it out on your bed for you.”

“I didn’t see it,” he insisted.

Regina chuckled at him. She swore her son could forget his own hands if they weren’t attached to his wrists. “Come on. I’ll help you look.”

She turned back at Robin as she guided her son back to his room. “Water’s in the fridge if you’re thirsty.”

Robin gave her a nod of acknowledgement before heading over to the kitchen. As he sipped on his water he took a moment to look over the dress she was currently working on. It wasn’t as if Robin knew a lot about women’s fashion but he knew enough to know that Regina was certainly talented. She’d even made a few dresses for the girls at the bar and they’d always been pleased. Why she
didn’t pursue it full time he’d never know.

His musings on Regina’s career path were cut short when his water bottle slipped out of his hand and spilled all over the counter. He cursed under his breath and grabbed a towel from the drawer next to the sink. Just before he shut it a letter with a bright logo caught his eye. Volante Designs.

*Miss Gardiner, we are pleased to offer you…*

His eyes widened as he realized that it was a job offer… from New York.

“Are you going through my drawers?”

He looked up to see Regina staring at him with crossed arms and an accusing look.

“I was just looking for a towel,” he said nonchalantly. “Why? Something you don’t want me to see?”

She sighed as she took a seat at the kitchen table. “You saw my offer letter?”

“Just the first few lines,” he replied shrugging his shoulders.

“Might as well read it all then,” she said. “I know you’re curious.”

He smirked at her as he took a seat at the table and went over the offer letter in my hands. He hated how tight his throat felt as he read all that they were offering her. “When did you apply?”

“Oh I didn’t,” Regina responded quickly. “Your wife did.”

“Marian did?”

“Always looking out for me,” she replied softly. “Even from beyond the grave.”

Before she’d died Regina had mentioned to Marian that sometimes she felt like Santa Barbara was a little too close to her old home. Every once and while she would think that it might be safer for her and Henry if they could cross state lines, put a little distance between them and her mother. She never expected Marian to start looking up ways to make it happen.

“She must’ve sent out dozens of applications before she died,” continued Regina. “I’ve gotten responses from design firms in New York, Boston, even one or two from overseas.”

Robin felt a chuckle fly from his throat. “She once did the same thing for me and colleges. The responses were never this good though.”

Just skimming his eyes over this offer letter told him this job was an incredible opportunity. A salary close to six figures, health insurance, retirement plan. They’d even offered to put her up in a hotel for a week while she found a place to live. Not to mention it was in New York, fashion capital of the world… all the way across the country.

Regina wrung her hands nervously. “I’ve been throwing them out as soon as I get them.”

He tilted his head at her in confusion. “You mean you’re not going to take it?”

She shook her head at him apprehensively. “No.”

Robin cleared his throat trying to stop the rush of relief that shamefully flowed through him. “Why not?”
“Well… it’s a great opportunity but it’s in New York,” she rationalized. “And I already have roots here. I have you guys and I have my business, which is decent enough. I’m comfortable. There’s no reason for me to rock the boat. Right?”

“Well I suppose that’s true,” he said shrugging his shoulders. “I mean… I’d hate to lose you.”

She forced a smile to her lips. “Then it’s lucky for you I’m not going anywhere.”

A few seconds later Henry rushed back into the living room finally wearing his favorite Hulk shirt. Regina was quite grateful for the distraction. The air had been getting a little thick when she and Robin were discussing her job offer. There was no way she was taking it but she couldn’t help but feel that he had been a little hurt that she hadn’t brought it up sooner. As he and Henry left for the movies she could only hope that he’d forget the whole thing by the time she showed up for work on Friday. Her hopes would go unfulfilled.

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After sitting through two hours explosive heroics and villainous comebacks Robin could honestly say that he remembered not one minute of the movie he’d just seen. The news of Regina’s job offer had taken up nearly all his attention. He couldn’t understand why he couldn’t get it out of his head. She’d told him that she had no intention of replying and that she’d rather stay here but for some reason he couldn’t stop dwelling on the look on her face. At least his absentmindedness hadn’t affected Henry’s mood. The young boy had been bouncing with excitement all throughout the movie and the dinner after. It was no surprise that he passed out on the car ride home.

As he carried him back up to Regina’s apartment Robin thought over how much he’d grown to love the little boy in his arms. He’d known him ever since he was a baby and they’d been spending a lot more time together since Marian’s death. He always thought of their time together as training for when Roland got older. The thought of him and his mother moving so far away wasn’t a pleasant one. He’d miss them both terribly.

After passing Henry off to his mother Robin made his way home to pick up his own son. To his pleasant surprise he was already sound asleep by the time he made it to Mrs. Connelly’s apartment. Somehow he managed to make it back across the hall with minimum conversation from the tiny old woman. He’d really grown to care for his strange old neighbor but she was still a bit of a chatterbox. After laying Roland in his crib for the night he did a quick check to make sure he had everything ready for tomorrow. Regina had taught him that it was better for him pack up Roland’s diaper bag the night before instead of rushing through it in the morning. And that hadn’t been all that she’d taught him. Robin had no doubt in his mind that he would be struggling twice as much if it hadn’t been for her help. It was probably why he was so relieved that she wouldn’t be taking that job in New York.

He let out a soft groan as he realized that the diaper bag was running low on baby wipes. The carpet scratched against his knees as he kneeled on the floor and reached for the unopened box of wipes under his bed. As soon as his hands landed against something firm he began to pull his arm back with a grunt. His breath caught in his throat when he realized that the object he pulled out wasn’t the baby wipes but instead it was an old blue leather suitcase.

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Robin shut his eyes as he leaned back in the driver’s seat of his old mustang. It was almost 7:30 and the glare from the sunset began to shine through his windshield. He felt like this day would never end but he supposed that’s what happened when you drop out of high school. The excitement over freedom soon turned to boredom when you realized that there was nothing for you to do. It’s
not like he could get a day job. It might interfere with his night activities and that was the closest thing he had to a purpose. Will hadn’t contacted him about a job in days though. It was beginning to make him a little anxious but he supposed it was for the best. Thieving wasn’t exactly the safest of jobs so it couldn’t hurt to lay low for a little while. Still it would be nice to have something to do. Something that could get his mind off… her.

Marian, he thought wistfully. Probably the last person who’d ever chosen to believe he was worth something. Her interest in him had always been a bit of a shock considering that the only reason they met was because he’d stolen from her. He’d always remember the day she walked up, eyes blazing, and bitched him out for stealing a garnet pendant from her gym locker. In his defense it wasn’t like he was stealing from her specifically. He’d gone through all the lockers in the girls’ locker room. They always had more expensive jewelry than the boys and quite frankly they were always more willing to believe that they’d lost it rather than say it was stolen. Not Marian though. She’d instantly called him out on his thievery, not that he’d admitted it. Still her hot-blooded demands were enough for him to slip the pendant in her family’s mailbox later that night. He’d left an anonymous note saying that he’d found it and thought it belonged to her. She’d seen right through it and thanked him the next day. He’d pretended not to know what she was talking about.

She never left him alone after that. And he’d never wanted her to.

He guessed that he shouldn’t be surprised that what they had didn’t last. He and Marian were always on the opposite ends of the spectrum. She was a well-off daughter of a doctor and a lawyer and he was just an emancipated orphan. She was class valedictorian while he had always planned to drop out. When she’d told him that her parents threatened to cut her off for seeing him he hadn’t judged her for ending their relationship. Marian had a future. A bright one, in fact, and he wouldn’t blame her for wanting it more than him. He just wished things had ended differently.

His eyes popped open as he heard three rapid knocks against his windshield. As if he’d summoned her, there was Marian staring at him nervously from outside his car. “Hi Robin.”

His mouth dropped open in shock as he opened his door and he tried to regain as much composure as possible as he stepped out of his car.

“Marian,” he breathed.

She looked as beautiful as ever with her curly dark hair pulled into a loose ponytail. She was out of her school uniform, for good this time seeing as how she’d graduated a week ago. It was replaced by a pair of light wash capris and a lavender halter top. He’d nearly forgotten how much he loved her in street clothes. His eyes dropped down to her side where she was carrying an old blue leather suitcase.

“What’s with the luggage?” he asked softly. “Are you going on vacation?”

“No,” she answered, giving her head a little shake. “This was all I was able to bring from my house.”

His eyes widened at her as she continued.

“It’s mostly summer stuff but the maid’s going to let me back in tomorrow so I can pick up some of my winter clothes,” she babbled, her voice only slightly above a whisper. “I brought some of my books too. I just didn’t want to leave without them.”

“Wait,” he said raising a hand at her. “What are you saying?”
She pressed her lips together nervously. “I’m saying that I told my parents that I’m not living under their rules anymore. I choose you Robin.”

He sucked in a disbelieving breath at her confession and shook his head in shock. “No... Marian you can’t do that.”

“Yes I can,” she said, calming setting down her suitcase. “And I already have. I want to be with you Robin, no one else.”

He licked his lips nervously. “Marian think about your future.”

“I did think about my future. Every day since they gave me that ultimatum,” she said tearfully. “And if I gave you up I know exactly what would happen. I’d end up at some fancy college, with some fancy job, living some ordinary life. And that’s not what I want. I don’t know what’s going to happen but I do know that I don’t want to end up filled with regret because I did what felt safe instead of what felt right.”

She took a step closer to him and grabbed his hands. “You feel right to me Robin. You always have.”

Robin stared into her brown eyes searching for any sign of hesitation. He found none and it was baffling. It was baffling how the smartest girl he knew could somehow think that he was worth more than her future. He looked down at his feet. “I can’t promise you anything.”

“I don’t need promises,” insisted Marian. “I just need you. Now are you going to turn me away?”

“Never,” he said, before pulling her into kiss.

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He ran his hands over the blue leather as the memory flashed through his mind. He’d driven to the highest parking lot he knew that night, determined to give her the best view for her first night in the car. She’d stayed with him, even when he had nowhere to sleep but that forest green ’77 mustang. They’d only had 700 bucks between them, mostly hers. He still had no idea what could possess her to make such a choice.

Doing what feels right instead of what feels safe, he thought to himself.

“Oh Marian,” he breathed softly. “I hear you loud and clear.”

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Regina sat at the bar counter thankful for the chance to rest her feet. It was near the end of her shift and the bar was close to empty now that the lunch crowd was officially gone. The perfect time to refill the napkin holders before the dinner rush arrived to see the weekly band. It was a repetitive menial task but she’d always loved doing it. It didn’t require much of her attention so she could just let her mind wander as she stuffed the napkins into place. Somedays she would think back to her old life, or her mother. She’d worry about her father or how Henry was doing. Somedays she would think about her dress business and what she would design next. Today, however, she thought of none of the above. Not even ten minutes in she looked over to see Robin settling into the bar stool next to hers.

“What are you doing down from the office?” she asked suspiciously.

“Roland’s taking a nap,” he said leaning his elbows against the counter. “It’s the perfect time to see
how everyone’s doing downstairs. Also, I have a gift for you.”

She raised an eyebrow at him. “Okay now you’ve got me frightened.”

He snorted at her skepticism as he dug into his left jean pocket. He set a small snow globe on the counter and she eyed it curiously. When she picked it up for a closer look she discovered that inside was a tiny replica of the marina just outside the bar. She looked over at Robin confusedly. “What is this for?”

“This is for those nights in New York when you catch yourself missing home,” he answered softly. He hesitated before looking into her eyes. “Regina you have to take that job.”

She scoffed at him and set down the snow globe. “I already told you I’m not. It’s not for me.”

He took a deep breath and nodded his head. She was not going to make this easy on him.

“Do you know what’s bothered me ever since I’ve seen that letter?” he asked, clearly not looking for an answer. “The date at the top was from a week ago. First class letter like that was probably mailed overnight meaning you’ve had it sitting in your drawer for at least a few days before I found it. Which is funny considering you told me that you’d been throwing them out as soon as you got them.”

Regina clenched her jaw and pursed her lips as her gaze dropped down to her hands.

“Now I believe you threw away the other letters,” Robin continued, seriously. “But I also believe you kept this one because the idea of throwing away an opportunity like that didn’t sit right with you. Regina, you want this job.”

She folded her hands tightly on the counter before turning to him with a forced smile. “Okay maybe I want the job a little, Robin, but that doesn’t mean I should take it.”

“Why not?” he asked seriously. “What’s keeping you from calling up and saying yes?”

“It’s… just… they are so much more professional than I am,” she said shaking her head. “They make dresses for senators’ wives and small time movie stars. The most exposure one of my dresses has gotten was when I made the ball gown for the Cinderella musical at the local theatre. I’m probably not even half as good as the people they already have there. What if when I show up they decide… they don’t want me anymore? What am I supposed to do then?”

Robin listened intently as she expressed her fears to him. It’d been years since he’d seen that look in her eyes. The one that signaled she was afraid to hope for anything better. The last time was just before her first shift at the bar.

He let out a sigh before reaching for her hand comfortingly. “I haven’t forgotten Regina. I still remember how you and Henry were living when we first met. I still remember how it felt to live like that myself.”

Regina blinked back tears as she thought back to the playground that Marian had found them on.

“You know one of the biggest problems with struggling like we did is that you become so afraid of going back to it,” said Robin. “And when you finally reach a place where you know you can keep a roof over your head, where you always know where your next meal is going to come from… it can be very hard to leave. Even if you know you can leave for something better.”

He sighed before continuing. “You’ve been using this bar as your safety net and now I think you
might be afraid to leave it.”

She sniffled before answering him. “The day Marian brought me here was the luckiest day of my life. Before that I had nowhere to go, no one to call my friend and no way to even feed my son. I don’t want to risk going back to that.”

“You won’t,” insisted Robin. “Look how far you’ve come from it already.”

“That’s different,” argued Regina. “I had help. I had…her.”

“You still do,” said Robin softly. “Marian wouldn’t have sent out those applications if she thought you wouldn’t succeed. And my wife was never wrong about people. She had faith that you could make it out there. And so do I.”

He looked at their hands guiltily before continuing. “If I’m being perfectly honest I was almost going to let you pass up on this offer because… I was a little afraid of losing your support.”

Regina raised her eyebrows at him in shock. “Really?”

“Yes,” he said nodding his head shamefully. “If this bar is your safety net Regina, then you are most definitely mine. You’ve done so much to help me and Roland that sometimes I feel like I don’t have to be afraid of screwing up as long as you’re here to help me fix things.”

She scoffed at him. “You know in a strange way I feel complimented but Robin you’re not going to screw up. Not with bar and not with Roland. You’ll do fine whether or not I’m here.”

“And you’ll do fine whether or not you have this bar to fall back on,” he retorted. “Regina this is a great opportunity, not just for you but for Henry as well. I know you don’t want him to see you struggle forever. Why not show him that hard work pays off?”

She cautiously smiled at him. “Do you really think that New York is what’s best for us?”

Robin sighed before answering her. “I think one day you’ll be filled with regret if you look back and realize you did what felt safe instead of what felt right.”

He slid the snow globe back over to her. “I think it’s time for both of us to let go of our safety nets.”

She reluctantly picked it up as he gave her shoulder a squeeze before heading back up to the office. A smile tugged on her lips as she watched the tiny glitter flakes settle over the tiny marina. Perhaps she’d put it on her desk at her new job.
Chapter 17

It was a still morning at the local cemetery. The sun was just about to rise and not even the birds were chirping. As Regina made her way through the various headstones she knew it was a bit extreme for her to come out this early. But even so she knew if she didn’t do it now, she might not get another chance for months. Her hair was pulled back into a loose ponytail, and she only had on a pair of worn out jeans and a t-shirt. It wasn’t exactly her best outfit but it would keep her comfortable on the plane.

She sighed as she came upon the marble headstone she’d grown so familiar with. Even after nine months the engraved words still looked as good as new.

MARIAN LOCKSELY

Beloved Mother and Wife

When the funeral home had asked her to define her friend in so few words she’d agonized over what she should say. Marian meant so much more than 40 letters could truly convey. So she’d picked the two things she thought her friend would be most proud of. Her happy marriage and her beautiful baby boy. If you knew who she was to her husband and son, then you would know she deserved a better ending than the one she got. Regina had always made a point to come out here at least once a week and she knew Robin did the same. It pained her to think she wouldn’t be able to do so from New York.

She sighed as she leaned down to place a dark pink rose in front of the headstone. Daniel had once told her that they meant gratitude and appreciation. If this was the last time she’d be seeing Marian’s grave that was definitely the message she wanted to leave with.

“Hi Marian,” she said softly. “Today’s my last day in California… but then I guess you would know that. Thanks for the new job by the way, I’ll do my best to make you proud. And I promise that even though I’ll be in New York, I’ll still look after Robin and Roland. I’ll do my best to make sure that they’re okay. You don’t have to worry about that.”

Tears streamed down her cheek as she continued speaking to the headstone with no response. “I just wanted to come by and see you one last time. You did so much for me and you were such a good friend. I just wanted you to know I’m still grateful for it every day. I love you, Marian and you’ll always be my best friend, no matter who comes along.”

She took a minute to wipe away her tears before laying a hand on the stone. “Goodbye bodega savior.”

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Morning light streamed through the window as Henry and Regina stood in the center of their apartment for the last time. Boxes were piled against all the walls and she knew it would be only a few hours before the electricity cut out.

“It looks bigger,” observed Henry quietly.

She rubbed his shoulders comfortably. “I know sweetheart.”

Henry had taken the news of their relocation rather well for a boy his age. He seemed most upset about having to pack up his stuff so quickly. After accepting her new job Regina was given two
weeks to wrap things up in California. It had been pretty hectic, getting things squared away, but by the time she was finished things were handled to her satisfaction. She’d completed all her dress orders, and paid off all her outstanding bills. After everything was balanced she’d had enough money to last her and Henry until her first paycheck from the firm. She’d arranged a decent filing system and checklist to help Robin with the bar’s budget. She’d even managed to look up a few places online for when she went apartment hunting in New York. The only thing left to do now was to leave. And it was just as hard as she expected.

“Take a look around Henry,” she said softly. “For three years this was our home and it was really good to us. I don’t want you to forget that, ok?”

“Okay,” he said nodding his head firmly.

Regina sighed as she looked around the apartment. It held so many good memories for her. She still remembered how proud she was the first day she had moved in. A place that was all her own. One that she’d earned herself and could make into anything she wanted. She supposed she’d be able to do the same thing once she found a place in New York. Remember this isn’t an ending Regina, just a beginning, she silently reminded herself.

She patted Henry on the shoulder. “Come on, the cab’s waiting for us downstairs.”

They both headed for the door, Henry pulling his miniature blue suitcase and Regina shouldering her small black duffle bag. As they stepped into the hallway together she took one last look back in the apartment and sighed. It really had been a good home.

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As she and Henry made their way out to the sidewalk below their apartment, Regina was unsurprised to Robin and Roland waiting for them. He’d promised more than a few times that he wouldn’t miss out the chance to see them off. Even if it meant the bar had to open late. However, she was a little shocked to see all her friends from the bar standing with him. Killian and Mulan and Tink. They were all waiting in front of the cab for her.

Henry wasted no time running to wrap his arms around Robin’s legs. A sad smile made its way onto Robin’s face as he dropped down to wrap his arms around the young boy. “Hey don’t start crying now. I’d never be able to let you go then.”

Henry pulled back to look at Robin’s face. “Why can’t you come with us?”

“Oh I wish I could Henry,” said Robin affectionately patting him on the shoulder. “But I have to stay here and take care of the Drunken Monk. I promise we’ll talk though. Your mom has my number and you can call any time you like.”

Henry pouted before reaching into his pocket and handing Robin a small photograph. A smile tugs on Robin’s lips as he looks down at the photo of Henry and Regina at the beach. Henry’s hair was still wet from the splash pad and Regina had wrapped him a towel as he sat on her lap. She was in a black one piece swimsuit with her hair down, falling just below her chin. The smiles on their faces were identical. “What’s this for?”

“So you don’t forget what I look like,” mumbled Henry.

His answer broke Robin’s heart but he managed to keep the smile on his face. “How could I ever forget you Henry? You’re the greatest sidekick I’ve ever had.”

Regina watched with a sad smile as Henry and Robin said their goodbyes. It was getting harder to
leave by the second.

She turned away when she felt Killian tap her on the shoulder. He gave her one of his charismatic smiles before holding up a folded piece of notebook paper.

“I know going to a new place can be scary but it always helps if you know somebody,” he said handing it to her. “I’ve been to New York a few times, kept in touch with a few people. Here are their numbers. You should be able to call any of them if you need some help.”

“Thank you Killian. That means a lot,” she said, tucking the numbers into her pocket. She pulled him into a hug before whispering into his ear, “Look out for them while I’m gone, okay?”

“Always,” he whispered back before releasing her. He gave her hand one final squeeze before smiling brightly at her. “You’re going to love New York. The city is magnificent.”

“But the plumbers are trash,” said Tink stepping over to her. She excitedly handed her a copy of *Home Repair for Dummies*. “In there is everything you’ll need to know to survive, plus a list of everything you should have in your first toolbox.”

Regina chuckled as she looked over the book cover. “Oh Tink, what am I going to do without you to fix my leaky faucets?”

Tink shrugged her shoulders with a smile. “I guess, you’ll have to roll up your sleeves and do the work yourself. It’s alright, I have faith in you.”

“Thank you,” said Regina giving her a hug.

The tiny blonde patted her on the back appreciatively before letting go. “Try not to become anyone’s mistress, okay?”

“Okay,” laughed Regina. She then turned her attention to Mulan who looked at her with nervous eyes.

“I didn’t bring you a gift,” she said flatly. “To be honest goodbyes aren’t really my thing. I never know what to say.”

“Just say something that makes it a little easier for me to leave,” offered Regina.

Mulan sighed before shaking her head and shrugging her shoulders apologetically. “Your plane tickets are nonrefundable…”

A bark of laughter escaped Regina. “Thank you Lani. That was exactly what I needed to hear.”

“Are you serious?” she said raising her eyebrows. “That helped?”

“No,” giggled Regina. “But it was perfectly you and that exactly the memory I want to leave with.”

“Well you’re welcome,” replied Mulan haughtily, before pulling her into a hug. She sighed as Regina wrapped her arms around her.

“Thanks for always giving me a kick when I need it,” she said softly.

Mulan hugged her a little tighter. “I’m going to miss you.”

“Me too,” said Regina pulling back.
She was going to miss them all. This motley crew that had somehow become her family. They’d all taught her so much and helped her so many times she didn’t know where she’d be without them. *I suppose I’ll find out now,* she thought to herself.

Oh this next goodbye was going to be the hardest.

She took a deep breath before kneeling down next to Roland’s stroller. She knew it was early enough that he couldn’t have been awake for more than an hour or so. Usually he’d be cranky but she supposed the weight of the occasion must’ve reached him because he was sitting in his seat as calm as ever. His pacifier was firmly in his mouth as he looked at her with his wide innocent eyes.

She ran her thumb over his cheek with a sad smile. “Hello Roland. God you’ve gotten so big. I know you’re going to grow up to be so strong and so handsome. I’m so sorry that after today I won’t be able to see you as often but I promise it’s not forever. In a few months Henry and I going to try and fly back and we’re going to be so very excited to see you. Until then I want you to try and be the happiest little baby you can be, alright? And remember just because I’m not here doesn’t mean I’m not thinking of you always.”

She leaned in to press a kiss to his forehead as a tear rolled down her cheek. “I love you.”

She quickly wiped the tear from her face as she stood to face Robin. “If I don’t get pictures every week, I swear I will hunt you down. You understand me, Locksely?”

“Of course,” he said nodding solemnly. “You’re his godmother. We’re not going to forget you.”

They stood there in heavy silence for a moment both of them unsure of what to say next. What type of goodbye could leave them both satisfied?

Regina swallowed before breaking the silence. “You know I’ll be back, right?”

Robin sent her a small smile. “I’m counting on it.”

She smiled back at him before stepping into his arms and pulling him close. “Thank you for the home and the family.”

“Thank you for bringing me back to life,” he replied softly.

Their hug lasted a moment longer before Regina finally allowed herself to pull back. “I should probably get going.”

He nodded sadly at her. “Just remember we’re always going to be here if you need us.”

“I know,” she said nodding her head.

She swore her duffle bag never felt heavier than when she was loading it into that cab. After saying her final words to the group she and her son got into the back of the yellow car and watched as the figures in the rearview got smaller. She let out a sigh as she turned to face forward in her seat. *Onto new beginnings,* she thought to herself.

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New York was a completely different animal than California. It was all Regina could think as she made her way down the sidewalk with Henry’s hand in hers. Where California was sunshine and beaches, New York was concrete and skyscrapers. It took her two whole days to stop looking up
when she walked down the street. It wasn’t exactly the safest way to move through dozens of people at once. God, the sheer amount of people, it almost made her feel claustrophobic. Though, if her mother hadn’t been able to find her in Santa Barbra then she surely couldn’t find her New York. It’d be like finding a needle in a pile of needles.

“Are we almost there?” asked Henry.

“I promise we’re only a block away sweetheart,” she said absentmindedly.

It was her first day at her new job and she had to admit that she was a little anxious. She’d changed her outfit no less than three times before settling on a cobalt blue dress with a folded, asymmetrical neckline and a pair of plain back pumps. A choice that she now regretted since she’d gotten off at the wrong subway station and ended up walking an extra five blocks. It was a relief when they finally reached the gigantic office building where she now worked. She quickly rushed them into the elevator and pressed the button for the eighth floor.

When she’d called to accept this job she was pleasantly surprised to find out that the building had a daycare center for most of its employees. The price tag would surely eat into her paycheck but it was worth it to have Henry close by. Besides he’d be starting school in a year anyway so it wasn’t like it was forever.

She kneeled down in front of him before dropping him off with the day care teacher. “Okay sweetheart, I know it’s your first day and you’re a little nervous but I promise you’re going to have such a good time here. And if you need me I will be right upstairs, okay?”

“Okay,” said Henry nodding his head stoically.

She tried to give him a reassuring smile. “Will you wish Mama good luck on her first day?”

“Good luck,” he said with a small smile.

“Thank you,” she said giving him a kiss on the cheek. “Have a good day baby.”

Regina watched nervously as the daycare helper led him over to another group of small kids before heading back to elevator and pushing the button for the twelfth floor. She fretfully drummed her fingers against her purse strap as the metal box made its way up the shaft. Her first day at the bar hadn’t been this nerve wrecking but she supposed that was because she had Marian and Robin’s friendly faces to help her through it. She didn’t know much about her new boss. Just that her name was Mallory Volante and she’d started the firm all by herself.

A ding signaled the end of her elevator ride and when the doors opened she stepped out onto the white tile floors of a very posh lobby. There were a three leather chairs and a small white coffee table across from the lobby desk with the word VOLANTE spelled out behind it in larger stylish letters. She felt her heart beat faster as the elevator doors shut behind her. There was no escape now.

At that very moment she felt a buzz against her side and reached into her purse to see she’d gotten a one-word text from Robin.

BREATHE

She let out a deep breath as she rolled her eyes at his instructions. She should’ve known he’d send something for her first day. Still the reminder of his faith bolstered her confidence just a little. She squared her shoulders and walked up to the lobby desk. It was manned by a tiny bird of a woman with her light brown hair pulled back into a severe bun. She raised one perfectly shaped eyebrow as
Regina approached her.

“Hi I’m Regina Gardiner. Today’s my first day.”

The receptionist gestured toward a leather chair. “Have a seat,” she said coolly.

Regina did as she was told while the secretary spoke softly into her headset, summoning someone from the office. It wasn’t long before Regina heard the click-clack of heels against the tile floors. A blonde woman rounded the corner and regarded her appraisingly.

“Regina Gardiner,” she said in a smooth voice. “I’m Mallory Volante.”

Regina rushed to shake the hand of her new boss. She could tell that Mallory was older than her but she didn’t think it was by that much. Maybe five or ten years. She carried herself proudly, with her shoulders back and her chin parallel to the floor. It could be the power suit or the bright red lipstick but Regina couldn’t help but be reminded of her mother when she looked at her.

“I, um, didn’t think you’d be greeting me on my first day,” she stammered.

“I like to meet with all my new employees personally,” Mallory replied. She let her eyes run over Regina’s body critically. “The dress. Where’d you get it?”

Regina eyes fell down to her chest as if she’d forgotten what she was wearing already. “I made it,” she said quickly.

“Really?” said Mallory with an impressed arch of her eyebrow. “Nice to know your application didn’t lie about your potential.”

“Thank you Ms. Volante.”

“Please… everyone here just calls me Mal.”

She beckoned Regina to follow her as she turned on her heel and headed back to the office. “Know now that despite our impressive client list this is a small design firm. I only employ eight designers but that is because I only choose to hire those that I know are capable of not disappointing me. I can only count the amount of people able to do that on two hands… and I am not afraid to cut off fingers.”

She led Regina to office space filled with two groups of white desks arranged in squares. If it weren’t for the fully grown adults sitting at each one she might’ve mistaken it for a class room. Mal lead her over to an empty desk surrounded by three other workers and gestured to them respectively. “These are the members of your design team, you’ll be working closely with them as you handle projects for our individual clients.”

They all looked over at her expectantly. Mal pointed to the woman closest to her, she was rail thin with two-tone died hair, one side white and the other jet black. “This is Carlotta Duville, she’ll be handling shoe design.”

The woman smiled at her mischievously. “Pleasure to meet you darling.”

Regina nodded at her with a forced smile. Something about that woman’s eyes just screamed sociopath.

Mal then pointed to the woman next to her. She was full-figured with flawless dark skin and blonde hair. “This is Ursula Triton. She’ll be designing the jewelry to match your dresses.”
“Hello,” said Regina softly.

The other woman only gave her a nod of acknowledgement before returning to her sketch pad.

Regina quickly recovered from her lack of interest and turned to the last worker of the group. He was the only man at the table and his light brown hair was complimented excellently by his light blue eyes.

“And last but not least is Jefferson Abbott, he designs all our outerwear and scarves but hats are really his specialty,” said Mal affectionately.

“Good to have you aboard,” he said giving her a non-threatening smile. Regina nodded appreciatively before taking a seat at the empty desk. As soon as she sat down Mal dropped a thin file in front of her. “Your first assignment.”

Regina opened it to find photos of a young blonde woman she was sure she’d seen in more than a few B-movies over the last few years.

“She has a premiere coming up and her agency wants her to look flawless,” said Mal, calmly folding her arms across her chest. “I want to have at least four dress options on my desk by noon tomorrow. You’d best get started.”

And with that she strutted back out of their sight back into her own private office. Regina watched her go with her mouth slightly open and Jefferson chuckled at her reaction.

“She’s a bit of a dragon,” he said shrugging his shoulders. “But that’s what makes her so successful.”

Carlotta eyed her from across the table. “Sketch pads are in the table drawers darling. If I were you I’d get busy.”

Regina nodded stiffly at her before reaching in her purse and pulling out her Marina snow globe. As she set it on the corner of her desk Ursula scoffed at it haughtily.

“What the hell is that?” she said, her voice dripping with disdain.

“A piece of home,” replied Regina, pointedly looking in her eyes as if daring her to say anything else. Ursula only rolled her eyes and returned her attention back to her sketch pad.

After a few hours at her desk Regina slowly felt the anxiousness leave her body. Coming up with possible designs for the young starlet had helped relax her. Designing was familiar to her and that familiarity was quite comforting given how much she felt like a fish out of water. She was so deep in her work that her focus was only broken when she saw two men in identical black suits walk into the office space.

“Who are they?” she asked curiously.

Cruella looked over her shoulder and rolled her eyes, clearly annoyed. “They’re bodyguards for our insipid little intern.”

“Intern?” said Regina, scrunching her eyebrows in confusion.

“If you can call her that,” scoffed Ursula absentmindedly.

“She doesn’t really do anything here,” said Jefferson shaking his head at her. “She’s just some
spoiled little girl whose daddy paid Mal major bank to let her work here. I don’t think she even really wants to.”

“Is she really that bad?” said Regina.

“So much worse,” replied Ursula, her eyes still on her sketchpad.

Regina looked over at the office doors just as the young intern made her entrance. As soon as they locked eyes she felt her blood run cold. Her hair was definitely shorter, cut just above her ears and spiked up with gel. She’d apparently traded in her bright sundresses for a dark bodycon dress and leather booties. But her green eyes were just as Regina remembered.

Jefferson leaned closer so he could whisper, “Her name is Mary-Margaret Blanchard but everyone just calls her-”

“Snow.”
Chapter 18

Regina sighed as she felt Snow’s fingers flutter across her scalp. She was sitting on the floor in the penthouse living room while the younger girl attempted to wrangle her hair into French braids.

It was a Wednesday night and that meant bonding time with her future step daughter. Cora kept insisting that it was prudent that she form a bond with the fifteen year old girl to get into Leopold’s good graces. Regina didn’t really mind though. When it came to her time in the city, it was usually a split between working for her mother, being on the arm of Leo or getting to know Snow. When she was with Leo there would be no doubt that she’d come home groped within an inch of her life and if she spent time with her mother all she’d do was simmer in her own rage. Snow was always the lesser of the three evils. The time she spent with the younger girl was always a strange mix of painful and pleasant. Whenever they were together she would always try her best to make Regina feel welcome. They went shopping together, saw movies and she would always ask Regina about her day. Sometimes she could almost pretend it was like having a little sister. Almost.

Snow patted her shoulder. “Done!”

Regina picked up a hand mirror as she moved to sit next to Snow on the chaise. She marveled appropriately at the loose French braids atop her head. “They look beautiful Snow! Thank you.”

“They’re not as good as yours,” said Snow modestly. Her satin button up pajamas shimmered as she shrugged her shoulders shyly. “Will you do my hair now?”

“Of course,” said Regina with a bright smile.

Snow quickly turned her back as Regina reached for her back-length hair. She was always eager to spend time with her father’s new girlfriend. Ever since Regina had sewed up her dress at that charity ball she’d come to see her as a bit of a hero. “Thank you for letting me spend the night here while Daddy’s away.”

“It’s no problem dear,” said Regina in a sweet voice. “I wouldn’t want you spend all that time alone in your house. It’s not good for a girl your age.”

“It’s okay,” said Snow softly. “The staff is usually around so I’m not really alone. I just miss my dad when he’s gone.”

“Well I’m sure he misses you too,” replied Regina comfortably. It hadn’t escaped her notice that Leopold didn’t make spending time with Snow a priority. It was clear that he adored his daughter, anyone could see that, but it didn’t seem like he was particularly interested in knowing her. At the most he spent maybe an hour with her a day. And that was only when he was in the same state. The rest of the time he seemed perfectly content to ignore her.

“He’s been spending a lot more time home now that you’re with him,” pointed out Snow. “I think he really likes you.”

Regina tried to overcome the ball of disgust in her throat by letting out a forced chuckle. “Well that’s good to know.”

“I overheard him on the phone talking with his jeweler asking for a ring,” continued Snow. “I think he might propose to you soon!”

Regina’s hands stilled in the middle of Snow’s hair and she grew increasingly grateful for the fact
that the young girl couldn’t see her. She felt like she was going to throw up. She’d always hoped that after a few months of this charade Leo would grow disinterested with her and see it’s ridiculousness. That he’d call off the whole deal and set her free. Knowing that he’s already buying her engagement ring shattered those hopes. As soon as that diamond was on her finger she and Henry’s fate would be sealed.

“Are you sure?” she choked out with false excitement. “Perhaps you misheard?”

“No,” said Snow shaking her head gently. “Daddy was very adamant that he wanted an engagement ring so big that you could see it from across the room. He’s definitely buying it for you.”

“Really?” said Regina, her voice shaking. “That’s… amazing.”

“So you’ll say yes?” asked Snow, turning to her face her with wide eyes.

“Of course,” answered Regina, planting a false smile on her face. “As long as you’re alright with it?”

“I am,” said Snow happily. “I want nothing more than for you to marry him!”

“Really?” said Regina, dropping her hands from Snow’s hair. “My age doesn’t bother you at all?”

Snow shrugged her shoulders apprehensively. “I don’t know. At first I thought it was weird but whenever I see you together you both look so happy. Anyone could see that he loves you and I guess things like age don’t matter so much when you care for someone in that way. I just want you both to be happy.”

Regina felt tears well up in her eyes. If Snow had no arguments against their marriage there was no way Leopold would call off their engagement. She was truly trapped.

Snow noticed Regina’s reaction and tilted her head curiously. “Are you happy with my father?”

“Yes,” Regina lied, tearfully. “I am so happy with your father because what we have doesn’t just include the two of us but the three of us. I’m very excited to be a part of your life as well Snow. Soon we can all be a family.”

“Really?” said Snow grinning widely. “I can’t wait!”

Regina forced a laugh from her throat as Snow wrapped her arms around her. She tried to smile through the storm of guilt and terror that had taken root in her stomach. Feigning excitement for Snow was sickening but upsetting her would risk Henry’s safety and she couldn’t do that. Even so she knew the dread she felt would only grow as she continued to live this lie.

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“Actually we just call her Mary.”

Regina tore her eyes away from Snow and back to Jefferson. “What?”

“We all just call her Mary. It’s what she prefers,” he said staring at her curiously. “Why would we call her Snow?”

“Maybe for that alabaster baby skin of hers,” quipped Carlotta, in a low whisper. A chuckle
escaped Ursula at her partner’s remark.

Regina snuck another look at Snow and found her glaring, not so subtly, back at her. It was strange to see her again after all this time. She’d changed a lot since being that girl in the satin pajamas four years ago. She’d been constantly smiling back then. Her face held nothing but a frown now. Snow raised her eyebrows at Regina daringly and she felt herself stand from her chair suddenly, attracting the attention of her team.

“I, um, need to use the bathroom,” she choked out shakily. “Where is it?”

Ursula gave her a strange look before pointing down the hall. “Second door on the right.”

“Thank you,” said Regina, quickly making her escape. She felt Snow’s eyes glaring into her back as she rushed into the hall.

The bathroom turned out to be just as posh as the lobby. The sinks were made of white marble with stainless steel faucets. It was almost blinding the way the bright light bounced off the cream walls. *As good a place as any for a break down*, thought Regina locking herself in the handicap stall. As soon as the door clicked behind her she fell against it, brought her hand to her chest and tried to take a deep breath. It was just as difficult as she thought. She felt like a baby elephant had just jumped on her lungs.

God, she should’ve never left California. They were safe there, they were comfortable, and no one from their old life had turned up. It was a stupid decision to come here. She couldn’t believe she let Robin talk her into it. Her eyes began to water as she began to pant and pace inside the stall. She ran her fingers through her hair as she attempted to calm herself. She tried to focus on the cool feeling of Daniel’s ring against her chest. Her fingers wrapped around the tiny gold ring as she finally managed to take a deep breath.

Okay, Snow had only seen her for a brief second. Not nearly long enough to tell if she was upset with her. The main thing she had to do was figure out a way to make sure that she didn’t end up telling Leopold where she was. Regina was more than sure that her former “fiancé” didn’t appreciate her disappearing so soon after announcing their engagement. There was no doubt he’d tell her mother and have her tracked down in a hot second. She just had to find a way to make sure that Snow didn’t let her father know where she was. *Simple enough*, she silently tried to convince herself. She took another minute to calm herself down before walking outside the stall. She stopped dead in her tracks when she saw Snow, smugly leaning against the bathroom door.

“We really should stop meeting like this,” she said, folding her arms across her chest. She pushed herself off the door with a skip. “I mean really, you hiding in the bathroom, me rushing in after you, and one of us obviously crying… God it’s like déjà vu.”

Regina’s words caught in her throat as she took in nineteen-year-old Snow up close. She’d filled out since they’d last seen each other but she still had a tiny frame. The baby fat around her face was gone revealing her strong chin which was only emphasized by her short spiked pixie cut. The biggest difference, however, was in her eyes. They used to light up when she spoke but there was something dark and calculating behind them now. Snow was just as beautiful as she had always been, maybe even more so… but her warmth was gone.

Regina struggled to find her voice. “I-um-h-h-how are you?” she stammered.

“Better for being without you,” Snow replied coldly. She stared Regina down with an unblinking gaze. “What the hell are you doing in New York?”
Regina ran her hands over her hips trying to dry the sweat from her palms. “Look Snow I-”

“Mary,” she swiftly interrupted. “I go by Mary now. Nobody calls me Snow anymore. Especially not you.”

“Okay… Mary,” Regina said softly. “I know I have a lot to explain…”

“Not really,” said Snow shaking her head at her. “I just want to know what the hell you’re doing here. Last I heard you were fluttering around Europe with the bodyguard you were screwing behind my dad’s back.”

Regina felt her jaw drop at Snow’s words. “Wait what?!”

Snow rolled her eyes at her. “Spare me the excuses and explanations. I just want to know why I walked into work and was forced to see your face.”

“I work here,” Regina choked out. “I design clothes now. Today’s my first day.”

Snow smirked at her superiorly. “Well I wouldn’t get used to it here.”

Regina watched with wide eyes as Snow reached into her jacket pocket and pulled out her cell phone. “What are you doing?”

“Calling my dad,” said Snow gleefully. “Once he finds out that you work here he will have Mal toss you out on your ass before you can say ‘bye-bye.’”

Regina snatched the phone out of Snow’s hands before she could stop herself. “No you can’t do that!”

An angry fire lit behind Snow’s eyes as she glared Regina. “Give me my phone back you psycho!”

“I will! Just please don’t tell your father that I’m here!” pleaded Regina.

“Why not?” bit out Snow. “Are you too afraid to face the man whose heart you broke?”

“I didn’t break his heart!” cried Regina desperately. “It was never like that!”

“Oh please,” said Snow, stepping closer to invade her space. “Daddy told me everything Regina. How he caught you in the elevator with that bodyguard and how you taunted him by saying you never felt anything for him! Real classy by the way!”

“That never happened!” insisted Regina. “He’s lying!”

“Why would he lie?” challenged Snow.

Regina swallowed hard before arching an eyebrow at Snow. “Do you really want to know?”

Things grew still at Regina’s question. Snow pressed her lips together angrily and took a step back from her. “What?”

“Do you really want to know the reason my engagement to your father never worked out? Because I will tell you,” bargained Regina. “All you have to do is promise that you’ll give me until lunch time to explain without calling your father.”
The air grew thick between them as Snow scoffed at her as she crossed her arms against her chest. “And why would I do that?”

“Because deep down you want to hear what I have to say and even further down you know that I’m the only person who has something to lose here.” Regina set the phone down on the bathroom counter. “It’s your choice. You can live with a lie or you can know the truth.”

Snow stared intensely into her eyes but Regina’s gaze didn’t waver. “Fine,” she said haughtily jutting out her chin, before picking up the phone. “What do I care if you get fired before or after lunch?”

She stalked over to the door and gripped the handle before turning back to Regina. “There’s a coffee shop on the corner where we can meet. And remember you are in no position to make me wait.”

Regina remained frozen in place as she watched Snow walk out of the bathroom. She didn’t know who that angry force of nature was but it wasn’t the girl she knew.

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The minutes Regina had to wait until lunch were torturous. She had no idea what she was going to say to Snow and with every tick of the clock she felt her situation grow more dire. What could she possibly say that would make Snow- or Mary she supposed- believe her over her father? She racked her brain trying to come up with an idea but nothing came to mind.

The only distraction she really had was Snow herself. Watching the way she put her feet up on the intern desk and carelessly lean back in her chair made her wonder if the girl she had known had ever even existed. The fact that she refused to remove her eyes from her cell phone screen was also unnerving. Her thumbs moved across the keypad furiously and if it wasn’t for the fact that Regina knew Leopold’s hatred of text messages she would’ve sworn she was already telling her father everything.

She didn’t talk to anyone in the office and as far as Regina saw no one wanted to talk to her. As a matter of fact she saw more than a few of them glare in Snow’s direction. For the first time in years she actually wondered what had happened to Snow after she’d left.

She leaned over to Jefferson and whispered, “So how long has Mary worked here?”

He shrugged his shoulders before thinking it over. “About a little under a year.”

“Yet it feels like an eternity,” drawled Ursula from across the desk. “She’s a drain on resources and my patience.”

“Is she just incompetent?” asked Regina, curiously.

“Incompetent, lazy, belligerent, snotty,” listed Carlotta. “Many adjectives could be used to describe her. Some that can’t even be said in front of children.”

“So everyone here… hates her?”

Jefferson hesitated before answering her. “We don’t hate her. We’re just… not very fond of her… or her behavior… or the way she treats people. She’s just not giving us reasons to like her.”

“I’m dreaming of the day where she finally gets so bored she leaves,” said Ursula wistfully. “Maybe then we’ll get an intern who actually wants to be here and will work for it.”
Regina drifted out of the conversation and back into her thoughts. That sounded nothing like the girl she knew years ago. Back then Snow couldn’t be described as anything other than sweet and maybe overenthusiastic. To know that she’d turned apathetic and mean was just disheartening.

A little while after 12 Regina saw Snow head for the elevator to go out for lunch. She waited ten minutes before following her out. The elevator ride down felt even longer than going up. She still had no idea what she could say that could secure her and Henry’s safety.

You could tell her the truth, she heard Marian’s voice say in her head. Regina almost scoffed at the thought of the advice her best friend would give. If Marian was here she’d tell her to go for broke and be completely honest with Snow. To believe that there was a part of her that would understand why she needed to keep this secret. She would tell her to have faith in her.

How can I? Regina thought to herself. How could she have faith in the girl she’d just met? The one who seemed so ready to ruin her just at the sight of her face. The ding of the elevator stopped her train of thought before she stepped out onto the ground floor.

It wasn’t hard to find the coffee shop where Snow wanted to meet. It was a bit of an old fashioned place with pairs of bright, colorful armchairs placed across from each other with tiny round tables in between them. She could already see Snow had taken a seat at one of the tables in front of the window. Regina grimaced as she watched her take a sip from an oversized mug with whipped cream piled over the coffee. She wiped a spot of cream from her nose before reaching for a spice jar and shaking it over the mug.

Cinnamon.

A spark of hope flickered in Regina’s heart as she realized that not everything had changed about Snow. She’d always preferred her whip cream topped with cinnamon.

Tell her the truth

Regina bit her lip as she realized that she had to be honest with Snow. She owed it to the girl. Not the one who’d threatened to take her job away but to the girl with the satin pajamas and French braided hair. She’d lied to that girl so many times before it was only fitting that she tell her the truth now. She just had to believe that Snow would choose to do the right thing.

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Snow had to admit she never expected the day to be so interesting. Her social life had really taken a turn for the worse when her father had demanded she work at the stupid little design firm. She wasn’t even interested in a career in fashion. In her opinion style should be effortless and if it wasn’t then you didn’t have any. She never expected anything to come out of her internship but boredom. So when she walked into the office and saw the stricken face of her former almost stepmother she almost felt grateful for the chance at a little entertainment. Now sitting across from her listening to the nonsense that flowed from her lips Snow nearly felt amused. Forced marriages, and daring escapes? She’d seen soap operas with more coherent storylines.

“Wait,” said Snow holding up a hand. “You’re trying to tell me that you the only reason you got engaged to my dad was because he bought you?”

She let out a dry chuckle before scoffing at Regina skeptically. “That is the most ludicrous thing I’ve ever heard.”

“It’s the truth,” Regina insisted, deathly serious. Her heart was pounding out of her chest but she
forced herself to continue. “Your father told my mother he’d invest in our company but only if I agreed to be his wife.”

“You cannot expect me to believe that,” gritted out Snow. “My father might be a lot of things but he’s not disgusting enough to marry someone against their will.”

“I thought that too until he slipped the ring on my finger,” replied Regina in a low voice.

“This makes no sense,” said Snow angrily shaking her head. “Cora might’ve been able to cut off your trust fund but there’s no way she could force you to legally marry someone. If things were so bad and you were so unhappy then why didn’t you just say no?”

Regina pressed her lips together nervously before answering. “Because if I did she would’ve taken away the only thing I had that mattered… my son.”

“You don’t have a son,” snapped Snow incredulously.

“Yes I do,” said Regina pulling a tiny picture out from her wallet. “His name is Henry. I had him a few months before I met you and your father. Mother swept his birth under the rug. Said it would embarrass the company and the family. If I didn’t agree to marry your father she was going to steal him from me and I would’ve never seen him again.”

Snow grinded her teeth as she stared down at the photo of the little boy and Regina. He looked like her with his dark hair and bright smile. Her blood began to boil as she realized that Regina was telling the truth. At least about this.

She looked up to Regina with a glare. “My father told me that you were thinking of adopting with him. Was that how they planned to hide him?”

“Yes,” said Regina softly. “My mother was going to transfer custody over to your father. That way I could never divorce him without being forced to leave Henry behind.”

“So he was supposed to be my brother,” Snow realized with a joyless smile. “How cute.”

“I know this a lot to take in,” said Regina gently. “But you have to understand I couldn’t marry your father. I couldn’t be with him, or anyone, knowing they would hang my baby’s safety over my head like a noose. So I ran. I took Henry, I got on a bus and I ran.”

Snow just regarded her coolly. “Okay. I just have one question left.”

“What?”

“What was the point of hanging out with me?” asked Snow, narrowing her eyes. “All the shopping trips and the sleepovers and the hair-braiding… what was the point of it all?”

Regina swallowed hard before answering her. “My mother… thought that having your affection would make me more valuable in your father’s eyes.”

Snow began to clench her fists against the table. “Of course it would.”

So none of it was real, she thought to herself.

“I’m sorry about my lies Mary. I really am,” Regina apologized tearfully. “But I did it to protect my son. And I am begging you not to ruin that. If my mother finds out where I am Henry and I will be trapped again and this time she’ll never let us go. So no one can know that I am here. Do you
understand me?”

Snow licked her lips and leaned her elbows against the tables before smiling deviously. “What I understand Regina… is that you just handed me a very explosive hand grenade. I just don’t know how I’m going to use it yet.”

Regina felt her heart drop into her stomach as Snow’s words ran into her like a freight train. “What?”

“It’s amazing really,” said Snow shrugging her shoulders with a grin. “I mean I was just hoping to get you fired but now I know that I could actually destroy your entire life with just one phone call to your mommy. It’s so much more than I ever could’ve hoped for.”

Regina watched with a dropped jaw as Snow smoothly stood up from her seat and slipped her arms into her jacket. “Oh don’t worry. I’m not going to call her because I don’t want you going anywhere. At least not yet. There’s just too much fun I could have now that I officially own you.”

She pulled her purse on her shoulder before giving Regina a look of false pity. “You know… you really should be more careful who you trust with your secrets.”

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The rest of the day went by in a blur for Regina. Nothing was in focus for her. All she could do was replay her talk with Snow and drown in the realization that the fate of her child and herself was now in the hands of a vicious nineteen-year-old. How could she have been so stupid to believe that Snow would’ve been on her side?

“Mommy are you okay?”

She shook with a start when she felt Henry place his hand on her leg. For a moment she was confused when she realized that they were on the subway headed back home. A quick glance at her watch told her it was already past five thirty. She must’ve picked up Henry after work and started heading home all while in her haze of despair. Poor Henry. He must’ve been talking about his day the whole time without her hearing a word.

“I’m fine honey,” she said, sending him a false smile. “Tell me more about your new daycare teachers.”

“Okay,” he replied cheerfully.

She tried as hard as she could to pay attention while her son described how fun and pretty his new teacher was but she still found herself drifting in and out. What was she going to do now? More importantly what was Snow going to do? She’d said that she wasn’t going to call her father. At least not yet. But what more could she want from Regina? It’s not like she exactly had a lot to offer in terms of money or power. She tried to push it out of her mind as she and Henry walked up to their new home.

Finding a decent, affordable place to live in New York was not an easy thing to do. Doing it in less than a week was nearly impossible. Yet somehow the stars had aligned and Regina had found a two bedroom townhome in Brooklyn to rent. It was only fifteen minutes away from her job and a few hundred less than what she was willing to pay. Henry’s room was smaller than the one he had in California but at least now she wasn’t forced to sleep on the pullout couch in the living room.

She quickly kicked off her heels as soon as she and Henry stepped inside. Unpacked boxes were still lined up against the walls and light from the window shined onto their bare hardwood floors. It
wasn’t a home yet but Regina was sure that once they set up their things and pulled out their pictures it would start to feel that way. If they stayed. Henry quickly rushed past her and flopped face down on their old red pullout sofa, the only thing in the house that was currently useful.

“I’m bored,” he complained with a pout.

Despite everything Regina chuckled at her son’s dramatics. She strode over to the couch and collapsed next to him. “Of course you’re bored. Everything to do is packed up in these boxes.”

“I wish I could color,” he said, turning to face her.

She rubbed his back comfortingly before standing with a sigh. “Well let’s see what we can do about that.”

She looked through the boxes until she came across two small ones labeled “HENRY’S ROOM” in thick black sharpie ink. A grunt flew from her throat as she picked them up and dropped them at his feet. “If your coloring books are anywhere I promise they’re in here.”

Henry hopped up eagerly to look through his boxes but was held back by his mother.

“But…” she drawled strictly. “Anything that isn’t a coloring book has to be put away before one line is drawn. Promise?”

“I promise,” agreed Henry, with a nod.

“That’s my boy,” said Regina, pressing a quick kiss to his forehead. “I’m going to get started on the kitchen boxes so we can order dinner.”

She sighed as she started sorting through their boxes. The sooner she got the kitchen boxes unpacked the sooner she and Henry could stop depending on takeout. Despite this fact, as soon as her eyes landed on a box labeled “PICTURES” she knew she wouldn’t be able to stop herself from going through that box first. When she’d escaped with Henry it was a while before it hit her that she had left all of her pictures behind. All of Henry’s newborn photos, the ones of her father and her own childhood were forever lost to her. Ever since that realization she’d grown a little obsessed with documenting and recording their new life together. She had hundreds of pictures from the last couple years all categorized and stored accordingly in photo albums. A wistful smile grew on her face as she looked through some of her old memories. Seeing the faces of Robin and Marian and all her friends from California made her feel homesick. She had to admit being without their immediate support made her feel a little bit lost. Especially after the day she’d had.

She was pulled out of her stroll down memory lane by a knock on her door. Her blood ran cold as she looked through the peep hole and saw Snow standing just outside her door.

The ball of dread she’d been carrying with her all day doubled in size. For a moment she thought about not even answering the door and pretending she wasn’t home but then she realized it would bode well for her to make Snow angry.

She turned back at the sound of Henry rustling through his boxes and realized that no matter what Snow wanted she didn’t want her son to see her demand it. She quickly rushed to his side and gathered the boxes in her arms.

“Hey!” cried Henry obviously offended.

“Baby I just think it would be better if you looked through these in your new room. It’ll make them easier to put away.”
Her heart began to drum faster as she heard Snow impatiently knock against the door again.

“Just a minute!” she yelled over her shoulder frantically. She quickly rushed Henry into his room before heading to open the door.

Snow raised an eyebrow at her challengingly. “You know for a place this small it really shouldn’t take you so long to get to the door.”

She shoulder-checked Regina as she pushed her way into the townhome. The sound of her thick heeled booties echoed against the walls as she walked around the living room critically.

Regina eyed her nervously as she walked away from the doorway. “How did you find my house?”

“The office,” answered Snow, shrugging her shoulders smugly. “You’d be surprised the files an intern has access to.”

“Why are you here?” Regina asked in a low voice.

Snow leaned against the kitchen counter with a devious smile. “Because after giving it some thought I think I know what the first thing I want you to do is. I would like for you to quit your job.”

Regina’s eyes widened. “What?”

“I want for you to quit,” repeated Snow, crossing her arms against her chest. “I mean obviously we both can’t work there and I can’t quit because what would the fun be in that?”

“Sn- Mary… I have a child to support and rent to pay. I can’t just quit my job,” Regina pleaded desperately.

“That’s not really a concern of mine,” said Snow tilting her head at her. “My only concern is making you squirm until I get bored. And hey, look on the bright side if you get kicked out at least you’re already packed.”

Regina felt her face begin to go red with a mix of anger and fear. “How the hell did you get like this?”

“I found out someone who loved me was only pretending,” Snow replied in a low voice. “That’s enough to piss off the sweetest of people, don’t you think?”

Regina felt a drop of guilt mix into her storm of emotions. She never would’ve thought that her disappearance would’ve affected Snow so deeply. Or turned her into something so ugly.

Snow held up her phone threateningly. “So do you want to make the call to Mallory or should I make a call of my own?”

“I found my coloring book!”

Both their head swiveled back toward Henry’s door as he rushed into the proudly holding his coloring book over his head, utterly oblivious to the tension that filled the air.

Regina quickly tried to overcome her shock before kneeling down to give Henry a watery smile. “That’s wonderful sweetheart but I thought I told you to stay in your room.”

“But I wanted to show you my coloring book,” he insisted softly. He looked over her shoulder and eyed Snow curiously. “Who’s that lady?”
Regina’s eye flickered back to Snow nervously. She was still leaning against the counter trying to look anywhere but in Henry’s direction. “That’s just one of Mommy’s coworkers from the office. Now please just go color-”

Henry quickly sidestepped her and ran up to Snow’s side with a bright smile. “Hi!”

She regarded him apprehensively before replying. “Hello.”

“You’re pretty!” he complimented.

A tiny smile tugged on Snow’s lips as she looked down at him. “Thank you.”

Henry’s eyes twinkled as he grinned up at her. He held up his coloring book proudly. “Wanna color?”

Snow let out a breath before shaking her head at him. “I’m sorry sweetheart, I can’t but, um, thank you for asking me.”

Regina quickly grabbed her son by his shoulders. “Henry why don’t you go into my room and go through the takeout menus. Pick the prettiest one and that’s what we’ll eat for dinner.”

“Okay,” agreed Henry rushing off to her room. She let out a deep breath as soon as he was out of sight.

Snow cleared her throat as she tried to recover from Henry’s appearance. She hadn’t really expected to see him when she came over. “So… that’s your son?”

“Yes,” said Regina tiredly.

“He’s cute,” replied Snow in a low whisper. And completely innocent. She grinded her teeth as she tapped her phone against her palm. After a second of silence she just rolled her eyes and shook her head. “You know what? Forget it.”

Regina raised her eyebrows at Snow as she started to walk past her. “What?”

“Keep your stupid job,” grumbled Snow. “I don’t care anymore. I have better things to do with my time than waste it on you.”

“So you won’t tell your father about me?” asked Regina hesitantly.

Snow scoffed at her. “Why would I? It’s not like he answers my calls anyway.”

Snow looked down at her shoes, trying not to let Regina see the pain in her eyes. The truth is she hadn’t really heard from her father in weeks. And probably wouldn’t for at least another month.

Regina tilted her head at her suspiciously. “Why should I trust you?”

“Because I’m the only one here who still uses my real name,” Snow bit out angrily. “I’d say that makes me the trustworthy one, don’t you?”

Regina pressed her lips together tightly before nodding. “Okay.”

Snow sighed tiredly at her. “I don’t care what happens to you. You can stay here or you can run away again. It doesn’t really matter. Just stay the hell away from me.”

Regina could only nod silently as Snow stomped her way out of the town house, giving her one last
glare before slamming the door behind her.

As soon as the door shut Regina let out a long breath and leaned against the kitchen counter. She’d avoided disaster. At least for today.

A buzzing against the counter nearly made her jump out of her skin before realizing it was just her phone. She quickly brought it up to her ear. “Hello?”

“Did you remember to breathe?”

A breathless chuckle escaped her as she smiled at Robin’s voice. “Yes I did. Thank you for the text.”

“Just wanted to give you some encouragement for your first day,” he said cheerfully. She could practically hear his smile through the phone. “So how’d it go?”

*I met my scary boss, met my suspicious coworkers, ran into a teenage ghost from my past, had a breakdown and confrontation in the bathroom with said ghost, got blackmailed but was saved by my son’s adorableness.*

“It went okay, I guess?”
Over the next few months Regina felt like she was walking on pins and needles. True to her word, Snow hadn’t told anyone of her reappearance but that didn’t mean Regina still didn’t feel wary around her. God, she wanted nothing more than to just pack up her things and leave New York but it wasn’t an option. It’s not like she had the means to create a new identity for her and Henry like her father had. And if she went back to California as Regina Gardiner and Snow did call her mother she’d just be leading her to the people she cared about the most. And she couldn’t let that happen. No, her best option was to stay in New York and make sure that Snow didn’t go back on her word. It was easier said than done though. She avoided her as much as possible at work but that wasn’t a hard task seeing as how disinterested Snow was in her life. Regina, however, did find herself a little intrigued by the person Snow had become in her absence. After watching her from afar at work she thought it was in her best interest to do a little research on the person who now held her life in her hands. What she found was shocking to say the least. It appeared that after she’d left Snow had fallen into a pattern of self-destructive behavior. A cursory internet search showed her underage partying, getting kicked out of schools, even crashing a car or two. It was painful for Regina to see how Snow had turned out. She’d would’ve never expected this from her four years ago.

Regina eyed the young intern from her designing desk. She’d come in late today. And if the sunglasses worn indoors were any indication, she was obviously hungover. Her head must be killing her too. She’d snapped at more than a few people about the volume of their voices. She was currently lying face down over her desk trying to block out the minimal noise in the office.

Carlotta snuck a look at her before rolling her eyes. “Who comes in hungover on a Tuesday?”

“You, on several occasions,” replied Ursula, smirking at her.

“Yes but I’m better at hiding it darling,” said Carlotta with a wink. “Our poor intern is clearly an amateur in that department.”

“She’s got no reason to hide,” said Jefferson, not lifting his eyes from his sketchpad. “As long as her father keeps investing with Mal she can’t be fired. Why wouldn’t she act out?”

Regina gave them all a disapproving look. It hadn’t taken her long to realize that the members of her design team were a bunch of gossips. Even though they talked about nearly everyone in the office Snow was clearly their favorite to bash. Regina couldn’t say that she blamed them. Snow wasn’t the friendliest face in building and she did little, if any, work. Still Regina couldn’t help but feel sorry for her.

“It seems to me all her behavior is just a cry for help,” she mumbled to herself.

“Of course it is,” sighed Jefferson. “Problem is no one’s coming to her rescue. I don’t even think she’d let them if they did. It’s best to just not think about it.”

It wasn’t the worst advice Regina had been told. It was just the hardest to follow. She couldn’t block out the voice in her head that said if no one helped Snow soon, she’d end up stuck in a situation she can’t get out of. She also couldn’t block out Marian’s voice saying that the person to help should be her.

The only thing that really distracted her from Snow was work. The silver lining in her move to New York was that she loved designing at the firm. A part of her missed working with her hands and sewing the dresses herself but she never would’ve had the chance to design the dresses she was
designing now if she’d stayed in California. They were being worn to movie premieres and A-list events. Watching them come to life was more fulfilling than she expected.

Regina hummed to herself as she critically ran her eyes over the sketchpad in front of her. She was designing a ball gown for a congresswoman and couldn’t decide between no sleeves or quarter sleeves. Her concentration was broken when she heard the shuffle of Snow’s boots walk up to her desk. The beat of her heart quickened as she looked up at her nervously.

Snow moaned tiredly before slipping off her sunglasses. She rapidly blinked her red tinted eyes as her pupils adjusted to the light. The dark circles under her eyes were only emphasized by the unhealthy pallor of her skin. Honestly she looked like hell.

“Rough night darling?” asked Carlotta, with false sincerity.

Snow glared at her venomously. “A little but at least it hasn’t given me crow’s feet.”

Carlotta’s smile dropped as her hands flew to the corners of her eyes. A smirk tugged on Snow’s lips at her reaction. “Your concern is appreciated but I’m only talking to you to give you all a heads up.”

“A heads up about what?” asked Jefferson, eyeing her curiously.

“My father,” said Snow, looking at Regina pointedly. She sighed before turning back to the rest of the group. “I just got a call that he’s coming in for a visit today.”

Regina felt her hands begin to shake. Leopold was coming here? She forced to herself to keep breathing and remain calm.

“Well, how nice for you,” said Ursula rolling her eyes in boredom.

“And lucky for you guys,” replied Snow with a sickly sweet smile. “You all know what a good mood Mal is in when my father visits. You could probably ask to take the rest of the day off and she wouldn’t even flinch.”

She gave Regina a pointed look. “I personally think it’s an opportunity you all should take advantage of.”

Regina nodded at Snow subtly. She could take a hint when it was thrown to her. Once she was satisfied that Regina understood her meaning Snow slipped her sunglasses back on and adjusted her peasant blouse before sauntering toward’s Mal’s office. “I guess I’ll go tell the dragon lady the good news.”

Carlotta scoffed as she watched her go. “Can you believe her audacity? Flaunting her daddy’s visit in our face.”

“I actually might take her up on her offer,” said Regina, rising from her seat shakily. “I miss spending time with Henry and I guess today’s my chance.”

“Any luck with his imaginary friend?” asked Jefferson with a grin.
Regina glared at him in response. She feared that Henry hadn’t been adjusting well to their move. Sure he seemed happy enough but he hadn’t really made any friends yet. She’d hoped that things would change after he started school but Henry didn’t appear to be connecting with any of the kids in his class. She tried not to be bothered by it but a few days ago Henry had run up to her and said he’d made a new friend named Emma. Normally she’d be thrilled but when she’d checked with his teacher she’d said that there was no little girl named Emma in his class, or even his grade. She worried that this imaginary friend he’d made up was just his way of coping with the loneliness.

“I still think you’re overreacting,” insisted Jefferson. “Grace is Henry’s age and she has plenty of imaginary friends.”

“Yeah but do you have to pack lunches for them every day?” challenged Regina, raising an eyebrow at him.

He nodded concedingly. “Point taken.”

She shrugged on her coat with a triumphant smile. “It doesn’t matter anyway. I’m sure Henry will make friends soon enough. Until then a surprise lunch with me should be enough to bring a smile to his face.”

As she walked over to Henry’s new school Regina tried to wrap her head around Snow’s mind boggling generosity that morning. Just as she’d said Mal had been more than willing to let Regina take the rest of the day off once she’d heard of Leopold’s arrival and Snow’s heads up had given her more than enough time to disappear before he got to the office. She just couldn’t understand why she’d warned her in the first place. Snow had made it perfectly clear that Regina’s predicament meant nothing to her and yet she’d gone out of her way to keep her fragile identity a secret. Why? She tried to shake the thoughts from her head as Henry’s school came into view.

Regina would always be grateful that their move had allowed her a decent amount of time to find a school for Henry. He went to a charter school not far from their town house. It was three story brick building with cement steps leading up to the double doors. Clean with new books and good teachers it was the best public school in their district. Far better than she expected from the New York public school system. And his teachers said that he was doing well, academically at least. Grasping onto his letters and colors and reading a little better than anyone in his class. (She blamed Robin and his comic books for that one.) The teachers were just a little worried about how he was doing socially. He participated and talked with other students, he just seemed to have a hard time forming an actual bond with them. It was a little troubling. Regina had always known that Henry was more comfortable in his own world but she didn’t think it was that serious until the teachers had told her so.

After going through the necessary protocol she finally approached Henry’s classroom. A concerned frown settled on her face as looked the classroom window. It was bright and colorful inside with children’s drawings on the wall and red plastic desks set up in a circle. There were around a dozen five-year-olds all running around and happily talking with each other in their navy blue school uniforms. And then there was Henry. He was sitting quietly at his desk, eyes firmly planted on the construction paper in front of him. Judging by the massive amount of yellow she could see he was probably drawing another picture of Emma. He always drew her with blonde hair, glasses and brown boots. His tongue stuck out of the corner of his mouth as he rapidly rubbed his crayon against the paper. Completely in his own world. Like always. She sighed before opening the classroom door.

“Henry?”
A bewildered look was on his face as he looked up to his mom standing in the doorway but in a split second it was replaced by a face splitting grin. “Mommy!”

A smile grew on her face as she knelted down to capture him in a hug. “Hi baby. I missed you.”

“Why are you at my school?” he asked curiously.

“Well I got some time off from my job,” said Regina with a smile. “I thought we could go to the diner for lunch together then go explore the big library with the lions. Would you like that?”

Henry started to shuffle uncomfortably at the mention of lunch. “I can’t go,” he mumbled, looking down at his feet.

Regina knitted her eyebrows at him. “Why not?”

“Because if I go then Emma won’t eat lunch,” he said softly.

Regina let out a soft chuckle. “Henry… I promise you Emma will be fine if you come with me.”

“No she won’t!” he insisted. “She can only eat at the playground with me.”

Regina hung her head and sighed. She had no idea that imaginary friends could be so much trouble. “Henry… Emma can eat with us at the diner. She’ll probably like it there.”

“You promise?”

“I promise,” said Regina with a grin. “Now go get your things.”

“Okay,” he agreed happily skipping off to his cubby.

She watched Henry quickly shove his things into his tiny backpack. Her beautiful imaginative boy. She wondered if anyone was capable of seeing the world like he did.

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After triple reassurance that Emma would be more than comfortable at the diner Henry and Regina finally walked out of the school. As she started walking in the direction of their favorite diner Regina was stopped short when she felt Henry tug on her arm.

“We have to get Emma first,” he said earnestly.

Regina widened her eyes at him. “Oh! She’s not with you?”

“No,” he answered, giving her a quizzical look. “Why would you say that?”

“No reason,” she laughed, giving her head a shake. “Where is she now?”

“She’s at the playground. She likes to wait for me there.”

“Okay,” conceded Regina. “Let’s go see if she’s there.”

Regina loved the playground at Henry’s school. There was a colorful basketball court, monkey bars and swings. It wasn’t hard to imagine children running around and having fun on it. Even when it was ghostly empty as it was now. Not a child in sight. Or an imaginary friend apparently.

“She’s not here,” Henry pouted, looking through the bars that surrounded the courtyard. “I thought
she’d wait for me.”

Regina set her purse on the ground beside her as she kneeled down to rub Henry’s back comfortably. “I’m sorry sweetheart. Maybe she had things to do today?”

Henry just leaned his forehead against the bars disappointedly. His dejection was a little alarming to his mother. Regina knew it was common for children his age to have imaginary friends but being this attached certainly couldn’t be normal.

“C’mon sweetie, we have smile pancakes with our names on them at the diner. Okay?”

He nodded sadly but she didn’t even get the chance to smile at him before she was knocked over. In a blur a man dressed in baggy pants and a gray hoodie pushed her into the fence before grabbing her purse and taking off down the street. A painful groan flew from her throat as he shoulder made impact with iron bars of the fence.

“Mommy!” cried Henry, fearfully wrapping his arms around her waist. “Are you okay?”

“I’m alright Henry,” she said, pulling him closer to check for injuries. Once she made sure he was alright she looked down the street to see her mugger racing away with her purse tucked under his arm. “Hey that’s mine!”

Her words had no effect on the mugger. The man only continued to sprint as far away from her as possible. He was rapidly approaching the end of the block when, as if out of nowhere, he was suddenly knocked off his feet by what appeared to be a flash of yellow. A metallic bang rang down the block as a blonde woman in a plaid shirt and jean jacket slammed a rusty trash can lid into the mugger’s face, knocking him flat on his back. Regina saw her quickly snatch the purse from the mugger and run in their direction. She skidded to a stop in front of them, her green eyes wild with adrenaline behind her glasses.

“Here,” she panted, holding out the purse. “I think this belongs to you.”

Regina eyed her warily as she took back her purse. Her blonde hero looked to be no older than Snow. Her hair was pulled back into a high ponytail and her glasses were covered with so many scratches it must’ve been a miracle she could even see through them. Regina struggled to find words as she continued to stare at her. “Uh… thank you?”

She was certainly grateful to the stranger who’d recovered her purse but after just being mugged she thought it best to proceed with caution. Henry, however, shared none of her hesitation. He wasted no time wrapping his arm around the girl’s waist and burying his face into her hip. “I knew you’d wait for me!”

Regina observed her son’s behavior with a dropped jaw.

“Henry!” she scolded. “We do not hug strangers, no matter how grateful we are.”

“She’s not a stranger,” he said, shaking his head. “She’s Emma.”

“What?” said Regina, furrowing her brow at him. Then she took another look at Emma. The blonde hair, the glasses, the brown boots. “Oh my god…”

Emma raised her hand shyly. “Hi.”

-----------------------------------------------------------------
There were dozens of plausible scenarios that Regina could’ve foreseen when she decided to take Henry to lunch. None of them included sitting across from her son’s previously imaginary, adult secret friend.

Emma Swan.

How she wished she’d remained imaginary.

When she’d discovered that the imaginary friend her son had spoken so fondly of was an actual person, it took everything in her to swallow her rage and not throttle her on the spot. Emma Swan. She must’ve been sneaking to see Henry for weeks. Regina wanted nothing more than to just take her purse and her son and go home where she could simmer down in private. A hope that would go unfulfilled thanks to her son. He was quick to remind her of her promise to bring Emma with them to the diner and it wasn’t like she could say no. Despite her inappropriate relationship with her son the girl had just recovered her purse from a mugger. She didn’t want Henry thinking that shouldn’t thank people who’ve done good things for you.

So that’s how she ended up in a diner sitting across from Emma Swan.

She tried not to let it irritate her that Henry had chosen to sit on Emma’s side of the booth instead of hers. They looked thick as thieves settled against the scratchy green and beige fabric of their seat. Emma, though apparently not shy with her pancakes, seemed more than determined not to make eye contact with her. She was perfectly content to keep her eyes on Henry, who was excitedly chatting with her. Regina had to admit it was the longest conversation she’d seen him hold since they moved to New York. After thirty minutes of watching them she gave Henry a roll of quarters to go play on the arcade game. As soon as he was gone she leveled a critical gaze on Emma.

“So… are all your friends kindergarteners or is my son just special?” she asked venomously.

Emma sighed guiltily pushing away what was left of her pancakes. “Look… the thing with Henry… it wasn’t intentional.”

“So you accidentally befriended my five-year-old and visited him every day for the past month and a half?” she retorted, arching an eyebrow. “What reason could you have for such inappropriate behavior?”

Emma shrugged her shoulders. “I guess I like talking to him.”

Regina just shook her head at her. “How old are you?”

“Nineteen,” she answered sullenly.

Regina sighed as she let her eyes roam over Emma critically. Her clothes hung off her body like they were just one size too big. The paint on her glasses her chipped and her nails were bitten to shreds. Her hair though beautifully blonde looked like it hadn’t been washed in weeks. It was then that Regina realized that Emma looked just like she had when she’d been living in the play castle with Henry.

“Ohay,” she breathed, trying to temper her anger. “What’s your story Emma?”

“My story?” responded Emma, arching an eyebrow at her.

“Yes your story,” repeated Regina with a touch of irritation. “You sneak around and get lunch from a five year old and you can take down a mugger without getting so much as a scratch. People who do those things always have a story.”
Emma rolled her eyes and sighed before answering her. “There’s not really much to tell. I was a foster kid in Minnesota. No family, not a lot of friends. Until I turned sixteen and met this guy… Neal.”

Regina saw Emma’s eyes darken and her hands clench at the man’s name. She raised an eyebrow at her. “Was he a good guy or a bad guy?”

“He was the worst guy,” replied Emma in a low voice. “Not that I knew it at the time.”

“What happened?” asked Regina softly.

Emma gave her a wry smile. “Let’s just say he screwed me over then left me behind.”

Regina wanted to demand more of an explanation but she knew she wouldn’t be getting one. She’d been sitting across from her for about half an hour and she could already Emma had built up massive walls around herself. It was clear she wouldn’t be opening up to her anytime soon. It was probably just to move on to a different subject.

“How did you meet my son?”

A small wistful smile grew on Emma’s face. “He talked to me. I was sitting on a bench, watching the kids play when he saw me and asked me why I looked so sad. I wouldn’t really give him an answer but he kept talking. Then he gave me an apple and said they were his favorite food. He thought they would make me happy. I don’t know why but I just kept coming.”

Regina scoffed to herself. “Probably dozens of kids on that playground. Of course my son had to bond with the stranger on the bench.”

“Well I was the only person who was alone.”

Regina knitted her eyebrows in confusion. “What?”

“Look,” sighed Emma. “Henry is new at his school and he might be in kindergarten but I know for a fact that all the other kids moved up from a nearby preschool together.”

“And?” said Regina shrugging her shoulders.

“And they all know each other,” elaborated Emma, leaning back in her seat. “Take it from someone who’s been in dozens of foster homes it’s hard to find friends in a place where everybody’s already bonded and grouped together.”

“They’re five year olds. It’s not like they have cliques,” responded Regina fiercely.

“Oh you’d be surprised,” said Emma with a smirk. “From what I’ve seen your kid’s pretty shy and breaking into a group can be intimidating. He might be more confident one on one.”

Regina regarded her with a tilted head. “You seem to know a lot about kids.”

“No I just know a lot about feeling out of place,” Emma replied softly. She sighed before crossing her arms. “So what happens now?”

“What do you mean?”

“Are you going to call the cops for my… stranger danger I guess?”

Regina narrowed her eyes at her. It was a reasonable assumption. After finding out how just how
much time this stranger had spent with her son a call to the police would be completely rational. And yet… she knew that she couldn’t make that choice. Emma had behaved inappropriately to say the very least but sending her to the cops didn’t seem like the right move. If she was honest the girl seemed more troubled than dangerous. And she couldn’t silence the voice in her head that said she needed help not punishment.

“Where do you stay Emma?” she asked.

Emma narrowed her eyes at her. “Why are you asking?”

“Because I get the feeling you can’t give me an answer,” Regina retorted. “Your clothes are too big. You eat like you don’t know where your next meal is coming from. And I’m willing to bet that you haven’t showered in at least a week because, quite frankly, I can smell you from across this table.”

Emma glared at her. “Well what can I say? Public showers are hard to come by.”

“I never really had that problem in California,” said Regina with a smirk. “I stayed close to the beaches so I could use their showers. Water was cold though.”

“You were homeless?”

“We were homeless,” corrected Regina. “Henry and I. When he was a baby… I struggled a lot.”

She leaned her elbows against the table. “You say that you don’t know why you continued to see my son Emma but that’s not true. You kept coming to the playground because you knew he’d feed you and that made it worth the risk. It would’ve been a smart move if it wasn’t so damn inappropriate.”

“Look I’m sorry about everything with the kid,” muttered Emma. “I promise I won’t see him again.”

Regina bit her lip before speaking again. “Alright, Emma. I’ll agree not to call the cops but you have to do something for me first.”

“What do you want from me?” asked Emma, giving her a quizzical look.

“I want you to come back to my apartment for the night. Take a shower, have dinner and then in the morning we will have a conversation about what comes next for you.”

Emma widened her eyes at her. “Lady, you are out of your mind if you think I’m coming home with you.”

“It’s either my town home or a jail cell,” replied Regina. “The choice is yours.”

It was a low blow, the blackmail. But she knew it would be more than effective.

Emma clenched her jaw before nodding with a false smile. “Fine.”

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It didn’t take long for Regina to second guess her decision to take Emma home. About halfway from the diner to the town house she realized that she had just invited a homeless, child stalking teenager to the home she shared with her five-year-old. On paper it probably wasn’t the smartest thing she’d ever done. Emma didn’t look particularly comfortable either. Arms crossed and a scowl
planted firmly on her face, she marched alongside Regina silently conveying her displeasure about their arrangement. She only chose to smile when Henry talked to her. Henry was more than thrilled that Emma was coming home with them for the night. His voice could probably be heard down the block as he rattled off all the activities he had planned for her visit. Coloring and movies and board games. Regina doubted he’d even have the energy for all of it.

Her doubts about Emma only intensified when they finally reached the townhouse. She’d barely gotten the door open when Henry rushed past her and pulled Emma inside by her arm. In the past few months Regina and Henry had really pulled the town home together. All their boxes were unpacked and all the rooms were set up. Henry’s colorful drawings now hung on the refrigerator door and the pictures of their friends in California now graced the walls. Regina had been extra sure to set up a few pictures of Marian, Robin and Roland in the living room where she would see them every day. It took a bit of work but the house finally felt like home.

Emma looked around warily as Henry gave her a detailed tour of his house. It wasn’t like this was exactly new territory for her. She’d gone through this routine dozens of times when she’d moved from foster home to foster home. A quick tour of the place she wouldn’t last long in.

Regina watched her with cautious eyes as she moved through the rooms. She stood like she was prepared to run at any minute and her fist were clenched like she was ready to fight off any surprise attack. Everything about her was just so damn defensive. She allowed for Henry to excitedly ramble for ten minutes before she finally interrupted. She quickly rustled up some jeans and a t-shirt for Emma before sending her off to the shower. Emma glared at her before taking the clothes but complied with relative ease.

As soon as the she heard the shower running from behind the bathroom door Regina collapsed on the couch and threw her head in her hands while letting out a deep breath. When she’d left the house this morning she’d thought she’d go to work, avoid Snow then come home, have dinner with her son, go to sleep and then wake up and do it all again the next day. Since then she’d avoided her ex-fiance, gotten mugged and brought homeless teenager into her house. What the hell was she thinking?

Regina leaned back against the couch with a moan. She needed to talk about this with someone. Henry was in his room setting up a board game for Emma to play. It was the perfect time to get some advice from a reliable source. She reached into her purse, pulled out her cell phone and dialed a number she’d long since memorized. The phone rang twice before she heard Robin’s rich comforting voice flow through the speaker. “Well isn’t this a lovely surprise.”

Hearing Robin’s voice helped bring her back to Earth and make her feel like she wasn’t so alone. Despite everything a smile tugged on her lips and a chuckle escaped her throat. “It would be lovelier if I wasn’t panicking.”

“Why are you panicking?” he asked curiously.

“I brought home a homeless teenager who was maintaining an inappropriate secret relationship with my son,” she blurted out in a rush.

For a moment there was silence on the other line of the phone. She could almost hear Robin scrunching his eyebrows in confusion like he always did. Then she heard him take a deep breath, clear his throat and say “Four months.”

“Four months?” repeated Regina curiously.

“Four months of you being in New York and this is the first time I’ve wanted to run up there and
drag you back home,” he chuckled. “I’ll admit I expected this feeling to come much sooner.”

“So nice to know you had confidence in me,” laughed Regina.

Robin laughed with her for a few moments before sighing. “Why don’t you start from the beginning and tell me what happened?”

And she did. Of course she’d left out certain bits, such as Snow and Leopold but she told him about everything else. The imaginary friend, the mugging, the diner. Even the parts she wasn’t proud of, like the blackmail.

“You actually blackmailed her?” asked Robin incredulously.

“It seemed like my only option at the time,” whispered Regina exasperatedly. She’d migrated into her room for privacy during their conversation. God forbid her new houseguest overhear her talking about this situation. She ran her fingers threw her hair and gave her head a little shake. “I’m insane, aren’t I?”

Robin sucked his teeth at her. “I can say with absolute certainty that you are…but I also said the same thing to Marian when she brought you home.”

A small smile tugged on Regina’s lips. “Did you really?”

“Of course I did. I came home and got punched in the face by a crazy woman hiding in my shower.”

“That was only because you were spying on me while I was naked,” pointed out Regina.

“I will say this for the last time, I thought you were my wife and that was the only reason I was in there,” explained Robin for the umpteenth time. “However, despite my shock over your appearance and your physical assault of me I completely understood why Marian brought you back. It was because she knew you’d be safer in the apartment with us than out on the streets. That’s why she brought you home. Now why did you bring this girl home?”

Regina shrugged her shoulders and sighed. “I don’t know… I guess because she got my purse back.”

“Is that really the only reason?”

“Yes but it’s deeper than that,” said Regina softly. “She had to have seen us on the playground and known who I was and how I’d feel about her but… she still helped. Nineteen years old and she’s tough as nails, has walls ten feet high but I think there’s good in her.”

“Sounds familiar,” replied Robin with a smirk. “Do you think you can help her?”

“I don’t even know if she’ll let me.”

“I am almost didn’t let you help me but you still found a way.”

“That’s different,” argued Regina. “I knew you and you at least trusted me a little. I’ve only been around this girl for an hour and she’s already blocked me out.”

“Well you’ve got her for the rest of the night, watch her and see if there’s any way she’ll let you in,” answered Robin. “If you think she’s worth saving then you’ve got to give it a try.”

Regina sighed. “I know. Marian would’ve wanted me to.”
“Yes she would’ve,” replied Robin softly. Silence between them grew heavy with the memory of the woman who had a place in both their hearts. Regina was pulled out of the moment by the realization that the shower was no longer running. Emma would be out of the bathroom any minute now.

“I’ve gotta go,” she said. “Give Roland a kiss for me?”

“Every day,” answered Robin with a smile. “Let me know how it goes?”

“Of course. Talk to you soon Robin,” she replied before hanging up.

Getting things off her chest with Robin had made her feel better. It always did. Regina still didn’t have very many friends in New York and conversations like the ones she just had always had a way of making her feel homesick. Still she couldn’t focus on that right now. She had a more present problem to deal with, namely the nineteen year old she’d blackmailed into spending the night.

Regina decided to take Robin’s advice and just watch Emma. She stayed out of her way for the night and instead observed her interactions with Henry. Though she remained guarded around Regina there was no doubt that Emma was more than comfortable around her son. She engaged him in all his fantasies and activities. She even taught him how to make paper turtles during their time playing arts and crafts. It was the most Regina had seen her smile all day. Henry, for his part, seemed to come out of his shell with Emma. He talked more and was definitely more social than Regina had seen in the past few weeks. Perhaps Emma was right and he was better off socializing one-on-one.

When they all went to sleep that night Regina was sure of one thing: Emma was no danger to her son. And the knowledge of that possibly gave her an idea of how to help her.

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It was early in the morning and silence was all that could be heard in the townhome. The clock read 5:15 and things were as still as could be. In fact, the only thing in motion was one Emma Swan as she tried to make her way out of the town house as stealthily as possible. Her footsteps were as light as possible as she moved from her place on the couch to the bathroom. Her night with Henry and his mother had gone better than she expected. If she was perfectly honest she’d wouldn’t have been surprised if she’d woken up in a bathtub full of ice with a kidney missing. Shockingly, things turned out to be quite the opposite. Henry and his mother were… nice. She didn’t exactly know what to make of Regina. She hadn’t been welcoming exactly but she’d fed her and made sure she was warm and comfortable for the night. And true to her word she hadn’t called the cops. But Emma still couldn’t be sure her generosity would hold. It was better not to take any chances and just leave before they woke up.

She exited the bathroom dressed in her clothes from the day before. They were clean but she still planned on changing once she got back to the car. She silently sent up a prayer that her yellow VW bug was still where she’d left it the day before. God, if she lost the bug then she’d truly be screwed. That car had been her home for the last two months. It might not be as comfortable as a pullout couch but it was twice as reliable.

She crept her way from the bathroom to the living room. The front door was right there. Ten steps and she’d be free to never return. She made it two steps before she was stopped in her tracks by her growling stomach. Her eyes flickered toward the kitchen. She knew she shouldn’t push her luck… but this might be that last chance she had to get food for a while. It’s not like she could keep getting lunches from Henry anymore. A bagel or two for the road couldn’t hurt.
She made her way into the kitchen and nearly let out a scream when she saw Regina sitting on the kitchen counter, sipping her coffee in the dark. “Leaving so soon?” she said flatly.

Emma repeatedly open and shut her mouth trying to come up with a reply. All that escaped her was, “How long have you been sitting there?”

“Long enough to hear you try and sneak out,” replied Regina flipping on the kitchen light. Her hair was pulled back into a low ponytail and she was still dressed in her light blue button up pajamas. There were early morning circles under her eyes but she still looked relatively well-rested. She gestured to the kitchen table. “Have a seat Emma.”

“Why should I?” replied the blonde, folding her arms across her chest determined to stand her ground.

“Because you won’t get your breakfast if you don’t,” answered Regina sternly.

Emma wanted so badly to tell her to go to hell but the growl of her stomach forced her into the chair while Regina smiled triumphant from her spot on the counter. She slid off the kitchen counter and set down her coffee before loading two bagels into the toaster. Once they were steadily cooking she took a seat across from Emma at the kitchen table.

“You’ve probably realized by now that I’m not going to call the cops on you Emma,” she said in a low voice. “Honestly I don’t think it’d really do you any good. Or Henry for that matter.”

“Thank you,” said Emma, softly.

“However, I’m not entirely comfortable with idea of sending you back into the streets,” continued Regina.

Emma scoffed at her. “I’m nineteen-years old. You can’t call CPS on me.”

“I’m aware of that,” replied Regina, with a touch of irritation. “And that’s not what I wish to do with you at all. In fact… I’d prefer to offer you a job.”

Emma raised her eyebrows in shock. “A job?”

“Yes. As my live-in nanny.”

A gut busting laugh erupted from Emma. “I’m sorry… you want me to watch your kid?”

Regina groaned as she set down her coffee mug. She was not going to make this easy on her. “Emma, as much as I hate the way this whole situation began I can’t deny that Henry has grown fond of you. You’re the only person he’s bonded with since we’ve moved here and I don’t want my son to lose that. And the only way I think I’m going to be comfortable with you being around is if you work for me so I can supervise you.”

Emma tilted her head suspiciously. “And just where I am supposed to stay here?”

“You can have the pullout couch in the living room,” replied Regina coolly. “I’m sure it’s not the worse place you’ve slept.”

Emma rolled her eyes at her. The statement wasn’t untrue but she didn’t have to let Regina know that.

“And I would pay of you of course,” continued Regina softly. “100 a week during the school year.
200 during the summer and breaks when Henry needs all day care. You are to walk him to and from school and watch him afterward until I return home. You are to stay in the house until I deem you trustworthy enough to go to the park with him alone. After I get home the nights and weekends are yours to do with whatever you want.”

“I’m assuming no boys over?” replied Emma, sarcastically.

“Absolutely not,” answered Regina sternly, with an unblinking gaze.

Emma searched her face looking for any signs of deception. It was a skill she’d actually gotten quite good at. Which was why it was so shocking when she saw only honesty in the older woman’s face. She took a deep breath before replying, “What exactly do you get out of this?”

“You mean besides a clear conscience and criminally cheap childcare?” asked Regina. She took a sip from her coffee before responding, “Truthfully… I’ll be getting a chance to do for you what someone did for me.”

Emma raised her eyebrows, challenging her to elaborate but Regina only responded with a clench of her jaw. No more information would be coming from her and strangely Emma found that she could respect that.

She bit her lip before speaking. “I have a bug.”

“You have a bug?” repeated Regina, arching an eyebrow at her.

“A Volkswagen beetle,” clarified Emma. “I’ll need a place to park it.”

“The town home came with a parking spot in a garage down the block. You can park it there,” replied Regina.

“Fine,” said Emma. “I guess I’m your new nanny.”

At that moment the bagels popped out of the toaster signaling the end of their conversation. They would figure out the logistics later. For now the two women chose to eat their bagels in silence as sun rose over the city skyline. A brand new day welcoming a fresh new friendship.
Eli Gold impatiently tapped at the crook of his cane as he waited for the hospital elevator to arrive at his desired floor. With a lazy stroke of his gloved hand he reached up to swipe a speck of lint off the shoulder of his black trench coat, a fashion choice he had grown to regret. Even in late October it appeared Northern California wasn’t quite as cold as he had expected. Yet another reason he hated coming to the states. The plane ride itself was reason enough to avoid the country but despite his distaste for the location he knew this visit could no longer be put off.

As soon as the elevator doors opened he stepped onto the sterile tiles of the hospital’s tenth floor. A nurse sitting behind the lobby sent him a pitiful forced smile and he nodded in acknowledgement to her. On the wall beside her a navy blue sign with white arrows showed directions for the hospital rooms. At the top in bolded letters it read: **ONCOLOGY WARD.**

Despite it being his first time there he turned confidently to the left and headed for the room down the hall. Hushed voices carried into the hall through open doors but they didn’t overpower the sound of his own footsteps. If there was one thing Gold could appreciate about a hospital it was the fact that you were always certain to find peace and quiet within its walls. At least on the surface.

As he closed in on the last room in the hall Gold felt himself straighten up and loosen his grip on his cane. He didn’t know why but he felt the need to appear as formidable as possible. He wrapped his knuckles against the doorframe and allowed a warm smile, the first in years, to grow on his face. “Landed yourself back in the hospital old man?”

A raspy voice spoke up from the hospital bed. “Who are you calling old man? You’re the one using a cane.”

A rich laugh rang through the room as Gold walked in and approached the hospital bed. He took off his coat and draped it over a chair revealing the crisp gray tailored suit he wore underneath. He slipped off his gloves before he grasped the hand of his old friend and sighed. “It’s good to see you Henry.”

“How are things looking?” asked Gold as he settled into a chair next to the bed.

Henry sighed. “It’s looking like… things won’t be ending as simply I’d hoped.”

Gold paused, his voice caught in throat before he replied, “I’m sorry to hear that.”

And he meant it. He’d visited Henry in the hospital many times during their youth but over the years he’d forgotten just how striking the visual could be. Even as the memories came back to him he could tell that this time things were different. Anyone with eyes could see that Henry was far thinner than he’d been in years. His voice wasn’t nearly as strong as it used to be, nearly reduced to a raspy whisper. All things considered it was fairly obvious that things wouldn’t be ending well for
him this time around.

Gold tapped his fingers against his cane anxiously. “Where is that demon you call a wife?”

“Protecting her empire,” replied Henry with a heavy breath. “She was at least kind enough to leave me to die in peace.”

“In a public hospital,” sneered Gold. “How generous of her.” Cora had never, and would never, be his favorite person and he had never been shy about making that fact well known.

Henry ignored his jab and leaned forward in his bed as much as his strength would allow him. “Did you bring what I asked for?”

Gold tightened his grip on his cane as he clenched his jaw. “Despite my better judgement… yes I did.”

He reached into the briefcase at his side and pulled out a thin manila folder. Henry’s eyes lit up when he saw it but Gold held it outside of his reach. He stared at him with hard eyes.

“You asked me to make her disappear,” he said in a grave voice. “I told you the cost that came with her safety. Seeing what is in this folder will not change the rules any more than your cancer. No contact is still a necessity.”

Henry glared at him with mouth pressed into a grim line. “I’m well aware of the cost Eli. I’ve lived with it for more than four years.”

“Then you know what’s in this folder won’t end that pain. Only feed it.”

“Yes,” said Henry with a nod. “But it will satisfy my curiosity and silence a few of my worries. Considering I’m on my death bed I don’t think that’s too much to ask.”

Gold searched his face hoping to find some sign that maybe he’d waver. He sighed when he saw none. With a roll of his eyes he reluctantly handed over the folder to Henry’s eager hands. Without hesitation he shakily opened it up and softly gasped when his eyes landed on a photo of his daughter, the first he’d seen in four years.

It wasn’t special. She wasn’t dressed up or surrounded by beautiful scenery. Instead she was dressed in a pair of old jeans with a t-shirt and pair of flats. Her dark hair was shorter than he’d ever seen, reaching just below her chin. She appeared to be leaving a grocery mart with a brown bag carefully tucked into the crook of her arm and legs frozen in mid step, completely unaware of the stealthy photographer. Henry ran his fingers over the edge of the photo longingly.

“My beautiful Regina,” he whispered to himself.

Gold watched his reaction uncomfortably for a moment before speaking up. “She didn’t go as far we’d hoped. At least not at first. She ended up in Ventura waitressing and tailoring on the side. Things were rough in the beginning but she made a way for herself, without my interference I might add.”

“She’s always been a strong girl,” mumbled Henry wistfully. He flipped through the photos trying to take in every detail of each one. There were ones where she was alone, others where she was with people who Henry could only assume were her friends but the ones he lingered on the most were the ones when she was with his grandson. There were more than a few of those, featuring the two of them on a playground, taking walks and eating out. His grandson had gotten so big it took his breath away. These pictures of her with little Henry were the ones where he could tell she was
the happiest. Seeing them - safe, together and free - made all the loneliness he'd felt in the last four years worth it.

"Have there been any close calls?" he asked, his eyes never leaving the photos.

"Only one or two in the beginning," answered Gold. "But I handled them. Cora is relentless but I've arranged for her investigators to be fed false information. As far as she knows Regina is still running around Mexico living off of fake credit cards. I've made sure to keep her off your girl's trail."

"Thank you," said Henry gratefully. He narrowed his eyes as he came across a third photograph featuring his daughter and a blonde scruffy man who appeared to be her age. He held up the photo to Eli. "Who's this man she's with?"

"Robin Locksely," answered Gold in a business-like manner. "Owns the bar where she used to waitress. Bit of a checkered youth but he appears to have straightened up. He and your daughter are quite close. They've known each other for years now and she's godmother to his son, Roland."

"That's quite a bond," replied Henry thoughtfully. "Is it romantic?"

A smirk graced Gold's face. "Not yet at least. He lost his wife, Marian, around a year and a half ago. She and Regina were quite close as well."

"Oh," said Henry softly. He had hoped that over the years his daughter had found someone to share her life with but he supposed that was too much to ask for.

"She's doing well," continued Gold. "Relocated to New York about eight months ago after getting a job offer. I've had my people watch her from afar. She's getting paid well, she lives in a nice home and her boy goes to decent school."

After a moment's hesitation he added, "She seems... happy."

"Good," sighed Henry, with a small smile. "But I'm afraid that might not last."

Gold tilted his head at him encouraging him to continue.

"The doctors say I don't have much time left on this earth. A year, maybe two if I continue treatment," said Henry sadly. "My daughter is just as sentimental as I am. If she knew I was here in this state I have no doubt she would try to see me."

"Lucky for her you've managed to keep things under wraps then," said Gold.

"Lucky for me Cora's more concerned with controlling the company than finding our daughter," corrected Henry. "I managed to convince her that if the board knew I was sick they would think that her focus was split, and attempt to force her out. It was enough to persuade her into keeping my illness out of the news."

"Smart play," replied Gold with a smirk.

"But it's only a short term solution," pointed out Henry. "Once I'm gone I have no doubt Cora will make a spectacle of my death in an attempt to snuff Regina out."

"You think she'll fall for it?"

"I think Regina's guilt will overwhelm her common sense," answered Henry. "She'll blame herself
for not being by my side. Try to make up for it by resurfacing. I worry Cora will take advantage of that.”

“What would you have me do?” asked Gold, leaning forward in his seat.

“Only what you have already promised me,” said Henry. “Look out for my daughter in my absence. Protect her from Cora once I’m gone.”

Gold grasped Henry’s hand with a sigh. “Of course I will look after her. She’s my goddaughter after all.”

The moon had just begun to rise over the New York skyline as Regina turned to examine her back in the mirror.

“You look pretty mommy!”

With a wide smile she turned to face her son from his spot on the bed. He’d been watching her get ready with great fascination all night.

“Thank you my little prince,” she said tapping him on the nose.

“I still can’t believe you made that dress,” commented Emma from her spot in the doorway. With her arms crossed she leaned against the frame in her yoga pants and oversized t-shirt watching Regina get ready.

“Well it’s been a while since I’ve made one from scratch like this,” said Regina, plopping down on her bed next to Henry. “But making a dress is almost always less expensive than buying one. Especially when I can just take the fabric from work.”

She was wearing a strapless floor length dress with a sweetheart neckline and sash tied bodice. It was ombre colored beginning with a deep magenta at her waist fading into a dark purple and finishing into pitch black at her chest and legs. Regina held up two different pairs of shoes in her hand trying to figure out which went with it best. She quickly decided on a pink pair of one-inch strappy heels.

She nodded toward a gold bracelet on her vanity as she slipped on her heels. “Emma could you help me put that on?”

“Sure,” she said shrugging. She sighed as she locked the chain around Regina’s wrist. Over the past few months she’d come to enjoy working as Regina’s nanny. The hours and the pay were adequate and having a roof over her head certainly didn’t hurt. She’d also be lying if she didn’t say that she liked being around both Regina and Henry. They didn’t give her that “outsider” feeling that she got in most of her foster homes. “So this gala-thing… it’s a pretty big deal?”

“It’s a charity ball slash casino night,” corrected Regina. “A lot of hot shots from the city come and gamble away their money and anything they lose goes to a support the arts foundation. Apparently the design firm reserves tickets every year.”

“So will there celebrities there?” asked Emma with a grin.

“I’ve been told it’s a possibility,” said Regina, shrugging her shoulders. “To be honest I don’t know if it’s going to be much fun. There are a lot of prospective clients so Mal wants us on our best behavior.”
“Why can’t I go to the ball?” complained Henry. He was laid out on the bed, already in his pajamas for the night.

Regina chuckled at him. “Because it’s not a party for children sweetheart. There’ll be plenty of dances for you when you get older.”

Emma rubbed his back comfortingly. “Trust me kid you don’t want to go to this thing. It’ll just be bunch old people in stiff suits and uncomfortable shoes trying dance to music that doesn’t have words.”

Regina glared at her as she stood from the bed. “Thanks, now I’m really excited to go.”

“Hey, the offer to stay in and watch the Toy Story trilogy with us still stands,” replied Emma.

“No,” drawled Regina, as she stared into the mirror putting on a pair of small dangling earrings. “The whole office is going to this event. I can’t miss it.”

Honestly, a night out in uncomfortable shoes talking to rich people was far less appealing to Regina than a night in with Emma and Henry. It reminded her far too much of her old life and that was only emphasized by the fact that Snow was most likely going to be there. She wanted more than anything to skip the whole event but she knew Mal would have her head if she did. Regina took one last look in the mirror before grabbing her clutch and heading toward the door. “Okay. I’m ready. Shall we go over the rules before I go?”

“Fine,” sighed Emma. She walked over to the bed and gestured to Henry. “C’mon kid.”

Henry quickly stood on the bed and giggled as he hopped onto her back, wrapping his arms around her neck. Emma instinctively looped his legs through her arms as she followed Regina out of the room.

“Alright,” said Regina as she absentmindedly double-checked the contents of her purse. “No visitors, stay in the house, only two cookies for dessert and he cannot stay up past 9:30.”

“I know,” groaned Emma, readjusting Henry on her back.

“Can I have pudding instead of cookies?” asked Henry, resting his chin on Emma’s shoulder.

“Fine,” agreed Regina. “But that means you only get one.”

She tried to ignore Henry’s pout as she turned back to Emma. “Remember to lock the deadbolt behind me, okay?”

“Okay,” drawled Emma.

“And after he goes to sleep you’re going to study, right?”

Emma rolled her eyes at her. A few weeks after coming to live with Regina she had decided to go to night school to get her GED. School had never really been something she was good at but one day Henry had asked her about her graduation and she found herself a little ashamed to tell him that she hadn’t finished. A GED wasn’t the same as a diploma but at least it was one step higher than drop out.

“I don’t have class until seven tomorrow. I’ll study in the morning.”

“Emma…” drawled Regina sternly.
“Fine,” moaned Emma dramatically. “I’ll study when the kid goes to sleep.”

“Good,” said Regina with nod. She quickly pressed a kiss to Henry’s forehead before opening the front door.

“Just try to have a good time,” added Emma with a shrug.

“No promises,” replied Regina stepping outside.

She shut the door behind her with a deep breath. As she climbed into the cab she’d ordered and gave directions to the driver Regina tried to be a little excited about the night ahead. It’d been a while since she’d had an evening to herself and there would be good food, pretty dresses and hopefully interesting people at this event. Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad.

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The Edison Hotel was one of the most iconic hotels in New York. Built in the 1920s history practically seeped out of its walls. There were claims that Frank Sinatra had once sung drunk on their stage and Marilyn Monroe had made her first appearance as a blonde at their rooftop pool. Of course all the claims were unverified but that did nothing to take away from the hotel’s charms. All it took was one step on their marble floors to make Regina to feel more glamorous than she had in years. A feeling that grew tenfold when she finally reached the ballroom.

The sign at the entrance had promised a night in Monte Carlo and boy did they deliver. The sultry sound of horns and piano keys flowed through the air mixing with the excited chatter of the event’s attendants. Everyone was dressed in their finest as they gathered at the various tables to gamble. Blackjack, roulette, craps. All the best ways to lose your money were present. Right below the stage the dance floor was filled with people moving smoothly along to the jazz from the band. Waiters in crisp uniforms moved through the crowd as they passed around flute glasses with champagne. Regina stood awkwardly by the entrance trying to decide just where to head first. Luckily the decision would soon be made for her.

“Well don’t you look dazzling?”

A relieved breath left her chest upon hearing the voice of her coworker. “Jefferson.”

He approached her from her left side with appreciative eyes and a wide smile. “You look beautiful Regina.”

She chuckled and blushed self-consciously. “Thank you. The tux seems to be treating you pretty well too.”

And it was. The black slim fit tuxedo in combination with his baby blue eyes and perfectly styled hair made him look like some kind of movie star or spy or combination of the two. However, Regina tilted her head curiously at the bright pink daisy sticking out of the pocket on the right side of his coat.

“Cute flower,” she commented.

Jefferson’s eyes dropped down to his chest with a sheepish laugh. “Yeah, Grace stuck it in there before I left tonight and I couldn’t bring myself to get rid of it.”

“That’s sweet,” she laughed.

“Well I’m getting plenty of crap for it from our lovely coworkers,” he replied with a roll of his
eyes. “We’ve got a table near the bar. You want to join us?”

“Like I know anybody else here,” she said cheekily looping her arm through his.

Just as he’d said, Regina and Jefferson found Carlotta and Ursula waiting for them at a cloth-covered table less than fifteen feet from the bar. Ursula was absentmindedly stirring the olive around the rim of her vodka martini as she watched the people in the crowd. Even though she looked beautiful in her sea green, fishtail gown her eyes clearly spelled out boredom. Carlotta’s eyes held more of a devious spark but that wasn’t unusual for her. Her simple halter top, black dress clung to her curves perfectly as she eyed the men next to the bar and sipped on her cocktail. She rose to her feet with a grin when Jefferson returned with Regina in tow.

“Darling you look positively ravishing!” she gushed, as she moved to kiss Regina on the cheek.

“Thank you,” said Regina politely. She tried not to gag from the stench of gin when Carlotta spoke. As she sat down next to Jefferson she took note of the three empty glasses already gathered on her side of the table. I hope to god she takes a cab home, she thought to herself. She turned her head curiously and searched through the crowd. “Where’s Mal?”

“Right over there,” answered Ursula, pointing out a crowded roulette table. Mal stood at the end on the table, looking gorgeous in a black full-length gown with a mermaid skirt. Her blonde hair was curled glamorously in 1950’s inspired style and her lips were their signature shade of blood red. She was surrounded by adoring men of various ages as they watched her anxiously wait to see how her turn of the wheel would work out. An enthusiastic cry erupted from the crowd as Mal, Regina could only assume, won her bet.

Ursula nodded appreciatively. “Say what you want about the woman… she sure knows how to network.”

Regina laughed in agreement as she grabbed a glass of champagne from a nearby waiter. Upon taking a sip her eyes fell to the bar where she saw Snow leaning against the counter sipping something that she was sure wasn’t water. Her light pink cocktail dress shimmered in the light as she vivaciously giggled at the comment from a blonde girl in a red dress sitting next to her. A frown appeared on Jefferson’s face as he followed Regina’s gaze and caught sight of Snow and her new friend.

“Oh my god, I can’t believe she brought her here.”

Regina turned to him with wide eyes. “Why? Who is she?”

“Anastasia Tremaine,” he said tiredly.

The name caught both Ursula and Carlotta’s attention. Practically in unison they both swiveled their heads in direction of the bar. A tiny gasp escaped Carlotta as her eyes landed on the pouty-lipped blonde sitting at the bar counter.

Ursula giggled as she raised her martini to her lips. “And to think I thought tonight would be boring.”

“Who is she?” repeated Regina, with a touch of urgency.

“A socialite with a penchant for drama,” answered Jefferson. “Word is that everywhere she goes bad things follow.”

“Bad things?” said Regina, raising her eyebrows.
“Overdoses, nude pics, car crashes,” supplied Carlotta. “Basically nothing you’d want to write home to mom about.”

“And she’s not quiet about it either,” said Ursula. “She’s been in the papers nearly every week since last year. She’s New York’s number one bad girl.”

Jefferson shook his head pityingly. “If she causes a scene here with Mary, Mal is going to be pissed and we are all going to bear the brunt of that storm.”

Regina tuned out their comments and refocused her attention to the bar. Snow and Anastasia seemed to be enjoying themselves as they sipped on their drinks. They laughed together as they pointed out various people in the crowd. Regina was just about to turn away when she saw Anastasia reach into her purse and stealthily pull out a small plastic bag. Even from her spot at the table Regina could tell it contained a suspicious amount of blue pills. Her heart clenched as she saw Snow grab the bag with a grin. She quickly stood from the table with a clenched jaw. “I’m gonna go say hello.”

She felt Jefferson suddenly put his hand around her elbow. “That might not be such a good idea.”

“Daisy Daddy is right dear,” slurred Carlotta. She ignored Jefferson’s glare and pressed on. “Getting caught in their orbit might prove to be fatal for your career.”

“I’m just going to say hello,” insisted Regina, removing her arm from Jefferson’s grip. “I’ll be right back.”

She strode over to the bar with determination clenched in her fist and tapped on Snow’s shoulder. She turned back to face her with a bewildered look on her face. “What do you want?”

“Can we talk?” she said with a blank face.

With her pouty lips pulled into a grin Ana leaned over in her seat to get a better look at Regina. “Who’s this Mary? A concerned friend?”

“Yes I am.”

“No she’s not,” replied Snow instantly.

Tension filled the air between them and Ana quickly picked up on it. She slid off her barstool with a bored sigh. “Well while you two figure out what you are, I’m going to visit the little girl’s room.”

She turned back to Snow with a devious wink. “Don’t start the party without me.”

Regina watched her go with a vicious glare in her eyes before turning her attention back to the girl in front of her. “Snow what the hell are you doing?”

Snow scoffed as she pushed away her drink. “Okay one, that’s not my name. Two, I thought we both agreed that life would go better for you if you stopped pretending to care about me.”

“I do care about you Snow,” she insisted gently. “And call it mother’s intuition but I’m pretty sure those pills she just gave you weren’t for your allergies.”

Snow turned to her with eyes as cold as steel and threateningly whispered, “Mind your own business Regina or I swear I will take down that house of cards you call a life.”

Regina stood frozen in shock as Snow’s words washed over her like ice water. She looked into her
eyes trying to find some flicker of the girl she once knew and found nothing.

A close-lipped smile appeared on her face at Regina’s silence. “I thought that might shut you up.”

She grabbed her clutch off the bar counter and slid off her stool. “Have a good evening Regina. I know I will.”

Regina watched her walk away with a familiar ball of dread growing in her stomach. She wanted nothing more than to rush after Snow and drag her home by her hair but the weight of her secrets kept her rooted to the floor.

“II take it that didn’t go very well.”

She turned in time to see Jefferson approach her from behind and quickly put a smile on her face. “About as well as anything with Mary can go.”

He shrugged his shoulders. “She’s a big girl Regina. You’re just going to have to let her make the bad choices and learn from them.”

She smirked at him. “I wonder if you’ll say the same thing when Grace turns nineteen.”

“Hopefully I’ll have done a better job of raising her than Mary’s parents,” he replied with a grin. His words were playful and his tone joking because there was no way he could have known about the daggers his words had just thrown in Regina’s heart. The smile she kept planted on her face made sure of that.

“If you’re done babysitting for the night baccarat awaits,” he said waving hand toward the gambling floor in a sweeping gesture.

“Sure why not,” said Regina shrugging her shoulders. Maybe a little gambling would help take her mind off the short-haired brunette who she couldn’t seem to stop worrying about.

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TWO HOURS LATER

“The itsy-bitsy spider went up the water spout…”

Snow softly sung the nursery rhyme as she stumbled across the floor the Edison hotel rooftop, a vodka martini in one hand, and her two-inch heels in the other. She didn’t know when she’d taken them off. In the foggy haze of the pills all she could remember was that Ana had ditched her for some brown-haired guy in a tux and she had the sudden need to feel the night air on her skin.

She hummed to herself as the wind blew causing a ripple to run across the water in the rooftop pool. The aquamarine water practically glowed from the lights in its floor and Snow was drawn to it like a moth to a flame.

“… down came the rain and washed the spider out…”

She spilled the rest of her martini in the pool as she slid into the water cocktail dress and all. Each step she took brought a bit of relief as the cool water came in contact with her warm skin. She stopped when the water reached the top of her chest and laid down against the pool’s underwater steps. Her pink dress swirled around her legs like a ribbon in the wind as she laid her head against the edge. Her purse sat on the edge of the pull and she stared at it with blank eyes as she sang.
“… up came the sun and dried up all the rain…”

With shaking hands she pulled out the bag of pills that Ana had given her. She took six or seven of the blue pills and held them in her palm. For a moment she stared at them wondering just where they could take her. Maybe back to a place where she could feel something other than pain. In one move she swallowed them all like they were candy. She leaned her head back against the edge of the pool singing under her breath as she waited for them to take effect.

“…and the itsy bitsy spider went up the spout again.”

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Regina nervously walked around the ballroom floor trying to catch a glimpse of Snow and her blonde-haired friend. Gambling hadn’t helped like she thought it would. All throughout the night Regina continued to be plagued with worries about Snow. Every twenty minutes or so she would search through the crowd trying to catch some glimpse of her. She’d been rather successful in her attempts to watch her from afar. Until now.

It had been forty minutes since she last Snow and Ana. Somehow that just didn’t sit well with her.

Carlotta and Ursula had warned her against searching for Snow but she just couldn’t let it go. The ball of dread in her stomach wouldn’t let her. She left the casino behind her and ventured into the hotel’s halls. It didn’t take long before she saw a flash of blonde hair followed by breathy giggle. Regina turned the corner and saw Ana pushed against the wall by a brown-haired man at least twice her age. One she specifically remembered showing up with his wife. She barreled through her disgust and called out to them.

“Hey you!”

The man looked alarmed by her sudden appearance and ran off but Ana only showed annoyance at Regina’s interruption. “Oh god, what do you want?”

“I want to know where Mary is,” she asked in a harsh voice, folding her arms across her chest. “I haven’t seen her in a while.”

“And let me guess? You’re concerned,” replied Ana mockingly.

“I always am,” said Regina in a clipped tone. “When did you last see her?”

“Like an hour ago,” replied Ana, shrugging her shoulders. “She said she wanted some fresh air. Went up to the roof.”

Regina’s eyebrows shot to her hairline. “The roof? You let her go up their alone?!”

“Hey just because I hang out with her doesn’t mean she’s my responsibility!” responded Ana angrily. “She’s a big girl so she should be able to handle herself.”

Regina scoffed at her as she turned her back. *I hope to god Snow makes better friends after tonight,* she thought to herself. She quickly hopped into the nearest elevator and pressed the button on the roof. As it rose floor after floor she had plenty of time to wonder why she was so concerned with Snow in the first place. If any of their encounters in the last eight months had taught her anything it was that Snow held no well wishes for her. She’d been nothing but mean and threatening every time they’d spoken and she showed no signs of changing. Regina thought back to their conversation earlier that night. Maybe Snow had been right. Maybe life would go easier if she stopped caring.
Her train of thought was broken by the ding of the elevator. Regina wrapped her arms around herself as she stepped out onto the cold night air. The winds on top of the ten-story building were fiercer than she expected. They reminded her of the nights she used to spend on the balcony at the penthouse wishing for a way out.

She squinted at the pool and saw Snow submerged up to her neck at the stairs leading into the pool. She sighed in annoyance as she approached her. “Snow what are you doing? Mal is going to kill you.”

Her words went unheeded by Snow who remained in the pool, unmoving. Regina walked closer to her and raised her voice. “Snow come on. Get out there before you catch your death.”

A bad feeling settled in her chest as she reached the edge of the pool.

“Snow?” Her name came out as a broken whisper. With a shaking hand Regina reached out to touch her shoulder and pulled her hand back with a gasp when Snow’s head only rolled lazily to the side.

“Snow! Oh my god!” She rushed into the pool, her dress growing more soaked with each step. The water splashed around her sides as she frantically wrapped her arms around Snow’s waist and pulled her out of the water. Hysterical noises flew from her throat as she dragged Snow’s limp body onto the pool deck. The wind blew against her now wet skin, causing goosebumps to rise across her back and shoulders but Regina barely noticed them as she screamed at Snow to open her eyes.

She pressed her two fingers to Snow’s neck, searching for a pulse and nearly sobbing in relief when she found one. It was faint but it was there. She gripped Snow’s face in her hands calling for her to awaken but she gave no response. Her already pale skin had gone a shade whiter when Regina remembered the pills she’d seen Ana slip her earlier that night. Without thinking she forced open Snow’s jaw and stuck two fingers down her throat. Almost instantaneously Snow’s body began to jerk forward as her gag reflex kicked in and she vomited onto Regina’s hand. Regina didn’t care though. She was too busy focusing on the steady rising and falling that had just returned to Snow’s chest. Relief soared through her as Snow began to moan and turn to her side. Regina pulled her head into her lap and brushed her wet hair out of her face as Snow slowly opened her eyes.

“It’s okay,” Regina panted, in a hushed voice. “You’re back.”

Snow only stared up at her unfocused eyes. “I… I didn’t…”

“Shh…” whispered Regina softly. “Don’t speak. Just focus on keep on keeping your eyes okay? I’m going to call for help.”

She reached toward the edge of the pool for the purse Snow had left sitting beside the water when she felt the girl’s cold, wet hand fall on her wrist.

“Don’t… please” she choked out.

“Snow, you need a hospital,” said Regina in as firm a voice she could muster. Her terror over finding Snow in the pool was still flitting through every inch of her body causing her to tremble.

Snow didn’t look much better but she still managed to give Regina a pitiful look. “The ambulance… the press… he’d kill me.”

Regina nodded in understanding as she realized that Snow was talking about her father. The only think Leo hated more than bad press was bad press concerning his family. He’d be furious if
Snow’s incident made the news.

Regina looked toward the elevator and back at Snow. “Can you walk?”

Snow nodded shakily. “Yes.”

Flipping off her shoes Regina rose to her feet, her dress clinging to her sides and legs in the night air. She gently pulled Snow to her feet and she shivered as the cold wind came in contact with her soaking wet dress. Regina allowed Snow to lean against her as they both hobbled toward the elevator, leaving their shoes behind at the pool. As soon as they were inside Regina pushed the button for the ground floor with a shaking hand and eyed Snow warily as the elevator began to descend. Propped up against the elevator wall she was still shivering her cocktail dress, the wet fabric sticking to her legs like a second skin. The color was coming back into her cheeks and the fact that she could stand even a little was a miracle in Regina’s eyes. She didn’t even want to think about what could’ve happened if she hadn’t shown up when she did.

As the elevator neared the ground floor Regina took Snow’s arm and wrapped it around her shoulders to better support her weight. She could see Snow’s knees shaking as she attempted to lean against her for support and she began to wonder just how she was going to sneak her out of the hotel without anyone seeing her. As the elevator dinged signaling their arrival she hoped beyond hope that the hallway would at least be empty.

It wasn’t.

When the elevator doors opened Regina was face to face with the last person she wanted to see at this moment. Mal.

Her boss stood rigid as stone in front of the elevator, her arms folded tightly across her chest and her lips angrily pressed into a thin line as she stared down at her sopping wet employees. The silent rage that burned behind her eyes made Regina shiver as Mal’s gaze landed on her and Snow.

“Enjoying your swim?” she said in deathly low voice.

Regina found herself speechless as she stared back at Mal with wide eyes. A drop of water falling from her dress onto her foot forced her out of her stupor. She tried to stand up straighter as Snow slumped into her side, practically half-asleep. “Mal I-”

“Don’t!” Mal gritted out through clenched teeth. “Just get her out. I’ll deal with you later.”

She turned on her heel and headed back down the hallway before yelling out harshly, “And use the servant’s entrance for god’s sake!”

Regina sighed in defeat as she watched Mal stalk away from her. I knew this night wouldn’t be any fun.
Chapter 21

It was long past eleven by the time Regina finally got home. Her no longer soaking wet dress still clung to her like saran wrap as she walked up the steps to her door half-dragging Snow behind her. She was still a bit loopy from her night of pill-popping but after a quick, subtle stop at the emergency room the doctors had said that she would be alright. She would, however, require supervision over the next twelve hours as the drugs left her system. Just someone to make sure that she woke up when she went to sleep. Given that Snow didn’t seem too particularly good at making responsible friends Regina opted to take her back to the townhome.

As they walked, or in Snow’s case stumbled, inside the house Regina sighed at the comforting feeling of the heated air on her skin. She couldn’t wait to peel off her dress and climb into some warm sweatpants and a t-shirt. Their bare feet hardly made a made a sound as Regina tried to usher Snow into her room as quietly as she could. All the lights in the house were off and Regina knew both Henry and Emma were likely to be sleeping. At least she hoped so but like all her hopes that night it would go unfulfilled.

Regina nearly jumped out of her skin when lights flickered on and she saw Emma staring curiously at her from the pullout couch in the living room. She tilted her head and squinted at them before quickly putting on her glasses. Her eyes widened as she took in the sight of her boss’s ruined dress, bare feet and stumbling accomplice. “Okay… what the hell?”

Regina let out a defeated breath before addressing Emma. “It’s a long story but this is Mary. She’ll be staying with us for the night.”

Emma eyed Snow warily as she stood from the couch. Her pink cocktail dress was just as ruined as Regina’s and the confused look in her eye hardly seemed like a good sign. It didn’t take Emma long to figure out that something wasn’t quite right with her. “Is she drunk or something?”

“Or something,” answered Regina softly. She looked down at her toes with a sigh. “I’ll explain later but I couldn’t let her go home alone. She shouldn’t be by herself.”

“Alright,” said Emma, nodding her head in understanding. She knew enough to know that nothing good could happen to a girl in Snow’s state if they were left alone. Her blonde hair flipped over her shoulder as she looked over at her pullout bed and back at Regina. “She can take my spot on the pullout couch. I’ll just take one of the extra blankets and sleep on Henry’s floor.”

“Emma… you don’t have to give up your bed,” said Regina shaking her head. “She can sleep in my room. I brought her home anyway.”

Emma just shrugged her shoulders. “It’s fine. It won’t be the first night I’ve slept on a floor and if you’re going to watch her all night you’ll want to be close to the coffee maker.”

Regina smiled at her apologetically. “Thank you.”

“Anytime,” said Emma nonchalantly. “Now get out of that dress before you freeze.”

A warm shower and a wardrobe change later Regina could say that she felt marginally better. She was still worried about Snow and fretting over the future of her job but at least she was warm. Her hands ran over her scalp as she pulled her hair back into a low ponytail and stared into her bathroom mirror. She’d traded in her now ruined dress for a pair of plain grey yoga pants and an
old white t-shirt. *Back into a pumpkin I guess,* she thought sullenly.

She snuck a peek out into the living room and saw Snow bundled up under blankets on the pullout couch. Her pink cocktail dress now hung lifelessly over the back of a table chair and Emma had helped her change into an old Mets t-shirt Regina had once borrowed Killian and forgotten to return. The sight of her with her eyes closed still made Regina’s heart race but the steady rising and falling of her chest was proof enough that she was alright.

Regina tore her eyes away from Snow when she heard her cell phone buzz against her nightstand. She quickly pressed answer and brought it to her ear. “Hello?”

“How have you turned back into a pumpkin yet?”

A smile grew on her face, the first genuine one of the night, as she recognized Robin’s voice. “What are you doing up so late? It’s past midnight.”

“For you maybe,” he said nonchalantly. “You keep forgetting I’m three hours behind you now. It’s barely nine here and wanted to check on how the charity thing went for you. You know, see if some delightful prince came and swept you off your feet?”

A soft laugh flew from her throat at the image of some fancy prince whisking her away in a horse-drawn carriage. If only that was what happened tonight.

“No there wasn’t any prince,” she sighed. She bit her lip before adding softly, “I did bring home a princess though.”

She could hear Robin go still through the phone before replying, “Really? I didn’t know you swung that way but I’m sure Lani will be thrilled.”

“Not like that!” Regina quickly clarified. “She’s a girl from my job. She got high on these pills she took and I brought her home with me so she wouldn’t get into more trouble.”

“Jesus, what’d she take?” asked Robin, his voice dripping with concern.

“A handful of sedatives,” answered Regina sullenly. “I found her halfway gone in the pool on the roof. The ER doctors said she’ll be fine though. I got to her in time.”

“Thank god,” breathed Robin in relief. “Who knows what would’ve happened if you weren’t there.”

Regina pinched the bridge of her nose as the image of Snow floating lifelessly in that pool flashed through her head. “Robin… I knew her.”

“You knew her? You mean from outside of work?”

“Yes. I knew her from years ago, before I even met you.”

“Really?” asked Robin curiously. “You never told me you ran into any old friends in New York.”

“She’s not a friend,” whispered Regina as she sat down on her bed. “She’s more like a… ghost.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about her?”

“Because the history I have with her… it’s not something I’m proud of,” she said softly. “I think I… really hurt her and she didn’t take it well.”
"What happened?"

Those two words made Regina bite into her lip so hard she was sure she could draw blood. For a moment she considered telling him everything. Everything about her past, about Snow, about Leopold and her mother. But it only took her two seconds before she knew that wouldn’t be happening. As much as she wanted to she couldn’t tell Robin these things. Not like this. Not over the phone in an effort to seek comfort. He deserved better than that. So she choked down the truth and cleared her throat before saying, “It’s complicated.”

“Try to make it as simple as you can and I promise I can follow,” said Robin, encouraging her to open up.

Regina sighed trying to find a way to answer him. “A long time ago the two of us used to be close. So close in fact that for a while it looked like we were going to be family. I was a few years older than her and I think she sort of looked up to me. She relied on me for a lot, probably more than I realized at the time. And when I went through everything with Daniel and Henry… I left her behind. I… abandoned her without a goodbye or a thought on how it might hurt her. And it appears that since I’ve been gone she’s been on this dark path. She’s been angry, doing pills and surrounding herself with bad people who don’t care about her. It’s like she’s trying to destroy herself. And I don’t have… a clue on how to stop her or save her. I don’t even know if it’s my job to do so. She certainly doesn’t want me to try, she’s said so but every time I see her get into trouble… I keep finding it difficult to walk away from her. And now I might lose my job because of it.”

“You might lose your job?”

“My boss saw us together in the elevator after everything. We were both dripping wet from the pool and she was clearly still suffering from the drugs. Mal was… displeased to say the least. Said she’ll deal with me later.”

Robin sighed sympathetically. “I’m sorry Regina. I know how much you enjoy your work.”

“I do,” said Regina, nodding her head with tearful eyes. “I love my job and I love my life and I just don’t understand why I keep feeling the need to put it at risk for this girl.”

She felt her voice began to crack as all the stress of the night began to seep out of her. She’d never felt so confused and terrified in her life. And Robin could tell… even all the way in California.

“Regina did Marian ever tell you about my past?” he asked softly. “What I was doing when I first met her, I mean?”

Regina tried to swallow down her feelings as she answered Robin. “If you mean stealing to survive then yes.”

“Well the thing is… I wasn’t alone when I did it,” he continued. “I had two friends who always went along with me, John and Will. We would always have each other’s backs when we went on job. Looked out for one another. I cared for them like they were my brothers. Still do in fact. But… when I met Marian things changed. I had something I didn’t want to lose so I told them I wanted out. Now John had gotten a scholarship to a school out a state so he wasn’t too upset but Will… he took it hard. Didn’t speak to me for a long time after that.”

“What happened to him?” asked Regina softly.

“After months of radio silence he contacted me at the bar. Said he’d scoped out this job that could
be a big score but to pull it off he needed me. And I told him that I’d changed. That I didn’t want to be a part of that life and he refused to hear it. He said that if I didn’t come he’d go through with it on his own. I didn’t want him to go alone but…”

“… you didn’t go with him,” finished Regina in whisper.

Robin let out a guilty breath. “I had Marian. I had a job that I liked. I had a life… and I didn’t want to ruin it. So when the night of the job came I didn’t show up. Will went alone and he got caught. He did six years in jail for breaking and entering.”

“Wow,” breathed Regina. “Do you regret it? Not showing up?”

Robin hesitated before answering her. “For the longest time I did but in the past few years I’ve realized that I can’t blame myself for the actions and choices people make in my absence. And neither can you. If this girl made any bad decisions while you weren’t a part of her life… none of them were your fault.”

Regina let out a shuddering breath as she leaned back against her headboard with closed eyes. “I just can’t help thinking that maybe if I had at least said goodbye to her then maybe things would’ve turned out differently.”

“And maybe if I’d shown up that night Will wouldn’t have gotten arrested,” reasoned Robin. “Or maybe we both would’ve. There are dozens of scenarios that could’ve happened but none of them are worth thinking about because they’re not going to happen anymore. We can’t change the past Regina. All we can do is try to make better choices in our future.”

“What if I don’t know what a better choice is?” argued Regina.

Robin scoffed at her. “Now I don’t believe that for one second Regina. You know what the better choice is. You always do. You knew it with Emma and you know it with this girl. It’s why you chose to look after her tonight. You don’t want to give up on her. Not yet.”

Regina licked her lips nervously. She could feel the truth in Robin’s words. She didn’t feel ready to give up on Snow. To accept that this angry, destructive person was all that was left of her. The thought of that broke her heart.

“She doesn’t want my help,” she whispered brokenly.

“Neither did I,” pointed out Robin. “You saw how I was after Marian’s death. I wasn’t even a person anymore. I didn’t want to be. But you forced me out of that headspace. You gave me the wakeup call that I needed. It wasn’t pleasant. And it wasn’t easy to accept but I needed to hear it all the same. I know that wasn’t easy for you.”

“No it wasn’t,” admitted Regina.

“But you still did it for me. And now you need to do it for this girl. If she’s anything like I was a gentle suggestion isn’t going to help her. You can’t tiptoe around the issue anymore. Let her know that she’s destroying herself and tell her she can fix it. If it’s coming from you she’ll have to listen.”

A small smile grew on Regina’s face. “You make me sound like some force of nature.”

“Who says you’re not?” replied Robin, cheekily. She could imagine him now grinning like a fool as he delivered advice from living room couch.
“Thanks for calling me tonight Robin,” said gratefully. “Hearing from you always helps things.”

“Yes well I’ll always pick up for you if want to give me a ring back,” he said, with sincerity in his voice. “Anytime. You know that right?”

“Of course,” said Regina. “Now enough about me. Tell me how my godson’s doing.”

She stayed on the phone with Robin for a little while after that, listening to stories of Roland’s hijinks and shenanigans at the bar. Each story he told her chipped away at her anxiety and once again she wished to be back at the place she called home.

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By the time morning rolled around Regina felt truly exhausted. She sat behind the kitchen table solemnly sipping on her third cup of coffee relishing the taste of hazelnut on her tongue. Sadly, the taste was all she could enjoy as the caffeine had lost its effect hours ago. She’d been up all night watching over Snow, making sure she was still breathing. The entire time the conversation she’d had with Robin played in her head like record. Remembering his faith and encouragement steeled her resolve when it came to Snow. The young girl she once knew was going to destroy herself and she couldn’t let that happen without knowing she did all she could do to stop it.

Regina perked up when she heard Snow begin to moan in her sleep. Her eyes began to flutter and she scrunched them closed against the harsh light of the morning. She tiredly stretched out against the blankets around her and her eyebrows knitted in confusion when she didn’t feel the 500 thread count Egyptian cotton that she had become so accustomed to. Her eyes popped open and she suddenly sat up as she realized she wasn’t in her bed in her Manhattan penthouse.

“Don’t sit up so fast,” said Regina dryly as she set down her coffee mug. “You’ll give yourself a headache.”

Snow groaned as she turned to send Regina a venomous glare. “You…”

“Yes me,” replied Regina.

“Why am I in your house?”

“Because it was the safest place for you after last night.”

Snow moaned under her breath as she brought a hand to her forehead trying to dull the pain that was growing behind her skull.

“How’s your head?” asked Regina, her voice harsher than the winter wind. “Doctors said it might be painful but that tends to happen when you swallow sedatives like M&Ms.”

“Ugh.” Snow rolled her eyes as she gently stumbled off the pullout couch. “Don’t.”

“Don’t what?” gritted out Regina through clenched teeth. “Don’t reference your drug problem?”

Snow raised a finger at her warningly. “I do not have a drug problem. Last night… was not a big deal.”

She swiftly turned on her heel and made her way into Regina’s bedroom as she stared after her in shock.

“Not a big deal?” she seethed, angrily following Snow into her room. She found the younger girl on
her knees rifling through the bottom drawer of her dresser. “Not a big deal?! You might want to check your priorities Snow because me finding you half dead in a swimming pool is a big deal!”

Snow slammed the dresser drawer shut, nearly knocking it back an inch with rage-fueled force. She stood to her feet with a pair of Regina’s jeans in hand. “Not it wasn’t. It was an accident, it’s over now and I don’t need a lecture from you about it!”

“Oh yes you do,” said Regina in a low voice. She stared down Snow with rage burning behind her eyes as she hastily stepped into the jeans. “If you keep going the way you’re going you are going to end up dead. You almost did last night.”

“You’re overreacting.”

“I am not overreacting!” yelled Regina, her voice bouncing off the walls and through the apartment. “The doctors said if I’d have found you ten minutes later you would’ve been dead! That is not a joke!”

“What do you want from me Regina? A medal?” she sniped, venomously as she buttoned up the jeans.

Regina took a deep breath as she tried to swallow her anger at Snow’s flippancy. “I want you to say that you’re going to at least try and stop destroying yourself.”

“I am not destroying myself,” Snow hissed as she invaded Regina’s space. “And if I were I don’t see how it’s any of your business. You are not my mother. You are not my anything. Now I let you live this sad existence you call a life in peace. I suggest you do the same for me.”

She headed out of the bedroom with Regina fast on her heels. “I’m going home.”

“And just how are you going to get there? It’s not like you have any cash on you!” Regina angrily pointed.

“Well then it looks like I’m walking!” sneered Snow. “I’ll take foot blisters over your presence any day!”

She angrily stomped her way towards the front door.

“Thanks for the jeans!” she said sarcastically, before slamming the door behind her.

A frustrated groan ripped from Regina’s throat as she banged her fist against the kitchen counter in anger. She leaned her elbows against the counter as she ran her hands over her face. She’d given it her all and it still looked like Snow hadn’t heard a word she’d said. Her heart rapidly beat against her chest as she took a deep breath trying to calm herself. She shouldn’t have lost control like that.

“Rough morning?”

She lifted her head to see Emma standing in front of Henry’s door nervously, her blond hair still messed up from sleeping on his floor. She wrung her hands anxiously as she approached Regina at the counter. “I’m sorry. I couldn’t help but overhear.”

Regina’s breath caught in her throat as she realized just how loud her confrontation with Snow had been. “Henry? Did he-?”

“No,” said Emma quickly. “That kid could sleep through an earthquake. He didn’t hear a thing. I promise.”
Regina let out a relieved breath at her answer as tears welled up in her eyes. “I’m sorry Emma. You shouldn’t have to listen to… that. She just… frustrates me so much.”

Emma nodded at her understandingly. She’d had more than a few friends who’d been just as difficult with their issues as Snow.

“Look you’ve been up all night. Your nerves are shot,” she said comfortingly putting a hand on her shoulder. “Why don’t you go and get some sleep? I’ll go out and get us some bagels for breakfast and we can talk more when I get back. If you’re up to it?”

“Sure,” said Regina forcing a smile to her lips. “An everything bagel certainly couldn’t hurt.”

She shuffled off for bed with all the stress of the past twelve hours visibly pressing down on her shoulders. Emma watched her go with concern in her eyes. In the four months that she’d worked for her she’d never seen Regina so broken before. It was upsetting to say the least.

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The cold concrete of the New York sidewalk nearly froze Snow’s feet as she ambled down the block in the direction of her penthouse. She silently cursed Regina for choosing to live in Brooklyn. God, it would be hours before she got home.

She hadn’t even made it down two blocks before she heard the sound of rapid footsteps approach her from behind.

“Hey you!”

She turned around with a bewildered look on her face to see a blonde girl with glass marching toward her with a scowl on her face. She stopped in front her with her arms folded across her chest.

“What the hell is your problem?” she seethed in hushed voice.

Snow stared her with a raised eyebrow. “I’m sorry do I know you?”

Suddenly an image flashed in her mind of the girl in front of her helping her into the oversized Met’s shirt she was currently swimming in. “Oh god you live with Regina don’t you? What did she send you after me?”

“Oh she has no idea I’m here,” replied Emma. “But if you had a shred of decency left in you, you would march back yourself and apologize to her.”

When Emma left the house to head for the bakery she had no idea that she would run into the girl who had treated Regina so callously. But when she turned the corner and saw her walking down the street without a care in the world she knew she wouldn’t be leaving without saying her piece. It had always been one of Emma’s worst qualities, the inability to turn down a fight. And after hearing this girl treat the woman who had done so much to help her with so little respect she was certainlly itching for one.

“I’m not going to apologize to that woman!” sneered Snow, unapologetically. “I don’t owe her anything!”

“She saved your life!” Emma spat angrily. “If you weren’t such an ungrateful little brat maybe you would give her the respect she deserves for it.”

Snow scoffed at her before turning away. “I am not going to stand here and take advice from
Regina’s latest charity case.”

Emma gripped her hand around Snow’s elbow refusing to let her walk away. “You think I’m her charity case? Well I’ve got news for you princess. You’re the charity case here, not me!”

“Really?” snapped Snow, wrenching her arm from Emma’s grasp. “Because those clothes say differently.”

“Well clothes aside I’m not the one who got so hopped up on drugs last night that I was abandoned by my friend and left to drown,” pointed out Emma. “I am not the one who had to be babysat last night so I wouldn’t suffocate in my own vomit. And I am not the girl the one who keeps walking away from the one person who actually appears to give a damn about her! Make no mistake here. I might not have all your money or your fancy clothes but I am not her charity case. You are! And now because of you she might just lose her job.”

Snow clenched her fists in anger as Emma went through her rant. “That’s not my fault! I never asked her to take care of me!”

“You didn’t have to!” retorted Emma. “When people really care about you they don’t ask for permission before they help.”

“She doesn’t care about me,” hissed Snow.

“After all that she did last night how can you even say that?” asked Emma incredulously. She shook her head at Snow pityingly.

“You know what?” she said reaching into her pocket. “I’m not even going to waste any more time talking to you.”

She grabbed Snow’s wrist and slapped a twenty-dollar bill into her hand. Snow looked down at it with disdain. “What’s this for?”

“For you to grab the next train to wherever you call home,” spat Emma with a hard glare. “And while you sit alone in your big, fancy house I want you think about all that she did. And I want you to really ask yourself if you think that anyone else in your life would’ve done the same for you because my guess is probably not.”

Emma gave her one last look of disdain before heading away from her. Snow watched her go as she crumpled the bill in her hand, anger radiating off her with every breath. Stupid girl. She knew nothing about who Regina really was. What she’d put her through. She had no right to judge her. Neither of them did.

Snow angrily stuffed the crumpled bill in her pocket before heading to the nearest subway station. She just wanted to get home.

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The earliest memories Snow has of home are from when she was no more than five years old. It was a warm bed and two arms that belonged to her mother, wrapped around her tight. It was the scent of her vanilla perfume and the soft crooning of her voice- a voice that she could no longer remember- singing her a lullaby to chase away the nightmares.

Snow hadn’t had a home in years.

Instead she has had houses. And penthouses. And high rises. All bought by her father in an attempt
manufacture that feeling of home. He had never been successful- not that she’d ever let him know that.

Snow stretched out her neck as she entered the apartment, her bare feet padding across the hardwood floor. The look on the doorman’s face when she’d walked in the building with no shoes, no purse, clearly wearing a man’s t-shirt had been one of pure sullen superiority. Luckily her face was well-known enough to convince the building manager to give her the spare key to her apartment. She currently lived in an expansive apartment right on Fifth Avenue of the Upper East Side. Three bedrooms with a view that half this city would kill for, Snow couldn’t say that she hated it. It was comfortable and it was beautiful… but it wasn’t a home.

She shuffled over to the kitchen and grabbed a bottled water from her near empty refrigerator. The apartment’s kitchen was gorgeous with a stylish modern oven and wooden kitchen island but Snow never used it. Cooking wasn’t really a skill she had and to be honest she didn’t like spending a lot of time in the apartment.

It was always empty.

She quickly downed the water bottle in effort to cure herself of the cotton mouth she’d had since she’d left Regina’s apartment. As she threw her now empty water bottle into the trash the deafening silence in the apartment began to weigh on her. She swiftly walked into the living room and headed straight for her entertainment system. She ran her fingers over her collection CDs before choosing an old Metric album to shove into her player.

As the near deafening sounds of modern rock filled the apartment Snow headed to the nearest bathroom and began drawing herself a bath. As the tub filled with water she stripped out of the clothes she’d taken from Regina’s house and took a look at herself in the mirror. The face that looked back at her was the stuff of nightmares. Her once precise eyeliner had melted overnight giving her the appearance of a ghost or a raccoon. Her green eyes were streaked with lines of red and her hair hung limply against her face. It wasn’t a pleasant sight but it was one she’d woken up to more often than she was proud of.

She turned away from the mirror and slipped into the bathtub, letting out a gentle moan as the warm water came in contact with her skin. Her bones ached and her head was still pounding but soaking in her tub was certainly helping. Despite the music blaring from beyond the door she felt her mind wander back to the night before. The feeling of being in the water triggered memories of the pool and just what she’d done. And what Regina had done.

Snow’s mind flashed back to moment she’d waken up in her arms. She couldn’t remember much about the night before but she did remember the gentle way Regina had brushed her hair from her face and carried her to the elevator. Why she would do any of those things, Snow didn’t know. It almost reminded her of years ago when they’d first met. When she’d looked up to her. Until it all came crashing down.

Emma’s words still haunted her just as they had all the way home and Snow was forced to mull them over. Would anyone do for her what Regina had done the night before? Risking their job to make sure she got home safe? Keeping watch over her at night to make sure she got up in the morning? Snow felt her chin begin to tremble as she realized the answer wouldn’t be yes. Ana had ditched her as soon as she’d become inconvenient and her father had never been capable of putting her before his work. She began to sob as the weight of her loneliness began to crush her from the inside out.

She didn’t want to feel like this anymore…
The following Monday Regina rode the elevator up to work with a brick sitting in her stomach. All weekend she’d felt like she was sitting on a ticking time bomb, with Mal’s words echoing through her head. She was going to lose her job. She could feel it in her bones. Her time at Volante had been short but Regina felt truly miserable at the thought of leaving it this way. She’d loved her work and she’d been good at it. Leaving it because of an incident like the one at the charity ball hadn’t been the way she wanted to go out.

She and Robin had talked all weekend. He’d said that if things didn’t work out in New York she was always welcome to go back to California. She and Henry could stay with him and Roland for a while they got back on their feet. While the prospect of returning back to everyone in California wasn’t a horrible one she couldn’t think of a worse circumstance for it happen under.

The doors to elevator opened and Regina forced herself to begin her death march to the office. As she passed the various open doors to her design space she could whispers go silent and see people turn to stare as she walked past. She lightly groaned under her breath as she realized that word had gotten around about her escapade with Snow. It was humiliating.

She miserably approached her desk to seem her teammates waiting for her with “I-told-you-so” clearly spelled out in all their eyes. As she got closer she could see Carlotta smugly start to open her mouth.

“Just don’t,” she warned, cutting her off before she could speak. It might be her last day here. She wasn’t going to spend it getting chastised by her teammates.

Carlotta raised a sharp eyebrow at her but remained silent. Regina felt herself sigh in relief as she moved to sit down in her usual chair. The back of her thighs barely touched the seat before she heard Mal’s voice ring through the design room.

“Regina,” she called from her office, her voice equal parts calm and tremble-inducing. “Step into my office please.”

Goosebumps rose on her skin as she turned to Jefferson with a helpless look on her face. He could only shrug at her in response as she got up and walked over to the office. With every step she took closer she felt the brick in her gut double in size. The door to Mal’s private office was almost never open and she rarely invited anyone inside. She valued her privacy and believed that her closed-door policy led her employees to examine their problems from every angle before choosing to knock on her door asking for an obvious solution. When she got inside she wasn’t surprised to see that it was just as stylish as the rest of the firm’s room. Black and white seemed to be the theme with accents of purple, such as the flowers on her clear desk and the throw pillows on her white couch, thrown in for good measure.

Mal sat behind her desk staring down Regina with hard eyes as she shuffled into the office.

“Be sure to close the door behind you,” she instructed in an even tone.

Regina quickly complied with her request. As much as being alone in a room with Mal terrified her she certainly didn’t want the rest of the office listening in as she was fired.

“Have a seat,” said Mal, coolly gesturing toward one of the luxurious chairs in front of her desk.

Regina swallowed hard as she did as she told. If she wasn’t so afraid of what was coming next she might’ve remarked on how soft and comfortable the fabric of the chair felt against her back.
Instead she just wrung her hands and crossed her ankles nervously. “Mal I can-”

“Regina what about this moment says you should be speaking?” snapped Mal, in a clipped tone.

A squeak escaped Regina’s throat as she tried to search for the right answer. “Nothing.”

“Exactly,” hissed Mal leaning forward in her seat. “You will not speak. Not in here and certainly not today.”

Regina’s cheeks grew red as she stared down at the floor and sent Mal a nod to say she understood.

Mal sighed as she rose from her desk and began to pace her office floor with her arms folded across her chest. “Life is short and time is precious, so I will make this quick. Regina… I’m not going to fire you.”

Regina rose her head in confusion and nearly choked trying to squash down at the questions that wanted to fly from her mouth. She wasn’t fired?

“I know this must come as a surprise,” said Mal raising an eyebrow at her. “Seeing you coming out of an elevator dripping wet, carrying a limp intern in your arms less than a hundred feet away from some of our biggest clients and competition… well let’s just say I could’ve fired you to a crisp on the spot. You and Snow risked embarrassing our company and eliminating a string of potential investors. So make no mistake… I am furious.”

Regina shivered in her seat as Mal sent a heated glare in her direction.

“However,” continued Mal, slipping back into the seat behind her desk, “as I was sitting in my living room yesterday, trying to come up with creative ways to dismiss you I got a visit from our slovenly little intern who insisted that what happened that night was not your fault. That she would’ve died if it hadn’t been from your actions.”

Regina knitted her eyebrows in confusion. Snow had talked to Mal for her?

“So now I suppose I can’t fire you for choosing to resuscitate our biggest liability but I would tread lightly if I were you,” said Mal. “Your talent, though great, will not buy you any more of my mercy. Do you understand me?”

Regina nodded her head swiftly.

“Good,” replied Mal in a low voice. “Now you can head home for the day. The less I see of you, the less likely I am to change my mind.”

Regina headed home with her mind swirling with questions. Why had Snow, after being so rude and so condescending before, go to Mal and beg for the safety of her job? Did it even matter now? The fight she’d had with Snow had pushed her over the edge. She hadn’t yelled and screamed like that in years. Losing control like she had made her feel… like her mother. It wasn’t a feeling she wanted to become familiar with. Snow had said that Regina should mind her own business, that she wasn’t her responsibility and after their fight Regina felt more than willing to comply with her wished. Maybe avoiding Snow altogether was the better choice. She wouldn’t get the chance to find that out though.

Her heart leapt into her throat as she turned the corner onto her block and saw Snow sitting on the steps in front of her house. For a moment she considered turning around and heading in the other
direction but in the end she decided against. She wasn’t going to let Snow keep her from entering her own home. With her eyes forward and her shoulders back she walked up to her house with a blank expression on her face, determined not to show Snow any emotion or weakness.

Snow stood up apprehensively when she heard Regina approach her. She looked better than she had in the last twelve hours. Her face was make-up free and her hair was combed. Red streaks no longer lined the whites of her eyes. Instead of her usual bodycon dress and booties she was wearing a pair of jeans and a light blue sweater with black boots.

Regina shrugged her shoulders at her. “What are you doing here Mary?”

Snow internally flinched at Regina’s formal use of her name before gesturing to the folded clothes that sat beside her feet. “I just wanted to return your clothes.”

Regina’s scoffed at the jeans and tee on the steps before gathering them in her arms. “Thanks.”

Snow hesitated before speaking again. “Did Mal fire you?”

“No,” said Regina in a clipped tone. “Thanks to you she let me keep my job.”

“Good,” sighed Snow, nodding in relief.

“Don’t know why it would matter to you,” said Regina, raising an eyebrow at her. “You’ve made it more than clear that you hate me.”

Snow wrung her hands nervously as she stared down at her feet. “I don’t hate you,” she mumbled. “You don’t hate me?” scoffed Regina. “Well I can think of a few instances that have led to me believe differently.”

“I know,” choked out Snow. “I’m sorry. I don’t hate you. I thought I did. I wanted to… very badly but I don’t.”

“Why?” asked Regina desperately. “Why is it so important that you hate me?”

“Because hating you is easier than missing you,” mumbled Snow, her chin trembling as she tried to look anywhere other than Regina’s eyes.

Her words were enough for Regina to offer her a tiny bit of sympathy. With a sigh she sat down on the steps and gestured for Snow to join her. She sniffed as she took a seat next to her in front of the door. Regina shook her head at her in confusion. “What happened to you? Because the girl I knew never used to be this angry. Or this lost.”

“The girl you knew was always lost,” replied Snow. “She just didn’t know it yet.”

She sighed before she continued. “You know that last time I felt really loved and really safe was with my mom. I was so little when she died I can’t really remember a lot about her but I do have this one specific memory. I was around five and it was night. There was a storm outside my window and I was scared. My dad didn’t like it when I slept in the bed with them but he was gone so I ran into their room with tears running down my face. My mom woke up and pulled me under the blankets with her. She rubbed my back and sung me the Itsy Bitsy Spider to make the storm less scary. After she died it was like I lost the one person who was able to make the world feel safe instead of frightening. It was like there was this hole where she used to be.”

Regina’s mind flashed back to Daniel as she’d listened to Snow talk about her mother. She could
understand that feeling of losing someone who meant so much to you.

“After she was gone my Dad didn’t really know what to do with me so he did nothing,” said Snow softly. “He just… left. On work trips, on business meetings. He was just never there. I did everything I could to get him to notice me. To get him to fill the hole that she’d left behind. I joined clubs, I got good grades, I participated in sports all just hoping that something I did would get him to stick around. And nothing ever did. Until I… introduced him to you.”

Regina’s eyes widened at Snow’s comment. “Me?”

“Regina… when you showed up it was like he finally had a reason to come home more,” she said, shrugging her shoulders pitifully. “I know it wasn’t real now but… then it felt like things were finally getting better. Dad was home more and I had you. You were so nice and kind. You’d seek me out and spend time with me. Talk to me about everything that mattered. I knew you were never going to be my mom; we’d never have a relationship like that but we were going to be family. When you were around the hole that I felt didn’t hurt as much. And then you got engaged and I was so excited. I was finally going to have someone who was there for me. Someone who wouldn’t leave.”

“But then I left,” said Regina sadly.

Snow nodded her head miserably. “He didn’t even tell me face to face. He had his secretary send an email. I couldn’t believe it. I couldn’t believe that you had just left me like that without a word or a goodbye. So I went to see your mother. I thought she might help me find you.”

“Oh god,” moaned Regina, scrunching her eyes closed. “What did she say?”

“She said that I was no longer your problem and that you told her that you were glad you no longer had to put up with me,” answered Snow, her cheeks growing red. “And the hole that I felt when my mother died, it grew twice as big. It ripped me apart and the only thing that made me feel better was choosing to be angry instead of feeling hurt.”

“I’m sorry,” whispered Regina.

“It’s not your fault,” said Snow forcing a smile on her face. “You were trapped there. You didn’t want to get my hopes up and let me down. I know that now.”

“But it happened,” replied Regina softly. “And I’m sorry for how it hurt you. I truly am.”

Snow looked at her with tearful eyes. “How awful must it have been for you to hang around me when you were forced to be with him? You must’ve died inside.”

“I’m not going to say that it was pleasant,” agreed Regina, “but being around you wasn’t the worst thing in the world during that time. Honestly, in the whole situation you were the only person who actually cared about my feelings. You just didn’t know what they really were.”

Tears began to fall from Snow’s face and she let out a choking breath as she tried not to cry. “Everyone keeps leaving me. My parents, my friends, even the maids have a high turnover rate. It’s like no one can stand to be around me and I am so tired of feeling alone.”

After a moment of hesitation Regina gently draped an arm over her shoulder. “You don’t have to be.”

Snow looked up with wide eyes as Regina continued to comfort her. “You know I talked to a friend about you earlier. Told him how worried I was about how you’re acting. He told me I shouldn’t
give up on you yet.”

“Are you going to listen to him?” asked Snow hopefully.

“I am,” said Regina with a nod. “But only because I’m not ready to give up on you. I think there’s still a chance for you to heal and I want to help you but you’ve got to start helping yourself and give up this anger and destructive behavior.”

Snow nodded slightly before reaching into the purse at her side. She pulled out to bottles of prescription pills. They rattled in their containers as she handed them to Regina with shaking hands. “I went through my apartment over the weekend. This was all that I had… and I don’t want them anymore.”

“Okay,” breathed Regina, taking them from her with tearful eyes. “We are going to go inside and you are going to sit at my kitchen table while I flush these down the toilet and then we’re going to talk more. Okay, Mary?”

“Okay,” sighed Snow. She shrugged as they both stood to their feet and headed inside. “You know if you wanted to… you could call me Snow? I’ve kind of missed it.”

Regina turned back to her with a smile tugging on her lips. “Alright… Snow.”
Chapter 22

TWO YEARS LATER

Emma forced open her eyes at the sound of shuffling feet in kitchen. She stretched out on the pullout couch as her pupils adjusted to the dim light coming from over the kitchen counter. Her watch beeped around her wrist and she sighed when she saw that it was 2:30 in the morning.

Just like clockwork, she thought to herself.

A yawn escaped her throat as she swung her legs over her mattress onto the floor. Rubbing the sleep from her eyes she walked into the kitchen and came across the same sight she’d seen every night for the past two months. Regina, in her pajamas, pencil in her hand and head bent over a sketchpad biting her lip in concentration. The overhead light fell over her face causing dark circles to appear under her eyes as she looked up and acknowledged Emma’s presence with a sigh.

The blonde tilted her head in concern. “Should I tell you to go to sleep or would I just be wasting my time?”

Regina rolled her eyes and shook her head. “Making me a bagel would be more productive.”

Emma gave her a look before shuffling over to the toaster and loading in a bagel. She eyed Regina pityingly as she walked over to the refrigerator for the cream cheese. “What’s the problem this time?”

“The waists,” moaned Regina in annoyance, as she crumpled up another unfinished sketch. “I can’t decide if they should be natural or empire or dropped. It’s been bugging me all night. I couldn’t sleep.”

“Okay, I don’t understand what any of that means,” said Emma, narrowing her eyes in confusion as she sat down at the table with the bagel in hand. “But I do know that none of it matters anymore because you handed in the final designs for this project weeks ago.”

Regina just sighed. Three months ago Mal had chosen her to help design a group of dresses for Volante to present as an application for Fashion Week. Five dresses would be presented to Elsa Arandale, the events manager who had final say on who would be included in the major runway shows. Mal had been more than on edge seeing as how Volante had never been chosen before and her stress had fallen onto Regina as well. She hadn’t had a good night’s rest in weeks.

“I know I already sent the designs in to the seamstresses but if I come in early tomorrow and hand in the new ones they can get it done before Elsa shows up,” Regina reasoned hysterically.

Emma just raised an eyebrow at her. “You expect them to make five whole new dresses before 3pm tomorrow?”

“I have faith in their abilities,” said Regina weakly.

“You should start having faith in yourself,” replied Emma as she gently reached over and removed the sketchpad from her friend’s death grip. “You’ve already sent in your designs. They’re great the way they are and they will turn into beautiful dresses. Stop stressing over it.”

Regina sighed. “I just keep feeling like there’s something more I should be doing. I mean I’m pretty sure my job is riding on this.”
“Well maybe it is but I’ve seen how hard you’ve been working on this project. You have nothing to worry about,” said Emma comfortingly. “You’re ready. You’ve prepared. The rest will take care of itself.”

“Quite the laid-back philosophy you’ve got there,” said Regina, shaking her head.

“Hey it got me my GED didn’t it?” responded Emma with a grin.

After a long road of bumps and setbacks Emma had finally gotten her GED a month ago. It was hard and it took her a couple tries but she was proud to say that as far as testing was concerned she’d finally finished high school. Regina and Henry had taken her out for celebratory banana splits when she’d learned that she’d passed. It warmed her heart to know that they were proud of her.

“Have you given anymore thought about what you want to do now?” asked Regina, settling back in her chair. If she wasn’t allowed to stress about her own life she could certainly stress about Emma’s.

Emma shrugged her shoulders. “A little. I mean I’ve spent so long working toward this goal and now that it’s done… I’m not really sure what comes next.”

“Well,” sighed Regina, “why don’t you look at something in childcare? Henry’s loved having you as a nanny these past few years and you’re actually really good at it.”

“Thanks,” said Emma with a grimace. “But I don’t think that’s the route I want to go down. I like kids but I don’t think I want to take care of them for the rest of my life.”

Over the past two years Emma had truly enjoyed nannying Henry and being a part of his life but when she thought about doing that for any other child it just didn’t sit right in her gut. Being a nanny full-time just wasn’t what she wanted to do with her life.

“Well, don’t rush into anything,” said Regina. “Like I said, I love having you as Henry’s nanny and the pullout couch certainly isn’t going anywhere while you figure out what comes next.”

Emma smirked at her. “You know there will come a day when I no longer sleep in your living room, right?”

“And I patiently await its arrival,” said Regina, with a grin. “I just want you to feel free to take your time.”

“I know,” said Emma with a grateful sigh, “It’s just that staying still has never really been something I’m good at. I mean these past two years with you and Henry are the longest I’ve ever been in one place.”

During her time as her nanny Emma had intermittently opened up to Regina about her past as a foster kid. How she’d been abandoned as a baby, and then given up by her adoptive family at three-years-old when they decided to have another child. The thought of a couple giving up a child purely for convenience always made Regina’s skin grow hot with buried anger. Anyone who could throw away a child so carelessly clearly didn’t deserve one. Especially not one as special as Emma.

“I’m glad you stayed with us Emma,” said Regina with a smile. “It would feel less like home if you weren’t here. Even if you do interrupt my midnight design sessions.”

“I do it because I care,” stressed Emma. “Seriously, please tell me you’re going to sleep after this.”
Regina scrunched up her face in hesitation before speaking. “Maybe in an hour if you give me back my sketchpad.”

“Regina!”

“The sooner I work through my stress, the sooner I’ll go to sleep,” she reasoned, holding out her hand for her sketchpad.

“Fine,” sighed Emma, handing it over as she stood from the table. “But I expect you in bed by 3:30.”

“And I expect you to remember that you’re Henry’s nanny, not mine,” Regina called out to her retreating back.

Emma just rolled her eyes as she crawled into bed, knowing full well that come morning she’d have to scrape an exhausted Regina off their kitchen table.

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The lights were bright and the coffee was fresh as Snow carefully steamed the hem of a beautiful dress in the office design closet the next morning. Old dresses and costumes surrounded her as she put the final prep touches on Regina’s designs before the models arrived to get dressed. Once she was sure there wasn’t a wrinkle in sight she turned her head and frowned when she saw a closed-eyed Regina leaning against a desk with a cup of coffee in hand, halfway between sleep and death. Snow rolled her eyes as she stood to her feet and gently flicked her on the nose. Regina’s eyes popped open and her coffee nearly spilled as she trembled with a start. She glared at Snow with narrowed eyes. “You’re not funny.”

“Wasn’t trying to be,” said Snow folding her arms across her chest. “You know I’m steaming your dresses; the least you could do is be awake while I’m doing it.”

“Sorry,” mumbled Regina, straightening up. “I’m just a little tired and anxious about today.”

Snow sighed at her and gestured back to the dresses. “Regina you have nothing to worry about. Look at these dresses. They’re beautiful. If the ice queen can’t see that then it’s her loss.”

“Don’t call her that,” scolded Regina, at Snow’s reference to Elsa. Whenever she heard successful women being called names it always made her skin crawl. The one thing her mother had taught her is that few people like it when a woman is in charge and because of that they’ll do many things to make her job twice as hard. Even name-calling.

“Just relax,” urged Snow. “The models will be here in a few minutes and then we can get the ball rolling and get this over with.”

“Thanks for the pep talk,” replied Regina dryly. Her words were sarcastic but her heart was grateful. Snow had been a big help to her these last few months as she prepped for the presentation. Ever since that day on the steps she’d been making strides to find her inner peace and Regina had started to see more pieces of the girl she knew rise to the surface. Her enthusiasm and her warmth were slowly starting to return and she hadn’t so much as looked at a pill in years. Regina couldn’t be more proud her. She was just about to say so when she heard rapid footsteps approaching the closet. Both she and Snow looked up when Jefferson entered the room with an urgent look on his face.

“We have a problem,” he said grimly.
And with those four words Regina’s heart sunk into her stomach. “What happened?”


Regina’s jaw dropped as she slid off the desk in shock. Any exhaustion she had before evaporated and was replaced with a hot vibrating panic. “What do you mean she dropped out? She can’t just drop out! We had a contract.”

“I know,” sighed Jefferson. “But apparently her boyfriend surprised her with a trip to Tahiti and she flew off without a second thought. She’s probably halfway to the south pacific by now.”

“What about the other models at the agency?” questioned Snow, sensing Regina’s distress. “They have to send a replacement girl. We’ve had this booked for weeks!”

“I asked but they said everyone they have is booked for the day!” he grumbled angrily. “I’m calling other agencies now but I’ve got to be honest, the chances of us finding another model in less than an hour are slim.”

With that he turned on his heel and marched back out of the closet, leaving the two shocked women behind him. Regina was left breathless in the wake of this new development but beneath all her shock was a tiny drop of relief. From the moment she left her apartment she’d known something would go wrong today and now she finally knew what it was. It would be comforting if not for the fact that all her hard work had gone up in smoke.

“Mal is going to kill me,” she whispered breathlessly.

Snow looked at her with determination behind her eyes. “No she won’t because we are going to find a solution.”

“What solution Snow?” said Regina tiredly. “If we have any less than five dresses our application will be deemed incomplete and as far as I can see there’s no way we can get a fifth model here in time.”

“Well I’ll just wear it!” said Snow frantically. “I can model… a little.”

“That would be an excellent solution if I hadn’t made it for a girl five inches taller than you!” said Regina shooting down Snow’s idea. She ran her hands through her hair as she paced the closet floor. “I can’t believe she flew off to Tahiti!”

“Who flew off to Tahiti?”

They both turned at the sound of Emma’s voice coming from the door. She stood there eyeing them curiously behind her glasses as an enthusiastic Henry stood by her side.

“Hi mom!” he said cheerfully.

Regina quickly forced a smile on her face for her son. He might be eight now but that was still nowhere near old enough to see his mother go through a breakdown over work.

“Hi Henry,” she said as happily as she could. She turned to Emma desperately. “What are you doing here? You know Mal doesn’t like it when our families come up to the office.”

“I know but we’re not staying long,” said Emma shrugging her shoulders. “Henry found something he’d like to give you for your presentation.”
Henry proudly held up a four-leafed clover and presented it to his mother. “I found it on the playground and the teacher said it would give you good luck.”

Regina smiled tearfully down at him as she took the tiny four-leaf clover from her son. “Thank you honey. If only I’d had this ten minutes ago.”

Emma noticed the tears in her eyes and quickly ushered Henry over to a desk before turning back to Regina. “What happened?”

“One of our models dropped out at the last minute and now I’m screwed,” answered Regina tiredly.

Emma gave her a sympathetic look. “That’s awful. Isn’t there something that you can do?”

“There possibly is…” mused Snow, as she circled Emma like a vulture. “You’re thin and tall.”

“What?”

Snow reached out to touch her ponytail. “Hair’s a little dull but I can fix that.”

Emma leaned out of her reach. “Okay hands off princess. And what the hell are you talking about?”

“You’re going to wear the dress,” declared Snow decisively.

“What dress?” asked Emma with wide eyes.

“This one,” said Snow pointing out the dress she’d just finished steaming. A floor-length ombre gown with long sleeves and a near-waist deep neckline, it was dark blue from shoulders to waist and lightened into a sea green near the feet. Emma could see that there were tiny threads of silver running through the flowing fabric, probably meant to make it shimmer as it moved. The dress reminded her of the sea and she let out disbelieving laugh when she saw it. “You expect me to wear that thing! Snow look at me.”

She gestured down to her own outfit which consisted of a pair of two-year-old jeans and a gray graphic tee with a button down plaid shirt thrown over it along with a pair of faded, no-heel brown boots. “I’m not exactly model material here.”

“But you can fit in the dress,” mumbled Regina hopefully.

Emma’s jaw dropped at her. “Oh please tell me you’re not taking her side in this!”

Regina shrugged her shoulders apologetically. Emma wasn’t exactly her first choice for a dress model but in her desperation she could see how she appeared to be the best option. “Well you have to admit you’d look good in it.”

“Yeah it even has pockets so you can hide your hideously chewed up nails,” pointed out Snow, critically eyeing Emma’s hands.

Offense colored Emma’s face as she self-consciously folded her arms, hiding her nails under her armpits. “Regina please don’t make me do this! I hate dressing up and I can barely even stumble in heels.”

“I’m not going to make you do anything Emma… but I am going to beg you,” said Regina with pleading eyes. “Please, please do this for me. My job is depending on this going well and that means yours is too.”
Emma groaned as she realized that Regina had a point. “Well what about Henry? You said your boss doesn’t like it when your kids are around.”

“I’ll smuggle him into the daycare,” said Snow, waving off her concerns. “I doubt they’ll notice one more kid.”

Emma took one more look at Regina’s desperate face before throwing her head back with a sigh. “Okay fine. I’ll wear it but we are switching beds for the rest of the week.”

“Deal!” agreed Regina quickly. She clasped her hands together in relief. “You won’t regret this I promise.”

“Come on,” said Snow, gripping Emma’s arm. “The judges will be here in the next hour and I still have to decide whether I’m going to hide those split ends behind a braid or a bun.”

Emma glared at Regina as Snow dragged her away. “I regret this,” she hissed.

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After nearly an hour trapped in a bathroom with Snow, Emma could honestly say that she felt like an over abused Barbie doll. Her hair had been pulled back into a strict bun and her lips had been painted with a nude shade of pink lip gloss. An even boundary of brown eyeliner now circled the edges of her eyes making them seem just the tiniest bit wider and greener than before and her cheeks were covered with a light layer of blush meant to highlight her cheekbones. Emma knew if she was to look in a mirror right now she wouldn’t even recognize herself. And not just because Snow took away her glasses.

The bottom of her dress swished elegantly around her ankles as she teetered to the waiting area in the strappy two-inch heels she’d been forced to wear.

“I feel ridiculous,” she hissed.

“Well you look glamorous,” responded Snow as she rolled her eyes.

Emma sighed as tried to focus on her footsteps. “What am I even supposed to be doing in there? I hope you don’t expect me to walk down a runway.”

“No,” insisted Snow. “I’m just going to walk you to your spot and you’ll stand there while Elsa judges the dresses. It’ll be fine.”

Regina quickly rushed over to them as they entered the waiting area. She took in Emma’s appearance with a dropped jaw. “Wow! I almost didn’t recognize you. You look perfect.”

Emma only groaned in response.

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“Are all the other models ready?” asked Snow.

“Yes,” said Regina gesturing over to the other young women present in the room. They were all made up in a similar fashion as Emma, just enough to highlight their features but not enough to overpower the presence of their dresses. All of which were just as stunning as Emma’s. Regina and Snow quickly guided her over to her spot next to them and gave her a quick pep talk.

“Okay just remember to stand up straight,” Regina reminded her with a gentle tug on her shoulders.

“And don’t smile!” ordered Snow.
Emma glared at her. “There’s literally no chance of that happening.”

Snow’s comeback was cut short by the sound of footsteps approaching the entrance of the waiting room. Mal swept into the room wearing a flawless black dress and a scowl. All three women straightened their backs at the sight of her. She walked over to Snow and Regina with quick even strides.

“The security guards just called. Elsa should be arriving in less than three minutes so I expect everything is ready,” she said.

“Yes,” said Regina with a nod. “The models are all here and they’re all dressed.”

Mal’s eyes floated over to the models taking in the appearance of each one critically. A frown settled on her face as her eyes landed on Emma. “Why is there a blonde when I specifically requested all brunettes?”

Regina’s eyes whipped back to the models and her eyes widened when she realized that Emma was the only blonde in the row. She stuttered as she searched for the words to mollify her boss. “I- I can explain that.”

“Her hair color or your incompetence?” gritted out Mal behind clenched teeth.

“It was a mistake on the part of the agency.”

Regina head turned quickly at the sound of Jefferson’s voice coming from her side. Her blue-eyed savior shrugged his shoulders at his boss apologetically. “They switched models on us at the last second and by the time she arrived there was nothing we could do.”

Mal let out a seething breath as she clenched her hands at her side. “Well tell her to straighten her back for god’s sake!”

Regina let out a breath as Mal went to double check things with the rest of the staff. She turned to Jefferson with a grateful smile. “Thank you.”

“Trust me I’ve taken harsher bullets,” he replied with a wink.

They both turned their head toward the door when they heard the room go silent. With an entourage of no less than three people Elsa Arandale walked into the room and truth be told Regina would swear that she felt the air get ten degrees colder. Elsa was a thin woman, with ice blue eyes and hair so blonde it was nearly platinum as it fell over her shoulder in a long braid. She wore a bright blue dress and a thin black blazer as she walked over to Mal, her silver shoes clacking against the tile floor with even footsteps.

She offered her hand to Mal with a forced smile. “Mallory Volante, so nice to see you… again. Your persistence is one to be admired.”

Regina could see Mal’s grip tighten as she shook Elsa’s hand. “Well you know what they say, only those who are afraid of failing don’t try.”

They smiled at each other and it was like watching two tigers bear their teeth before battle. Elsa was the first to pull back her hand as she grinned at Mal with false sincerity. “Shall we get started?”

Mal held out her hand toward the models in a sweeping gesture. “After you.”
Elsa slipped on a pair of sleek black-framed glasses before walking over to the first model on the far right. She was wearing an ombre-colored dress, one that began as black at its strapless bodice but flowed into shades of purple, pink and golds in the sheer fabric that reached down to its hem. The waist was emphasized by a thin sleek belt that Jefferson had designed himself. Regina held her breath as she watched Elsa circle the dress critically, writing a few notes in her iPad before moving on to the next model.

The idea for the next dress had come to Regina after watching a rerun of the 1968 version of Romeo and Juliet. Seeing even a fictional interpretation of loss and first love put thoughts of Daniel in her mind and she suddenly felt the need to design a dress that could withstand a tragedy. The dress had short capped sleeves and was fitted with tiny gold beads until just under the bust line where the fabric turned into a form-fitting purple lace that fell into a sheath design that reached the model’s feet ending in mermaid’s tail. Snow had said even though the color would look awful on her that the dress would always be her favorite. Elsa examined it with a neutral expression, the ghost of a smile only appearing when she lightly ran her fingers over the sleeve.

She moved through the next two dresses rather quickly, which made Regina wonder if she should be nervous or excited, before landing on Emma who subtly straightened her back and clenched her hand in her pockets. Elsa tilted her heads and pursed her lips as she circled Emma like a vulture. After a moment she turned to Mal and asked, “You worked with your staff on this project. Who’s responsible for this dress?”

“That would be one of our senior designers, Regina Gardiner,” she answered smoothly, pointing out Regina.

As soon as Mal’s finger landed on her Regina felt her breath get caught in her throat as her brain decided to stop working. She was sure she was about to have an out-of-body experience when Snow subtly nudged her forward bringing her back to Earth. She cleared her throat before nodding at Elsa. “Hi.”

“Hello,” replied Elsa with a smile. “Would you mind telling me what inspired you with this dress?”

Regina took a deep breath as everyone in the room began to stare her down. “Well, I was with my son helping him prepare for a project for school, a landscape actually for his art class. He chose the ocean as his landscape so we stayed in for the afternoon watching sea documentaries so he could get a better idea of what it looks like under the water. He became inspired and so did I.”

Elsa nodded her head appreciatively. “Well that’s adorable but what about the pockets?”

“The pockets?”

“Yes,” said Elsa. “I’m assuming this is a ball gown, meant to be worn at the elegant black tie events. Do you really think a woman who attends such events would need pockets?”

Regina’s mouth hung open as she searched her brain for an appropriate answer. Elsa stared at her pityingly before adding, “I doubt anyone would think such a thing.”

Mal opened her mouth to reply but was cut off by an unexpected voice.

“I would.”

All heads turned to Emma as her voice broke the silence. She stared down at Elsa with confidence radiating from her pores despite the terror pouring into her stomach as everyone in the room turned
to look at her. “I think the pockets could be useful.”

Elsa turned back to Emma with a surprised expression. “Huh, you know it’s strange. I’ve never actually heard a model talk in such a situation.”

“Probably because rarely anyone lets them but I’ve never really been someone who follows the rules,” replied Emma, not missing a beat.

Regina stared at her in shock. Apparently all it took was a bun and some make-up to turn her roommate into a completely different person. A person who was going to get her fired if the look on Mal’s face was any indication.

Elsa just looked up at Emma with a smirk. “Hmm, a rebel. Well if you are so inclined to speak then answer me this. You’re on a date in this dress. He’s a handsome, wealthy young man and he’s taken you to a lovely fundraising gala. What exactly do you put in these pockets?”

Emma pressed her lips together in thought before smoothly answering, “Snacks and a Taser.”

Elsa’s eyebrows rose to her hairline as she heard Emma’s answer. “Snacks and a Taser? Why those two things?”

Emma shrugged her shoulders. “The snacks are for if I don’t like the food and the Taser’s for if I don’t like my date.”

Snow quickly pressed her lips together to keep her laughter from escaping and out of the corner of her eye Regina saw Jefferson do the same.

“That’s quite an answer,” said Elsa with a small smile. “And a point well taken. Perhaps pockets will be the new trend.”

She sighed to herself before turning back to Mal, with a conceding look on her face. “Well Mallory, I still have to fill out the paperwork but it appears that 2015 is your year. I’m willing to offer you a slot on the third day of Fashion Week.”

“Excellent,” replied Mal arching an eyebrow at her. On the outside she looked as cool ever but Regina could see the small smile tugging on her lips. “Your people have my number. We can deal with the paperwork next week.”

“Perfect,” said Elsa. “Bring your head designer and we work out the details in your office.”

The two women walked out of the room in sync and Regina subtly gave Emma a thumbs up before following on their heels. *Well that went better than expected.*

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High-paced Latin music played in the background of Regina’s favorite restaurant as she, Snow and Emma clinked their glasses in celebration. The two girls had persuaded her to leave Henry with a sitter for the night and get a round of drinks celebrating her success. To be honest it hadn’t taken much convincing. Now that the presentation was over and Volante was officially in Fashion Week Regina felt lighter than she had in weeks.

“So how’s it feel to finally take a break without Mal breathing down your neck?” asked Snow playfully. She was chomping on the plate of tortilla chips in front of her with a grin.

“Damn good!” replied Regina, slurring her words just the tiniest bit. She was on her second
margarita of the night and was just now starting to feel the effects. Her heels had already been kicked off under the table and her shoulders swayed slightly with the music. “And I owe a lot of this project to you two. I wouldn’t have been able to get through it without you.”

An uncharacteristic giggle flew from Emma’s throat at Regina’s slurred words. “Well you’re welcome. I was happy to do it.”

“No you weren’t!” laughed Snow, shaking her head incredulously.

“Okay I wasn’t,” admitted Emma, playfully rolling her eyes. “But I will be when I climb between her soft 500 thread count sheets tonight.”

Save for the thin layer of brown eyeliner around her eyes she was back to old herself with her hair back in a high ponytail and her glasses settled firmly on her nose as she took another sip of her margarita.

Regina rolled her eyes before suddenly sitting up straight in her chair. “Oh that reminds me!”

She reached down into her purse and pulled out a small business card which she handed to Emma. “Elsa Arandale wanted me to give you her card.”

“What for?” asked Emma curiously looking over the card.

“She owns a pretty decent clothing line and she’d like for you to be the face of it,” answered Regina, before taking another long sip of her margarita.

“As a model?!” said Emma, her eyebrows raising in shock.

Snow’s eyes widened at the news of Emma’s new opportunity. “That’s awesome! You should totally do it!”

Emma chuckled at her enthusiasm but slid the business card back over to Regina. “Thanks but my modeling days are over.”

Snow threw her head back with a moan. “Oh my god. Why do you have to be talked into everything?”

“Hey!” Regina scolded Snow warningly. “She can make her own choices about whether or not to call.”

“Thank you,” said Emma with a smug smile.

“However,” continued Regina pointing a finger at her, “This morning you did say that you didn’t exactly know what you wanted to do next and now a golden opportunity has fallen into your lap and you won’t even give it one chance? I find that odd.”

“It’s not odd,” said Emma, offense coloring her tone. “I just don’t think modeling is in my future.”

“Why not?” asked Snow, narrowing her eyes at her. “Don’t tell me you think you’re too good for it.”

“No,” drawled Emma, shaking her head. “It’s fine but dressing up, posing for photos? It’s not something I’d ever really want to do. It’s not me.”

“Well what is you?” asked Regina, leaning back in her chair.
Emma leaned her elbows against the table and pressed her lips together anxiously. “Well I’ve thought about it and I really want to do something to do something with kids like me. The foster kids. I was thinking I could go into social work to help them.”

A proud smile grew on Regina’s face as she heard Emma’s preferred career choice. She reached over and squeezed her hand encouragingly. “Emma that’s great. You’d be amazing at that.”

“Thanks,” said Emma with a grin. “It’ll take me a few years to actually get my degree but I think it’d be worth it if I could actually make a difference in a kid’s life.”

Snow nodded her head concedingly. “Well that’s totally awesome and noble but just how are you going to afford college? I mean I know Regina pays you well but it’s not that well.”

“I can make it work,” said Emma, straightening her back. “I’m willing to get another part-time job while I go to school.”

“I’m sorry do you know what New York’s minimum wage is?”

“Do you Miss Manolos?” replied Emma challengingly.

“I think what Snow means is that modeling while getting your degree might be easier than working two part-time jobs,” said Regina quickly jumping in.

“I realize that,” conceded Emma, “but I still don’t know about it. I mean modeling isn’t something I ever saw myself doing.”

“And waitressing wasn’t something I ever saw myself doing but I did it,” responded Regina. “When I was around your age my friend gave me a job in her bar so I could support Henry on my own. I’d never done it before and I was sure I’d be awful at it but it ended up working out for us. I was able to take care of Henry and after a while pursue what I really wanted to do. If you decide to model while going to school, it doesn’t have to be forever.”

“I don’t know,” sighed Emma, shrugging her shoulders. “How would it even work? I can’t imagine it’s actually going to leave me much time to go to classes.”

“Emma no one actually physically goes to classes anymore,” said Snow shaking her head. “Pretty much everything is online now. As long as you plan well you’ll be able to get everything done.”

Emma tilted her head at her. “Was that encouragement coming from you?”

“Don’t get used to it,” replied Snow with a smirk.

“All we’re saying is… maybe just call and see what she’s offering,” said Regina, sliding the business card back over to her.

Emma pursed her lips as she picked it up with a shrug. “I suppose it couldn’t hurt to check.”

She slipped the business card into her pocket, cautiously optimistic that the ten numbers printed on the side could be her ticket to a more secure future.

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6 MONTHS LATER

Regina sat on the edge of her bed anxiously tapping the side of the “Best Mom in the World” mug Henry had gotten for her two Christmas’s ago while the hot chocolate inside of it slowly reached
room temperature. It was silly but she was hoping it would fill her with confidence like it usually did.

She took another look at the clock. It was 2am and despite the late hour she could still see the lights of the city twinkling outside her windows. In a few hours she would have to get up and start heading over to their tent at Fashion Week. Her designs would be shown to the world, with Mal’s name on them of course, and it was all she could think about. Her nerves were at their last end and she still couldn’t sleep. For a moment she considered going out to the living room to have one of her late night chats with Emma but then she remembered that Emma was no longer there.

It’d been nearly three months since she’d moved out and Regina still had to remind herself her old roommate/nanny had crossed over the bridge and moved into a small Manhattan apartment that she now rented with Snow. It had been a bit of a shock when they’d decided to move into together but it made sense now that Snow was managing her modeling career. Still Regina longed for someone who she could express her fears to at this late hour. She eyed the cell phone on her night stand warily before picking it up and dialing the number she now knew by heart.

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Robin was already deep into sleep before he heard the buzzing of his phone against his nightstand. He groaned as he forced his eyes open to look at the clock. 11:00 PM. His eyes flicked over to the left side of the bed and he felt a moment of relief when he realized that when he saw that Roland hadn’t crawled into bed with him like he usually did. His son was a very light sleeper. Sometimes even the lightest creaking of the stairs could wake him up.

He reached over to grab the cell phone and was shocked to see Regina’s face stare up at him. He quickly pressed answer and brought the phone up to his ear. “It’s a little late for midnight chats, don’t you think?”

Regina sighed as she leaned back against her headboard. “I’m sorry. Did I wake you?”

“It’s alright,” said Robin, switching on the lamp next to his bed. “I’m a bar owner. I’m used to late night calls.”

He sat up in his bed and let out a stealthy yawn. “It should be at least two in the morning there,” he said. “You’ve got a big day tomorrow. Might be a good idea to get some rest.”

“I would… if I could,” mumbled Regina. “I can’t really get to sleep.”

“Is that due to excitement or fear?”

Regina hesitated before answering him. “Fear.”

“Okay,” drawled Robin. “Tell me what your fears are.”

“I guess… I’m afraid it won’t go well,” admitted Regina softly. “It just feels like… I don’t know, I’ll put my heart out to the world and the world will decide that it’s not good enough.”

“That won’t happen,” said Robin automatically.

“How could you know that?”

“Because I know you,” he replied, shrugging his shoulders. “And I know how much it’s taken for you to get here. You’ve been designing for years now and you’ve been working on this project for months. And from what you’ve told me of your boss, she wouldn’t have chosen to work with you if
she didn’t trust your abilities completely.”

“I know,” sighed Regina. “I know all of that but what if something goes wrong? I could mess up one thing and the whole show could fall to pieces.”

“That’s not true,” said Robin. “You won’t let it be true. Regina I’ve known you for close to seven years now. I’ve seen what you’ve been through and how you’ve put it behind you. You’re one of the strongest, most determined people I’ve met. And that determination isn’t going to allow you to fail. You’re ready and you deserve this chance at the spotlight. You’ve earned it.”

Regina felt herself smile at Robin’s words. Hearing him say exactly what she needed made the anxiety in her chest disappear. It was always baffling to her how easily he could talk her down from a ledge. “Is it silly that I called so late just to hear those words?”

“No,” said Robin with a small chuckle. “You know I have an always-pick-up policy with you. Whenever, wherever. That’s always been the deal.”

She took one more look at her clock and sighed before asking, “Will you be watching?”

She could almost hear his grin through the phone. “Of course. We all will.”

Robin’s house had never been so crowded, but then again he’d only lived in it for a few months. It was the day of Regina’s fashion show and Robin was kneeling next to the back of his television desperately trying to hook up his laptop while both Hook and Mulan watched him apathetically.

“You know you wouldn’t have had to worry about this if you’d just gotten a smart TV like I suggested,” pointed out Mulan as she leaned against the kitchen counter smugly. Her police belt weighed down against her hips as she cracked open another can of soda.

Robin turned to glare at her. “My TV’s intelligence is just fine thank you. It’s the wires that are confounding me.”

“Let the man work Lani,” said Hook, reaching for the bag of chips. “We all know how this is going to end. He’s going to try to do it himself, get frustrated and then realize it’s just better to wait for Tink to show up and do it for him. Let the process continue.”

“I don’t need Tink to help me,” Robin mumbled absentmindedly plugging in another wire.

“You don’t need me to help you with what?”

They all looked over to see Tink opening up the back sliding door with a large purple bowl in her hands.

“Is using the front door just a foreign concept to you?” said Mulan, narrowing her eyes at her.

“It’s a party,” drawled Tink, shrugging her shoulders. “Why would I come in through the front door?”

“It’s a little thing called common courtesy Tink,” said Robin. “And it’s technically just a viewing party, not an actual party.”

“Well then I guess this isn’t actually strawberries and whipped cream, just viewing strawberries and whipped cream,” she quipped, setting her bowl down next to the chips.
Robin growled under his breath as he plugged in yet another wire with no effect.

Tink kneeled down next to him on the floor. “Still can’t get the stream hooked up?”

He turned to her with a defeated look on his face. “This is not me asking for help but…”

“Yes I can hook up the stream,” she said with a nod. “Move over.”

Hook let out a chuckle as Robin left Tink to play with the wires. “And cycle continues.”

Robin turned to give Hook a piece of his mind but was stopped when he heard rapid footsteps coming down the stairs. Roland ran up to his father’s side wearing a pair of nice slacks and a white button up shirt. Robin looked down at him curiously as he held up a tie and vest. “Daddy can you help me put these on?”

Robin kneeled down to his eye level with a small laugh. “Son, why are you all dressed up?”

“For Aunt Regina’s fashion show,” said Roland enthusiastically. “Aunt Lani said everyone had to wear nice clothes.”

“Everyone on the runway kiddo,” corrected Mulan, with a smile. “We don’t have to dress up because we’re staying home.”

“Oh,” mumbled Roland, his smile falling into a frown.

“However,” said Robin, noticing his son’s dejection, “your Aunt Regina would probably be so happy to know that you’ve dressed up. I bet it’d make her feel really special. So how about we put on your tie and vest and take a picture for her?”

“Yeah!” said Roland, his dark curls bouncing as he nodded his head gleefully. Robin smiled at him as he looped the tie under his shirt collar. His son had grown up a lot in the past 3 years and he looked more like Marian every day. Except for his dimples. Those were purely his.

“So I have a question,” said Lani. “Now that her dresses are literally streaming worldwide, does that mean Regina’s famous?”

“No,” said Hook shaking his head. “If her firm was one of the bigger names they would’ve had a show either at the beginning of fashion week or at the end. Since their show is on a Tuesday I would say they have a decent reputation but they’re not that widely known.”

Everyone turned to look at Hook with a quizzical expression but he just shrugged his shoulders at them. “If you want to date models you learn about what’s important to them.”

“Wow,” breathed Mulan. “It’s almost impressive how you’ve managed to make sleazing an art form.”

“I’m gonna choose to take that as a compliment,” replied Hook with a smirk.

“Oh I’ve got it!” exclaimed Tink suddenly. “The stream’s set up.”

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Regina felt a bead of sweat go down her back and tried not to cringe. The flurry of models, designers and assistance made the tent they were under practically swell with heat. The blazer she’d worn to work now lay forgotten over a chair she hadn’t had the chance to sit in all day. This was officially the most hectic day she’d ever had.
As she kneeled down to double check the hem of a model’s dress she felt her back pocket buzz and stealthily pulled out her cell phone. A smile grew on her face as she saw a picture of a dressed up Roland pop up on screen. The text beneath it read: dressed up, ready and watching. She chuckled under her breath and nearly started to text back when she heard a voice from over her shoulder.

“That better not be a cell phone!” Jefferson whispered fiercely. “You know if Mal sees it she will kill us all!”

“It’s not,” said Regina shoving the phone back into her pocket. “It was just a pick me up from an old friend.”

Jefferson only shook his head at her before turning back to adjusting a hat on a model’s head.

“Alright everybody!” They heard Mal’s voice shout above the crowd. “The show’s about to start! Get them lined up!”

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“It’s starting!” yelled Tink from her spot on the couch.

Everyone’s attention turned to the screen as models began to pour out on the runway in a steady stream. High paced pop music played in the background as strutted one after the other, each wearing a phenomenal dress.

“The dresses look beautiful,” said Mulan in awe. “I can’t believe she was able to design all of these.”

“I know. I’m so proud of her,” said Tink, before reaching for another strawberry.

“I think we all are,” said Robin proudly. He sat with Roland on his lap and watched as the fruits of Regina’s labor make their way across the runway.

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The show was over before Regina even realized it. With all her time spent dressing and undressing models she barely even has time to watch. The most she saw were the backs of the models as they walked away from her and onto the runway. In the blink of eye Mal had pulled her and the rest of the team onto the stage to do a final wave to the crowd along with the models. As she stood awkwardly on the stage she quickly spotted Henry seated between Snow and Emma. Her son held a bouquet of roses bigger than his own head as he waved up at her with a grin. She waved back at him with a happy tearful smile.

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Robin watched her walk off stage with a grin on his face. He waited only ten seconds before calling her once she got offstage and she answered immediately.

“Did you see it?” she asked breathlessly.

“We all did. Every second,” he said with a smile. He quickly put her on speakerphone so everyone else could speak to her.

“Hey sweetie it’s Tink! That was glorious! I loved it all!”
“That was totally amazing, so proud you!”

“Well done lass!”

Regina was grinning from ear to ear as she listened to the accolades coming from all her old friends. Each one made her heart swell with pride. “Thank you guys so much. I can’t believe you all watched it for me.”

“Of course we did. Wouldn’t miss it for the world,” Hook yelled over Robin’s shoulder. “Now please tell me you’re planning to go out to celebrate at least a little.”

Regina shrugged her shoulders. “I guess a drink or two wouldn’t hurt but I do have a son waiting home for me so we’ll see what happens.”

“Enjoy yourself. You deserve it,” commented Mulan. “And tell Henry we love him.”

“I will,” she said happily. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Mal urging her back to group. “Guys I gotta go. I love you all though.”

“We love you,” said Robin quickly before she hung up.

For the rest of the night of the night Regina felt like she was walking on air. When she finally left backstage she was greeted with massive bouquet from Henry and hugs from both Emma and Snow. The two girls convinced her that an hour or two out on the town couldn’t hurt and she happily obliged. As she crawled into bed sometime after midnight Regina could honestly say that she felt like she was on top of the world.

She should’ve known it wouldn’t last.

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The next morning started out relatively normal. She woke up, had her coffee and got dressed. The high from the previous night kept a smile planted on her face as did the fact that Mal had given them the day off. She was looking forward to a day of drowning herself in reviews of shows as soon as she walked Henry to school.

They were all dressed and ready to go when they heard a knock at the door. Regina opened it find Emma and a grim looking Snow by her side.

“Hi,” she said cheerfully, despite her apprehension. “What are you both doing here so early?”

“Well,” yawned Emma, still clearly exhausted from her night out with Snow, “Snow had something important she wanted to share with you that for some reason had to be shared in absolute privacy, so I’m here to walk Henry to school for old time’s sake.”

“Awesome!” exclaimed Henry. Even though she still visited more often than not, it was no secret that Henry missed having Emma around.

Regina looked between them nervously before letting out an anxious chuckle. “Okay, I guess.”

She turned her attention back to Henry. “Have a good day sweetie.”

“Bye mom!” he said, practically skipping out the door to Emma’s side.

Regina watched them make their way down the block before heading back inside to talk to Snow. The younger was practically trembling as she nervously twisted up the newspaper in her hands. She
swallowed hard as she stared at Regina with tears welling up in her eyes. Full of concern Regina placed a hand on her shoulder. “Snow what’s wrong? You’re scaring me.”

Snow let out a shaky breath before speaking. “Regina… there’s, uh, something you should know and you might want to sit down for it.”

A heavy ball of dread began to form in Regina’s chest as she slowly sat down on one of her bar stools at the kitchen counter. “Is this about your sobriety Snow? Did you break it last night after I left? Because I can help you get back on track.”

“No,” said Snow quickly shaking her head. “This isn’t about me. This is about… your family.”

Regina’s heart sped up as fear settled into her bones. “Is it my mother? Did she find us?”

“No it’s not about your mother,” said Snow tearfully. “It’s about your father.”

She shakily handed over the newspaper that she’d brought with her. Regina felt the world go still as she opened up to see a youthful picture of her father staring back up at her. Above his picture was the headline: HENRY MILLS, DECEASED at 54.

“I’m sorry Regina,” whispered Snow. “Your father died last night.”
THREE AND A HALF YEARS EARLIER

Robin watched with a heavy heart as Regina and Henry climbed into the yellow cab that would take them to the airport. He forced a smile to his face and waved goodbye as the car pulled away from the curb carrying them away. A hole had already begun to form in his gut at the knowledge that he’d wake up tomorrow without them in his immediate life. On his walk home to the apartment he wondered just how things would go for them in New York. He’d told Regina he had all the faith in the world in her and he could only hope that faith would bring her success.

As he walked into his apartment he heard Roland begin to whine in his stroller seat and quickly gathered him into his arms. He rubbed his back comfortingly while murmuring in his ear, “Oh I know you’re worried about her too sweetheart but don’t worry. She’ll be okay.”

He sighed before softly adding, “And so will we.”

THREE YEARS EARLIER/SIX MONTHS WITHOUT REGINA

Robin took a deep breath as he listened to yet another excuse from the meat dealer about why the delivery of wings would be late. He leaned back in his office chair as he shut his eyes in annoyance. It had been more than a little stressful running the bar without Regina’s help but thankfully she’d left an organized and well-detailed system behind to help him in her absence.

Robin scowled in his seat as he went through the calendar on his desk searching for the proper day. “Mikey I’m looking at the calendar right now and we agreed to a Wednesday delivery. Not a Friday. It’s right here in ink… well I don’t care if you wrote it down wrong all that matters is that the delivery arrives on my schedule, not yours… well you better figure it out or I promise I will take my business elsewhere!”

He hung up the phone and slammed it on the desk in a fit of anger. A frustrated groan escaped him as he ran his fingers through his hair tiredly. He knew he should take a minute to calm down but at that moment a sharp noise attracted his attention. His eyes flickered over to the corner where he saw Roland slamming his bright red play phone onto the ground repeatedly. He held up a finger warningly. “Roland Tucker Locksely, don’t you dare start imitating me.”

Roland just looked up at him with a grin and giggled playfully. A chuckle escaped Robin at Roland’s laughter. He walked over to his son’s play area, careful not to step on any of the toys scattered across the floor, and pressed a kiss to the top of his curly-haired head. “Oh Roland, you’re the only thing that ever goes right around here.”

Bringing his son to work with him was one of Robin’s greater joys in life. Having Roland’s books and toys scattered about the office floor and his playpen in the corner made it feel less like work and more like home. He half-considered taking a little break to spend some playtime with his son when the office door opened and Mulan and Hook entered with the same nervous look on their face. When Robin saw them his shoulders deflated as he let out a deep sigh. “Oh god, why are you both in here? You only both come in here when you’re too afraid to tell me something by yourself.”

Hook subtly nudged Mulan in the ribs. “See I told you he noticed!” he whispered.

She sent him a sour look before turning her attention back to Robin. She strode over to where he sat
with Roland and tried to keep her voice as calm and even as possible. “Okay first of all I’d like to
start this conversation with the fact that we adore Roland.”

“Absolutely,” chimed in Hook. “He’s our favorite person in the world.”

“However,” continued Mulan, seriously “it’s been three months since you promised to find him a
daycare and he’s still showing up to work with you.”

Robin sighed at their comments. They’d been over this more than a few times since Regina had
left.

“Robin you have to admit that having your son at work with you is a bit unprofessional,” said
Hook, shrugging his shoulders. To be honest, this whole conversation made him feel a bit
uncomfortable. He was a firm believer that as long as they weren’t hurting their child everyone
should be allowed to raise their kids in their own way. However, he’d heard more than a few
complaints from both workers and vendors on how Roland’s presence had been a bit of a
distraction for their boss. He hated it but somebody had to bring up the issue and as Robin’s closest
friends it was no surprise that the job fell on his and Mulan’s shoulders.

Robin shook his head at them. “I’ve been looking you guys. It’s just been a bit difficult to find a
decent daycare with openings this late in the year.”

Mulan narrowed her eyes at him. “I think you’re being picky on purpose.”

“Well forgive me if I have standards for my son’s childcare,” said Robin, offense coloring his tone.

“Robin I got you a tour of one of the best daycares in this county and they still weren’t good
enough for you,” she pointed out.

“Of course they weren’t,” said Robin, with a grimace. “It was as sterile as a hospital in there and
they had one teacher watching seven one-year olds. Who can keep track of that many infants by
themselves?”

“That’s actually a fair point,” mumbled Hook from his spot by the door. Mulan shot him a glare
and he cleared his throat awkwardly. “However, it doesn’t change the fact that you can’t keep
bringing Roland to work with you.”

“Hook’s right,” said Mulan. “It’s not good for his social development if you keep him cooped up in
this office with you all day.”

Robin stared at her with a tilted head and narrowed eyes. “His social development?”

His eyes widened and a scoff flew from his throat when the realization dawned on him. “Regina
called you didn’t she?”

Hook and Mulan exchanged an awkward glance before she turned back to Robin and crossed her
arms guiltily. “We may… have exchanged an email or two.”

Robin chuckled darkly as he stood to his feet. Even from New York Regina had been pushing him
into putting Roland into daycare for weeks now. Still he didn’t expect for her to reach out to Mulan
and Hook to further her agenda. “Well you can tell her that Roland is just fine coming to work with
me. I am quite capable of both managing the bar and watching my son.”

Hook focused his eyes to the wall behind Robin’s back. “Is that why he’s coloring on your walls
with a Sharpie?”
“What?” Robin whipped his head behind him to see Roland happily drawing on the walls with a permanent marker. His eyes widened as he rushed over and wrenched the marker from his son’s grip. “Roland!”

Roland only giggled as his father scooped him up into his arms. Robin groaned at the sight of the two feet high black scribble now permanently drawn on his walls. He sighed as he walked Roland over to his playpen in the corner. “Come on son. You’re making me look bad in front of my critics.”

Mulan smugly shook her head at him and scoffed. “Yeah looks like you’ve got this completely handled.”

Robin turned to her with a glare. “Look I will stop bringing him once I find a decent place for childcare. Until then I’d prefer to keep an eye on him from here.”

She rolled her eyes at him. “Fine but you and I both know you’re going to have to let him go someday. So I say you might as well treat it like a band-aid and just rip it off.”

She turned and stalked out of the office. Hook watched her go with raised eyebrows before turning back to Robin and shrugging. “You know she has a point mate.”

Robin crossed his arms defensively. “Look you might not understand this because you’re not a parent but I can’t just leave my son with anyone. And now that Regina is off in New York I’m just having a bit of trouble finding someone I trust.”

Hook nodded his head understandingly. “So you’re saying that if I was able to find a daycare run by someone you could trust you’d let them take care of Roland?”

Robin hesitated before answering him. “Yes.”

“Well alright then,” said Hook with a mischievous grin. He sauntered out of the office smugly and Robin watched him go with a bit of anxiety settling into his chest.

What the hell is he up to?

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A few hours passed and Robin migrated down to bar area with Roland in tow. His son wiggled happily in his high chair as Robin spoon-fed him another round of mashed peas. An awful choice really seeing as how he now had three green stains on the legs of his jeans. He let out a sigh as he spotted yet another glob of green goo on the sleeve of his gray hoodie.

He scrubbed at the stain with a napkin before whispering to Roland, “You’re not going to stop until I’m as green as Gumby, are you?”

His son paid him no mind, he was far more interested in the food he was sucking off his pea covered hands.

Robin was about to get started on cleaning him up when Hook practically skipped up to his side and clapped a hand on his shoulder with a grin. “Get your son ready, Locksely. We’re going on a little field trip.”

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After a ten-minute argument against leaving the bar in the first place Robin agreed to load Roland
into Hook’s car and head toward a nearby suburb. After a short ride they pulled up to an old fashioned two-level manor surrounded by an iron wrought fence. As he climbed out of the car Robin could see five school-age children copying the yoga poses of a tall, brunette woman on the front lawn. He gripped Roland’s car seat tighter as he followed his friend up to the house. Once they reached the fence Hook let out a sharp two-note whistle as he leaned over the railing gate. At the sound of his whistle the brunette turned her head toward them and rolled her eyes. After a few quick words to the children she stalked over to Hook with a glare. “What the hell are you doing here?”

Hook smiled at her sheepishly. “I take it from your tone that you’re still be upset about how things ended between us.”

She crossed her arms and scoffed at him. “I’d slap you but there are children present.”

Robin cleared his throat awkwardly as he watched the woman glare at Hook but his friend only chuckled lightly at the brunette’s anger. “Well I can’t say that I wouldn’t deserve it but I am not here for myself. I’m here for my friend Robin and his adorably dimpled son.”

He clapped a hand on Robin’s back and gestured toward the brunette. “Robin this is Ruby. She and her grandmother run a daycare here.”

An uncomfortable chuckle slipped from Robin’s throat as he politely offered his hand to Ruby. She begrudgingly stretched out her own and shook it firmly. “So what’s the deal? You’re interested in us watching your son?”

Robin shrugged his shoulders. “Well I’m not exactly sure if-”

“Yes he absolutely is!” said Hook jumping in. He gripped the back of Robin’s neck warningly. “He’s quite fond of the warm, home-like feel your daycare has. We just thought a small tour along with a meet and greet would be helpful.”

Ruby rolled her eyes at him with a soft laugh. “Of course you do but you know how Granny feels about surprise drop-ins. It’s better if he makes an appointment.”

Hook sighed before tilting his head at Ruby. “Look I know it’s a bit unorthodox but don’t consider this a favor for me. It’s more like helping out our mutual friend.”

He leaned closer to Ruby and whispered, “This is her godson.”

Ruby raised an eyebrow at him as she let out an annoyed breath. She took a quick look down at Roland’s car seat and smiled when she saw his dimpled face staring back up at her. “Well I suppose we could make an exception for such a cute little boy. Just let me get the kids situated with another teacher before I bring you inside.”

She opened the gate and instructed them to wait on the porch while she talked to the kids on the lawn. Robin watched her go with his lips set into a thin line. As soon as her back was turned he angrily punched Hook in the arm. “You’re unbelievable! Did you really bring me to your one of one-night-stands for childcare?”

Hook hissed as he tenderly rubbed his arm. “Okay, first of all, Ruby and I were not a one-night stand. We were in a steady relationship for a good two months. And secondly, just because I’ve slept with her doesn’t mean she isn’t good at what she does.”

Robin scoffed and Hook glared at him. “Hey that woman has a degree in early childhood development so you will not scoff at her skills. She runs the place with her grandmother’s help and
I advise you to wipe that angry look off your face before you meet her because she will notice.”

Robin’s quick-witted comeback was cut off by the sound of Ruby’s approaching footsteps. She walked up to them her, her long brown hair bouncing against her shoulders as she hopped up the porch steps to the front door where they waited. With no flourish at all she opened the door and gestured for them to follow.

As soon as he walked through the manor doors Robin felt like he was transported into a Thanksgiving movie on the Hallmark channel. The hardwood floors beneath his shoes creaked as all three of them made their way into the foyer. Sunlight streamed through a bay window at the landing level of the staircase, illuminating the dozens of framed pictures that were hung above the railing leading downstairs. More apparent than all of this was the smell of fresh cookies that hit Robin’s nose the second he crossed over the threshold. Ruby lifted her nose into the air and smiled. “Looks like you boys are just in time for Snickerdoodles.”

She led them past a row of children’s cubbies to the kitchen in the back of the house where they found a plump old woman lifting a tray of cookies from the oven. She looked over toward the kitchen door when she heard them enter and sighed as she slipped off her red oven mitts. “Now don’t tell me you actually smelled my cookies from the front yard.”

Ruby tilted her head with a smirk. “I’ve always had an unnaturally good sense of smell Granny. You know that.”

Granny smirked back at her before offering her a cookie from a plate on the counter. “At least take one that’s already cooled off. You’re more fond of chocolate chip anyway.”

“Thank you,” sang Ruby as she lifted a large cookie from the plate. She gestured back to Hook and Robin before taking a huge bite. “You remember Killian, right? We used to date.”

“Oh how could I forget,” drawled Granny, peering at him from behind her wire-rimmed spectacles as she crossed her arms against her chest. “All the moaning and complaining you did after the break up I wouldn’t be surprised if I remembered his name well into my nineties.”

“Well it’s nice not to be forgotten,” said Killian with a forced smile. “It’s a pleasure to see you again Eugenia but as I told your lovely granddaughter outside I am not here on my own behalf. I am here for my friend Robin.”

Robin sent her awkward wave at the mention of his name. “It’s lovely to meet you mam.”

“Glad to hear it,” she said warmly. She dropped her eyes down to the car seat hanging from his right hand and smiled. “And who is this handsome little fellow?”

“Oh this is my son Roland,” said Robin holding up the car seat so she could get a better look. Roland had since wakened from their car ride and began to fuss at the sudden movement.

Granny cooed at him as she gently reached out to stroke his cheek. She looked up over at Robin and raised an eyebrow. “Well you might as well unload him from that thing. It’s not like you’ll be leaving anytime soon.”

Her bluntness made Robin want to argue but one look into the grey-blue eyes behind her glasses told him that any efforts he’d make would be futile. He quickly unloaded Roland from his car seat and settled him on his hip. As Roland continued to whimper at his side he turned to Granny with apologetic eyes. “I’m sorry. He just isn’t fond of being in new places.”

“Uh-huh,” said Granny knitting her eyebrows at him. She watched him for a moment more before
turning back to Ruby with her hands on her hips. “Ruby why don’t you take Killian out back and show him the new swing set we installed for the kids.”

“My pleasure,” said Ruby sarcastically, before snatching another cookie. She gestured for Hook to follow her as she headed toward the back door.

Hook followed her without hesitation and Robin watched them go with a confused look on his face. “Should I also go—”

“No,” said Granny, cutting him off bluntly. “You can take a seat right there.”

She gestured toward the kitchen table and looked at Robin with expectant eyes. He stared back at her with uncertainty coloring his face and she let out a boisterous chuckle. “You don’t have to be so afraid darling. We might be in a kitchen but I’m not gonna eat you.”

Robin forced a laugh from his throat as he lowered himself into one of the table’s chairs. He settled Roland on his lap as he watched Granny head back over to the stove to transfer her freshly baked cookies onto cooling tray. She tsked to herself as she puttered around the kitchen in her slip on shoes. Her silver hair was piled on top of her head in an elaborate fashion and Robin had no doubt that in her younger days it was probably a glorious shade of blonde. In the few moments since he’d met her he had already begun to wonder how someone so short could manage to occupy so much space with just their personality.

She headed back over to the table with a plate of cookies in hand and set them in front of him. “Go ahead and take a snickerdoodle,” she ordered in a gruff voice. “I know you want one.”

If he was perfectly honest Robin had been drooling for the cookies from the moment he stepped foot in this house, yet somehow it had seemed impolite to ask for one. Maybe it was because he so sure that he wouldn’t be needing her services but it just seemed like bad manners to take the cookie, even if it had been offered to him.

He shrugged his shoulders at her. “I’m fine actually. Thank you.”

“Really?” said Granny, raising an eyebrow at him. She took a seat in the chair next to his and eyed him critically. “You know I’ve only had people refuse my cookies for two reasons. One, they are physically sick and two, they’re about to give me bad news. Forgive me if I’m wrong but you don’t look particularly sick to me.”

Robin bit his lip nervously as he shook his head at her. “I’m sorry about all this. My friend thought a tour of this place might help me be more comfortable with the idea of putting Roland in daycare but honestly I just don’t think that daycare is what’s right for us. I apologize if I’ve wasted your time in anyway.”

She waved him off with a laugh. “You don’t have to feel so guilty about it Robin. I completely understand.”

“You do?”

“Of course,” she said shrugging her shoulders. “Anita, my daughter, would only leave Ruby in my care. I did the same with her and my mother. I understand if the idea of leaving your son with strangers isn’t something you’re comfortable with.”

Robin felt relief flood through him at her words. “Thank you. It’s just been a little hard explaining that to my friends. Neither of them are parents yet.”
Granny hummed in understanding as she nodded. “I tell you what. Why don’t I show you around the house anyway? Even if Roland won’t be staying with us I can show you some excellent tips on how to start baby proofing your home now that he’s walking. Plus, it would allow you to eat one my cookies without guilt.”

Robin was tempted to refuse her offer and just wait in the car for Hook to join them then yell at him for the entire ride home but then his mind flashed back to the giant black scribble that now marked his office wall. A few tips couldn’t hurt, he thought to himself.

“Well I suppose I would like a cookie,” he reasoned softly.

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Eugenia “Granny” Lucas was quite the interesting woman. An accomplished world traveler she met her husband on an expedition to Macchu Picchu when she was only 18. After three years and five separate proposals she finally agreed to marry him in 1960’s Paris. They had a good life filled with travel until she gave birth to their daughter, Anita. After that she and her husband thought it best to settle down and provide a life for her. Still the traveling never stopped completely. They took their daughter on trips to New York, Italy, wherever the mood struck them and soon the traveling bug took hold of Anita too. The only difference being that motherhood wouldn’t be enough for her to give it up. She’d come to visit one night with baby Ruby in tow and the next morning they’d woken up to find her gone, leaving their granddaughter behind with nothing more than a note. Robin found out all of this and more during his tour of the house with Granny.

Built in the 1950’s Granny had inherited the house from her parents and lived there with her family ever since. Pictures of her husband, Ruby and even Anita were prominent in every room on the lower level. And yet when they headed upstairs to see the nursery Robin didn’t see any of their photos in the frames lining the staircase walls. When he asked Granny about it she’d only smiled and said that the wall was reserved for the children in the daycare, the ones she might not have had the privilege to raise but to still see grow up. They held a special place in her heart and therefore on her wall. The thought made Robin smile. He made his way up the stairs behind Granny eyeing each of the photos curiously until he was stopped in his tracks midway up the stairs by a single circled framed photo. His jaw dropped as he pointed out the photo to Granny. “Henry Gardiner was one of your daycare kids?”

It was an old picture. One where Henry couldn’t have been more than three years old. He was grinning at the camera with his hands behind his back proudly displaying the Thor t-shirt that covered his chest as he stood in front of the porch steps. Robin had the same photo hanging on his wall at home. Roland cooed in his arms as he reached for photo, recognizing Henry’s familiar face.

Granny turned and smiled at the photo he pointed out. “Oh yes. He was quite a joy whenever he was in my care. You know him?”

Robin stuttered as he tried to get over his shock. This is where Regina took Henry for daycare. “I, uh, his mother is Roland’s godmother.”

Granny’s eyebrows climbed to her hairline in surprise. “Regina? Well what a small world. I’ve missed her since she took that big job in New York. Any idea how our girl’s doing?”

Robin let out a shaky breath at her question. “She’s stumbled a bit but I think she’s been doing quite well up there. Calls every week.”

“Well that’s good to hear,” said Granny happily. She leaned in and mischievously whispered, “You know I like to say that I don’t have favorites but I will admit that those two… highly favored
“Not just here,” mumbled Robin absentmindedly as he continued to stare at the photo. It was still hard to wrap his head around the fact that this was where Henry had gone for daycare. That these were the people Regina had trusted with her son. How could he have not known that?

The questions swirled in his head as he followed Granny up the stairs with Roland on his hip. She led them to a room at the end of the hall with the word NURSERY spelled out in yellow block letters nailed above the doorframe. She opened the door with a tiny bit of flourish. “And here’s where we keep the kids who are Roland’s age.”

It was a small room with light green walls and two cribs across from each other. There was a mobile above each one with tiny elephants on each arm and a plush stuffed toy in the corner. A crate practically overflowing with toys was just under the window and a small bookcase full of children’s stories sat next to it. It was a room full of warmth and Robin could actually see Roland being comfortable in it. Speaking of Roland, the time spent his father’s arms had begun to make him restless as he began to squirm and cry out.

“You know you can let him wander around the room if he needs a little exercise,” Granny suggested. “I don’t mind.”

Robin sighed as he gently lowered his son to the floor. Without hesitation Roland waddled over to the toy chest as soon as he escaped and giggled as he begun to play with a squeaky rubber duck. Granny watched him with a satisfied smile. “You have quite the adorable son Robin.”

“So I keep hearing,” said Robin with a grin. He eyed Granny curiously as she moved to introduce Roland to a few new toys. He had to admit she seemed more than comfortable with his son and Roland didn’t seem to be stressed by her presence. The knowledge that this was also a woman who Regina trusted weighed heavily on his mind. Regina didn’t trust easily that much Robin knew for sure. So what about this particular woman had garnered her confidence.

He cleared his throat to get her attention. “Um Eugenia…”

“Just call me Granny,” she said raising a hand. “It’s the only thing you can answer to once you get to my age.”

“Okay… Granny,” he said, the word feeling a bit unfamiliar as he forced it from his throat. “Since you’ve taken care of so many children I suppose I just wanted to know… what exactly is your childcare philosophy?”

She turned to him with a quizzical expression on her face. “My philosophy?”

“Well…yes. I mean you’ve been doing this a lot longer than I have. There must be some steadfast rules you could pass down to a new parent like myself,” explained Robin.

She rested her hand on her hip as she shook her head at him. “Robin I can’t give you a guide book on how to raise your son. He’s your child and only you will be able to truly know what’s best for him.”

He nodded his head in concession and she gave him a long hard look before sighing. “But I suppose if I had to narrow it down to a few things it would be this: I believe that children need to be kept close so that they can feel secure. They should be encouraged when they do well and they should be punished when they misbehave. I believe they should always be watched with a careful eye and guided so that they always know the difference between right and wrong. But most
importantly I believe that children should be told they are loved every single day. There’s nothing sadder to me than a child who doesn’t know just how special and treasured they are. It’s our job as the adults in their life to make sure that they do. Those were my guiding principles when I raised Ruby and now that she’s grown I use them to guide every child that comes under my care. In a way, from the moment they step foot in my house every one of them becomes my grandchild. At least that’s how I like to think of them.”

Robin nodded his head dumbly, just a little overcome at the sincerity in her voice. It suddenly became very apparent of how Regina was able to trust this woman. He looked over at Roland and sighed when he saw his son giggling over a plush toy train. He did seem rather comfortable here.

Granny patted him on the shoulder comfortably. “Look Roland is your first child and I completely understand if you’re not ready to separate yourself from him yet. But if he was to enter my care I can promise you that he’d receive the same care I provide to every child that comes through my door. Showered with affection and watched like a hawk. So if you’re willing I could take him tomorrow. Just for a half-day in the morning to see how you feel. Free of charge?”

Robin swallowed nervously before choking out. “I suppose a half day wouldn’t be so bad.”

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The next day Robin woke up with reluctance poured into his heart. He was reluctant to get out of bed. He was reluctant to force himself to take a shower. He was even more reluctant to get Roland dressed and loaded into his car seat. He was reluctant the whole morning and all because he knew as soon as they left the apartment he would get into his car and take Roland to daycare. The entire drive there Robin tried to focus on anything other than the fact that in a few minutes he would be separated from his son for no less than half the day. As he pulled up to the manor his eyes flashed to the rearview mirror where he could see Roland tucked away in his car seat still a little sleepy from his early morning wake up call. He eyed the manor with a sigh trying to remember all the good things he’d liked about it from the day before. If Regina could trust Granny, then so could he. He turned back to back to Roland and tried to send him a reassuring smile. “Okay son, I’m going to be leaving you with Granny and Ruby for the morning but I promise it’s only until lunch. As soon as that’s over I’ll be right back.”

As he reached for the handle of his car door his breath caught in his throat as he realized what he’d just said.

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The Year Before

“Are you sure you don’t want to come in with us?” asked Robin. “I’m sure the gang would love to see you.”

Marian shrugged her shoulders at him from the driver’s seat. She had parked them right in front of the Drunken Monk fully prepared to drop off her husband and son when Robin tried to coax her inside the bar. Her dark curly hair was pulled up into a shoddy ponytail which swung slightly as she shook her head at him. “Robin please,” she laughed. “I don’t want to go in there right now. Look at me. I’m a mess.”

“You’re crazy. I think you look gorgeous,” insisted Robin with a smile.

She only rolled her eyes at him in response. Despite his sincerity she could never believe him in her current state. Not when she knew there was a spit up stain on the shoulder of her purple t-shirt, one
that she’d chosen to hide under sleeves of her old jean jacket. The rims of her eyes were accentuated by the dark circles only found on a woman who’d spent most of her night soothing her newborn back to sleep and some days she couldn’t even be bothered to care. These things, however, weren’t what Robin saw when he looked at her. Instead he saw the way her brown eyes lit up whenever she held their son. And he saw the bright smile that graced her face whenever Roland did something even remotely interesting. He saw the love that she was pouring into their child and he knew that she would never look more beautiful to him.

Marian leaned into the back seat to tickle Roland’s stomach and he smiled, toothlessly, back up at her. She smiled down at him and sighed. “I love our son Robin, but you have to admit he has infringed on my beauty regimen.”

Not that I would ever care, she added silently. She knew that looking this run down wasn’t even a fraction of the price she’d pay to have Roland in her life. For that she’d give up anything.

She turned back to Robin. “Okay how about this? I will go to the store and pick up some makeup along with the milk. A little blush and mascara and I’ll be confident enough to face the world. I promise.”

“Well if you’re sure,” said Robin shrugging his shoulders. “I mean we could just go with you to the store and come back together.”

“No that’s alright,” insisted Marian, waving him off a bright smile. “You need some time to look over the books and the grocery store’s just a few blocks away. I’ll pick up the milk and the makeup and I’ll be right back.”

Robin sighed before nodding his head with a forced smile. “Okay.”

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NEW YORK

Regina flipped through the business section of the New York Times as she waited for her lunch order to arrive at her table. It truly baffled her how a day could feel so long when it wasn’t even noon yet. What with Mal breathing down her neck and Snow glaring at her from across the room the forty-five minutes it took her to eat lunch would be the only time she got peace all day. The only thing that kept her going was knowing that in hopefully less than ten minutes she would be tasting the delicious Albondigas soup from the bistro down the street from her job.

Her attention was pulled from her newspaper when she heard her phone begin to buzz in her purse. After fishing it out she saw Robin’s name lit up on her screen and she quickly answered.

“Hey!” she greeted brightly. “Have you dropped off Roland yet?”
Robin hesitated before answering her. “Well not exactly.”

Regina straightened up in her seat, the tone of Robin’s voice sending a spark to her nerves. “Why not? What happened?”

Robin sighed as he looked over at the manor again. “Well I’m here in front of the manor. Less than fifty yards away from the front door… but I can’t get out of my car.”

Regina knitted her eyebrows in confusion. “I don’t understand. Are you stuck?”

“Not physically,” mumbled Robin. “I just... I can’t open the door.”

“Robin…” sighed Regina sympathetically. “We talked about this last night. Granny and Ruby are good people. I trusted them with Henry and I know you can trust them with Roland.”

Frustration ran through Robin as he recalled their conversation the night before. Regina had spent the better part of two hours convincing Robin that Granny was more than well equipped to take care of Roland in his absence. She’d told him dozens of times just how much Henry had enjoyed his time there and how much she’d loved the staff. It had all seemed so reasonable and believable from the safety of his apartment but now that he was here, in front of the now intimidating manor where he was expected to leave his only child, those words just seemed like they weren’t even real.

Robin ran his hand over his face tiredly. “I know what we talked about but I just can’t help thinking… what if he needs me? What if something happens and I’m not there to help him? How am I supposed to live with myself if I’m not?”

Regina set down her paper and swallowed hard before answering him. “I know that letting go is hard. It’s hard because one day you’re not going to be there. One day he’s going to be hurt or sad and you won’t be around to do anything about it. That’s a certainty that haunts every parent. It haunts me. Every time Henry’s out of my sight I wonder what could happen to him. It’s always in the back of my mind. The only way I can live with it is knowing that I’ve prepared him to experience things without me. Even if right now it’s just little things like going to school.

“Robin… you can’t be by Roland’s side every minute of every day. It’s just not possible or healthy. You’ve have to start believing that he’ll be able to survive without you even if it’s for just a few hours with someone else that you trust. Granny and Ruby will take good care him. And if you can’t believe that then believe me. If you leave Roland with them today everything will be fine. I know it will.”

Robin gritted his teeth as he listened to Regina reason with him. He knew she was right. But that still didn’t make it any easier for him. He looked into the back seat and Roland smiled up at him flashing his three baby teeth. Robin stroked his cheek affectionately with a sigh. “What if he misses me?”

“Oh he’ll miss you,” chuckled Regina. “But I promise it won’t be half as much as you miss him. You can’t let him cling to your side Robin. If you do he’ll just grow up afraid.”

Robin looked at his son with apprehension in his eyes. *I don’t want you to be afraid*, he thought silently.

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Getting out of his car and walking Roland up to Granny’s door would go down as one of the hardest things Robin had ever had to do. His throat was practically closing up by the time he rang the doorbell.
Granny greeted them with a smile on her face. “Hi there! It’s good to see you fellas again. Did you make it over alright?”

“We had a bit of car trouble but we got along just fine,” answered Robin. Every word felt like gravel tumbling out of his mouth.

Granny nodded at him understandingly. “Well I’m glad you could make it. Why don’t you follow me up to the nursery so we can get Roland situated?”

Robin followed her up the staircase trying to remind himself to breathe. It was just for a few hours. Everything would be fine. He glanced at the picture of Henry as he passed it on the railing. Henry had gone here and he’d turned out just fine. So would Roland.

As he entered the nursery with Roland on his hip Robin was a bit startled to see another baby playing in the crib on the right side of the room. When she caught sight of them the baby girl lifted her arms and let out a soft, “Up. Up.”

“Okay darling,” said Granny walking over to fulfill her request. She lifted up the little girl and set her on her hip before turning back to Robin. “Guys I’d like you to meet Alex. She’s one of our regulars. Say hello Alex.”

The little girl waved shyly at them both and Robin summoned up a smile for her. She was a pretty little girl with shiny blond hair and chocolate brown eyes. The tiny yellow bow in her hair matched her yellow Winnie the Pooh onesie perfectly and she gnawed on the plush piglet in her hand absentmindedly.

“How thoughtful,” said Robin, forcing a smile to his face.

He hesitated before kneeling down to plant Roland’s feet on the floor. He pressed a lingering kiss to top of his head and whispered, “Okay Roland, I am going to leave you here with Granny and Alex for the next couple of hours and then come back to get you. I’m going to miss you while I’m gone but I will be back before you know it.”

Robin didn’t know if the words he said were meant to comfort Roland or himself but in either case he was sure that they weren’t effective. There was a lump still caught in his throat as he pressed another quick kiss to Roland’s cheek before reluctantly releasing him from his grip. His son quickly tottered over to Alex’s side where he joined her digging through the toy bin.

Robin sighed as he stood to his feet and Granny reassuringly patted him on the shoulder. “I’ll watch him like a hawk, I promise.”

Robin could only force a smile to his face in response. He didn’t know how he was going to get through the day without Roland by his side.

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Regina impatiently paced the floors of the office closet, her heels making even clacks against the white tile floors. She’d been more than a little on edge since her talk with Robin during lunch. Even though she reassured him that Roland would be fine at Henry’s old daycare she found herself a little anxious at the prospect of Robin being separated from his son for so long. To be honest, she didn’t even think he’d be able to make it for the whole half day. She took another look at the clock on her phone. 4:10. She sighed. Robin should’ve picked up Roland by now and that meant he could be calling any second. She’d snuck off to the closet in order to get some privacy from her team. This wasn’t exactly a call she wanted to answer in front of them.

Her heart began to race as the phone vibrated in her hand and she pressed the answer button. “Hey. So… how’d it go?”

“That was the longest day of my life,” complained Robin sullenly. He opened the door to his apartment with Roland’s car seat in his hand. “I don’t think I even got any work done. I could hardly focus on a thing.”

“Well that’s unsurprising,” sighed Regina, as she drummed her fingers against her thigh nervously. “Did you manage to make it the full six hours?”

“Only five and a half,” admitted Robin. “I sped through traffic to make it there early.”

He placed Roland in his play pen and settled down on the couch. All throughout the day he couldn’t make it ten minutes without worrying about Roland. He’d almost called the daycare no less than 12 times. Having his son back in his sights had been the only thing with the ability to make him relax.

Regina chuckled at his eagerness. “And how did Roland take the day without you?”

“He took it just fine apparently,” mumbled Robin. “According to Granny, he ate well, played nicely with his playmate and didn’t even cry the whole time.”

Regina pursed her lips as Robin rattled off Granny’s assessment. “You know it might just be a bad connection but I’m detecting a little bitterness in your tone.”

Robin sighed before replying. “Well it’s just… I fretted over him the whole day and when I went there to pick him up it was as if he’d hardly even noticed that I was gone. I don’t know whether to be relieved or worried.”

“For now… be relieved,” answered Regina. “Your son’s first time in daycare was easy for him. Try to remember that’s a good thing.”

“I suppose,” sighed Robin. “He did look like he was having a good time there.”

“Good,” said Regina with a smile. Relief flowed through her with the knowledge that everything had gone well. “So what do you think? Are you willing to let Granny watch him full time?”

“We talked it over while I was there and I agreed for her to watch Roland three days a week,” said Robin. “I don’t think I can handle any more than that right now. Baby steps, you know?”

“I get it,” said Regina, nodding her head. “I’m just glad that you found a place you could trust.”

“Well that’s all due to you isn’t it?” replied, Robin with a smirk.
“I don’t know what you mean,” said Regina softly.

Robin chuckled at her attempt to feign ignorance. “Regina please. Do you really expect me to believe that Hook came up with the idea to take me to your old daycare on his own? I know you sent him there.”

“I… may have mentioned Granny in one of our emails and suggested he bring you by,” she admitted reluctantly. “I just… I wanted you to have a safe place to send Roland.”

“I know you’ll always have his best interests at heart. It’s why we chose you as his godmother in the first place,” said Robin with a smile. “It’s nice to know that hasn’t changed. Even with the distance between us.”

“Robin I could be on the moon it wouldn’t stop me from meddling in your life,” joked Regina. “I’ll always be keeping an eye on you and Roland. I love you both dearly.”

“I know,” he said. “It’s always nice to hear though.”

They weren’t able to chat for long after that. Regina needed to head back to work and Robin was more eager than ever to spend a little time with Roland. Letting go of his son had been hard today and if he was perfectly honest he wasn’t particularly gung ho about doing it again in a few days. Still he knew that he would. Regina had been right when she said he couldn’t cling to Roland for the rest of his life. Going to the daycare and seeing his son having fun with his first real playmate had reminded him of that. There was a world outside of him that Roland needed to experience and Robin knew that he wanted him to see all of it.
Chapter 24

TWO AND A HALF YEARS AGO / ONE YEAR WITHOUT REGINA

At this point in Robin’s life he could honestly say that he had two great joys: Roland and football. Or as the Americans called it soccer. Now Robin loved Roland with all his heart, he’d hop in front of a bus to protect him but this weekend was the beginning of the FIFA World Cup Tournament, a month long celebration where 32 international teams would give it their all to see who could make it to the final round and bring home the cup for their country. So it was fairly obvious which of his joys had taken priority for the weekend.

That’s not to say that he’d put Roland on the back burner in anyway. His two-year-old son was currently jumping on the couch in a slightly oversized Brazil jersey, one that matched his father’s perfectly, as he chanted over and over “Bra-zil! Bra-zil!” Robin watched him bounce around with a grin on his face. Yes, Roland and football were his two greatest joys in life but football with Roland would never fail to put a smile on his face.

The doorbell rang and Roland raced to answer it. Robin quickly stepped into his path and scooped him up into his arms with a playful growl. “What did I tell you about answering the door?”

Roland giggled as his father tickled his ribs. “Wait for you!”

“That’s right,” laughed Robin, pressing a kiss to his cheek. In the last few months Roland had moved on from stumbling into trouble to running towards it headfirst. It gave Robin a near overwhelming mixture of pride and fear to know that his son had inherited his own brand of irresponsible fearlessness. He never looked where he was going as he ran, he would climb on top of any and all furniture and jump from any height without hesitation. Roland required near constant supervision and though somedays he ran his father ragged Robin wouldn’t change one curly hair on his head. Though he knew Roland was a bit reckless, he also knew his son was always the first in line to try new things and make new friends. He was never shy or fearful of attention, on the contrary he embraced it with a smile every time. A smile that, for Robin, made every day worth living.

After depositing Roland back on the ground Robin opened up the door to find Hook standing on the other side wearing the same Brazil jersey as Roland and himself. He held up a six pack and grinned. “Ready to watch Italy get their asses handed to them?”

“Always,” replied Robin. He eyed the beers in Hook’s hand with a tilted head. “You haven’t forgotten that I don’t drink anymore, have you?”

Hook scoffed at him and smirked as he made his way into the apartment. “Who said any of these are for you?”

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Four beers, and root beers, later Robin and Hook were happy to say that the football match lived up to their expectations. It was touch and go for the last half but Brazil had triumphed over Italy in a match that caused frequent shouts of shock and indignation to fly from both their mouths. Shouts that would go unnoticed by Roland seeing as how he had fallen asleep sometime in the second half. He was currently draped over the side of the arm chair, one hand still inside the bowl of chips he’d nestled into his lap during the game.
Hook affectionately ran his fingers through Roland’s curl’s. “Tuckered out in the first half. What a lightweight.”

“Excitement must’ve gotten to him,” said Robin walking over to armchair. He gently gathered Roland in his arms, being extra careful not to wake him. “I suppose I’ll just put him down for the night. If I’m lucky he’ll sleep ‘til morning.”

He headed down the hall with Roland in his arms, trying to make his footsteps as soft as possible as not to wake him. Tip toeing his way into his room he gently laid Roland on the left side of the bed. He’d outgrown his crib months ago and Robin knew he should look into getting him a bed of his own soon, but until then his son could just sleep by his side. After making sure that Roland was properly tucked in, he made his way back to the living room. He knew that Hook had drank no less than four beers and was probably in no condition to drive. That made his responsibility to make sure that he got into a cab instead of driving home on his own. Shockingly when he came out from the hallway he found Hook already going through the drawer where he kept the number of a taxi service. “Looking for the taxi cab number again?”

“Yeah,” mumbled Hook, still staring down at the drawer with wide eyes. “But I just have one quick question. Why is there a check for 800,000 dollars buried in this drawer?”

Robin just stared back at him with wide eyes as the sight of his best friend holding up the check he’d long since tried to forget caused his mind to suddenly go blank. He silently cursed himself for not ripping it up like he’d wanted so many times before. After a moment of tense silence, he croaked out, “You weren’t supposed to see that.”

“And yet here we are,” replied Hook smoothly. “So if you don’t mind I’d like an answer.”

“Maybe I do mind,” said Robin, walking over to snatch the check from Hook’s hand. “It’s not exactly your business.”

Any trace of the joy Robin had while watching the game had evaporated when the check had been brought up and it was replaced by a mix of pain and anger that made his spine rigid and his jaw clenched. Hook watched him with narrowed eyes as he placed the check back into the drawer and slammed it shut.

“Perhaps it isn’t my business,” said Hook, crossing his arms. “But money like that doesn’t just fall off trees. So maybe you might be able to understand why I’m so concerned with how you got it?”

Robin sighed as he turned to face him. “Well if you must know… it’s the money from Marian’s life insurance.”

Hook’s eyebrows rose to the top of his forehead at Robin’s answer. “Really? I didn’t even know that you guys had life insurance.”

“Perhaps it isn’t my business,” said Hook, crossing his arms. “But money like that doesn’t just fall off trees. So maybe you might be able to understand why I’m so concerned with how you got it?”

Robin sighed as he turned to face him. “Well if you must know… it’s the money from Marian’s life insurance.”

Hook’s eyebrows rose to the top of his forehead at Robin’s answer. “Really? I didn’t even know that you guys had life insurance.”

“We took it out when we first started looking into adoption,” explained Robin tiredly. “Marian thought it might make us look better to the agencies and when we found out she was pregnant with Roland she figured that it made sense for us to keep up with our policies just in case.”

Robin sighed as his thumb instinctively rubbed the wedding band that still graced his left ring finger. “She was always looking out for our future in little ways like that.”

His mind flashed back to the year where they’d decided to look into adoption. Marian had spent weeks devouring every piece of literature that she could about adoption agencies and how they chose which families to help. It hadn’t taken her long to realize that she and Robin had close to no
chance at being chosen. After that unwelcome discovery they’d discussed ways to make themselves more appealing. Searching for a better home was at the top of their list of course but she’d also had them sign up for an insurance policy as a way to show that they were prepared for the future. He’d never expected that they would actually have to use it one day.

Hook nodded his head understandingly and licked his lips before asking his next question. “Robin… how long have you had that check?”

“A while,” he replied cryptically, as he leaned against the kitchen counter.

“A while like… a few weeks?” prodded Hook gently.

Robin looked away from him guiltily. “A while like… a few months. Six.”

Hook’s jaw dropped as he openly gaped at him. “You’ve been letting a million dollars burn a hole into your drawer for half a year?!!”

“Well it’s not a million dollars,” Robin mumbled. It was $800,000. God he’d thought of that number every single day for the last few months. It had painfully knocked around in his head leaving bruises on every memory he had on his marriage. Every happy moment, and every hope and dream and plan he’d made with his wife had vanished. And the value of those things? $800,000. Of course this was predetermined amount set by the insurance company but it still made Robin’s skin crawl to have the value of someone he loved translated into dollar and cents. It wasn’t a small amount of money but he still knew he’d trade every penny of it for the chance to give Roland his mother back.

“Why haven’t you used it yet? Or at the very least deposit it into your bank account?” questioned Hook, his voice going up an octave. “You can’t just leave it sitting around like this!”

“Why not?” said Robin shrugging his shoulders. “There’s nothing I could spend that money on that won’t make me feel guilty for using it.”

“Why would it make you feel guilty?”

“Because I feel like I’m profiting of my wife’s death!” exclaimed Robin. “If Marian hadn’t died then I wouldn’t have this money and every time I see that check it’s all I can think about. It just feels like blood money. I don’t want to use it and I don’t want to need it.”

Hook took a deep breath through his nose trying to process just what Robin had told him. He supposed it made sense for Robin to feel this way but he still knew that he had to at least try to make him see the other side for Roland’s sake.

“Do you want my advice?” he asked.

“Not really,” said Robin, shaking his head at him. “You’re pretty drunk right now so I doubt it’ll be useful.”

“Oh please, I’ve only had four beers,” pointed out Hook. “I’m buzzed at the most and you know it.”

Robin only rolled his eyes in response.

“Drunk or not I have an opinion that I feel you should hear,” said Hook pressing on. “Marian took out that policy to take care of you. Because she didn’t want you scrambling to make ends meet if she wasn’t able to help out anymore.”
“But I’m not scrambling,” interjected Robin. “I’m doing fine on my own.”

“Let me finish!” ordered Hook, raising a finger to Robin’s face. “I know that you’ve taken care of Roland alone for the past two years and you’ve done a damn good job of it. But you know that this was never the life you and Marian planned for him to have. To be living here, in this one-bedroom apartment doing just a little bit better than barely making it. That wasn’t what you wanted. And things might be fine now but they could pile up once he gets older. Maybe he’ll need braces or football lessons or tuition for some fancy private school. This money was Marian’s way of making sure that you could give him all those things without hesitation. She wanted to make sure that even if she was gone you and Roland would still be able to have the life you planned for him. You can’t just let it sit around collecting dust. This money was her gift to you so you need to use it in a way you think would honor her. Make a better life for you and your son."

Robin hated to admit it but as he listened to Hook’s advice he knew his friend had a point. He and Marian had always wanted to at least try and give Roland the best of everything. Despite her death Marian had given him an opportunity to do just that but he was squandering it. He didn’t like the idea of using the money but he did wish to give Roland all the things he didn’t have when he was a child and he owed it to Marian to make sure that he followed through on that wish.

Robin narrowed his eyes at Hook with a smirk. “Has anyone ever told you that when you’re drunk you make very good points.”

Hook shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly. “It’s one of my hidden talents.”

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Over the next few days Robin gave himself time to think over Hook’s advice. He and Marian had always wanted better for Roland and it was time he took steps for making that happen. The only question was where to get started. He found his answer early one morning when the shower handle for the hot water snapped off for the fifth time.

Robin leaned against the doorway with his arms folded across his chest as Tink kneeled in his bathtub screwing the knob back into place. With her trusty red toolbox at her side she’d showed up not long after he called her, always happy to lend a helping hand despite this being the tenth time he’d called in six months.

“Ten bucks is all it takes Robin! Ten bucks!” she complained. “These knobs would be replaced and you’d never have to call me again for this.”

“Tell that to my super,” Robin shot back tiredly. “He’s the one who won’t get off his lazy arse!”

In the years that he’d lived in his apartment building he’d put in dozens of work orders to the apartment manager that went unfulfilled. After a while he just realized that he was better off calling Tink for help rather than waiting for the apartment staff to do their jobs. She’d get things done faster and better.

“Supers,” she spat. “They give all handymen a bad name.”

Robin smirked at her indignation as he helped her step out of the bathtub. “Not to worry Tink. I don’t think there’s a super around awful enough to damage your reputation.”

She sent him a proud smile as she wiped her hands off on her overall shorts. “Do you want me to take a look at your ceiling fan while I’m here?”

“Yeah that’d be great.”
While providing him with sufficient light in the dark the fan above Robin’s bed had begun to rhythmically shake whenever it was turned on. With a craned neck Tink groaned as she stood atop Robin’s mattress and narrowed her eyes at it. She raised her hand above her head and pointed toward the base. “I see the problem… the screws have come loose. It’s a good thing you called me when you did. Another week this thing probably would’ve crashed down and crushed you in your sleep.”

Robin felt a shiver run down his spine as the image of Roland being trapped under his faulty ceiling fan.

“You’ll want to move your bed until I can come back with a ladder tomorrow,” said Tink, hopping off the bed. She put her hands on her hips and brought her eyes back up to ceiling. “Does your rental agreement say anything about nail holes?”

He shook his head at her. “No. Why?”

“Well I was thinking when I come back to fix up your ceiling fan, I might take some measurements so I can fix you up with a room divider.”

“A room divider?” questioned Robin. “For what?”

“For you and Roland?” responded Tink. “I assume that one of these days you plan on getting him his own bed and a room divider might be nice for when he gets older and wants some privacy.”

“Oh,” breathed Robin. “Well I suppose that makes sense.”

Tink gathered together her tools and headed for the door. “I’ll be back tomorrow after I borrow my dad’s ladder. See you then.”

“Yeah see you then,” he mumbled back.

As he heard the door close behind her Robin looked around his bedroom with a grimace. Suddenly it just seemed very small. He’d been so excited when he and Marian had first moved in but now he felt as though he’d outgrown it and he knew that in a few years his son would too. Roland was young enough now that things like sleeping in the same room as his father didn’t seem strange to him but he wouldn’t stay that way for long. He’d soon need his space.

Robin walked out into the living room with a sigh. He’d spent his entire marriage in this apartment but maybe it was time for him to move on. Janet Smith loved working in real estate. She’d been a realtor for nearly twenty years. And she was damn good at it. She’d sold houses, condos and townhomes to families and bachelors and newlyweds. And those sales were what made her heels into Manolos, and kept her handbag Gucci but it wasn’t as if she was in the business purely for the money. No she was in the game for the rush. That indescribable, overwhelming sense of pride she received when she smacked a SOLD sticker over a FOR SALE sign. That was what got her out of bed in the morning. The knowledge that no matter who came in her path she would always succeed in finding them just the right real estate. And there was only one person who made her doubt that knowledge. Robin Locksley.

At first he’d seemed like an average, everyday client. Widowed single father with a little boy, decent budget and a sexy British accent, a definite plus in Janet’s book, but nothing special. Then as she showed him house after house she realized just what was wrong about him. Houses with pools, houses without, houses with five bedrooms, houses with three bedrooms, houses close to the beach, lofts downtown. He refused them all. Somewhere around the fifth house was when Janet realized that Robin Locksley was a client that didn’t know what he wanted. And therefore, was
incapable of making a decision. It was clients like him that almost made her hate her job.

Janet sighed as she locked the front door to a lovely four-bedroom, two-story home less than two miles away from the beach. Tile floors, a magnificent kitchen and plenty of room for guests. Yet another house that he’d declared “just not right for him.” It was the third house she’d shown him this week and it was beginning to grate on her nerves that he hadn’t liked one thing about it. She could feel his eyes on her back as she locked up. He was probably standing behind her with his hands in his pockets and his shoulders pulled up in a shrug as he stared at her with that familiar apologetic look in his eyes.

“I’m sorry if I’m being a bit difficult,” she heard him mumble. “I just… really don’t think this is the place for us.”

She quickly fixed her lips into a tight smile before flipping her bleach blonde hair over her shoulder to face him. “It’s fine Robin really. I’ve been doing this for quite a while and I know this is a decision you need to trust your gut on.”

Robin sighed as he shrugged his shoulders. “I just hate to feel like I’m wasting your time.”

She nodded her head understandingly as she walked past him to the driver’s side of her 2012 Mercedes. “Robin I’ve told you over and over, this would be done a lot quicker if you told me what you’re looking for exactly.”

“I don’t know,” said Robin shaking his head absentmindedly. “I just… I’m not getting the feeling you should get when you step into your future home.”

Oh god, he was a feeler. Janet had to resist the urge to roll her eyes. “I understand that but you have to form some idea of what you want. Or at the very least what you don’t want.”

Robin sighed as he reached for the passenger door of her car. His fingers drummed against the roof of her car as he thought over the house he’d just been in. “Well… I suppose I don’t want as many rooms as this one. It’ll just be me and Roland for years and then it’ll probably be just me, so I don’t want the spare rooms. It’ll just seem…”

“Like empty space,” finished Janet. Yeah she’d heard that more than once. She slipped into the driver’s seat and buckled her seat belt as she racked her brain of the properties that her agency was responsible for. Her hands settled on the steering wheel as Robin slipped into the seat beside her.

“Oh hell no,” she growled under her breath. She forced a smile to her face as she stepped out of the car and called out to her nemesis. “Cindy, might I have a word?”

The brunette turned to face her with a devious smile as she nodded. “Of course.”
She spoke a few short words with the couple before smugly joining Janet by the fence. “Why hello there Jan. Something I can do for you?”

Janet bristled at the shortened version of her name but she took a deep breath to reel in her anger. “Spare me the passive aggressive greetings Cindy. What the hell are you doing at this house?”

“So selling it. I thought that was rather obvious,” replied Cindy, her tone dripping with superiority.

“You know damn well every house in this neighborhood is in my territory,” whispered Janet, ferocity flaring behind her eyes. “You should’ve stuck to downtown.”

“ Territories aren’t official!” snapped Cindy, in a hushed voice. The freckles over her nose danced as she pulled her lips into a smirk. “A professional courtesy sure, but you should’ve never expected me to be courteous to you. If you were so protective over this house, you should’ve sold it three months ago when it was first listed. Don’t throw a hissy fit at me just because I’ve learned to do your job both better and faster than you can.”

Janet felt her skin grow hot with every word that fell from Cindy’s mouth. It took all she had not to throw her fist right into her smug face.

Bitch.

Cindy only chuckled at Janet’s apparent rage. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have paperwork to draw up.”

Janet watched her saunter back to her car, her anger still steaming in her gut. Just like that her plans to show Robin the house went up in smoke. And so did her possible commission check. She took a deep breath before turning back to the car, prepared to tell Robin that they’d missed their window. To her surprise he was no longer in the car anymore. Her head whipped down the street and she found him leaning against a wire fence gazing at a property two houses over.

At the approaching sound of her heels against the sidewalk Robin tore his eyes away from the house. “I’m sorry, you seemed a bit preoccupied.”

“Yeah, well... there’s not really much to say about that,” replied Janet. “Turns out you won’t be able to look at the house anyway. It’s already been sold.”

“Shame,” muttered Robin absentmindedly. “What about this one?”

Janet widened her eyes at him in shock. “This one?”

“Yeah, I saw your agency owned it.”

Janet turned back to the house with a scoff. It was true that the house was under her agency’s jurisdiction, their familiar for sale sign planted on the front lawn, but Robin’s apparent fascination with it came as a bit of a shock. The house was not attractive by any standards. Planks of wood were nailed over the holes where the glass from the windows had been bashed in on both the first and second floor of the house. The front lawn was bare besides the sprouts of weeds that grew around the foundation of the house, highlighting the cracks that could be seen in the concrete. A tire swing swayed listlessly from a nearly broken branch of the oak tree in the front yard. Everyone in the agency knew about this house. It’d been on the market for nearly ten years. They’d nicknamed it the Orphan because despite its size no family would ever want it.

“Can I get a closer look?” asked Robin eagerly.

“Sure,” said Janet, a disbelieving chuckle escaping her. “I don’t have the keys but you can check out the yard.”
The hinges of the wire screeched as Robin opened the gate to enter the front yard. He could make out different pictures in the graffiti spray-painted on the wooden planks over the windows. Some of it was rather inappropriate. He approached the door with caution and made his way onto the porch. From the corner of his eye he could see Janet cringe with every step he took and he couldn’t blame her. The wood beneath his feet creaked under his weight and the paint chips on the railing fell like snow despite his light grip. The house practically sagged with age. Robin knew if Roland was here he would say that the house looked sad. And he would be right.

“How long has your agency held onto this place?” asked Robin curiously.

“A little over a decade I think,” answered Janet. “The head of the agency bought it hoping he could put it through some renovations and sell it for a profit but the market took a dip and he couldn’t afford to. Ever since then it’s just been sitting here. It’s an absolute eyesore. Everyone in the neighborhood complains about it.”

Robin nodded as she listed off the house’s history. Sad old house could use a second chance.

“It’s got three bedrooms though,” added Janet. “A big backyard. Just needs someone willing to give it love and attention.”

He turned to her with a knowing look. “And if I was willing to give it love and attention… how much would that cost me?”

A grin stretched its way across Janet’s face. She eyes flickered to the “For Sale” sign planted ten feet from where she stood. It suddenly looked ripe for a sticker.

NEW YORK

Regina grimaced as she clicked through the house photos that Robin sent her. Not one angle looked flattering, and that was just the exterior. The pictures of the inside revealed rotting floorboards, a ripped out stove and tilted cabinets. She scrunched up her nose as she reached for the red wine by her side.

“Oh I know that look,” drawled Robin. “You are not pleased.”

She scoffed at her laptop screen before taking another sip of her wine. Her hair was pulled back into a low ponytail as she sat cross-legged at her kitchen table, warm in her button-up pajamas. Henry had long-since gone to bed after having a lengthy conversation with Robin about the latest marvel movie and its inaccuracies and Emma was out at her night classes. It was just her and Robin now. A bit like old times. He’d insisted on Skyping her to make sure he got the full picture of her reaction to the house. Personally, Regina thought he was being silly. She’d never been one to hold back her opinion, not with him at least.

“I know it looks… rundown,” admitted Robin. “You are not pleased.”

She sipped at her laptop screen before taking another sip of her wine. Her hair was pulled back into a low ponytail as she sat cross-legged at her kitchen table, warm in her button-up pajamas. Henry had long-since gone to bed after having a lengthy conversation with Robin about the latest marvel movie and its inaccuracies and Emma was out at her night classes. It was just her and Robin now. A bit like old times. He’d insisted on Skyping her to make sure he got the full picture of her reaction to the house. Personally, Regina thought he was being silly. She’d never been one to hold back her opinion, not with him at least.

“I know it looks… rundown,” admitted Robin.

“I was going to say ‘decrepit’” responded Regina. “A mess this big requires SAT words.”

“Very funny,” he mumbled. He leaned back in the chair at his own kitchen table, watching her shake her head as she went through photo after photo. Skyping wasn’t something he was fond of, in his opinion it never worked as well as it should, but despite his misgivings he’d taken up an account to keep up with Henry and Regina. Phone calls were good but sometimes seeing their faces was what he needed. That small lift of Regina’s eyebrow when she found something dubious in his tone, or suspect in his reasoning. The narrowing of her eyes and parting of her lips when her
curiosity was piqued. Regina might be capable of lying with words, but her face was always honest. And he could use that honesty right now.

“Where did you even find this place?” asked Regina, shaking her head at him.

“My realtor showed it to me.”

“You should find a better realtor. This one clearly hates you.”

He only chuckled in response. “I know it’s unsightly… but I want it.”

Regina eyebrows jumped to her hairline. “Are you serious? Three months of house hunting and this is the one you’ve settled on?”

“It’s old but it’s cheap,” pointed out Robin. “Four times cheaper than anything else in the area. It just requires a bit of work to make it livable.”

“A bit?”

“Well…” drawled Robin. “The floors need to be replaced, as do the windows, and the cabinets. Come to think of it I’d probably just redo the whole kitchen. I’ll have to get the electrical wiring inspected and possibly replaced. The lawn and backyard also need to be brought back to life and I might even rip out the wire gate.”

“Is that all?” replied Regina sarcastically. “What about the upstairs?”

“I didn’t really get the chance to look,” admitted Robin. “They said letting me go up the stairs was a liability they couldn’t afford.”

“Robin…”

He sighed at the chastising tone of her voice. “I know it’s insane. Everyone here has told me so.”

“But you don’t want to listen?” said Regina curiously. It was more of a statement then a question. She could see in Robin’s eyes how much he wanted the house. It’d been a long time since she’d seen him this passionate about anything besides Roland. She leaned her elbows against the kitchen table and looked into the camera seriously. “Okay tell me why.”

“Tell you why?”

“Tell me why you want the house so badly,” she ordered. “You’re seeing something there that no one else is. What are you seeing Robin?”

He licked his lips as his mind flashed back to vacant house in the photos. Despite the boarded up windows and bared lawn he’d felt a pull the moment he’d laid eyes on it. “You know when I was seven my father decided to move us to America. It was just him and my mother and me but we lived in this tiny apartment so we were always on top of each other. Sometimes it was nice to be so close but most of the time it was just… uncomfortable. My father worked so hard trying to get us out of that apartment. Weekends, nights, early mornings if asked. Yet somehow he always managed to find the time to walk me home from school, every single day. There was this house that we used to walk past two streets down from my school. When I think about it now it’s like looking at a picture, I remember it that well. It was two stories with blue shutters around the window panes, boxwood shrubs around the lawn and the door was painted red with gold numbers nailed to it.” A wistful chuckle escaped him. “Even had the white picket fence. My father would always tell me that one day, when things got better, we would live in a house like that. He
promised me that every day.”

Regina eyes were fixed to the screen as Robin began to lose himself in his memory. His eyes began to cloud over as he brought his hand up to his chin and continued his story with a sigh. “We never got the house. When I was eleven my father died of a heart attack. He never really took care of himself and it caught up with him. My mother she… she didn’t take it well. She started… drinking. Like mother, like son I suppose.”

Regina felt a lump grow in her throat at Robin’s words. “You got better,” she reminded him softly. “That’s what counts.”

He nodded reluctantly. “Maybe… but my mother wasn’t as lucky. She just got worse until one day she dropped me off at a home for boys and drove off. I never saw her again after that.”

“I’m sorry,” whispered Regina. If it wasn’t for the clenching of his jaw she’d doubt he’d even heard her.

“I know I probably had a lot of better reasons to be upset but there was a part of me that was just really angry that we never got that house. I know it was probably childish but I really believed if my family was ever meant to have a good life, better than the one we ended up with, it would’ve been in a house just like the one my father used to walk me past.”

Regina’s eyes flickered back to the photos of the decrepit old house Robin had his heart set on. “And you think this house will provide that life for you and Roland?”

“I know it’s stupid and foolish,” admitted Robin, shaking his head pitifully. “But when I saw this house I saw everything my father ever wanted for me and now it’s everything I want for Roland. I want him to have a home and I just know that this is where it’s supposed to be. I don’t how but I know it.”

Regina sighed before pressing her lips together in thought. After a moment’s hesitation she blew out a breath and nodded her head. “Well, you’re going to need a hell of a contractor.”

A grin spread across Robin’s face at her words. “Really?”

“Sometimes in life we have to trust our guts,” said Regina. “Buy the house. Make it a home.”

Even through the slightly pixelated view of the computer screen, it took one look in her brown eyes to know that she meant every word and it was strange but he knew if he wasn’t able to see that acceptance in her eyes and the encouragement in her smile he wouldn’t be able to go through with any of it. Not the house, not even moving, none of it. But he did have her blessing. And somehow that made it seem like he was making all the right moves.

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A YEAR LATER

Robin stood next to the kitchen counter surrounded by glasses and newspaper. One by one he took each glass, wrapped it up and placed it into the box at his feet. He never knew that packing could be so monotonous. His back had already begun to ache from his repeated bending over.

It took months. So many months of nails, and hammers and tiles but it was finally done. The renovations were costly, nothing that he couldn’t afford though certainly not cheap, but the house was finally done. Transformed from the crumbling mess he’d originally bought to a stunning home that he would raise his son in. The floors were now solid and the rooms were ready. It was finally
time to leave the apartment for good. He’d waited a long time for this day. And yet, as he packed up the last few boxes of the kitchenware, he felt his heart grow heavy. He’d had a lot of good memories in this place with Marian and without her. It was harder than he’d expected to leave.

“Hey Robin?”

He looked up to see Mulan coming from out of the hallway with a small box tucked under her arm. Her hair was pulled back into a slick ponytail and her knees had barely visible bruises from the last few hours she’d spent on the floor packing up the bathroom. When Robin had told her this was his final week in the apartment she’d insisted on being there to help pack up despite his insistence that it wasn’t necessary. There was very little left to pack up and he was more than capable of doing it with only Roland’s minimal help. However, now that the day had arrived he found himself grateful for her presence. Ever since she’d given up waitressing to join the police academy Robin had missed having her around. Besides, packing up alone would’ve made him feel… sadder.

“You might want to have a talk with your son,” she said, raising her eyebrows at him.

Robin set the box he’d been packing on the counter with a sigh. “Where is he?”

“Hiding under your bed with his monkey, refusing to come out.” She gave him a knowing look before heading out to the car.

Robin gave his head a little shake before heading back to where Roland had hidden. He felt his heart clench as he opened the door to what could now be considered his old bedroom. It was stripped down to nothing but the bare walls now. They’d already moved out his dresser and nightstands, loaded them into the truck and drove them to the new house. Their indents in the carpet still remained. Cleaning out the closet had been the most difficult thing. For days he’d wrestled with himself over the decision of what to do with Marian’s things. He’d ended up donating most of it, her clothes and shoes, but he kept a few sentimental items for himself and Roland, a book or two and the necklace he’d stolen when he’d first met her. Those things were moved out now and the room felt so unbearably empty without them. All that remained was his bedframe and mattress.

Robin groaned as he reached his bed and kneeled down to look underneath it. He found his son just where Mulan had said he was. Laying under the bed in his overalls and striped t-shirt, clutching the same stuffed Monkey that Henry had given him the day he was born. His curly hair had flecks of dust attached to it from where he’d laid his head against the floor and he looked up at his father apprehensively with his shiny brown eyes.

“Roland,” drawled Robin gently. “What are you doing under the bed?”

The tiny boy shrugged his shoulders and mumbled, “I like it here.”

“Well can you come out?”

He shook his head so fiercely the flew out of his curls as he hummed his discontent.

“Roland come out from under the bed,” ordered Robin, raising his voice an octave.

“No!” snapped Roland. “I don’t want to!”

Robin let out a frustrated groan as his patience began to wear thin. Over the past few weeks Roland had begun acting out in small ways. Refusing to eat vegetables, not going to sleep when told, just general unpleasantness. It was a hassle but Robin had no reason to believe it was nothing other than normal toddler misbehavior, a way to test his limits. In the face of such actions, Regina had
told him to be gentle but stern and he had but Roland’s behavior hadn’t turned around yet.

“Roland we do not have time for this right now. We have to finish moving.”

“I don’t want to move!” cried Roland.

“What?” The word tumbled from Robin’s mouth leaving him breathless with shock.

“I wanna stay here,” whispered Roland tearfully. “No new house.”

“No new house?” repeated Robin softly. A pin slid into his heart as he watched his son curl up under the bed fully prepared to stay there for as long as he deemed appropriate. He supposed this was Roland’s form of a peaceful protest, a sit-in to express his displeasure with the idea of moving. At the very least, he had to admit it had caught him off guard. He and Roland had spent plenty of weekends at the house before, camping out in the living room to get used to the place and the neighborhood but Roland had never been this apprehensive about going there before. Robin took a moment before laying down on his back beside the bed. He turned his head so he could face Roland where he lay on his side underneath the bed frame.

“What’s wrong with the new house?” he asked gently. “Do you not like it there?”

Roland shrugged his shoulders and Robin pressed his lips before continuing. “Don’t we have fun at the new house?”

“Yes,” Roland mumbled softly.

“Don’t you like your room there?”

“I guess.”

“Then why don’t you want to live there?”

“I like it here,” he said sadly. “It’s happy.”

“It’s happy?” said Robin curiously. “Are you afraid you won’t be happy in the new house?”

Roland nodded his head sadly and Robin let out a breath before reaching his hand under the bed. “Come out here son. I want to show you something.”

“A good something?” asked Roland, his curiosity piqued.

“A very good something,” responded Robin with a grin. After a moment of consideration Roland hesitantly grabbed his father’s hand and allowed himself to pulled from under the bed. Robin quickly stood, picked up Roland and placed him on his hip. “What I would like to show you, Roland, is a very special spot.”

He walked them out of the bedroom to the kitchen and stood on the space where their kitchen table had once been. “This spot Roland, is where your mother and I had our first dinner in this apartment. We’d ordered Chinese takeout and it came fifteen minutes late but it was the best meal I’d ever had. Do you know why?”

Roland shook his head.

“Because it was the first meal I had in a home with your mother,” continued Robin. He smiled as he remembered Marian in her plaid button-up pajamas and braided pig tails sitting cross-legged on the old, metal fold up chairs Tuck had given them along with a collapsible table. She’d smiled as
she slurped up her lo mein noodles and planned out which furniture they’d buy first. “Before that she and I had been living in a place underneath someone else’s home but this was ours. And we were really proud of that. And as we ate together on our paper plates I thought I couldn’t be happier. Until…”

He walked over to the apartment door. “I found this spot.”

“The door!” giggled Roland happily.

“That’s right the door but this isn’t just the door,” clarified Robin, in a playful deep tone. “No, this is where I gathered your mother in my arms and carried her over the threshold when we first married.”

“Like the prince carries a princess?”

“Just like a prince carries a princess,” said Robin with a nod. The memory of Marian in her simple white, lace dress and him in his borrowed gray suit and black tie flashed through his mind and Robin felt a lump begin to grow in his throat. They had been so young back then. How he longed to do that day over again. He smiled at Roland and let out a low chuckle. “I was stupidly clumsy and ended up knocking her head into the doorframe. I thought she’d be mad at me but she just laughed. Still as I stood in this spot and laughed with her that when I thought I certainly could never be happier. But that was only until I found the next spot.”

“Where?” asked Roland eagerly.

“Why in the bedroom of course,” said Robin. He returned them back into the room where less than a minute ago Roland had been protesting under the bed. In his mind he tried to remember just where the dresser was and quickly went to stand next to it. He turned his head to Roland with a grin and both their dimples flashed. “Now this is the most special of all my happy spots. Do you know why?”

“Why?”

“Because this story involves you,” answered Robin, lightly tapping him on his small chest. “When your mother carried you in her belly we didn’t know whether we going to have a little boy or a little girl. We thought that we wanted to surprised when you were born but after a few months we just had to know. So I was in this spot when we finally called the doctor and found out that we would be having a little boy. And right then was the happiest I ever thought I could be.”

They’d barely lasted a day when the doctor told them they could find out the sex of the baby. Robin still remembered the mix of joyful terror that had run through him when he heard that he’d be having a son for the first time.

He affectionately ran his fingers through Roland’s brown curls. “I have so many happy spots in this apartment. Roland your mother and I lived here together for seven years, each one better than the last. We had so many good times and made so many happy memories. And in our new home you and I are going to do the same. We are going to have so many moments where we think we can’t be happier and we are going to have even more moments where we’re proven wrong. Do you believe me?”

“I believe you Daddy,” said Roland with a firm nod.

His dimples flashed as he smiled at his father and Robin felt relief flood his chest. “Good. Now let’s get finished packing.”
It took another hour before they finished packing. Everything was officially out of the apartment and piled in the moving truck. Mulan had gone ahead to the new house in the truck and Robin had asked her to take Roland with her. He wanted a minute alone in the apartment.

As he stood in the center of the bare living room he was struck by just how empty it felt. Just as he’d told Roland, this apartment held so many memories for him. The good ones with Marian and the bad when he’d first lost her. They’d spent their entire marriage here. This was where he’d watched Roland take his first steps and say his first words. He’d met Regina and Henry here. When he thought of all those moments and memories he was surprised that he didn’t feel sadder.

He turned the apartment key in his palm and smiled. It was just an apartment, he realized. It didn’t hold his memories or his joys, just gave them a setting. Whether he lived here or not, the memories would always remain in his head and for that he was grateful.

He took one more minute to take it all in before setting his key down on the counter. It was certainly the end of an era but it was also the beginning of a new one. Hopefully one filled with happy spots.
Chapter 25

6 MONTHS AGO/ THREE YEARS WITHOUT REGINA

“No,” said Robin.

Hook raised his hands up indignantly. “I haven’t even asked you anything!”

“No but you’re about to, so I thought a preemptive strike was in order,” retorted Robin.

He flipped another page in his calendar while giving Hook a superior look. He’d wandered into his office about a minute ago full of swagger, doling out compliments. A moron could’ve seen what he was up to.

“What do you want?” asked Robin, narrowing his eyes. “I hope it’s not more time off.”

As evidenced by his quite noticeable tan, Hook had recently spent over two months off on a sailing trip from the coast of California to the shores of Maui and back. He’d spent twenty-one straight days on his boat before getting to Hawaii. He’d said it’d been gorgeous there. The fruit had been delicious and the locals had been welcoming but he hadn’t stayed long. Only about two weeks or so before he began heading to Santa Barbara. He’d only returned a few days ago.

“I don’t need time off,” said Hook, settling into the chair in front of Robin’s desk. “What I need… is a wingman.”

Robin dropped his pen down on the desk and sent Hook an incredulous look. “Excuse me?”

“There’s this girl,” explained Hook. “Smart, pretty but not exactly trusting. I asked her out and she’s willing to go out this Friday but only if I can find a date for her friend as well.”

A scoff flew from Robin’s throat. “Are you dating a middle schooler?”

Hook rolled his eyes at him. “It’s not as strange as you’re making it out to be.”

“Yes it is,” insisted Robin, as he stood from his desk to head over to the file cabinet. “And there’s no way I will be participating in your… double date.”

He said the final two words with a grimace. Honestly he could think no worse way to spend an evening than going on a blind date with a girl of Hook’s choosing while also having Hook present. It sounded like a nightmare.

Hook followed him over to the cabinet with imploring eyes. “Come on I need this favor. I’d already convinced Dave to go with me but he had to back out at the last minute. Said he had to study for some vet thing.”

David was the Drunken Monk’s newest bartender. Robin had hired him a few weeks before Hook had taken off on his sailing trip. At first Robin had feared that a rivalry would develop between the two of them but they’d actually to each other quite well. Good enough to go on dates together at least.

“You’re the only other single mate I’ve got,” Hook pointed out desperately.

Robin looked up from the files he’d been searching through to roll his eyes at Hook. “I’m not
single. I’m widowed. There’s a difference.”

As he slammed the file drawer shut his eyes flickered down to his own noticeable tan line. A strip of skin, lighter than the rest around it still remained in the place where he’d once worn his wedding ring. It hadn’t been intentional, the decision to take it off, but a while ago he’d removed it to clean out the garbage disposal in his house and he’d just forgotten to put it back on. Ever since he’d noticed its absence he’d been testing his will to see how long he could last before rushing to put it back on. He was up to fifteen days.

“I realize that,” mumbled Hook, “but Robin… this girl could be the one.”

“Ha!” barked Robin. “You’ve said that about the last three girls you’ve dated.”

“Yes… but they all carried the possibility of that being true,” admitted Hook, shrugging his shoulders. “Come on mate. I promise I’ll owe you. What have you got to lose?”

Robin had to stop himself from subconsciously rubbing his thumb over the spot where his wedding ring used to be. He had to remind himself that it had been four years seen he’d last had a kiss and that perhaps it was time he took opportunity for the chance at another. It took a vicious internal battle but Robin replied, “Okay but only if I can find someone to watch Roland.”

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Friday night came sooner than Robin would’ve liked.

If he was perfectly honest, he would admit that there was a small part of him that hoped that his search for a babysitter would be unsuccessful. If he couldn’t find someone to watch Roland it would give him a perfect out for this blind double date. Ugh, the words still made him internally cringe. He’d had a brief moment of hope when Granny and Ruby declined his request, stating they were taking a trip up to their cabin for the weekend and wanted to be on the road by Friday. However, an unwelcome savior had stepped into his path in the form of Mulan. She’d heard about the date from Hook and immediately offered her services which Robin had been forced to accept.

She was out back with Roland now, playing cops and robbers on the surprisingly healthy grass in their backyard. Robin sighed as he watched them from his upstairs bathroom window, Roland giggling as Mulan chased him around his swing set. They’d been living in their house for over a year now and Robin still felt his pride bubble up whenever he saw Roland enjoying his new home. Playing in his backyard, building forts in the living room and skipping down the stairs. It made him feel good to know that his son finally had what he never did.

Robin tore his eyes away from the window and refocused them back onto his mirror. He’d just gotten out of the shower and was debating whether or not to shave. He ran his hand over his chin, the stiff hairs on his jawline tickling his fingertips. It was more than visible but certainly not unruly. He decided against shaving. He’d already agreed to go on this childish group date, he might as well do it looking like a grown man instead of a twelve-year-old.

He quickly dried himself off with a towel and wrapped it around his waist before heading through his room over to his closet. It was a walk-in and as he flipped on the light Robin felt a familiar twinge of annoyance when he saw that all his clothes didn’t fill even a quarter of the space it provided. Roland had taken to using it base of operations when he played star command with his toys. There were three action figures and a stuffed bear in the corner right now. Roland’s “lieutenants.” Robin walked over to his shirts with a sigh. They were hung up next to the door and flipped through them indecisively. Button up or t-shirt, he mused silently. He pondered his decision for a moment before swiping a plain white t-shirt from its hanger. He paired it with a soft
gray zip-up hoodie and a dark wash pair of jeans. Not his best outfit but decent enough for a night at the carnival.

After taking one last look in the mirror he headed downstairs to find Mulan and Roland in the living room surrounded by the beginnings of what appeared to be an elaborate fort made out of couch cushions. Mulan looked over at him with a judgmental expression when he walked into the room. “Really? That’s what you’re wearing?”

Robin’s eyes quickly dropped down to look over what he was wearing. “Yes. What’s wrong with it?”

Mulan scoffed at him as she stood her feet. “It’s like you’re not even trying.”

“I’m not though,” replied Robin, shrugging his shoulders. It was a blunt admission but one that Robin thought was fairly obvious. He wasn’t exactly jumping for joy at the idea of this date and he saw no reason to pretend otherwise.

“Doesn’t mean you have to let her know that,” responded Mulan, alluding to his date. She rolled her eyes as him as she strolled over to the closet next to the front door. “I know you’re out of practice Robin but, geez, you could at least try to consider that your date is looking forward to a night out and decide not to ruin that for her.”

Robin folded his arms across his chest as he leaned against the wall while Mulan dug through hallway closet. “I’m not out of practice,” he replied weakly.

She scoffed as she turned to face him with one hand on her hip. “Oh really? When’s the last time you’ve been on a first date?” she challenged.

“Well it was with Marian so… seventeen years.” The realization dawned on him as the words slipped from his mouth. It had been almost two decades since he’d been on a first date. Nearly six years since he’d been on any type of date at all. “Oh… wow,” he breathed.

Mulan arched an eyebrow at him. “You nervous?”

“Well I wasn’t until you had me point it out,” he said, a touch of irritation coloring his tone.

“Well you can relax,” she replied. “The truth is not much has changed since you’ve been on the playing field. You’ll go out. You’ll eat together. You’ll have awkward first date conversation and hope the evening ends with a kiss.”

She pulled out a green leather jacket from the closet and handed it to him. “Here, put this on. It at least gives her the impression that you care about her opinion.”

He rolled his eyes at her as he slipped out of his grey hoodie. She’d said that not much had changed since he’d been single but that wasn’t true. He’d changed. Drastically so. He was no longer a wily young teenager with no responsibilities and an aversion to following rules. He was a grown man now and a father. He’d learned to take things seriously and he didn’t know what that meant for him in terms of dating.

After pulling on the leather jacket he held his hands up at her expectantly. “Better?”

“Much,” said Mulan, with a smirk. “You gonna give me a rundown of the rules before you go?”

“No it’s pretty much just the basics. No sugar, no violence, no staying up late.” He looked over his shoulder to where Roland remained fixated on constructing his fort. “Roland can I get a goodbye
hug?”

Roland quickly trotted over to his father’s side with a grin. Robin kneeled down to give him a tight hug and a kiss on the forehead. “I’ll be back after you’ve gone to sleep. Now listen to your Aunt Mulan and do as she says cause if you don’t she can arrest you.”

“No she can’t,” laughed Roland.

“Oh yes I can,” growled Mulan, playfully scooping him up into her arms. Roland giggled as she set him on her hip and began to ruffle his hair. “I’m a cop remember!”

Robin watched them with a smile. “Alright, have fun you two.”

“Try your best to do the same,” Mulan knowingly called out as he walked away from them.

“Not bloody likely,” he muttered under his breath.

The moon was in full view by the time Robin pulled up to the state fairgrounds. It’s luminous glow in harsh competition with twinkling lights of the various rides and games of the carnival he currently ambled toward. He could hear the delighted laughs and screams of its visitors as he paid the entrance fee at the ticket booth and walked deeper into the increasingly dense crowd. The smell of carnival food came at him from every side as he quickly spotted the Ferris wheel, Hook’s predetermined meet up spot, and made his way toward it. He took in all the smiling faces of the kids running around him and made a mental note to bring Roland along next weekend. Perhaps he’d be able to use tonight as a scouting trip for some age appropriate rides.

It wasn’t long before Robin made it to the base of the Ferris wheel where he found Hook waiting for him while chomping down a cheesy carnival pretzel in his signature black leather jacket. He raised an eyebrow at Robin as he approached. “So nice to see you put in some effort.”

Robin sent him an annoyed look before nodding toward the pretzel in his hand. “Eating already?”

“It’s a carnival,” reasoned Hook shrugging his shoulders. “Besides It’s not like the girls are going to eat in front of us.”

*When did women stop eating on dates*, Robin silently asked himself. He pushed the thought out of his head as he watched Hook toss the pretzel into a nearby trash can. Suddenly the realization hit him that he knew absolutely nothing about his date in question. “What are the girls even like? Please tell me they’re at least in our immediate age range.”

“When did women stop eating on dates?,” Robin silently asked himself. He pushed the thought out of his head as he watched Hook toss the pretzel into a nearby trash can. Suddenly the realization hit him that he knew absolutely nothing about his date in question. “What are the girls even like? Please tell me they’re at least in our immediate age range.”

“More or less,” answered Hook, tilting his hand in an awkward gesture. He groaned in annoyance when Robin used his unwavering gaze to press him for a better answer. “My date is 27, yours is 28.”

Robin sighed apathetically. It could’ve been worse he supposed. “Names?”

“Ariel and Rachel,” Hook replied. “Ariel is a bit of a regular down at the marina, works at a seashell shop nearby. I’ve asked her five times in three years, this is the first time she’s said yes.”

“And they say persistence doesn’t pay off,” said Robin sarcastically. “What about Rachel? What does she do?”

“Oh you’ll love this!” laughed Hook. “She’s a private investigator and perceptive as hell if I’ve
“A P.I.” moaned Robin. “That’s just what I need a night under her trained scrutiny.”

“Well you never know what’s going happen, it might do you a world of good,” suggested Hook, absentmindedly focusing his attention beyond Robin’s back. “Anyway, whatever doubts you have I’d shove ‘em down. The girls are here.”

Robin turned to look behind him and quickly spotted two girls heading toward them. The taller of the two, no doubt because of the three-inch purple heels she’d chosen to wear, was a red head. *That shade can’t be natural*, Robin thought to himself, but it was gorgeous all the same. She was all smiles and the excitement that shone in her hazel eyes told Robin that she was most definitely was Hook’s date. Someone who had been dragged along wouldn’t be so enthusiastic. No his date was beside her. At least two inches shorter than her friend she had hazelnut colored skin and hair that fell past her waist in a thick braid. As her friend immediately went to Hook’s side to greet him with a kiss on the cheek, she was left to turn to Robin with apprehension in her eyes and a forced smile on her face. She held out her hand to him, and nervously said, “Hi I’m Rachel Punzelle, your co-hostage for this evening.”

A flash of uncertainty played out on her face after her greeting, as if even she couldn’t believe what she just said. He just gave her a forced chuckle as he shook her hand. “Well then… pleased to be suffering with you. Shall we get started?”

Robin had always considered himself lucky to have a group of long-term friends. He’d known Hook for more than a decade, ever since he’d washed up on the marina and stumbled into the bar looking for a short term job to pay for a ticket to New Zealand. Mulan, he’d met nine years ago when Tuck offered her a job at bar after she’d returned from her final tour in Afghanistan. Waiting tables had been nowhere as interesting for her but it’d been a hell of a lot safer. Tink had been fixing things for Tuck long before any of them even got there. Hell she’d been the first friend he and Marian had made through the Drunken Monk. And of course there was Regina, the one he trusted more than anyone despite being the most recent addition to the group, which he supposed wasn’t a massive hindrance considering he’d still known her seven years. These people had been in Robin’s life for so long and helped him in so many ways that he’d never be able to repay but as he walked alongside Rachel at the carnival he realized they’d stunted his growth in one particular area.

He had no idea how to talk to strangers anymore.

After spending more than ten years in a close-knit friendship with the same four people Robin was no longer adept at the “getting to know you” stage of meeting a new person. Nearly an hour had passed on this feeble excuse of a date and Robin could only name three things he’d discovered about Rachel. One, she liked cotton candy better than cinnamon pretzels. Two, she lived about thirty minutes away. And three, she’d worked as a private investigator for almost seven years. He hadn’t even learned those things on his own. They’d come from her rather chatty friend, Ariel. Clearly more excited about their situation than anyone else, she seemed to be doing all the talking for Rachel, who, on her own, seemed more the silent type. A point that was made even more obvious as they were waiting in line for the roller coaster.

Robin had been standing next to her for the last ten minutes trying to rack his brain for a useful conversation starter. Nothing interesting came to mind. In a moment of utter desperation, he turned to her and said, “So, been enjoying the weather lately?”
She raised an eyebrow at him and let out a disbelieving chuckle before replying, “It’s California weather. What’s not to love?”

“Right,” he responded with a nervous laugh. Did I actually just talk about the weather, he silently lamented. Sneaking a look over at Hook and his date, he saw the redhead infectiously laugh at some comment his friend had made. He didn’t want to be petty but he felt a spark of annoyance seeing his friend’s date go so swimmingly when he didn’t even want to be here in the first place. As he mentally went through a list of excuses he could use to make an early escape, he was surprised to feel the light touch of Rachel’s hand upon his arm. As he turned to her he saw her stare up at him with unusually imploring eyes. “Do you mind if we get out of line? I really hate roller coasters.”

Shocked at her sudden vulnerability he nodded his dumbly before croaking out, “Sure.”

After a few short words to alert Ariel that she was leaving, Rachel made her way out of the line for the roller coaster with Robin following close on her heels. For a few moments they walked through the alley of carnival games in silence before Robin finally gathered the courage to make another attempt at conversation. “So you’re not a fan of roller coasters?”

She shrugged her shoulders at him. “Well to be perfectly honest, I don’t really hate them. I’m indifferent at the most.”

He sent her a strange look. “Well then what was the point of getting out of line?”

“To separate from your friend and mine,” she answered smoothly, her eyes floating over the various booths. “I heard that flirtatious laugh she let out. It means she’s ready to be alone with him. My presence was no longer required.”

He raised his eyebrows at her. “And is that the only reason you came out tonight? To be an emergency buffer if needed?”

Her lips pulled back to reveal a toothy smile, her first of the night, as she let out a tiny chuckle. “You make it sound like such a burden.”

“Well,” drawled Robin, “you must be quite the friend.”

“Yes I am,” she replied pointedly.

Huh, Robin thought to himself. Fact number four, willing to endure a blind date for a good friend. It was something that they had in common and realizing it made Robin a bit more willing to play along for the night. If she’d been dragged along as he had he could at least do his best to show her a good time. He quickly spotted an archery booth not far from where they stood. Upon seeing it he turned to her with a smug grin as he guided her in its direction. “Well I’d hate for you to end the night with only my miserable company as a reward. How about I win you a stuffed bear for your troubles?”

She scoffed at him as she eyed the massive bears above their heads. “As if you could. Those things are unwinnable.”

“Is that a challenge?” he said raising his eyebrow at her.

She folded her arms across her chest with a mischievous twinkle in her eye. “More of an observation.”

“Well let’s see if that observation is true,” said Robin handing a five-dollar bill over to the booth
operator who quickly replaced it with a shoddy bow.

“Land all five arrows in the center ring you get a bear for your lady!” the carnie asserted festively, as he handed Robin the accompanying arrows.

Robin had to squash down the urge to correct booth operator and let him know that the woman next to him was in no way, shape or form his lady, nor would she ever be. Instead he focused on the targets in front of him. Three stacks of hay, one in front of him, all nearly seven feet tall marked with giant colorful circles. Yellow in the center, then red, blue, black and of course a thick layer of white representing the outermost ring. Staring at them now brought back memories of his father and the hot summer days they used to spend together practicing a skill that his father had sworn was tradition for their family. He could almost feel the sun of his face now, as he looped three fingers around the bowstring, locking his arrow into position and preparing to shoot. Moving his feet into the once familiar stance that he'd perfected after days on end in his youth, he pulled back on the taut string until he felt tips of his fingers land against his chin. A single breath passed through his lips before he released the arrow and it flew with a flwhish and landed dead in the yellow center.

A proud grin appeared on Robin’s face as he admired his handiwork. One down, four to go.

And down they went. Five arrows all in the yellow, to the surprise of both Rachel and the booth operator. With a look that could only be described as sour he begrudgingly handed Robin an oversized bear with a pink bow tied around his neck that he immediately presented to his wide-eyed date. An amused chuckle erupted from his throat as she stared at him in shock. “It appears your observation skills are faulty.”

“Well it wasn’t exactly obvious that I was on a date with Robin Hood,” she quipped, the surprise still evident in her tone.

“Locksely but still pretty close,” he corrected facetiously. He watched with a smug grin as she wrapped her arm around the bear’s middle, pulling it close to her body. It was nearly half her size and she actually giggled as she attempted to hold it up.

“Just so you know I’ll probably be using this as a decoy passenger so I can use the carpool lane,” she joked.

“Wouldn’t have it any other way,” Robin responded smoothly.

With the oversized bear between them and an interesting conversation starter, finally, the night started to lose its awkwardness. Robin was able to talk to Rachel about how he’d learned archery when he was younger and she was able to respond with sincere interest in his story and open up about a few of her own. Turns out that being a private eye wasn’t as interesting as most people would suspect but she still had a few tales to tell. Stopping at the carnival food court to pick up snacks they’d set themselves at a rickety picnic table to talk. After another hour Robin was now up to ten things that he knew about her and he could admit to himself that she was funny and attractive and most likely worth going on another date with… if he had been willing to ask. Still though, the evening hadn’t been as big a disaster as Robin had thought it would be.

He was telling Rachel a story about a brawl that had broken out at the Drunken Monk when her cell phone began to vibrate in her jeans pocket. She rolled her eyes and let out a disappointed sigh when she gave the screen a cursory glance. “Well looks like this double date just ended on a sour note.”

“What do you mean?” asked Robin, tilting his head at her curiously.
She flipped her screen toward him revealing a ten-line text that she’d just gotten from Ariel. “A message this long means your friend has screwed up, drastically so, and she’s probably offended.”

Robin rolled his eyes and scoffed. “What did he do?”

Rachel ran her eyes over the message and smirked to herself. “A small sexist comment.” She clicked her tongue. “Big mistake mister Jones.”

“I take it your friend is quite the feminist?”

“As we all should be,” answered Rachel. She sighed as she patted the oversized bear that was still attached to her side. “She’ll be making her way to food court now so we can walk back to the car together.”

“Well it might be petty of me but I am pleased to know that our evening went better than theirs,” said Robin, sheepishly.

“Me too,” chuckled Rachel. “It’s been nice getting to know you Robin. Almost makes me regret the fact that I’m never gonna see you again.”

The bluntness and confidence of her last comment made Robin lean back in his seat in confusion. “How can you be so sure of that?”

She smiled at him knowingly. “Well the space was a pretty big tip off.”

“What space?”

“This space.” She gestured to the air between them. “All night you’ve been just a little bit further than close. One foot away at all times, sitting across from me at the table instead of next to me. You’ve been polite and courteous but you haven’t tried to hold my hand or go in for a kiss at all.”

Robin shrugged his shoulders at her. “Perhaps I’m just old-fashioned?”

“Maybe,” she mused, nodding her head. “But you see, I have actually been on a date before this. I’ve also staked out a lot of dates as well and I just have to believe that… if you were really interested you would’ve made a move by now.” She sighed as she turned her attention back to her chili fries. “Besides, we’ve been on this date for nearly two hours now and you haven’t even told me how pretty I look.”

Robin sat there in a stunned silence as she listed the subconscious signals that he’d been sending all night. Hook had been right; she was perceptive as hell.

His breath caught in his throat as he searched for the proper words to appease her. “I’m sorry Rachel. It’s just that I…”

She quickly shook her head at him. “You don’t have to explain anything to me. I understand. The tan line on your ring finger says it all.”

Robin’s eyes dropped down to his right hand where the outline of his wedding band still remained on his ring finger.

“I noticed it at the archery booth,” she revealed softly. “So are you divorced or…”?

“Widowed,” he responded quickly. He hesitated before adding. “She passed away a few years ago.”
“I’m sorry,” said Rachel nodding her head understandingly. “What was she like?”

A wistful smile grew on Robin’s face as he shook his head at her. “I’m not exactly sure that talking about my deceased wife would be proper first date conversation.”

“Well you would be right,” replied Rachel. “But I think we’ve both established that this isn’t a date and never has been so why not break a few rules?”

Robin mulled over her reasoning before sighing in defeat. He’d almost managed to get through this entire “date” without thinking of Marian but he supposed that had been too much to hope for. “Well she was beautiful and kind and smart. She had this way of bringing out the best in every person she met.”

Rachel smiled at him. “Did she make your heart race?”

“Like a race horse on steroids,” he answered immediately.

“I’m sorry you lost her,” mumbled Rachel. She absentmindedly pulled on the bow around her stuff bear’s neck as she pressed her lips together nervously. “I, um, actually lost my brother a few months ago in a swimming accident.”

Robin felt his heart clench at her admission. It was only then that he noticed the shade of sorrow that colored her eyes. The same shade he’d seen every day for months after Marian had died. He felt shame wash over him for not noticing it earlier. “I’m sorry,” he croaked out.

She shrugged her shoulders. “I’ve sort of been wallowing in his memory, I guess. Haven’t gone out, only taking easy cases at work. Ariel thought bringing me out tonight might help.”

Robin suddenly found himself wishing that he’d tried harder to show her a good time when they’d first arrived. His decision to put in as little effort as possible into their “date” suddenly seemed very selfish. “I’m sorry if this evening has been disappointing to you Rachel.”

“That’s the thing; it hasn’t been,” she said shaking her head at him with a small smile. “To be perfectly honest, I wasn’t looking forward to night out with someone who… I don’t know, was looking for something with me. I’d sort of been building up my guard all day but when I realized that you actually held no expectations for me at all… that’s when I was able to let myself have some fun. It felt good to laugh and make a good memory. It was nice to know that I could still do those things. So thank you for not wanting more than just a night out. I think it was exactly what I needed.”

“Me too,” said Robin with a smile. It was good to know that he hadn’t made the evening a total waste for her. Perhaps he wasn’t as out of practice as he thought.

Rachel focused her eyes beyond his back as she saw Ariel stalking towards the food court in a huff, her red hair flying behind her like a flame. “Well it looks like my ride’s here.”

They both stood to their feet, Rachel grasping at her bear and Robin shoving his hands into his pockets to prepare for their goodbye. She smiled up at him as she pulled the bear to her side. He let out a surprised breath as she stretched to her tip toes to land a soft kiss on his cheek. “Thank you for a night with no expectations, Robin.”

“Happy to oblige,” he responded with a shrug.

She moved to walk away from him but turned back at the last second. “I hope one day you can find someone who makes your heart race again.”
With those final words she turned on her heel and made her way towards her friend, giant bear flopping at her side. As he watched her walk away Robin felt a tiny drop of regret that he would never see her again. It might’ve been nice to widen up his circle of friends.

It was barely later than nine-thirty when Robin finally got home. The last words Rachel had spoken to him were still swirling around in his head just as they had the entire drive from the carnival. *I hope one day you can find someone who makes your heart race again.* He went over them again as he stepped into his house and locked the door behind him. The silence in the house told him that Roland was asleep in his bed, as he should be. The only light on in the house came from the kitchen where he found Mulan sitting on a stool beside the kitchen counter, engrossed in whatever she was reading on her kindle.

“New book?” he asked.

She looked up as he made his way into the kitchen light. “Stellaluna,” she replied, holding up the kindle. “Nice to know it still holds up after twenty years.”

“One of Roland’s personal favorites,” said Robin, with a smile as he slipped off his jacket and draped it over the kitchen counter. “How many times did you have to go through it with him?”

“One and a half but he fell right to sleep after.”

“Thanks for sticking around to watch Roland. I appreciate it.”

“Anytime,” responded Mulan with a nod. “You know he’s one of the few kids I can tolerate.”

He walked over to the fridge and reached inside for a chilled water bottle. When he turned he’d expected to see her at least making some attempt to head for the door but was surprised to see her still sitting on her stool, arms folded across her chest staring at him with expectant eyes. Robin narrowed his eyes at her as he leaned against the kitchen counter. “You’re not leaving.”

“No I’m not.”

“Why?”

Mulan sighed as she rolled her eyes at him. “Okay I know I don’t seem like much of a gossip but you know damn well I’m not leaving without the details of your date. So you can give them to me willingly or I can camp out in your guest room. It’s your choice.”

“Really? Doesn’t feel like it,” he mumbled.

“Robin…”

“Fine,” he groaned. He should’ve known better than to think he could escape the third degree from Mulan. “The date went fine, I guess.”

“You guess?” questioned Mulan, raising an eyebrow. She’d leaned forward in her seat, curiosity blazing in her almond-shaped eyes.

“I don’t guess. I know,” he quickly corrected. “She said that she had a good time.”

“What was she like?”

“She was lovely and pretty and… really observant,” described Robin. “I liked her well enough.”
Mulan narrowed her eyes at him. “But…”

“But nothing’s going to come of it… cause she’s not Marian,” he said softly.

Mulan gave him a pitying look. “Robin…”

“I know, alright,” he said quickly shaking his head at her. “I know she’s never coming back but at the end of our date Rachel said something to me. She said that she hopes that I can find someone who can make my heart race again.”

“So…?”

“So I already had that person,” Robin reasoned sadly. “I had her for years but she’s gone now and honestly I don’t think I’m going to meet someone who can make me feel like that again. And I don’t know if it’s even worth it to look.”

It was a question that had entered his mind long before this date was even a possibility. As time passed after Marian’s death Robin had often pondered the idea of seeking out romance but never seemed to gather the courage to take any steps toward actually looking. His talk with Rachel had illuminated the source of his reluctance. How could he ever hope to love again after loving Marian? After having someone who could make him feel the way she had how could he settle for anything less? He imagined it would be like eating after losing your taste buds, just not as satisfying as before.

Disappointment colored Mulan’s eyes as she pressed her lips together at Robin’s admission. “So that’s it then? You’re just going to… monk out for the rest of your life?”

He shrugged his shoulders at her. “I don’t know. All I know is I was lucky to find the love that I had and if I’m not going to have something like that again… then what would be the point?”

Mulan slowly shook her head at him, her eyes wide in contemplation. “Wow… I really can’t tell if I should find that deeply romantic or just really depressing.”

“It’s probably a little bit of both,” he admitted with a chuckle. “But don’t worry about me, I’m fine. I have Roland, good friends, a job I love most of the time. I have everything I need right now and that’s enough for me.”

She sighed in defeat as she slid off her chair. “Well as someone who has never really been in love I don’t suppose I’m the best person to advise you now am I?”

“I wouldn’t discount you so quickly,” he replied. “Your opinion is probably one of the more valuable ones that I receive.”

“Well in that case I would tell you to keep an open mind,” she said, slipping her purse onto her shoulder. “My mother is constantly telling me that love never blossoms where you expect it to.”

Robin only nodded in response to her advice. That night as he climbed into bed Mulan’s words and Rachel’s would both swirl around his head causing confusion to rise into his heart. Would he ever love again? Did he really want to?

PRESENT DAY

The steady beeping of his alarm clock caused Robin to sigh as he was roused from his sleep. It was
the morning after Regina’s fashion show and Robin groaned as he stretched out his limbs while still under his blankets. He’d given himself the day off from the bar and had plans to spend the day with Roland. He also intended to give Regina a call, of course. If he knew her – and he did – she would’ve spent the morning drowning herself in the reviews of her show.

He stretched his hand out toward his night stand, blindly reaching for his cell phone to check the time. A yawn came from his throat as he squinted at the screen and was surprised to see a message from Regina had already arrived.

COMING BACK TO TOWN FOR A SHORT VISIT. WILL BE THERE IN THREE DAYS

Only two short sentences. Yet they knocked the sleep right out of him.

Robin immediately sat up in his bed, his eyes going over the words no less than four times to ensure that he’d read them correctly. Regina was coming back to town. In three days no less.

Now it had been months since his date with Rachel and weeks since he’d allowed himself to ponder the last words that she had spoken to him. But perhaps if he had thought of them more recently he might have noticed just how fast his heart started beating.
Chapter 26

Regina had always hated flying. It wasn’t as if she was afraid of heights or crashes, she just truly despised the experience. Being trapped in a confined space for hours on end breathing in recycled air just to get from one place to another. Even when her mother had forced her on the private jet for trip after trip she couldn’t stand it, so being in economy class on a public flight was its own kind of hell. However, laying back in her far too small to be legal plane seat, she couldn’t help but feel like the hell outside of her was nothing compared to the storm she felt within.

Regina’s eyes flew open at the ding of the seatbelt sign above her head. She swallowed harshly as she realized the soft whirring of the plane’s engines had lulled her into a light sleep. Her eyes dropped down to the watch on her wrist. She sighed as she realized she’d only been out for less than an hour. Still it was probably the best sleep she’d gotten in a while. Her mind hadn’t stopped racing ever since Snow had showed up at her house three days ago. It hadn’t exactly made resting an easy task.

Hoping to clear her head she turned on the screen embedded in the headrest in front of her. As soon as it lit up she was greeted by nothing other than the face of her father. Her throat tightened as she stared at the same photo that haunted her every minute of the last 72 hours. She silently cursed the airline for the making a news network their default station. With shaking hands, she turned off the screen in front of her but even as she closed her eyes she could still see her father’s face. She can’t escape her his death. It’d been on every screen, every newspaper, every article she saw. His face was everywhere taunting her with the fact that she hasn’t been there for him in his final moments. A fact that she would have to live with for the rest of her life.

She took a deep breath before opening her eyes and reaching down, between her feet for her purse. Before they’d boarded been sure to get a magazine in case she couldn’t sleep, which she knew was an absolute certainty. She pulled out a thick issue of Cosmo magazine and flipped to a random page. Immediately, she bit down on her lip when she saw Emma’s face staring back up at her. Laying luxuriously against an expensive white chaise she modeled one of Ingrid’s dresses, a shimmering gold ballgown. In her grief Regina had nearly forgotten that Snow had booked her that ad campaign. Her former nanny’s face was now in magazines across the country and looking into her glossy green eyes she felt guilt rise in her chest. Emma thinks she’s on a business trip for Mal, meeting with potential West Coast clients. There was no way she could tell her she was actually on her way to infiltrate her own father’s funeral. Not without her whole house of lies tumbling down. She hadn’t even told Snow that she was coming. She’d only try to talk her out of it. A moan from the seat beside her caused her to turn her head. Henry was still fast asleep, his head leaning against the plane wall as he curled up in his seat. The entire ride to the airport he’d reminded her over and over that she’d promised him the window seat so that he could watch the clouds go by. He’d ended up sleeping through the entire flight. She sighed sadly as she adjusted the blanket around his shoulders to ensure his warmth. It’s now official. He’ll never meet his grandfather. He’ll never know what he did for them both. She’d always known that this was how it was meant to be, that this was the price she’d chosen to pay for Henry’s safety but now that collection day had come all she felt was misery. Just pure misery. Her eyes flickered above her head as she heard the speaker system click on.

“Good morning passengers, this is your captain speaking. We are on schedule for our flight and will be landing at LAX in the next half-hour.”

He continued on to describe the weather but Regina found herself tuning out. In thirty minutes she’d be back on California soil. Less than a few dozen miles away from her mother. She’d spent
so long running from a monster and now she was voluntarily heading back into its lair. She knew it was an awful, sentimental decision and yet she couldn’t talk herself out of it. It was her father’s funeral. She had to be there. She just had to.

XXX

Robin had never been a fan of going to the airport. It was always crowded and loud, not to mention the markup in all the stores was practically criminal. Still he sat in the airport lobby without complaint as Roland played with a toy airplane in the seat next to him. As annoying as it was there was only one person he’d do this for. Or rather, two persons.

Sunshine streamed down from the skylight above him as Robin waited for Regina’s plane to land. It had been a long ride from Ventura to LAX but it was worth it for him and Roland to meet her as soon as she and Henry were in-state. He leaned back in his seat as he watched Roland play with his tiny toy plane, mimicking the sounds of a jet engine. Despite it being only a short while since he last checked, his eyes flickered down to the watch on his wrist. Any minute now. He sighed as he leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees. He didn’t know why but he’d been filled with something akin to anxiety ever since he’d gotten that text from her three days ago. Since then he’d cleaned the house more than four times, double checked the records at the bar and made sure that Roland understood that he was to be on his best behavior. It’d been three years since she’d last been in town and he couldn’t help but feel the need to impress. In a way she’d become his standard for good parenting and he wanted to prove that he could live up to the example she set for him.

Roland suddenly lowered his airplane with a grin and pointed behind his father’s back. “Daddy look!”

His head whipped in the direction Roland pointed and he saw her walking in his direction, though still not registering that he was in front of her. Her hair fell against her shoulder as she and Henry made their way towards them both. It was longer than when he’d last seen her, not by much but enough that he could remark upon the difference. The purple sweater dress she wore hugged her curves and accentuated her waist with the help of a thin black belt. For a second he thought that she had gotten taller but then he noticed the thick-heeled boots she wore that came up to her knees. She flipped her hair over her shoulder as she dragged her suitcase in her left hand and gripped Henry’s shoulder with her right. Robin saw her lick her lips nervously as she gazed about the room clearly searching for him. She looked completely different, yet utterly the same.

He smiled as he raised his hand in an effort to gain her attention and she finally spotted him. They locked eyes and Robin felt his smile falter. It was just a brief moment, a flash really but he saw something buried deep in those familiar brown eyes, something struggling to remain hidden. Pain. And just like that it was gone. He saw her bring a smile to her face and that flash disappeared, hidden behind a layer of excitement as she waved back to him. He quickly tightened up his smile to match hers.

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Regina rapidly blinked her eyes as she made her way through the airport terminal with Henry shuffling beside her. She could only hope to god that the eye drops she’d used ten seconds ago were as fast acting as their advertising claimed. Otherwise she’d have to explain to Robin why her eyes were still streaked with red from the hours she’d spent crying over her father. Which of course she couldn’t do.

She didn’t know why she’d called Robin. If she really thought about it she’d admit that it was probably better if he didn’t know she was in town at all. It’s not as if she could tell him about
anything that was happening with her. She couldn’t speak to him about her mother or her father. Or the increasingly ludicrous risk she’d be taking by going to his funeral. No she couldn’t tell Robin about any of these things but that hadn’t stopped her from picking up the phone minute Snow left and texting him that she would be coming back to town. It wasn’t a smart decision. She knew he’d have nothing but questions for her. Why was she coming to town? For how long? How had she been? The last question being the one she was most afraid of. Her heart was broken over her father and when it came to Robin she was a bit of an open book. She didn’t know if she could fake as if everything was alright around him. Not for three whole days. It was the reason she spent most of the plane ride cursing her decision to text him in the first place.

Then she saw him.

Well it was Roland she heard first. She’d been through enough video chats and phone calls with her godson to know his voice when she heard it. Even in a crowded airport. His cry of “Daddy look!” was enough to let her know she was at least headed in the right direction. She scanned the airport lobby until she saw Robin wave to get her attention.

He looked good in his plain white tee and brown leather jacket. Just as she remembered. Well perhaps there was a spare wrinkle here or there but that was to be expected. And he wore them well. The same could be said about the scruff that covered his jaw. She’d always preferred him with it rather than without. Making eye contact she quickly put a smile on her face. Now that he was in front of her it was an easier task than she’d expected.

Giving Henry’s shoulder an extra shake so he would stay alert she picked up her pace as she made her way over to the bench where he stood. She saw his smile widen as she got closer and felt hers do the same. As soon as she was within three feet of him she released her grip on her luggage handle and extended her arm for a hug. A happy laugh rang from Robin’s throat as he reciprocated, bringing her in for a bone crushing hug, not that she minded his intensity. On the contrary, she welcomed it.

As Robin tightened his arms to pull her closer she let her chin rest on his shoulder and brought her hands up to the backs of his shoulders. She felt her own laugh bubble up as she breathed in his scent. It had always astounded her how a man who lived so close to the beach could constantly smell like forest. There in his arms her smile didn’t feel so forced. There she felt safe and comforted. And deep down she knew that was the reason she’d texted him in the first place.

“I missed you,” she breathed.

“I missed you as well,” she heard him respond.

XXXXXXX

After taking a moment to marvel at each other’s kids and how much they’d grown, they all piled into Robin’s car. After the old Honda he’d shared with Marian had sputtered his last sooty breath Robin had reluctantly upgraded to a sturdy midsized jeep. The gas mileage was awful but it was worth it to know that in the case of a crash the car could more than take a hit. They barreled down the highway with their boys in the backseat, headphones in watching the latest Disney movie on the iPad that Regina had passed to Henry as soon as they got in the car. Robin glanced at them through the rearview mirror.

“It’s so silent compared to the ride down here,” he chuckled. “ Might have to pick up one of those pads myself.”

“It’s a solid investment, I promise you,” replied Regina with a smirk.
She turned in her seat to get a better look at the boys. A wistful breath escaped her as her eyes fell on Roland. Over the past few years she’d watch him grow from behind the screens of her laptop and cell phone but it was nothing compared to the real thing. Dressed for California fall, a small gray beanie covered his thick curls, leaving only a few to poke out around his forehead. His dimples had become even more defined in her absence and she could hardly resist the urge to lay a kiss on each one. At the airport she’d settled for one on the top of his head instead. He’d grown so much. The gurgling baby she’d left behind was now a giddy little boy. And despite her smile she couldn’t help feeling like she’d missed so much.

“He’s so big now,” she marveled softly.

“You don’t have to tell me,” replied Robin, with a smile. “He grows like a weed. I swear it’s another day, another inch. I still can’t believe he’ll be starting school in a few months.”

His eyes flickered back to the rearview mirror where he saw his son transfixed by the screen in his lap. “You always did tell me it goes by quick.”

“Even I didn’t know how true that was back then,” she said with a small tilt of her head. She clicked her tongue sadly before adding, “Henry stopped calling me ‘mommy’ a few months ago.”

Robin’s eyes widened as his head turned to her in surprise and then whipped back to the road. “Really?!?”

“Yes, I am strictly ‘mom’ now,” she said shaking her head with a small laugh. “God it was like a knife in the heart when I first realized it.”

“Well that’s frightening,” laughed Robin. “I suppose I only have a few more years left before ‘daddy’ is no longer on the table.”

When he’d first spotted Henry at the airport Robin had been a little shocked by how much he’d grown in the past few years. The last time they were in the same room Henry had been just a little older than Roland, now his head went over Robin’s hip. Sitting in the backseat, he’d shed the button up coat he’d worn on the plane – what was fit for a New York winter, was not fit for a California fall – and revealed his long-sleeved superhero-themed shirt. Robin would be lying if he said he didn’t feel a spark of pride when he saw the masked face of Batman on his chest. That had always been one of their favorites to read together whenever they’d talked over video chat.

“It looks like New York has been good for him,” he mused happily. “I’m glad it worked out for the two of you.”

Regina nodded her head at him. “I guess I have you to thank for that. I never would’ve gone if you hadn’t given me the push I needed.”

A cautious smile tugged on Robin’s lips at her words. He was truly happy that she’d found success in New York. From what he’d seen her decision to move there had been the right call. She had a good job, good friends and Henry appeared to be thriving. So why didn’t she seem happy?

Regina had been smiling at him, sure, but Robin knew her well enough to know when it was forced. The bright, elusive smile she had when she was truly happy was one of Robin’s favorite things about her and he hadn’t seen it once since she’d returned. The smiles she’d given him were restrained, calculated. They didn’t quite reach her eyes and they didn’t light up her face like her real ones. And of course there was the flash of pain he’d seen at the airport. He didn’t understand it. Her fashion show had gone well. The reviews were extremely positive; he’d been sure to read every one of them. And now she was on a business trip that doubled as an excuse to see old friends. With all of
those things turning out in her favor how could she still have a cloud over her head?

Regina sighed as she turned forward in her seat and checked the clock in the dashboard. “I forgot how far Ventura is from the airport. Do you think we’ll make it in time for check-in at the hotel?”

Robin nodded his head. “Yes we would… if that’s where we were headed.”

Regina narrowed her eyes at him. “It is where we’re headed, isn’t it?”

He turned to her with a sheepish smile. “It’s your first visit back in years. Do you really think I’m going to let you stay at a hotel? You’ll be so much more comfortable at the house with us.”

Regina threw her head back against her seat with a playful groan. “Robin I told you, I really don’t want to impose, especially on such short notice.”

“You wouldn’t be imposing!” he insisted. “I’ve been looking forward to showing you the house ever since you told me you were coming. I’ve got the guest room all set up. Just give me one night. I’ll even pay your cancellation fees at the hotel.”

Another calculated smile arose on her face as she snickered at his enthusiasm. “Well I suppose if you’re so desperate to show off your new home I could be gracious enough to give you one night.”

“You astound me with your generosity,” he replied sarcastically. Still he couldn’t hide the grin that showed up on his face when she agreed.

Xxxx

As they pulled up to Robin’s house Regina recalled the night that he’d sent her the photos of the old, decrepit structure he’d planned to buy. She remembered all the grimacing and wincing when she did as she watched the images on her laptop screen get more and more disturbing with every click. Even though she’d told Robin to buy the place anyway she still held a bit of apprehension as he went through his yearlong renovations. But now that she was here, looking upon the finished product, she knew that her doubts were misplaced.

The house looked gorgeous. It’s old rickety porch had been replaced by a sturdy front deck. She could see Roland’s toys scattered haphazardly across the green lawn as she stepped out of the car. The dying oak tree she’d seen in photographs still held bare branches but now she could see that it was due to the weather and not to poor care. The front of the house was truly transformed with a layer of forest green paint that was complemented by the maroon storm shutters attached to the hinges of the windows. She felt Robin walk over to her side with her suitcase in hand as she stared up at the house in awe.

“Do you like it?” he asked cautiously.

“It’s beautiful,” she said with a disbelieving shake of her head. “Better than I imagined.”

A proud smile grew on his face at her compliment but before he could get a word in he was pushed aside by his son who grabbed his godmother’s hand in excitement and began to pull her towards the front door.

“Wait ‘til you see my room! It’s the best one!” Roland declared excitedly.

With a smile Regina allowed herself to pulled along, not wanting to discourage his eagerness. Only pausing when he bent over to swipe the spare key from under the welcome mat Roland quickly guided Regina into the house and up the stairs, holding onto her hand the entire time. She barely
had a second to take in the lower level of the house as he led her through the living room and past the kitchen. It was quite a leap from the dull interior of the apartment she remembered so fondly. The same shade of green that characterized the outside of the house graced the walls on the inside. Most of the mismatched furniture that had been present in their old apartment was now replaced with a comfortable looking living room set with a sofa, recliner and love seat in a chocolate-colored fabric. The kitchen, or what little she saw of it, was equally beautiful. Like he’d said, Robin had redone the entire room. The old tilted cabinets were gone and in their place were ones made of shiny Cherrywood. She could tell it was the same wood he’d used on the railing on the stairs as Roland rushed to show her his room.

Once they reached the top of the stairs Roland led her to the room on the right side of the hall. At last, his room.

The walls were a bright, happy yellow covered by framed posters of popular children’s characters. Toys were everywhere in all shapes and sizes, scattered about the multicolored alphabetical rug. A tiny twin bed with a red frame was just beneath the window, with a blanket covered in fire engines over the mattress. Regina’s eyes fell to the floor, extra cautious of stepping on the action figures Roland had left out, as she made her way around the room. She sat on the edge of his bed as she excitedly went through his toy chest and showed her his favorite playthings. As he babbled on and on she found herself distracted by the frame on his nightstand. Inside lay a picture of him and his mother, it must’ve been taken when Roland was only a few weeks old. Staring down at Marian’s kind brown eyes and seeing their match in the excited little boy in front of her caused a smile to tug on Regina’s lips.

She would’ve loved this place.

When Robin convinced Regina to stay at the house with them he thought he’d be able to get more time alone with her. He didn’t count on being nudged out of the box by his own son. Roland had become truly enamored with his godmother in the few hours she’d been present. He’d hardly let go of her hand since they’d gotten home.

Through the sliding door he watched them – Roland, Regina and Henry – from his spot in the kitchen as they played in the backyard. Roland happily seated in his swing as Regina pushed him higher and higher while Henry, ever independent, swung on the seat beside him. Their laughter floated through the glass in the door to the counter where Robin prepared the hamburger patties for dinner. It was nice to hear.

He’d lowered his eyes back to the hamburgers in front of him when he heard the back door slide open. Henry slipped his way into the kitchen, his face still red from all his activity outside and his hair messy from the wind.

“Tired of being outside?” asked Robin, looking up from the counter.

Henry shrugged his shoulders in response. “A little. Can I make hamburger patties with you?”

“Sure. Just make sure you watch your hands first.”

A grin appeared on Henry’s face as he rushed over to the kitchen sink and Robin watched him with an equally happy smile as he ran his hands under the warm water. After making sure his hands were appropriately clean he went to stand by Robin’s side and without hesitation dipped his hand into the bowl of hamburger meat on the counter. His casual approach to the raw meat caused a shocked chuckle to fly from Robin’s throat.
“Wow,” he laughed. “Looks like this isn’t your first time handling beef.”

Henry sheepishly shrugged his shoulders. “Mom and Emma let me cook with them sometimes. I like it. It’s fun.”

“That’s good,” responded Robin. “Everyone needs to know how to cook. Otherwise no one would eat.”

Henry let out a tiny giggle at his joke and Robin joined in on the laughter. While they were in New York he’d missed Henry as much as he’d missed Regina. In a way he considered him as much a part of his family as Roland. He’d always put in effort to make sure that they stayed close over the years. Phone calls, skyping, sending Christmas and birthday presents. He never wanted Henry to forget that he was happy to be a part of his life.

As they rolled up hamburger patties for the grill Robin’s attention was split between his conversation with Henry and watching Roland and Regina outside. Moving on from the swing Roland slid down the plastic slide attached to it while Regina clapped to show off her enthusiasm. Her smile was brighter when she was with Roland but Robin could still see that she was holding something back. It made him desperately curious. If something was bothering her he wanted to know what it was.

“So how are things at home?” he asked Henry.

“Okay I guess,” replied Henry, focusing on the meat in his hands. “School’s fun. Last week we went on a field trip to the zoo.”

“That must’ve been interesting,” responded Robin. “And what about your mother? I heard you went to her fashion show. That must’ve been fun, right?”

Henry pressed his lips together at the mention of Regina’s show. “It was but…”

“But what?” questioned Robin, his curiosity piqued at Henry’s hesitancy.

“But she got sad after,” answered Henry with a sigh. “Really sad. Sometimes she’ll cry in her bathroom where she thinks I can’t hear… but I do.”

Robin could see worry grow in Henry’s eyes and he could feel it do the same in his gut. His desire to know more doubled with every second.

“Do you know why she was so upset?” he asked gently.

“No,” said Henry shaking his head. “I asked Aunt Snow but she only said that Mom’s heart hurts and that’s why she was sad.”

*Her heart hurts*, Robin mused silently. A bad break-up maybe? No, if she had been seeing someone she would’ve told him about that. Then again, he hadn’t exactly told her about the date he’d had… at all. Perhaps there had been some… person she’d been seeing. A thought that made Robin irrationally upset given that it had ended with his friend in tears. He watched her run around the backyard trying to keep up with Roland. It made no sense to him though. Regina was smart, generous, tough and, if he was being perfectly honest, a total knockout. What man would dare to break her heart?

XXXXXXXXX

That night Regina sat through what felt like one of the longest dinners of her life. Robin had grilled
hamburgers for her and the boys and as they sat to eat she couldn’t help but sense the weight of his gaze on her. It was heavier than usual, full of unspoken questions that for some reason he wouldn’t speak aloud. The entire time she wondered if her mask was more transparent than she hoped. It led to her upping the ante, smiling just a little too hard, laughing just a little too much. She knew he saw right through her. She’d slunk upstairs not long afterwards, claiming a shower was long overdue after a day of traveling.

She stood in the shower now, letting the warm water run over her shoulders and back, hoping it would soothe an ache that wasn’t anything close to physical. She didn’t know if she could keep this up. The funeral was tomorrow and she’d told Robin she’d be spending the day in meetings for Mal. If she was barely holding it together now, she could only imagine how transparent she’d be after burying her father. Just the thought of it was enough to force a shaky sob from her throat. She took a long breath to try and swallow her heartache before stepping out of the shower.

Wrapping a towel around herself, she glanced at the sink counter where she’d left her cell phone. A quick tap showed that it was half-past eight. She should be getting Henry ready for bed. Quickly drying her hair and slipping on her pajamas, a pair of yoga pants and plain white t-shirt, she made her way out of the bathroom and towards Roland’s bedroom. To her surprise she found both Henry and Roland curled up in sleeping bags on the floor, sleeping soundly as a Disney movie played on the iPad nestled between them.

She heard Robin’s approaching footsteps and it wasn’t long before she felt the warmth of his chest against her back.

“Didn’t account for the time difference did you?” he whispered.

A soft chuckle escaped her before she shook her head. “No I did not.”

It might’ve been only eight-thirty in California but on Henry’s internal clock it was already half-past eleven. No wonder he’d knocked out so quickly. Roland had no doubt followed his lead.

As careful as could be, she tiptoed between them and gently lifted the iPad from the floor. “Solid investment,” she whispered to herself smugly, as she tapped the power button.

Robin smiled at her as she made her way back toward the door. “Now that the kids are down, how would you like a glass of the best apple cider you’ve ever tasted?”

She arched an eyebrow at him. “From Granny?”

“No one makes it better,” he replied cheekily.

Regina hummed in agreement. “I always did love her cider,” she said with a smile. “Count me in.”

They headed downstairs to the kitchen where Robin pulled a quart-sized mason jar filled with cider from the fridge. He clicked his tongue as he held it up to her. “I got this from her the day after you told me you were coming back.”

“That’s sweet,” she said softly. “It’s nice to know you still keep track of my favorite foods.”

A little red flowed into his cheeks as he sheepishly shrugged his shoulders. “Well apples were always high on the list.”

Pulling two mugs out from the cabinet next to the stove he poured them both a cup of cider and set their mugs into the microwave. The scent of apples and cinnamon began to fill the kitchen as their drinks heated up. Regina leaned against the black marble counter of the kitchen island happily
breathing it in. She loved apple cider, especially Granny’s. In fact, apples had always been her go
to comfort food. It didn’t matter whether they came in the form of a pie, a pastry or cider, they
never failed to lift her spirits.

Robin handed her the warm cider once it’s time in the microwave was up. It’s heated ceramic mug
warmed up the palms of her hands as she cautiously blew over her beverage before taking a sip.
She hummed in satisfaction as the cider went down her throat.

“Just as good as I remember,” she said with a smile.

Robin nodded in agreement before taking a sip from his own mug. She watched him from her spot
against the counter and anxiously tapped her finger against the mug in her hands. It wasn’t like this
was her first time lying to him, it was just the first time it was this damn hard. She hadn’t wanted to
tell him a secret this badly since Marian’s pregnancy. It was eating her alive.

She cleared her throat trying to force the guilt from her head. “So… how are things at the Drunken
Monk?”

“Good,” Robin answered automatically. “I mean it’s been a little difficult breaking in the new
crew, especially now that Lani’s gone. Kind of feel like I’ve lost my right hand there.”

“I still can’t believe she’s a police officer now,” said Regina shaking her head. “Trading in her
waitress apron for a badge and gun.”

“I couldn’t believe it at first either but it makes sense for her. And I’d be lying if I didn’t say I sleep
better at night knowing her stern eyes are watching over the city.”

A chuckle rose from the back of her throat at the thought of the stern looks Lani used to give them
all at the bar. “If anyone could keep the criminals in line I guess I’d have to put my money on her.”

Robin sighed before setting his mug down on the counter. “What about you? Anything new in your
life?”

“Not really.” The lies felt sharp tacks as she forced them out of her mouth. “Just still reeling from
the show.”

She saw Robin narrow his eyes at her as he folded his arms across his chest. His motions made her
throat grow tight. He didn’t believe her. She brought her mug up to her lips in attempt to avoid his
gaze.

“Have you been… seeing anyone lately?”

His question nearly caused her to choke on her cider. “Seeing someone?” she repeated, giving him
a quizzical look.

“Yeah…” he drawled. “Just wondering if you’ve been dating recently?”

Her jaw dropped as she narrowed her eye at him and embarrassed snort flew from her nose. “Not at
all.”

“Not at all?” questioned Robin, raising his eyebrows at her. “Really?”

“No,” she replied forcefully. “Robin when would I even have the time for it? Between Henry and
work I barely have enough energy for Netflix and tea.”
It was her turn to cross her arms as she took in Robin’s reaction, the way his eyes began searching her face for a flicker of deception. She hoped he would see none. “Why are you asking?”

“Just curious,” he mumbled. “I’m sure you’ve attracted some attention during your time in New York. Just wanted to make sure it was coming from the right people.”

She scoffed at him before dropping her gaze back down to her cider. “Trust me you don’t have to worry about that.”

He watched her tapping the side of her tea as she frowned and he saw the storm pass over her eyes once more. The same one she’d been trying to keep hidden ever since her plane landed. After a moment’s hesitation he said the four words he’d been dying to let out since he first saw her.

“Regina… are you alright?”

Her eyes flashed up to his face. “What?”

“What?” he repeated. “Are you alright?” His voice grew serious as he trapped her in his gaze making it impossible for her to look away. “Ever since you got here I feel like… I don’t know you’re holding something back from me. Something that you’re unhappy about.”

Damn it. Turns out her mask was as transparent as she’d expected. Still she tried to keep up her act. She gave her head a little shake trying to force a smile to her lips. “Robin… that’s just… not true.”

Her heartbeat began to echo in her ears as her face grew red. She couldn’t let him know the truth. He can never know the truth. She repeated that sentence in her head over and over trying to keep from cracking as her stared at her with concern in his eyes.

Robin took a step closer to her and suddenly the kitchen felt ten times smaller. “I spoke to Henry,” he whispered. Henry? “He said you’ve been crying in the bathroom where you think he can’t hear.”

She bit down on her lip to keep the gasp in her throat from escaping. Oh god. She’d been trying so hard to keep Henry ignorant of her misery the knowledge that she’d failed made her want to burst in tears. Her little boy shouldn’t have to hear her cry. Unable to keep her mask up any longer she turned away from Robin not wanting him to see her distress.

“Regina… what’s going on?” he asked gently. “Is it… a man?”

“No!” she replied fiercely. “It’s not a man!”

“But it is something?” said Robin, quickly picking up on her word choice.

She ran her fingers through her hair as she tried to swallow her anxiety. The light above her now seemed blindingly bright, making her feel like she was in an interrogation room at the local police station. Her shoulders suddenly felt heavy as seven years of secrecy began to weigh down on her all at once. She had to remind herself to breathe.

He can never know the truth.

Her arms went rigid as she felt him comfortingly place his hands on top of her shoulders. “Regina… you can tell me.”

“No I can’t. I really can’t.” Her voice shook even as she tried to put all her power into it.
“Why?” he asked desperately. “Why can’t you tell me?”

“Because… you’d never look at me the same way,” she whispered brokenly. “And I just… I can’t have that.”

His hands left her shoulders then and she mourned their loss until she saw him walk in front of her. Before she could stop herself she looked into his blue eyes and was overwhelmed by the amount of concern and sincerity she saw in them. His hands slipped over hers and instead of letting go she began to grip them tighter.

*He can never know the truth.*

“Regina… do you remember how I was after Marian. I was drunk. I was miserable. And… I was a terrible father. It’s been a long time since then and I’ve gotten better, mostly due to you but I want you to remember that you’ve seen me at my absolute worst and you still found a way to help me. All I want is the chance to do the same for you.”

Tears began to well up in her eyes as he brought up their history together. She pressed her lips together mostly to keep her chin from trembling but also to keep the truth from escaping.

“Regina there is nothing that you could say or admit that would make me see you as less than what you are right now. So please… just tell me what has made you so upset.”

At that moment staring into his eyes, gripping his hands and trying to hold back everything she’d been determined to keep hidden… Regina felt herself grow weak.

*He can never know the truth.*

No.

*He has to know the truth.*

She trusted Robin. She trusted him more than anyone. He was her friend and he was beseeching her for the truth. What else could she do but give it to him?

Her chin trembled as she opened her mouth to speak. “I… I’m not here on a business trip.”

Robin nodded his head encouraging her to continue.

“I’m here… for a funeral. My father’s,” she finished softly.

“Your father’s?” breathed Robin. “But I thought you said your parents died when you were a child.”

Regina’s eyes dropped to the floor as her chest began to grow tight with anxiety. “I lied,” she admitted. “About both of them. About everything in my past.”

She both felt and saw Robin go rigid at her admission. His eyebrows knitted together in confusion as he stared down at her. “What do you mean everything?”

She both felt and saw Robin go rigid at her admission. His eyebrows knitted together in confusion as he stared down at her. “What do you mean everything?”

“I mean… everything up until the day I met you,” she answered tearfully. She took a deep breath working up the courage to continue, to admit the truth she’d kept hidden for so long.

“My real name isn’t Regina Gardiner… it’s Regina Mills.”
Standing in the kitchen across from Robin having spoken the words she’d promised never to utter Regina felt a ten-pound weight of guilt lift off her chest. Unfortunately, it was immediately replaced by the fifty-pounds of uncertainty that now pressed down on her shoulders. The truth, well some of the truth, was out. Like the scent of their fresh cider it was now seeping into the air between them causing it to go thick with tension as she tried to gauge his reaction. Would he be angry, or sad, or comforting? As she looked into his eyes searching for an answer she found none of the above. Instead the first thing she could she flashing in his blue eyes was confusion. And then, doubt.

“Wait…” he said, slipping his fingers from hers. “You… you’ve been lying to me? To everyone we know?”

His voice dripped with shock and it fell over Regina like hail, bruising her with its impact. Her fingers twitched as they fell to the kitchen counter, searching for the support he’d just pulled away from her.

“I did it because I had to,” she said, staring up at him with pleading eyes. “I was doing it to protect Henry and myself.”

“From what?” The question came out as barely more than a whisper.

“My mother,” she breathed. “I’ve been running from her since before I met you.”

“Why?”

“Because she’s cruel… and cold,” said Regina, her voice wavering. “And the thought of going back to her… terrifies me.”

Robin took a deep breath before nodding his head understandingly. “Who is she?”

Regina hesitated before answering him. “Her name is Cora Mills.”

“Cora Mills?” he repeated Robin. He said the name as if he’d heard it once before. Suddenly a spark recognition shone behind his eyes. “The CEO of Molinari Hotels? That’s your mother?”

“Yes,” she whispered with a nod. It unsurprising that he knew of her. Her mother’s face had been plastered across the news in the days since her father’s passing. According to the papers she was devastated over the death of her beloved husband but Regina doubted that was true. If anything her mother was relieved she was no longer forced to have him around for appearances.

She saw Robin press his lips together in anger. “So what does that make you? A millionaire?”

Regina bit her lip as her eyes dropped down to the counter. “That’s… not important.”

“Oh I beg to differ,” he seethed. With one look Regina could tell how much he was trying to hold back from her in his effort to be understanding. His hands, which less than a minute ago had been holding her so comfortingly, were now placed at the crooks of his elbows as he folded his arms across his chest defensively. His eyes were hard and his jaw was clenched as well. He looked as if he could explode at any minute. “You were homeless when we met. Marian found you in the winter, living on playground with Henry and now you’re telling me you could’ve gone home to your wealthy parents any time you wanted!”
“It’s not that simple!” she gritted out. A tear ran down her cheek as frustration began to build inside her. “I was scared! If I went back to them I would’ve lost everything! Including Henry!”

“How? How would you have lost him?” questioned Robin, desperate to understand her reasoning.

“She would’ve stolen him from me,” she explained. “I wasn’t married when Henry was born and his father, Daniel, worked for us as a gardener. My mother said that his birth would be an embarrassment for the family so… she hid him away. No one knew about him except my parents.”

“And you just let her hide him?”

“It was my only option!” she whispered fiercely. “Before that she was going to drag me to the nearest clinic against my will! I didn’t care if it was a secret. I just wanted to keep my baby.” Her voice cracked with desperation as she internally prayed for Robin to understand.

“So you had him in secret…”

“Yes,” she sighed. “And I did everything I could to keep her happy so she wouldn’t take it out on him. I worked for her. I smiled for every event. I flirted with every man she pushed in my path, just hoping that it would be enough to keep Henry safe. And it worked… for a while.”

She pressed her lips together nervously before continuing.

“When Henry was a few months old, I met a man at a charity ball. He was rich, powerful and decades older than me. I caught his eye.” Her voice cracked with emotion as she remembered the touch of Leo’s hands on her skin, and the feeling of his eyes on her body. It still made a shiver run down her spine. “He wanted me to be his trophy wife so he offered my mother investment money but only if I would marry him… she agreed. She sold me to him.”

“That’s… disgusting,” said Robin shaking his head in disbelief. “Why didn’t you just leave? The right way I mean.”

“Robin it wasn’t as if I could just walk out,” she said desperately. “She had armed guards surrounding me at all times! I had no money, nowhere to go or hide. And if I ran and she caught me I would lose my son forever! She promised me that! I was trapped. And I honestly thought I was going to be trapped for the rest of my life. Please… believe me.”

And he did. Her story was incredible and unfathomable and yet he couldn’t dispute it if he tried. Seeing the way her body shivered and hearing how her voice cracked told him that every word she was saying was the truth. It softened him to her plight but not enough to comfort her. Not yet at least. He sighed as he brought his hands down to grip the edge of the counter. “I believe you,” he whispered. “But if this is true, how did you escape and become… Regina Gardiner?”

“My father, Henry,” she said with a shaky breath. It was the first time she’d spoken his name since his death. “He had never… been a strong man, especially when it came to my mother but when he heard of my… engagement” – she spat the word out as if it was poison – “he knew he had to act. I don’t know how but he got fake ids and social security numbers for me and Henry. Gave me a couple hundred dollars and told me I had to leave as soon as possible and he would buy time for me to get away from my mother for good. So as soon as I had my chance I ran away from my guards and got on a bus to Santa Barbara with Henry. That’s how we ended up on the playground.”

“And then Marian found you,” finished Robin.

Regina nodded her head. “Felt like the first stroke of luck I’d had in years. And after that I stuck to my cover story because I didn’t want to drag you guys into this if someone came around looking
“Wow,” said Robin breathlessly.

Regina’s eyes dropped down to her feet as she began to grip the kitchen counter anxiously. “Are you… angry with me?”

“Am I allowed to be?”

Her eyes flashed up to his face in confusion. “What?”

Robin stared at her confusion coloring every inch of his face. “You just told me that you’ve been lying to me for years. That I’ve hired you, worked with you… confessed to you, made you my son’s godmother and the entire time I didn’t even know what your real name was. That… hurts.”

Glass shards went through Regina’s heart at his words. Hurting Robin was something that she’d never wanted to do.

“But also…” he continued. “You told me about your pain and your fears. How much you’ve had to carry and how much you’ve had to overcome for Henry and yourself and suddenly it seems like my pain is just inconsequential.”

“That’s not how I want you feel,” Regina insisted softly. “I know that this is a lot to take in and I really didn’t want to burden you but… you asked.”

“I did,” he whispered. “I asked you for the truth but I never expected this. I don’t know how I’m supposed to feel about all of this.”

He stared at her from across the counter. She seemed so small then, nervously pressing her lips together as she awaited his reaction. Lines on her cheeks glistened where her tears had fallen from her eyes down to her chin. She’d folded her across her chest and at any other time such a gesture would be purely defensive, but now it just seemed like a desperate attempt to hold herself together.

Robin wanted to comfort her, he really did but something inside him wouldn’t allow it. Perhaps it was pride. Or more likely hurt.

“I think I’m just going to need some time to wrap my head around this,” he said stoically.

Though it broke her heart Regina nodded her head. “I understand.”

“And of course you going to funeral is out of the question.”

Her eyes whipped up to his. She tilted her head as she looked up at him with imploring eyes, silently begging him to understand. “Robin… I have to go.”

“No you don’t,” he growled as he leveled her with a harsh stare.

“This is not up for discussion Robin.” Every syllable of her words were sharp as if daring him to fight them. And of course he dared.

“Like hell it isn’t,” he hissed. “You have just spent the last ten minutes explaining to me how dangerous it is for you to go anywhere near your mother. If one word of that is true, then this funeral is the last place you should be going!”

“Don’t you think I know that?” replied Regina forcefully. “You don’t think I’ve tried to talk myself out of it every minute since I’ve learned he died? I know going there is a ludicrous decision
“But what?” he demanded.

“It’s my father!” she declared. “I loved him! He’s the only reason I even escaped in the first place.”

“And risking yourself seems like pretty piss poor way to repay him now doesn’t it?” Robin harshly replied.

“I owe it to him to be there,” she said, her voice growing firm as the guilt became replaced with self-righteousness. “I deserve the chance to say goodbye to my father! I won’t miss my last opportunity to do so!”

Robin sucked in a breath as he raised his hands to her in a pleading gesture and tried to speak to her as calmly as he could. “Regina… I understand that this is important to you but…”

“No Robin you don’t understand!” she said, cutting him off. Her back straightened as a fire began to light behind her eyes. “She’s already taken my home! She’s already taken my freedom, my honesty, my name! All I want is to say goodbye to my father! How am I supposed to live with myself knowing I let her take that from me as well?”

“And how am I supposed to live knowing I let you take this risk?” shot back Robin, his patience worn down to its barest bones. “What if you get caught there?”

“That won’t happen.”

“But what if it does?”

“It won’t!” she said raising her voice. “I know the risk that I’m taking here but I can’t let this pass. I’m going to the funeral. And there’s nothing you can say to change my mind.”

Tension quickly filled the air as they glared at each other, separated by the marble counter between them. Time moved at a glacial pace as they remained locked in eye contact silently having a conversation that would reach no resolution. Him, angrily begging her to reconsider and her, stubbornly refusing to change her mind. Regina was the first to break contact, her eyes falling to the long forgotten mugs of cider on the counter.

“I’m tired,” she sighed. She ran her fingers through her hair as she closed her eyes in exhaustion. “I can’t talk about this anymore. I don’t want to. I just – I want to sleep.”

She didn’t even wait for his response before shuffling tiredly toward the stairs. She could feel his eyes on her back but she couldn’t find it in her to care. It had been the longest, most emotionally exhaustive day of her life. All she wanted to do now was knock back a sleeping pill, fall into bed and pray that Robin found it in his heart to forgive her before slipping into a black, dreamless slumber.

XXXXXXXX

Robin stayed in the kitchen long after Regina went upstairs. He remained rooted in place by absolute disbelief over what just happened. Less than twenty-four hours ago he’d stood in that very same spot feeling optimism and excitement over the prospect of welcoming an old friend into his home. Now that very friend had shattered his trust at his own request for the truth.

Regina Mills.
It felt strange to even think.

Unsure how to even move on from what he’d just discovered Robin did the only thing he could do. He cleaned up their mugs.

The cider had long since reached room temperature and was therefore undrinkable. A twinge of disappointment went through him as he realized they’d barely taken three sips of it before… everything had come out. What a waste.

As he poured the cider down the drain his eyes flickered over to the kitchen cabinet. The door remained closed but, as if he had x-ray vision, his gaze dropped down to the second shelf up from the floor. On that shelf, blocked by a half-empty sack of potatoes, sat a bottle of fifty-dollar Napa Valley red wine. Given him to by his realtor when he’d first moved into his house, it had remained there, unopened, for over a year. He’d never been tempted to open it. Wine wasn’t his first choice in drinks anyway but tonight, after all he’d learned, he’d be lying if he said he wasn’t hyperaware that the only thing standing between him and the sweet bliss of alcohol was a cabinet door and a cork. His heart began to speed up as he imagined, just for minute, what it might be like to take even a sip. To have his troubles suddenly seem that much further away.

He let the mug in his hand drop into the sink as he shut his eyes and sucked a rush of air in through his nose.

Roland.

Marian.

Me.

Roland.

Marian.

Me.

He chanted the names in his head over and over again in his head. The names of three people he never wanted to disappoint again. His son, his deceased wife and himself. Taking even a sip of that wine would be breaking the promise he’d made to all three of them to be better than he once was. Normally, the name of a certain raven-haired beauty would also be on the list, but he couldn’t handle the thought of her. Not at this moment. Luckily he didn’t need to. The reminder of the promise he’d made to his family was enough to conquer his urges for the night.

He left the kitchen quickly after that.

As he made his way to his bedroom, he decided to check in the boys. They were stilled curled up in their sleeping bags in Roland’s room, blissfully unaware of the revelations that had just taken place downstairs, the glow of Roland’s night light shining on them from the corner of the room. Henry, if that was even still his name, snored peacefully by Roland’s side, drool rolling onto the pillow beneath his head. As Robin watched him another round of sorrow grew in his chest. He’d known Henry since he was a baby. Watched him grow, watched him learn to walk and speak. What did those memories mean now that he knew they’d all taken place under false pretenses? What changed?

Nothing, he realized. Nothing at all.

He didn’t know just how he felt about Regina yet. If he could forgive her or if he even needed to
but he did know that he still loved Henry. He always would. Nothing could ever change that.

As quietly as he could he shut the door to Roland’s room and continued down the hall to his own. His heart skipped a beat as he neared the guest room and saw the light from inside glow from the crack underneath the door. She was still awake. Robin’s pace slowed to a stop as he reached the point in front of the door. Should he knock? Did he want to? He did.

There were still so many questions he’d wanted to ask, so many answers he felt he deserved but all he could think about was the look on her face as she’d shuffled up the stairs to bed. So tired and drained. He supposed his questions could wait for another day. He walked past her door and continued to his bedroom.

Once inside he shut the door behind him and headed straight to closet to grab his pajama pants. He would take a shower in the morning. He didn’t think he had the energy tonight. As soon as he slipped his shirt off and his pajama pants on he slipped into bed fully intending to head to sleep. But then his eyes fell to the top of his dresser where his laptop sat.

He really shouldn’t… but he would.

In a flash he threw back his comforter, headed over to the dresser and snatched up his laptop. He flipped it open and waited for it to power up with bated breath. Just one cursory internet search. Just to satisfy his curiosity.

He let out a guilty sigh when his screensaver popped up and a picture of Marian with baby Roland appeared. He wondered if she would approve of his current method of truth seeking. Probably not.

His cursor blinked at the bottom of his screen as it hovered over the icon of his web browser. Hesitation froze his hand in place as his mind raced with all the memories of Marian and Regina together. They’d always been rather close, even when they’d barely known each other. So very close…

**Had she known?**

The question popped into his head before he could stop it. Had Marian known the truth about Regina? Did she keep it from him? They had always been close, practically sisters some would say. Especially during Marian’s pregnancy. It’s certainly plausible that Regina had chosen to reveal the truth to her at some point. But if she had Marian would’ve told him. Right?

He let out a frustrated breath as he removed his hand from the keypad and shutdown his laptop. Speculation would get him nowhere. The true answer to a question like this could only come from the source. He placed his laptop on nightstand and returned to bed.

There was one thing he knew for certain. If Marian were alive and if she did find out the truth about Regina, she’d find some way to support her no matter how she felt. And of course she’d expect the same from him.

XXXXX

The next morning, Regina awoke in Robin’s bedroom to the company of a grinding headache pulsing beneath her skull. She gritted her teeth as she forced her eyes open to face the blinding light of the morning sun. The night clearly hadn’t treated her well. Instead of the dreamless sleep she had prayed for she’d been plagued with visions of her threatening mother, her dying father and an increasingly betrayed Robin. She could tell by the way her blankets were twisted up around her legs, that her attempts to escape them had made their way past the dreamscape.
She groaned as she sat up in bed, pressing a hand to her forehead. Her mouth felt dryer than desert sand and the light streaming in from the window was doing nothing for her headache. She shuffled over to the guest bathroom and turned on the sink. As she loaded up her toothbrush with toothpaste the events of the night before began playing in her head on a loop.

Robin knew the truth now. She’d told him everything about her father and her mother. Now there was no going back. As she brushed her teeth she could feel herself begin to obsess over every detail of his reaction. The memory of the look in his eyes as she’d revealed how long she’d lying to him. The frustration behind his words as he tried to convince her not to go to the funeral. He’d been concerned and Regina couldn’t help but feel a little glad about that. If he was concerned, then he still cared. And that meant she hadn’t lost him. Not completely at least.

After spitting out the last of her toothpaste, she shuffled back over to the nightstand next to her bed to check her phone. Her eyes widened when she saw that it was ten-thirty. Henry must’ve been awake for hours now. Yet it was so quiet.

She quickly exited the room in search of her son. Her heart skipped a beat when she crossed the hallway to Roland’s room and found it empty. Only after reminding herself that the boys were most likely with Robin was she able to calm down.

She felt her heartbeat speed up as she made her way downstairs expecting to find Robin and the boys waiting for her. She wondered just what Robin’s reaction would be to seeing her after last night. Would a good night’s rest have made him more understanding? Or would 12 hours of stewing over her betrayal make him pricklier than ever? It seems her question would go unanswered. She found the first floor of the house just as empty as the one above it. No Robin or boys in sight.

She sighed when she found a note in Robin’s blunt handwriting waiting for her on a legal pad on the kitchen counter.

TOOK THE BOYS OUT FOR BREAKFAST. THEY’LL BE SPENDING THE DAY AT THE ZOO.

“Of course,” she grumbled, shaking her head at the note. He didn’t want to see her. She didn’t even blame him for it.

The silence of the house began to weigh down on her as she stood alone in the kitchen. She considered eating breakfast but couldn’t find her appetite. Her eyes flickered to clock above the stove. The funeral would be starting in less than two hours. She should start getting ready.

Back in the guest room she dug through her suitcase and pulled out the plain black dress she’d buried underneath the rest of her vacation clothes. As if hiding it would make it less real. It might as well have been made of two tons of iron as she slipped it over her shoulders. As soon as she zipped it up she wanted nothing more than to take it off. Tears filled her eyes as she examined it in the mirror. It reminded her of another black dress she’d worn to Marian’s funeral so long ago. She’d never longed for the comfort of her best friend more than she did today. To have Marian here to hold her hand and convince her that she was making the right choice by attending this funeral would’ve made the day that much easier. Instead she had the silence of an empty house and the weight of unrelenting guilt pressing down on her shoulders.

She let out a shaky breath as she turned away from the mirror and back to her suitcase. Reaching inside she pulled out a shoulder-length light brunette wig, a cast off from the year Henry had wanted to be Thor for Halloween and he insisted that she go along as Jane Foster. Tucking her own hair beneath it, she gently situated the wig on her head with a groan. She ran her brush over it a few
times to get the strands in place. Her lips pulled into a frown as she eyed herself in the mirror. Brown certainly wasn’t her color but the wig looked believable enough. Hopefully once paired with her sunglasses it would be enough to throw her mother off her scent.

With one last look in the mirror she made her way downstairs to the kitchen again. In all the excitement from the day before she hadn’t able to make it to the rental car dealership. Without a car of her own she’d have to call a cab to take her to father’s funeral. It was not ideal, considering she’d rather have the ability to leave whenever she wanted as quickly as possible, but it was her only option. She knew Robin always kept the number to a cab service in his kitchen drawers. That might’ve changed over the years but it was still worth a look.

When she reached the bottom of the stairs she was surprised to find Robin waiting for her in the living room. She hadn’t even heard him come in.

He stood when she entered the room, rising from his spot on the living room couch to catch her in his uncertain gaze. Her heart clenched as they locked eyes. She could no longer see the anger that was so obvious in his eyes last night. Today it was replaced with a heavy concern, that despite her best efforts to keep her expectations low, caused her heart to soar in the hopes that he still cared.

Her eyes moved on from his face and widened when they took in his outfit. A plain black suit. Unsure of what to say to him she blurted out the first thing that came to mind. “You’re wearing a suit?”

“You’re wearing a wig?” he retorted quizzically.

Her hands flew up to the ends of her chocolate-colored wig. “I thought it might help me keep a low profile,” she mumbled. “Where are the boys?”

“I dropped them off at the zoo with Hook and Lani,” he answered, tugging on his black tie uncomfortably. “After that I swung by Macy’s to pick up this suit.”

“Why?”

“For the funeral,” he said like it was the most obvious thing in the world. “Did you really think after everything you’ve told me that I’d let you go by yourself?”

“Robin…” she sighed, stepping closer to him. “You don’t have to come with me. I know that I’m now your favorite person right now.”

“Just because you’re not my favorite person doesn’t mean you’re no longer important to me,” he whispered sincerely. “You might not be Regina Gardiner to me anymore but you’re still the woman who stood next to me as I buried my wife. And I still want to be there for you as you do the same with your father.”

Regina felt her eyes begin to fill up with tears. She didn’t know what to say.

“Whatever I feel about what you’ve done doesn’t matter today,” said Robin. “You need me. So I’m here.”

Regina nodded her head gratefully, choking down the sobs that threatened to escape her.

“Thank you,” she choked out.

The day had barely begun and she knew it wouldn’t be an easy one. She knew going to bury her
father would be the riskiest and most emotional thing she’d ever do. But now, thanks to Robin, she also knew that she wouldn’t be doing it alone.
FOURTEEN YEARS AGO

The florescent lights above shined down on the tile floors as Regina made her way down the hospital hallway. Her pleated skirt bounced rhythmically against her tight-adorned thighs as she cantered in the direction of her father’s room. In her haste to check on his condition she hadn’t even changed out of her school uniform. Despite the fact that her father was having major surgery Cora had still insisted that she attend school that day, claiming that such a luxurious education couldn’t be squandered. Cora herself had chosen to continue working as well, hopping aboard a plane to Berlin rather than coming to the hospital to be by her husband’s side.

Regina tried to push the thoughts of her mother out of head as she rounded the corner and immediately spotted her father’s hospital room. Light shined in through the blinds as she found her father in his hospital bed eating red Jello as if he hadn’t just been through a four-hour surgery that morning. He smiled at her as she cautiously made her way into the room.

“Hope you don’t mind but started on the Jello without you,” he said jovially. “Turns out going nearly a whole day without eating can make you quite hungry.”

She sent him a cautious smile. “No daddy I don’t mind.”

She tossed her backpack onto the pleather couch beside the door and slipped off her school blazer before scooping up the bowl of Jello her father had placed next to his own on the tray attached to his hospital bed. It had always been a strange tradition of theirs. Jello at the hospital. No matter what reason had brought them there her father had always made sure they take a visit to the hospital cafeteria for a round of red Jello. Just a little bit of sunshine to break through the gloom.

Seated in the arm chair next to his hospital bed, Regina twirled the spoon in her hand absentmindedly as she regarded her father with cautious eyes. “How are you feeling?”

“Better than before,” answered her father softly. “The doctors say my body isn’t rejecting the liver which is good. After we hire the private nurse I should be back home in a few days.”

“Good,” she answered softly. She turned her attention back to her Jello but couldn’t seem to find her appetite.

Henry tilted his head as he gave her a concerned look. “Regina what’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” she muttered with a shrug of her shoulders.

“I’m your father dear. I think I’ve spent enough time with you to know when something is bothering you.”

She sighed before setting down Jello and shaking her head. “It’s just that you’ve been sick so much lately. I’m worried.”

“It’s just a side effect of getting old sweetieheart,” said her father nonchalantly. “My body just can’t take things like it used to. I’m just going through a rough patch.”

She pressed her lips together anxiously before asking her next question. “Daddy… are you dying?”

Henry let out a nervous breath as he looked into his daughter’s fearful eyes and lifted his
shoulders apologetically. “Well, my dear, if you believe the doctors I’ve been dying since the day I was born. I’ve never been particularly healthy you know that.”

“I mean are you dying now?” she asked anxiously leaning forward in her seat.

Henry sadly shook his head at her. He’d hoped to avoid this conversation with her. “No sweetheart I’m not… but I will be someday. And sadly I can guarantee you it’ll come sooner than either of us would like.”

Regina nodded her head solemnly. It wasn’t the answer she wanted but it was one she could accept for now. “Are you afraid?”

He raised his eyebrows at her. “Of dying?”

She nodded.

He let out a breath and shrugged his shoulders. “No more than anyone else I suppose. No one really wants to go Regina.” He reached over and grasped her hand lovingly. “Especially when they have something as special as you to leave behind but unfortunately death is something that will happen to all of us. The best you can hope for is not to face it alone.”

Regina squeezed his hand appreciatively. In that moment she made a promise to herself. A promise that no matter when or where it happened her father would not be alone in his final moments. She didn’t know it then but it was a promise that she would be unable to keep.

XXXXX

PRESENT DAY

Regina had to remind herself to breathe as she sat in the passenger seat of Robin’s jeep, staring out the window to the church where her father’s funeral was being held. People were just beginning to arrive and she found herself a little daunted by how many of them had shown up. Her father had never had very many friends, so that had to be her mother’s doing. She wondered just how many of these people were capable of recognizing her. Her knees subtly began to shake as she took in the numbers of cars and people that were beginning to swarm around.

She felt Robin gently place his hand on her shoulder and her knees began to still.

“It’s not too late to drive away,” he calmly suggested.

She shook her head. “No I need to go in. I want to. I just didn’t expect so many people.”

Robin sighed as he observed the outside of the church. Nearly a dozen town cars were parked outside on the street and half as many limousines were prepared to follow their lead. Groups had already begun to congregate on the lawn before heading into the church.

“No this is good,” said Robin, nodding his head gamely. “The more people there are the easier it’ll be for you to blend into the crowd.”

“What if someone recognizes me?”

“Well do you recognize any of them?”

She shook her head. “Not really.”

Regina blew out a nervous breath as she narrowed her eyes at the church lawn. She knew a few
faces, obviously, but none of them really stuck out in her mind as important. Just as she’d suspected most of them were investors and business partners of her mothers. Probably there out of professional courtesy.

She nervously turned back to Robin. “I think the wig and sunglasses should be enough to throw them off.”

With shaking hands, she slipped on an old pair of Ray-Bans hoping they would provide her with the anonymity that she so desired. She swallowed hard as she gave herself another look in the rearview mirror. She was actually doing this. Sneaking into her father’s funeral while in disguise. She couldn’t believe this was what she had stoop to in order to say goodbye to him.

“Are you ready?” asked Robin.

She exhaled shakily. “No but if I waited until I was ready I’d never go in.”

She opened the car door and stepped one foot out onto the parking lot pavement. The gravel crunched under her feet and for a split second she considered jumping back inside the car and begging Robin to whisk her far away. She had no doubt that he’d agree but it was her decision to be here and she was determined to see it through. So she shut the car door behind her and stared down the church as if she going into battle. In a way, she felt like she was.

She tried to relax as she felt Robin walk up beside her.

“I’ll be next to you the entire time,” he promised, supportively offering her his arm.

She nodded at him as she placed her hand around the crook of his elbow, gripping it for dear life. “Okay, let’s go.”

He placed his hand atop hers comfortingly before they began steadily making their way to the church.

XXXXX

Snow had never been a fan of funerals. She supposed no one was but she really didn’t understand the appeal of having one. To have everyone show up in their blackest outfits and cry around a corpse hardly seemed an appropriate way to appreciate someone’s memory. Yet here she was in her most demure black cocktail dress and blazer fiddling with the strap of her purse as she waited for Henry Mills’ funeral to begin.

Seated next to the bar counter, absentmindedly swirling the ice cubes in her water Snow looked out among the crowd in the reception area just outside the sanctuary doors. It was a much larger turnout than she expected. Regina had always said that her father wasn’t much of a people person. She’d only met the old man twice before Regina had run off with Henry. There wasn’t much that she could say about him from her own experience but she knew from Regina that he’d loved his daughter and his grandson more than anything. And since neither of them could be present today Snow had decided to show up in their place. It was an impulsive decision but one she didn’t think would yield any negative consequences. Not even if it meant facing the architect of her friend’s misery. She’d yet to see Cora and was hopeful things would stay that way.

People were beginning to file into the church for the ceremony and Snow leaned against the bar, letting her eyes roam the crowd. Despite being only two in a dozen a young couple caught her attention as they walked through the church doors. A blonde man with a brunette woman. The man she barely gave a glance but the woman… she seemed far more familiar. Sunglasses obscured
her eyes but the clenching of her jaw, the tone of her skin and the scar above her lip were unmistakable.

The glass in Snow’s hand slipped from her fingers and shattered onto the floor. “No…”

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Regina’s grip on Robin’s arm could not be tighter as they made their way into the church. Despite her sunglasses and wig she’d never felt more exposed. She had to remind herself to breathe as she robotically put one foot in front of the other.

Soothingly placing his hand on top of hers, Robin whispered into her ear, “How are you feeling?”

“Fine,” she lied. “Just a little nervous.”

“Do you see your mother anywhere?”

“No,” she said quickly shaking her head. “I don’t see-”

Her sentence was cut short by the sound of shattered glass. Immediately her head, along with everyone else’s, whipped toward the direction of the sound. Her jaw nearly dropped to her chest as she locked eyes with Snow from behind her sunglasses. Even from across the room the shock and disbelief in her green eyes was obvious.

Snow took a step in her direction and Regina slyly shook her head stopping the younger girl in her tracks. They couldn’t talk. Not out here.

Regina saw her take out her cell phone before marching over to a nearby stairway with a clenched jaw. She watched her go with parted lips as Robin’s head swiveled between them.

“Who is that?” he asked.

The side of Regina’s purse began to vibrate and she swiftly pulled out her cell phone to find a text from Snow.

UPSTAIRS BATHROOM. NOW!!!

Regina sighed. “She’s someone I owe an explanation. Come on.”

She gripped his arm and lead him to the staircase. Her mind began to race searching for any reason that Snow could have to be there. She thought it was clear that neither of them were to attend the funeral. Then again she hadn’t really stuck to that agreement, had she?

Once upstairs she and Robin quickly found the bathroom and entered to find an irate Snow already pacing its floors. Her fiery gaze landed on them the minute they opened the door.

“What the hell are you doing here?!” she immediately questioned. Her green eyes blazed with indignation as she gritted her teeth at Regina.

Regina shook her head guiltily. “Snow…”

“No we agreed that you were staying far away from this place!” Despite the low volume of her words, Snow’s voice still echoed off the bathroom’s pink tile floors, as she stood her ground against Regina with both hands on her hips.

“I know we agreed but I couldn’t not be here!” shot back Regina. “It’s my father’s funeral. I have
“to be here!”

“No you don’t!” snapped Snow.

“Ladies I’d like to remind you both that voices carry,” said Robin timidly stepping forward.

Snow’s eyes snapped to his face as if she was just now realizing that he was there. He found himself knocked back by the intensity of her gaze.

“And who the hell are you?!” she snapped.

He opened his mouth to reply to her.

“You know what I don’t even care,” she said raising his hand in his direction and turning her attention back to Regina. “You have to leave. Now!”

Regina stared down the younger with tired eyes before turning to Robin with a sigh. “Would you give us a minute?” she whispered.

Robin’s eyes flickered back to Snow before he grimaced at Regina with uncertainty. “Are you sure?”

She nodded at him. “Yes. It’ll just take a second.”

He gave her one last look before leaving the bathroom and shutting the door behind him. As soon as he was gone she let out a slow breath trying to calm her nerves before slipping off her sunglasses and turning back to Snow. “Look, I know that I’m not supposed to be here.”

“Damn right you’re not,” muttered Snow.

“But it’s my father’s funeral,” finished Regina. “What did you expect me to do? Miss it?”

“Yes!” hissed Snow. “For your sake and for Henry’s I expected you to miss it!”

“Well I couldn’t okay! I needed to come!” she stressed. “He’s my father! This is my last chance to be there for him!”

With one hand she leaned against the bathroom counter as Snow stared at her with pity in her eyes. “Look it’s not like I’ll be sitting front row. I’ll stay in the back. I’ll leave early if I have to but I need to be here for this. Please…”

Snow sighed in annoyance. She wasn’t that close to her father, not after learning what he’d done, but she could understand Regina’s need to be present for the funeral. “Fine. If you really need to be here, then I’ve got your back.”

“Thank you,” said Regina softly. “And thank you for showing up here when you thought I couldn’t.”

“Whatever,” mumbled Snow, shrugging her shoulders nonchalantly. Her flickered up to Regina’s hair. “Your wig is ridiculous by the way.”

A chuckle slipped from Regina’s lips. “It was the best I could do on short notice.”

“Well brown is most certainly not your color.” Snow nodded her head toward the mirror. “Let me help.”
Regina moved to stand in front of her reflection as Snow reached for the top of her head. The younger girl blew out a breath as she ran her fingers through the wig’s brunette strands. “So… who’s the guy outside the door?”

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After an impromptu styling session, Regina exited the bathroom with Snow on her arm. They found Robin waiting against the wall just outside the bathroom.

He raised his eyebrows at Regina. “Are we staying?”

She nodded. “We’re staying. Snow’s agreed to help me keep a low profile.”

He quizzically narrowed his eyes at the younger girl. “Snow?”

“It’s Mary to you,” she replied in a clipped tone. She hid her displeasure behind a tense smile as she slipped her arm from Regina’s. “I’m going to head downstairs and make sure Cora’s out of sight. I’ll send a text when the coast is clear.”

Robin waited until the sound of her footsteps faded before turning to Regina with concern in his eyes. “Who was that?”

She swallowed hard before answering him. “You remember when I told you about the man who wanted to marry me?”

He nodded.

“That was his daughter.”

Robin widened his eyes at her before his head whipped back in the direction Snow had just walked off in. “But she’s… she can’t be more than ten years younger than you.”

“Eight. She is eight years younger than me,” she corrected softly. “Like I said it was a complicated, undesired situation.”

Looking into his confused eyes Regina felt embarrassment rise up into her cheeks. She dropped her gaze down at the red-patterned carpet under her feet. There was less judgement there.

The phone in her hand beeped and Regina nodded toward him. “Coast is clear. We should head in now.”

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The sound of the church organ filled the sanctuary hall as the funeral began. In back of the church, in the darkest corner possible, Regina sat as almost trembling with grief. From behind her sunglasses, a tear fell from her eye and down her cheek as her gaze remained fixed on the coffin on the alter. Her lips were pressed into a thin line as she compelled herself not to cry out and attract attention to herself.

Her father was gone. Really, truly gone.

Regina had imagined her father’s funeral many times since she was a young girl. Henry Sr. had never been particularly healthy and because of that she’d always felt the need to prepare herself for the moment when she’d lose him, funeral preparations included. Of course the day was nothing as she’d imagined. A church ceremony had never been in the cards given her father’s lack of faith.
Neither had this many people. Her father had always said he’d prefer a private ceremony with only those he knew personally. And of course when she’d imagined the day she’d say her final goodbye to her father Regina had always imagined herself front row. Being involved. Not having to hide behind sunglasses. But also she imagined having to go through the day alone. Instead, sitting in the back row of the sanctuary with Robin on one side of her and Snow on the other, she had more support than she ever expected. Through the entire ceremony they sat next to her offering her silent comfort as she remained transfixed on her father’s coffin.

Robin had offered her his hand the minute they sat down and she’d immediately gripped it with all her might. In truth, the feeling of his hand clasping hers was the only thing keeping her from running up to the alter.

Her grip remained tight through the whole ceremony, not that it was a long one. Just a few words were spoken, first from a priest and then from a few of her father’s old friends from school. The whole thing lasted just under an hour. Then it was time for a few words from Henry’s wife, her mother. As soon as Cora’s speech was announced Regina swore she felt her heart stop beating. For the first time since entering the sanctuary her eyes left her father’s coffin. Instead they immediately whipped to the front row of the church where she saw her mother rise from her seat.

It had been years since she’d last seen Cora and the sight of her knocks the air from her lungs. Perhaps there was an extra gray hair or two and a spare wrinkle here or there but it almost seemed as if no time had passed for her at all. Her lips were still painted their signature red. Her hair, pulled back into a bun, was still it’s same shade of lustrous auburn. And her eyes, even in manufactured grief, were as sharp and calculating as ever. Even from twelve rows she could see that hadn’t changed.

Snow placed a hand on her shoulder and Regina felt herself start to breathe again. As she watched Cora make her way up to the podium she tried to remind herself that her mother couldn’t see her and probably wasn’t looking for her anyway.

Once Cora reached the podium she tapped the mike before speaking.

“Hello everyone,” she said in a grief-stricken tone. “I wish I could’ve seen you all under better circumstances. The loss of my husband brings me a pain that I didn’t think was possible. And in this time I am grateful for the solace that can only come from being surrounded in the comfort offered by my husband’s colleagues, friends and of course… family.”

And on the mention of family Cora’s eyes slid to the back of the church, to the darkest possible corner and landed directed on her daughter. Regina felt her body go rigid as the weight of Cora’s icy gaze fell on her. She felt Snow begin to grip her shoulder in panic.

“Did she…?”

“Yes,” Regina hissed under her breath. She turned to Robin the anxiety clear in her eyes. “We have to leave. Now!”

Her arms began to shake as the sound of Cora’s voice continued to fill the room. She tried to stand to her feet but Robin’s kept her in her seat.

“We can’t get up while she’s speaking,” he whispered.

Regina sucked in a breath trying to slow the beat of her panicking heart. “She saw me.”

“We don’t know that yet,” Robin whispered practically. “And if she hasn’t we don’t want to attract
her attention by leaving while she’s still speaking. Let’s wait one more minute between speakers.”

Regina thought over what he said and nodded her head slowly as she tried to swallow down her apprehension. God, she hoped he was right. Maybe her mother hadn’t seen her and she was just overreacting. Either way she wanted nothing more than to escape as soon as possible.

For the entirety of Cora’s speech Regina focused all her energy on fighting the instinct to launch herself out of the church as soon as possible. It seemed as if time had stopped and Regina swore she could feel her legs slowly turning to stone.

As soon as her mother finished and moved to sit back down Robin tugged on her elbow. “Okay we can go now.”

Trying to be as inconspicuous as possible the three of them stood to their feet. As the sound of hymns began to fill the church they scurried toward the nearest exit and out to the side of the church. Once the sun hit her face Regina felt herself begin to hyperventilate with anxiety. She could still feel the weight of her mother’s eyes on her skin.

Snow rubbed her back comfortingly. “You okay?”

Regina sucked in a breath through her nose. “Not really.”

“We should go,” said Robin. “You’ll feel better once you get far away from here.”

“Oh I think that’s going to be a little difficult,” mumbled Snow.

Rounding the corner of the building four intimidating men walked in their direction. In all black suits with mics feeding from the collar of their white shirts and into their ears, it was clear they were guards. And of course they could only be working for one person.

The sound of the church door slamming open behind her caused Regina to go rigid.

“Regina!”

Everything went still as Regina heard her name called by the voice she’d hoped never to hear again. She turned to see her mother standing in the door of the exit, shock and anger burning in her brown eyes. Snow moved to step in front of her defensively but Regina tugged her back by her wrist. Whatever happened next wouldn’t be pretty and she didn’t want Snow to be cannon fodder.

Stepping forward to face her mother she was immediately struck by the swift heat of Cora’s palm against her cheek. The sound of Snow and Robin’s cries of shock echoed in the background as she stumbled sideways at the force of her mother’s assault.

She felt Robin wrap his arm around her waist protectively as she brought her hand up to her cheek in a daze. She had no doubt that her skin was already beginning to grow red. After taking a deep breath in order to find her courage Regina stared up at Cora with spiteful eyes. “Hello mother.”

Tension filled the air as Cora took another menacing step toward her. “Hello mother?” she growled. “Is that really all you have to say to me after all these years?”

“What else could I possibly say?” responded Regina. “Quite frankly I think the hand mark you’ve left on my cheek speaks for itself.”

“Oh don’t pretend you didn’t earn it,” snarled Cora. “Your little disappearing act cost me millions! Do you have any idea how much time and energy I’ve had to waste explaining your absence and
seeking you out?!

Regina began to tremble as her mother began to raise her voice. Just like that she felt just as frightened and alone as she did all those years ago. She swallowed hard as her eyes dropped to the ground to avoid her mother’s gaze. “I’m sorry mother.”

Cora scoffed at her. “I should’ve known Henry’s death would’ve been the only thing to get you to pop up. I cannot believe how much money I had to spend to get coverage for this miserable funeral.”

“What?” mumbled Regina. “So all this? The funeral and the non-stop press was all just a way to get me to come back here?”

“Of course,” snapped Cora. “Did you really think anyone would care when your father stopped breathing? Be realistic dear.”

Her words flew at Regina like bullets landing straight in her heart.

“You should be flattered by the effort Regina,” said Cora. “It certainly wasn’t cheap to get people to pretend as if he mattered.”

“He mattered to me!” cried Regina, her voice beginning to waver.

“Well that makes you the exception dear, not the rule,” hissed Cora.

Snow angrily stepped forward. “That’s enough Cora!”

The older woman’s icy gaze landed on the girl beside her daughter as she scoffed. “I should’ve known you’d be here. I heard you had a penchant for sticking your nose where it didn’t belong. Just like your mother.”

“Don’t speak about my mother,” growled Snow, her cheeks growing red with anger. “She was twice the woman you will ever be.”

“Then I can only imagine what a disappointment her druggie daughter would’ve been to her,” replied Cora.

Snow’s lips pulled into a thin line and Regina could see she was struggling to hide just how much damage Cora’s words inflicted on her.

“As happy as I am to see how thorough your latest rehab treatment has been, this matter doesn’t concern you,” continued Cora. Her eyes drifted back up to Regina’s face. “This is between my daughter and me.”

“There is nothing between us anymore,” seethed Regina. “I’m a grown woman mother. You can’t control my life.”

Cora chuckled cruelly at her. “You foolish girl. This isn’t your life. It’s mine.”

Her dark eyes suddenly turned serious. “Look at the choices you’ve made my dear. First sleeping around with the help, then choosing to have his baby and walking out on the most lucrative deal I made to secure both your future and your son’s. Really Regina? How could I ever trust you to make a decision when you are constantly deciding wrong?”

“Choosing love over power isn’t choosing wrong,” whispered Regina.
Cora narrowed her eyes and shook her head at her. “If you truly believe that then I didn’t raise you half as well as I thought I did.”

Regina clenched her fists as she felt a fire start to kindle in stomach. Looking into her mother’s eyes she growled, “Time hasn’t changed you a bit. You’re just as cruel as ever.”

“Well look who climbed into the gutter and found a backbone,” sneered Cora, her voice deathly low. She advanced upon Regina until their faces were just a few inches apart. “A few years away from me and you think you’ve earned the right to talk back but that insolence ends today. You’re coming home with me Regina. Right now.”

Her mother attempted to pull at her wrist but Regina swiftly resisted.

“No I’m not,” she declared defiantly.

Cora just chuckled cruelly at her. “Oh sweetheart, look around you. Does it seem like I’m giving you a choice?”

It was only then that Regina noticed that the guards they’d seen had surrounded them in a tight circle. Each more than six-feet tall with an intimidating look mirrored on all their faces, Regina felt her heart speed up just looking at them. It was like the penthouse all over again.

“Aren’t they handsome?” purred Cora, eyeing her guards. “And you know I pay them well enough that they’ll do whatever I say.”

She took another step toward her daughter. “Now are you going to get in my car or are they going to have to drag you there?”

Regina felt Robin’s grip on her waist loosen as he moved to stand in front of her. “She’s not going anywhere with you,” he growled protectively.

Cora only smirked in his direction. “Well look what we have here, a white knight.”

Regina shivered as she watched her mother’s eyes roam over Robin before turning back on her. “Tell me dear is he a gardener as well or has your taste actually improved?”

Her words had no effect on Robin at all. He only narrowed his eyes at Cora and continued to stand protectively in front of Regina. Unfortunately, this only served to make her more nervous. Regina had no doubt that Robin could hold his own in a fight but this wouldn’t be fair. There were four of them and only one of him. She couldn’t let him try to fight his way through these guards. They’d destroy him.

Regina placed her hands on his shoulders and whispered, “Robin… don’t.”

He turned to her with a wild look in his eyes. “I’m not just going to let her take you.”

Regina swallowed as she looked into his eyes searching for the right words to convince him to stand down. None came to mind. Luckily they didn’t have to.

“Is everything alright here?”

Everyone’s heads whipped toward the new voice that had suddenly arrived. A small group of six men in black suits were approaching them from the rear. At the head of the group was a man with ice blue eyes and platinum blonde hair slicked back with gel. He raised an eyebrow as he observed the situation before him and then turned his attention to Snow. “Do you require our services Miss
Snow let out a relieved sigh as she nodded in his direction. “No, everything is fine Damien. Thank you.”

She turned back to Cora with a devious smirk on her face. “Ms. Mills I’d like you to meet Damien Masters, my head of security and his associates.”

Cora’s hands clenched into fist as she sent a tight-lipped smile in Damien’s direction. The tables had just turned and she knew it.

Snow looped her arm through Regina’s before turning to address Damien. “I’m ready to leave now Damien and I just wanted to make sure my friend got to her car safely. I hoped you would escort us there.”

She turned to raise her eyebrows at Cora daringly. “Unless your four bodyguards have something to say to my six?”

Regina watched with baited breath as her mother appeared to have an internal debate. She knew it wasn’t in Cora’s nature to give up a fight without exploring every option but it was clear the situation was no longer in her favor. After a moment’s hesitation Cora let out a seething breath and shook her head. “I suppose there’s nothing more to say, is there?”

“Well then I guess this is goodbye,” replied Snow, pointedly placing a guiding hand on Regina’s back. She gave Cora one last superior look. “So sorry for your loss.”

Still trembling with fear, Regina let Snow and Robin guide her toward the safety of Snow’s bodyguards. The entire time she could feel the weight of her mother’s gaze on her back. It made every step she took feel like her feet were made of lead. She barely made it ten feet before her mother called out to her causing all of them to look back in fear.

Cora stepped forward and leveled a fierce glare on all three of before settling a threatening gaze on her daughter. In a deathly low voice, she said, “You might be leaving today but don’t mistake this for a victory. You will come home to me. Whether you like it or not. And now that I’ve laid eyes on you… there is nowhere that you can hide.”

With one last look Cora turned her heel and headed back into the church taking her bodyguards with her. As she watched her mother walk away from her Regina replayed every syllable of her threat on a loop in her head and she knew… her mother meant every word of it.

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From the comfort of his town car Eli Gold shook his head to himself as he watched his goddaughter walk away from her father’s funeral flanked by two friends and six bodyguards.

“So sentimental,” he muttered in disapproval. Just as Henry had suspected Regina had been lured out of hiding by his funeral.

He turned his head toward the driver’s seat as the partition in front of him began to roll down.

His driver asked timidly, “Would you like to go inside now Mr. Gold?”

He shook his head in response. “No. I’ve seen all I need to see from here.”

He pulled out his cell phone with a sigh. Suddenly he had a lot of calls to make.
The drive home from the funeral was one of the longest rides Robin had ever endured in his life. With his hands gripping the steering wheel until his knuckles went white and Regina staring blankly out the window in the passenger seat, the whir of the tires against the road was the only thing breaking the silence that filled the space between them. Immediately after their confrontation with Cora, he and Regina had headed straight for their car accompanied by Snow and her many bodyguards. Attending Henry, Sr.’s burial was certainly out of the question now so Robin drove toward the highway instead. He wanted to get Regina back to the house as soon as possible. After everything that’d happened he was sure that she needed to be somewhere she felt safe.

Even as he tried his best to focus on the road Robin was still reeling from the things that he’d just seen. It was as if he’d left real life and entered one of those telenovelas that Marian had once been so fond of. Bodyguards, step-daughters and evil mothers. It was too much to comprehend.

He snuck a look over at Regina before pulling off the highway. If he thought, she’d been in pain the day before it was nothing compared with how she looked now. As the sun moved over her face Robin could see a bright, red mark had taken shape over her left cheek. A souvenir from her mother. She hadn’t spoken a word the entire drive home but her body was rigid with tension. Once glance down at her hands told him that her nails had been digging into her palms for as long as they been in the car. He was surprised she hadn’t started to bleed yet. He longed to reach out and comfort her but a part of him feared that she’d shatter at his touch.

Not half an hour after leaving the funeral they pulled back into the driveway of his house. Regina was out of the car before the engine even stopped running. Arms wrapped herself, she headed for the house with Robin right on her heels. As soon as the door was open she breezed past him and headed inside. Robin watched as she robotically slipped off her shoes and closed her eyes before taking in a deep breath.

He licked his lips before addressing her. “Regina… I’m sorry.”

She turned to him with a raised eyebrow. “For what? You told me not to go. I refused to listen. And just as you said everything went horribly. There’s nothing to apologize for.”

He shook his head at her. “Regina…”

“It’s fine!” she said, raising her voice. Her eyes began to water and she started to blink back her tears. “I’m fine. I just need some rest.”

If only that were true, Robin thought to himself. He watched her turn on her heel and her rush up the stairs, her feet thudding against the floor as she made her way to the guest room. He ran his hands over his face in frustration as he heard her slam the door behind her. He wanted nothing more than to chase after her and comfort her in the way she deserved but he doubted she’d be receptive to him. All he could do was wait until she was ready to come to him.

Regina barely made it to the guest room before the tears started streaming down her cheeks. She ripped the wig off her head and dropped it carelessly to the floor as she stumbled over to the bed. The events of the day played on a loop in her mind as she collapsed onto the mattress and buried her face into the cotton bed sheets.

How could she have been so reckless?
Everything her father had sacrificed for, everything she’d been so careful to protect was now in jeopardy because of her. Like a fool she’d played right into her mother’s trap and put both herself and her son back in danger. And not just them but Robin and Snow as well. Now that Cora knew about them it would only be a matter of time before she tracked them all down.

Sobs began to overtake her as she imagined all the horrible the scenarios that could take place. She could feel it swirling in her gut, that ball of dread that appeared right before she was about to lose everything that mattered. It was sweeping through her entire body. It was long before she closed her eyes and let herself fall into the darkness.

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That sun had long since set by the time Regina woke up. As her eyes creaked open she could see the moon glowing in the sky outside her window. With a groan she sat up and swung her feet down to the bedroom floor. The events of the day resurfaced in her mind and she brought her hand up to her forehead as pain began to bubble underneath her skull. Standing to her feet she stumbled to the bathroom and turned on the sink. She ran a small cloth under the water and sighed as she brought it up to her face. Its cool dampness offered her a bit of relief from the heat radiating from her skin. She let out a slow breath as she continued to press it against her eyelids. No more tears, she thought to herself. There wasn’t time for them. She had to figure out a way to protect herself and her son.

Her son?

Regina narrowed her eyes once she realized that the house was just as silent as when they’d first arrived back. Even as she strained her ears she couldn’t hear the pitter-patter of either Henry or Roland. She snuck a look the clock. They should’ve been back from the zoo by now.

Still feeling a little weak from her crying session Regina headed downstairs in search for her son. Instead she found no one but Robin. Having changed out of his funeral suit, he was now dressed in a pair of jeans and a snug green cotton shirt. Sitting in an armchair in the corner of the room, he was clearly lost in thought as he stared blankly into the roaring fire that was now flaming in the living room’s fireplace. He only looked up when he heard the creaking of Regina’s feet against the stairs.

She cleared her throat nervously as she made her way over to him. “Where are the boys?” she asked.

“They are spending the night on Hook’s boat,” he answered. She raised an eyebrow at him and he quickly raised a calming hand in her direction. “The boats docked, they’re below deck and will be wearing life vests the entire time I promise. Don’t worry they’re safe.”

He shrugged his shoulders at her uncertainly. “I just thought you might need… some time.”

She nodded at him in acceptance. Truth be told she didn’t think she could face her son right now. She’d failed him today and no matter how good of a liar she could be she knew she wouldn’t be able to hide her feelings from Henry. Not today anyway.

A tired sigh escaped her as she moved to sit in the loveseat across from his armchair. He watched her with a concerned eye as he leaned forward in his seat. Her dress from the funeral was now crumpled and wrinkled from her time in bed and her hair in still slight disarray as she set her chin in her hand. Even after sleeping through the afternoon she still looked tired.

“How are you feeling?” he asked.
“Like my heart got run over by a lawnmower.”

“As well as can be expected,” Regina responded dryly. “I just… don’t know what I’m going to do now. I mean I fell for my mother’s trap… like an idiot. And now everything I wanted to protect is in danger. I feel like now all I can do is wait for the moment when she shows up and takes away everything I love.”

“That won’t happen,” said Robin firmly.

“I wish I could believe that,” she whispered. She ran her fingers through her hair as she shook her head. “God… I really wish I had a drink right now.”

He nodded his head before standing to his feet. “Wait here for a second.”

He headed into the kitchen and returned a second later with a bottle of wine and a long-stemmed glass. Regina raised an eyebrow at him as he set them down on the coffee table in front of him. “Wine?”

“After the day you’ve had I think you’ve more than earned it,” he replied, pulling out the bottle cork.

Regina licked her lips nervously as she watched him pour the white wine into a glass for her. She couldn’t help but wonder if this wine was the only alcohol present in the house. As far as she knew Robin hadn’t broken his sobriety and she’d like it to stay that way. She forced a smile to her lips as he handed her the glass and Robin narrowed his eyes at her.

“It was a housewarming gift.”

“What?”

“The wine,” he specified. “It was gift from my realtor when I first moved in here. Don’t worry. I’ve still got my chip, don’t plan on losing it.”

An embarrassed breath escaped her as she shook her head at him. “Robin I didn’t…”

“It’s alright,” he said. “You know I love it when you’re concerned about me.”

A small smile tugged on her lips as he sat next to her on the love seat and she instinctively shifted closer to him. He nodded at her encouragingly before she took her first sip of wine. It was sweet and she relished the taste of it on her tongue. She sighed as she tried to will its heady effects to advance faster. This day had put her through the wringer and she’d be lying if she said she wasn’t in the mood to feel numb tonight. In that respect she supposed drinking probably wasn’t the best thing for her right now. Not that she would stop.

Robin put a hand on her shoulder and raised an eyebrow at her. “Better?”

She nodded her head. “A little.”

She turned to him with serious eyes. “Thank you for coming with me to the funeral. I just want you to know that I don’t take it lightly.”

He pulled his hand from her shoulder and brought it back to his lap. “Well it wasn’t as if I could let you go alone. Marian would never forgive me for that.”

Regina just brought her glass back to her lips in response and her silence didn’t go unnoticed by
Robin. His gaze dropped to his hands as he uttered the question that had crowded his mind for the past 24 hours.

“Did she know?”

Regina’s head whipped toward him with wide eyes. “What?”

“Marian,” he whispered. “Did she know… about you? About everything?”

For a brief moment Regina considered lying. She considered saying that Marian had never known the truth about her. That she had remained just as ignorant as everyone else about the true origins of her circumstances. She didn’t know what good she thought it would do but staring into his eyes she knew that even if she wanted to lie she couldn’t.

She pressed her lips together nervously before whispering, “She was my best friend Robin. She knew all my secrets.”

Robin let out a deep breath as he leaned back in his seat. He wished he could say he was surprised. Instead he just shook his head to himself as he went over the last three years of his marriage in his head wondering just when his wife decided to keep things from him.

Regina watched with concern in her eyes as Robin grappled with the news he’d just been told. “Robin… I’m sorry.”

Robin just shook his head at her and sighed. “You know yesterday I would’ve been mad about it and maybe tomorrow I will be but… today I think I’m just glad that you had someone to talk to. Even if it was her and not me.”

Regina felt relief flood through her chest at Robin’s words. He wasn’t mad now. That was all she needed to hear.

“Did she take it better than me?” asked Robin. “Finding out the truth?”

Regina shook her head. “Not even close. I wasn’t the one to tell her and when she found out on her own she was furious with me. She hardly looked at me for more than a week.”

She tapped the side of her glass absentmindedly as her mind wandered back to those heart wrenching days when her best friend wouldn’t speak to her.

“I really thought I was going to lose her,” she whispered.

After a moment Regina set her glass down on the coffee table and turned to Robin with serious eyes. “Robin… I appreciate everything you’ve done for me today but… if you wanted time without me I would understand.”

Robin sighed before shifting in his seat to face her better. “I will admit that after everything that I’ve learned things are going to be a bit different for us. There are still some questions that I need answered and it might take me a while to truly get past everything but… I don’t want you to think that you’ve lost me because you haven’t. I’m still here and I promise that I’m not walking away from you Regina Mills.”

Tears began to well up in her eyes. “You… you said my real name.”

“I know,” he said with a small smile. “I like it.”
And listening to it in his voice Regina realized that she missed hearing it.

As Robin pulled her into a hug she let her face fall against his shoulder with a sigh. She breathed in his scent as he held her tight and wondered if she would ever again feel as safe as she did right there in the warmth of his arms.
Chapter 29

Regina’s dreams were not kind to her that night. They were frightening and tortuous. Filled with distorted images of her mother all her greatest fears played out in hideous forms as the inescapable sound of Cora’s voice echoed through her skull.

*There is nowhere that you can hide.*

She woke up in a cold sweat in the guestroom. Still in her funeral dress from the day before, she looked around her twisted sheets in confusion. Robin must’ve carried her upstairs last night after she’d fallen asleep. The last thing she remembered was being in his arms with a glass of wine in her hand, crying over just how badly she’d screwed everything up. She knew he still had questions – about her mother, about her life, about Marian – but despite his curiosity he’d held back, trying to be as sensitive as possible given the day she’d had. For that she would always be grateful to him.

Trembling as she went, Regina climbed out of bed and headed for the bathroom. She’d been in this black dress for far longer than she’d preferred. It was time to change. Turning the shower lever as hot as it could go, she stripped out of her funeral clothes and stepped under the stream of scalding water, letting out a hiss as it rained against her skin. Taking a deep breath as she allowed the heat to penetrate her skin and flow through her muscles, bringing relief to the aches she felt through her body. Despite the fact that she wanted to, she didn’t stay in the shower for long. There was too much for her to worry about in there. Instead she hopped out less than ten minutes later and quickly put on a pair of jeans and a t-shirt. They were picking up the boys today and after everything that happened with the funeral she was more desperate than ever to have Henry in her arms again.

She trotted downstairs to find Robin already awake and clearly waiting for her. With folded arms and an intense stare, he stood next to the living room window looking out at the neighborhood. At the sound of her footsteps he turned to face her and she felt herself cringe. Judging by the bags under his eyes she could tell he’d only slept marginally better than she had and it sent a slice of guilt through her gut. Two days ago he’d been a single father with nothing more to worry about than what to cook for dinner the next day. Since her arrival he’d faced down her lies, Marian’s betrayal, and her vicious mother. Without even trying she’d managed to completely drag him from his life and into her nightmare. Just another reason she’d wished she’d never come on this trip.

“Morning,” she sighed, brushing her hair out of her face. She crossed her arms as she stepped into the living room. “How long have you been up?”

“No long,” he replied, shrugging his shoulders at her. “Just an hour or two.” He pointed towards the kitchen. “I went out and got us breakfast.”

Upon entering the kitchen, a small smile – the first real one she’d had in days – grew on her face when she spotted a box of Eller’s donuts waiting on the island counter. She still remembered the Saturday mornings when she and Marian would drive to Eller’s Donut Shop to indulge in their delicious glazed crullers. Crullers that Robin had been sure to fill half the box with. She turned to him with a smile. “You got me Eller’s.”

He nodded his head with a chuckle. “I thought it might brighten your day.”

“Thank you,” she said gratefully before lifting a cruller into her hand. As her teeth sunk into its flaky dough and the sweet taste of its glaze washed over her tongue, a moan escaped from her throat. She leaned her elbows against the counter and hummed appreciatively. “New York may have the world’s best bagels but they’ve got nothing on California’s donuts.”
Robin smirked at her as he lifted a donut into his hand. He still went to Eller’s at least once a month with Roland. As far as his son was concerned there was no problem those sugary pastries couldn’t solve and right now, while eating the chocolate flavored one in his hand, Robin found it hard to disagree.

He gestured to the coffee maker before swallowing his bite. “Coffee?”

Regina nodded at him. “Please.”

It wasn’t as if she’d gotten a lot of rest the night before. Hopefully the coffee would perk her up before they met up with the boys.

Robin cleared his throat before setting up the brew and pulling mugs from the cabinet above the counter. “So… I was actually thinking I could go and pick up the boys myself today, bring them home alone.”

She scrunched her eyebrows at him. “Why?”

He turns to her with a pained grimace. “Well… the gang sort of wanted to surprise you for your visit. I arranged for them all to meet up with you at the bar today.”

A knot formed in her gut. “Oh.”

He weakly shakes his head at her. “I’m sorry. It was before…”

He lets his sentence trail off allowing the weight of all that happened the day before to fill the air between them. It turns her stomach but she nods her head in understanding, placing her cruller back in the box, the sweet icing on her tongue turning bitter with this new revelation. In the whirlwind of revealing herself to Robin she’d nearly forgotten about the rest of her old friends, the ones she was still lying to. Another wave of guilt sliced through her at the thought of avoiding them when they were so clearly eager to see her.

So she forced herself to push the weight of yesterday off her shoulders and shrug them in Robin’s direction. “Well there’s no reason to cancel,” she mumbled. “I’m only here for one more day and I would like to see everyone again.”

Robin stared at her, the hesitation clear in his eyes as he pressed his lips together nervously before asking, “Are you sure? I mean after everything that’s happened-”

“There’s nothing I’d like more than to see those I love.” She cut him off, her words sharper than a woodsman axe. Her hands slid to edge of the counter and she began to grip it for support. She attempted to force an easy going smile to her face before looking up at him. “It’s fine Robin, really. I want to see my friends.”

He continues to stare into her eyes and it’s as if she can feel him poking around in her soul, searching for the cracks she’s fighting so desperately to hide. He opens his mouth to speak and for a moment she could swear he was going to talk her out it, try and convince her to stay behind but then the light behind his eyes changed, his lips pressed together and he let out a defeated sigh before apathetically shrugging his shoulders.

“Okay,” he mutters.

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They left the house soon after that, donuts and coffee left on the counter in their haste. Despite her
lack of actual rest the night before, Regina had somehow managed to oversleep and it wasn’t long before it was time to pick up the boys. Even with the time crunch she still managed to make it upstairs to change and put on her face. She’d originally planned on wearing mascara at the most but now that she knew the whole gang was waiting for her at the bar she decided a full face of makeup was probably a better choice. She returned downstairs in a casual patterned wrap dress and a pair of wedges, her lips appropriately colored and eyes bordered with Revlon, ready to take on the world.

Robin raised his eyebrows at her as they walked out the door. “You look nice,” he said softly.

She mumbled a grateful reply before climbing into the car. She could only imagine how in comprehensible her behavior must seem to him, going to meet up with the gang after everything she’d just been through but she hadn’t been lying when they’d talked in the kitchen. She wanted to see her old friends again, to feel their warmth and love surround her once more. And it’d be a lie if she didn’t say that she was eager to slip back into Regina Gardiner’s life. Being Regina Mills was just as hard as she’d remembered and after all the drama and devastation that came with the truth there was a piece of her, a very large piece actually, that yearned for the simplicity of the lies.

Excluding the low music playing from the radio, the ride to the bar was silent. As much as she wanted to talk to Robin, she couldn’t find anything to say. Everything she wanted to talk about seemed far too heavy to speak about before they met up with everyone else, and if she brought up any of the lighter topics, like her job or the boys, it would only seem insincere. And it wasn’t as if Robin was interested in striking up a conversation with her anyway. He hadn’t looked at her once since they’d gotten in the car, his eyes switching between being focused on the road and flickering toward the rearview mirror. Watching him so reluctant to look her in the eye Regina couldn’t help but remember the night before. They way he’d held her so close, listened so intently and wiped away her tears. It had been so comforting and intimate but none of those feelings had transferred over this morning. He was being distant with her, stoic she would even say and after feeling so close with him before it hurt. The space between them was painful but even so she knew it was her decisions that had put it there. Robin had promised her that he wouldn’t walk away from her but she’d also promised him that she’d be understanding if he needed distance. So she remained silent, only choosing to speak up in confusion when, after taking an unusually scenic route, Robin ended up parking three blocks away from the bar.

“Why so far?” she asked curiously, unbuckling her seat belt.

He didn’t answer her immediately, instead his eyes narrowed at the rearview mirror before twisting in his seat to just look through the back window. Her face scrunched up in confusion as she took in his questionable behavior. “Robin?”

When he finally turned back to her she could see thinly veiled panic in his eyes. He swallowed thickly before speaking, “I didn’t want to scare you… but I think we’re being followed.”

Regina’s heartbeat immediately sped up and her hands clenched up in fear. “What?”

“Well… when I woke up this morning I saw black car sitting across the street,” explained Robin. “I’d never seen it in the neighborhood before but I didn’t think much of it, people have visitors. But it was still there when I brought back the donuts and every time I’ve looked in the rearview mirror it’s been behind us, the entire drive here.”

Regina swallowed thickly trying to remind herself to breathe. God was her mother having her followed? Already? It had only been less than a day! Pushing past the intense alarm that was creeping up her spine she sucked a deep breath in through her nose and attempted to calm down. *Panic k never helps anything*, she reminded herself.
Softly nodding her head, she asked Robin, “Where is the car now?”

He nodded his head toward the rear of the car, “Behind us, across the street.”

Pressing her lips together she forced herself to look in the direction he’d just pointed out. Just as he’d said there was a black car parked on the curb opposite of theirs. The sight of it raised goosebumps on her arms. It was a plain town car with tinted windows, same as the ones her mother’s guards used to drive in but once she caught sight of its grill she let out a relieved breath.

“It’s not my mother,” she whispered, shutting her eyes in relief.

“Are you sure?” urged Robin, panic and concern still lacing his tone.

She nodded her head. “Yes I’m sure. That’s a Ford town car, my mother’s guards use Lincolns exclusively. It’s her brand.”

After being pulled in and pushed out of them almost her entire life, Regina would recognize her mother’s town cars in a heartbeat.

At her reassurance Robin finally relaxed in his seat. “I’m sorry,” he said apologetically. “I didn’t mean to frighten you. I just wanted to be safe.”

Concern was etched onto his face and the sight of tugged on Regina’s heartstrings. She still remembered what it felt like those first few months on the run with Henry, checking over her shoulder constantly, wondering if the next knock on the door would be her mother coming to drag her away. It suddenly struck her that this sudden shift into vigilance was the cause of his distant behavior this morning. She reached out to grab his hand and was pleasantly surprised when he didn’t pull away but instead laced his fingers through hers.

“I understand,” she said gently. “Knowing what you know now, every little thing can seem like a threat.” She sighed as her eyes flickered back to the car across the street. “Thank you for being vigilant though. I suppose I’ll need to get back in the habit.”

She brushed her hair behind her ears as she narrowed her eyes at the cars tinted windows. *Ford town cars*, she thought to herself. Not her mother’s brand but still a brand that she recognized, quite easily actually. Why was that? Who used them? Suddenly a realization sparked in her brain.

She turned back to Robin with wide eyes. “You’re sure it was sitting outside the house this morning?”

Robin nodded his head. “Yes. It’s the same car I’m sure of it.”

Regina’s head fell against her seat. “Then I think we are being followed… just not by my mother.”

Slipping her fingers from his she opened her door and gestured for him to follow her as she crossed the street. He was by her side in a flash, and they approached the town car with caution, Robin keeping a hand on her back as they walked across the road. Swallowing thickly as she stared into the tinted glass, Regina rapped her knuckles against the car window praying to god that she was right about who was sitting in the driver’s seat. After a moment the window slowly began to roll down and she let out a soft, relieved breath when she saw a familiar face sitting behind the wheel of the car. With his platinum blonde hair and ice blue eyes she immediately recognized the driver as Damien Masters, Snow’s head of security.

He looked up at them from his seat, all business in his demeanor. “Mr. Locksely. Miss Gardiner.”
“Damien,” she replied smoothly as her anxiety began to seep away. She wiped her palms against the side of her dress as she stared him down. “It appears you’ve been following me.”

Not breaking eye contact he responded with, “I prefer the term ‘shadowing.’”

A soft scoff flew from her throat as she nodded her head. “And I suppose you did this at Mary’s request?”

His eyes flickered back to the steering wheel then, and she saw him clench his jaw as he tried to find an appropriate response. “Miss Blanchard has been… concerned about your safety given recent events.”

“Huh… I’m touched,” Regina softly replied. And she was. She felt her heart swell at the thought of Snow being so protective of her… but not enough to make her okay with the idea of being “shadowed” by one of her bodyguards. Her eyes dropped down to her toes. “I don’t suppose if I told you to leave… that you would?”

Just as she suspected Damien shook his head. “I’m sorry Miss Gardiner but I was given clear instructions to shadow you until I’m told otherwise.”

“You can’t be serious?” Robin’s voice cut through the air, reminding them both that he was still there. “Even after she’s told you to leave you’re just going to keep following her?”

“Shadowing,” repeated Damien, gritting out his words defensively.

“Stalking is what the police call it,” shot back Robin, his patience clearly growing thin.

Damien’s grip on the steering wheel tightened as he let out an annoyed breath. “I’m just trying to do my job sir.”

“Which is protecting me,” said Regina, placing a hand on Robin’s shoulder to silence him. She shook her head at him as he stared at her in bewilderment. “He’s just following orders,” she reasoned softly. She turned back to Damien. “However, Robin and I are meeting up with a group of old friends. Ones who don’t know about my… situation. So I would prefer it if you shadowed me from a distance?”

Damien nodded his head at her. “I’ll be sure to be discreet,” he promised.

“Thank you.”

With that he rolled up his window, signaling the end of their conversation while Regina practically dragged an open-mouthed Robin back across the street. His eyes were full of disbelief as she guided him in the direction of the bar, seeming to be silently resolved to the idea of being followed by her friend’s security guard.

“Is that it?!?” he questioned incredulously. “You’re just going to let him follow you like this?!”

She sighed exhaustedly. “I don’t have much of a choice, Robin. He doesn’t work for me. He works for Snow. Only she can call him off.”

“That’s ridiculous!” he declared, the self-righteous anger in his tone clear. “When a person tells you to stop following them, you have to stop. It’s the law!”

“Well laws don’t apply to them!” snapped Regina, shaking her head at him.
Her sudden outburst stopped Robin in his tracks. Looking into his blue eyes she took a deep breath as she searched for the right words to explain her world to him.

“Robin… when you have the money and the power that they have at your disposable you start to find out that there is nothing that can’t be bought. Loyalty, integrity, freedom. It’s all up for sale,” she stressed. “Snow has Damien’s loyalty. She probably pays him very well for it. It’s why he’s willing to sidestep laws for her. And right now I’m just thankful that it’s her paying someone to protect me, instead of my mother paying someone to throw me in the back of an unmarked van and cart me away.”

Robin shuffled uncomfortably as Regina explained why she was allowing Damien to follow her. “Do you really think your mother would do that to you?” he asked softly.

She shrugged her shoulders at him. “Honestly… it’s one of my biggest fears.”

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, suddenly ashamed of his earlier self-righteousness.

“It’s fine,” she said quickly. “Let’s just go and see everybody.”

The rest of their walk to the bar was silent, both Robin and Regina unwilling to talk about the altercation they’d just had. By the time she saw the familiar sign of the Drunken Monk relief flowed through her chest. It was just as she’d remembered, well perhaps a little more put together than the last time she’d been there but still the same. Robin had replaced the old torn up awning and she no longer recognized the patio furniture but the old bricks were just as faded as they’d always been and the neon sign above the door still featured the same potbellied monk with a pitcher of beer in hand. At the sight of it memories of the friends she made and the experiences she’d had within its walls started to flood her mind bringing a smile, a true smile, to her face. An old Kinks song was playing on the jukebox as they stepped through the door. Things had changed inside – the old booths had finally been reupholstered, the wall behind the bar had about a dozen more frames added to it and the overhead lamps had been replaced with sleeker models – but the bar had retained its core. Walking inside was like walking home.

She hardly got a chance to marvel at the changes before she heard an enthusiastic “Mom!” coming from her side. She turned to see Henry running up to her, properly tanned from his day out in the California sun. With a grin he wrapped his arms around her waist and she immediately pulled him closer, pressing a lingering kiss to the top of his head. As soon as he’d laid hands on her she felt her heart grow lighter, cautiously shaking off the shadow of the morning. It felt good to have her son in her arms again, even if she was worried about how long she could keep him there. No sooner had she reluctantly released him from her grip, did another pair of arms wrap around her upper thighs. With a giggle she looked down to see Roland flashing his dimples as he grinned up at her. “Hi!” he chirped.

“Hello boys!” she said with a smile.

“Those aren’t boys they’re sailors.”

As soon as she looked up she locked eyes with Killian, the familiar blue shade of his eyes causing her smile to widen. After three years away she could say that he hadn’t changed a bit, at least physically. He still walked with the same swagger in his step, his eyes twinkling with dastardly charm and an easy going smile on his face. Without hesitation he wrapped her up in a crushing bear hug and she happily reciprocated, letting his familiar scent of seawater overwhelm her senses. She sighed contentedly when he released her. “You still smell like you bathe in the ocean,” she said.
“And you still love that I do,” he replied flirtatiously.

A chuckle escaped her even as she rolled her eyes at him. Some things never change. “I have missed you Hook.”

“And I you,” he said with grin. Giving her a quick once over he nodded his head appreciatively. “You look beautiful, love. New York clearly agrees with you.”

“I love it there,” she said wistfully, “but it still doesn’t compare to this place.” She looks around the bar, nostalgia swirling up in her chest as she takes it in once more. “It’s good to be home.”

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Sitting in a booth at the Drunken Monk, surrounded by her son, godson and old friends Regina felt at ease for the first time since stepping foot back in California. Not long after her reunion with Killian, Tink had arrived, rushing through the doors and squealing with excitement eager to capture her in a hug after so long apart. Physically it seemed as though not much had changed with her. Her smile was just as bright and her nails still had a thin layer of grease embedded under the tips just like Regina remembered. Her hair, though straightened from the curls she remembered so fondly, was still as yellow as the center of a daisy. And her eyes still shined with the same almost childlike enthusiasm and happiness that could so rarely be found in anyone else her age. As Tink was gushing over Henry and her new wardrobe Mulan walked through the door, not nearly as excited as Tink but still clearly happy to see their old friend back in town. Regina had to admit that it took her breath away to see Lani walk in fully decked out in her police uniform but she wore authority well, just like she always had, police belt and all. To her surprise she didn’t hesitate to wrap Regina in a hug and remind her of just how much she’d been missed around the bar.

They’d all crowded into a corner booth in the back of bar with a mountain of wings in the center of table and a drink in every hand to catch up with her. However, not wanting to talk about herself, she tried as best as she could to keep the focus on the changes in their lives. Hearing about their new jobs (Lani’s transfer to law enforcement, Tink finally taking over her dad’s business), relationships (Hook was apparently still flying solo, while Mulan had taken up with Roland’s daycare supervisor Ruby to Robin’s surprise), and other changes in their lives Regina felt herself get happier by the minute. The longer she spent with them the stronger her sense of comfort and security became making it that much easier for her to pretend that this was who she really was. Regina Gardiner. Just a woman on a business trip catching up with some old friends. The only time that illusion felt broken was when she locked eyes with Robin. He’d hadn’t spoken much since they’d arrived but he hadn’t taken his eyes off of her, probably still wondering how she could sit with their friends and chat as if there wasn’t a bodyguard sitting right outside this building tracking her whereabouts. Luckily she found it easy to avoid his gaze and stay in her illusion.

They’d been there for about an hour when her she felt her phone begin to vibrate. Pulling it out of her purse her heart clenched when she saw Snow’s avatar lit up on her screen. And just like that the illusion was shattered.

Clearing her throat, she slid from the booth and forced a smile to her face. “This is work,” she lied, holding up her phone.

A unanimous groan arose from the table.


“Business trip,” she clarified, raising a finger in her direction. It was a lie but it was enough to silence the group.
“You should take it in the storage room. It’s still the best place for privacy,” she heard Robin say. One look in his eyes told her he knew she was lying and though he wouldn’t call her out on it now he would be demanding the truth from her later. She sent him a quick nod before rushing off towards the storage room feeling the weight of his eyes against her back until she disappeared behind its door.

As soon as she was sure the old mop heads and cleaning products were her only audience, Regina sighed before bringing the phone up to her ear. “Hello.”

“So nice of you to pick up,” Snow answered snappily. Her tone was biting and sarcastic, it didn’t even attempt to mask her underlying irritation. “You were supposed to call me this morning.”

Regina winced as she remembered the promise she’d made to Snow before Robin had whisked her away in his Jeep. “I’m sorry Snow. I got sidetracked picking up Henry and meeting up with old friends. Not to mention dealing with the guard dog you’ve ordered to follow me around.”

“So I’ve heard,” mumbled Snow. “Damien told me about your… confrontation.”

Regina shook her head to herself. “Snow… why would you have him follow me?”

“Because you need the protection,” she insisted. “Sue me for being worried about you.”

“Well that’s very sweet of you but you almost gave me and Robin heart attacks this morning. We thought mother was following me.”

Only silence was heard from the other end of line as Snow took in Regina’s reaction. For a second Regina thought she might actual be contrite but then she heard, “Wait, you and Robin? Are you staying with him?”

Regina rolled her eyes. “Not the point.”

“Yet, so very intriguing,” Snow shot back mischievously. Regina could practically see her now grinning like a Cheshire cat through the phone. “What’s the deal with you two?”

“He’s just an old friend,” she answered softly. “A good one who cares about my safety and is put on edge when he knows that I am followed around by a man with a gun.”

“A man who is there to protect you,” stressed Snow. “Someone trustworthy and close by who can do something if Cora sends her goons to sweep you and Henry away. Tell me that doesn’t help you sleep better at night.”

Regina bit her lip as she failed to find the words to refute Snow’s claim. Perhaps it wouldn’t be so bad to have extra security. At least until she went back to New York.

“I’ll take your silence as a thank you,” replied Snow, her tone light with triumph. “Besides Damien wasn’t what I called to talk about. There’s something bigger we have to deal with.”

Just like in the car with Robin, Regina’s heart started to race at the seriousness of Snow’s tone. “What?”

The younger woman blew out a breath before answering. “After the funeral I went back to my hotel and a man came to see me. Said he saw me with you at the church and he needed to see you as soon as possible.”

_In and out_, Regina silently reminded herself to breathe. She blew out a slow breath before asking,
“Who was he?”

“He said he was a friend of your father’s,” said Snow urgently. “Archie… something, Hall, Hiller?”

“Hopper?”

“Yes! Archie Hopper,” exclaimed Snow. “You know him?”

She nodded her head. “I know him.”

The name brought images of a tall, wiry redheaded man to Regina’s mind eye. Archie had been her father’s private lawyer, one he kept separate from the company and therefore from her mother. Regina had only met him a few times in the past, each time being consistently pleasant while remaining utterly unremarkable. From what she remembered Archie was a rather shy man, always speaking softly and adjusting his red-rimmed glasses so he wouldn’t have to look her in the eyes when they talked. Very different from the cocky, corporate cutout lawyers her mother tended to employ. Their interaction never went beyond formal pleasantries but her father had always spoken highly of him, stating that he wasn’t just a valuable lawyer but a trusted friend.

Regina swallowed thickly. “Did you tell him where I was?”

“Of course not,” said Snow immediately. “I pretended I hadn’t heard from you in years but he was adamant. He left his business card with one of my bodyguards. Said he needed to meet with you as soon as possible. That it was about your father and his plans for you.”

*Plans? What plans?*

“Do you know what he’s talking about?” asked Snow.

“No idea,” said Regina softly.

“I still have the business card. Do you want me to set something up?”

Did she? She had to admit she was intrigued by his claims. She had no doubt that her mother had tied up her inheritance but if her father had left something, anything behind for her that was separate from that she wanted to know what it was. But after what happened at the funeral she wasn’t really in the position to be taking risks. For all she knew this could just be another set up by her mother. She ran her fingers through her hair trying to decide whether it was worth it to take the chance and meet up with Archie. Her father had trusted him. And from what she knew Archie had never even stepped foot in the same room as her Cora. She searched her gut and after a minute she just knew that she had to see what he was offering.

“Call and see if he can meet me today.”

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Going to lunch had turned out to be a lot harder than Robin expected, not that he ever thought it would be easy. Watching as all his friends fawned over Regina’s return while she smiled in their faces turned his stomach with guilt. One, for allowing her to be put in such a situation so soon after what happened with the funeral and two, for not telling his friends the truth about what had happened in the first place. As soon as they’d all sat down in the booth it struck him that by not telling them the truth of what he knew he was now lying to everyone he knew, same as Regina. That realization pierced him in the gut like a spear and he couldn’t help but wonder if Marian had felt that same sharp feeling when she’d chosen to keep the truth from him. Still he spoke not a
word about all that had occurred between him and Regina. Instead he chose to follow her lead, watching as she hugged, smiled and laughed with all their old friends, trying her damnedest not to let a shred of her pain show through. She appeared to be succeeding and his eyes never left her as he wondered just how she made it look so easy.

After she left for the storage room he let out a sigh of relief. The swirling in his gut had slowed now that she was out of his sight.

“Well it looks like New York has been good for her,” commented Mulan. “She’s happy, more confident.”

And just like that guilt returned in full force. He let out a resigned sigh before knocking his knuckles against the table. “How ‘bout another round of drinks? On me?”

Hook looked up from his beer. “Wait, was this round not on you?”

Robin smirked at him as he stood from the booth. “Don’t worry, mate. I’ve already added the drinks to your tab.”

“Why does it have to go on my tab!?” asked Hook incredulously.

“Because you’re the only one who still works here,” deadpanned Mulan, earning another round of laughs from the table.

Still shaking with giggles Tink hopped up from her seat and approached Robin’s side. “Come on. I’ll help you load up the tray.”

He nodded at her gratefully and they made their way to the bar. Pulling out five mugs from under counter Robin started refilling them with everyone’s choice of beverage while Tink watched him from across the counter.

She sighed contently as she leaned against the bar. “It’s nice to have the whole group back together. Even if it is just for lunch.”

Robin smiled at her. “I know. Feels like old times doesn’t it?” Well it did if you excluded the massive secret he was now carrying.

“Yeah,” replied Tink smirking at him mischievously. “You know we could’ve had more time to catch up if you hadn’t been hogging her for the last two days.”

“Excuse me?” said Robin, raising an eyebrow at her. “I have not been hogging Regina.”

“Oh yes you have,” drawled Tink, nodding her head with a chuckle. “You got to pick her up from the airport. You got to have her stay at your house. You got to drive her to the bar today for the lunch that you set up.”

She ticked the items off on her fingers as she listed them out to him, causing Robin to scoff at her and roll his eyes.

“You all were more than welcome to set something up yourselves,” he pointed out.

“As if we would,” said Tink, shrugging her shoulders resignedly. “You and Regina have always been just a little bit closer than the rest of us. No one was surprised when you took charge of her visit. Besides we could all see how excited you were when you found out she was coming back. We didn’t want to get in the way of that.”
Robin forced a smile to the lips as he remembered the days after he’d learned that Regina would be returning. To say he’d been ecstatic would be an understatement. Before they’d even finished talking he’d started planning out the weekend in his head. Things he wanted to show her, places she should revisit. They’d barely gotten to do any of it. Learning Regina’s secret had sent his plans up in flames. His lighthearted visit between old friends had been turned into a mission to help hold her together in the face of her old life. He’d told her that he wasn’t walking away from her but he’d lying if said things weren’t different now that he knew who she really was but that was all his fault now wasn’t it. He’d begged for the truth from her… and now he couldn’t help but miss the lie.

Pushing his complicated relationship with the brunette out his mind, he handed two pitchers over to Tink. “You’ve still got her for a little while longer. Let’s head back, make it last.”

Loading up the drinks in their hands they returned to the booth to find Regina had returned from the storage room. When they arrived she turned to them with an apologetic look.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I just got a call from my boss. She wants me to meet with another potential client and apparently they can only make room for me in an hour. So I’m afraid we’ll have to cut lunch short.”

Her tone was convincing; her story was plausible but as he looked in her eyes Robin only saw one thing. _More lies._

“No!” whined Tink. “But you just got here!”

“I know, I’m sorry,” said Regina. “But this is pretty urgent.”

“How unfortunate,” mumbled Robin, setting down the drinks. It took all his strength not to let his growing irritation color his tone. He tried to appear sympathetic as he asked her, “Do you need a ride?”

Regina nodded her head at him, clearly seeing through his mask. “Yes, I do.”

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Robin was fuming. That much was clear. She could see it in the clench of his jaw and his grip of the steering wheel. Could feel it in the weight of his silence and the absence of his gaze, the way he forced himself only to speak when spoken to and kept his eyes on the road, away from her.

They’d stayed at the bar a little while longer but still left sooner than anyone would’ve liked. It was hard to leave her friends behind, especially when they were so sad to see her go. After saying their goodbyes, they’d piled back into the Jeep with their boys. As soon as they were on the road Regina had directed him to Ramsett Park, an old playground they used frequent with the boys, thereby confirming that she’d lied to their friends again, not that he didn’t already know that.

They pulled up, hopped out of the car and the boys ran ahead toward the open swings leaving their parents behind in the dust. With their buffers gone Robin turned to her with expectant eyes. “Okay, what are we really doing here?”

Regina sighed before answering. “An old friend of my father’s got in contact with Snow. He said my father left something behind for me so I told him to meet up with me here.”

He crossed his arms and let out a frustrated sigh. “When is he supposed to get here?”

“Ten, twenty minutes tops.”
Robin nodded his head with a clenched jaw. “Alright then.”

Without another word he turned from her and headed for the bench next to playground with Regina hurrying behind him, struggling in her wedges to keep up with his stride. They sat down on the bench together, Robin on one end, her on the other. The space between them finally taking physical form. For a while she allowed him to ignore her in favor of watching the boys but soon the silence became too much for her to bear.

“You’re upset with me?” It was statement, not a question and they both knew it. Whatever Robin had been feeling towards her had been building all morning and frankly Regina was just ready for him to explode. “If there’s something you’d like to say Robin, just say it,” she ordered.

He angrily shook his head. “I just don’t understand how you can do it so easily.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Do what?”

“Lie,” he spat harshly. “You lie so damn easily, to me, to our friends and it is frightening. You sat with them as if nothing happened yesterday. As if you didn’t have an armed gunmen following you there, as if everything wasn’t ten steps away from shattering. You hid everything and you did it with a smile. And I am wondering how, after everything we’ve been through with you, you could’ve lied to us so easily and for so long.”

His words fell over like a cloud of sulfur, making her cheeks grow hot and her eyes itch with unfallen tears. She could feel all his frustration, it sliced through her like bullets and she was hardly able to conceal the pain it caused. But it also sparked an indignant rage inside of her, one that burned and boiled at the idea that he could judge her so harshly and assume she felt so little.

“You think it’s easy for me?” she asked, her voice deathly low and quivering as she leveled him with a glare. Her hands slid to the edge of the bench and gripped it tight trying to quell the emotion that was rising up inside of her. “After everything I’ve told you, you think it doesn’t kill me on the inside to lie to their faces? To look in the eyes of everyone I love and know that they’ll never know who I truly am? You think I take that lightly?! I don’t!”

Her voice started to rise and she silently reminded herself that they were in public. “Just because I make it look easy Robin, doesn’t mean that it is. I wish more than anything that I could be able to tell them the truth but I can’t.”

“Why not?” he asked in irritation. “What’s holding you back this time? ‘Cause it’s clearly not your desire for safety.”

“It’s because I don’t know what’s going to happen next!” she snapped. “My mother has finally caught wind of me. I don’t know how much longer I’ll even have in this life. And if this was the last time I saw them… I didn’t want it to be the day they found out I was a liar. I didn’t want them to hate me.”

She whispered the last sentence not realizing how true it was. If she never saw any of them again, she wanted to remember them as her friends, not as people she’d lied to and betrayed.

“They wouldn’t hate you,” said Robin softly, his anger muted by her outburst. “Telling them the truth wouldn’t make them hate you.”

“But it would change the way they see me,” she stressed. “Can you honestly say that after all I’ve told you and all that you’ve seen, that you don’t look at me any differently?”

He wanted to be able to refute her claims, to tell her that she was still the same person she’d always
been for him... but then he’d be lying. Things had changed. He’d discovered a whole other side of her, an entire person that she’d kept locked away from him. A person he didn’t feel he could trust like he used to. He’d promised her that things wouldn’t change but they had. And now, even as she stared at him with wide, imploring eyes, he couldn’t find the words to let her know that she still mattered just as much as she’d always had.

“Lover’s quarrel?”

Their heads whipped back to find Snow, with one perfectly plucked eyebrow arched above her sunglasses, staring at them from behind the bench. Quickly, clearing her throat Regina stood from the bench and walked over to her. Bypassing any pleasantries, she only asked, “Did you find the park okay?”

Snow rolled her eyes before slipping off her sunglasses. “It’s a city park Regina. Not the Temple of Doom. I used my G.P.S. and found it in ten minutes. I’m sure Archie will too.”

She was sassing her but Regina could tell there was no fire behind it. One look at Snow’s eyes told her that she’d slept only slightly better than she had last night.

“Who is Archie?” asked Robin, reminding them both of his presence.

“He’s my father’s old lawyer,” answered Regina before turning back to Snow. “And is everything all set up?”

“Yes,” said Snow nodding her head. “He knows to meet you by the picnic tables. I’ve already had Damien and two of my other guards set up shop there. They’ll protect you if anything goes down.”

Regina just nodded her head resignedly while Robin crossed his arms in response. “And you’re certain this is safe for her?”

Snow turned to glare in his direction. “Certainly safer than the funeral you let her attend yesterday,” she responded icily.

Regina’s eyes widened at her comment. “Snow!”

“What?” she replied in mock innocence. “Just using it as a point of reference. That was a private event where your mother could’ve snatched you up at any minute. This time we’re in a public place, with plenty of witnesses and guards that have your back and not hers. Safe as can be.”

Robin rolled his eyes at the nonchalant way she listed their advantages. He still thought Regina was better off not meeting with this man at all. He felt it too risky but knew better than to think he had say in the matter. Not after his behavior this morning.

Not a minute later Regina spotted Archie approaching the picnic area with a small box and briefcase. He looked just as she’d remembered. Tall, redhead and visibly nervous. He sat down at an open table and expectantly looked around the park.

“I suppose that’s my cue,” mumbled Regina, standing from the bench. Nervously wiping her palms against her thighs she turned to Robin. “Keep an eye on Henry?”

He wanted to grab her hand right then, drag her back to the car and drive away to never come back. But he couldn’t do that. Instead he offered a supportive nod and replied, “Of course.”

She nodded at him thankfully and took a deep breath, before turning to Snow. The younger woman offered her a look of encouragement before nodding her head. “You’ll be fine,” she promised.
“I know,” said Regina softly. It was a lie but one she tried to force herself to believe.

Squaring her shoulders back she made her way over to the picnic tables. As she walked further away from her two friends each step she took caused her feet to grow heavier but still she pressed on. It wasn’t long before she reached Archie’s table causing him to look up at her in shock.

“What Regina?”

She nodded her head at him. “I heard you were looking for me.”

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As soon as Regina walked away from them Snow replaced her on the bench next to Robin, something neither of them were particularly happy about. Sitting so far away from him she was in danger of slipping off the edge, Snow sighed as she turned her attention to the playground. Henry hadn’t noticed her arrival yet. He was too busy with his new friend and for that she was grateful. After last night, she was far too tired to come up with a lie to explain her sudden appearance in California. Sneaking a look at her bench partner, she saw Robin completely wrapped up in Regina. His eyes clearly hadn’t left her since she’d walked away and he’d positioned his body in the direction of the picnic tables, as if ready to bolt toward her at any minute. The sight of him made a scoff fly from her throat.

“Relax boy wonder,” she ordered, leaning back to cross her legs. “If she’s in trouble she’ll scream.”

A light annoyed growl rumbled from the back of Robin’s throat as he turned to face her. “Pardon me if I’m not as easygoing about this whole arrangement as you seem to be.”

Snow only rolled her eyes in response and he narrowed his at her. “You don’t like me very much do you?” he asked flatly.

She arched an eyebrow in his direction. “Well I don’t exactly know you, now do I?” She turned her eyes back to the playground. “What I do know is that you allowed her to walk into that funeral and burn her whole life into ashes.”

“You say ‘allow’ as if I had any control over the situation,” Robin gritted out. “What was I supposed to do? Handcuff her to a pipe in my basement ‘til it was over?”

“She’d be a hell of a lot safer if you had,” deadpanned Snow.

It was Robin’s turn to scoff as he shook his head at her blasé reaction to a suggested kidnapping. He supposed he could only expect as much from a girl who paid for men to follow her friends around.

“Whatever,” she mumbled under her breath. “It’s not like I’m here to punish you anyway. I just wanted to make sure she has everything she needs before I say goodbye to her.”

Robin sent a curious glance her way. “Why? Are you going somewhere?”

She turned to glare at him with hard eyes. “I’m not. She is.”

“What are you talking about?” he said narrowing his eyes at her.

Snow reared her head back as if shocked by his willful ignorance. “Oh my god. Do you really not see it?” She twisted her body to better face him. “Robin, she’s going back on the run. And once she does we’ll probably never see her again.”
She said it so matter-of-factly he could almost swear she was talking about the weather, not the possibility of their friend disappearing from their lives. The realization came at him like bullets and he immediately put on his Kevlar vest of denial.

“That’s not true,” he replied automatically. “She wouldn’t do that.”

“She doesn’t have a choice anymore,” stressed Snow. “Cora has found her now and it’s only a matter of time before she starts manipulating things to regain control of her life. The only option left is for her to disappear before she loses everything again.”

“Or she could stay and fight,” said Robin, his voice growing firm.

“With what resources?” scoffed Snow. “That woman, her mother, has all the money and power in the world compared to her. It would be a battle of David and Goliath proportions and she doesn’t stand a chance.”

“You know I might’ve slept through church as a child but I’m pretty sure David won that battle,” he shot back.

“David had God on his side,” pointed out Snow. “And in our case… Cora is the god.”

Robin sighed as he leaned forward to place his elbows into his knees. Cora Mills. He’d heard so much about her these last few days. Regina practically trembled every time she was brought up, Snow certainly held no love her and from what little he’d seen of her there was nothing that he could possibly say that was flattering. “This woman… what can she really do?”

“Honestly… anything she wants,” Snow answered solemnly. “She could have her blacklisted so she can’t find work. Have her declared mentally ill to claim conservatorship over her finances. Or she can skip all that and have her thrown in the back of a white van.”

“And you really think she’s willing to do all that?”

“A woman who can sell off her daughter to a man more than twice her age is clearly willing to do anything,” stated Snow resignedly.

“A man who just happens to be your father,” ventured Robin.

Her eyes whipped toward him at that. “Don’t remind me.” Her voice was soft but her words were sharp with an anger Robin suspected she kept buried deeper than she realized. Obviously he’d struck a nerve with her.

The sound giggles called Snow’s attention to the swing set and sorrow washed over her as she caught sight of Henry again. “What’s best for her and what’s best for Henry is to make sure Cora doesn’t have the chance to get to them again and that requires for both of them to disappear.”

She turned to Robin with a stern look in her eyes. “So I suggest you stop wasting time with whatever issues you have with her and start preparing your goodbyes. Make sure you don’t leave anything unsaid.”

They sat in silence after that. As far as Robin could tell there was nothing left for them to say to each other. Snow remained steadfast in her belief that Regina would choose to disappear, to leave everyone she knew behind and vanish without a trace. Though he didn’t want to believe it was true the words she snapped at him rang in his ears.

I don’t know how much longer I’ll even have in this life!
His eyes went back to the picnic area where he saw her still sitting at the wooden tables across from the redheaded man she’d told him about. Could she really be thinking about leaving? And if she was, did he have any right to ask her to stay?
Chapter 30

The dry wood of the picnic table scraped against her thighs as Regina sat across from Archie at the park. Even as no less than three separate splinters dug their way into her skin she still would count the awkward silence as the most uncomfortable element of their meeting. Just as she remembered Archie was flustered from the minute she sat down, completely unsure of what to say. She supposed he’d aged well in the years she’d been away, the only evidence being the growing bald spot at the top of his head. For the most part he hadn’t changed though. He still wore the same red-rimmed glasses and brown tweed jacket and apparently he still held the same need to go through formal pleasantries. In an effort to override his mandatory politeness she bluntly stated, “You said my father left something behind for me.”

“Oh yes!” said Archie, as if suddenly remembering the reason he’d met up with her. “I suppose we should get started with that.”

He reached to his side and set a medium-sized box on the table. “Why don’t we start with your physical inheritance to keep things simple.”

“What’s this?” she asked, cautiously sliding the box closer to her.

Archie adjusted his glasses as he stuttered, “Well, your father didn’t have much in the way valuable possessions as you know. He wasn’t particularly fond of jewelry or finery… like your mother.”

*Yet another reason their marriage was doomed from the start,* Regina thought sullenly. While her mother had always cared very much about appearances, making sure her wealth was subtly showing from head to toe, her father had been the opposite. He didn’t go out very often so he rarely indulged himself with expensive clothes or watches. Not that Regina cared. She didn’t exactly come here hoping for jewelry.

“However,” continued Archie, gesturing at the box, “there were a few mementos that he wanted me to make sure you received.”

Peering into the box Regina felt her throat grow tight at the things her father had left behind for her. The photo albums were what she noticed first. There were at least three in the box. One she recognized as the binder chronicling her childhood, filled with photos of her and her father at birthday parties and Christmases. The one that choked her up though was Henry’s baby book. When she’d escaped she’d left behind all his newborn pictures and the ones of him and her father together. She truly thought she’d never see them again and her heart swelled at the thought of her father saving them for her. There was more in the box too. Henry’s original baby blanket, old knick-knacks from her room at the mansion, even an old book of fairytales her father had once read to both her and Henry. Things that mattered.

She nodded her head at Archie gratefully. “Thank you.”

“Of course,” he said softly. “But there is more.”

He set his briefcase on the table, opened it up and pulled out a set of files. “First there is the matter of your son’s inheritance.”

He slid a file over to her. “In there is an account number for a trust fund in his name. It can be accessed with a seven-digit PIN Number included in the file. I haven’t looked at it,” he promised. “But I would still advise you to change it as soon as possible.”
She nodded her head as she opened up the file. The account was based in the Cayman Islands, had existed since a few weeks after Henry’s birth. She had to admit that she was a little shocked that her father had set up such a thing for her son but warmth filled her heart at the thought of it. When her eyes reached the account balance she felt her jaw drop against her will.

“2.5 million dollars?!” she whispered, her eyes wide with shock. In the back of her head she knew the amount probably wouldn’t even put a dent in her family’s fortune but she hadn’t lived that life for a very long time. The idea of her son having that much money to his name practically knocked her off her seat.

“Your father wanted to leave him more but feared that you wouldn’t approve,” explained Archie, shifting in his seat uncomfortably. “But if you’re displeased –”

“I’m not!” she said, quickly shaking her head at him. “I’m not. I just… wasn’t expecting such a large number.”

Archie nodded his head understandingly. “Your son’s future meant quite a lot to your father, Regina. He wanted to make sure that finances wouldn’t impede it any way.”

“And my mother doesn’t know about any of this?” asked Regina curiously. Her mother usually kept an iron grip on their finances. Watching over them like a hawk to make sure their fortune wasn’t depleted by reckless spending or investments.

“It took some maneuvering… not all of it necessarily legal,” he mumbled, “but I can promise you your mother knows nothing about the money he set aside for you and your son.”

“He set aside money for me?” said Regina tilting her head at him.

Archie nervously adjusted his glasses. “Yes… but that’s a bit more complicated.”

“How so?”

Archie slid another file over to her. “The set-up is basically the same as your son’s inheritance, larger but with one difference. Three people have access to the account. You, obviously, Regina Gardiner and a third party named Gina Colter.”

Regina’s eyebrows scrunched together at that last name. “Who is Gina Colter?”

“Well… at this point Gina doesn’t entirely exist yet,” he answered. He handed her a thick envelope. “Everything she is is in this envelope.”

Opening it up she found an ID with Gina’s name and her face, a passport, social security card and birth certificate. Her father had left her everything she’d need to disappear… again. Just like he had all those years ago.

“Where did you get this?” she asked softly.

She saw Archie swallow thickly. “I can’t answer that but I can tell you there is another envelope just like it for your son.”

“Right,” she mumbled, nodding her head.

“All three of these aliases have access to the account,” he explained, “but once one of them claims it the other two will be blocked out. Permanently. All it takes is one signature.”
Regina nodded her head solemnly. It appeared her father was giving her options. Reclaim her old identity, fight for the one she has or run off to be somebody else. Already, she found herself split between two of them.

“Where do I sign?” she asked in a grave tone.

“On the last page of your inheritance contract,” answered Archie. “But there is one final thing that comes along with it.”

Oh what now, she thought tiredly.

Archie reached into his pocket and pulled out a small flash drive. “Your father’s one request with all of this is that you watch what’s on this drive before you sign the papers.”

With trembling hands, she took it from him and twirled it between her fingers curiously. “What’s on it?”

“Oh I have no idea,” said Archie shrugging his shoulders and shaking his head. “Henry was very clear that only you were to view it.”

Regina didn’t respond. She just silently dropped her eyes back down to the flash drive in her hand. Whatever was on it would probably be the last thing her father ever gave her. What was it? A message? Instructions? Just goodbye? Hundreds of possibilities filled her mind, each just as likely as the last and it made her heart grow heavy.

She was brought out of her haze by the sound of Archie briefcase clicking shut. Clearing his throat once more he nodded at her, “That’s all there is for now. You can contact me through Miss Blanchard once you’ve signed the papers.”

She nodded her head at him, still silently contemplating the trio of options he’d just laid out for her. Archie awkwardly stood from the table and his collected his things. He moved to walk away from her but suddenly turned back on his heel and looked her straight in the eye.

“Your father was a good man, Regina and I will always be grateful to say that I knew him,” he said sincerely. “I am truly sorry for your loss.”

A lump formed in her throat as she nodded her head at him gratefully. “Thank you,” she said, “And thank you for this.” She gestured toward the files and box he’d given her. “I know it didn’t come without risks for you.”

Archie pressed his lips together and nodded his head. “Well, it’s always worth the risk if you can help a true friend. And your father was one of the truest I ever had.”

He gave her one last look before walking away and leaving her alone. Even with the decision that now lay in front of her she was glad that she’d come to see Archie. Not because he’d provided her with options in the form of her inheritance but because of the final words he’d spoken to her. The ones that let her know that despite what her mother had said at the funeral there was someone who missed her father just as much as she had.

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After taking a moment to collect herself Regina returned to the bench where Robin and Snow eagerly awaited her return. Snow curiously eyed the box in her hands while Robin just looked relieved that she’d returned at all.
“Are you alright?” he asked.

She stiffly nodded her head as she continued to blink back tears. “Yeah I’m just… a little overwhelmed.”

Robin wanted to reach out to comfort her then but something held him back. Perhaps it was the echo of Snow’s warning in his head or her very presence that kept him from wrapping his arms around Regina but in any case he just nodded his head understandingly and offered her a seat on the bench.

“What did your father leave you?” asked Snow curiously.

Regina settled down on the bench, box in her lap and sighed, “Options.”

With her two friends by her side she relayed to them all that Archie had told her with one exception. While she told them about the photo albums, accounts and fake ids she left out the flash drive her father had given her. She knew they’d want to know what was on it and despite having no idea herself she still found herself feeling reluctant to share it with them. Perhaps she just wanted the last piece of her father to herself.

Once she was done recounting her meeting they both stared at her with wide eyes.

“Wow,” breathed Snow. “I can’t believe your dad set all that up for you.”

“Neither can I,” whispered Regina, shaking her head to herself. “I mean… I knew he was always prepared to go but I never thought he looked this far ahead.”

“Well if he didn’t for himself then he certainly did for you,” commented Robin. He hesitated before adding on, “Even if you weren’t there in the end he was still your father. And I doubt he’d want to leave this earth without making sure you would be taken care of.”

Hearing one of Roland’s squeals, he turned his eyes back to the swings where he could see his son rocking back and forth in delight. “I know I wouldn’t.”

Regina nodded her head solemnly. She knew Robin was right. If she had the luxury of knowing when the end was coming she knew she’d do everything in her power to make sure Henry had what he needed before she died. It shouldn’t have surprised her that her father had been willing to do the same for her.

“However…” Snow drawled softly, “he did leave you with a big decision to make.”

“I know,” mumbled Regina, running her fingers through her hair. “Trust me I know.”

How could she forget? Three different lives and she could only pick one. Once her decision was made there was no going back. She could return to a life she hated, fight for the one she loved or create a new one altogether. With the threat of her mother looming over her she knew she didn’t have long to make a decision but it seemed nearly impossible. In her heart she knew it would be the biggest decision she ever made, and all she wanted to do was make a choice she wouldn’t regret later.

“What do you want to do?” asked Robin. His heart had leaped into his throat when he’d discovered there was a chance that she could stay in his life. And it had dropped to his knees when she’d said there was also chance she could leave it. Anxiety filled him from head to toe as he waited for her answer.
Regina just slowly shook her head. “I want… time to think about it. Everything is happening so fast I just want a minute to a catch up.”

Her words carried the nothing but weariness in them.

Snow nodded her head understandingly. “Okay…take a day then. You still have some time left in California, right?”

Regina nodded her head. “We leave tomorrow.”

“Good,” said Snow. “It’ll give you time to think. Just know that whatever you decide we support you unconditionally. Right, Robin?”

The younger girl turned to him expectantly, her eyes daring him to disagree while her voice carried a hint of I-told-you-so in its tone. He wanted to tell Regina how he really felt but he knew that wasn’t what she needed to hear right now. Snow was right she needed to hear that she was supported in whatever he chose. What else could he do but nod his head and reply, “Of course.”

Time to think was what Regina had asked for. Time to stop, consider and really think through her options. Robin and Snow had advised her to take the day, and she would, but it still didn’t seem like enough time. Hell she could have a month to figure things out she doubted she’d get much further than where she is now. She’s not stupid enough to think she has that sort of time though. It’d been only 24 hours since she’d last seen her mother but she knew there was little chance that Cora wasn’t already scheming and plotting to get her back under thumb. With that threat looming over her head she had to make a decision and make it now.

That’s how she’d ended up here, in the guest bedroom, files spilled open around her while Robin cared for the boys downstairs. She’d heard him tell Henry that she was just working as an explanation for why she’d locked herself away upstairs. It wasn’t exactly a lie – she was working to ensure his safety – but it still made her feel guilty. Everything she did, she did for Henry but she knew her behavior over these last few days had confused him. She tried to remind herself that once she settled on a decision and had a plan for their future she’d finally be able to sit him down and assure him that everything would be alright. She just had to make sure she wouldn’t be lying first.

She’d been staring at these files for hours now. Reading them over and over but the words stayed the same. Her father had left behind $10 million for her, 2.5 for Henry. To get it she needed to sign those papers but whatever name she chose to sign with would be the life she’d be forced to stay in. She’d been weighing the pros and cons from the minute they’d left the park. She knew she couldn’t go back to being Regina Mills. If she started using her old name again her mother would find her in a hot second. In truth she was torn between the lives of Regina Gardiner and Gina Colter. Her time as Regina Gardiner had been the greatest years of her life. She’d done so much, made so many friends and memories, become the person she’d always wanted to be but… she didn’t know if this life was safe for her anymore. Her mother had caught wind of her at the funeral. How long did she have until she was caught by her? She might be able to ward off her mother’s attacks with the money her father left her but did she really want to take that chance? What if she failed? She could lose everything. Running away to be Gina Colter seemed like the safest option. A whole new identity, she could go anywhere in the world and build a new life, one far away from her mother and the threats she carried. But leaving behind her mother also meant leaving behind everyone else. Her friends, her job, her life. Robin and Roland. She’d never be able to see any of them again. How could she do that to them? How could she do that to Henry? Taking him away, changing his name, his whole life? Her son wasn’t a baby anymore. He’s old enough to know when something isn’t right and leaving behind everything he knew, Emma, Snow and Robin, the people he
considered family would leave him heartbroken. *Heartbroken but safe*, she silently argued.

Of course, there was one thing that might make all of this simpler. The flash drive her father had left her was still burning a hole in her purse. She hadn’t watched it yet. She couldn’t bring herself to because she knew once she played it then the last piece of her father would be gone. A piece of her past, not her future. And she just wasn’t ready for that. Not yet.

She rubbed her hands against her eyes, trying to wipe away the exhaustion they held. Hours of running them over line after line had left them strained. Letting her gaze wander over to the window she saw it was already night. The sun must’ve set while she’d been drowning herself in her lack of decisiveness. She stretched out her neck with a groan as she walked over to the door. Reading these files was getting her nowhere. It was time for a break.

Her stomach growled as she walked downstairs and the smell of garlic and tomato sauce hit her nose. She hadn’t eaten since the bar and she was starving. She found Robin standing by the kitchen sink, his sleeves pushed up to his elbows as he rinsed leftover dishes and loaded them into the dishwasher. So apparently lost in his task that he didn’t even notice her until she was already next to him at the kitchen counter.

His eyes widened when he realized she was downstairs. “Hey.”

“Hey,” she repeated, leaning against the counter. She frowned at the dishes in the sink. “I missed dinner?”

“You did,” he replied with a shrug of his shoulders. “It was spaghetti. The best I’ve ever made actually. It ended wars and changed lives. Such a shame you weren’t there for it.”

A smirk grew on her face at his light teasing. “I suppose it’s too much to hope that you’ve saved me a plate.”

He cocked his head to the left. “It’s in the microwave.”

“Thank you,” she said gratefully. She found her dinner right where he said she would, a small bowl of spaghetti with a small piece of garlic bread on the side. Snatching up a fork from the cutlery drawer she sat down at the table to eat. Bringing a heap of spaghetti up to her mouth she softly moaned in surprise as the sweet taste of the sauce hit her tongue. Maybe not war-ending but it certainly was delicious. She turned to him.

“When did you learn how to cook so well?” she questioned, shock evident in her tone.

He chuckled to himself as he wiped his hands off with a kitchen towel. “Somewhere around the time when Roland grew teeth and I realized serving him takeout every night probably wasn’t in his best interest.”

Regina nodded her head with a soft laugh. She still remembered when Henry had started wanting solid foods and she realized she couldn’t feed him the leftover wings from the bar that she’d been subsisting off of.

“How long did it take you to figure out the basics?”

“A year at least,” he sighed, taking the seat next to her. “I swear I’d never been more dependent on anything like I was on Kraft mac and cheese.”

Regina laughed at that. “It is certainly a lifesaver, I agree.” She sighed as she ran her fingers through her hair. “Honestly I haven’t cooked – I mean, really cooked – in ages. I’ve been so busy
with work I just end up ordering takeout or popping a frozen lasagna in the oven.”

She thoughtfully twirled her fork into her spaghetti. “Maybe I’ll get back in the habit once… things calm down.”

*Once I make a decision.* That was what she really meant and they both knew it. Robin had been puttering around the house since they’d gotten back, trying desperately not to focus on the fact that she was upstairs trying to decide whether to stay or disappear. His eyes dropped to the table, unable to look her at her anymore as his fear that she wouldn’t stay began to press down on his chest.

“Don’t go.”

He said the words so softly he wasn’t sure she’d even hear them. Part of them hoped she wouldn’t but he heard her fork clatter against the side of her bowl as her hands went still in shock. He brought his eyes back up to her face to see her staring back at him, lips parted with wide eyes. “What?” she breathed.

He licked his lips before repeating, this time stronger and louder, “Don’t go. Please.”

Her eyes stayed on his face, her lips remained parted and her breath caught in her throat as she sat there utterly shell-shocked by the three words he’d just said to her. Seconds passed – or hours, she couldn’t tell – before she was even able to make a sound. A soft squeak was the best she could manage before she finally swallowed her surprise and whispered, “Robin… I…”

“I know,” he said, cutting her off, his voice wavering as he forced himself against his better judgement to continue speaking. “I know that you haven’t made a decision yet and it’s unfair of me to ask it of you but I have things to say and I just cannot leave this table without knowing I’ve said them. So could you please… just let me finish?”

Her mouth closed then as she swallowed nervously, her heart beating out of her chest and her eyes unable to look away from him. Still unable to speak, she just silently nodded her head at him, allowing him to continue.

“Regina you’ve been a part of my life for more than seven years now,” he said. “And in that time there isn’t one memory, not one important moment that hasn’t been made better because you were there. You’ve gotten me through bad times, helped me celebrate the good and somehow helped me see that the monotonous moments in between are still a gift.”

His eyes dropped down to his hands as they began to clench into fists against his will. “I know that I haven’t shown it very well these past 24 hours but having you in my life, well I’ve always counted that as a blessing. For a long time, I just thought of you as my wife’s best friend but the truth is you’re not just her best friend. You’re mine. You’re my best friend and I don’t want to lose you.”

Tears had welled up in Regina’s eyes at this point. Her bottom lip started to tremble at the sincerity in his words.

“And I know that it’s selfish of me to tell you all of this,” continued Robin. “I’ve seen your mother. I’ve seen how afraid of her you are. I know that you think you’d be safer if you just disappeared so she couldn’t find you. And if I weren’t so selfish, if I were a better friend, I’d be able to just let that happen but I can’t because every time I think of you and Henry leaving my heart breaks. Every time I think of never seeing the two of you again I feel like I’ve been hit for a bus. So this is me, being selfish, asking you to stay and promising that if you do I will be there for every battle, every setback and every victory. If you stay and fight, I promise you won’t be alone. So please… just
stay.”

His voice broke on the last two words. He hadn’t planned on this, on begging her to stay by his side and promising to fight by hers. He’d just wanted to sit by her as she ate, to give her what she wanted: time alone to think things through. Just a few minutes to pretend like her entire life wasn’t under fire but once she brought up, even marginally, the choice she’d been forced to make he couldn’t hold it in anymore. All he could hear was Snow’s warning in his head, reminding him that he was running out of time. That if there was anything he could say to keep her here he damn well better say it before she decided to leave. And he had but now there was nothing but silence. He didn’t speak. She didn’t speak. They just sat there locked in place by the weight of everything he’d just said to her.

She stared at him, tears still threatening to spill from her eyes and her chest growing heavy as his confession tore her heart to bits. Each word he’d said acted like a knife stabbing at her heart because she knew not one of them had made a difference. She was just as uncertain at the table as she had been upstairs. Perhaps even more so. He’d promised her his loyalty and she couldn’t even offer him a decision.

Instead she just silently stood from her chair and stepped away from the table. Giving him one last painful look, she turned away from him so he couldn’t see her tears as she walked towards the stairs. Her appetite long forgotten she locked herself away in the guest room once more. And he let her.

He didn’t follow her up the stairs or say a word to bring her back to him. He’d said all he’d needed to say when she sat across from him. Now all he could do was let her think it through.

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She’d been in the room for hours. No longer reading. No longer sorting through files. Just laying on top of the bed, staring up at the ceiling and hearing Robin’s voice in her head like a track on a loop. She couldn’t even blink her eyes without seeing his face.

It was long past midnight and Robin had gone to sleep. Long ago she’d heard the sound of his footsteps as he made his way down the hall to his bedroom. He’d paused in front of her door and for a moment she’d thought he might come in to speak with her. She hated herself for the relief she’d felt when he didn’t. She couldn’t see him right now. There was still too much she didn’t have figured out and now she had him to consider as well. Not that she wasn’t already doing that. It was just more weighted now that he’d officially asked her to stay.

She stood from the bed and started to pace the length of the room. She wanted to stay. She really did but what if it wasn’t in everyone’s best interest? If Robin stood by her side like he’d promised he’d be putting himself in her mother’s crosshairs. She could come after his business and his life. Regina didn’t want that for him or Roland. But she also didn’t want to hurt them by disappearing from their lives. Robin had told her that he’d be heartbroken if she left and he’d meant it. She knew he did. And if she was honest, the idea of leaving them behind, never speaking to Robin or seeing Roland grow up, broke her heart too. But is avoiding heartbreak, or at the very least delaying it, worth giving up certain safety?

Round and round her thoughts spun in her head. Dragging her through a loop, always bringing her back to the same questions, the same answers but no solution. It was maddening. She desperately ran her fingers through her hair as she practiced rhythmic breathing trying to calm herself down. She searched her heart for the answer but it was just as muddled as her brain. Stopping in the middle of the room Regina realized that she didn’t trust herself to make the decision on her own. She needed help. An opinion or guidance from someone she trusted to tip the balance. She
needed…

She needed her father.

Digging through her purse she found the flash drive and ran her thumb over it twice. She snatched up her iPad and settled back against the bed’s headboard, her heart beating out of her chest. The last piece of her father she would ever have. She hoped with all her heart it would be what she needed.

She shut her eyes for moment, trying to prepare herself for whatever she would see. Softly under her breath she prayed, “Please daddy… tell me what to do.”

She let out a deep breath and plugged the drive into the tablet’s USB port. Immediately a small video box appeared on screen. Pressing her lips together nervously she tapped it to initiate playback. As soon as the video started a small gasp flew from her throat and she covered her mouth in shock.

Her father was onscreen. It was the first time she’d seen him in years… and it wasn’t a pretty sight. He stared at her through the screen, sitting on a wheelchair in what she could only assume was a hospital room. He looked gaunt. Almost hauntingly thin, she could see his hospital gown practically hung off his body even if he tried to hide it with a thick red robe. His cheeks appeared sunken in and dark circles were prominent under his eyes. An IV was hooked up to his left arm and the tubes from his oxygen tank ran to his nose.

Still a smile grew on his face as he stared into the camera and despite his obvious exhaustion, kindness shined in his brown eyes.

“Hello Princess,” he said, bringing a tear to her eye. His voice was soft and grave, not like she remembered but god it felt good to hear.

“Daddy,” she whispered.

He let out a small cough before shaking his head at the camera. “As you can probably tell I’m not in the best of shape, sweetheart.

His breathing was labored as he spoke to the camera. “I told you a long time ago that this day would come sooner than we’d like and now it’s here. I’m dying Regina. I don’t have very long left. I’ve been sick for a while now and that’s why I’ve made this video. To let you know that everything will be alright.”

A lump formed in her throat as she listened to him speak.

“You don’t know any of this yet,” he continued. “Because you’re in New York with Henry.”

Her eyes widened at that. Her father had known where she was? This whole time?

“That’s right I kept tabs on you,” said Henry, Sr. with a small smile. “You’re my daughter. I needed to know that you were okay.

He paused, his chest heaving as he took in a deep breath. “I know that you’ll feel guilty once you learn I’m gone. That you’ll wish you had found a way to be by my side but Regina, I don’t want you to worry about that. If being alone now is the only way to keep you and Henry safe, then I will pay that price a million times over.”

He took a moment to catch his breath before speaking again. “Just know sweetheart that I am so
proud of you. I am proud that you’ve kept yourself safe for so long. That you have a career. And that you’ve taken care of your son so much better than I took care of you.”

She found herself nodding at her tablet screen, wanting him to know that she’d heard him.

Her father had a small coughing fit before suddenly growing serious. “Now it’s time for business. If you’re watching this Regina that means that I am gone and you’ve resurfaced. I always knew this was a possibility and that’s why I wanted to leave you prepared. Archie will have told you about your inheritance by now. I promise Regina that you can trust him. He’s a good man and he’s there to help you.”

A small smile grew on his face. “You’re probably wondering why I chose to leave you your inheritance under three separate identities.”

He sighed before continuing. “I did that because I wanted you to have a choice… for once in your life. For so long I’ve allowed your mother to push you into corners and twist your arm in order to force you into situations you wouldn’t have chosen for yourself. Even when I helped you escaped it was because she’d taken away any other option for you to feel safe. So my final gift to you is this choice. No one can make it but you. If you want to run, you can… but if you feel the need to stay I hope you do.”

Regina’s breath caught in her throat.

“I know that the thought of your mother still scares you and I know that the idea of standing up to her seems impossible at times but you are so much stronger than you know,” he said, his voice growing firm and earnest as he implored her to find her strength. “Regina don’t let your mother scare you into giving up what matters most. If you have something you cherish, keep it. If you have people worth loving, stay with them. I sent you away because there was nothing left here for you. Nothing worth fighting for and that included me. But I didn’t just want you to be safe. I wanted you to find a life worth living, one with happiness and love. If you have that now, please don’t give it up. Don’t let her take that away from you. Not again.”

Tears were streaming down her cheeks now as she listened to him urge her to fight.

He chuckled then. “I know. Fierce words from a dead man, right? Still I mean them with every piece of my soul.” He coughed once more before smiling at her through the camera. “I love you Regina, so please be happy for me. And remember no matter what you choose I will always be so proud to call you my daughter.”

She was openly sobbing now, her heart overwhelmed with emotions. The video ended with him smiling at her his eyes still kind and hopeful, just as she remembered. He wanted her to fight. He wanted her to stand up to her mother. He’d believed in her. Her daddy… in his final moments he’d given her just what she needed.

With the decision made in her heart she swallowed her sobs and nodded her head with determination. She would do this for her father. She would find a way to be just as strong as he believed her to be.

She stared at the image of his face, still frozen on the screen of her tablet. Blinking away tears she tapped the replay button and heard her father’s voice reach her ears once more. “Hello Princess…”

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The night passed quicker than Robin wanted it to. The moon set and the sun rose, shining light into
his room and waking him up long before his alarm went off. He groaned as he forced his eyes to open and face the morning light. He painfully shut them again as the memories of the night before came rushing back. Memories of Regina tearful eyes as he’d begged her to stay, taking away the peace he’d so desperately wanted to give her. He ran his hands over his face in shame. He’d had no right to do that to her. To make her feel so conflicted. She hadn’t even responded to him. She’d just walked away with tears in her eyes.

Forcing himself out of bed he headed downstairs for coffee. Hopefully he could clear his head before the boys woke up. He didn’t want them to pick up on any tension between him and Regina.

To his surprise the scent of coffee hit his nose before he even made it to the last step of the stairs. Following it into the kitchen he found Regina, sitting in the same spot she’d been in the night before, sipping on a cup of coffee as she looked through a scrapbook. His heart clenched when he saw her. Her hair was in disarray and her eyes were puffy and red as if she’d spent the whole night crying. But even with all of this he could see that the storm that had been lying beneath the surface was gone. She seemed calm, finally at peace. In an instant he knew that she had made her decision.

She looked up when she heard his footsteps against the stairs. Forced a smile to her lips as she locked eyes with him. “Morning,” she mumbled.

“You gave me too much to think about. At least that’s what he heard.

She sighed, shaking her head at him. “Technically I’m up late. Couldn’t sleep. There was too much to think about.”

He guiltily looked away from her. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” She softly cut him off. “It wasn’t just you I had to think about.”

It was true she’d been up all night. Watching her father’s final message over and over until it was burned into her memory forever. Only when she knew the words by heart did she finally shut down her iPad and wipe away her tears. The sun had barely been rising.

Her eyes dropped back down to the scrapbook on the table. “Somewhere around 5 I came downstairs and started looking through the box Archie gave me. Figured I’d take some time look through everything else my father left me.”

Sitting down at the table, Robin reached for the scrapbook while raising his eyebrows at her uncertainly. “May I?”

She smiled at him and pushed it over. “Sure.”

He took the book in his hands and smiled to himself as he saw the pictures of baby Henry glued to the pages. Henry was already six months old by the time they’d met so he’d never seen him so little. Looking at these pictures reminded him his days with newborn Roland. How tiny and fragile his son had been. For the first few weeks he’d been terrified of hurting him. In the photographs he could see Regina glowing as she held her new child. So happy to finally know him.

“God he was so little,” he whispered.

Regina chuckled, resting her hand in her chin. “I know. It’s hard to believe I used to be able to carry him around like that.”
She smiled to herself as she remembered the weeks after Henry’s birth. All the time she spent caring for him, getting to know him and letting him know her. She owed him so much. In her heart she knew if it hadn’t been for Henry, she’d still be trapped under her mother’s thumb. She’d never have found the strength to leave if she hadn’t had him to fight for.

She sighed as Robin flipped further through the book. “Robin I’ve made my decision.”

His hands stilled as his eyes shot up to her face. He felt his chest grow tight with tension at her words. Would this be the moment that she told him she was leaving forever?

Lacing her fingers together on top of the table she licked her lips nervously and said, “I’m staying.”

Relief flooded through his chest and his heart swelled with hoped. “You are?”

“I am,” she said, nodding her head. “And while the things you said last night were overwhelming they did open my eyes to just how much I would lose by running away. I have a life here. Henry has a life here with people that we love and don’t want to be apart from. And if I ran away from my mother I’d still be losing everything that matters to me. The only difference would be that I took it away from myself instead of her stealing it from me. And I can’t do that to myself or to my son. So… I’m heading back to New York today to talk to Mal about my job and once everything is settled I’m moving back here.”

“To California?” he asked, tilting his head curiously. “You would do that?”

“I have to,” she said confidently. “I love New York but California is my home. And as awful as this visit has been, this is where I belong. Here with you and my family. Now that I have my inheritance I can afford to live anywhere but this is the only place I want to be. So… if you wouldn’t mind could Henry and I stay here for a little while until we find a place of our own?”

“Yes, he would. As far as Robin was concerned they could stay with him until Henry was in his thirties, it would be worth it keep them in his life. He was just glad that she was staying.

“So how long until you sign the papers and become Regina Gardiner permanently?” he asked.

“Well it’s a bit more complicated than that,” she mumbled, slowing shaking her head. “I love being Regina Gardiner. It was the greatest time in my life but if I’m going to stay here I need to start building a life that my mother can’t take away from me. One that has roots that she can’t possibly tear up… and I can’t do that under false identity.”

He leaned forward in his seat. “What are you saying?”

She blew out a reluctant breath. “I’m saying that if I’m going to stay here and fight for my life. I can’t do it as Regina Gardiner. I have to do it as Regina Mills.”

“Are you sure?” he asked. “Regina that is… a dangerous move to make. Your mother would know exactly where to find you.”

“I know,” she said nodding her head. “But it’s only a matter of time until she does anyway. This way I won’t be hiding from her. I’ll be able to build up my defenses and start living the life that I really want. One where I’m not looking over my shoulder constantly. Or lying to the people I love. I don’t want to live like that anymore. I want our friends to know who I really am. I want my son to carry my father’s name again. I want to live my truth.”
Robin pressed his lips together nervously. Her decision might be a risky one but at least this time he understood why she had to make it. He supportively laid his hand on top of hers. “Then I promise that I will be there with you every step of the way.”

She squeezed his hand gratefully. “Thank you.”

The Smoking Wizard was one of the most exclusive cigar clubs on the west coast. Converted from an old speakeasy it sat in the back of an old steakhouse, the only entrance hidden with the help of a turning display case. With only one room the place could barely hold more than twenty people at a time. That’s probably the reason for its “invitation-only” admittance policy. Though more likely it was because the Wizard’s main clientele was high-class criminals.

Archie practically had to hold his breath as he stepped inside, the smoke was so thick. Men were lighting up cigars in every corner of the room and the only escape for the smoke were two small windows on the east wall. Walking inside he felt like he could have an asthma attack.

Places like this weren’t made for men like Archie, men with a conscience. He was visibly uncomfortable in the club, unwilling to look anyone in the eye, barely concealing the shiver that went up his spine with every step he took. It wasn’t just his tweed jacket and round glasses that made him stand out in the sea of dark suits and expensive watches. It was his very aura. The aura of a good man.

He felt as though he couldn’t stand to be in the place one minute longer until he heard his name.

“Archibald Hopper!”

He turned to the furthest corner of the room and saw the very reason he’d shown up there in the first place.

“Eli Gold.”

He sat in an armchair with his back to wall, one hand atop his cane, like always, and a cigar in his other. He stood as Archie walked over and greeted him with a firm handshake and a sly smile. In turn Archie greeted him with the unique mix of apprehension and curiosity one reserved for old friends. He shook his hand and offered him a cautious smile. “It’s been a long time.”

“Yes it has,” Gold agreed. He gestured to the armchair across from him. “Have a seat.”

Archie cleared his throat as he settled into the armchair’s leather cushion. He looked on disapprovingly as Gold took another puff of his cigar and exhaled into the air. “You know those things can kill you, right?”

Gold chuckled darkly as he snuffed out the cigar in an ash tray. “Many things can kill me Archie. If these cigars end up with the honor, I’ll consider myself lucky.”

Archie felt his blood run cold at Gold’s acceptance of his mortality. Given the life that his old friend he supposed smoking wasn’t the most dangerous thing in the world.

Pushing away the ash tray Gold leaned forward in his seat and rested both hands on top of his cane. “But we’ve got more important things to talk about than my health. Did she receive her inheritance?”

Archie nodded his head. “Yes. I just got the call from her this morning. She’ll be signing them this
afternoon. Then the money is hers.”

Gold drummed his fingers against his cane with a sigh. “And the alias she chose?”

“Regina Mills,” he answered firmly.

Gold’s fingers went still and his eyes grew serious. “You’re sure?”

“I asked her twice to be certain,” Archie stressed. “She’s taking back her real name.”

Gold leaned back in his seat an impressed smirk growing on his face. “Well she’s certainly inherited her mother’s brass, now hasn’t she?”

“Perhaps she’s just tired of running,” suggested Archie. “It’s been eight years. She’s been through a lot.”

“Well what she’s been through is not my concern,” Gold coldly pointed out. “It’s what she will go through once this decision is final that matters to me.” He exhaled in annoyance. “This makes things much more complicated.”

Archie wiped his palms against his thighs nervously. “Henry asked us to protect her.”

“He asked me to protect her,” Gold corrected. “You brought her the inheritance and that’s all Henry asked of you. For now, your work is done. Leave the rest to me. I’ll figure out a way to keep Cora off her back.”

Archie eyed him nervously. “What do you plan on doing?”

Gold turned his gaze onto him as his grip on his cane tightened. “Archibald, I know that the three of us – you, Henry and I – used to be quite close… but the truth is the two of you have never had the stomach for my methods. Don’t pretend like you do now.”

Archie swallowed harshly as his gaze dropped down to his feet. “You know even after everything that happened, I still consider you two the best friends I’ve ever had.”

Gold nodded his head solemnly. “I know… so do I. Certainly better than the ones I have now.”

He snapped his fingers and a well-dressed waiter rushed over with two glasses of scotch on the rocks. Gold took one for himself and handed the other to Archie. “I know you don’t favor cigars but I figured one last toast before you go might be nice. To Henry?”

“To Henry,” said Archie raising his glass. “May we protect the thing he loved the most.”

Gold nodded his head solemnly. “We shall do our best.”

With that they clinked glasses and took sips in honor of their lost friend. Archie left as soon as his glass was empty but Gold stayed behind. He’d promised his Henry that he would protect his daughter but her choosing to stay behind made his job that much more difficult. He’d keep his promise to Henry that was for sure. It would just require more from him now. A lot more effort and a lot more patience. He knew that Cora was smart. She wouldn’t attack Regina outright, she would wait for the perfect moment to strike and leave her broken. He just had to figure out a way to be there when it happened.

He ordered another glass of scotch and a cigar. Today he wouldn’t act. Instead he would mourn his friend like he hadn’t been able to since he died. But tomorrow? Well that was when the real work
would begin.
Chapter 31

After nearly three years of living there it surprised Robin that he still found new things about his house to fall in love with. The cabinet next to the pantry which Roland had turned into his hidey-hole. The view of the backyard from his bathroom window. Even the old creak of stairs had somehow wormed its way into his heart. The house was a dream and after nearly three years of living there, Robin could honestly say that the only thing he didn’t love about it was the garage.

It wasn’t the house’s fault that he hated the garage so much. If anyone was to blame it could only be him. While he prided himself on the fact that the rest of the house was well-maintained and clean, the same couldn’t be said about his garage. The place was a complete mess, filled to the brim with old discarded toys, unfinished projects and unpacked boxes, most of them not even his. More than a few of his friends had co-opted the space as their own free storage unit and Robin hadn’t even argued. The space was so crowded that Robin couldn’t even park his car there anymore. It was always hell to get in and out with what you needed. Which was why he’d spent the last hour trapped inside it, searching the place for his old toolbox. He sighed to himself as he sifted through another box, disappointed to see that his toolbox was nowhere in sight.

“You know you really should clean this place out,” commented Hook from the south corner of the garage.

Robin glared at him. “Yeah, I’ll start with throwing out your crap.”

“It is not crap; it is my childhood in box form,” Hook responded with a grin. He opened up another box. “When’s the last time you even stepped foot in this room?”

Robin shrugged his shoulders. “Um… Christmas I suppose. Regina and Henry were here so I needed the spare box of decorations.”

Just after Thanksgiving, less than three weeks after her father’s funeral, Regina and Henry returned to California. Just like the month before Robin and Roland were waiting for them at the airport. Even though they’d talked everyday while they were apart he’d still felt relief swell up in his chest when he was finally able to put his arms around her again. After everything that had happened it had been hard to let her out of his sight.

Hook hummed to himself thoughtfully. “I suppose I should add braving the land of lost boxes to the list of things you’re willing to do for her.”

Robin rolled his eyes at him. “Are you really going to start this conversation again?”

Hook shrugged his shoulders. “I’m just saying you two seem pretty close lately.”

“Well she’s been through a lot lately,” Robin pointed out. “I like to think that’s a good enough of a reason to keep her close.”

“I know, I know,” sighed Hook. “We’re all still reeling from the double life reveal but you have to admit that it means something that you’re the only one who’s been in the mix with any of it.”

Robin remained silent against Hook’s accusation. About a month after her return to California he and Regina, mostly him, had agreed that it was time to tell the rest of the group who she really was. It hadn’t been an easy conversation.

They’d had everyone meet up at the Drunken Monk during opening hours. It just seemed right to
have the truth come out in the place where’d she met them all, the place that she considered her first real home. Even though he was by her side the entire time Robin could tell that revealing the truth to them had been difficult for her. They were her family and she had been terrified that they’d reject her. She was practically shaking before she even started speaking. Of course everyone had been appropriately shocked. They took the truth hard but better than she’d expected them to. Mostly they’d just shouted questions at her while she did her best to answer. Robin had done his best to rein everyone in but more than a few egos were bruised. Still they’d supported her in the end even if some of them took it harder than others, especially when they’d realized that Robin had been the first of them to know. Since then the rest of the group, Hook mostly, had been taking a closer look at their relationship and coming to their own conclusions.

“I mean she’s even living with you now,” Hook added.

Robin shook his head at him. “That’s because she needed a place to stay when she moved back.”

“Which happened three months ago,” Hook pointed out. “Most people would be expected find their own place by now.”

“Well Regina is not most people to me,” responded Robin, a little bite in his tone. “Besides I love having her and Henry here.”

It was true. Having Regina and Henry in his home turned out to be a treat for both him and Roland. Even though things had been quiet for the most part he still knew that Regina’s mother was threat and it made it easier for him to sleep at night knowing they she and Henry were safe down the hall from him. Regina had taken over the guest room while the boys were sharing a room for the time being, which of course led to some late nights. Well, late for a five and eight-year-old. The two boys were absolutely smitten with each other. Hardly any arguments between them. The same was true for him and Regina. Though her days were spent searching for her own place and setting up her branch of the company, her nights were spent with the boys, sharing meals together and watching Disney films. They’d easily formed a routine with their sons, switching off the days they would cook and pick them up from schools. Sometimes it surprised him how naturally they’d all found a rhythm with each other. After everything that had taken place during their last visit they were closer than ever. As far as Robin knew there were finally no secrets between them and for that he was grateful.

“I just think it’s really telling how much you two have intertwined your lives in these past few months,” commented Hook.

Robin sighed as he set down another box. “Look… I know that I’ve been more than a little involved with her lately but it’s because I promised her that I would be. When she chose to stay here I promised her that she wouldn’t have to go through anything alone. I’m just trying to follow through on that. It’s the least I can do for her. I mean she is one of my oldest friends.”

Hook scoffed at him. “I’ve known her just as long as you have and I’m not searching through my garage at eight in the morning so I can help her set up her office on my only day off.”

Robin sent him a stern look and Hook rolled his eyes. “Well I am but only because you forced me.”

He drummed his fingers against a box. “So you’re really saying there’s nothing more between you two?”

“No,” chuckled Robin, as he searched through another box. “We’re old friends, we’ve seen each other through a lot but I promise you there’s nothing romantic between us.”
Hook nodded his head understandingly and shrugged his shoulders. “Do you want there to be?”

Robin whipped his eyes back up to him. “Excuse me?”

“Come on Robin be honest,” said Hook, his tone growing serious. “Are you saying that there has never been a moment, in these past few years, in all your years of friendship, that you’ve thought to yourself that maybe, just maybe, you’d like something more with her?”

Robin felt his jaw clench against his will. He didn’t know why but the question caused his fight or flight response to kick into gear. Suddenly his mind wandered back through the past few years of his relationship with Regina. How she’d pulled him out of his grief over Marian, how often they’d talked to each other when she was away, how she’d allowed herself to lean on him in these past few months. He remembered a moment they’d shared just this last Christmas. A forehead kiss and a perhaps-a-little-longer-than-necessary hug. It was true that there was nothing romantic between them… but could there be? No, he quickly decided. What he and Regina had was special, that was true, but it wouldn’t turn romantic. It couldn’t. There were too many reasons it couldn’t. He and Regina were just friends. He didn’t have any feelings for her. He couldn’t have any feelings for her.

“No,” he said firmly. “I’ve never wanted something more from her.”

Hook stared at him for a moment, as if searching for a lie in his eyes before nodding his head with a smirk. “Okay Robin… if that’s what you believe.”

The smug look on his face lit a fire in Robin’s gut but he just buried it as he returned to his search. It didn’t matter what Hook thought. He knew where he and Regina stood and he was fine with it. At least that’s what he told himself.

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An hour later Robin and Hook arrived downtown with the toolbox in hand. It didn’t take them long to find their destination. Regina’s new design studio wasn’t a large space. Nestled between a jewelry store and a candle shop, the property had one large showroom, two medium offices and a small closet. It was nothing like Volante’s office space in New York and Regina intended to keep it that way. While the New York branch would be churning out designs for starlets and icons alike, her branch would be catering to the wealthy Californian average joe. Because of that she wanted her space to have a warmer, more intimate feel. It had taken her weeks but she’d finally found an affordable property with the energy she’d been searching for.

Looking through the windows the place appeared completely empty but as soon as Robin tapped on the glass door they saw Regina poke her head out from the back room. She cantered over to the door, dressed in a pair of old denim shorts and plain grey tee with urgency clear in her brown eyes.

“Did you bring the tools and nails?” she asked, not even offering a greeting before addressing what she needed.

Robin held up the toolbox with a smile. “Took me a few hours but I got them here.”

She clasped her hands together and let out a relieved sigh. “You are my hero.”

As he stepped into the store, Robin tried to ignore just how much her words made his heart swell. Those words would’ve felt good coming from anyone he tried to tell himself.

“Thank you guys for coming in to help,” she said, patting Hook on the shoulder.
Hook sent her a charming grin. “Well you know we’re always eager to lend a hand when asked.”

“Is that the guys?”

They all turned to see Emma walk out of the office, dressed in a pair of black denim overalls with her blonde hair piled atop her head in a knot. She smiled and sent them a small wave as Snow came trailing out behind her. Dressed in a pair of gray leggings and a plain maroon tee, she didn’t appear to be in half as good a mood but her attitude appeared no different than Robin usually met her.

Regina quickly introduced them. “Guys this is Emma, my friend from New York. Emma this is Killian and Robin. And you both remember Snow.”

Emma nodded at both of them with a close-lipped smile. “Hey guys. Nice to meet you.”

“It’s good to meet you too,” Hook slowly drawled. He narrowed his eyes at her before tilting his head at her curiously. “Hey aren’t you…”

Emma’s smile dropped and shook her head. “Please don’t say it.”

“The Swan Princess?” he finished.

Emma let out a defeated groan while beside her Snow released a triumph bark of laughter.

“I am so happy I thought of that moniker for you.” She let out a pleased sigh. “It is truly the gift that keeps on giving.”

Ever since she’d started managing Emma’s modeling career, the blonde’s face had been a less than rare sight. With her natural tenacity and wealth of connections Snow had booked Emma jobs in ads and commercials. Her face had been featured nationwide in fashion magazines. Initially Emma hadn’t minded. The work was hard but well-paying and for the most part enjoyable. Modeling had opened up a lot of avenues for her and most importantly allowed her to save the money she needed to go to school and earn her degree. However, the more her fame grew, the more her privacy shrunk. Her rising star combined with her and Snow’s friendship made her a bit of a target for the paparazzi. Nothing truly invasive had happened yet but a few photos of her around her city had shown up on Page Six and she wasn’t exactly happy about it. It made her skin crawl thinking of camera men following her, all yearning for a photo of the “Swan Princess.” Normally throwing on a pair of glasses and dressing down was enough to keep her from being recognized but that clearly wasn’t the case today.

“I was really hoping that name would’ve stuck to East coast,” she mumbled to herself.

“I can see why,” chuckled Hook. “As beautiful as the title is I’m not sure it does you justice.”

Emma raised her eyebrows at him. “Oh! Well that was… smooth.”

“I do my best,” Hook replied with a flirtatious wink.

Robin watched their interaction with a mixture of disbelief and annoyance. Well that didn’t take very long at all.

He warningly cleared his throat at Hook. “Well seeing as we’re all here to work I suggest we get started.”

He turned to Regina. “What exactly needs to get done?”
“Cleaning, painting and replacing the lightbulbs,” she listed meticulously. “The girls and I have been cleaning all morning so everything is pretty much done on that front.”

“Thanks for showing up to help with that by the way,” Snow added sarcastically.

Regina sent her a warning glare her way and she returned it with an annoyed look of her own. “What? I woke up at six am to be here. You should’ve known I wasn’t going to be pleasant about it.”

“Well we are here now,” Robin interjected, sensing Regina’s annoyance begin to rise. “So painting first?”

“I think we’re better off starting with lights,” said Emma. “It’ll be easier to paint once we can actually see.”

“Well the lights in my office are already done so there’s that,” said Regina.

“Why don’t you and Robin get started painting the office while the rest of us finish of what’s left of the lights?” suggested Hook. “By the time you’re finished with the office we’ll have the lights done and we can all start painting the showroom together.”

“Sounds good,” Regina with a nod of her head. “I’ll grab the painter’s tape from the closet.”

“And I’ll grab the ladder,” said Emma, following her towards the storage closet.

Snow shuffled behind them unwilling to engage the men in any small talk. Robin watched them go before turning to Hook with a sharp look in his eye. “You’re not just gonna flirt all day are you?”

“No,” replied Hook. He arched an eyebrow at him. “Are you?”

“Don’t start,” said Robin in a low voice. “I’ve told you before there’s nothing there.”

“Then explain why you keep getting so worked up over something that doesn’t exist,” challenged Hook calmly.

Robin didn’t even have time to put together a rebuttal before Regina exited the closet with a roll of blue tape in hand. Instead he just glared at Hook and ordered, “Just focus on the lights” before stomping off into the office.

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While Snow, Hook and Emma started on replacing the lights in the showroom, Robin and Regina took on painting the office. Upbeat salsa music played from her iPod as they colored the walls a welcoming shade of Tiffany’s blue, all the while Hook’s words still swarmed around in Robin’s head making it hard for him to concentrate on his work. Did he want more with Regina? He forcefully reminded himself that no he didn’t, that they were just friends and nothing more. He reminded himself of this over and over but the more time he spent alone with her in that office the more his resolve weakened. For the fifth time in ten minutes he snuck another look at her from the corner of his eye. Her hair was pulled down into a small over-the-shoulder braid as she painted beside him. He noticed a speck of blue paint had fallen on a strand just above her right ear. It went well with the matching streak on her left cheek. He’d arrived here earlier than him, had been working much longer than he had but it hardly showed. She seemed full of energy. He’d caught her dancing to the music more than once, not openly of course, just a rhythmic step here or a sway of her hips there. He doubted that she even noticed but he had. Her little bouts of dance made him smile. She’d grown a bit addicted to salsa music in the past few months. She told him
her grandmother used to listen to it constantly when her father was a young boy and he’d done the same when she was a little girl, so much so that she’d learned to salsa dance just for him. He knew listening and dancing to the music made her feel closer to the father she’d lost and it made him feel good to see her enjoying it. Perhaps he would take her to that salsa club by the beach one night. He’d love to see her dance more openly. With the group of course, he added hastily. It’s not as if he’d ever take her alone. That would be heading into date territory. And he tried to remind himself that wasn’t what he wanted.

They’d been painting for more than an hour, nearly finished with the first coat when she set down her paint roller and stretched her hands over her head revealing a sliver of skin between the hem of her shirt and the top of her shorts (not that he’d noticed it specifically). “I think I’m about ready for a break,” she moaned.

“It’s hardly been an hour,” he pointed out in surprise. “You can’t tell me you’re already tired.”

“Well I’ve been here longer than you have,” she responded playfully. “Plus we have to let the paint dry before the second coat anyway.”

“Fair point,” he said nodding his head and lowering his own paint roller. “Ten-minute break couldn’t hurt.”

He stretched out his shoulders and considered ordering the pizza for lunch when he saw Regina sigh and rub her hand against her right cheek, unknowingly smearing paint against her skin. The sight of it caused a burst of laughter to sneak up his throat.

Regina widened her eyes at him. “What?”

“Nothing, you’re just covered in paint,” he chuckled.

“It’s not that bad,” she said defensively. “Besides you’re not exactly sparkling clean yourself.”

“There is not a drop of paint on me,” he declared confidently.

Regina scoffed and marched closer to him. “Oh really? What is this then?” She stabbed a finger at a speck of paint on his bicep. “And this?” Her finger dropped down to his wrist. “And all of this?” She giggled as she waved a hand at the specks mixed in his hair. “Don’t throw stones if you live in a glass house Robin.”

“Hey I avoided the general face area,” he pointed out. “You’ve got paint on your right cheek, your left cheek, just above your ear. Pretty sure I’ve seen Roland finger paint and make less of a mess himself.”

Another laugh flew from her throat and Robin smiled at her. He hadn’t seen her this carefree and weightless since before her father’s funeral. He’d missed it, seeing her laugh and smile so freely. He wished he could keep her this way forever.

“Are you happy Regina?” he asked softly.

His question caught her off guard, causing her laughter to trail off. Bringing her hands to her hips she sighed and nodded her head slowly. “Yeah… I think I am.”

He found himself staring into her eyes, searching for a trace of a lie, pleased when he found none. He firmly nodded his head at her. “Good.” He shrugged his shoulders. “Just checking.”

She rolled her eyes at him but kept a smile on her face.
“Am I interrupting?”

They turned to see Emma standing in the doorway staring at them curiously. Robin immediately took a step back from Regina, not wanting the blonde to get the wrong impression.

Regina shook her head at her. “Of course not Emma. What’s up?”

“Apparently there’s a surprise at the door for you,” she said. “You might want to come and see it.”

Regina frowned at her. “It better not be the furniture. It’s not supposed to arrive until tomorrow.”

She exited the office and looked toward the front door. Her eyebrows scrunched together but her lips grew into a surprised smile as she saw who was waiting for her. “Jefferson?”

He stood there in all his New York glory, a bright smile on his face as he watched her come out of her office. A happy laugh came from both of them as he wrapped her in a warm hug, not even half-caring about the chances of getting his clothes stained by the paint specks on her.

Robin watched their interaction with a frown. Who the hell is this guy?

Regina turned back to the rest of the group, a smile still planted firmly on her face. “Guys this is Jefferson Abbott. He was on my design team back in New York. The girls have met him already.”

He and Killian both mumbled awkward hellos in his direction. The name sparked a vague recognition in the back of Robin’s head. He remembered Regina mentioning him a few times over the phone. He felt his gut begin to twist as he took him in. Jefferson was a clean-shaven man and particularly well-dressed. He wore a crisp, blue button down shirt paired with a gray, two-button vest, matching pants and a purple tie to bring it all together. It was a bit much for California but somehow Robin was sure such an attire was commonplace in New York. He had to admit Jefferson was a good-looking man with his thick brown hair and white teeth. Nothing like he’d imagined. And seeing Regina approach him with such affection… well it stirred up something inside him. Something… unpleasant.

He watched as Regina turned away from him to face the man whose presence had stirred up such an unpleasant ferocity inside of him.

“What are you doing here?” she asked curiously.

Jefferson sighed apologetically. “Do you even have to ask?”

Regina let out a defeated groan. “Mal sent you here to check up on me.”

“Yes,” said Jefferson nodding his head.

“Seriously?” moaned Regina. “Unannounced? Not even a phone call or e-mail to give me a heads up?”

“She kind of insisted on catching you off guard,” he said. “After everything that’s happened she’s developed more than a few trust issues where you’re concerned. And I think you’re big enough to admit that you’ve earned them.”

Regina rolled her eyes at him but didn’t defend herself. She knew he was right. Things between her and Mal had been... tense. And that was due to her lies. She supposed if a sneak attack would help quell her boss’ anger then it wasn’t the worst thing in the world.
“Okay,” she sighed. “Where do you want to start?”

“Tour of the studio might be nice,” he replied.

“Well it’s basically all that you can see right now,” she said, waving her hand around the bare studio. “We’re painting right now and the furniture’s scheduled to come in tomorrow.”

“Do you have a copy of your order from the store?” asked Jefferson. “Mal wants to make sure you’re not going over budget.”

“Of course she does,” mumbled Regina. She sighed and gave her head a little shake. “I have a copy of the confirmation e-mail on my phone. We can go over it if that’s what you’d like.”

She pulled out her iPhone and glanced at the time. 12:30. She grimaced. “However I did promise these guys pizza so… would it be alright if we stepped out for a bit? You can ride with me to the pizza shop and we can talk on the way.”

“Sure sounds good.” He flashed her another grin and Robin felt his gut twist once more. He resisted the inexplicable urge to punch the other man in his teeth when he saw Regina turn toward him.

“Do you mind cracking the whip while I head out to get the pizza?” she asked, completely ignorant of just how much he wanted to say no.

In truth something about the idea of her being alone with Jefferson turned his stomach and he honestly would’ve preferred that they stayed here with everyone else while he went to pick up the pizza himself. He almost offered to do just that but instead he squashed down the feeling in his gut and forced a smile to his lips. “Sure. I’ll make sure we stay on task.”

“Thanks,” she said with a smile.

And with that she was gone. Purse hanging from her shoulder, she walked out the door with Jefferson trailing after her. Knots were still forming in his gut as he watched them go.

Once they were out of sight he turned to Snow with a sigh. “So… that’s Jefferson?”

“Yeah,” she said shrugging her shoulders. “She’s mentioned him before, right?”

“Once or twice,” Robin mumbled sullenly.

He frowned once more and Snow narrowed her eyes at him. “What?” she asked.

“Nothing,” he said, shaking his head unconvincingly. “It’s just I expected him to be more…”

“Gay?” Snow supplied with an arched eyebrow.

Robin let out an embarrassed snort and shrugged his shoulders. “Well I mean… hat designer.”

Snow chuckled at him with a knowing look in her eyes. “Firstly, he designs more than just hats. Secondly, I’m so sorry to disappoint you but he’s completely straight.”

It was Robin’s turn to narrow his eyes as he replied to her, “Why would that disappoint me?”

Snow just smirked at him while behind his back Hook commented, “Why indeed?”

He turned back to see Hook standing behind him with the same smug look he’d worn in the garage.
Once again the words he’d said echoed in Robin’s skull. *Do you want there to be?* Immediately he forced down the swirl of emotions they evoked and sent a harsh glare Hook’s way.

“Don’t you have a wall to paint?” he ordered firmly.

Hook continued to smirk at him but still took the hint and walked away, as did Snow, leaving Robin alone to simmer in his emotional discomfort. He tried to tell himself that his feelings were just a strange mix of concern and apprehension, nothing more. Regina’s mother was still out there and he didn’t exactly know if he could trust this Jefferson person. Yes, that’s all it was. Just worry. Not actual romantic feelings. Besides even if they were, which they weren’t, it wasn’t as if he even had a reason to be jealous. Regina and Jefferson were just co-workers and nothing more.

At least that’s what he kept trying to tell himself.

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There were many differences between California and New York. The streets, the buildings, the people. While Regina knew that California was where she was meant to be, she also knew a part of her heart would always belong to the concrete jungle where she’d learned how to fend for herself. She knew that she would always miss the way the lights sparkled at the night and the unique fashion that she could find just walking down the street. But more than anything she knew she would miss the food. Oh the delicacies she could find hiding around the next corner at all hours of the day. No matter how hard it tried California just couldn’t compare. A fact that was glaringly apparent when she brought Jefferson into the pizza shop.

The place was an old favorite of hers. She, Henry and the rest of the gang used it as their go to whenever a pizza craving hit. Even now the smell of sauce and cheese brought back memories of holidays and movie marathons where they’d stuffed their faces with its fattening deliciousness. But while she knew and believed in the quality of the pizza she was getting the same didn’t hold true for Jefferson. As born and bred New Yorker his standards for Italian were a bit higher than most.

As they waited near the cash register for her order to be filled he eyed the pizza display critically. “Is this actually what Californians think pizza is?”

Regina snorted at him. “It’s better than you think.”

“It’s cardboard with sauce on it,” he retorted, doubt clearly showing in his eyes.

She just chuckled at his reaction. “If you think the pizza’s bad just wait until you see the bagels.”

Jefferson shut his eyes as he groaned in disgust. “I pity your poor taste buds.”

“I promise you they’re doing just fine.”

“Well what about the rest of you?” he asked curiously.

She scrunched her eyebrows at him. “What do you mean?”

He sent her a knowing look. “You tell me… Regina Mills.”

His use of her real name gave her pause. She knew word of her secrets had gotten out in Volante but she didn’t think he’d heard. He hadn’t exactly approached her about it. Then again, neither had anyone else at the office. She let out an embarrassed breath and brushed her hair behind her ears. “So… you heard about that?”
“Mal told me,” he admitted with a shrug. “And Ursula and Carlotta told everyone else.”

Regina scoffed and rolled her eyes. “And to think I was just starting to miss them.”

Jefferson let out a tiny laugh before folding his arms across his chest and staring down at her curiously. “So… secret identity? That’s has to be quite the story.”

“Well it’s a… long, complicated one for sure,” she softly replied, giving her head a little shake. “And it’s certainly not one I can tell while waiting for an order of pizza.”

“Okay,” said Jefferson, nodding his head understandingly. “So come out to dinner with me.”

Her eyebrows hit her hairline in surprise. “What?”

He shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly. “Well we barely scratched the surface of the studio business on the ride over. I doubt we’ll finish it on the way back. It might be easier if I could just take you out to dinner and we could talk about it there.” He sent her a disarming smile. “Maybe there’ll be enough time left over for your story then.”

Regina felt her cheeks go red at his offer. “Well… I’m not so sure about that,” she drawled nervously.

“C’mon it’ll be fun,” he promised playfully. “We’ll eat a good meal, have a couple drinks. I’ll even remind you what good food actually tastes like.”

Despite her uncertainty a giggle escaped her and she could see he only took it as encouragement.

“It’ll be just like old times,” he added. “Except we’ll be in a restaurant instead of working late in the office.”

A smile tugged on her lips as she remembered their late nights back at Volante. Staying in the office long past nine trying to catch up on the work that Mal had unexpectedly dropped down on their desks. Somehow he’d always been able to make it feel like the office wasn’t the last place she wanted to be on a weeknight.

She sighed as she drummed her fingers against her thigh. She had been all work no play for a while now, setting up things with the new branch and making sure Henry was well-adjusted. Perhaps it wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world to have dinner with a good friend.

She arched an eyebrow at him. “Where would you even take me?”

“Oh don’t worry about that,” he said, a mischievous glint dancing in his eyes. “I know a place.”

She let out a disbelieving chuckle. “Half a day in this town and you already know a place?”

“Oh I always know a place,” he replied with a confident grin. “Think you can wash off the paint by eight o’clock tomorrow?”

“I’m sure it won’t be a problem,” she said gamely.

“Good.” He nodded his head happily. “It’s a date then.”

Ten minutes later Regina left the pizza shop with two medium pies, dinner plans and a smile.

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By the time Regina returned to the studio the rest of the group had already finished prepping the showroom for painting. They decided to take a break for pizza with the guys graciously offering to get started on the painting while the girls had lunch in the office. Robin had finished it off while she was gone. As she chewed on a bite of her stuff-crust pizza Regina looked around her with a critical eye.

“Maybe I should’ve gone with a darker blue,” Regina softly mused. She was sitting cross-legged on the office floor, staring at the walls with a critical as she chewed on a bite of her stuffed-crust pizza.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” piped up Snow. She sat across from Regina picking the toppings off of her slice. “This color is perfect. It’s warm, it’s welcoming. And even if you don’t like it, it’s too late to change it because I’ve already picked out the matching furniture.”

“Snow’s right,” chimed in Emma, from her spot on the floor. “You’ll feel more comfortable once the furniture arrives tomorrow. Don’t overthink it now.”

“I guess you’re right,” sighed Regina. “Besides I’d hate to ask Robin to redo it now.”

Snow and Emma shared a look before mutually deciding to change the subject.

“So what did Jefferson want?” asked Snow, leaning back on her palms. “A hard copy of the studio’s ten-year plan written by tomorrow?”

“No,” chuckled Regina. “He just wanted to run though the budget again and make sure we’re on schedule for the grand opening.”

Emma raised an eyebrow at her. “You covered all that in one car ride to the pizza shop?”

Regina shook her head. “Not even close. We actually made plans to go out tomorrow and talk about it more.”

Emma and Snow exchanged another look before the brunette leaned forward with intrigue clearly blazing in her green eyes.

“Go out?” she asked curiously. “Like a date?”

“No! It’s not a date,” Regina quickly assured them with a shake of her head. “It’s just a meeting between professionals.”

“Okay,” scoffed Emma. “And when is this ‘professional meeting’?”

“Eight o’clock tomorrow night.”

A bark of laughter flew from Snow’s throat. “Yeah that’s a date.”

Regina shook her head. “No it’s not.”

“Yes it is,” said Emma nodding her head fervently. “If this was about business he would’ve taken you to lunch. He’s taking you to dinner. It’s a date.”

Snow nodded her head in affirmation. “Let me guess he didn’t even tell you where you’re going yet?”

“No,” mumbled Regina.
“Which would also mean that you’re not meeting him at the place but he’s coming to pick you up?” added Emma, wiggling her eyebrows suggestively. “Regina that’s a date. You were asked out on a date.”

Regina mentally ran through her and Jefferson’s conversation at the pizza place trying to find a way to prove that they were wrong and her dinner with him was not in fact a date. But the more she thought about it – the way he’d grinned at her, the playfulness in his tone – the harder it was to deny that perhaps there was more to their plans than she’d realized.

“Oh my god! He asked me on a date!” she hissed, her eyes widening at the revelation. “And I said yes to him!”

She brought a hand up to her forehead as her mouth fell open in shock. Oh this wasn’t good. She’d completely led him on without even realizing it.

Emma giggled at her reaction. “Calm down Lady Macbeth. It’s not that bad.”

“Yes it is!” insisted Regina. “I can’t go out with him.”

“Why not?” said Snow incredulously. “I mean… he’s cute.”

“He is,” agreed Emma, nodding her head. “I mean I don’t usually go for pretty boys but he is damn attractive.”

Regina rolled her eyes. It wasn’t as if she disagreed with them. She wasn’t blind. She knew that Jefferson was a handsome man. With his steel blue eyes and thick brown hair he was definitely a catch. She couldn’t deny that he was nice to look at but his looks weren’t exactly the problem.

“But he’s my coworker!” she anxiously reminded them. “Don’t you think it’s crossing a line if we go out on a date?”

“He’s barely your coworker,” argued Emma. “You’re in different branches of the company now. It’s not as if you see him every day.”

“Yeah,” chimed in Snow. “Besides half the office already thought you two were sleeping together anyway.”

Regina’s eyes bulged out of her head. “What?!?”

Surprise flashed across Snow’s face at her outburst. “You didn’t know that already? A lot of people at Volante thought you were secretly dating.”

“Why would they think that?” Regina demanded.

Snow shrugged her shoulders. “I don’t know. You were always eating lunch and working late on projects together. You had each other’s back with Mal. I don’t know. It just always seemed pretty obvious that he was into you.”

“He wasn’t into me,” Regina protested weakly.

Snow sent her a disbelieving look. “Yes, he was.”

“If he was then why didn’t he say anything?”

“Maybe, same as you, he thought it might be awkward because you worked together,” Emma gently suggested. “But now you don’t.”
Regina threw up her hands with a defeated sigh. God, was she really that oblivious?

Snow tilted her head and stared at her curiously. “Would it really be the worst thing in the world to go out with him?”

“Well… I never said that it was the worst thing,” mumbled Regina. “I’m just not sure it’s the right time for it now.”

“A likely excuse,” teased Emma. “Seriously when was the last time you’ve even been on a date?”

Regina squared her shoulders and turned her nose up at Emma’s question. “What does that matter?”

Snow narrowed her eyes at Regina’s deliberate non-answer. “Regina…” she drawled. “How long has it been?”

Red began to flood the older woman’s cheeks at the two girl’s curiosity. Her gaze dropped down to her pizza as embarrassment started to heat up her skin. “It’s… been a while.”

“Define a while,” ordered Snow.

Regina licked her lips before uttering, “A few years.”

She saw Emma rapidly blink her eyes in an effort to hide her surprise. “So when you say a few years do you mean… a few years like one or two or do you mean a few years like… since before Henry’s birth?”

Regina let out an embarrassed breath before admitting, “Well… I’ve had a lot on my plate since Henry was born.”

A gasp flew out of Snow as she widened her eyes in shock. “You haven’t been on a date since before Henry was born?! You do realize he’s turning nine in three months!”

“Do you realize what I’ve been through in those past nine years?!” Despite her best efforts Regina’s voice cracked with frustration on the last two words.

She sighed tiredly. “I mean with everything that was happening dating was the last thing on my mind. I was too busy looking over my shoulder and worrying about tomorrow and the day after that. Every time the idea even entered my brain I just felt… exhausted. So I made a decision not to date at all. Not while I was still in hiding.”

“But you’re not in hiding now,” Emma said gently. Her gaze turned sympathetic as she looked Regina in the eyes. “Look I get why you chose not to date anyone as Regina Gardiner. It makes sense but you’re not Regina Gardiner anymore. You made a commitment to start living life as Regina Mills again.”

“That life doesn’t have to include dating,” Regina protested.

“No,” drawled Snow, “But it might help. Look I thought you were crazy when you decided to take back your old name but you said you wanted to start living a life that your mother couldn’t take away from you. Dating sends a message that you’re looking forward to the future. That you’re hopeful about it.”

Emma nodded her head in agreement. “And I personally can’t think of a better candidate for you to start with.”
Regina scoffed and rolled her eyes.

“I’m serious,” insisted Emma, playfully nudging her arm. “Jefferson is cute and smart. And you already know he’s not crazy which takes out half the risk.”

“Also because you’ve known him so long there’s a zero percent chance that he’s spying for your mother,” added Snow practically. “It’s just one date. Why not see what happens?”

Regina had to admit that they did have a point. It wasn’t as if she had any good reason not to go out with Jefferson. He was handsome, and funny. And she did always enjoy the time she spent with him when she’d lived in New York. And before she’d drowned herself in the realization that he had been asking her out she had been excited to spend the evening with him. Perhaps one date with him wouldn’t be so bad?

Her train of thought was interrupted by a knock against the wall. She looked up to see Robin awkwardly standing in the doorway of her office with his hands in his pockets.

“Hope I’m not interrupting,” he said sheepishly. Her jerked a thumb back towards the showroom. “Hook and I measured the walls again just to double check and it looks like we’re running low on paint. I was going to head to the store and pick up a couple cans. Did you want to come with me, make sure I pick up the right color?”

Regina nodded her head. “Yes, I will meet you at the car in a second.”

He returned her nod before disappearing around the corner. For reasons she didn’t quite understand Regina silently hoped that he hadn’t a word of the conversation she’d been having seconds before. She turned back to the girls with a sigh.

“I’ll be back in a few minutes,” she said standing to her feet. “Do not expect me to finish this conversation when I return.”

“Then before you go just answer this one question,” said Snow. “Are you still going on the date or not?”

Regina saw Emma lean forward, the curiosity in her eyes just as strong as Snow’s. She bit her lip before nodding her head and answering, “Yes I am still going on the date.”

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Robin generally considered himself to be a perceptive man. He wasn’t Sherlock Holmes by any means but he considered himself observant enough to, at the very least, notice changes in the people around him. Especially the ones he cared about.

Since they’d left the studio he’d noticed a shift in Regina’s behavior. She was no longer the carefree woman he’d seen absentmindedly dancing to salsa music earlier that day. She seemed more withdrawn and silent. Not exactly sad but certainly weighted down by something. He could only assume it had something to do with the talk she’d had with Jefferson (he couldn’t help mentally sneering at his name). While he thought he could wait it out and let Regina decide when to open up to him, his curiosity got the better of him when her silence continued all the way to the paint aisle of the nearest Home Depot.

Leaning against his empty cart he curiously observed her as she searched through the paint tiles for the shade of lavender she’d fallen so in love with the last time she’d visited.

“Are you feeling alright?” he asked softly.
She turned to him, confusion evident in her eyes. “What?”

He shrugged at her. “You just seem a little... off since we left.”

She unconvincingly shook her head at him. “I’m fine, just a little distracted.”

She turned back to the cards and nervously tucked her hair behind her ears before clearing her throat ominously. “I actually wanted to ask if you were gonna be busy tomorrow night.”

He shook his head at her. “No I should be home by six like always. Why?”

She hesitated before answering him. “I... have a date actually. With Jefferson.”

Now Robin had had his heart broken before. When Marian had died, when his mother had abandoned him, when he’d lost his unborn child. He knew what it felt like, the pain that came with it. So he was experienced enough to know that the knowledge of Regina’s plans didn’t break his heart... but damn it if it didn’t leave a crack.

On the surface he knew he had no reason to feel this way. He reminded himself over and over that he didn’t have feelings for her. He didn’t have feelings for her. He could not have feelings for Regina. But when he thought about the idea of her on a date with that guy he could help but feel things for her. Jealousy, disappointment... longing. Like a flood those feelings seeped out of the crack in his heart and filled him from top to bottom, leaving him stricken their wake.

Not that he let it show.

Somehow, in what should be considered an Oscar-worthy performance, he managed not to let a single emotion reach the surface of his face, except perhaps surprise.

“Oh!” he said, raising his eyebrows at her. “He asked you out?”

“Yeah,” she said shrugging her shoulders. “It just sort of happened. So I just wanted to make sure that you were free to watch the boys while I’m out.”

“Sure,” he said nodding his head. “I’ll be around.”

She sent him a grateful nod before turning back to the painting tiles. The silence between them quickly turned awkward and it was too much for Robin to bear.

“So... where are you going on this date?”

“Just out to dinner,” she answered nonchalantly. “Not exactly sure where.”

Well not exactly sure I like the sound of that, he thought to himself. His gaze fell down to the cart as he struggled to battle the emotions swirling in his gut.

“Do you think it’ll go well?” Robin softly asked. As soon as the words were out of his mouth he silently berated himself. Why would you ask that? No matter what she said he could see himself liking the answer.

She looked at him with uncertainty coloring her face. “I’m not really sure. I mean Jefferson’s a nice enough guy. I like spending time with him...”

“But?” supplied Robin. Please let there be a “but.”

“But it’s been a while,” she finished nervously. “I haven’t been with anyone since Daniel and even
then we barely ‘dated.’” She put the words in air quotes. “I don’t know. I just feel like I might be a little rusty when it comes to things like dating rituals.”

“I get that,” he said, nodding his head understandingly. “But I suppose you won’t know until you try.”

The words felt like nails falling out of his mouth. He wanted to be supportive of her but the more he spoke the wider he felt the crack in his heart grow.

Regina tilted her head at him curiously. “What about you?”

“What about me?” he asked.

“Have you been dating?” she asked.

Robin reared his head back, a little shocked at her question. “No,” he immediately answered.

Regina arched an eyebrow at him. “No?”

“No,” he chuckled. “Why do you sound so surprised?”

“Well because I am. A little bit,” she said shrugging her shoulders. “I mean… you’re not an unattractive man Robin. You’ve got the whole sexy-single-dad bit going on.”

He scoffed and narrowed his eyes at her. “Sexy-single-dad bit?”

She rolled her eyes at him. “You know what I’m talking about. Don’t act like you’ve never looked in a mirror before.”

He tried not to let her comments go to his head as he let out another laugh.

“I don’t know,” continued Regina. “I just always thought that maybe you’d started dating and never told me. You know… because of Marian.”

Right, his deceased wife who had also been her best friend. The mention of her brought him back to reality and he shrugged off Regina’s comments with a playful tilt of his head.

“Well the truth is I did go on one date a few months ago,” he said.

“Really?” said Regina, her curiosity piqued. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because nothing came from it,” he answered honestly. “She was a lovely woman but…”

“She just wasn’t Marian,” Regina finished for him.

He nodded his head sadly. “Yeah.”

“I get it,” said Regina understandingly. “When you’ve had love like the one you had with her, like the one I had with Daniel, it’s hard to imagine finding something that ever comes close to it.”

The words he spoke were everything he’d said to himself about dating in the past but now, looking into her whiskey brown eyes, he found them harder to believe. Suddenly standing across from this woman whose life had become so interwoven with his own he felt the possibility for love was more likely than he’d been willing to admit in these past few years.

He swallowed hard before responding to her, “Even so I don’t think that’s a reason for you to give
up on it just yet.”

She looked up at him, uncertainty still present in her eyes. “You think so?”

“Yes,” he said softly. “Sometimes love can show up quite unexpectedly.”

He saw a smile begin to tug on her lips. “Nice to know one of us still has hope.”

She turned away from him then, her attention returning to the paint tiles on the while Robin was left to watch her. There in the paint aisle of the nearest Home Depot Robin made three important discoveries. That one of his oldest friends was going on a date for the first time in years. Two, that he wasn’t comfortable with the fact that she was going on this date. And number three, he wasn’t uncomfortable because he was worried. He wasn’t uncomfortable because it was too soon for her.

He was uncomfortable because tomorrow night she would be leaving for a romantic evening with another man.

He was uncomfortable because no matter how much he fought it he desperately wanted to be that man.

He was uncomfortable because despite all his denials and insistence that there wasn’t anything there, the truth was he had fallen deeply and unexpectedly in love with her.
Chapter 32

All throughout her life Regina Mills had considered herself to be a neat and well-organized person. From a young age her mother’s demands for structure and order had seeped into her personality causing her to become the type of person who despised clutter and strived to have everything in its exact place. Becoming a mother herself had softened her stance on such things – children were, by nature, messy, unorganized beings – but she still required a certain amount of structure in her life in order to be truly comfortable. It’s not that she was strict. It’s just that she liked it when things were in their proper place. She liked being able to find things at a moment’s notice. Something she currently wasn’t able to do while she lived in Robin’s guestroom.

While she would always be grateful that Robin had allowed Henry and herself to stay with him while they got resettled in California she didn’t exactly love living in his guestroom. For one, the space was very small, even smaller than her bedroom back in New York which was saying something. Secondly, the already small space was half-filled with unopened boxes from her townhouse. She never realized just how lived in her old New York home was until she started to pack it up. The boxes of clothes and books and knick-knacks had accumulated much faster than she anticipated. While she’d arranged for her furniture to reside in a storage unit at the edge of town, the rest of her things had been delivered to Robin’s house and quickly took up more space than either of them expected. Half of them were stored in his already filled-to-the-brim garage while the rest were moved into the guest room with her, piled up against the walls and stuffed under the bed. Some of them were filled with stuff she didn’t necessarily need at the moment: books, old design portfolios, Henry’s neglected toys. But others had more vital importance. Like her clothing.

Regina would be the first to admit that while she lived in New York she’d become a bit of a clothes horse. It was a side effect of both the city and the industry she’d chosen to make her living in. When she’d started working at Volante Mal had made it clear that appearances mattered and every designer was expected to elevate themselves to a certain level of style. And for the first time in years that Regina found herself in the possession of disposal income so she figured why not indulge herself in a few well-earned treats. New York fashion proved to be quite addictive though, and over the years she’d amassed quite a collection. Most of which still remained boxed up.

If Robin’s guest room was small, then the guest room closet was positively miniscule. The lack of space had forced her to play Sophie’s Choice with the clothes she’d decided to hang up and the ones she’d kept in their boxes. Of course Robin had offered to share space in his glorious walk-in but she’d refused. She and Henry had already taken up enough space in his house, might as well let him keep his closet. Besides she’d developed a system. Luckily for her she was smart enough to box up her clothing according to season and events. (Actually, she’d hardly describe it as luck. It’s not like there was any other to pack up clothing.) For the time being she’d decided that it was best to just unpack her late winter/early spring clothing. It was mostly casual wear. Denim pants, thin sweaters and the like, a couple of button up shirts and blazers. Clothes she could wear almost anywhere. Which would’ve been fine except she wasn’t going just anywhere tonight.

Tonight she would be going out with Jefferson.

On her first date… in ten years.

Casualwear would not do for such an occasion.

Which is why she was currently stuck on her hands and knees, reaching under her bed for yet another box, in order to search for her red, keyhole dress.
“What the hell is a keyhole dress anyway?”

Emma wrinkled her nose at the description Regina provided for the infamous dress. She sat on top of the bed with an open box of clothing in between her legs, her blonde hair falling over her shoulder as she peered inside. When Regina had called her over and asked for help getting ready for her date this wasn’t exactly what she had in mind. While Emma also worked in the fashion industry, she’d somehow managed to allude getting bitten by the fashion bug. Besides her unstoppable penchant for leather jackets, she had no interest in clothes, choosing to subsist off a combination of what Regina was sure amounted to no more than ten t-shirts and four pairs of pants.

With a flip of her hair Regina lifted her head above the mattress to send Emma an exasperated look. “It means that it has both a collar and a deep neckline. It leaves the cleavage open in a keyhole-like manner.”

She awkwardly gestured to the space in between her breasts trying to illustrate the concept to her not particularly fashion-inclined friend before once again disappearing out of sight.

Emma’s eyes lit up in recognition at her gesture. “Oh that dress!” She wiggled her eyebrows at Regina. “Bit saucy, isn’t it?”

Regina reappeared, panic in her wide eyes. “Are you serious? Cause if you think the dress is sending the wrong message you need to tell me.”

Emma threw up her hands. “The message it sends is fine. Relax!” She turned her attention back to the box in her lap before grumbling, “Geez. One guy asks you out and you forget how to dress yourself?”

“Well this date is kind of a big deal,” said Regina, snatching a box from underneath her bed. “Only because you’re making it one,” responded Emma.

Regina set the box on top of the bed and glared at her. “You made it one! You and Snow harassed me into admitting I hadn’t been out in a decade and now it’s all I can think about!”

Emma sent her an annoyed look. “We didn’t harass you. We were just curious. And honestly it’s not that big of a deal.”

“Well, I must’ve too distracted by the shock in your eyes to notice,” mumbled Regina as she cut through the packing tape with a pair of scissors. “You both looked at me like I was a freak of nature.”

“We were just surprised!” stressed Emma. “I mean… you’re a catch Regina.”

The older woman just scoffed at her.

“You are!” Emma insisted with a laugh. “You’re beautiful, have a great job, a nice body –”

“Tragic secrets, hidden identity.”

“Okay those things aside,” continued Emma, “you were still a catch. It’s just hard to believe that in all those years you never went out once. Not even casually.”

Regina threw her head back with a groan and shrugged her shoulders. “Dating casually just isn’t something I considered myself capable of.”
Her eyes dropped down to the box she was rooting through. “After what I had with Daniel… it just felt disrespectful to his memory.”

Emma set aside the box in her lap as her gaze turned curious. “You know you never talk about him. Henry’s father.”

Regina lifted her eyes up from the box and pressed her lips together apprehensively. “For the longest time I felt like I couldn’t,” she whispered.

It was true. You can’t tell a story without thinking about the ending and even ten years later Regina still found it hard to separate the love she and Daniel shared from the tragic end that he had met. Thinking of him through their son made it easier but after his death she found it hard to even whisper his name. Being on the run with Henry made it twice as difficult. The longer she’d lived as Regina Gardiner the less she wanted to think about life as Regina Mills, even if it did include the love of her life. It didn’t take long before the thought of speaking his name felt like summoning a curse upon herself. An invitation for all of her previous life’s pain and horror to sneak up and grip her by throat. In the years since his death, she’d barely spoken about Daniel at all. And sometimes, in the dead of night when there was nothing else to obstruct her thoughts, she felt very ashamed of that fact.

“Maybe it’s time you started,” suggested Emma gently. “What was he like?”

Regina’s hand found its way up to the ruby engagement ring that still hung around her neck. “He was… everything I needed. Calm but passionate. Affectionate. Always wanted the best for everyone around him. He was my shelter in the storm.”

A smile tugged on her lips as she remembered the feeling she had being in Daniel’s arms. How secure she could feel knowing he was in her corner. “Life was never easy for me. I know that I had more than most people could hope for but nothing ever felt certain until I fell in love with him. I was always afraid of something. Losing my father, being controlled by my mother, never having a future that was my own. But when I was with Daniel… that was the closest I’d been to fearless. Knowing that he loved me made everything else inconsequential. And he made sure that I knew it. Every day. Every time he was near. Being with him gave me exactly what I’d dreamed for in a relationship.”

“What was that?” asked Emma, her green eyes blazing with curiosity by this point.

“Love you could feel from across the room,” Regina answered wistfully. “It was all I’d wanted ever since I was child.”

Growing up it hadn’t taken long for Regina to realize that her parents didn’t love each other. It was always obvious to her in their treatment of one another. Never once did she see her mother smile at her father. Never once did she see him appear eager for her arrival. They were always far happier separated than together, and chose to act as such even when they both occupied the same house. She was barely older than ten when she decided that she never wanted the marriage her parents had. She wanted something warmer, more intimate. An obvious love that no one could deny.

Her hand dropped from her ring back down to the box in front of her. “After Daniel died I just felt like I’d missed my chance at that. And then I changed identities and I knew that I had.”

“That’s not true,” said Emma softly.

“Isn’t it?” said Regina raising an eyebrow at her. “All my life I wanted a love that was real. And you can’t love someone, I mean truly love them without knowing the depths of who they are. The
things that make them beautiful, the things that make them ugly. Their biggest fears, their craziest
dreams. How was I supposed to find someone to share those things with when I couldn’t even tell
them what my real name was?”

“Well you’re telling everybody your real name now,” said Emma with a smile. “Don’t you think
Daniel would want you to take a chance on finding love again?”

Another smile tugged on Regina’s lips at the thought of Daniel’s opinion. “Yes he would,” she
admitted, “But even that’s a little frightening.”

“Why?”

“Well for so long I’ve always had a built in excuse to avoid love,” said Regina, sifting through the
box of winter clothes. “But now that I don’t have that excuse that means anything could happen. I
could fall in love with someone. It’s been ten years and I still don’t even know if I’m ready for it.
Building something that has roots. Drawing someone into the hell that is my life.”

Emma rolled her eyes as she pulled another box out from under the bed. “Your life isn’t hell,” she
drawled insistently.

“It could easily become hell,” Regina shot back. “You know my mother is still lurking out there
somewhere.”

“You haven’t heard from your mother in months,” responded Emma. “You can’t keep creeping
along being afraid of what she’ll do.”

“Oh god, I’ll probably have to tell Jefferson about her tonight,” grumbled Regina. “If he’s smart
he’ll probably run before the check is delivered.”

“You don’t have to tell him about Cora tonight,” said Emma, slicing through her box’s packing
tape.

Regina turned to her with wide eyes. “Yes I do,” she asserted. “If there’s any chance my mother
could target him…”

“She is not going to target a man you went on one date with,” said Emma, “Because that’s all this
is. It’s one date. You’re not agreeing to move in together. You’re not proposing marriage. You’re
not even looking to fall in love.”

With a smile she whipped out the red dress they’d been searching for from the box in front of her.
“It’s just a first date Regina. You’re only job is to find out if you like him enough for a second
one.”

She offered Regina the dress with a hint of superiority in her eyes. The older women took it from
her with annoyance clear on her face.

“Now get dressed. He should be here any minute.”

Regina watched as Emma made her way out of the room muttering curses as she tripped over boxes
on the way. Once the blonde was out of sight she stared down at the dress in her hands with a sigh.
Normally putting it on would make her feel confident and unstoppable. She doubted that it would
have the same effect tonight. Even with Emma’s assurance that her evening was nothing to fret
about she still felt herself growing more nervous by the second. The minute she stepped out that
doors on Jefferson’s arm she’d be opening herself up to the possibility of once again having
something that’s real. She wasn’t quite sure why but her stomach started to twist at the thought of
Beneath Emma and Regina’s feet someone else’s stomach was also twisting. All day Robin had
done everything possible to try and forget the fact that later tonight Regina would be out on a date
with Jefferson (he still couldn’t stop mentally sneering at his name). For most of the day he’d been
able to throw himself into work, careful not to let his inner frustrations show with his employees
and vendors, but once he got home things became harder to ignore. Regina had been there, sitting
at the kitchen table, seamlessly altering between helping the boys with their homework (well,
Henry’s homework and Roland’s drawings) and putting together a small portfolio of possible
candidates for designer positions at her new studio. Less than a day ago he’d loved living with
Regina, he still did but now that he’d admitted to himself the true depths of his feelings for her
Regina’s presence now carried a slight twinge of torment that hadn’t been there before. He could
no longer see her raven-colored hair without thinking of how much he wanted to run his fingers
through its thick silky locks. He couldn’t look into her brown eyes without getting lost in the
different shades of amber and whiskey that resided there. And he definitely couldn’t look at her
rosy lips without wondering just how good they’d feel pressed against his own. Yet, despite all of
this he couldn’t bear to look anywhere else.

It was torture.

Even as he’d shuffled around the kitchen to make dinner he found it difficult to take his eyes off
her as she’d sat at the kitchen table, her fashionable glasses perched just on the edge of her nose as
she stared down at the resumes in front of her, biting her lip as she went over every line with damn
near competitive concentration, only breaking focus when Henry asked her for help with
multiplication tables. Even before he’d realized that he’d had feelings for her Robin had decided
that he’d loved these two sides of Regina best. The passionate side of her that fully throws herself
into whatever task is at hand, executing it flawless and creatively. And the motherly side of her,
the one that carries the patience required to nurture every child that comes in her path. Watching
her effortlessly flow between those two personas was practically hypnotizing. Not that he got the
chance to enjoy it for long.

He wasn’t even halfway through dinner before the doorbell rang and Emma appeared, ready and
willing to help Regina get ready for her date. The two of them immediately trounced upstairs to
prepare, leaving Robin in the kitchen with a half-cooked meal and a twisted gut.

For the past forty minutes he’d tried to focus on cooking dinner instead of the fact that the woman
he was in love with was getting ready to go out on a date with another man. Tried, being the
operative word. He’d damn near burnt the chicken he was baking as he lost himself in the various
scenarios that could happen between her and Jefferson. All the different ways the night could end.
Every other minute found himself shifting between whether he wanted her to have a good time or a
bad time. He didn’t want to wish ill on her evening but he didn’t exactly want things to go well
either. In the end it didn’t even matter because it wasn’t up to him. The only two people who could
control the outcome of the date were the two who were going. And he was not one of them.

He sighed to himself as he pulled a bag of frozen Brussel sprouts out of the freezer. He knew it
wasn’t his right to be jealous. He and Regina weren’t dating or romantically involved in any way.
As far as he knew his feelings were one-sided and would remain that way for the foreseeable
future. Hell, for all he knew his feelings weren’t even real. Perhaps they were a fleeting side effect
of having her so close these past few weeks, spending all this time with her. It was certainly
possible that once she moved out they would just float away and he would look back on them and
laugh.
Perhaps that was best.

He was still grappling with his feelings when Emma clomped downstairs in her black jeans and striped tee. He didn’t know much about her. Only what Regina had told him over the years. That she used to be in a situation similar to the one he found Regina in when they first met, she used to be Henry’s nanny until she started modeling full-time to save up for school and she was constantly leaving crumbs wherever she ate (he’d heard Regina gripe about that last one for months). Emma was supposedly tough, fiercely independent, blunt at the best of times and harsh at the worst. Maybe not the friend that everyone wanted but certainly the one we all needed at some point.

She raised her eyebrows and let out a hissing breath as she approached the kitchen counter.

“How’s it going?” Robin asked.

Emma sucked her teeth at him. “About as well as can be expected. She’s nervous but not backing out.”

“That’s good, I guess.” Robin wondered if she could hear the bitterness that he was sure was sweeping into his tone.

If she did, she certainly didn’t comment on it. Instead she wandered out to the backyard to greet the boys. Robin had sent them outside as soon as Henry finished his homework. Since he’d be handling them both by himself tonight he figured he’d run them out before dinner then stuff them full of food so they’d pass out after a quick bath. They were currently outside enjoying a game of tag that Emma had immediately joined in on. Watching her with the boys it was easy to see why Regina had kept her as Henry’s nanny for so long. She appeared to have an easygoing nature that made it easy to build a natural rapport with kids his age, even Roland who she just met.

Robin was watching them run around the backyard when he heard that familiar creak of the stairs. He turned to see Regina making her way in the down the stairs, a vision in an enticing red dress. She wasn’t finished getting ready, that was clear. Her face was free of makeup; she didn’t have any shoes on or jewelry. Yet the sight of that red fabric against her olive toned skin was enough to get his heart racing. It took nearly everything in him to keep his jaw from dropping. He settled for clenching it as she made her way towards him, looking about the kitchen clearly in search of something.

“Where’s Emma?” she asked him, raising up her palms as if surprised that her friend had disappeared so quickly.

Robin took a moment to remind himself how to speak before nodding his head toward the sliding doors. “She’s out in the backyard.”

Regina turned her gaze out through the sliding doors and let her shoulders slump when she saw Emma running around the backyard with the boys. “Damn,” she softly hissed.

Robin narrowed his eyes at her reaction. “Did you need something?”

She turned to him, hesitation on the surface of her brown eyes. “Oh, nothing that urgent. I just…” She turned her back toward him reveal the half undone zipper on the back of her dress. “I need some help with this.”

Robin felt his throat grow tight as he ran his eyes over bare skin of her back, unable to look away even when his gaze met the black lace of her bra snap. She brought her chin over her shoulder as she looked back at him with imploring eyes. “Would you mind zipping me up?”
Robin swallowed hard as he nodded his head at her. “Sure.”

With shockingly steady hands he reached out and gripped the tag of her zipper. He slowly raised it up to the back of her collar, his heart skipping a beat whenever his knuckles brushed against her bare skin. His mouth nearly went dry as he swept her hair away from her neck and attached the clasps of her collar together. Once done he awkwardly patted her on the shoulder. “There you go,” he whispered.

She turned to him, the fabric of her red dress now hugging her curves and a resigned smile gracing her lips. “Thanks.”

She sighed and he tilted his head at her curiously. She wasn’t exactly glowing with anticipation for the evening. If anything she seemed passive at best. He tried not to get his hopes at that realization.

“Are you excited for your date?” he asked.

She hesitated before answering him. “Yeah. I’ve known Jefferson for years now so… this should be fun.”

He arched an eyebrow at her. “Should be?”

She shrugged her shoulders apathetically. “Well, historically speaking dates have never been fun for me,” she mumbled. “Daniel and I had more of a… hide-in-the-shadows type of relationship and when I was forced to go out with… him… I felt more like a trophy than an actual person.”

Robin saw her tense up at the mention of her old, disgusting fiancé. He felt his own muscles do the same at the thought of the time she’d spent shackled to the arm of a man nearly three times her age at her mother’s will. It was in that moment that the internal shifting inside of him halted and he came to the decision that he wanted her to have a good time on her date. No matter who it was with. She deserved it.

“It’s alright to be nervous,” he reminded her. “After everything that’s happened I’d be worried if you weren’t, but being nervous doesn’t automatically mean that you’re going to have a bad time.”

A smiled tugged on her lips as she playfully arched an eyebrow at him. “Really? Are you speaking from experience there?”

“A little,” he admitted with a shrug on his shoulders. “I wasn’t excited for my date at all. Wound up having a better time than I ever expected.”

Regina nodded her head, clearly intrigued. “You really weren’t excited at all?”

“It was a last minute, blind double date… set up by Hook,” he deadpanned. “Would you be excited?”

Regina snickered at his description and shook her head. “I can’t believe you let Hook set you up.”

“Neither can I,” replied Robin, “But like I said, I ended up having a better time than I hoped for.”

Regina thought over his words and nodded her head. “True,” she conceded. “And since I know my date I suppose I can consider myself one step ahead of you.”

“Two,” he quickly corrected. “You’re far better dressed than I was.”

A blush began to rise in Regina’s cheeks as she chuckled at his compliment. “I’m always better
than dressed than you,” she teased.

She was full-on smiling now and Robin felt his heart warm up at the sight of it. Oh, the things he would do to keep that smile on her face. They’d probably kill him.

Regina reached out and patted his hand. “Thanks for the encouragement Robin. It helps a lot.”

He smiled back at her. “Anytime,” he replied.

She gave his hand one last squeeze before heading over to the sliding doors and calling for Emma to keep a lookout for Jefferson. He should be arriving any minute now, she’d yelled. The imminent arrival of her date returned Robin’s stomach to its original twisted state. As he watched her head upstairs in order to finish getting ready, he silently reminded himself that she deserved this. She deserved a night out where she was treated properly, and as her friend he was right to encourage her to enjoy it.

Even if the idea of it twisted him up inside.

Jefferson arrived hardly twenty minutes after Regina headed back up to her room. Robin was setting dinner on the table for the boys when the doorbell rang and he felt that familiar storm return to his gut. While Emma ran up the stairs to alert Regina of her date’s arrival Robin, feeling very much like the reaper at his own execution, headed for the door. He opened it to find Jefferson on the other side, looking slick as ever. Dressed in a dark grey three-piece suit with a silk blue tie he was quite a contrast to Robin in his plain blue jeans topped with a dull blue tee shirt and gray hoodie. His eyes widened when he saw Robin open the door.

“Oh! Sorry,” he clumsily apologized. “I think I might have the wrong house.”

He was pulling out his phone to double-check the address when Robin quickly assured him, “Don’t worry. You’re in the right place.”

He gestured to the floor above their heads. “Regina’s just upstairs. Should be down any moment. Why don’t you come in?”

“Oh! Sorry,” he clumsily apologized. “I think I might have the wrong house.”

He had long since set the table when Robin assured him, “Don’t worry. You’re in the right place.”

He gestured to the floor above their heads. “Regina’s just upstairs. Should be down any moment. Why don’t you come in?”

“Alright,” drawled Jefferson uncertainly. He stepped over the threshold, confusion still evident on his face as he stared down the man who had let him inside.

“I’m Jefferson, Regina’s friend from work.” He held out his hand Robin firmly grasped it with his own, giving it two stiff shakes before quickly pulling back his hand.

“I’m Robin.” He gave himself a simple introduction, not really in the mood to offer up anything more. Not to this guy. “We’ve actually met before actually. Briefly.”

A spark of recognition shone in Jefferson as he remembered seeing him in the studio the day before. He snapped his fingers. “Right! You were one of the guys she was painting with. Shame I didn’t get your name then.”

“Yeah, well you were obviously busy.” Yet again Robin hoped the bitterness in his tone went unnoticed. He gestured toward the kitchen. “We can wait in the kitchen.”

Without waiting for Jefferson’s response he headed past him toward the kitchen. He could hear the other man following as they made their way past the stairs to the islands. Jefferson had just taken a seat on one of the stools at the kitchen island when the sliding door opened and the boys tumbled inside.
Still giggling from his time outside Roland ran up to the table and asked, “Is dinner ready yet?”

“Dinner is ready,” replied Robin, “But you are not. You need to go wash your hands.”

Roland’s face scrunched up in indignation. “But my hands aren’t even dirty! See!”

He held up his seemingly clean hands as proof and Robin smirked at his protest. “Just because you can’t see the germs doesn’t mean they’re not there. Now go wash your hands,” he ordered in a firm voice. “Henry you too.”

Roland growled at him as he stomped his way to the bathroom while Henry just groaned in protest. Robin watched them head to the bathroom with a shake of his head before calling after them, “And the attitude is not appreciated.”

Jefferson watched their interaction with an amused look on his face. “Is handwashing always such a battle?”

Robin turned to him with a shrug. “It is when you have boys.”

Jefferson clicked his tongue. “I wouldn’t know about that. I only have a little girl Grace.”

Robin raised his eyebrows in surprise as he made his way over to the island. “Really?”

He didn’t personally see Jefferson as the fatherly type but the other man nodded his head in the affirmative. “Yeah, she’s Henry’s age actually.”

An awkward silence filled the air then as Robin grabbed a water from the refrigerator. Jefferson looked around his surrounding as if hoping for Regina to appear out of thin air so the tension would finally break. When she didn’t he let out another sigh. “So what’s the deal with you? Are you babysitting for the night?”

Robin had to resist the urge to punch him in his teeth. “Not exactly,” he said, shaking his head. “Regina and I live together for now. We kind of switch on and off between watching the kids, if necessary.”

Though he tried to hide it Robin saw surprise flicker across Jefferson’s face. He began to fidget in his seat, rubbing his hands together with poorly veiled intrigue in his eyes. “Oh, you live together? I didn’t know that.”

“It’s a pretty recent development,” replied Robin, a hint of smugness in his voice. “It’s working out though. The boys love it and it’s been nice to have her close again.”

A non-committal sound of agreement came from Jefferson’s throat and Robin hated that it gave him pleasure to hear it.

“So how long have you known Regina?”

He was fishing for more information and they both knew it. Robin briefly considered letting him squirm but decided to answer, “Almost eight years now. Ever since Henry was a baby. She and my wife were best friends.”

“Oh so you have a wife?” A hopeful spark of interest flared in his eyes and Robin immediately crushed it.

“Not anymore. She died when my son was a baby,” he bluntly replied.
Over the years Robin had noticed that whenever he revealed this particular piece of information about his life it tended to yield the same reaction. A reaction he saw play out on Jefferson’s face. The other man’s eyes went wide and he leaned back in his seat as if blown back by Robin’s admission.

“Wow,” he breathed. “I’m sorry.”

Robin gave him his practiced response. “Well it happened a long time ago.”

He set his water bottle down on the counter with a thud and let out a sigh. He was no longer interested in playing games. “Listen Jefferson… I don’t know you very well but I do know Regina. She’s my son’s godmother and she means quite a lot to us. I’ve seen her hurt before in the past and I’d like to avoid seeing it in the future.”

A smug look showed up on Jefferson’s face. “Is this where you threaten to break my legs if I break her heart?”

Yet again the urge to punch him in his teeth rose up in Robin’s chest. His knuckles went white as he stealthy started to grip the island counter. “No this is where I make sure that you’re not a man who’s blind to her value. She’s a good woman with a good heart. I just want to make sure that hasn’t escaped your notice.”

His tone was even and solid, allowing for no misinterpretation. And the bite it contained didn’t go unnoticed by the man sitting across from him.

Jefferson leaned forward in his seat, resting his folded hands against the island counter. “I’ve worked with Regina for a few years too Robin. So you can believe me when I promise you… that you are not the only man who sees her value.”

A little bit of forced entered his tone on the word “not.” A response to the verbal punches he knew Robin had been sending his way. A subtle shout out to the feelings he knew the other man harbored. Despite his efforts to conceal them Jefferson had spotted them the moment that door had opened.

Robin pulled his lips into a wry smile and nodded his head appreciatively. “Good. Because I can assure you if you did break her heart I’d be breaking a hell of a lot more than just your legs.”

A smug smirk grew on Jefferson’s face at Robin’s threat. “Noted.”

Another tension filled silence occupied the room as the two men stared each other down, sizing each other up, both trying to gauge the other man’s intentions with the woman who was still getting ready upstairs oblivious to the barely sub textual war that was being fought across the kitchen island. Their battle of wills was broken the sound the boys returning from the bathroom. Satisfied that his warning had been heard he turned his attention back to Roland and Henry who rushed up to him showing off their freshly washed hands. He focused on getting the boys settled at the table for dinner, choosing to ignore the presence of the well-dressed man who he’d just threatened.

Barely ten seconds after he’d set down dinner in front of the boys he heard that familiar creak on the stairs combined with the unmistakable sound of heels against wood. His breath caught in his throat when he saw Regina making her way down the stairs, finally finished getting ready. Satisfied that his warning had been heard he turned his attention back to Roland and Henry who rushed up to him showing off their freshly washed hands. He focused on getting the boys settled at the table for dinner, choosing to ignore the presence of the well-dressed man who he’d just threatened.

Barely ten seconds after he’d set down dinner in front of the boys he heard that familiar creak on the stairs combined with the unmistakable sound of heels against wood. His breath caught in his throat when he saw Regina making her way down the stairs, finally finished getting ready. Even he’d been taken aback by her before he was completely blown away now. She was still wearing the red dress she’d had on earlier but now it was paired with two dangling earrings and a pair of black
heels that accentuated the shape of her legs. The lids of her eyes were perfectly bordered by her pitch black eyeliner and her lips were painted the same color as the fabric of her dress, drawing attention to the luminous smile that was now on her face. Positively stunning.

“Sorry I kept you waiting,” she said, walking over to Jefferson. “Forgot which box my shoes were in.”

“Don’t worry about it.” He gave her a kiss on the cheek. “Well worth the wait.”

_Kiss ass_, thought Robin sullenly as he averted his gaze.

Regina turned to Robin with an anxious look on her face. “Are you sure you’re alright with the buys tonight? Because I could ask Emma to stick around.”

He shook his head at her. “No I’ll be alright. We are gonna have a boys’ night in. Lot of video games and sugar.”

She chuckled at him. “Not too much I hope.”

Her black heels clacked against the floor as she stepped over to the table and placed her hands on Henry’s shoulders. She leaned down and said, “Alright sweetie I’ll be back after you’ve gone to bed. Do whatever Uncle Robin says, ‘kay?”

“Okay,” gurgled Henry, his mouth still full of chicken as he firmly nodded his head.

Regina smiled as she leaned down to press a kiss against his forehead and Roland quickly hopped out of his seat and rushed to her side. Bouncing on his toes he reminded her, “Don’t forget to give me a kiss!”

She giggled as she kneeled down to his level. “How could I ever forget?”

She pressed three quick kisses to his forehead before sending him back to his seat. Grabbing her purse and a small work binder, she sent Robin a smile. “See you when I get back?”

He nodded his head at her. “Have fun.”

In that moment he was sure drinking acid would’ve burned his throat less than saying those words. She was gone ten seconds later. Carted off in Jefferson’s rented car. Robin decided against having dinner. He didn’t have the stomach for it that night.

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The ride to the restaurant was stilted to say the least. As Regina sat in the passenger seat of Jefferson’s rented Lexus she found herself wishing that she’d had the foresight to drive herself to the restaurant and meet him there instead of arranging for him to pick her up. Sitting as rigid as a pillar of granite against the soft leather seat of his car, her legs crossed at the ankles and her hands placed just so atop the binder in her lap, Regina knew she was being stiff and hated that she couldn’t find it in herself to stop. Jefferson, for his part, had been giving it his all trying to keep the ride from reaching peak awkwardness. He tried to fill the space between him with unimaginative questions, trying to find a flow of conversation that would help her relieve the obvious tension in the air. Poor guy didn’t even come close to succeeding but she still admired his effort.

Thankfully it wasn’t long, maybe 20 minutes, before they pulled up to the restaurant, a small, fancy affair named _Poseidon’s Cliff_. Certainly a restaurant for romantics, Regina looked past the hostess stand and saw white cloth covered tables with candle lit mood lighting. The small
flickering flames reflected off the dark wood of the walls and combined with the soft music streaming from a baby grand piano to create a positively sensual atmosphere. Jefferson quickly claimed their reservation and requested a table out on the patio. He placed a hand on the small of her back and guided her through the tables as the hostess led them outside. Regina took note of the placement of his hand, low on her back but not so low as to be inappropriate. *Classy,* she thought to herself. His touch was light and not possessive. Very unlike the treatment she’d gotten from Leopold.

They swiftly reached the patio and were placed at a small, two-seat table near the wood railing. From this spot Regina could now see how the restaurant got its name. It was situated right near the edge of a cliff, probably 100 feet above the ocean below. The sound of the waves crashing against the bluffs could be heard from the table and she knew if she looked over the railing she would see the rising white foam of the ocean as it came in contact with the sturdy, gray rock of the cliffs. When she looked straight ahead she could see the light of the full moon reflected against the ocean’s horizon. It was a breathtaking view.

As Jefferson pulled out her chair and she settled into her seat she asked, “Just how did you find this place so quickly?”

He shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly before taking a seat. “An old friend gave me a recommendation.”

Hardly a minute after sitting down they were approached by young, well dressed waiter who handed them their dinner menus and a wine list. They quickly settled on a red wine and then looked over their options. As Regina had suspected, the restaurant specialized in seafood. Jefferson made a small quip that seafood was the only thing California could do better than New York. His comment made her giggle. Taking a moment to catch her breath she realized that it was a beautiful night and she was with a charming man in a wonderful restaurant. She consciously decided that it was worth her while to try and enjoy it for her own sake. No more fretting, no more second guessing. Just enjoying the evening at hand.

The waiter quickly returned with their wine and they told him their selections for dinner. By the time she took her second sip of wine, the tension had already begun to slowly seep out of her body. By the time dinner arrived she could finally say that she was completely relaxed. They’d started the evening by talking about work, as they’d originally planned. Running through her budget for the studio, the schedule leading up to the grand opening and even looking through the portfolio of potential candidates that she’d brought along. It wasn’t long before Jefferson artfully steered the conversation away from work though. He started asking questions about her time in California, which she was happy to answer. She talked to him about making sure Henry was adjusting to the move, reuniting with her old friends and how excited she was to be running her own branch of the company. It was more responsibility than she’d ever had but she was ready to start proving her own merit. Little by little the conversation grew more serious until Jefferson finally asked the question he’d been dying to ask all night.

“Why weren’t you using your real identity?”

The question gave her pause. She’d been expecting it all night but it still put a brake in her relaxed demeanor. She took another sip of wine to steel her nerves, swallowing hard as she tried to figure out just how much she wanted to tell him.

Finally, she set down her glass and licked her lips before answering him, “Because… I was afraid.”

She told him the story she’d rehearsed and retold many times over. That when she was younger there had been an older man, one her mother wanted her to marry. That this man had been wealthy
and powerful. That she’d never felt safe around him nor did she feel like he’d ever let her leave him.

“So I ran away, changed my name and I went into hiding… for more than seven years,” she finished.

It was truth carved down to its barest bones. Enough to satisfy curiosity but not enough to make her feel particularly vulnerable.

“Wow,” breathed Jefferson. He’d been listening to her story intently, not interrupting, allowing her to continue on in her own pace. Looking in his blue eyes Regina was surprised to see not one ounce of pity there, only thinly veiled awe.

“And they never caught on to you?” he asked, curiously.

She shook her head. “Not that I know of. I don’t think I’d be here if they had.”

“So what made you decide to come out of hiding?”

Regina sighed as she rested her arms against the edge of the table before bluntly answering, “My father died.”

Jefferson’s eyes widened, fearful that he’d overstepped his bounds. “Oh! I’m sorry.”

She gave her head a little shake. “It’s fine. He was always – well, he was never the healthiest man in the world. I’ve always known it would happen before I was ready.”

She leaned back in her seat, swallowing thickly, trying to alleviate the sudden need to cry. She would not cry on this date. Instead she just let out a shaky breath before shrugging her shoulders.

“I just always thought that I’d be there when it happened,” she said. “Knowing that I wasn’t because I was too afraid to face them – my ex-fiancé and my mother – just made it feel like maybe hiding wasn’t worth it anymore.”

She reached for her glass of wine once again, the burning of unshed tears quickly subsiding in her eyes. “So… I took back my name, moved back to California and decided to live my life. My real one, anyway.”

Jefferson nodded his head, as if trying to wrap his mind around all that she’d told him. “Well… are you enjoying it? Being you?”

A small chuckle escaped her and she found herself starting to relax again. As she took another bite of the best shrimp scampi she had ever tasted she heard him ask, “So have you heard from either of them yet? Your mother or your old fiancé?”

She shook her head as she swallowed her food. “Not yet but I expect it’ll happen sooner rather than later. I try to be on the lookout for them.”

He paused before hesitantly asking. “Is that why you stay with Robin?”

His question caught her off guard and she let out a surprised chuckle. “What?”
“I just didn’t realize that you lived together until tonight,” he elaborated, his hands making an awkward gesture.

“Oh,” she said, suddenly remembering that she hadn’t exactly warned him about the fact that she lived with another man.

“Well, that’s actually just a bit of laziness on my part,” she admitted. “Robin agreed to let me and Henry stay with him when we first moved back and with the studio taking up so much of my time I haven’t really been house hunting like I planned to.”

It was the truth… mostly. She had originally planned to move out as soon as possible but over the past few weeks she had grown accustomed to her current living arrangement. It made her feel better to know there was another pair of eyes around the house, ones just as vigilant and concerned for Henry’s safety as hers were. Having Robin down the hall did help her feel safe and perhaps it had even helped her grow complacent when it came to searching for a new home. Robin had told her, in no uncertain terms, that there was no need for her to rush.

Across the table Jefferson’s gaze turned piercing. “You’ve been friends for a long time, haven’t you?”

It was more of a statement than a question. Almost accusatory in its tone but not so much that Regina felt the need to be openly defensive about it.

Instead she just tucked her hair behind her ears and nodded. “Yeah for around eight years now.”

“So you’re pretty close then?”

She hesitated before firmly answering, “Yes. He’s seen me through a lot. And I’ve seen him through just as much I’d like to think. I don’t expect that to change anytime soon.”

Thinking it over she realized she and Robin had been by each other’s side for a lot of milestones in their lives. Losing Marian, raising their children, finding new homes. Sometimes she still couldn’t believe that he’d come to her father’s funeral with her but looking back on it she didn’t know why she’d expected any less from him. Robin was one of the best friends she’d ever had. Certainly the closest. And she didn’t particularly like that Jefferson seemed concerned about it.

She took another sip of wine. “Does it make you uncomfortable? That I live with him?”

There was a hint of challenge to her words. Almost as if she was daring him to answer in a way that she disagreed with.

Jefferson, of course, knew better than to fall into that trap. He just let out a lighthearted laugh and shook his head. “No,” he answered. “I’m just trying to get a feel for the relationship. You know the type of people you keep in your life says a lot about a person.”

“True,” she said nodding her head condescendingly. “But honestly, I think me being friends with him is more beneficial than him being friends with me. His reputation is far better than my own right now.”

“Seems like a decent guy,” commented Jefferson. “A bit overprotective but that’s just my opinion.”

Regina narrowed her eyes at him. “Why?”

Jefferson’s lips pulled into a smirk. “Well he did sort of threaten to break my legs.”
Regina’s eyes bulged out of her head. “What?! When?”

“When I came to pick you up,” he answered, like it was the most obvious thing in the world. “It was actually a decent threat. I might use it when Grace starts dating.”

She chuckled at the thought of Robin threatening her date like some protective older brother. It was ridiculous but it did explain the slight tension she’d felt when she came downstairs. She threw her head back with a groan. “Oh we are going to have such a conversation when I get back.”

“Please don’t,” said Jefferson. “The last thing I want is for him to think he intimidated me.”

She arched an eyebrow at him. “Didn’t he?”

Jefferson shrugged his shoulders. “Not physically,” he answered, eyes dropping down to his plate. “Just made me wonder if there was something more between you two, romantically I mean.”

Romantically? Regina reared her head back in surprise. Between her and Robin?

“Are you asking me if I’ve ever had a crush on him?” she said, playfully shaking her head.

“Oh, you make me sound so immature,” chuckled Jefferson.

Well you are a little bit, she thought to herself. On one hand she found the notion of her and Robin as couple utterly ridiculous. They were just friends. They shared a history. She was best friends with his deceased wife for God’s sake! His son was her godchild. The idea of them ever getting together was positively ludicrous.

But on the other hand…

She did remember laying against his shoulder on the late nights after she’d returned to California, too afraid to go to sleep without him there. How the sound of his voice could calm her down from miles away. The particularly heartwarming sight of seeing him playing with their boys, blue eyes sparkling with joy, his rich laughter ringing through the yard. The fact that when anything happened – bad, good, exciting, unusual – he was the first person she’d call, without hesitation. She remembered these things and suddenly she felt… doubtful.

Jefferson took another sip of his wine and looked into her eyes. “But really… there’s nothing there?”

With a tight smile she shook her head at him. “No. There isn’t.”

An easy grin returned to Jefferson’s face and he nodded. “Alright. Good to know.”

The conversation grew less serious after that, returning to more lighthearted topics like the changes in New York since she’d been gone and how their children were doing in school. She felt more relaxed as the evening went on but even as Jefferson called for the check and they prepared to leave a question buzzed around in the back of her head.

If the words she said about her and Robin were the truth, then why did they feel so much like a lie?

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The neighborhood around Robin’s house was heavily silent by the time Jefferson pulled up to the curb. It was past ten o’clock at night and every light but the streetlights were out. All husbands and wives, daughters and sons were tucked away in bed, fast asleep. Regina let out a soft breath as she
climbed out of the car and onto the sidewalk. She’d reached the end of her date and she couldn’t help but feel like a survivor. She’d managed to make it through the evening with no nervous breakdowns or mortifying moments. Somehow she’d managed to let go and enjoy herself at least for a little while. It was more than she could say for the past few months.

She looked over to the side of the car when she heard Jefferson slamming his door shut after he’d stepped out into the street. A bit of laughter escaped them both at the surprise in their eyes when it echoed down the street. Jefferson was still chuckling as he walked around the front of the car and over to her side.

He sighed as he looked down the street with an amused look on his face. “Wow! I have never heard silence like this in my life!” he passionately whispered. “It is… unsettling.”

Regina laughed at his observation but nodded her head in agreement. The still silence of the street was a far cry from the lights and noise that characterized night time in New York City.

“I will admit it took a while for me to get used to it again but once you’ve grown accustomed to it, it makes falling asleep twice as easy.”

Well for normal people, she silently added. Ones who aren’t plagued with nightmares.

She pushed those thoughts out of her head and returned her attention to Jefferson who was smiling down at her. He’d been a good date, she thought to herself. Her expectations for the night had been low but she had to admit that he’d shown her a good time. And despite herself she felt grateful for that.

“Thank you for taking me out,” she said. “It was nice.”

“Well I aim to please,” he replied playfully.

The silence in the street grew heavier as he stared into her eyes. At this moment she suddenly remembered that end of the night kisses were a particularly common dating ritual. Tension spiked through her entire body as she saw him lean in towards her. Her eyes fell down to his lips as they moved closer to her own. It was a split second decision but she swiftly raised her hand to his chest, stopping him from coming any closer and tilting her own head so she could land a quick peck on his right cheek.

She felt him freeze as her lips pressed against his skin and she realized that there it was. That nervous breakdown, that mortifying moment she’d been waiting all night. She’d should’ve known better than to think she could’ve avoided it.

She pulled back, groan rumbling from the back of her throat as Jefferson sheepishly looked away from her.

“Well that was unexpected,” he chuckled, trying to diffuse the tension.

“I’m sorry,” she drawled, a nervous waver entering her tone. “It’s just… I don’t want to start something I can’t finish.”

It was the quickest excuse she could come up with. And the most rational.

“I mean, you’re leaving tomorrow and I’m staying here,” she rambled. “It just doesn’t seem like a good idea to make it into something it isn’t or couldn’t be.”

He held up a hand to keep her from elaborating further. “Don’t worry,” he said. “I get it.”
“You do?”

“Yes,” he insisted. “You don’t have to apologize to me for it. This probably isn’t the best situation to start a relationship in. Geographically speaking.”

She nodded her head, relief swelling in her chest at his easy understanding. “Right,” she said nodding her head. She quickly added, “For the record, I really did have a good time. You were… an excellent date.”

“Thanks,” he chuckled. “You weren’t so bad yourself.”

He opened his arm to offer her a hug and she happily accepted, grateful that he hadn’t taken her rejection personally. He really had been an excellent date. Kind, attentive and funny. But for the life of her she just couldn’t shake the feeling that this one night was as far as they were meant to go.

He pressed a quick kiss to her forehead before letting her go. Sharing one last smile they bid each other goodnight, Regina heading toward the door and Jefferson climbing back into his car. She could feel his eyes on her back as she unlocked the door. He only pulled away once she was safely inside. Through the peephole she watched him drive away from the house until he was out of sight. Once he’d disappeared down the road, she leaned back against the door with a sigh and kicked off her heels. As she dropped her binder and purse down on the hallway table she noticed the kitchen light glowing past the staircase.

Immediately she headed toward it hoping Robin had just forgotten to turn it off after dinner and that it wasn’t one of the boys up past their bedtime sneaking late night ice cream. Turns out it was neither. She rounded the corner to find Robin dressed in a white tank top and sweatpants, standing at the island counter, artfully piling layers of lunchmeat onto a slice of bread.

He raised his eyebrows at her as she walked into the kitchen. “Hey.”

“Waiting up for me?” she asked suspiciously.

“No,” he instantly replied. He gestured to the half-made sandwich in front of him. “I didn’t eat dinner. Figured turkey and swiss could cure my hunger for the night.”

At least that what he was telling himself. He didn’t want to admit to anyone, especially her or himself, that he’d stayed up watching the window and listening for the sound of the front door just wondering when she’d be home and growing more anxious as the minutes went by. It was just easier to tell himself that he stayed up late to go over the Drunken Monk’s finances again, not because he couldn’t sleep while he was still wondering just what she was doing out on her date with him. He tried to convince himself that he stayed up purely out of need and not out of curiosity.

“How was your date?” he asked.

“Fine,” she drawled, heading over to the fridge. He wanted to know more about their date and she knew it but she couldn’t help but torture him after learning about his territorial warning to Jefferson earlier. She was still on the fence about whether or not she would tell him that she knew about his little show of concern.

Pulling out a small carton of chocolate ice cream and grabbing a spoon from the drawer next to the refrigerator she sat across from him, pulling up a stool at the kitchen island.

“How were the boys?”
“Resistant but relatively obedient,” he replied. It had been a pretty calm night for him and the boys. They ate dinner, watched Cars 2 and went off to bed without much of a struggle. His night had been easy but it wasn’t the one he was interested in.

“So where did he take you for dinner?” he asked, trying his best to sound apathetic.

Regina hummed as she swallowed her ice cream and regarded him coolly. “Poseidon’s Cliff.”

He inwardly cursed. Even he knew about Poseidon’s. It was one of the fanciest restaurants in California.

“Was it any good?”

“Shrimp scampi was the best I’d ever tasted,” she replied, eyes still focused on her ice cream.

He topped of his sandwich with a sigh. “And what about your date? Was he any good?”

She shrugged her shoulders. “You don’t have to break his legs if that’s what you’re asking.”

She looked up then, just in time to see his hands go still and his eyes go wide. “Sorry?”

“Sorry?” she repeated mockingly. “You’re really gonna play dumb here?”

Though she hadn’t planned on revealing what she knew but the look on his face made it worth it. All wide-eyed, red-cheeked and open-mouthed. He looked positively dumbfounded.

She softly laughed at him. “You realize you’re not my big brother right?”

“I know,” he sighed, taking a seat beside her. “Believe me I know. But I’m entitled to lookout for you every once in a while, right?”

A bemused smile on her face she turned her attention back to her ice cream. “Maybe. If you left out the threat of bodily harm.”

He chuckled. “Now how’s that any fun?”

She just shook her head at him. God, sometimes men were unbelievable.

“My question still stands,” said Robin. “Think you’ll see him again?”

He was toeing a dangerous line. Teasing his heart. He knew if she said yes he’d be disappointed. But if she said no… well what did that matter? It wasn’t as if he was going to tell her how he felt. Things were far more complicated than that. He didn’t know why he was asking her these questions. Perhaps he’d developed a taste for masochism in these past few days. Learned to enjoy the pain that came with holding his feelings inside. Or maybe, more likely, the part of him that longed to be her lover wasn’t as strong as the part of him that needed to be her friend. That needed to be the one she could confide in and open up to. Maybe that part of him was stronger because he knew it was the one she needed the most. In any case he couldn’t help but be relieved when he saw her shake her head.

“No he’s going back New York tomorrow,” she answered. “There’d really be no point in prolonging anything.”

Robin tried his best to look disappointed for her. “I’m sorry.”

She shrugged her shoulders. “Don’t be. I had fun tonight.” A smile tugged on her lips. “It was nice
to be able to go out, enjoy myself and be treated well but…”

“But what?”

She hesitated before continuing. “But I couldn’t shake the feeling that he wasn’t the guy who should be taking me out.”

Robin’s heart leapt into his throat. “Really?”

Regina let out an embarrassed breath. “Just a gut instinct,” she said. “Emma told me before I left that I should try and figure out whether or not liked him enough for a second date. And somewhere along the line I decided that I didn’t.”

Robin stared at her as she took another bite of her ice cream. “Any idea what turned you off?”

“I don’t know,” she said softly shaking her head. “He was everything a date should be, polite and charismatic. It just… didn’t feel right in the end.”

She didn’t know just when she’d decided that Jefferson wouldn’t be worth another date. Maybe it was during the stilted car ride or on the way back. Or perhaps it was when he’d asked her about the man sitting next to her. Perhaps it was when he’d held up a mirror to one of her oldest friendship and forced her to look harder than she’d originally deemed necessary. Or maybe it was when they’d pulled up to the house and she’d realized that she’d rather talk to the man inside it than the one who’d driven her home.

Suddenly she was very aware of how close he was sitting next to her. Of how good his arms looked as he placed his elbows on the island counter. Maybe it was their proximity or Jefferson putting the idea in her head but in a brief flash she imagined what it would be like to on one of those arms. To have Robin take her out. She started imagining how her date would go if he had been the one sitting across from her tonight instead of Jefferson. In a flash the idea of it ran through her head and she stopped it in its tracks.

She turned back to her ice cream and took another bite.

“So… think you’ll be going out again anytime soon?” asked Robin.

She laughed as she swallowed her ice cream and shook her head. “Nope. As fun as tonight was I don’t think I’m up for a repeat anytime soon.”

She turned her head to him. “What about you? Think you’ll be taking anyone out?”

Robin hesitated before answering her. “Maybe… if the opportunity presents itself.”

A moment of charged silence passed between them. Against her will Regina’s heart skipped a beat at his words and her lips pulled into a smile.

“Well make you sure bring her home first. If I don’t threaten to break her arms God only knows how she’ll treat you,” she whispered playfully.

Robin snorted at her as she climbed off her stool. “Please you can barely break bread.”

She sent him an offended look before packaging up her ice cream and sliding it back into the freezer. “It’s getting late. I’m gonna head to bed,” she said, walking past the island counter. “Enjoy your sandwich.”
She’d made it to the stairs and had one foot on the first step when she looked over her shoulder, back to where he sat at the kitchen counter.

“You know it’s not your job to protect me,” she told him.

A little surprised by her sudden add-on he nodded his head. “I know. That’s why I volunteered,” he replied seriously.

She locked eyes with him for a moment, absorbing the fact that he meant every word before finally looking away and heading back up the stairs. As she entered her room and started getting ready for bed she couldn’t help but think about her relationship with Robin. Jefferson had seen something more between them than she’d been willing to notice. She wanted to say that he was insane. That the only thing between her and Robin was friendship and nothing more. But after tonight she wasn’t entirely sure that was true anymore. She couldn’t help but think about the way Robin made her feel. Safe, free… happy. She couldn’t help but think about the fact that in the ten minutes she’d spent with him sitting at the kitchen counter she’d felt more of a connection than she’d had in the whole two hours she’d spent with Jefferson at Poseidon’s Cliff. And she couldn’t help but wonder if perhaps Jefferson was right. That maybe there was something more between them.

But as she pulled on her pajamas she firmly told herself that no, there couldn’t be.

This was Robin. Marian’s husband. Roland’s father. She couldn’t go down that route.

She couldn't dwell on the way his dimples flashed when he smiled. She couldn't think of how when he grabbed her hand she felt like she could get through anything. She couldn't remind herself that she loved his son as much as she loved her own.

She couldn't let herself fall in love with her dead best friend’s husband.

All she could do was ignore the tiny little voice in her head screaming to her that it was already too late.

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The sun shined through the windows of LAX the next morning. Jefferson took a moment to soak it in as he waited on a bench for his flight to start boarding. He’d checked the New York weather report when he’d woken up that morning and was dismayed to discover that it was expected to rain over the city all day. This might be his last chance for sunlight until the weekend.

As he sipped his coffee he found himself grateful that he’d decided to book a mid-morning flight instead of an earlier. His dinner with Regina had ran long and he’d barely gotten to sleep before eleven thirty. As he sat on the bench, his carry-on bag looped over his shoulder, his mind wandered back to the raven-haired beauty he’d taken out the night before. Suddenly he was very aware that last night might be the last time he ever saw her. He couldn’t help but be a bit relieved by that. Spending time with Regina Mills had not been good for his soul.

“Mind if I take a seat beside you?”

His back tensed up at the sound of that voice. He didn’t even have to look up to know there were a pair of dark, piercing eyes looking down at him now. His eyes flickered to the ground beside his feet and locked onto the familiar sight of an expensive pair of black shoes joined by the lustrous end of a painted cane.

He swallowed hard before answering, “You ask me as if I have a choice.”
A dark chuckle flowed from above him before he felt the man settle onto the bench next to him. Two hands rested atop the golden cobra cane topper as a sigh emanated from the well-dressed man who’d sat next to him.

“Lovely to see you again Jefferson.” His voice felt like poisonous honey, sweet, smooth and fatal.

“Is it?” replied Jefferson. “I’m never able to tell with you, Gold.”

He finally looked over to see Eli Gold sitting next to him. Dressed in an all-black suit like always, with the ever present look of superiority in his eyes.

“Bit early for so much attitude isn’t it Mr. Abbot?” he spat, his temper flaring.

Jefferson averted his gaze, turning his eyes back to the coffee in his hand. “Sorry. Just had a long night.”

“Well I expect so,” replied Gold. “How was your evening with Miss Mill?”

“Good,” Jefferson answered, guilt rising up in his chest.

“Did you take her to the restaurant I recommended?”

“Yes.” He nodded his head. “I think she enjoyed herself.”

Gold nodded his head with a smile. “Good. I expect you were able to keep track of the usual things for me.”

Jefferson sighed and nodded his head before telling Gold all he’d discovered about Regina the night before. Her working habits, her son, her moods, her friendships. The more he spoke the dirtier he felt. It wasn’t the first time. No he’d done this many times over the past three years. Hell, it’d all started a week after he’d first laid eyes on her.

Once he’d finished Gold nodded his head thoughtfully. “Did she mention anything else? Anything unusual or noteworthy?”

Jefferson hesitated before answering him. “She talked about her mother and an old fiancé. Said she’s on the lookout for them.”

At the mention of these two figures from Regina’s past Jefferson swore he saw a spark of interest in Gold’s eyes.

“Really?” drawled the older man. “And have either of them made contact with her yet?”

Jefferson shook his head. “Not according to her.”

Gold looked away from him then, twisting his cane as he fell deep into thought. Suddenly he rose from his seat and looked down at Jefferson. “Thank you Mr. Abbott. As always you’ve been a big help.”

He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a thick envelope of cash, handing it down to him. “Consider it a parting gift. After today your services are no longer required.”

Even as self-loathing washed over him, Jefferson took the money and stuffed it into his carry-on. He told himself it was for Grace’s future and that was the only reason he was accepting it.

He saw Gold begin to walk away from him and suddenly he felt his curiosity return. If this was the
last time he was would see the old man perhaps it might be worth it to get some answers.

“Wait!” he softly called, standing to his feet. “What will happen to Regina now?”

Gold turned back to him, his lips pulled into a surprised smirk. “Well, now… is that concern I’m hearing in your voice, Mr. Abbott? Don’t tell me you’ve grown to care for her after all this time?”

Jefferson clenched his jaw as shame rose, burning red, into his cheeks. He knew he wasn’t the most honest person in her life, selling her movements to the man in front of him, but after three years of sitting across from her at work he wouldn’t be lying if he said that Regina’s safety did matter to him.

“Maybe I’m just a little worried about what your intentions are,” he replied, trying to make his voice as firm as possible.

“My intentions should not be your concern,” Gold gritted out strictly. “They never have been in the past. You’ve always come when I called, mouth open like a broken vault willing to answer whatever I’ve asked without question.”

“You’ve never given me a choice in the matter,” Jefferson shot back.

In glorious technicolor he remembered the day when he’d first met Eli Gold. He remembered walking Grace to school, waving goodbye, crossing the street and having a black bag pulled over his head. He remembered being carted off in a vehicle he’d never laid eyes on, being so sure that he wasn’t going to make it to see tomorrow only to be dropped at the feet of the man in front of him and calmly told that he was going to perform a much needed service.

Gold smirked at him. “Paint the picture however you like Mr. Abbott. The truth will always be that you entered an agreement with me of your own volition. I offered to keep the Romanians off your trail in exchange for information on Miss Mills. It was a simple deal that you agreed to. You could’ve said no and accepted the consequences but you chose not to. That’s hardly my fault.”

Leaning on his cane he took one step closer to him. “Have I not held up my end of the bargain, Mr. Abbott? Have I not protected you and your daughter from the thugs you owed and kept you safe like I promised?”

He stared into Jefferson’s eyes with all the warmth of a cold-blooded shark. “Would you like me to dissolve our agreement Mr. Abbott?”

“No,” said Jefferson instantly. “No I would not.”

As much as he feared and mistrusted Gold he still needed his protection. He and Grace wouldn’t last long without it.

“I thought not,” replied Gold with a cold smile. “Now like I’ve said before I will no longer be requiring your services, which is not to say I won’t continue to hold up my end of the deal. It just means that I’ll no longer have these little chats to look forward to.” He reached out to tightly grip Jefferson’s shoulder. “So I suggest that you do what you’ve wanted to do since the day we first met. Go home to your daughter and forget you ever knew me.”

He lightly shoved Jefferson toward his gate, which had just begun boarding. “You’ve already worn out your usefulness Jefferson. You don’t want to see what happens when you wear out my patience.”

His threat was piercing and it did its job. Jefferson only gave him one last look before heading onto
his plane, his questions overshadowed by the need he felt to get far away from the man whose interest in him could prove fatal.

Gold watched him go with a satisfied look on his face. He’d admired the young man’s survival instinct. In another life he might’ve been worth grooming into something better than he was. But he didn’t have time for that now. He already had a pet project that he needed to deal with.

As he made his way toward the airport exit he thought over all that Jefferson had told him. Neither Cora or Leopold had made contact with Regina yet. On one hand that was a good thing. If Leopold had come chasing after Regina yet it was doubtful that he ever would. Men like him were selfish and entitled but they never had a particularly long attention span. So long as Regina didn’t provoke him he doubted that Leopold would come after her. Cora was an entirely different story. The fact that she hadn’t popped up yet only meant that she was biding her time, lying in wait, looking for the perfect opportunity to strike. And of the course the longer she waited the more vicious he knew her attack would be.
Chapter 33

It was a cloudless, sunny day as Sydney Glass walked down the block in downtown San Francisco. Even with the passing shade of the towering buildings, he counted himself lucky to have remembered his sunglasses on the way out from his office. Shoving the manila file in his hand under his armpit, he reached up to adjust the frames trying to relieve the pressure he felt on the bridge of his nose. Lifting up his wrist he checked the time on his old watch. 12:20. He picked up his pace. He didn’t dare to keep her waiting.

Increasing his speed, he made it up to the hotel in five minutes. As always his eyes drifted up to the roof of the Molinari before he headed inside. At the very top of the hotel, sitting in the penthouse, she was waiting for him. Probably already pursing her lips with impatience despite the fact that he was five minutes early.

Crossing the marble floors, not even stopping to greet the hotel staff, Sydney hopped into the center elevator and punched in the code for the penthouse floor. It was long ride up to the top floor and like always Sydney found himself wondering just how he got into this line of work. All his life he’d wanted to do was win a Pulitzer. With his inquisitive mind and unquestionable work ethic all his college professors had told him he was destined for a bright future. But fifteen years after journalism school and one poorly timed layoff later he now spent his days snapping photos of unfaithful husbands and staking out seedy motels. Working as a self-employed PI had never been what he wanted to do with his life, but he was good at it. It kept tailored suits in his closet and imported wine in his fridge.

Finally, the elevator completed its ascension and opened its doors. He took off his sunglasses and removed his old grey trilby hat before stepping onto the penthouse floors. Within seconds a maid appeared and offered to store them in the closet. Sydney enjoyed the finer things in life, relished his good clothes and expensive wines, but every time he came to her he was always reminded that he was further from true wealth than he’d like to admit. Normally his clients would come to him to discover his findings… but she was hardly normal client.

He was directed down the hall to her office. He found her, poised as a queen, waiting for him behind her grand, mahogany desk. He pursed lips pulled back into a smile when she finally caught sight of him.

“Sydney! So glad to see you made it on time.” Her greeting was like black coffee, warm but distinctly bitter.

He replied, “I’ve always strived to make punctuality a priority, Ms. Mills.”

She continued to bare her teeth at him, disguising it as a smile. “Have a seat.” She gestured toward the leather bound chair in front of her desk. Sinking into it, Sydney kept his eyes locked on her face. There was something about Cora Mills that made him unable to look away from her. Whenever he was in the same room as her, he felt as though he was in a locked cage with a hungry tiger. Too look away was to provide her with an opportunity to pounce.

She wasted no time with pleasantries. “What do you have for me today?”

He passed over the manila folder in his hand. “All that I could find on the bartender.”

Cora hummed with interest as she perused the file pages. Her eyes lingered on the photo of the raven-haired, ocean-eyed man her daughter called friend. She flipped through the pages, her
attention caught by phrases. *Dead brother. Married lover. Orphan.* She shook her head with a tsk of her tongue. “Quite a sordid past for such a pretty face.”

“He’s not the lynchpin you’re searching for,” said Sydney. “He’s got pressure points, might be useful enough to manipulate but none so big as to sway him in your favor.”

Cora rose from her seat with a sigh. “Of course.”

Heading around the desk, she walked over to an old oil painting of a young girl playing a piano. Delicately placing her fingers behind the frame she pulled it from the wall, revealing the door of a hidden safe. Typing in a quick code she inserted the file, laying it atop four identical manila folders. Closing the safe and returning the painting to its original position, she turned back to Sydney, a malicious glint in her eye as she pulled her lips down into a frown.

“I must admit Sydney… I’ve never been quite so disappointed with you.” She ran her fingers across the back of his shoulders, the sound of her nails lightly running across the fabric of his suit sent a shiver down his spine. He clenched his jaw and resisted the urge to recoil from her touch. “I asked you to find my daughter’s weak spots. And with three months of work you’ve yet to bring me anything of value.” She settled back behind her desk, arms haughtily folded across her chest. “I’m starting to think you’re beginning to lose your touch.”

Her tone was sharp as she stared him down and her message was clear. *I am unhappy. Do something to fix that. Now.*

Sydney swallowed hard and tried his best not to fidget under the weight of her gaze. He nervously wet his lips before responding, “I can assure you that’s not true. It’s just you’ve given me quite a bit of work with this investigation. I’ve had to dig into the cop, the bartender, the model –”

“Is there a point to all these excuses or are you just wasting more of my time?” she sharply interjected.

He felt his cheeks grow hot at her interruption. “Of course not,” he replied. “I’m just saying a case like this requires thoroughness. I assumed you would prefer it that I left no stone unturned.”

Cora pursed her lips as if musing over his words. “Normally you would be correct but I find myself growing impatient. Stop wasting your time on the guppies and bring me the big fish,” she ordered.

He nodded her head, knowing exactly who she was referring to. “Robin Locksely.”

Cora nodded her head as she began to pace behind her desk. She’d seen quite a bit of this Robin Locksely. Her daughter’s “white knight.” In all the photos of Regina that she’d seen he’d been in nearly every one. Always right by her side, just like at the funeral. It made her sick.

“Regina’s grown far too dependent on him,” she muttered in disgust. “Living in his home like some common leech, playing house. If there’s a lynchpin in this mess it’s him. All I need is one tiny weakness that can help me pull him apart and I’ll have her back.” She turned back to Sydney her eyes sharp with disappointment. “Now is that too much to ask?”

“Of course not,” he softly answered. “It might take a little work but no one is ever clean as they seem. I’ll find his pressure point.”

Cora silently turned from him, her back rigid with slowly boiling anger. In a moment of unprecedented boldness Sydney cautiously commented, “There are more direct ways of getting your daughter back, Ms. Mills. Why not just approach her?”
Cora scoffed before shaking her head and turning back to face him. “Because she’s too comfortable to see reason. She thinks that she’s finally carved out a place for herself in this world, with these people.” Her words dripped with disdain as she alluded to the motley crew her daughter surrounded herself with. “I don’t just want her back Sydney. I want her behaved. And that won’t happen until she realizes that I know best and always will.”

The way she spoke of her daughter always seemed curious to Sydney. If he didn’t know better he might believe that Cora was speaking of a rebellious teenager, not the 30-year-old mother he knew Regina to be.

“And just how do you plan on bringing her to this revelation?” he asked, curiously.

Cora smirked at him, before sternly shaking her head. “So many questions Sydney. One might think it was your job to ask them.”

Sydney’s gaze dropped down to the desk as he clenched his jaw. He didn’t know why Cora hired him to look into her daughter’s life. She seemed to have no trouble identifying weaknesses on her own.

Cora smugly settled back into her desk and pointed toward the door. “You can go now. Return only when you have something useful to me.”

Sydney robotically rose from his chair and headed for the door. She watched him go, only relaxing into her seat when she saw his back disappear into the hall. When she heard his footsteps fade away she let out a slow, silent breath to calm herself. Sydney was competent, thorough and more than a little afraid of her. It was why she hired him. It made him easy to control. But he’d been more than disappointing lately. If she ever wanted to get her daughter back she could no longer rely strictly on him. She’d have to start outsourcing some of his work.

Her eyes drifted over to the framed photo on the edge of her desk. Regina, no older than fourteen years old, in an elegant baby blue ball gown, posing against the stair case in the country home. She’d been so perfect back then. So easy. Always willing to see reason. Cora ran her fingers along the edge of the frame longing.

“I’ll bring you home Regina, she thought longingly. I’ll make you see reason if it is the last thing I do.

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Miles away, sitting in an old diner, oblivious to her mother’s machinations, Regina sipped on an iced tea as she swiped through yet another photo gallery on her tablet’s real estate app.

“What about this one? It’s got two bedrooms and a nice backyard.” She smiled widely at Henry, trying to seem enthusiastic as she turned the tablet in his direction.

Henry apathetically glanced at the screen. “It’s okay,” he mumbled with a shrug of his shoulders, before turning his attention back to his milkshake. The same reaction he’d had to the last two houses she’d shown him.

Roland peered over his shoulder and scowled at the images on screen. “My house is better!” he sourly declared. Pouting, he leaned back in his seat and defiantly crossed his arms.

Regina let out a disappointed sigh before running her fingers through his curls. “I know, baby.”

Their lack of enthusiasm dampened her spirits.
“Let me see!” Snow snatched the tablet from her hands and brought it over to her side of the table where Emma sat next to her. Their heads leaned closer together as they looked down at the tablet screen, Emma’s long blonde hair contrasting with Snow’s black pixie cut. As they swiped through the photos their faces simultaneously twisted in displeasure.

Snow looked over at her with and arched one perfectly-shaped eyebrow. “You can do better,” she stated flatly. “The carpet is dingy, the layout is weird and the bathroom is just pitiful.”

Regina rolled her eyes. It had been like this for the last week. Searching through the internet listings, thinking she found a decent property, sending it to her friends only to have them ruthlessly list out its flaws.

She swiped the tablet back from Snow’s hands. “Thanks for your input,” she grumbled.

Snow just smirked at her from across the table. “If you wanted a sugar coated opinion you should’ve asked lover boy, not me.”

Regina’s eyes nervously flickered toward the boys, who were thankfully oblivious to the adult conversation at the table as they colored on their children’s mats. “Robin is not my… lover!” she harshly whispered, stumbling over Snow’s word choice. “Stop calling him that!”

Any other day she would’ve responded to Snow’s quips with a roll of her eyes of a stern look, but ever since her date with Jefferson – and the realization that came afterwards – she found herself particularly sensitive when it came to her relationship with her handsome, blue-eyed roommate. She could already feel her cheeks burning red at Snow’s comments.

“Why are you in such a rush to get moved out anyway?” questioned Emma. “Dimples is right. Robin’s house is gorgeous. Why would you ever want to leave?”

Out of the corner of her eye, Regina saw Roland grin at the use of the new nickname Emma had bestowed on him. Perhaps he was paying attention.

“It’s been three months,” she answered pragmatically. “It’s time I found my own place.”

Not to mention the more time she spent around Robin the deeper she fell in love with him. And that was something she could not allow to happen.

She sighed as she scrolled through the listings for the third time. Staying with Robin was no longer an option for her. Things had changed since she’d discovered her feelings for him. They’re not better or worse. They’re just different. In the past few weeks she’d felt a shift in their relationship. An increase in awkward pauses and stilted conversation. Talking to Robin used to be easy as walking along the beach, but now she felt like she was maneuvering her way through a minefield with every ever conversation they had. Second guessing everything she said, trying to make sure not a hint of her true feelings shined through. It kept her on edge every time he so much as entered the same room as her.

She couldn’t stay with him anymore. Trying not to get swept up in his sky blue eyes and flashing dimples was far too difficult living in such close quarters. Every time he so much as looked at her a flurry of butterflies would immediately fill her stomach. No, it was better for everyone that she finds her own place as soon possible. Once she moved out, spent a little time away from him her feelings would fade away and things would go back to normal… she hoped.

Snow eyed her curiously as she sipped her hot green tea. “Hmm… are you sure there’s no other reason you’re rushing to get out from under him?”
Regina glowered at her from across the table. “Snow…”

“No heart thumping, pulse raising reason?” she continued, a lecherous look in her eyes.

By this time Regina was sure her face had turned beet red. She nervously wet her lips before turning to Henry and clearing her throat. “Sweetie, the food should be here any minute. Why don’t you take Roland into the bathroom and wash your hands before it gets here, ‘kay?”

Henry nodded his head, grabbed Roland’s hand and led him toward the back of the diner. As soon as the two boys were out of sight, Regina sternly glared in Snow’s direction. “You know I’d appreciate if you reeled it in around my eight-year-old son and five-year-old godson.”

“I was being discreet,” Snow argued playfully. “Besides it’s nothing to be ashamed of. Sex is one of the four basic human needs.”

Emma snorted in her direction. “You say that like you’ve had any,” she chuckled.

It was Snow’s turn to blush then as she fell silent at Emma’s comment. Though she will admit she felt a modicum of pleasure at seeing Snow being put in her place, an uncomfortable shiver still ran down her spine at the mention of her almost-stepdaughter’s sexual activity, or lack thereof.

She groaned and shook her head. “Could we please tone it down with the bedroom talk? Seriously, we’re about to eat.”

Snow rolled her eyes, quickly recovering from her flash of embarrassment. “We just find it curious that you went on one date with Jefferson, and then immediately started house hunting like you were going to be put out on the street.”

“Oh really?” She arched an eyebrow in Emma’s direction. “Is that what we think?”

Emma shrugged her shoulders apologetically. She knew how much Regina hated it when they talked about her outside of her presence. “Well… it is suspicious timing,” she drawled. “You were barely looking before.”

“Then one night on the town and it’s like you can’t get out of there fast enough,” added Snow.

Regina sighed in annoyance. “I don’t get it. The two of you are beautiful young girls living in one of the most vibrant cities in the country. Do you seriously have nothing better to do than gossip about my life?”

“Only when there’s nothing on Netflix,” Emma playfully replied.

“Very funny,” deadpanned Regina.

Snow sent her a sympathetic look. “There’s no need to be so defensive Regina. We totally get it if you think it’s a little weird to be dating and living with Robin at the same time.”

An offended squeak rose from the back of Regina’s throat. “That’s not why I’m moving out!” she protested.

“But we would understand if it was,” Emma said gently. “I mean it can’t be easy to say ‘Sure I’d love to go out on a date. Just pick me up at the house I share with my sexy best friend and the two sons we co-parent together.’”

“We do not co-parent out sons,” argued Regina. As soon as the words were out of her life she
realized they weren’t exactly true. The boys had hardly been separated since she’d moved back to town.

“The point is it can’t be easy to bring home a guy when there’s already one there. Especially one as cute as Robin,” said Snow. She took another sip of her drink. “I can’t imagine Jefferson took it well.”

Regina bit her lip before responding. She still remembered the tense feeling in the room when she’d come down to the kitchen to greet Jefferson before their date. The way Robin’s overprotectiveness had flared up. “Jefferson was… intimidated. I won’t lie about that.”

“Well he had a right to be,” replied Emma. “Your relationship with Robin is very… intimate. Most guys won’t know how to compete with that.”

“Who says they have to compete?” said Regina. She pursed her lips. “I’m not so sure I want to date a man who sees all my male friends as competition.”

Snow smirked into her mug of tea. “Well it won’t be all your male friends. Just the one you’re in love with.”

Regina’s heart skipped a beat. “I’m not in love with Robin!” Her voice was rough with indignation, as she shot daggers across the table at Snow.

Emma hand with still as she knitted her eyebrows together and studied Regina’s face. Her bull detector was suddenly on high alert. “You sure about that?” she said softly.

Regina’s gaze slid over to her. “Excuse me?”

Emma shrugged her shoulders. “Like I said, your relationship with him is very intimate. I don’t think it would surprise anyone if you started having feelings for him.”

Regina felt her jaw clench against her will as Emma shined her interrogative gaze on her face. The table went silent as Snow began to watch both of them intently, the mischief in her eyes replaced with deep seated intrigue.

“Regina…” she slowly drawled, “Are you starting to have feelings for Robin?”

She hesitated before firmly answering, “No I am not.”

She locked eyes with Emma from across the table and saw a slight tug pull on the blonde’s lips as a spark of recognition passed behind her green eyes. She didn’t say a word but the message was clear.

*I know you’re lying.*

Regina’s eyes fell back to the tablet in her hands as she tried to avoid the intrusive gazes of the two girls sitting across from her. She roughly swiped at the screen.

As firmly as she could she declared, “Robin and I are just friends. We’ve never been anything more than that.”

“We know that,” said Snow. The heavy solemnity in her voice was a stark contrast to her earlier playful tone. “But I’m less interested in what you and Robin have been and more curious about what you could be.”
When she lifted her gaze up from the tablet, Regina saw Emma and Snow were both looking at her with a mixture of concern and curiosity. She’d never felt more transparent. Her mouth went dry as she struggled to find the right words to say. Nothing came to mind.

Swallowing hard she stood from her seat. “I think I need some air.”

She headed for the door, her movements stiff as she tried to bury the panic and embarrassment rising from her gut. The bell of the door jingled as she left the diner and stepped out onto the sidewalk. She shut her eyes against the blinding light of the sun and let out a deep breath. Taking a seat on the bench in front of the diner windows she tried to take long deep breaths to calm herself.

The bell above the door rang again and she’s no longer alone.

“Not now Emma,” she says shaking her head.

Emma sighs as she settles down onto the bench next to her. “I’m sorry Regina,” she said apologetically. “We were just teasing… at first.”

“I know,” she mumbled, keeping her eyes locked on the hands in her lap.

They were both silent for a moment and Emma studied the face of the brunette woman next to her. “Regina… just be honest with yourself for once. Can you honestly say that you don’t feel anything for him at all?”

Regina’s chin wavered as she opened her mouth to speak. “I… can’t.”

“Can’t be honest or can’t have feelings for him?”

Regina hesitated before answering her. “Both.” She sucked her teeth and shook her head. “No, I was right before. There’s no need for romance or dating in my life right now. It’s just not worth it. I’ve gone without it for years. I can continue for a few more.”

Emma narrowed her eyes at her. “Really? You were fine without it?”

Regina brought her eyes up to Emma’s face then. “Yes,” she firmly asserted.

Emma shook her head before turning her eyes down to her feet. “Regina… do you remember what we talked about before your date. When we talked about Daniel and how he used to make you feel – “

“Yes Emma I remember.” Regina sharply cut her off, the voice had grown thick with pent up emotion.

Emma continued on. “You talked about how he used to make you feel safe and fearless at the same time. And how important that was to you.”

“I know,” said Regina. “But I’ve lived without that for a long time. And I’ve survived.”

Emma kept her eyes on Regina’s face. “Regina did you ever stop to think the only reason you survived without those things was because, even if you didn’t know it, you still had them… with Robin.”

Regina felt her throat close up as she remembered all the phone calls, all the late night conversations, all the hugs, and touches, and memories, and comfort she’d experienced at Robin’s hand. Emma’s prodding forced her to remember every moment and just how she’d felt in each one.
As each memory swept over her she realized that in all the years since she’d known him she’d never felt safer than when Robin was by her side. Even before she realized her feelings, even before they’d started growing, he’d become her safe place.

And she couldn’t lose that.

Swallowing hard, she shook her head and repeated, “I can’t.”

“Why not?” questioned Emma, the frustration rising in her voice. “Give me one good reason why you can’t.”

“I can give you fifty good reasons why I can’t,” she shot back. “Not the least of which includes the fact that his deceased wife was the best friend I had. What type of person would I be if I dragged her husband, the only man she ever loved, into a relationship with me knowing full well I’d be putting him danger?”

Emma solemnly replied, “You’d be the person who loves him.”

Regina rolled her eyes and let out defeated sigh. “Emma… I can’t tell him. It would ruin everything.” Her eyes dropped back down to her hands. “Besides it’s not like there’s even a chance that he feels the same way about me. Marian was the only woman he ever loved.”

“Regina it’s been years since Marian… passed away.” She hesitated before the speaking the final words. “You really don’t think there’s a chance that he’s ready to move on?”

Regina pressed her lips together and shook her head. “I know to you it might seem crazy but… you didn’t see the way he used to look at her. It was like nothing and no one else could compare. So why should I even try?”

“Because you’ve never seen the way he looks at you,” Emma softly replied. When Regina remained silent she sighed before shifting her body on the bench so she was facing her. “Look… no one is going to force you to do anything you’re not ready for. But there are a lot of people in this world who want to see you happy. And I just hope that for once you’ll start acting like you’re one of them.”

Her head eyes whipped back up to Emma’s face. Staring into her green eyes she wished that she could find something, anything to say in her own defense. But nothing came to mind.

Emma glanced back in the diner’s window and sighed. “It looks like our food is ready.” She stood to her feet. “I’m gonna head back inside. You coming?”

Regina shook her head. “No. I’m gonna take another minute. I’ll be in soon.”

She heard the bell above the door jingle as Emma made her way inside. Once she was out of sight Regina let out another deep breath. As she sat on the bench letting the sun warm her skin, Emma’s words replayed in her head. She wanted to be happy. And despite what Emma thought she was taking steps to make that happen. They just didn’t include revealing her feelings to Robin. No, he’d already had more than enough surprises from her. Whatever feelings she had it was best for her to keep them to herself.

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The Drunken Monk was busy. It was lunchtime and Robin could hear the rumble of the bar beneath his feet. The sound of Bon Jovi’s voice rose up through the floor boards, floating up to his ears but failing to enter his mind. The lyrics barely seeped into his skull as his eyes remained
transfixed on his computer screen. A photo of a small white bungalow stared back at him. Another listing Regina had sent him. His eyes dropped down to the three sentences she’d sent along with her link.

*Going to an open house to check this one out. I think it might be the one. Take a look for me?*

It was a lovely little house. Two bedrooms, nice backyard. Even a master bathroom most people would kill for. It looked like she finally found a winner.

And somehow he couldn’t write a two-sentence email to send her encouragement.

He groaned as he leaned back in his seat and ran his fingers through his hair.

*It shouldn’t be this hard,* he thought to himself. She was a friend. She’d found a good place to live. He should be happy for her.

He was happy for her… but he couldn’t ignore the aching feeling in his chest. The irrational, steadily growing need to keep her close. It shook him to his bones and he hated himself for it.

He was happy she found a place to live but he still didn’t want her to leave. Even if that was the best thing that could happen for both of them.

He was still brooding over his lack of response when Hook traipsed into his office a pleased grin on his face. In triumph he held a small slip of paper over his head and pointed his finger at Robin accusingly. “You remember the brunette with brown eyes who likes to come in here for lunch? The one who you said wouldn’t go out with me in a million years?”

Robin released a short groan while he rolled his eyes. “Yes, I remember.”

“Well, guess who got her phone number and a date for Friday night,” Hook boasted, waving the slip in the air with a triumphant cackle.

Robin just narrowed his eyes at him. “Hook how many times do I have to tell you not to pick up dates while you’re working? You realize every girl you disappoint is a customer I lose?”

“Please,” scoffed Hook as he fell into the seat across from his desk. “My charm is this bar’s greatest asset and you know it.”

Robin just shook his head and returned his attention to the computer screen. He still grimaced at the sight of the house.

Hook narrowed his eyes at Robin’s face. “What are you looking at?”

“Regina sent me a new listing for a house,” sighed Robin. “She thinks she might want to buy it.”

Hooked walked over to Robin’s side of the desk. He ran his eyes over the computer screen and nodded as he examined the photos and listing. “It looks good to me,” he proclaimed,shrugging his shoulders. “Hell of a lot better than your house when we first saw it.”

Robin chuckled at that. “True.”

“So why do you look like you just sucked on a lemon?” asked Hook, as he made his way back around the desk.

Robin felt a spark of annoyance at Hook’s bluntness but he knew he’d only brought it on himself by being so transparent.
“I guess I’m just a little sad to see her go,” he softly admitted.

Hook sat back down in his seat and continued to study Robin’s face. “Are you sure it’s nothing it’s else?”

Any other day Robin would’ve brushed off Hook’s question with an annoyed roll of his eyes. He would’ve sworn up and down that there was nothing going on between him and Regina and that’s how he wanted it to stay. But today he just couldn’t find the energy to fight his accusations.

He sighed before looking his friend in the eye. “Alright, Hook I am going to admit something and I’d like you not to be smug about it.”

Hook struggled to keep his face impassive but he couldn’t hide the light behind his eyes at Robin’s admission. “Yeah?”

Robin let out a reluctant breath before admitting, “There is a chance that I… might… have feelings for Regina.”

Hook pressed his lips together as he nodded his head. “Wow… how hard was it to admit that aloud to me?”

“A sledgehammer to the face would’ve been less painful,” Robin flatly replied.

Unable to hold it in any longer a grin split across Hook’s face as he banged the palm of his hand against the desk. “I knew it!” Boisterously laughing, he ran his hands over his face. “I never knew being right could feel this good.”

Robin glowered at him from across the desk. “Really wishing I would’ve gone with that sledgehammer right about now.”

“Okay, alright.” Hook took a moment to calm himself before slapping on a serious expression. “So when did you first start realizing it?”

Robin sighed as he thought back over it in his mind. The question was harder to answer than he’d previously thought. He could say he knew it when she’d had her date with Jefferson. Watching her go out with another man hard sparked something in him that he hadn’t felt in years. But if he really dug deep he could say he knew it when she started living with him. When seeing her every morning and coming home to her at night became the highlight of his day. Or maybe it was even further back. When she first stepped off that plane and he’d put his arms around her for the first time in years.

In any case he never got the chance to answer.

_Rap-Rap-Rap_

Robin swiveled his chair toward the window behind his desk and saw Tink rapping her knuckles against the glass. Once she caught his attention she held up her toolbox with a bright smile and Robin internally groaned. He’d forgotten he’d asked her to check on the water heater today. Standing to his feet he opened the window and held out his hand to help her inside.

“Tink we’ve talked about this. You have to start using the main entrance to get in the bar,” he said sternly.

“But I like using your window,” she said, sending him puppy dog eyes. “It makes me feel special.”
Robin just sent her a disapproving look as she climbed into his office and set her toolbox on the ground. She wiped the dirt from the fire escape off her hands before shrugging her shoulders at him. “Besides nothing important happens in your office anyway.”

Robin and Hook shared a loaded glance and Tink narrowed her eyes at them. “What’s going on?” she drawled suspiciously.

Hook just shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly. “Nothing. Robin’s just having an epiphany.”

“Oh!” whispered Tink, nodding her head. “Has he finally realized that he’s in love with Regina?”

Robin just stared at her open mouthed while Hook burst into laughter from his seat. Robin finally shut his mouth and glared at him. “Hook!”

He raised his hands submissively, laughter settling in his throat. “Don’t look at me. I didn’t say a word.”

“He didn’t have to,” said Tink, shaking her head. “Robin, your feelings aren’t exactly subtle.”

She leaned against the back of Hook’s chair and tilted her head at him. “Honestly it’s the little things that give you away. Like the way you can’t take your eyes off her when she walks into a room. When she’s gone you’re always looking to see where she went. And the way you talk to her… it’s different then the way you talk to the rest of us. There’s just more warmth to your voice. It’s fairly obvious once you start paying attention.”

Robin just stared as she listed off the tiny habits he’d formed in Regina’s presence. Tink had always been quirky, a bit less serious than everyone else in the group but every once in a while, she’d stump them with her keen observation skills. Personally, Robin thought she saw more than anyone else realized. He just didn’t know whether she chose to keep to herself due to respect or disinterest.

“Well it’s nice to know my feelings are glaring obvious,” he sourly mumbled.

“Maybe to us. But not to her,” Tink replied, shaking her head.

Hook leaned forward in his seat. “Do you think you’re going to tell her?”

A tense moment of silence passed before Robin clenched his jaw and stiffly shook his head. “No,” he firmly declared.

Hook and Tink both widened their eyes at him in shock.

“You can’t be serious,” said Hook, shaking his head.

“Don’t you want to be with her?” asked Tink, confusion clear in her green eyes.

“I don’t know,” said Robin shrugging his shoulders. His eyes dropped down to his desk. “I mean I’ve thought about it but…”

“But what?” questioned Hook.

Robin drummed his fingers against the desk. “But I just don’t know if it’s worth the risk right now. Between her mother, the fact that she’s living with me, our history together and her friendship with my wife all I’m seeing is a mountain of reasons to keep this to myself.” He paused before adding, “She’s been through so much these past few months I don’t want to add my feelings on top of that.
What she needs right now is a friend, not a lover.”

“You can be both,” Tink stated optimistically.

“You have to admit she has a point there,” said Hook, gesturing toward her in agreement. “We’ve all seen how much you’ve supported her these past few months. I doubt that would change if things became romantic between you.”

“But that’s only if things get romantic,” Robin pointed out. “There’s always a chance that I’ll tell her how I feel and she won’t reciprocate. And if that happens she’ll start to pull away from me. I know she will.”

The conviction in his tone left no room for argument. As sure as the sky was blue Robin knew that as soon as he revealed his feelings to Regina nothing would ever be the same between the two of them.

“She’s finally got some peace in her life,” he said softly. “I don’t want to take that away from her.”

“But what if she does feel the same?” asked Hook, hope lighting up his blue eyes. “If that’s true don’t you think you owe it to yourself to find out?”

“Maybe,” mumbled Robin. “Maybe not…”

“Is this about Marian?” Tink asked, eyeing him curiously.

Her bluntness through him off. “Well… I’d be lying if I said she hasn’t crossed my mind whenever I think about the whole situation.”

His thumb ran over the underside of his ring finger, just like it always did whenever Marian’s name came up, searching for the ring he’d removed so long ago. It was true. Whenever he thought of Regina and the possibility of moving forward with her, his mind would always wander back to Marian. He couldn’t help but wonder just how she’d feel about the idea of him and Regina together. Hurt? Glad? He could still remember the feeling of her hand in his and the way the sunlight reflected off her chocolate colored hair but it’d been so long since he’d talked with her, he was ashamed to say that he couldn’t hear her voice in his head as clearly as he once could.

Hook stared at him with understanding in his eyes and pressed his hands together in a pleading gesture. “Robin… I get that the idea of it might seem… unsavory to you but it’s been more than four years. No one’s going to think less of you if you’re finally ready to move on.”

“I know that,” said Robin, nodding, trying to make his voice sound as firm as possible. “But to move on with Regina? You guys remember how close they used to be. They were practically sisters. And thinking of them and how they used to be… I can’t help but feel like I’m betraying her if I tell Regina how I feel.”

Tink raised her eyebrows in contemplation. “Yeah, I’m starting to see that mountain you were talking about,” she mumbled.

Hook leaned back in his seat and ran his thumb over his jaw. “Look mate, I understand that this is a messy situation filled with complicated emotions but speaking as a concerned third party I still think you need to tell her.”

Robin shook his head. “Hook…”

He raised his finger silencing Robin from across the desk. “And before you start citing all the
reasons it couldn’t work I’d like to remind you of a couple things.”

He ticked the items off his fingers as he went. “One, we’ve all known Regina just as long as you but while she was in New York she managed to talk with you every week while the rest of us were only lucky enough to get an email once every three months. So when you start thinking about how easy it’ll be for her to pull away from you, just remember that for more than two years there were nearly 3,000 miles between you and she still didn’t let you go.”

Robin rolled his eyes and opened his mouth to offer up a rebuttal but Hook held up a finger to silence him.

“Don’t speak. I’m not finished,” he ordered, cutting Robin off before he spoke. “Secondly, I’d like to remind you of the fact that less than three months ago I practically had to drag you out on a date and you bitched and moaned from start to finish. But when she sent you a three sentence text to let you know she’d be coming down for a visit you couldn’t stop smiling for days. And I say this as your friend, someone who’s known you for nearly a decade now, you hadn’t been that happy or excited in years.

He hesitated before continuing. “But also… I knew Marian too. Not as well as you did but I knew her and loved her just like everybody else here. And if you don’t think that she wasn’t kind or loving enough to hope for your happiness then you’ve forgotten more of her than I thought possible.”

Tink’s eyes widened at Hook’s words. The air in the room suddenly went very thick.

Anger flared up inside Robin at Hook’s accusation. Narrowing his eyes, he pointed a stern finger in his direction. “You might want to watch yourself Hook,” he advised in a dangerously low voice.

Hook raised his hands submissively but kept his tone steady. “Not trying to overstep my bounds Robin. Just trying to remind you of who you married. Marian was a woman who wanted the best for everyone she met and that included you. If you think you’re betraying her by moving on… then you’re wrong.”

The two men continued to stare each other down and things in the room had grew very tense. All that could be heard was the muffled thumping of the bar music rising from the floor boards. After a moment Robin turned his attention back to the computer screen.

“Things are getting busy downstairs. You should probably head back.”

Hook scoffed at him as he rose from his seat. “Okay.”

Without another word he left leaving Tink behind. She let out an awkward, nervous breath before sinking down into the seat he just vacated.

“Wow… lot of testosterone in the air right now.” Robin ignored her comment and she tilted her head at him sympathetically. “You know he didn’t really mean what he said. He’s just concerned.”

Her eyes dropped down to her hands and back up to his face. “Robin do you really think Marian would feel betrayed if you got together with Regina?”

Robin nervously pressed his lips together before facing her. “Honestly? I’m not sure.” He shrugged his shoulders. “I want to believe that she wouldn’t but it’s not as if I can get her blessing.”

Tink nodded her head understandingly. “I get it. But for the record, I think she’d just want you and Roland to be happy. I don’t think she’d care who brought you that happiness.”
A small smile graced Robin’s lips. “Thanks Tink.”

She smiled back at him as she stood to her feet. “If you don’t want to tell Regina how you feel that’s fine. But the longer you wait the more time you’re going to spend wondering what you could’ve had if you’d just spoken up. And at some point you’re going to have to ask yourself if you want to keep wondering… or if you just want to know?”

She shrugged her shoulders at him as if to say “that’s it” before gathering up her toolbox and heading out of the office to find the water heater.

Robin watched her go, listened to the door close behind her before releasing a frustrated breath and roughly running his hand over his face. His eyes drifted to the two photos that sat on top of his desk. One of him and Marian, smiling brightly at each other as they stood on the steps of the courthouse, practically glowing in their newlywed bliss. It was an old photo and it filled him with warmth and nostalgia every time he looked at it. Right by its side sat another photo. A candid picture of Regina and the boys. He’d taken it himself the month before, wanting to preserve the moment when he’d caught them running around the backyard together, smiles on all their faces, not a care in the world. He hadn’t even thought about what it meant when he framed it and set it on his desk without hesitation. All he knew was that it made him happy to see it every day. Looking at them both now he felt his heart being pulled in two different directions. A tug from the past on the left, and a pull from the possible future on the right.

It wasn’t as if he hadn’t imagined what a future with Regina would look like that. He had, many times over. He just didn’t know if that future was even a possibility. And he didn’t think he was ready to discover if it wasn’t yet.

Regina’s email was still displayed across his computer screen. He sucked in a determined breath before placing his fingers on the keyboard.

THE HOUSE LOOKS GREAT, REGINA. LET ME KNOW HOW IT GOES.

A moment of hesitation before he clicked the send button.

For now, he would just have to wonder.
It was a grey day when Regina finally moved out of Robin’s house. Dark clouds filled every part of the sky and wind steadily blew through the air, shaking the branches in the trees. A hell of a storm was about to roll through. And yet it was nothing compared to the storm Robin felt inside.

He’d been helping her load up boxes all day, watching as she’d shuttled them from his garage to her new home, a lovely little bungalow with two bedrooms not even five miles from his own home. As the weather worsened so had the melancholy feeling in his gut.

He was sad, truly sad to see Regina and Henry go. Having them in his home over the last three months had been a joy. Though he knew they’d be visiting often he’d miss the certainty of seeing their faces every day. Despite his feelings on the matter he knew their departure was for the best. Regina and Henry deserved a home of their own and spending some time apart from her would help him sort out his feelings. Gauge their authenticity as it were.

Fat raindrops had started splattering against the windows by the time she returned for her final trip. Even from the kitchen he could hear the howling of the wind as she walked through the front door, struggling to slam it closed on her way back inside. She appeared in the kitchen, breathless, her hair blown wild form the wind, raindrops scattered across her face as she shrugged off one of his old hoodies revealing the plain maroon tee underneath. God she looked beautiful.

“It’s really blowing out there,” she said, attempting to brush her hair back in place.

“I noticed,” he replied, taking another sip of his coffee. He didn’t make it for the caffeine, just for the warmth. He set his mug down on the kitchen table where he sat. “You’re lucky you got the bulk of it done before things got too bad. How much more do you have left?”

“Just the last three left upstairs.” She’d going back and forth all day. Steadily shrinking the number of boxes cramping up his guest room. It was back to being empty now. He’d offered to help but she’d said she’d rather him stay with the boys. Keep them busy and out of the way.

She softly shook her head and placed her hands on her hips. “You know it’s funny? I was unloading the boxes at the house and I could’ve sworn I had another box of linens,” she mused, her eyebrows scrunched in confusion.

A smirk grew on Robin’s face. “You did. Roland hid it under my bed this morning.”

A guilty moan rose from Regina’s throat. Her godson hadn’t taken the news of her departure well. The closer they’d gotten to move-out day the surlier his mood had become. His latest act of defiance? Hiding all her things so she and Henry couldn’t leave.

“A guess I’ll pack it up with all the others,” she mumbled. She sighed before speaking again. “Actually I wasn’t wondering if you wouldn’t mind letting him come along with me and Henry for the night. You know? To help ease him through the move.”

“Yeah?” Robin raised his eyebrows at her. He didn’t know why he was surprised. Regina had always been careful to consider Roland’s feelings.

He shrugged his shoulders as a contemplative look grew on his face. “You’re certainly welcome to it but you should know that Roland hates storms. If things get rough through the night, he won’t be easy to deal with.”
Regina waved off his concerns. “Things will probably clear up by then. Besides I think I’ve gotten pretty good at handling Roland’s moods by now.”

A soft sound of agreement passed through Robin’s lips. During her time in the house Regina had gotten better at dealing with Roland than anyone else besides Robin. She could always manage to talk him down from his tantrums, calm him down and clear the tears from his eyes like no other woman could. Except perhaps his mother… not that she’d ever gotten the chance to try.

Robin nodded his head. “I think a night with you would do him some good.”

Regina smiled at him. “Thanks.” She jerked her thumb over her shoulder. “I’ll head upstairs ask him how he feels about it.”

She turned and headed up the stairs, crossing paths with Henry as he made his way down. She smiled and patted him on the shoulder as she passed but he didn’t give her much of a response. Robin saw her smile falter as she continued up to Roland.

Henry made his way over to the kitchen table where Robin sat.

“It’s cold,” he mumbled. “Can I have some hot chocolate?”

Robin smiled at him. “Sure. One more for the road.”

He had to admit he agreed with Henry’s assessment. It’d been chilly all morning. Robin had even deigned to put on one of his thinner pullovers.

He rose from the table and headed over to the pantry for the hot chocolate packets. While he pulled out a mug and stirred up the ingredients Henry climbed onto a stool next to the kitchen island and laid his head on top of his arms. Robin loaded his hot chocolate into the microwave before turning back to him.

“So are you excited about the move?” he asked, forcing himself to be enthusiastic.

Henry only shrugged his shoulders. He hadn’t exactly been taking news of the move that well either. However, unlike Roland, Henry had chosen to retreat inside himself as a way to express his displeasure. He’d become very quiet and withdrawn over the last few days, hardly speaking or cracking a smile. It was unnerving.

Robin sighed before taking a seat next to him at the counter. “What’s wrong Henry? Don’t you like the new house? It’s got a lot of space and you’ll have a room to yourself again.”


A spike pierced Robin’s heart. “Well, we’ll still be around,” he promised. “And you can visit anytime you like. I’m sure your mother won’t mind.”

“It won’t be the same though,” Henry stressed, his voice going wobbly. His lips had pulled into a watery pout. “What if I need you and you’re not here?”

Robin nervously pressed his lips together before digging into his pocket for his phone. He clicked it on, brought up Google Maps and typed in his address. Once the red flag appeared onscreen he showed it to Henry.

“Do you see this?” he said. “This is where my house is.”
He tapped on the screen, typing in Regina’s new address. A green flag dropped and a red line appeared connecting the two points on screen.

“And this is where your new house is,” he said, pointing it out onscreen. “Can you read the distance between them?”

Henry squinted at the map. “2.3 miles,” he read, softly.

“That’s right,” said Robin nodding his head. “And do you know how many miles I run when I go jogging at night? Three miles.” He emphasized the number by holding up three of his fingers. “I run three miles a day, four days a week and it’s become really easy for me to do. So I promise, that if you need me you can call, I’ll put on my jogging shoes and I’ll run the 2.3 miles to your house, just like that.”

Henry sat up in his chair. “Just like that?”

“Just like that,” promised Robin. He wrapped his arm around the boy’s shoulders. “Henry if you ever need me all you have to do is ask and I’ll be there. No hesitation.”

Henry looked up at him, serious as an eight-almost-nine-year-old could be. “You promise?”

“I promise,” Robin solemnly replied. He pressed a quick kiss to the top of Henry’s head.

The microwave beeped then, signaling to them that the hot chocolate was ready. Once Robin stood to get it he heard the sound of footsteps against the stairs and looked over to see Regina making her way back into the kitchen.

She nodded to him as she approached. “Roland’s packing an overnight bag.” Turning her attention to Henry she added, “And what about you mister? Do you have all your things packed up?”

“No,” Henry drawled sullenly.

“Well hop to it,” Regina gently ordered. “You can have your hot chocolate when you’re done.”

“Fine,” he sighed, climbing off the stool.

Regina shook her head to herself as she watched him drag his feet up the stairs. “I swear that kid acts more and more like a teenager every single day.”

Robin chuckled as he pulled the hot chocolate out of the microwave and onto the counter. “You know I hear maturity is a desirable trait for young boys.”

Regina sucked her teeth as she leaned against the kitchen counter, her hands gripping the edge. “I just hope I’m not forcing him to grow up too fast. You know with everything that’s happened these past couple months. All the changes and unpredictability…”

“Hey.” Robin placed his hand on top of hers. “Henry’s fine. He’s a little upset about the move but he’ll adjust. You’re just a mile or two away. He doesn’t even have to switch schools.”

Regina softly nodded her head. “I know. I just feel like I’ve been shifting him around a lot lately.”

Sympathy shined in Robin’s blue eyes. “You wouldn’t have done any of this if you didn’t think it was best for him. You’re an excellent mother Regina.”

He gave her fingers a comforting squeeze sending a jolt of electricity through both of their hands. For a moment Regina allowed herself to sink into the comfort and familiarity brought on by the
feeling of his hand atop her own. Then she remembered the line she’d drawn and the decision she’d made.

Clearing her throat, she gently wriggled her fingers free and brought her hand up to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. “Robin there was actually something I wanted to talk to you about.”

“What?” asked Robin. His fingers stretched out of their own volition, as if searching for the ones that she’d so suddenly removed from his grip.

She opened her mouth to speak but nothing came out.

Lightning flashed and the kitchen lights flickered. On and off they blinked before everything suddenly went dark. Thunder pounded outside the windows and Robin instinctively stepped closer to her, his hand immediately reaching for her shoulder as if to make sure she hadn’t disappeared.

She hadn’t.

Her hand gripped his elbow as her eyes searched the room, caught off guard by the blackout. Goosebumps rose up on her arms. Whether they were from the storm or his touch she couldn’t tell. It hardly mattered.

“What the hell…” she heard him softly mutter, his voice closer to her ear than she’d anticipated. He’d moved closer to her in the darkness, his hand protectively drifting down to the middle of her back. The weight of his touch caused her pulse to quicken.

Almost simultaneously their phones began to buzz while cries of “Mom!” and “Daddy!” were screamed from up the stairs. Another flash of lightning lit up the kitchen and for a brief moment they each caught sight of the temporary panic in each other’s eyes.

Robin sprang into action first. He moved past her and headed in what he thought was the direction of the stairs. “I’ll get the boys,” he called over his shoulder. “Just stay here.” She heard him curse as he tripped over what she assumed was the first step of the stairs.

As she heard the sound of his footsteps ascend to the next floor she pulled her cell phone out of her back pocket. Tapping the screen, she saw an emergency alert displayed.

SEVERE STORM WARNING IN THIS AREA UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE. POWER OUTAGES EXPECTED. LOCAL ROADS CLOSED. STAY INDOORS. CHECK LOCAL NEWS.

She cursed under her breath before swiping it away and flicking on her phone’s flashlight. She raised it to get a good look at the kitchen and caught sight of Robin making his way down the stairs with the boys, Henry by his side and Roland in his arms, his own phone shining a light in his hand. Henry rushed down the stairs and immediately wrapped his arm around his mother’s waist. It was the most affection she’d received from him in days. She could almost feel grateful for it if it hadn’t been born out of her son’s fear over the blackout.

Roland didn’t appear to be doing much better. His arms were tightly wrapped around his father’s neck as he sniffled in distress. Regina’s heart broke for him.

“Did you see the alert?” Robin asked as he approached her at the counter. He dropped his cell phone on the counter – light-side up – so he could comfortably rub Roland’s back. Shadows covered both their faces as she nodded her head at him.

“Yeah. Looks like the roads are closed.”
“How are we going to get back to the house?” Henry’s voice was small and trembling as it rose up from his spot at her side. She gently ran her fingers through his hair in an effort to comfort him.

Robin shook his head. “I don’t think you can. At least not tonight.”

Regina sighed. “Looks like we’ll be spending another night in your hair.”

Roland lifted his head from Robin’s shoulder. Even in the dark Regina could see his big round eyes glistening with tears. “You’re not leaving?” he sniffled hopefully.

She sent a small smile his way before reaching over to wipe a tear from his cheek. “No my dear, not tonight.”

“Then can we have a sleep over?” he asked, perking up.

“Yeah,” Henry chimed in, softly but enthusiastically. “We can sleep downstairs with blankets by the fire place.”

A chuckle rose from Robin’s throat. “I don’t see why not.” He smiled over at Regina and playfully shrugged his shoulder. “How about it? One final sleepover for the road?”

Her lips pulled into an amused smile as she took in their excited faces. Chuckling she nodded her head. “Alright. One last sleepover.”

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Regina had to admit she was a bit surprised by how well Robin was handling their sudden emergency.

Within ten minutes a roaring fire was set up in the living room. While she and the boys set up blankets by the fireplace Robin braved the outdoors and locked all the storm shutters. With a flashlight in hand he’d headed into the garage and managed to scrounge up an old generator and battery operated hot plate. Together they’d lit a few candles and set them up in the kitchen and the downstairs bathroom downstairs. Everyone dressed in their pajamas the boys were busy building a blanket fort in the living room while Regina helped Robin hook the fridge up to the generator.

Robin was pulling the fridge out from its spot in the counter while Regina watched from the counter. The howling of the storm from just outside the kitchen windows could be heard as she trained the flashlight in her hand toward the back of the refrigerator where Robin was focusing his gaze.

Her lips were pulled into a grimace. For the third time she asked, “Are you sure you know what you’re doing?”

“You better hope so,” Robin replied, “or I’ll have to force the boys to eat all the ice cream before it melts. And I don’t think either of us wants that.”

He reached down to pull out the fridge’s electrical cord out onto the counter while Regina watched him, clearly fascinated. “You know I’m a little impressed,” she said. “I didn’t think disaster preparedness was something you were into.”

Robin chuckled as he shrugged his shoulders, the candlelight flickering over his bare arms. “I wish I could take credit but most of this stuff belongs to Hook actually. He left it here after he returned from his last sailing trip.”
His tone darkened a bit at Hook’s name. Regina detected a bit of resentment but also a hint of sadness. She tilted her head at him. “You know Tink told me the two of you had a bit of a falling out.”

Robin’s heart skipped a beat. For a moment he feared that Tink had revealed his feelings for her but he quickly decided that such a move wasn’t in the tiny blonde’s nature.

“She said you fought during his shift at the Drunken Monk?” Regina continued, her chocolate-colored eyes attempting to bore into his soul.

“It was a gentleman’s disagreement,” Robin sullenly replied.

“It was an overstep followed by an overreaction,” countered Regina. She shrugged her shoulder. “According to Tink, that is.”

Robin grumbled as he rolled out the generator’s extension outlet. “Well, witnesses do tend to be unreliable.”

“Robin… I think you need to let up on this cold shoulder treatment,” Regina advised. “From what I hear you’ve barely spoken to him in two weeks.”

Robin groaned as he pulled on the cord. “You weren’t there Regina. What Hook said… he crossed a line.”

“Really? Did he suddenly reveal that he’s been lying about his identity for the past eight years?” she sarcastically replied, arching her eyebrow in his direction.

Robin scoffed and rolled his eyes at her. “Wow. You really had to go there?”

“Felt like it was the smoothest way to get my point across,” she said smugly. “Look Robin I might not have been there for this one moment in your friendship but I have seen a lot of it. Hook might overstep every once in a while, but he’s only ever done it because he cares. I doubt this time was any different.”

Robin let out an exasperated breath. She was right. He knew she was. Even if Hook had crossed a line he’d only done so out of concern. He might be an ass but he was still a good friend.

“Fine,” Robin reluctantly agreed. “I will send him a text to make sure he’s okay during the storm. We’ll see where it goes from there.”

Regina grinned over her flashlight. “Just glad to see you’re putting in the effort.”

He plugged in the refrigerator to the extended outlet and grinned when it began to hum in response. Turning to Regina with a triumphant look on his face he said, “Told you I knew what I was doing.”

She smiled at him. “My hero,” she replied.

A moment of silence passed between them as both their hearts fluttered. Once again Robin felt the irrational need to be closer to her. A smile was plastered to his face as he took in her appearance. She was dressed in his pajamas that night, a plain white tee and green plaid pajama pants, both of which were at least two four sizes too big for her. She was practically drowning in them but like every other piece of clothing she’d worn Robin thought she wore it well. Her flawless skin glowing under the yellow light of the candles, the flickering flames reflected in her eyes, dark hair falling over her shoulder. She couldn’t be more beautiful to him.
The moment was broken by another flash of lightening. It made both of them jump.

“We should check on the boys,” said Robin.

Regina nodded her head as she slipped off the kitchen counter. Flashlights in hand they tiptoed their way into the living room where they found the boys, lying on their stomachs under a fort of blankets next to the fireplace. An open bag of marshmallows was by their side along with two empty juice boxes. Their heads were huddled together as Henry shined his small flashlight onto a picture book that he read aloud to Roland. They could barely hear his soft voice over the storm.

“The next day was Sunday again. The caterpillar ate through one nice green leaf…” His reading was stilted and slow. It still warmed both their hearts.

Robin smiled as he leaned against the living room entrance way. He turned to Regina with a smug look in his eye. “See you can sing your praises for the iPad all you like. There is nothing greater than an old fashioned book in my opinion,” he stealthily whispered.

Regina rolled her eyes at him before turning her attention back to the boys. They looked so cute together, warm in their pajamas, huddled over the book, their flashlights shining beneath the blankets causing them to glow as they hung over the chairs they’d arranged in front of the fireplace. If she didn’t know any better she would say they looked like brothers. Perhaps they were.

She sighed to herself. “I almost feel guilty taking him away from this. He’s always wanted a little brother. Someone to share the space in the house. I think he’s dreading the day it goes back to just him and me.”

“Well it’s not like Roland and I will disappear,” said Robin. “And he’s always welcome here. You do know that?”

She turned and looked into his eyes. “Yes. I do know that.”

For the second time that night she felt that familiar warmth swell up in her chest. The same one that appeared every time she saw just how much Robin cared for her son. She could never doubt his love and affection for Henry. It was one of the few things in the world that she knew would never change.

It was then she was reminded of the urgent matter she had planned to speak with him about. Yet again she opened her mouth to have nothing come out.

“Mom come get under the blankets with us! You too Robin!” She heard Henry yell his order at them from over her shoulder. She turned to see both him and Roland grinning at them from their spot in the living room. Light shined into her eyes and she squinted as they both beckoned them over with their flashlight.

“Okay,” she giggled nodding her head. She trotted over to them with an enthusiastic smile on her face, Robin on her heels. They descended to their knees and climbed under the fort with their boys. Their joined laughter mixed in with the storm as she pulled Roland into her lap and Robin laid on his side next to Henry.

“Looks like you two have been having all the fun without us,” Robin said playfully.

They boys laughed as they nodded their heads in unison.

“Henry was reading me stories but now I want to hear you tell me one!” said Roland, pointing at his father.
“Me?” said Robin with false shock. “What story could I possibly tell you?”

“Tell me one about Mama.”

Robin’s face froze for a moment. “One about your Mama?”

“Yeah,” said Roland softly. “Like the ones you used to tell me.”

Regina saw Robin attempt to swallow his guilt as his eyes dropped to the floor. “It has been quite a while hasn’t it?”

Regina caught his eye and saw a mixture of hesitation and remorse. The warmth inside of her dimmed at the sight of it. She pressed her lips together before playfully squeezing Roland’s side and smiling down at him. “Hey? How would you like to hear about the first time I met your Mama and Papa?”

“Yes!” Roland nodding his head so enthusiastically his dark curls shook against his scalp.

“Am I in this story?” asked Henry.

“Yes you are,” said Regina, nodding her head, “But you were a tiny little baby at the time. I could practically fit you in my pocket.”

The boys giggled at her euphemism and her smile grew.

“Henry you and I… well… we were lost in a way.” Her throat started to tighten up as she struggled to find the words to explain to her son the poverty she’d experienced months after his birth. “And we were hungry. After you were born we lost our home because it wasn’t safe for us there.”

“Why?” asked Henry, his hazel eyes growing more curious by the second. He was staring at her intently as he lay by Robin’s side.

Regina hesitated before answering him. She caught Robin’s eye and saw him give his head a little shake. She agreed with him. It was best not to go into detail.

“Because there were bad people there,” she said cryptically. “So we left but I didn’t get the chance to bring very much with me so we didn’t have much. One day you were crying because you needed new diapers. I went to the store but I didn’t have enough money to buy them. And the cashier made fun of me because of it.”

“That’s mean!” Roland declared vehemently, causing a proud smile to grow on Robin’s face.

“He was mean,” said Regina, nodding her head. “He was one of those greasy teenager with pimples and stringy hair. He was so rude to me I wanted to cry.”

Even though years had passed Regina still felt her skin grow hot with embarrassment over how the cashier had treated her that day. She’d never felt lower in her life.

“But then your Mama showed up,” she said softly, the beginnings of a smile growing on her face. She held Roland closer to her as she wistfully remembered the first time she’d met his mother. “She yelled at the cashier for being so mean to me.” She nodded her head at Henry. “She bought me your diapers and food. Then she convinced me to come home with her.”

“To this house?” chirped Roland.

“No no no,” said Regina shaking her head. “To your first home. Remember the apartment?”
“A little,” said Roland, shrugging his shoulders with a frown.

“Well she brought me there,” she continued. “And it was warm and safe and the nicest place I had been in months. She made me macaroni and cheese and let me take a shower. But then, while I was in the bathroom, she went across the hall…”

Robin dramatically rolled his eyes. “Oh god…”

Regina laughed as she continued her story. “And your daddy didn’t know that she’d brought me home…”

“Because your Mama neglected to tell me even though it would’ve taken one short phone call,” Robin interjected.

Regina shushed him as she continued to laugh. “And he came into the bathroom while I was showering. Now I didn’t know who he was and I got a little scared.”

“Your mom punched me in my nose!”

“What?!” sputtered Henry.

Regina glared at Robin while he pointed an accusing finger in her direction. Henry burst into laughter while Roland giggled in her lap.

“I was a defenseless man coming home from a long day of work and she punched me!” Robin declared.

“It was more complicated than that,” Regina playfully argued. “I was alone in the bathroom. I didn’t know who he was and I thought he was a villain there to hurt me.” She sighed and shook her head. “But yes, the first time I met your daddy… I punched him the face.”

“That’s funny,” laughed Roland.

“You wouldn’t think it was so funny if it was your sore nose,” said Robin, teasingly poking him in the stomach.

“It was a misunderstanding but we were both very angry,” said Regina, continuing her story. “Your Mama came home and found us arguing in the bathroom. I wanted to leave and your daddy wanted me to go but that didn’t happen. Instead your Mama convinced me to spend the night and she convinced you daddy to let me.”

“She didn’t have to try very hard,” added Robin with a wistful smile. “She told me she brought you home because you were lost and she wanted to help you find a home. And I couldn’t say no to her. Especially when she’d brought home such an adorable little baby.”

He ruffled Henry’s hair.

“The next morning your Mama made me the best eggs I had ever had and she took me to the Drunken Monk,” said Regina. “She said if I wanted to you and I could stay in the apartment above it until we could afford to leave.”

As she smiled over toward her son she remembered just how close she’d come to giving him up and how grateful she’d felt when Marian had told her she could stay above the bar. And how grateful she still was for everything that had happened afterward.
She leaned down to press her cheek against Roland’s. “Your Mama gave us our first home. But not just that she gave Henry and me a family. We made one together with your Mama, and your papa, and Uncle Kilian, and Aunt Mulan and Tink, and later on with you. And that’s why every night before I go to sleep I thank her. Because none of us would be sitting here if we’d never met her.”

A watery, grateful smile tugged on her lips. The idea of where she could be if she’d never met Marian is something she could hardly imagine. At best she would be alone, separated from Henry, still hiding who she was with no one to confide in. At worst… well, she might not even be alive. Because of Marian she still has her son and more. That’s how she knows she’ll never have a greater friend than her first one.

Silence fell over the four of them and Henry was the first to break it. “I wish Aunt Marian was still around,” he whispered.

Robin sighed. “You aren’t the only one Henry.”

He locks eyes with Regina. Guilt floods both of their hearts.

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The storm rages on for a while. The clouds thunder, the rain pours and lightning strikes repeatedly. But despite nature’s monstrous call for attention inside the Locksely house it continues to be ignored. Drowned out by the good times created by Robin and Regina and their two boys. The four of them barely leave the living room floor, opting to stay in the warm cocoon of laughter, junk food and old-fashioned fun they’d cultivated by the fireplace. Over time the storm wanes. The thunder quiets, the lightning stops and only the rain remains. Robin puts out the fire and replaces it with an electric heater as they all snuggle into their blankets and sleeping bags for warmth. Soon after the steady pitter-patter of raindrops lulls them all to sleep. There’s no rhyme or rhythm to their arrangement. Heads are beside knees; arms are over stomachs. Yet they’re all as comfortable as could be, huddled together on the living room floor.

At least for a little while.

As they slumber in their blankets the storm begins to pick up. The wind returns and thunder shakes the windows.

This time mother nature’s call is not ignored.

Lightning strikes and Regina eyes open. She’d been sleeping peacefully, her head less than two feet away from Robin’s finely toned stomach (a fact that does not go unnoticed by her). It’s not the storm that causes her to wake but the tears. With a mother’s hearing the muffled whimpering from across the carpet is far louder than any thunder could ever be. Leaning up on her elbows she whispers, “Roland?”

In the darkness she can barely make out where he is but she hears the shuffling of his body and turns her attention to her left. As her eyes adjust to the lack of light he takes shapes, sitting up from where he lays head near the fire place, toes an inch from Henry’s nose. She sees him wipe at his eyes, more likely wiping away tears than sleep.

“Is the storm scaring you?” she gently whispers. She doesn’t want to wake Henry or Robin.

She sees him nod in the darkness but remain silent.

“Do you want to come in my sleeping bag, next to me?”
Even in the dark she sees how quickly he moves, standing to his feet as swiftly and silently as possible he heads over to her without hesitation, tripping over Henry’s legs as he goes. Her son lets out a soft moan in response but doesn’t wake. She smirks to herself. He’s always been a heavy sleeper.

Arms wide open she welcomes Roland into her sleeping bag. His arms immediately wrap around her waist and his head falls onto her chest as she gently rubs his back, softly *shushing* in his ear.

“It’s okay,” she whispers, resting her chin on the top of his head. His curly tickles her skin and she breathes in his familiar scent of dirt and baby powder. “You’re safe,” she promises.

The stay like that for a while, him clinging to her while the storm thunders outside the window. She lets her hold onto him as hard as he likes, hums to calm him down. Over time she feels his grip loosen and his breath evens out. She hums a little longer, almost certain that he has gone to sleep, until she hears his tiny voice in the darkness.

“Regina?”

“Hmm?”

“Is my mama in heaven?”

His asks his question so quietly but to hear ears it’s as loud as a shattered glass. Her heart skips a beat and her hand goes still on his back.

“That’s where daddy said she was,” added Roland.

Through parted lips she lets out a slow, silent breath and nods her head. “He said that because it’s true, sweetheart. Your mama’s in heaven.”

She feels him clutch the fabric of her shirt between his fingers. “Will she ever come back?”

A lump forms in her throat. She tries her best to swallow it. “No honey,” she whispers, shaking her head. “Once you go to heaven you can’t come back.”

It breaks her heart to say those words but she can’t leave him with false hope. Like many times in the past few months she finds herself wishing that Marian was still alive, not for her sake but for Roland’s. He was so young when she’d passed away he didn’t remember her at all. The sound of her voice, the touch of her hands and the warmth of her heart were all mysteries for him. Oh the things she would do to give him one memory of her, one moment that he could see through his eyes, not someone else’s. She’d move mountains for that chance.

She feels him let out a disappointed breath and she comfortingly runs her fingers through his hair.

“If my Mama’s not here anymore… does that mean you’re my mama now?”

Her eyebrows knit together and her lips part in shock. She tilts her head down so she can see his face. “Why do you think that?”

He shrugs his shoulders. “You do mama things for me. Like reading me stories and bake me cookies. Doesn’t that mean you’re my mama now?”

She’s silence for a moment. The storm is fades in the background as her attention focuses on the swirl of guilt residing in her stomach. Over the past few months she and Roland had spent more than their fair share of time together. She’d tucked him into bed, driven him to school, praised him
when he’d done well, chided him when he’d done wrong. But in all that time she didn’t realize that Roland had started seeing her as a mother figure. She’d never thought that he’d place her in that role.

She hadn’t wanted him to.

It was bad enough that she’d started having feelings for Robin. Knowing Roland wanted to place her in a role that his mother should’ve filled… well, it felt like stealing. In the worst possible way.

Even in the dark she can see there’s hope in his eyes as he looks up at her, silently waiting for her answer. She nervously wets her lips, internally struggling to find the right words to say.

“No Roland it doesn’t,” she softly answers, staring into his big brown eyes. She takes a deep breath before continuing. “Roland your mama is your mama whether she’s in heaven or not.”

She places her hand right above his heart, close enough that she can feel it’s tiny thumping against her palm. “I know you can’t see her or hear her but before she died your mama loved you so much that a tiny piece of her heart jumped out and leapt into yours. And as long as you keep it there your mama will always will be with you.”

She took his tiny hand and placed it under her own on his chest. “So every time you miss her you can just place your hand right here and feel her heart beating, with same rhythm as yours. Do you feel it?”

Roland’s heart thumped in his chest and nodded his head. “Yes.”

“Good.” She presses a kiss to his forehead and pulls him closer, silently praying that this was the end of his questions for the night.

It wasn’t.

A moment later she hears, “Regina?”

Her heart races in fear of what he’ll say next. “Yes?”

“If you’re not my mama then what are you?”

She hesitates before answering him. “I’m your godmother, Roland.”

“What does that mean?” he whispers, curiously.

She smiles into the darkness. A small, almost inaudible chuckle escapes her. “It means that no matter what I’ll always bake you cookies and read you stories. Every time you ask.”

“You promise?”

She holds out her pinkie. “I pinkie promise.”

Roland grins as he loops his pinkie with hers, satisfied that she really means it. The storm continues as he settles his head against her chest but this time it doesn’t touch him. He yawns. Listening to the beat of her heart his breathing evens out. He falls asleep, arms still wrapped around her middle. She follows not long after thoughts of his mother still on her mind.

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Robin was usually the last to go to sleep. It was something he’d noticed in the nights since Henry
and Regina’s arrival. He could never bring himself to lay in his bed and close his eyes without knowing that everyone in the house was safe, dreaming in their own beds first. Tonight was no exception. Even with the three of them laying less than two feet away he waits until their eyes close and their breathing evens before letting himself rest. For a few moments he just takes them in, watching the steady rising and fallings of their chest. It feels so right to him. Having the four of them together like this, all under one roof. He hates that after tonight that won’t happen again.

He hears the storm outside the window as he drifts off to sleep. The deeper he goes the more the sound of the raindrops transform. Before he realizes it all he can hear is the sound of the ocean…

*He’s standing on a beach. He can feel it in the sand beneath his toes. Hear it in the sound of the waves rolling in with the tide. It’s beautiful. The sun is shining and the sky is blue.*

*He can see them. A family. His family. His two sons. The oldest with thin brown hair and small hazel eyes.*

*Henry.*

*The younger with wild thick curly locks and large, round eyes.*

*Roland.*

*They’re with their mother. Their gorgeous mother. Her olive toned skin and midnight-colored hair. Whiskey eyes deeper than sea itself.*

*He breathes her name. “Regina.”*

*The boys splash in the water as she walks in the sand along the shoreline.*

*They see him and they wave.*

*He waves back.*

*They want him to join them. They call him over.*

*He wants to go but he looks down at his feet.*

*There’s a line in the sand. He can’t cross it.*

*If he does… they’ll crumble and fade away. He won’t see them again. That’s not what he wants.*

*He stays on his side of the line.*

*He feels someone by his side, grabbing his hand. He turns to see her. Dark skin, warm brown eyes, chocolate hair.*

*He hears himself say, “Marian.”*

*She’s even more beautiful than he remembered. Her hair shines in the sunlight. Her dark skin is flawless and glowing. She radiates peace and he’s calmed by her presence.*

*For some reason he’s unsurprised to see her but still he asks, “Why are you here?”*  

*Smile on her face she replies, “I’ve always been here Robin. I never left.”*  

*She looks at his family waiting on the beach. “Why won’t you go to them?”*
He can’t lie to her. “Too afraid to lose them.”

She shakes her head at him. “You shouldn’t be so afraid of losing something that you don’t even try to have it. That’s no way to live.”

His eyes drop back down to the line. “If I cross it everything will crumble.”

“No it won’t,” she promises. “Not if you don’t let it.”

She makes him turn to face her. Her eyes have grown serious. “It has to be you Robin. She can’t cross the line so you have to do it. You need to be the brave one. You always have been.”

She turns back to look at the boys and their mother. She smiles. “I made you a family Robin. You just need to be brave enough to have them.”

His eyes are fixed on their hands. His uncertainty is obvious.

He whispers, “What about you?”

“Every day you were with me you made sure I knew that I was loved.” She nods at him and a tear falls down her cheek. “I still know. And I’ll keep knowing even when you let go.”

Her gaze drifts over to Regina. “But she doesn’t. So you have to tell her.”

She steps back from him, still holding onto his hand. “You just have to let go and cross the line.”

His eyes flicker over to his family and back to her. She nods encouragingly as her smile returns. “You can do it. It’s okay.”

His thumb runs over the back of her hand. He hears himself whisper. “Thank you. For everything.”

Giving her hand one last final squeeze, he takes a deep breath and slips his fingers from hers.

XXXXX

When Robin woke up the next morning the storm outside was gone. As his eyes opened he saw the sun shining and heard the birds chirping outside the window. Silently sitting up from where he looked over the room and saw everyone was still on the floor with him. Everyone was still laying where they dropped. Well everyone except Roland that is.

It appeared his son had wandered into the arms of his godmother sometime the night before. Robin had no doubt this was due to his fear of storms. Even so, Roland seemed rather at peace laying in Regina’s arms and from what he could tell she certainly seemed comfortable having him there. Her eyelids lightly fluttered as dreams still played out in her head but on the whole her face appeared rather serene. One could even say she looked poised as she slept. Her son, on the other hand, was different story. Henry was a wild sleeper and in the morning light it certainly showed. Separated from his mother he was situated to Robin’s right, limbs splayed out in every direction as his mouth dropped open bringing in more air to power the snores flying out of his nose. It didn’t look as though he’d be waking up anytime soon.

Robin stood to his feet and let out a content sigh as he, once again, took in their sleeping forms. Crossing his arms with a smile he realized that just like the storm inside him had disappeared just as much as the one outside. He no longer felt sad or conflicted because he knew, without a shadow of a doubt, this was not the last time the four of them would be under the same roof. It was not the last time that they would feel like a family. He would make sure of that.
The power had been restored to the house overnight and Robin set about making himself a pot of coffee. As soon as he had a steaming mug of breakfast blend he headed out the front door to see if there was any damage left over from the storm.

Though it certainly hadn’t swept by gently there didn’t appear to be any major repercussions. A broken tree branch here, a knocked over mailbox there, wet leaves scattered all about. Nothing a good day’s yard work wouldn’t cure.

He sat on his porch and sipped his coffee, mulling over the night before.

He remembered his dream as clear as day. He remembered the feeling the sand between his toes and his wife’s hand in his own. He could still hear her voice urging him to cross the line, telling him that he had to be the one to do it.

He didn’t know if the dream was what he thought it was, what he believed that it was. A blessing from beyond. But he did know it would be just like Marian to waltz into his dream just for the chance to talk to some sense into him.

Real or not she had been right. He hadn’t told Regina how he felt because he’d been afraid of losing her. Of losing the makeshift family that they’d created in the past few months. But he couldn’t be afraid anymore. If he stayed afraid he’d lose any chance of having what he really wanted.

He had to tell her how he felt.

She deserved to know.

He heard the front door open behind him. Looking over his shoulder he saw Regina step outside, still wearing his clothes from the night before. Her had covered her mouth as she let out a small yawn, and joined him on the front porch.

“Good morning,” she said, her voice still raspy from sleep.

“Morning,” he replied.

He smiled thinking to himself about how adorable she looked, hair still mussed from sleep, yawning in his oversized pajamas as she sat down next him.

“Coffee?” He offered her his mug.

“Thank you,” she said, gratefully taking it out of his hands. She took a sip and licked the spare drops from her lips. Her eyes ran over the yard. “Look like it was quite a storm.”

“Looks like.”

They sat together in silence for a moment, taking in all the damage the storm had left on the street. The entire time Robin watched her from the corner of his eye. They were alone. Could he tell her now? Lay out all his feelings over coffee and a sunrise?

Perhaps he could.

He nervously clasped his hands together before speaking. “Regina –”

“Robin, I –”

They both started talking at the same time and paused, chuckling together over their verbal
“Sorry,” said Robin, gesturing toward her. “You can go first.”

If he was honest he was grateful for the delay.

She nodded her head and took a deep breath. “So I’ve been meaning to talk to you, all night actually, about something. Something very important.”

Robin felt him so grow worried. He shifted in his seat to better face her. “What?” he asked.

“Well… I’ve been doing some thinking… about us and our relationship,” she began.

Robin felt his heart begin to race. Was she about to say what he thought she was?

“And I’ve been thinking a lot about everything that’s happened this last few months, and losing my father and all that he did for me,” she continued, her fingers nervously tapping against the mug in her hands. “I’ve started realizing that life is very short and unpredictable. So… I went to see Archie.”

“Archie?” He twisted the man’s name on his tongue in confusion. He remembered Archie, the tall, red-haired lawyer who’d given her inheritance. As far as he knew they hadn’t talked since she’d signed the papers as Regina Mills and taken back her life.

Regina nodded her head. “Yes. See I needed a lawyer I could trust… to help me write my will.”

Robin’s eyes went wide. “Your will?”

“Yes,” said Regina. “Like I said I’ve been thinking about my father and all he left behind for me and I just want to make sure that I’ve done the same for Henry if the worst happens.”

Their conversation has taken a turn and he is not please by it. He doesn’t like the idea of her planning for her death, speaking as though she could be gone at any time. It twists his gut.

She bites her lip before continuing. “Robin I don’t have any blood family left. If something was to happen to me the only person left would be my mother. I don’t want that for him.”

Her last sentence is barely louder than a whisper. He can practically see the shivers running down her spine as she imagines her son in the hands of her mother.

“Archie and I are drawing up drafts of my will now,” she said softly. Her nervous brown eyes lock onto his confused blue ones. “Robin if anything happens to me… would you be Henry’s legal guardian?”

“Yes.”

There’s no hesitation before his answer. The word comes out firm, full and sincere, leaving no room for doubt. He’s shocked she even thinks she has to ask.

She smiles at him relief playing out in her brown eyes. She’d known he’d say yes but actually hearing it lifts a weight off her shoulders. “I know it’s a lot to ask and I knew you’d say yes but after everything we’ve been through I just couldn’t imagine leaving him with anyone but you. If I’m not here I want my son to have a family and this is the only one he knows.”

He knows that she doesn’t mean just him. She means him and Roland and all the mock aunts and uncles Henry acquired over the years. She means all the people that make him feel safe and loved.
And he knows that should anything happen to her all those people would rally to make sure her son was cared for.

But for a moment he let himself believe that all she meant was him and Roland. That the family she wanted for her son was the one that they’d made together under his roof.

“Regina you don’t have to worry,” he said. “You’re not going anywhere.”

She moves to speak again but he cuts her off.

“And even if you do I’ll make sure he’s taken care of,” he promises. “He won’t end up with her. I swear it.”

She studies his face for a moment. She’s not searching for lies or uncertainty. She’s just staring, wondering just what she’d done in her life to deserve having him by her side.

“Thank you Robin,” she says softly.

“No need to,” he replies. “I’d do anything for him. You know that.”

She nods her head and sighs in content, turning her gaze onto the street and then quickly back to him as if she’d suddenly remembered something. “Oh, did you have something that you wanted to talk to me about?”

Yes.

He thought about it, telling her his feelings then and there. It would’ve been easy. Wait, that wasn’t true. It would’ve been convenient but hard. Like ripping off a band-aid so it wouldn’t hurt as much. But his feelings weren’t a band-aid. If he was going to tell her the truth, he didn’t want to do it just to get it over with. He wouldn’t say it just because the timing was convenient. He wanted to take his time. Say the right words, choose the right moment.

This was not that moment.

He could feel it.

“It was nothing important,” he lied. “I was just wondering if you still wanted to take Roland for the night.”

She nodded her head. “Sure. Another night with him would be great.”

She started talking then about her house, about checking on it to make sure that it was okay but he barely heard her. He was too busy lost in his own thoughts.

He’d tell Regina how he felt about her. He just wouldn’t tell her today.

But he would tell her. Of that he was certain.

He would have to be the one to cross the line.
Chapter 35

Sitting in her car Regina felt more confused than ever. It’d been more than two months since she’d moved out of Robin’s house and her heart was more unsettled than ever.

She’d hoped that her feelings would fade after she escaped his every day presence. That they’d turn out to be a temporary side effect of having him so close for so long. But in fact, the opposite had turned out to be true. She missed him. From the minute she’d woken up in her new room and realized he wouldn’t be the first person she saw that day there had been a twinge of disappointment in her chest. Having her own house was important and of course she didn’t regret moving out but her days just felt half full with only her and Henry. It felt strange not to hear the pitter patter of Roland’s feet running through the house. Or to come home and not see Robin standing at the stove preparing dinner. It just felt like there was a two-person-shaped hole in her life.

Which was obviously ridiculous considering the fact that she and Robin still saw each other quite regularly. They still managed to have dinner at each other’s houses at least twice a week with the boys. He was still the first call she made when she needed someone to watch Henry and of course he did the same with her when it came to Roland. And they talked nearly every day. But all of this only made things more torturous because she was forced to realize that those little moments that she had with him, that she had with all of them together, were the moments she most looked forward to.

Every time she saw Robin she felt herself fall a little bit deeper in love with him.

And it wasn’t okay.

Or was it?

She’d made the decision not to pursue her feelings for Robin but with every passing day it became less and less clear why. The certainty of her reasoning appeared to be fading away. Every time she saw him she reminded herself exactly why she couldn’t say anything. She was staying away from Robin to protect him. She was staying away from Robin out of respect for Marian. He was too important and their relationship was not something she wanted to risk. When she was alone these seemed like firm, solid reasons to avoid turning their friendship into more.

But when he was there…

When she was looking into those blue eyes and hearing his calming voice it almost seemed…like it would be worth it.

She felt like her head and heart were spinning in circles. And it wasn’t as if she could talk to anyone about it. Robin was definitely not an option at the moment. Emma and Snow would just tell her to go for it without thinking of the consequences. And frankly she was a little afraid of what her friends from the Drunken Monk would say about the whole situation. They had known Marian too and she didn’t want to put them in an awkward position.

Which is why she had gone to the cemetery.

She didn’t know what exactly had brought on this decision. Only that she’d woken up in bed that day and as clear as a bell she’d heard a voice tell her… you need to see Daniel today.

It had struck her in the heart when she heard it but when she’d looked inside herself she’d discovered that the voice was right. If she was honest she’d always felt as if a part of herself had
never fully closed the chapter on Daniel in her life. She hadn’t wanted to. Knowing that his death was how their story had ended, with him in a body bag and her on the run, never felt right. There was something more to be said, something more to be done but she didn’t know what it was. And she didn’t know if she’d find it here.

But that didn’t mean it wasn’t worth a try.

She’d always known where Daniel had been buried. In the days after his death she’d scoured the internet and newspapers for any sort of announcement and after a short time she’d found one. She must’ve read that obituary a hundred times wishing she had the chance to go to his funeral and say her last goodbye. Of course her mother wouldn’t have allowed it and she hadn’t dared to ask.

Daniel had been laid to rest five days after he died. In a plot next to his father’s, buried in a cemetery less than forty minutes away from where she and Henry had ended up a year later. In the beginning there were many days where she had to resist the urge to visit his grave. She’d always reminded herself that her mother would be sure to look for her there and that it wasn’t worth the risk.

But now she was here. Sitting in the parking lot. Trying to summon the courage to leave her car.

It had taken her two hours just to work up the courage to even drive to the cemetery. And now she’s spent half an hour just sitting in her car, steeling herself so she’d have the strength to get out.

She doesn’t know what she expects to find here or why she’s so afraid. But she does know that it’s time she finally do this. It’s time to give him a proper goodbye.

A few more minutes of deep breathing and she finally gets out. Gravel crunches under her shoes as she starts down a path through the rows of headstones searching for the one that she seeks. It’s sunny and unseasonably warm out but she’s surrounded by graves on every side and things still feel pretty grim. There’s a single red rose in her hand and she twirls it nervously as she searches. On her way here she realized that it hadn’t felt right coming empty-handed and pulled into the first flower shop that she could find. Daniel had always loved roses. He’d given them to her constantly, in many different colors always telling her the meaning of each one. She’d agonized over which one to choose but in the end classic red seemed like the only appropriate choice. Love, respect and romance. Three things she would always associate with Daniel. And with red roses.

It’s not long before she finds him. His grave is right where it should be and Regina immediately feels her throat tighten as she stands in front of it. Her eyes grow itchy and hot as she reads the engraving on his headstone.

DANIEL COLTER Beloved Son and Brother.

And father, she thinks to herself. It should say father too.

Hesitantly she steps toward his headstone, her hand shaking as she reaches out to touch it. After ten years a few knicks and chips brush against her skin but it’s still solid. Made of blue pearl granite it’s beautifully carved. It looks expensive. More expensive than she expected but she doesn’t dwell on that thought for long. There’s an old, wilted bouquet of flowers sitting against it and she lays her rose by its side.

She drags her hand from the top of the headstone down towards his name and lightly brushes her fingers against the engraved letters.

She lets out a short shaky breath and a tear runs down her cheek as she whispers, “Hi Daniel.”
Dropping down to her knees a sad smile starts to pull at her lips. “I’ve missed you.”

Before she even realizes it words are spilling from her mouth. She tells him everything. Everything she wanted him to see, everything she wished he’d been there for, everything about the life she’d so desperately wanted him to be a part of. She tells him how she’d run away from her mother and lived on the streets. About being saved by Marian and working at the Drunken Monk. About starting her own side business and eventually moving to New York. About reconnecting with Snow and finding Emma. About her return to California and the death of her father. But mostly she talks to him about Henry, their son. She tells him about every birthday, every milestone, every moment he should’ve been able to see for himself. She tells him that Henry has gotten very good at drawing and writing but that he struggles in math. That he’s short for his age and shy. She lists all the ways that they are alike and all the ways they are different. She doesn’t know how long she sits there talking, only that it seems like she can’t stop. Nor does she want to.

Shadows shift as she continues to speak. She’s moved to sit cross-legged in front of his headstone and she knows it should feel strange but it doesn’t. It feels right. Easy even. Almost like he’s sitting right across from her, listening to every word.

After going through every moment of her life since his death she takes a deep breath before getting into the real reason that she came to see him. “It feels weird telling you this but… there’s a guy. A man actually. His name’s Robin and I… I think I’m starting to have feelings for him. And it’s just… so much more complicated than I thought.”

Her eyes drop to the grass as if she’s avoiding his gaze. She nervously starts to pick out blades as she continues to speak. “He’s Marian’s husband. Or he was until she… joined you. He’s kind. And funny. And so very caring. He cares so much about me and about Henry and Roland.”

A sad wistful smile grows on her face as she lists off all of Robin’s good qualities. Maybe it’s wishful thinking but she imagines that Daniel would’ve really liked him if he’d had the chance. “He’s sort of been my rock these past few months, these past few years actually. And I… I always knew that I loved him. I just never thought I could love him… like I loved you. But I do.”

She feels herself getting choked up as she continues confessing everything to his headstone. Even though it’s nothing but lifeless granite sitting next to it it’s almost as though she can feel Daniel’s eyes on her.

“I don’t think I can say anything to him about it. It’s just… so complicated. With our history, and our children, and… Mother. I just don’t think I could handle losing him now. Or ever.” She pauses for a short moment. “Snow and Emma think I should come clean about how I feel but… I don’t know if I can. I don’t know if it’s worth it. And I just wish… that I had a sign.”

That’s what it came down to isn’t it? Ever since she’d discovered her feelings for Robin she’d felt like she’d come to a fork in the road with each path holding a very specific future. She felt like she was stuck not knowing which way to turn. She needed a sign. Some trustworthy direction from the universe to let her know she was making the right choice.

She took another deep breath as she brought her eyes back up to the wording on Daniel’s headstone. “You knew me so well,” she whispered, desperately shaking her head. “You always knew what I needed. So how about it? Think you could give me a sign here? I’ll take anything.”

She sat silently staring at his headstone. Waiting, watching, willing it to move or do something that would tell her what the right choice is. Of course nothing happened. She sighed. Well it was a long shot anyway, she thought to herself.
“What the hell are you doing here?”

The intruding voice makes her jump out of her skin. At first her eyes go toward the sky thinking that the interruption had literally been Daniel or the voice of God himself. But then she hears the sound of footsteps and realizes that the voice is coming from behind, not above her. Her head whips around as she stands to her feet and sees a woman approaching her with an unpleasant grimace on her face. She’s tall, with wavy brunette hair and a perky nose that she crinkles in Regina’s direction. Regina can see that she’s holding a bouquet of flowers in her hand but that’s not what captures her attention. It’s the woman’s eyes that she notices first. They’re a deep shade of hazel. Just like Henry’s.

“Get away from my brother’s grave!” she harshly orders.

Regina feels her heart begin to pound. She knows who this is. Had heard about her plenty of times from Daniel.

She nervously licks her lips before asking in a small voice, “You’re Daniel’s sister? Lydia?”

She sees the woman clench her jaw and straighten her back before firmly answering, “Yes. I am.”

Every nerve in Regina’s body is firing off at once. This is Lydia Colter, Daniel’s older sister. The one he’d talked to her about. The one who’d babysat him and walked him to and from school. The one he’d spent holidays, birthdays and a childhood with. She couldn’t believe that she was here. God, she was beautiful. Didn’t look a thing like her younger brother though. Her dark brown hair is a long way from Daniel’s black. And her hazel eyes didn’t carry a hint of the deep blue that had characterized his. If wasn’t for their similar chins she wouldn’t have even guessed they were related.

Regina had never met any of Daniel’s family. And this certainly isn’t how she expected to. She could only imagine was sort of impression she was making.

Swallowing hard she nervously wrung her hands together. “I know you don’t know me but I-”

“I know who you are,” Lydia sharply interjects.

Regina goes still. “You do?”

“Yes,” she coldly drawls. “You’re that girl he loved. His boss’ daughter.”

The tone of her voice forces Regina to go silent. It’s harsh and unwelcoming. With that tone and the look in her eyes Lydia’s disdain is clear.

“He used to speak about you… a lot,” she says, her gaze cold and unwavering. “Shame we’ve never met until now. We expected to see you at the funeral… but were told you were otherwise engaged.”

Regina felt her gut begin to twist with guilt. She raised her shoulders helplessly. “I… I’m sorry –”

Lydia just shakes her head and raises a hand to silence her. “No don’t apologize,” she says, wryly shrugging her shoulders. “I get it. You were a rich girl looking for a distraction and he was there.”

Regina immediately started to shake her head. “No that’s not true.” Her voice, firm with righteous indignation, goes an octave lower because no matter who Lydia was that accusation would not stand. “I loved Daniel… with all of my heart.”
“Then where the hell were you after he died!!” said Lydia, her voice wavering as she levels her with a cold glare.

The question she hurls causes Regina to shrink a little on the inside. “It’s complicated,” she tries to argue, despite the ball of shame slowly swirling up in her gut.

Lydia continues to glare at her. “Sure it is.”

A tension-filled silence grows between the two women before Lydia gives Regina one last look of disdain before giving her head a little disbelieving shake. Something in her must’ve decided that their conversation was no longer worth her time because she begins to turn away from her. At the sight of her leaving something inside Regina breaks.

“Wait! Don’t go!” she pleads, desperately stepping toward her.

Lydia just shakes her head as she continues to walk away from her.

Regina’s heart pounds, her breath goes short and she blurts out, “I had a baby!”

Lydia stops in her tracks. Everything goes still. Regina’s heart beats three times and then she sees Lydia stiffly turn back to face her.

“What?” she hisses.

“I have a son,” Regina breathlessly repeats. “He’s Daniel’s.”

Another beat passes and Lydia starts to frantically shake her head. “No,” she says. “No, I don’t believe you.”

“It’s the truth,” promises Regina, reaching for her purse. “His name is Henry. Henry Daniel Mills. He’s nine-years old.”

She pulls out a small picture of Henry from her wallet, the one she always carries with her and hands it to Lydia.

She stares at it and Regina sees a million different emotions pass through her eyes. The only ones she can truly recognize are shock and disbelief. Lydia is stunned. And silent. Can’t take her eyes off this photo of her brother’s only child.

“He was born in early August on the fifteenth,” Regina informs her. “He looks like him. And talks like him sometimes. I swear they walk the same-”

“Stop!” Lydia orders. Her voice has gone watery and so have her eyes. Her body has gone stiff as she holds the photo in her hand so tightly that her knuckles nearly go white. “Just please… stop… talking.”

Regina immediately stops. She lets the silence between them return, thick and murky with emotion. Even without the sound of her own voice she can tell that it’s still too much for Lydia. Without a word Regina reaches into her purse once more and pulls out one of her business cards.

“This is my number,” she softly says, holding it out to her. “Would you take it… please?”

Lydia finally tore her eyes away from the picture in her hand to the card in Regina’s. She clenched and unclenched her jaw before finally snatchng it away from her. Without saying anything else she stuffed it into her pocket, turned on her heel and walked away.
Regina watched her go, frozen in place. She didn’t move for a solid minute, too stunned to take a single step. She’d asked Daniel for a sign.

Was that supposed to be it?

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It’s midafternoon and things are slow at the Drunken Monk. The lunch rush had ended, the dinner rush had yet to come and the bar was practically at a standstill.

Normally that fact wouldn’t bother Robin but today the lackluster crowd is something he truly laments. He stood behind the bar, cleaning out glasses, eyes lingering over the empty tables in disdain. When he’d offered to cover the bar for Hook he’d really hoped the day would’ve provided a bit more action in terms of business. Or at least distraction.

Ever since he’d made the decision to tell Regina how he felt he’d rarely been able to think about anything else. Every day he woke up wondering would today be the day? Would the moment finally come when he could just say what he was feeling? It was like he had a tight ball of tension growing in his chest and the only thing that would relieve it was an all-out confession of his feelings. But the moment had yet to come.

He’d had various false starts over the past few weeks. Moments where things almost felt right, where he almost felt like he could tell her how he felt but things had never panned out. Sometimes it was because the kids were there, or she was in a rush, or he wasn’t prepared or there were people around. There always seemed to be something that threw the moment off and forced him to keep his mouth shut.

How was he going to tell her?

God, it was all he could think about.

“Hey there stranger.”

Torn from his own introspections he sees Mulan sitting in front of him with a knowing smile. His lips pull into a smile of his own as he takes her in. He’s hardly seen her since the holidays and he welcomes her presence.

He greets her with an enthusiastic *Hey* and immediately sets down a clean glass on the counter. She’s not in her uniform so he can tell she’s off duty and expecting a free serving of her favorite beer.

“When did you get here?” he asks.

“About ten minutes ago but you were so deep in thought you didn’t notice,” she smoothly answers, her eyes fixed on the glass in front of her as he fills it with her favorite ale. “Something on your mind boss?”

Robin smirks at the familiar moniker she’s yet to take away from him. “More than you know,” he cryptically replies.

She arches an eyebrow at him, clearly intrigued. She takes a small sip of her ale and lets out a satisfied sigh before gamely tilting her toward the dart board. “Tell me about it over a game darts.”

Before he can even refuse, she’s already lifted her drink from the counter and made her way over to the board to snatch out the remaining darts. Rolling his eyes he follows her without protest,
grabbing a waitress on the way over and ordering a burger and fries for Mulan, also on the house of course.

By the time he reaches the table where Mulan has set her drink and the rest of the darts, she’s already lining up her shot at the board. Her eyes narrowed and her lips pursed in concentration. It was a familiar sight to Robin. He and Mulan used to be the bar’s best darts players. As a duo they’d won many a competition but as competitors things used to get fierce between them. Both bets and respect had been lost.

Robin flexes his fingers as he watches her let loose a dart, aiming at the center of the board. A disappointed hiss escapes her when it lands in the third innermost ring. She glares at him when a smirk appears on his face.

“I’m just warming up,” she warns.

“Sure you are,” he smugly chuckles, picking up a dart of his own. Taking a quick second to gain his bearings, he lets it sail toward the board, landing in the center ring.

He hears Mulan grumble before taking another sip of her beer. “I fucking hate you sometimes.”

The light bitterness in her tone causes him to laugh as he hands her another dart. “Don’t take it personally Lani. Some skills you just have to be born with.”

She rolls her eyes as she snatches the dart from his hand. Twirling it in her fingers she asks him, “So what had you so deep in thought before I walked in?”

Robin clenches his jaw as she throws the dart at the board, landing right next to his. “Personal things,” he answers.

“Personal things like what?” questions Mulan, spinning on her heel to face him.

Her almond-shaped eyes carry their usual spark of curiosity as she stares him down. It’s a clear sign that she won’t let up until she gets the whole naked truth from him. On another day he might’ve have let her squirm and interrogate a little more before opening up, but today he just didn’t have the energy to fight her on it.

“Things like… the fact that I have feelings for Regina,” he reluctantly admitted. He let another dart fly. It landed in the second outermost ring.

Mulan continued to stare him down. “Feelings?” she probed. “Feelings like… you’re in love with her?”

Robin nodded his head. “Yeah.”

For five seconds her face remained blank before twisting up in a gleeful snort. “Took you long enough to admit it.”

She throws another dart at the board, it lands dead center next to his own as she grins. Robin just stares at her with a bewildered look on his face. “You knew?”

“Of course I knew,” she scoffs.

“How?”

She rolls her eyes at him. “I’m a police officer Robin. I’m trained to have keen observation skills.”
“Robin narrowed his eyes at her. “So Hook told you?”

“Yup.”

An annoyed grunt rose up in the back of Robin’s throats. “Perfect,” he gritted out.


“No!” he said, swiftly pointing a finger in her direction. “I am not embarrassed. Just irritated.”

“Understood,” she mumbled, picking up another dart with a smug smile still on her face. She threw it at board, and it landed fairly close to the center. “So… are you gonna tell her how you feel?”

“I am,” said Robin, as confidently as he could. “It’s just that…”

“Just that what?” prompted Mulan.

“The timing never seems to be right,” he finished, throwing another dart at the board. “Every time I try to talk to her about it something always comes up and throws me off. It feels like the moment is never right.”

Mulan snorts and rolls her eyes at him. “Pussy.”

“Hey!” Robin’s jaw drops at her insult. “Uncalled for.”

“Disagree,” she calmly replied, sauntering over to the board and pulling out all the darts for round two. She turns back to him with a fierce, knowing look in her eye. “You’re scared.”

Despite the blush he could feel rising in his cheeks Robin shook his head. “Not true.”

“Oh yes it is,” laughed Mulan. “You’re shaking in your boots at the thought of coming clean to her. Admit it. It’s why you’re making up all these excuses to keep your mouth shut.”

“That’s… ridiculous,” Robin protested weakly. To be honest it wasn’t as if he had a strong argument against her accusation. Whenever he even came close to letting her know how he felt it was like his heart couldn’t stop pounding. Before he knew it he was overthinking and… it just felt better to wait for another time.

“Robin listen up and listen good because what I’m about to say cannot be ignored.” Mulan dumps the darts onto a nearby table before seriously staring into his eyes. “There is not going to be a perfect moment. The stars are not going to align. A light bulb is not going to go off. There will be no magic neon blinking light that’s going to tell you when it’s the right time. So if you want to tell her how you feel… just do it.”

Robin sighed. “It’s not that simple.”

“Yes! It really is!” she said, sending him an incredulous look. “You just need to pull her aside for a private moment and let her know the truth. Preferably in a place that’s on neutral ground for you both.”

The waitress arrived with Mulan’s order and she happily thanked her before immediately munching on a fry. She shrugged her shoulders as she chewed. “It really is that simple Robin. You know… unless you’re scared.”

Both her tone and eyes held an unhidden challenge, one that Robin, despite all his reservations, felt like he couldn’t ignore. Narrowing his eyes at her he declared as firmly and confidently as he
“I’m not scared.”

“Good,” drawled Mulan, a clear grin appearing on her face. “Then the next time you see her just tell her how you feel.”

“Fine,” Robin said gamely, with a smirk. “The next time I see Regina I will tell her how I feel.”

“Great!” said Mulan, with extra enthusiasm. She pointed towards the door. “She just walked in the bar.”

Robin’s smirk immediately dropped from his face. He whipped his head toward the bar door to see Regina heading toward the bar counter. The sight of her filled him with surprise and terror. Surprise that she was even there – Regina hardly had time to make it to the bar these days. And terror that he was actually had to follow through on what he’d just agreed to with Mulan. He turned back to his smug darts partner and glared.

Mulan just continued to grin as Robin stared her down. “Fate’s a bitch, isn’t it?” She shrugged her shoulders. “Oh well. Guess you better hop to it then.”

Robin let out an annoyed, seething breath. “I hate you,” he softly hissed.

Mulan only chuckled and offered him a mock salute. “Go get ‘em tiger!”

He rolled his eyes at her and started walking back towards the bar where Regina sat. His heart pounded harder with every step he took. Could he really come clean to Regina about his feelings today? Right now in the Drunken Monk? It was neutral territory for them both. It was where they’d first become friends. It might be the perfect place for them to start becoming more. Just pull her aside for a private moment and let her know the truth, he heard Mulan in his head once more.

Could it really be that simple?

He reached Regina’s side and tapped her shoulder. Her head turned to face him and the minute he locked eyes with her he knew things would not be as simple as Mulan made them out to be.

Her brown eyes are rimmed in red and the edges of her nose look irritated. She’d clearly been crying. A fact that was punctuated when she forced a smile on her and let out a husky, pathetic Hey as a greeting. She spoke as though her throat was still tight with emotion and Robin instantly knew that his feelings would not be the main topic of discussion that day.

Immediately he pulls her behind the bar for a little more privacy. “What happened?” he asks without preamble.

She hesitates, pressing her lips into a thin line and sighing before answering, “I saw Daniel today.” She pauses. “I went to his grave and… his sister was there. I told her about Henry.”

Robin’s eyes went wide. She hadn’t told him that she’d planned to go see Daniel that day but he did know that she’d never met any of Daniel’s family nor told them about Henry’s existence. Her arms were crossed as she stood in front of him, her fingers practically clutching at her elbows. A clear sign that she was barely holding it together.

Robin comfortingly rubbed his hands down her arms. “Go upstairs to my office. I’ll get someone to cover the bar and I’ll be up to talk in a minute.”

Pressing her lips together once more she gave him a short nod and a barely audible okay before heading toward the stairs. Robin watched her go feeling a strange mix of relief and concern.
He took a deep breath before asking the nearest waitress to keep an eye on the bar counter before ducking out of sight and pulling up a martini glass and a bottle of vodka. No sooner had he set them on the counter did Mulan show up her eyes blazing with curiosity.

“I saw Regina go upstairs,” she said, the excitement clear in her voice. “So you’re finally gonna tell her?”

Robin scoffed as he pulled out a small bottle of apple schnapps. “I talked to her. She just got back from seeing Daniel’s grave for the first time.”

Mulan’s eyes narrowed in confusion. “Daniel, her fiancé Daniel?”

“Yes,” Robin said with a nod. “She just went to see his grave for the first time and she ran into his sister, who she also met for the first time, and blurted out that she has a son that none of his family ever knew about.”

“Oh,” Mulan drawled, her eyes wide in shock. She paused for a moment before adding, “So basically you’re gonna keep your mouth shut?”

“Pretty much.”

She sighed before nodding her head in agreement. “Good choice.”

Robin went back to fixing his drink. Perhaps Mulan might’ve been right in pointing out that there would never be a sign to show him when it was the right moment to share his feelings but in terms of knowing when it was the wrong moment the signs were obvious and numerous.

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She didn’t remember how she got there. Honestly, it was a blur. The last thing she remembered was standing at Daniel’s grave watching Lydia walk away from her, feeling like everything was a dream. A heart-wrenching, volatile dream that she just wanted to wake from. Next thing she knew she was at the bar, staring into those warm blue eyes that she knew so well, telling him what happened, letting her fear seep out against her will. It was almost like magic. She must’ve driven there. Gotten in her car and made her way to the Drunken Monk. But that didn’t matter. All that mattered was that she’d felt unsteady and then she’d ended up right where she needed to be, with him. Everything that happened in between was inconsequential.

She was sitting upstairs in the office now. The sound of the music from the bar was drifting up through the floorboards as she sat on the couch across from his desk, eyes closed, two fingers placed to her temple as if she was trying to physically stop her rapidly approaching headache in his tracks. She took a deep breath to try and temper her anxiety.

The door opens and so do her eyes. Robin walks in with a martini glass in hand. She sees the green shade of the liquid inside and a small smile tugs on her lips. “An appletini?” She playfully tilts her head. “Really?”

He shrugs sheepishly. “Apples are your comfort food. And this is the closest thing I’ve got to one.” He holds it out to her. “Besides you look like you could use a drink.”

A small puff of agreement rises from her throat. He’s not wrong.

She takes the glass from him. It feels cool in her hand as she takes a sip of the sweet drink inside.
The apple taste is obviously manufactured but it does its job. She feels herself calm down. Not by much but it’s a start.

She feels Robin sit down on the other end of the couch, can feel his eyes on her as she takes another sip.

He sighs before speaking. “So… what was it like there? At his grave.”

She pauses before answering. “It was… a little hard at first to see him, to know that he was buried there. That he wasn’t going to go any further than that one spot but… once I started talking it got easier. I was able to talk to him like he was right next to me. Told him everything I wanted to… and a little bit more.”

Her throat went dry as she remembered telling Daniel about her feelings for Robin. She took another sip of her drink.

“Then Lydia showed up and things… kind of went to hell.” She tucks her hair behind her ears. “She thinks I never loved him.”

“Did she say that to you?” Robin speaks up, and she can immediately hear the protectiveness rise up in his voice.

“Yeah she said it,” answers Regina. “And she believes it. I mean she really does. Robin if you could’ve seen the way that she looked at me. It was…”

“Like the way Marian’s parents used to look at me,” he said softly. It had been more than a decade since he’d seen Marian’s parents up close but the way they’d looked, glared and stared at him would forever be etched into his memories. In all his life he’d never felt so very small and unwanted. Like a nuisance or a virus they just prayed would go away. He didn’t want to imagine anyone making Regina feel the same.

“That couldn’t have felt good,” he says to her.

She shakes her head. “No… it really didn’t.”

She swallows another gulp of her appletini and leans back into the couch, her black hair falling against the cream-colored fabric. She could feel the tension slowing leaving her, aided by the swift hand of vodka and Robin’s calming presence. He sets his hand on her knee. A swift spark of electricity runs through her at his touch. She takes a deep breath trying to ignore it.

She turns to look at him and sees that he’s staring at her, the concern obvious in his blue eyes. “Why did you tell her about Henry?”

She blows out a breath and shakes her head. “I’m not really sure. I guess… because I felt like it was my only chance.”

She pauses before sitting up a little straighter, as if it would help her gather her thoughts. “I told you that I never met Daniel’s family before this. I wanted to but after Daniel died, and Henry was born so much was going on that it just felt like it was never going to happen. I was on the run and somewhere along the way I just accepted that I was never going to meet them and they were never going to meet me… or Henry.” She sighed before continuing. “And seeing her, Lydia, walking away from me in the cemetery, seeing me, leaving me and still not knowing about him… it didn’t feel right. So I yelled at her back that I’d had a baby and that it was her brother’s.”

“Sounds like quite a scene,” commented Robin, with a soft chuckle. “How did she take it?”
“As well as you could imagine,” replied Regina, a wry smile on her face. “She couldn’t even look at me but I ended up giving her my card though. In case she wants to meet up again.”

Robin hesitated before speaking up. “You know you don’t have to meet up with her again if you don’t want to.”

Regina slowly nods her head. “Yes… I really do.”

“Why?”

“Because if what she thinks is what his entire family thinks then I have to let them know they are wrong.” Regina explained firmly. “I cannot let them think that their son was just a… passing fancy for me. He was the love of my life and they deserve to know that as well as the existence of his only child.”

There was no arguing with her. Robin could see that in the steel present in her brown eyes. She’d made up her mind about this. And he wouldn’t dare attempt to change it.

“Do you think she’ll call?”

“I hope she does,” said Regina nervously. “I want her to. And I want Henry to meet his father’s family.”

Robin nodded his head thoughtfully. “She’ll call.”

A line appeared between Regina’s eyebrows as she scrunched them curiously in his direction. “What makes you so sure?”

“Because she lost her brother,” Robin said solemnly. “And now she’s learned there’s another piece of him in the world. She’s not going to ignore that. She couldn’t possibly.”

He leaned back in his seat, suddenly lost in thought and it was Regina’s turn to stare at him in concern. The way he spoke, his words so full of certainty, was not lost on her. “What about you Robin?”

“Me?”

She nods. “Have you heard from Roland’s grandparent’s lately?”

And with those words Robin finds himself wishing he’d had an appletini of his own. He sucks in a hissing, annoyed breath when he thinks of the two people who could call themselves Roland’s grandparents due to blood and blood alone. Unfortunately, he has to nod his head and answer “Yes, they’ve called.”

Regina’s eyes go wide. “When?” she bluntly asks.

“A few times over the years,” he vaguely answers, waving off her concern. “I never pick up and I never respond.”

“Really?” she asks in a small voice.

“No,” says Robin, his voice firm and unwavering. “When he was born Marian and I decided that Roland does not need them in his life. And as of right now I see no reason to go back on that decision. My son has more than enough family without them.”

Regina just nodded in agreement, even though she felt a slight twinge of apprehension settle over
her at Robin’s words. She didn’t disagree that Marian’s parents had been awful people. She’d experienced that first hand. And it was clear to anyone who knew him that Roland was one of the most loved children in the world. Love came at him from all corners, including hers. But she had also known Marian. And she knew that her friend had always lamented the fact that her parents had chosen not to be a part of their grandson’s life. And if she was here and knew they had reached out then she would want Roland to meet them. At least once.

But she didn’t say those things. As close as she and Robin were, she knew that wasn’t her place.

Instead she focused on her own situation. She began to wonder just how differently things would’ve gone if she’d gone to his family earlier. If they’d been in Henry’s life from the beginning. She wondered if they would’ve accepted him? Or her? She wanted to believe that they would’ve. Daniel had always said that they would love her. But he obviously never expected for her to meet them like this.

Robin sees that she’s retreated into her mind again and speaks up to bring her back. “Hey… everything’s going to be alright.”

“I know,” she says, taking in another breath. “It’s just that I imagined meeting them so many times… this was never what I pictured.”

Robin pauses for a moment before sending her a cheeky smile. “Well, to be fair, is anything in life as you pictured?”

Regina tilts her head and playfully rolls her eyes before replying, “No I suppose it isn’t.”

“Exactly,” said Robin. “But isn’t it still good?”

Regina thinks over his question, remember all the amazing and unexpected turns her life has taken thus far. Every time she thought she knew where she’d end up something always pushed her to a place that was just a little bit better. She thought over all she had, all she knew and all the love she had in her life. Locking eyes with Robin she nodded her head.

“Yeah it’s still good.”

It takes three very long weeks for Regina to finally hear from Lydia. She’d called in the middle of day and Regina felt her heart begin to pound the minute she’d heard her voice. Their conversation had been short. She’d wanted to meet up and talk. She told Regina when and where but didn’t say much else. Though the call only lasted two minutes it left her feeling unsteady. Still, two days later she found herself sitting at a table in the corner of a coffee shop waiting for Lydia to show up.

Her foot tapped against the ground as she stared at the cooling cup of tea that she’d ordered. She’d tried to force herself to stop several times but she couldn’t help it. She was nervous. On the one hand, she was relieved that Lydia had reached out but she still felt apprehension at the thought of their future conversation. Their first hadn’t exactly gone that well. She could only hope that in the time since their first meeting Lydia’s attitude toward her had cooled some.

She tried to distract herself by observing the coffee shop where Lydia had asked her to meet. It was a nice place. One she could see herself coming back to if the opportunity presented itself. It sat at the end of an old historic block in downtown Santa Barbara. The shop was small. It barely held room for the counter, a few tables and a small sitting area but it gave off a warm feeling when you stepped inside. The couches looked well-worn and cozy. And the coffee table in the middle of the
seating area was stacked with oversized books. It seemed like a nice place to spend time with friends. Looking around Regina wondered if Lydia spent a lot of time here by herself or with others. For a brief moment she wondered Daniel had ever come here. If he and his older sister had met up here to catch up over coffee when they got the chance. She hoped they had. He would’ve liked it here.

Regina didn’t have to wait long for Lydia to show up. Her tea had barely turned lukewarm before she saw her walk through the door. Regina’s breath caught in her throat at the sight of her. Again, she found herself surprised by just how little she saw of Daniel in her. They differed in more than just looks. It was the very air of them. When Daniel walked in a room all you could see was his light. But with Lydia… all she could see was walls. It showed in the subtle clenching of her jaw and the rigid way she held herself. It was just… defensive.

She scans the room and spots Regina within seconds. Regina feels a shiver run down her back when Lydia’s gaze falls on her. She tries to swallow her apprehension and raises her hand in a timid greeting that Lydia doesn’t return. She stalks over to the corner table where Regina sits and pulls up a chair, eyeing her warily as she does so.

As she takes a seat Regina notices that she’s wearing some sort of double breasted all black uniform. When Regina sees the stains covering her middle she remembers that Daniel had once said that his older sister was a professional chef. She must work at one of the restaurants nearby.

For a moment neither of them says anything. They sit at the table in silence taking each other in. It’s a bit unreal, sitting across from a stranger who loved someone who you loved. It’s almost as if by looking at each other they see another side of Daniel. A side they never thought they’d get the chance discover. One of them is pleased by this prospect. The other is not.

Regina is the first to break the silence.

“I’m glad you called,” she says timidly. “I was afraid you were going to ignore me.”

Lydia just narrows her eyes at her. She opens her mouth as if to say something but then closes it as if she’d thought better of it. Regina notices that she’s fidgeting – rhythmically tapping her fingers against her thigh – but not because she’s nervous. It’s more likely because she’s trying to keep control of herself.

Lydia takes a short breath before finally speaking. “Did my brother know you were pregnant?”

The bluntness of her question throws Regina off. She shakes her head before replying. “No, I didn’t get the chance to tell him.” She pauses before adding, “I found out too late.”

Regina’s sees a flash of pain go across Lydia’s eyes before she’s steeling herself again. “And you’re sure that your son is his?”

Regina feels a blush rise up in her cheeks as a spark of anger is lit in her gut. Clenching her fists beneath the table she firmly answers, “Yes. I am sure.”

“There was no one else?” interrogates Lydia.

“No! There was no one else!” she hisses, thoroughly offended by this point her tone is short and clipped yet still quiet. With time and perspective she would later come to admit that Lydia’s question was valid. She was as good as a stranger and Daniel’s sister certainly had no reason to trust her. But in the moment, as she sat in that coffee shop hearing the sister of her child’s father doubt his paternity, all she can feel is insulted. And it makes her bristle in response. Lydia hardly
seems thrown off by her anger. She simply nods her head in acceptance. “Okay.”

An awkward silence grows between them then. The air grows tense as they stare each other down both of them equally distrustful of the other now.

Lydia breaks the silence with a reluctant sigh. “My mom wants to meet him,” she reveals. “Your son, I mean.”

Regina feels herself go a little breathless at the mention of Daniel’s mother. She knows about her grandson now. About Henry. The thought of it makes her palms go sweaty. What that woman must think of her.

“Our family is meeting up on the 23rd;” says Lydia. “The twenty-third is –”

“Daniel’s birthday,” Regina quickly interjects. “I’m aware.”

Of course she’s aware. She and Henry lit a candle for him every year. It was their own little tradition and she wasn’t surprised to find out that Daniel’s family had their own.

“Will you bring him?” Lydia asks. Her voice sounded tired and a tiny bit desperate.

A part of Regina considered saying no but she knew that would never happen. She had to meet the rest of Daniel’s family and so did Henry. At least once. She wouldn’t let Lydia’s rudeness and lack of tact deny him that opportunity.

She nodded her head. “Yes, I will bring him.”

Lydia gave her a curt nod. “Good. I’ll text you the address.”

And with that she was gone. Mumbling that she had to get back to work, she walked out of the coffee shop without so much as a second glance back at Regina. Once she was gone Regina let out a breath she didn’t realize she was holding. Well, she’d made it to the talk no worse for wear. And she was finally going to meet Daniel’s family.

She ran over the conversation and in her head and was suddenly paralyzed by what she’d just agreed to. The 23rd was less than ten days away.

In less than ten days she and Henry would be meeting Daniel’s family.

Anxiety began to bubble up inside of her.
Chapter 36

What outfit do you wear to meet your dead fiancé’s mother?

Of all the things Regina could’ve worried about this was where she got stuck.

It was the 23rd and she stood in front of her closet, daunted by the endless possibilities it offered. Jeans and dresses. Blouses and tanks. Boots and heels. Not to mention the colors. Dear god, the colors! She couldn’t decide. She’d changed eight times and it wasn’t even noon.

Sighing, she took another look in the mirror. At the moment she had on a pencil skirt that she’d paired with a dark blouse and a deep magenta blazer. She’d added a pair of black pantyhose for modesty and planned to finish it with a pair of knee high boots. It was a decent ensemble. Classy. Professional. And it made her look… like she was going out to drinks after work. *Goddamn it.*

She started shoving the blazer off her shoulders. She couldn’t wear this outfit. It was too… everything. It wasn’t right.

Breathing heavily, she stepped back into her walk-in closet and viciously swiped through her clothes, shaking her head as she went.

*No.*

*No.*

*No!*

*NO!*

“Damn it!” she hissed to herself. She and Henry were meeting Daniel’s mother today and she had nothing to wear. Nothing was right. They were going to hate her. They should hate her. They had every right to. He wouldn’t have been dead if it wasn’t for her. If he hadn’t been coming to meet her he wouldn’t have died.

Dark thoughts were coming at her from every corner of her mind as she swiped through the clothes. They’d been prodding at her for the past week, growing louder and sharper with every passing day. She could hear them constantly and she hadn’t been able to chase them away.

Gripping the nearest shelf Regina leaned against the wall for support as she tried, without success, to suck in a deep breath. She could feel her heart pounding as she continued to hyperventilate. Her face grew hot, the walls started to close in. Sliding down to the floor she realized that she recognized this feeling.

*Oh shit, I’m having a panic attack.*

Sitting on her closet floor, practically shaking in terror she tried to remember the last time she’d had one. It must’ve been after her father’s funeral. After seeing her mother again. That was months ago but they’d started long before that. Back when she was being forced on Leopold’s arm. All those times she’d held herself together in public only to mutter a polite excuse and lock herself in the nearest bathroom so she could breakdown in private. It was just like she remembered. The harsh pounding of her heart. The uncontrollable shaking of her hands. Her short, rapid breathing. Panic seeping through every muscle in her body.
She placed her hands on her belly and tried her old coping method. Pulling her lips into a tight “o” she slowly sucked in a deep breath feeling her stomach expand beneath her palms. Only when it couldn’t expand any further did she finally exhale as slowly and steadily as she could.

*It’s alright*, she thought to herself. *Everything’s going to be okay.*

It’s a platitude, a lie. One that she doesn’t even really believe but repeats in her head, over and over again like a mantra.

*It’s alright.*

*Everything’s going to be okay.*

She sits there for god knows how long, repeating it and trying to focus on her breathing.

After the maybe fiftieth echo it finally starts to sink in. Little by little her panic recedes, reduces itself to just an underlying buzz of anxiety. It’s not gone but at least it’s no longer debilitating.

She takes another minute to catch her breath and wipe away her tears before standing to her feet. Still a bit shaky, she used the shelf for support again. Her eyes sweep across the endless supply of clothes in her closet.

She still doesn’t know what to wear.

Thankfully the sound of the doorbell saves her from falling down the rabbit hole again.

She gives herself a quick onceover before heading to the open the door. When she gets there she’s not surprised to find Robin waiting for her on the other side, hands in his pockets and a warm smile on his face. He said he’d check in on her before she and Henry left. And after her episode in the closet she’s damn glad he has.

She doesn’t hesitate to let him in, stepping aside so he can cross the threshold. He lays a quick peck on her cheek on his way in and she feels her heart skip a beat. This time in a good way.

“Thanks for dropping in,” she says, self-consciously tucking a lock of her hair behind her ear.

“Oh of course,” he said, looking her over with concern in his eyes. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m fine.”

It’s a lie… and he knows it.

And even worse… she knows he knows it.

The concern from his eyes drifts into his voice. “Regina…”

“No I’m really fine!” She lies again, plastering a smile on her face for good measure. “I’m fine. I just… don’t have anything to wear.”

Her voice breaks as the tears pile up in her eyes. In an instant his arms are around her. She drowning in the smell of his pine-scented cologne as her tears fall onto his shirt. His hand is rubbing at her back in soft, comforting circles and she’s never felt safer. Her muscles lose tension, her heartbeat steadies and her anxiety is banished. Once again she marvels at the effect this man has on her, and curses herself for needing it so badly.

“It’s alright,” he softly says. “Everything’s going to be okay.”
She could almost laugh at the irony. Of course he knows her calming mantra. The only difference is that coming from his soothing, husky voice she actually believes it.

“I know,” she says, nodding her head and wiping away her tears. She pulls back and takes a deep breath. “I think I’m just a little overwhelmed,” she reluctantly admits.

“That’s understandable,” Robin said calmly. “This is a big day. One you’ve waited a very long time for. It’s okay to be nervous.”

She scoffs. “Oh I am so far pass nervous. I am… a disaster.”

Robin takes a deep breath before guiding her over to the living room. With a gentle hand he pulls her over to the couch and tells her to take seat next to him. He doesn’t let go of her hand. Instead he keeps it in his own as he tries to send her a reassuring smile.

“Alright,” he says. “Just for the hell of it… why don’t you tell me what you’re so afraid of?”

She nearly rolls her eyes at him. “Robin…”

“What have you got to lose?” he challenges.

Not much, she silently admits to herself.

Shrugging her shoulders she thinks it over before speaking up. “I guess… I’m afraid that they’ll hate me,” she reveals. “I’m worried that they won’t believe me when I say that I loved Daniel. And that they’ve already made up their minds about who I am. And that… because of how they feel about me they won’t accept Henry.”

It felt scary saying her fears aloud. Letting them softly tumble from her mouth to fall at Robin’s feet. But it was true. Even though she knew meeting Daniel’s family was something she needed to do she was more than frightened of what they might say to her, think of her. She didn’t know if she could handle it if things went badly.

“Okay,” said Robin, shifting closer to her on the couch. “I’m not going to tell you those fears are ridiculous because they aren’t. You don’t know these people. You don’t know how they’ll react to you. And the truth is they could react badly.” He paused for a moment to let this sink in. “But it seems like that’s the worst case scenario for this day. What’s the best case?”

“All right,” Regina mused thoughtfully. Her head had been so wrapped up in all the things she didn’t want that she hadn’t given much thought to the things that she did.

“I suppose… in the best case… they’ll be kind,” she started. “That they’ll hear me out and try to understand.”

“What else?” prodded Robin.

She sighed. “That they’ll be good to Henry. That they’ll give him pieces of his father that I don’t have. They’ll talk about his childhood and show his pictures.” She paused. “In the best case scenario they’d want to want to be a part of his life. And Henry would want that as well.”

Robin offered her a small smile. “Those sound like really good things. And to me the good scenario sounds a lot more likely than the bad one.”

He supportively squeezed her shoulder. “Regina think about it. Do you really think they would’ve invited you over, on a day that’s clearly very important to them, just to yell at you? In front of
Henry?"

“No,” Regina admitted, shaking her head.

“They want to meet him,” Robin assured her. “They want to know him. And if they didn’t they
wouldn’t have reached out.”

Regina nodded her head. “Right. That’s true.”

“And no matter what happens there,” continued Robin, “you and Henry have a family here. One
that loves you and supports you both. So if things go badly there just come back here. We’ll help
you get through it.”

She let out a soft breath. Listening to Robin’s logic had managed to clear her fog of insanity. For
the first time since she’d been to Daniel’s grave the thought of meeting his family no longer
seemed frightening. Meeting them wasn’t meant to be a trial where she would defend every choice
she’d made since his death. It was an opportunity to give her son a little more of his father than
he’d had before. Talking to Robin had reminded her of that.

It’d also reminded her of just how much she loved him.

Robin soothingly rubbed her back while his eyes searched her face. “Better?”

“Yes,” she nodded her head. “Much better.” After a moment’s pause she added, “Thank you.”

Robin sheepishly shrugged his shoulder. “It’s what I’m here for.”

She smiled at him before taking a deep breath and standing to her feet. “I should go change.” She
softly chuckled. “I still have no idea what I’m going to wear.”

Robin nervously pressed his lips together before speaking up. “I’m not really a fashion expert
but… there was this old picture of you that I remember. From your time in New York,” he clarified.
“I think you’d taken Henry to the zoo with Emma. And in it you were wearing this pink, sort-of,
silky shirt and a pair of jeans or capris.”

Regina narrowed her eyes at him surprise. She didn’t think he’d remember something so very
small. Robin awkwardly chuckled as he stood from the couch. “I only bring it up because… I
remember thinking that you looked… beautiful… and happy.”

Regina nodded her head thoughtfully. “I remember that day,” she said softly. It had been a good
day. An easy day. So simple and carefree. She hadn’t a day like that in a while.

“I always really liked that outfit,” she added with a small smile. “I could wear that today.”

“Yeah, well… I’m happy to help,” said Robin, returning her smile. “But in terms of jewelry you
will be on your own.”

“I think I’ll manage,” she replied, with a playful smirk.

She headed back to her room then, quickly letting him know that Henry was up if he wanted to
talk. The weight on her shoulders had subsided after talking to him. And her dark thoughts were
practically non-existent.

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Robin breathed a sigh of relief as he watched her walk away. He mentally patted himself on the
back for making sure to see her before she and Henry left. He knew she’d be freaking out. Today was an important day for her and Henry both. One that she felt could have a major impact on Henry’s feelings about his father. Of course, she’d be nervous. He was glad he gotten the chance to calm her down even if, truth be told, he was just as nervous about this day as she was.

Regina had told him about her meetings with Lydia and it didn’t give him a lot of confidence in how the rest of the family would react. The idea of her meeting them alone worried him. He couldn’t help but see it as her walking into a lion’s cage, steak in hand, without even a chair to protect herself. For the hundredth time he wished that he could go with them, check out the family for himself. But he wouldn’t dare ask that of her. Through their years of friendship it had always been clear to him that for Regina Daniel was a private, very painful topic. One that she’d never really gotten comfortable with discussing anyone, except perhaps Marian. All he could do is stay where he was and hope for the best.

In any case, Regina was taken care of for now. Calm and relatively collected. It was time to check on Henry.

Going down the hall to Henry’s room, Robin softly knocked on the door, calling his name. After a mumbled Come in from the other side he opened it to find Henry sitting as his desk, head hanging over a sheet of drawing paper. It was a familiar sight.

Henry loved to draw. Robin always thought it was a side effect of seeing his mom work so passionately at her designs. Regina, however, would always claim that his artistic talent was the result of Robin shoving comic after comic into his face whenever they were together. It was most likely a combination of both. Stepping into Henry’s room, Robin smiled when he saw all the sketches and pictures of superheroes that were littered across the desk, floor and bed. Some were copies of well-known characters, ones that they’d read together. Captain America, Hulk and the like. While others, the ones Robin was most interested in, were original. Superheroes and characters that Henry came up with himself. He’d sketch them elaborate costumes, give them names and backstories. It was quite impressive actually. Which was not to say that Henry was very forthcoming with them. In fact Henry rarely shared his drawings with others. The only people he would freely show them to were Regina, Emma, Roland and Robin himself. A fact that made Robin feel a little special if he was being honest.

Looking over Henry’s shoulder he could see that he was working on another character. It appeared to be a man with spiky hair and very long cloak.

“Who’s that?” asked Robin, taking a seat on Henry’s twin bed, next to his desk.

Henry shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know. I haven’t named him yet.”

“Oh,” drawled Robin, intrigued. “What’s his power?”

“He has a cloak that makes him disappear into nothing,” said Henry, not even looking up from his paper. “When he puts it on he can’t be seen or touched.”

Robin nodded his head thoughtfully. “Sounds useful.”

“I guess,” mumbled Henry, his eyes still trained on the character in front of him.

An awkward silence fell over the room then, only broken by the sound of Henry intensely scribbling against his drawing paper.

“So… today is the big day, huh?” ventured Robin. “Are you excited to meet your father’s family?”
The scribbling stops then. He sees Henry go rigid at his question. Pressing his lips together like he wants to say something but can’t.

Robin leans closer to him, concerned. “Henry?”

Biting his lip before speaking, Henry finally turns to him and softly asks, “Can I stay with you today instead?”

Robin’s eyes widen in surprise but he quickly recovers. “You want to stay with me today?” Henry silently nods. “What about meeting your father’s family?”

Henry just shrugs his shoulders with a grimace, offering no further explanation. Robin lets out a sharp sigh as he thinks over the best way to proceed. He decides questioning is his best path forward.

“Why don’t you want to meet them?” he asks.

Henry shrugs his shoulders again, unable to meet Robin’s eyes. “I don’t know,” he mumbles.

“Are you nervous?” Robin continues to question. “It’s fine if you are.”

“Mom is,” Henry says bluntly. “She keeps pretending like she’s not but I know she is.”

Robin pauses for a moment before cautiously asking, “How can you tell?”

“Because when I ask her she has this weird look on her face. Like she’s trying to be happy but really isn’t,” Henry explained.

*Oh, that look,* thought Robin. He knew it well. It was a face with a too tight smile and lying eyes. He’d seen it many times over the years when he asked her things like “are you alright?” It wasn’t surprising that Henry knew it too. He’d always been a bit more perceptive than expected for his age.

“Well, you’re right,” Robin reluctantly admitted. “Your mother is… feeling a little nervous about today but that’s only because today is very important to her. And to you. She really wants you to know them.”

“Why?” drawled Henry, a hint of exasperation in his tone. “She never took me to meet them before. Why does it matter now?”

Robin nervously tapped his fingers trying to come up with an appropriate response. “Henry… that’s complicated.” He sighed when Henry sent him an annoyed look. “Listen. These people, your family, they were very important to your father. And because of that you’re very important to them. It’s why they want to meet you and tell you things about him. Things that your mother doesn’t know but that she wants you to know. Stories of how he grew up and how he lived before he met her.” He paused before adding, “Things that he should’ve been able to tell you himself but didn’t get the chance to.”

“I know it might feel very scary to meet these new people who want to know you so badly but I don’t think it would be good for you to run away from them,” he continues. “They’re your family. And family gets a chance. Even if it’s just the one.”

He feels like such a hypocrite as he says these words, knowing how he feels about Marian’s parents, how he feels about his own mother and how Regina feels about hers. But he reminds himself that this is different. That no matter how apprehensive he feels about the whole situation
this is that family’s first chance to meet the special little boy sitting in front of him. And they
deserve it. They deserve the chance to know him and love him. And he shouldn’t do anything to
steal that chance from them.

Henry sat in his chair, no longer drawing, only solemnly thinking over Robin’s words. He was
silent for a moment before softly asking, “Will you come with us?”

Robin would later swear that no words had ever taken him more by surprise than the five Henry
just uttered. He sat in shock for a full five seconds before the idea of them actually sunk in. Henry
wanted him there when he met his family. In a way, they were the words he’d wanted to hear all
week. An invitation to be present when the two people he cared about met the family they were so
nervous to see. An opportunity to protect them if things went awry. But the words were coming
from the wrong person. As much as he wanted to fulfill Henry’s request, he couldn’t step on
Regina’s toes.

“Henry… I…”

“Please,” he begged. “If you’re there then Mom won’t worry. She never does when you’re around.
Please come with us.”

He was staring at Robin, hazel eyes wide and pleading. Staring back at him Robin was taken back
to that stormy night so many weeks ago, when he’d promised to be there for Henry, rain or shine,
whenever he asked. It was a promise he was desperate not to break.

Sucking in a deep breath, he nodded his head. “Let me talk to your mother first.”

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After her talk with Robin Regina was feeling much better. She’d changed out of her pencil skirt and
blouse into the outfit that Robin mentioned. This time when she looked at herself in the mirror,
dressed in a pink silk tank and dark wash denim capris, she could smile. Seeing herself in this outfit
reminded her of that day at the zoo. A day of sunshine, cotton candy and no worries. It helped calm
her down. She added a simple gold necklace as well as a pair of small hoop earrings for good
measure. Before she left she’d throw on a pair of wedges but she was pleased with how she looked.

Instead she’d moved onto another issue. She was currently sitting on her living couch with at least
a dozen photo albums spread out on the coffee table in front of her. Slowly flipping through them
all she tried to narrow down the options of which ones she was bringing along for the day. She was
sure Daniel’s mother would want to see Henry’s baby pictures, birthday celebrations and holidays.
But there were also the random photos she’d taken throughout Henry’s life, ones of him with their
friends and the ones that highlighted the similarities between him and his father. She blew out an
exasperated breath as she stared down at the coffee table. Maybe she’d just take them all.

She was still mulling over her options when Robin reappeared in the living room. He looked down
at the coffee table. “Trying to figure out which ones to take?”

She nodded her head. “Yeah, it’s a little difficult to decide.” She looked up at him. “Did you check
on Henry?”

Robin hesitated before nodding his head. “Yeah I did and… we need to talk.”

Regina’s smile disappeared in an instant. Her brown eyes immediately filled with fear and
apprehension, as she asked, “What’s wrong?”

Robin dug his hands into his pockets. “He wants me to come with you today, to meet Daniel’s
family.”

It took a second for Regina to process what he was saying. Henry wanted to bring Robin along for the day? To meet Daniel’s family? She scrunched her eyes closed and gave her head a little shake as she tried to swallow this new information. “He asked you this?

“Yeah,” said Robin, nodding his head. “Just now in the bedroom.”

Regina ran her hands over her thighs and let out a deep breath. The idea of Robin coming wasn’t a terrible one…but it was too much. It was too much to ask of him. And with her feelings for him and her feelings for Daniel and his family’s feelings for her…it was too complicated.

“I could come,” Robin ventured. “I could call into work for the day.”

Regina shook her head at him. “Robin, you don’t have to come with us. You shouldn’t. It’s…complicated and… personal.”

“I want to come,” Robin said, firmly correcting himself. “I mean it. I want to be there.”

He could barely look her in the eyes as spoke but he still sounded sure. He didn’t want to pressure her but if Henry wanted him there he needed her to know that he would show up. Not because he had to but because he wanted to.

Still she shook her head. “Robin…”

“He’s scared,” Robin firmly states. “He knows this is a big deal. He can feel it and he’s afraid. Genuinely, unmistakably frightened. And I don’t want him to think I won’t be there when he is.”

It breaks her heart knowing that her son is afraid. Knowing that in this particular instance she’s not enough to make him unafraid. And why would she be? Look at how she’d been acting. Breaking down in her closet, forcing smiles onto her face. No wonder he’d reached out to Robin and not her.

Robin crossed over to the other side of the coffee table and joined her on the couch. “Roland is with Granny for the day. I can call Tink and have her pick him and put him to bed for me tonight.”

She sighed as she stared into his eyes, contemplating just what he was offering. How much it would mean to her. How much it was not his responsibility. “Robin… you really don’t have to do this.”

“Yes. I really do,” Robin asserts. “When you walk in there Henry needs to know that there’s someone in your corner. And frankly, so do they.”

She’s silent for a moment. Thinking over in her head all the complications and reasons she should say no. It’s complicated. It’s inappropriate. It’s not his responsibility. But they are all silenced when a single thought enters her head.

It’s what Henry asked for.

Her son asked for this. Asked to have Robin there on this very important day and she can’t deny him that request. Not when he’d made it clear it’s what he needs.

He’s not coming along for you, she silently reminds herself. He’s coming for Henry. And that makes it okay.
“Okay.” She gently nods her head. “You can come.”

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At twelve o’clock Regina and Henry load into Robin’s jeep and begin what felt like the longest car ride of their lives. Though Daniel’s mother only lives an hour away time seems to drag on as they ride down the highway. No one really talks. In fact, the only thing breaking the silence are the soft sounds of the radio as each person remains silently stuck in their own little world.

Regina, sitting in the passenger seat, silently thinking over all the she knew about Daniel’s family and mentally rehearsing all the she wanted say.

Henry, stuck in the backseat, eyes trained on the video game he was playing on the iPad, only choosing to break concentration when he reached out a hand to steady the stack of twelve photo albums his mother had placed beside him. (Yes. She’d chosen to bring them all.)

And of course Robin, sitting in the driver’s seat, eyes focused on the road, worrying about the two people in the car with him and trying to figure out how to help make sure this day goes as smoothly as possible for both of them.

After what felt like an eternity on the highway Robin finally drifts toward an exit. When he does Regina can feel her heart start to pound in her chest. She was in Daniel’s hometown, the one where he grew up, the one he’d told her about. Somehow she thought she’d never get the chance to come here. And maybe it was ridiculous given how much time had passed but she felt closer to him being here.

It didn’t take them long to reach the house. She can feel herself tensing up when they turned onto Daniel’s childhood street. They pull up in front of a small, unassuming tan house with a white picket fence and a green lawn and her breath catches in her throat. They’re here. This is Daniel’s home. This is his lawn. And his fence. And his… mother.

Regina can see her. She’s was standing on the porch, staring at the car. She’d been waiting for them.

Suddenly it feels like nothing outside the car is safe. This was a bad idea. She should just drive away. She should just turn to Robin and ask him to –

“Regina?”

His hand is on her knee and a calm sweeps over her when she turns and looks into his blue eyes.

“Are you ready?” he asks, his voice a mix of concern and optimism.

No more running away from this, she thinks. It’s time.

She nods her head. “Yes, I’m ready.”

She takes a deep breath before turning toward the backseat. “What about you sweetheart? Are you feeling okay?”

Henry doesn’t respond to her at first. He’s looking out the window, headphones finally pulled out of his ears, curiously staring at the house they were sitting in front of.

“Is that my grandma?” he asks softly.
“Yeah,” Regina breathes. “That’s her.”

She sees him bite his lip and take a deep breath before turning to her. “Can you take me to meet her?”

She nods her head. “Yeah. I’ll take you.”

His eyes turn to Robin. “And will you…?”

“I will be here the whole time, buddy,” he promises. He took a deep breath before turning his gaze over to Regina and nodding his head. “Okay… let’s do this.”

He added a hint of optimism to his tone but it does nothing to stop the somersaults performed by her stomach as she steps out of the car. Henry climbs out after her and she immediately lays a hand on his shoulder, pulling him close to her side. Daniel’s mother is leaving the porch now, slowly coming down the steps to greet them. Regina’s heart beats faster the closer she gets. A car door slams behind her and she can hear Robin’s footsteps as he comes around the side of the car. She takes a deep breath when she feels him by her side. He stays silent but gives her shoulder a small supportive squeeze. It’s all she needs to start moving.

In sync, she and Henry walk across the lawn’s stepping stones with Robin right behind them until they meet up with Daniel’s mother in the middle.

Up close Regina’s finally able to get a better look at her. She’s beautiful, truly. She doesn’t look much like Daniel but she is the spitting image of Lydia, right down to the hazel eyes they both share with her son. Her hair is streaked with a few gray locks but most of it is still a deep chestnut brown just like her daughter’s. For a minute Regina thinks that Daniel didn’t physically inherit much from his mother but then she smiles. That same warm, lopsided smile that had made Regina’s knees go weak so many years ago. The sight of it now fills her chest with warmth.

She tries to speak but her throat feels tight with emotion. She takes another short breath and tries to swallow all that she’s feeling.

“Hi.” She manages to squeeze out an unsteady greeting. “I’m Regina.”

She saw tears begin to well up in the older woman’s eyes as she slowly nodded her head. “I know,” she softly replied.

Her voice was trembling. She kept a smile on her face but it wasn’t forced. It was genuine. Regina could tell.

A soft, emotional laugh fell from her throat as she, to Regina’s surprise, raised her arms and wrapped her in hug. She held her tight, resting her chin on her shoulder, hugging her like you would a good friend you thought you’d never see again. Not a stranger you harbored resentment for. After a momentary lapse in shock, Regina returned her hug. The pounding in her chest slowing as she breathed in her honey-scented perfume. Relief flowed through her when she realized there wasn’t an ounce of anger in this woman’s embrace. Only joy.

“It’s so nice to finally meet you,” Regina whispered. And it was. She’d spent so many years imagining this moment in so many different ways. None of them compared to the real thing.

Daniel’s mother let her go then. Pulling back to take a deep breath and wipe a stray tear from under her eye but still holding Regina’s hand in her own. Her eyes fall down to Henry then and Regina sees her smile her lopsided smile again.
Clearing her throat she places both her hands on Henry’s shoulders and gives them a soft supportive squeeze, similar to the one Robin had given her only moments ago.

“This is Henry,” she says, tears starting to form in her eyes. She drops her gaze down to her son. “Henry… this is Evelyn Colter. Your grandmother.”

Henry shyly raised his hand to wave at her. “Hi,” he softly mumbled.

“Hi,” she emotionally whispered back. Regina noticed Evelyn’s grip on her hand subtly go tighter and she could tell that Evelyn wanted desperately to take Henry in her arms but didn’t want to invade his space. A good call. She could tell that at the moment her son was curious but apprehensive. It was best not to move too fast.

“Oh god,” breathed Evelyn, letting out a soft chuckle. “You both look… so beautiful.”

Regina felt her cheeks go red at Evelyn’s compliment. She felt relief flow through her as she looked down at the outfit she’d chosen, thankful that she’d settled on Robin’s suggestion and not changed for a tenth time.

“Thank you,” she said, running her fingers through Henry’s hair. “Today is always a… special day for us.”

Her voice went low as she alluded to Daniel’s birthday, unsure of how Evelyn would react. She simply nodded her head solemnly and replied, “It is for us too. And we’re so glad you both could make it.”

Her gaze falls behind them then. “And who is this?” she asks curiously.

Regina whips her head back, her eyes widening as she suddenly remembers that she’d brought Robin along with them. In the emotional haze of meeting Daniel’s mother she’d nearly forgotten that he’d been standing behind her the entire time. Her mind goes blank as she tries to sputter out an introduction. Luckily Robin, is more than willing to speak up for himself.

He reaches past Regina and Henry to hold out a hand to Evelyn. “Robin Locksely. It’s lovely to meet you, ma’am.”

“Hello” said Evelyn, shaking his hand still a bit confused.

“Robin is a close friend of mine,” said Regina, finally finding her words. Then she added, “He’s also Henry’s godfather.”

Her heart skipped a beat after her last sentence and the flash of surprise on Robin’s face certainly didn’t escape her notice. It was the first time she’d ever used that particular title for him. She hadn’t exactly planned to do it but she didn’t know any other way to introduce him while also subtly explaining the important role he played in both their lives. Besides, given the fact she’d named him Henry’s legal guardian it wasn’t as if she was lying.

“Oh!” said Evelyn, surprise flashing across her face. Her smile widened as she took Robin in once again. “Well it is such a pleasure to have you here.”

“Very glad to be here ma’am,” he says, smiling at her.

“Well,” she said, clasping her hands together. “I have some snacks laid out by the coffee table.” Her gaze drops down to Henry. “I hope you’re a fan of snickerdoodles.”
Henry’s eyes widened. “You know how to make snickerdoodles?”

“Of course,” she said, gently nodding her head. She pauses for a moment before adding, “They were your father’s favorite cookie.”

“Really?” asked Henry stepping forward. “Mine too.”

A flutter goes through Regina’s heart at the similarity. She looked at Evelyn’s face and could tell that her heart was doing the same.

“That’s great!” she said, the smile on her face growing wider. She offered Henry her hand. “Why don’t you come inside and let me know if my recipe is up to your standards?”

Henry glanced at her hand before flickering his eyes up to his mother, silently searching for her approval. She nodded and gave him an encouraging pat on the shoulder.

He took his grandmother’s hand. “Do you put sugar on top of your snickerdoodles?”

“Is there any other way to make cookies?” Evelyn answered playfully, leading him into the house.

Regina let out a soft, deep breath as she watched them walk toward the front door. Henry and his grandmother. The sight of them together was literally taking her breath away.

The house where Daniel had grown up was not extravagant. It had three bedrooms on a single level, a nice backyard and a clearly well-used kitchen but not much else. It wasn’t a mansion… but it was a home. And a warm one at that.

Regina could tell from the minute she stepped inside.

There were pictures everywhere. Literally, she couldn’t turn her head without seeing at least one. Pictures of Evelyn. Pictures of Evelyn and her husband, Daniel’s father. Pictures of Lydia and Daniel’s younger brother, William. And of course there were pictures of Daniel. God, she could see him everywhere in the house. On walls, on top of end tables and on counters. All through the ages. From baby pictures all the way to his twenties. Of course none of them went past the age of twenty-five… and they never would. Realizing that fact gutted her but she ignored it for Henry’s sake.

Her son was seated on the couch next to his grandmother now. Snickerdoodle in hand, his head was bent over the coffee table while his eyes were fixed on the photo album Evelyn had laid in front of him. Regina sat by his side while she showed them both photos from Daniel’s childhood. For Regina, it was mind-blowing. Not just because she’d only known Daniel as a man but also because she was now able to see even more similarities between the man she’d once loved and the son he’d never gotten the chance to know. Flipping through the photos of Daniel’s childhood was giving her flashbacks of Henry’s. They’d had the same shaggy brown hair, the same nose and the same round face. It was like realizing her son had a twin.

As her eyes ran over page after page her throat subtly grew tighter. Looking at all the pictures of him now, even the young ones, reminded her of how much she’d missed seeing his face everyday. How much she’d missed seeing that lopsided smile and dark blue eyes. She’d forgotten just how handsome he was.

Regina wasn’t the only one captivated by the photos of Daniel’s youth. Henry’s eyes never left the pages Evelyn set in front of him. He looked over the pictures of his father with a blazing curiosity
that Regina had never seen from him before. It made her heart ache knowing that she’d kept him from seeing this part himself. Things might’ve been dangerous but she should’ve made more of effort to make sure that Henry knew Daniel as best as he could. He was clearly more interested than he’d let on earlier.

He listened to his grandmother speak about his father with great fascination. She explained each picture to him, letting him know the day it was taken, Daniel’s age and what he was doing, only stopping whenever Henry offered up a question of his own. A frequent occurrence.

“How old was he when you took this?” he asked, pointing at a picture of his father at the beach. He couldn’t have been more than five years old, Regina thought to herself. She sat next to her son on the couch – her on one side, Evelyn on the other – looking over his shoulder as he flipped through the pictures in his lap. He pointed at one that rested on the corner of the page. It was a picture of Daniel – probably no older than Roland was now – sitting on his mother’s lap at the beach. They were both in swimsuits, their hair still wet from the ocean and matching grins on their face. It was an adorable picture. One that reminded her of the summer days she used to spend at the beach with Henry.

“Ah,” Evelyn drawled wistfully, “Your grandfather took this the summer Daniel turned four. He’d started learning to swim and we were going to the beach nearly every weekend. He loved it there.”

Henry narrowed his eyes at the picture thoughtfully. He turned to Regina. “It looks like you and me.”

She let out a short, surprised breath. “What?”

“It does,” he insisted. “Like that picture we used to keep on the wall in New York.”

Regina thought back to the pictures she’d hung up in her townhouse in New York. Her eyes widened when she remembered the photo Henry was thinking of.

“Oh my god,” she breathed. “You’re right.” She turned to Evelyn. “I used to work in a bar next to the beach and I’d take him there after I finished my opening shifts. Every once in a while, a few of my friends would come along and one of them must’ve taken a picture of us just like this when Henry was around three years old,” she explained. “I used to have it on the wall in my front hallway.”

She racked her brain trying to think of where that picture had ended up. It must’ve gotten shuffled around in the move. It was probably still packed up in a box somewhere.

“The one of you in the black swimsuit with the spider-man towel?”

Regina’s eyes drifted toward the armchair on her right where Robin sat. He’d been next them the whole time, silent but clearly engaged. For all his insistence on coming along, he felt a little out of place in the situation. He was glad to be there, of course, it was just difficult finding a moment to insert himself in the conversation. But when Henry had mentioned that specific picture a spark of recognition had gone off in his brain.

Regina tilted her head at him, her lips slightly parted in surprise at his good memory. “Yeah, that one.”

He paused for a moment before reaching into his pocket. “Hang on.”

Pulling out his wallet, he reached inside and took out a small folded picture. A small smile grew on his face as he unfolded it and handed it to her.
A happy chuckle fell from her lips when she looked at it. “Oh my god,” she laughed. It was the exact picture she’d been thinking of. It was old and faded from time but the picture was still clear enough to see. She was there her hair still slick from the water, a three-year old Henry wrapped up in a blue spider-man towel as he sat on her lap.

Her eyes met his. “How long have you had this?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “A few years now.” He sent Henry a smile. “You gave that to me the day you and your mother left for New York,” he said, pointing to the picture. “Said you didn’t want me to forget what you looked like.”

Regina kept her eyes on him as she passed the picture over to her son. “I can’t believe you kept it.”

“Yeah, well… how else was I going to remember your faces?” he said, brushing off her shock with a sheepish look on his face. “Just put in my wallet, never saw a reason to take it out.”

“I’m glad you didn’t,” said Evelyn, staring down at the photo in Henry’s hand.

Regina turns to face her, as if suddenly remembering the reason she was here. Evelyn had a knowing look on her face as she looked over at the two of them.

“I’m glad I got to see this,” she said with a smile, her eyes dropping back down to the photo. She sighed longingly as she took in the image of her grandson during his toddler years. “You two look adorable together.”

She reached her hand out to the armchair on her left. “Lydia you have to see this.”

Lydia, sitting in the armchair rigid as ever, shifted uncomfortably at her mother’s request. Regina had been watching her out of the corner of her eye the whole time. Lydia, in turn, had been openly staring at her… and Henry. She’d barely spoken a word besides a mumbled *hello* when they’d first come inside but she hadn’t been able to take her eyes off either one of them. Regina could tell she was tense. Every part of her appeared to be clenched like she was waiting for disaster to strike.

Forcing a smile to her lips she took the photo from her mother’s hand and looked it over. For a moment Regina could see her walls turn transparent. Lydia went breathless as a flicker of sadness and amazement fell across her face. It didn’t last for long though. In an instant she swallowed down her emotions and tightened up her smile before passing back the faded picture.

“That’s… very cute,” she forced out as cheerfully as she could. “William’s gonna love it.”

“William is Daniel’s younger brother,” Evelyn warmly reminded them. “He’ll be here in a little while. He just had to finish up some things at work.”

Regina nodded her head understandingly. Not all employers recognized days of personal mourning.

“I have more photos in the car,” she said, gesturing over her shoulder. “I thought you might like to see some of Henry’s baby pictures.”

“Oh I’d love that!” Evelyn said excitedly.

Regina smiled at her enthusiasm as she rose from the couch. For a second she wondered how she was going to carry all the albums with her in one go but then she saw Robin stand up beside her.

“I should help you gather them up,” he decided. He sent a mischievous smirk toward Evelyn. “She brought more than ten albums.”
Evelyn face lit up at the idea of so many pictures of her grandson but Regina shook her head in Robin’s direction. “I’ll be alright. You can stay with everyone while I run outside really quick.”

She stressed the *everyone* to him, silently reminding him that Henry had wanted him close by. Things were going well and she didn’t want him to withdraw in their absence.

“You should let Robin help,” chimed Henry, from his spot on the couch.

Regina turned to him with wide eyes. “Are you sure?”

He paused for a moment before firmly nodding his head. “Yeah,” he said softly. “You’ll need the help.”

She looks into his hazel eyes, searching for an inkling of fear or discomfort. But she finds none. Instead she finds a clear calm and secuerness. He was comfortable and unafraid.

And subtly telling her that he would be okay.

He was with his family and he was fine.

That realization made her a little breathless but she doesn’t show it. Instead she slips a smile on her face and gently nods at him. “Okay.”

She gives him one last reassuring look before turning to Robin, gesturing toward the door. The sunlight hits her face as she slips her cellphone out of her back pocket and checks the time. 2:45. They’d been inside for nearly two hours but it’d felt like minutes. She lets out a small relieved breath.

She and Robin walk to the car side by side, the silence between them loaded with anxiousness. As Robin reaches out to open the back car door he let out a whooshing breath and relieved chuckle.

“So…”

“Yeah,” she breathes nodding her head. Leaning against the side of the car, she closes her eyes and just lets the warmth of the sun and moment wash over her.

Robin lets her breath, allows her to spend a few moments in her bubble of relief before he speaks again. “How are you feeling?” he asks.

“Good,” she answers, opening her eyes and nodding her head. “I’m feeling good.”

And she was. Things were going well. There had been no yelling or anger, perhaps a little tension and awkwardness but that was to be expected. She knew the day was hardly over and she still had to make it through dinner and meeting Daniel’s brother but at the moment she carried no regrets. She was glad she had come to meet Daniel’s family. And she was glad she had taken Henry with her. She still felt a little nervous but she was no longer petrified.

“It’s a bit surreal… hearing other people talk about him,” she admitted. “For so long… it kind of felt like I was the only one who knew him… and missed him.”

Robin nodded his head understandingly, even though he knew he couldn’t personally relate. When he’d lost Marian he’d been surrounded by people who felt the pain of her absence, maybe not as sharply as he had but in some way. It broke his heart to know that Regina had been denied the same experience when she lost Daniel. That she hadn’t had the comfort or support of people who could understand her pain. How isolating that must’ve been for her.
She stepped away from the car and turned to him with anxious eyes. “Do you think Henry’s doing okay?”

“Better than okay,” he firmly replied. “He’s doing great.”

It had been a bit surprising to see how quickly Henry had opened up to his grandmother, given how reluctant he’d been to come. It took less than ten minutes for him to crack a genuine smile, which was a record for him when it came to meeting new people. Perhaps a grandmother’s touch was all it had taken.

“He’s asking so many questions about Daniel,” marveled Regina. “And he’s learning so much. I’m so glad. I never could’ve answered these things for him.” She pauses for a moment to catch her breath. “Thank you for coming today,” she says gratefully.

Robin smiles and nonchalantly shrugs his shoulders as he finally reaches for a stack of the albums she’d left behind in the backseat. “Of course,” he says, not making a big deal of it.

But then she places her hand on his shoulder and he’s forced to turn to her. There’s nothing but sincerity in her face as she seriously looks him in the eyes.

“I mean it,” she softly insists. Dropping her gaze down to her shoes she tucks a lock of hair behind her ear. “Look I know that I… fought you on coming with us and I know that it’s been more than a little awkward for you to be here but… having you here has made this so much easier. For Henry… and me. So thank you for being here.”

She meant every word. Forced them out no matter how hard it felt to say them aloud. She didn’t know how this day would’ve gone if they hadn’t had Robin by their side, radiating his calming presence, reminding them of the love they already had in their lives. It could’ve been fine but deep down she just knew that him being there had made all the difference. And she’d be damned if he didn’t know it.

Robin stares at her. Surprise colored his face. His eyebrows scrunched together as he shifted toward her. “Regina… you don’t have to thank me.”

“I just…”

“No you really don’t.” His tone was firm and final. He stared harshly into her eyes as if daring her to argue with him.

“Regina there is no place in the world I’d rather be today than by your sides,” he solemnly declared. “You and Henry mean the world to me. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for you two.”

His words – the way he said them, the way he meant them – it filled her with paralyzing awe. She opened her mouth but nothing came out. There were no words on Earth that could describe how grateful she felt. Regina had never considered herself a lucky person but standing there listening to Robin speak on how important she and Henry were to him she could believe that somewhere along the way the universe had decided to tip in her favor. What other explanation could there be to explain how she’d managed to end up with this amazing, caring man in her life?

She didn’t know what she’d done to deserve him.

The air between them grew thick, yet again filling up with weight of their unspoken words. Robin, satisfied that she recognized his sincerity, pulled his lips into an easy going smile. He pulled a short stack of photo albums from the backseat. “We should bring these inside.”
“Right,” she softly breathed. She tried to shake the earlier moment off of her as he passed the album into her arms. Her shoulders hunched over with their weight and she teetered in her wedges.

“Need a little help there?”

She turned around and a sharp gasp flew from her throat. All she could see was that thick dark hair, that straight nose and strong jaw. He was tall like him and carried the same lopsided smile on his face. Once her eyes landed on his face the albums slipped from her hands and fell into the street as she stared up at his face in shock. “Oh my god,” she whispered under her breath.

Daniel?

It was the thud of her photo albums hitting the ground that brought her back to reality. Well, that and the absence of those deep blue eyes she’d fallen in love with so many years ago. Her eyes dropped to her feet where her albums had fallen and he was on his knees in an instant gathering them into his arms. She dropped down to help him and he chuckled to himself.

“I’m sorry I didn’t mean to startle you,” he said, keeping a smile on his face. That same lopsided smile. He reached out his hand to her. “William Colter.”

“Oh!” Her eyes widened in recognition, as they quickly shook hands. “Daniel’s brother.”

He nodded happily. “Yeah that’s me,” he said rising to his feet, a few albums in his arms. “And you must be Regina Mills. Love of his life, mother of his one and only offspring?”

She struggled for a moment to find her words. “Uh… yeah I guess that’s me.”

Well he seems…open, she thought to herself. She didn’t know very much about Daniel’s younger brother. From what she remembered he had been seven years younger than Daniel himself, so that would make him at least 27, only 18 when Daniel had died. He’d played some sort of sport during high school and Daniel had said that he was a bit of goofball. Always open to being the comic relief. Daniel hadn’t spoken about him often but whenever he did it was always with fondness.

At least he hadn’t noticed her microscopic freak out when she’d first seen his face.

“And don’t worry about the little reaction you had,” he said, waving the whole thing off. “Happens all the time.”

Damn.

“Oh… you saw that?” she meekly asked.

“Well you did drop all your photos into the street, so it was kind of hard to miss.”

She felt a hot blush rising up in her cheeks. “Right.”

“It’s fine,” he said shrugging his shoulders. “I’ve met up with a lot of Daniel’s old friends over the years. Sometimes it takes them a second to realize I’m not a ghost. I just look like one.”

He smirked a little at his own joke and Regina forced herself to offer up another chuckle. Even though she knew he was joking, she still ran her gaze over his face in amazement. He looked so much like his brother. They had the same jaw. The same nose. The same thin lips. And it certainly didn’t hurt that William was very close to the same age Daniel had been when he’d died. The only difference she could find between them were the color of their eyes. While Daniel’s were a deep sea blue, William’s eyes, like those of the rest of his family, bore a warm shade of hazel. And
perhaps it was just the wedges she was wearing but she could swear William was a little shorter as well. Those two features aside it was like seeing a ghost.

So she focused on his eyes. The one thing that was distinctly not Daniel. The one thing that made him easier to look at. His hazel eyes.

His hazel eyes that were current looking over her shoulder.

“And is this your husband?”

Her head whips back to Robin and her eyes go wide. “Oh no!” she says, swiveling her gaze back to William and fervently shaking her head.

Robin shakes his head along with her. “No, we’re not married.”

William raised his eyebrows. “Oh just dating then?”

“No,” they flatly answered in sync. William stared at them confused and they both squirmed under his scrutiny. Regina’s eyes nervously flickered toward Robin before she cleared her throat and broke the awkward silence settling over the group.

“Robin and I are just friends,” she clarifies. “He’s Henry godfather.”

“O-kay…” William suspiciously drawled. “Nice to meet you.” He was silent for a moment. “Well, I’m ready to meet my nephew. So do you…?”

“Have everything?” Regina quickly finished. She nodded her head. “Yeah I do.”

They headed inside then with William leading the way. Robin and Regina silently trailed behind him, both of them playing the last ten seconds in their heads on a loop. How in sync they were when denying the depth of their relationship. It had been… odd, to say the least.

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It was odd seeing him.

Ever since Lydia had seen that picture of him at Daniel’s grave she hadn’t been able to get Henry Mills face out of her head. A son. Her brother had a son. Well would’ve had.

It hadn’t seemed real. He didn’t seem real. But he was. Real enough to stand in her mother’s kitchen anyway.

She’d whisked him into the kitchen with her the minute his mother and her “friend” had left. (She didn’t know what was going on there but it was clearly more than they were saying.) Henry had mentioned that he loved superheroes and her mother had immediately run back to Daniel’s room to pull out a few of his old comics. They’d been alone. Henry’s expectant gaze had fallen on her and suddenly she’d felt paralyzed. She wasn’t particularly good with children, and this one made her exceptionally nervous. After floundering for a few seconds she’d asked him if he’d wanted to help with Daniel’s cake. He’d eagerly agreed.

Red velvet cake had always been Daniel’s favorite. Their father’s too. A fact she’d been sure to tell Henry. Everyone used to remark on how clear it was that the apple never fell far from the tree with the two of them.

Apparently the same could be said for Daniel and Henry.
She watched him as he poured the cake batter into the round pans, the concentration clear in his eyes. Even though they hadn’t shared so much as a minute breathing the same air she could see the clear similarities. Henry had Daniel’s nose. His ears. Even his lack of height but she suspected that wouldn’t last because it certainly hadn’t for her brother. He even had their mother’s eyes. It was hard seeing him in person.

Her brother had a son. One he’d never get to know.

Henry set down the bowl when finished and looked up at her with expectant eyes. She smiled at him and offered up a quiet good job and thank you before placing the pans into the oven. Looking out of the window she could see that Will had arrived and was heading back inside with Regina. Her own mother would be coming out of Daniel’s room any minute now.

It was now or never.

“Hey Henry,” she said, pulling out the silverware drawer. “Do you know what the best part of baking a cake is?”

His eyes light up with excitement. “Licking the bowl!”

She grins as she passes him a spoon. “Exactly.”

Her gut twists as she watches take the spoon and scrape out a dollop of leftover cake batter. He hums in satisfaction as he slips it into his mouth, leaving a small tinge of red on his lips. “It’s good!” he tells her.

She forces herself to smile harder. “Thanks.”

The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.

The front door opens and she can hear Will’s voice as he loudly announces his presence as usual. Henry realizes that his mother is back and goes out to greet her, leaving his spoon behind on the kitchen counter.

She stares at it for a moment, feels a rush of nausea and self-loathing before ripping off a paper towel and picking up the spoon in her hand. Guilt swirls in her stomach as she places it in a plastic bag and hides it behind an old cookbook on the counter. She’d come back for it after everyone left and slip it into her purse.

She took deep breath and tried to remind herself that this was for the greater good. Getting this test was in her family’s best interest. They’d been through enough with Daniel’s death. This was insurance that they’d be spared any further pain.

Yes, he was the right age. Yes, Regina had claimed that there was no one else. And yes, he did look like her brother.

But looks weren’t everything.

Looks weren’t proof.

Daniel had once told her that she didn’t have any faith. Not in people or anything else. He was right.

In her book solid proof always trumped misguided faith.
Even if she had to cross a few lines to get it.

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Robin hadn’t known Daniel but looking at his family was like looking at a Picasso painting.

They were mess of jumbled pieces, pieces that didn’t look the same, pieces that individually didn’t look like they belonged together.

There was his mother, Evelyn. Kind and matronly. Not a disingenuous bone in her body. Despite the pain she carried in her heart she had a light in her eyes, one that said she still had joy in her life and was more than willing to share it with whoever came along. Robin liked her. She was good to Regina.

There was his sister, Lydia. Quiet and closed off. The spitting image of her mother in everything but personality. Truth be told, Robin didn’t know what to think of her. She’d kept her distance and hadn’t such much. She seemed… detached from the whole situation. Or at least like she was trying to be.

And then there was William. The only one of them who seemed to be unrattled by the weight of the day. He was all smiles and ease. Robin suspected it took a lot to throw him off balance. In a way he reminded Robin of Tink.

Evelyn, Lydia and William. They were all so different. And separately you never would’ve guessed that they were pieces to the same puzzle. But somehow… they fit.

You could see it in the jokes William cracked to get Lydia smiling. In the stern looks Evelyn would send his way. And in the protective manner in which Lydia watched over them both.

They were a family. They fit.

And watching them together Robin realized that it’d been a while since he’d seen anything like them.

The Colters were a flesh and blood family. One that loved and cared for one another. One that had managed to stay together through their shared grief and hardship. Despite all the pain they still fit.

And they wanted Henry to fit with them. That much was clear.

They’d moved out into the backyard now. It was gorgeous. There was a spacious stone patio with an eating area. String lights were attached from the roof of the house, over the green lawn, to the branches of the old sycamore tree that sat in the center of the yard. In the branches of the sycamore lay a treehouse, handmade with sturdy wooden planks and rope ladder that fell down the trunk to the grass. Henry sat inside of it now, along with Lydia.

She’d mentioned that the treehouse had originally belonged to her before Daniel had laid claim to it when he was ten. After that he’d wanted her to show him the inside. There couldn’t have been more than 80 square feet to share but she’d squeezed in with him. While Lydia told him tales of treehouse adventures the rest of them set up for dinner.

Regina and Evelyn were laying out plates and silverware on the patio table. Robin watched her from the corner of his eye while he stood next to William and watched him grill up steaks. She seemed better. Certainly more relaxed than she’d been this morning. Her shoulders were no longer tight and she was smiling in a way that finally didn’t seem forced. It was a relief to see her loosen up. It almost made Robin feel like he could let his guard down. Almost.
“How do Henry and Regina like their steaks?” William asked him, firing up the grill.

Robin tore his focus away from Regina long enough to answer, “Regina will want hers medium but she’ll insist that Henry’s be well done. Apparently, it’s safer for his stomach.”

“That poor boy,” William deadpanned with a smirk.

Robin offered a polite chuckle but didn’t say anything further. He was still watching Regina from the corner of his eye. She’d laid out plates and silverware and was getting started on the glasses. He heard Evelyn call her from the kitchen and sighed when he saw her retreat into the house.

He’d come along on this trip to watch out for her and Henry but right now he felt more like a bodyguard than a friend. Standing silently off to the side, always keeping them in his sight, hardly saying a word. He might as well have a black suit and a mic in his ear.

Henry and Regina are fine, he silently reminded himself. They hadn’t been accosted. They weren’t uncomfortable. The Colters had been nothing but warm and welcoming. They weren’t out to get his friends. There was no need to have his guard up this high. It wasn’t helpful. It was just adding to the tension.

He needed to loosen up. Maybe get to know the family better. William was still standing next to him, manning the grill in his jeans and plain gray tee shirt. He seemed friendly enough. Might as well start with who’s closest.

“So,” Robin ventured. “How does it feel to be an uncle?”

“So fucking weird!” William drawled, adding a low chuckle. His eyes flickered up to the treehouse. “I mean I’m a middle school English teacher. I spend all day with kids and they’re great. I love ‘em but it’s only been an hour and I’m already more invested in him than all the students I’ve taught combined. It… freaks me out a little.”

Well, thought Robin, he seems to be an open book. At least he wouldn’t have to muddle his way through any awkward small talk. Instead he nodded his head understandingly. “I get it. Just wait until you have one of your own.”

William blew out a breath. “Believe me that’s been on my mind for weeks.”

Robin raised his eyebrows in surprise. “So you’re – ”

“Yeah, my girlfriend, Claire, is pregnant,” William quickly interjected. “Been together two years, she’s barely out of her first trimester. Only started telling people about two weeks ago.”

“Two weeks ago?” Robin gaped at him. God, they couldn’t have found out about Henry no more than five weeks ago.

William smirked as he nodded his head. “You might not have noticed but it’s been a pretty eventful month for the family,” he jested, good naturedly. He threw another steak on the grill and it sizzled against the heat. Still smiling, he added, “Mom is thrilled though. I haven’t seen her smile this much in years.”

He went silent for a moment as he shut the lid to the grill. “You know a month ago I thought I’d be giving my mom her first grandchild. Have to admit it kind of feels like my kid got dethroned.”

He softly chuckled to himself as he stared up at the treehouse where Henry sat.
“I can’t imagine what it must feel like. Finding out about him after all this time,” said Robin.

William shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly. “Well it’s definitely something none of us saw coming but we’re all glad he’s here. It’s nice knowing there’s another piece of Daniel in the world. I just wish my brother could’ve met him. He would’ve loved to have a kid.”

A moment of silence passed between them before Robin asked, “What was he like?”

“Daniel?” said William, turning to him.

Robin silently nodded. He wished he could’ve waited to ask Regina. Wished he knew with certainty that she’d want to answer him. But he couldn’t help it. He was curious. He wanted to know more about the man who’d played such a huge role in her life. He wanted to know more about Henry’s father. About Daniel.

William sucked in a deep breath before simply answering, “He was good.”

Robin stared at him expectantly, waiting for him to continue but he just chuckled.

“People are always shocked when I don’t have more to say about him,” he said. “But the truth is that’s the best thing I could possibly say. Daniel was good. He was a good son. He was a good brother. He was a good man. He stopped to hold open door for others. He asked how your day was and actually cared what you’d say next. If he saw someone drop twenty bucks he’d run to give it back to them. He was just… a good person. Extraordinarily so. And being around him made you want to be good too.”

William spoke softly but passionately and with obvious admiration. Robin could tell that in his eyes his older brother had done no wrong and never could’ve. The way he spoke of him reminded Robin of how people spoke of Marian. Daniel had been a good man. The type of man Regina could fall in love with.

“Were the two of you close?” he asked.

“Close as we could be with the age difference,” said William. “He was my big brother. He always looked out for me and I loved him for it. Probably more now than I did back then.”

He said the last sentence with a tiny smile on his lips, as if he was reminiscing about his brother in his head, but he quickly returned to the moment. “What about you and Henry?”

“Hmm?”

“He seems pretty attached to you,” said William.

“Well I’m pretty attached to him,” Robin replied with a smile. “I’ve known him since he was a baby. Saw the first steps and everything. Guess you could say I’m invested.”

“That good to know,” said William. He was silent for a moment. “And what about you and Regina?”

Robin’s mouth suddenly went dry.

“What do you mean?” he forced out as normally as he could.

“I mean… you two seem pretty close. You being Henry’s godfather and all.”

Robin swallowed and averted his gaze back to the treehouse. “Well… we are. Close, I mean. I’ve
known her for years. We’ve been through a lot together.” He paused. “I couldn’t imagine my life without either of them. And I don’t want to.”

William nodded his head silently, took a few seconds to contemplate something, then suddenly asked, “You ever date her?”

Robin’s heart pounded in his chest as he shook his head. “No. We’ve never dated.”

William’s eyebrows rose in surprise. “Really?”

“Yes,” Robin chuckled, forcing a smile onto his face. “We’ve only ever been friends.”

“Oh,” William drawled with a knowing grin. “But you’d like to change that right?”

Robin could feel the blush rising up in his cheeks as William stared him down with that mischievous glint in his eye. This wasn’t good. He’d wanted to be relaxed, not transparent.

He tried to form a response but William waved him off.

“Don’t worry you don’t have to answer that,” he said, reopening the lid of the grill. “But even if you did you’d get no judgement from me. You clearly have good taste… and so did my brother.”

He laughed to himself while Robin tried to force a polite smile that he was sure came off as a grimace. Perhaps he shouldn’t have started with the whoever was closest.

But my god, how obvious must his feelings be if this man, who hadn’t known him more than an hour, could already point them out? It was embarrassing. And not because he had feelings for Regina but because he was failing so miserably at hiding them, except from the one person who actually mattered. He felt like a teenager mooning over his first crush. It was intolerable.

And it had to end.

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Regina really liked Evelyn’s kitchen. It was definitely old, probably at least older than she was, but it had charm. It had white tile floors and wooden countertops. The cabinets were painted white with wooden knobs and the bay window over the sink looked out into the front yard. There were piles of well-worn cookbooks on the counter, and various papers and photos were held onto the fringe with alphabet magnets left over from her kids’ childhood. Standing in her kitchen Regina could tell that Evelyn spent a lot of time in it.

She was standing by the sink now rinsing and drying off some glasses for dinner while Evelyn frosted the cake for dessert. The cake was red velvet and she was using a thick buttercream frosting. Regina had asked about candles but Evelyn had shook her head. They didn’t use candles for Daniel’s birthday anymore. No candles, or singing, or wishes. Just the enjoyment of her son’s favorite dessert.

Evelyn set down her frosting knife and asked, “Do you think this looks even?”

From where she stood Regina examined the cake and nodded her head. “It looks great.”

Evelyn smiled to herself as she looked down at it. “He always loved red velvet cake,” she said wistfully.

“I remember,” Regina said softly. “He used to joke it was the only thing in the world worth killing
In Daniel’s eyes, no dessert would ever surpass a moist red velvet cake. He’d always made that clear.

They both chuckled at the memory of that, but soon Evelyn’s laughter grew tight and strangled. A tear slid down her cheek and Regina realized that she’d started crying. The sight of it paralyzed her.

“Evelyn?” she cautiously drawled.

She took a step closer but Evelyn shook her head.

“No, I’m fine,” she said, wiping away her tears. She took a deep breath and leaned against the counter. “I’m fine. It’s just… thirty-five. He would’ve been thirty-five today.”

A pained smile tugged her on her lips. “I can never get through this day without wondering about him. Wondering about who he would’ve become if he’d gotten the chance.”

Regina, still frozen in place, bit her lip as Evelyn continued to speak.

“I wonder where he would’ve been living,” she said. “I wonder if he’d still have the same job, the same car.” She pauses and locks eyes with Regina. “I wonder if he would’ve been married. If he’d have kids. I wonder if he’d be happy.”

Her voice breaks and she goes silent, her eyes drifting down to the cake in front of her. “I used to spend whole days imagining all the different ways his life could’ve played out. But none of them matter because now I’ll never know.”

Regina still remained silent, trapped under the heavy weight of Evelyn’s grief. Her throat had grown tight and her eyes had started to burn as she listened to her. Earlier by the car she’d told Robin that before today she’d felt like no one had missed Daniel like she had. In her grief, no one around her had even spoken his name let alone offered meaningful condolences. It was almost as if he’d faded into thin air. If it hadn’t been for Henry she almost could’ve been convinced that he been a figment of her imagination. But he had been real. And others had missed him. Evelyn, and Lydia and William. They’d mourned him then and they grieved him still. And as welcoming as they’d been to her and Henry, Evelyn’s confession had reminded her that this was and always will be a difficult day for them. Just like it had been for her.

Pressing her lips together she silently set down the glass in her hand and stepped closer to the counter where Evelyn stood. She swallowed hard and started to speak.

“He would’ve been married,” she said softly. Evelyn looked up and locked eyes with her but she continued on. “It would’ve happened ten years ago in a New Mexican courthouse. It would’ve happened the same day we got there and I would’ve been wearing the first pretty white dress I could find and Daniel would’ve worn the only suit he owned at the time, the gray one that used to be his dad’s.”

She sadly laughed as she remembered Daniel’s old, ill-fitting gray suit. The one he’d never replace or throw out because his father had loved it so much.

“It would’ve been our secret, the courthouse,” she said. “We wouldn’t have told anyone. We were just going to let everyone think that we were just engaged until a year later when we were able to have a real wedding with flowers and a church and our families, well his family. And we would’ve thrown the real wedding on the same day as our first one so we wouldn’t get confused about when
our anniversary was."

Her voice had grown tearful and wobbly as she spoke. She took a moment to catch her breath before barreling on with her story.

“And we would’ve had kids. Plural,” she said, as firmly as she could. “Daniel always loved being the middle child and I always felt so miserable being the only child in my family, so we decided on three kids. Minimum. And he wanted them to be close in age so they could all play together and no one would feel left out.”

She sniffled as she imagined the family she and Daniel could’ve had together. The siblings Henry could’ve had. How beautiful it could’ve been.

“We would’ve stayed in New Mexico until Henry turned five and then we’d move back to California so the kids could go to better schools and be closer to our families,” she said. “We would’ve spent weekends at the beach and had winter vacations up north so the kids would get to see the snow.”

Tears were streaming down her cheeks now but she barely registered them as she continued to speak about what could’ve been.

“He would’ve grown old with me,” she said, the tone in her voice leaving no room for doubt. “We would’ve had a family. And we would’ve been… so… happy.” She nods her head in certainty. “And I don’t have to wonder about that. I know.”

And she did. Over the years she’d doubted many things about the different ways her life could’ve turned out but on one thing she would always hold firm. If she and Daniel had made it on that bus, if they’d gotten away together, they would’ve been happy.

She could feel Evelyn’s eyes on her as she finished her story with a deep wistful sigh. For a full minute they were both silent, neither of them knew what words to say next.

Then she felt Evelyn take her hand and give it a comforting squeeze. Tears had welled up in her eyes as she nodded at Regina. “That sounds like it would’ve been a beautiful life.”

Regina sadly nodded her head in agreement. “Yeah… it would’ve been.”

It was the first time she’d ever told anyone about the life she’d imagined for her and Daniel. The one she’d imagined every day after he’d died. Even though she’d moved on and built a new life for herself, she’d always kept it locked up in the back of her head. The memories of what could have been.

Evelyn comfortingly placed a hand upon Regina’s cheek. “I’m so sorry you never got that life, sweetheart.”

“Me too,” whispered Regina, the corners of her lips tugging down into an uncontrollable frown.

She sucked in a deep breath and tried to reel in her emotions. She carefully wiped away her tears and tried to pull a smile onto her face.

“I have something for you,” she told Evelyn before reaching into her pocket.

Evelyn’s eyes widened in surprise when she saw her pull out Daniel’s engagement ring. It was just as she remembered. A simple golden band with a tiny ruby centered on top.
“Oh my god,” she whispered.

“I kept it this whole time,” said Regina, handing it over to her. “Even when it would’ve been… helpful… to get rid of it I never did. It was all I had left of him and I couldn’t let it go. It was too important.”

Evelyn stared at the ring as she ran her thumb over the ruby in its center. A small smile tugged on her lips. She couldn’t deny that having it back in her hands was like having a piece of herself returned. For twenty-six years this ring had sat on her right hand. He husband had given it to her and she would always count it as the most important piece of jewelry she’d ever owned. Until she’d given it away.

“I still remember the day he asked for it,” she reminisced, with a smile. “Came home, said there was this beautiful, incredible girl and he wanted to make happy for the rest of his life. God he was so nervous but so sure at the same time. It was the first time he’d even mentioned you to me but I slid it off my finger and gave it to him without a fight. He loved you and I wanted him to have the best chance of you saying yes. I thought the ring might help.”

“It didn’t,” Regina chuckled, shaking her head. “I loved the ring but the truth is he could’ve proposed with a Ring Pop and my answer would’ve still been same. I would’ve said yes, no matter what.” She paused before adding, “I loved him so much.”

“I know,” said Evelyn with a smile. “You wouldn’t be here if you didn’t.”

She looked down at the ring again, took a satisfied breath and handed it back to Regina. “You should keep this.”

Regina shook her head. “I…”

“It’s an heirloom Regina,” Evelyn gently interrupted. “Heirlooms are meant to be passed down. Not up. Keep it. Save it for Henry. I’m sure he’ll want it some day.”

Regina wanted to say no. She wanted to be able to refuse, to admit that Evelyn deserved to hold onto it to more than she did. But when she opened her mouth to speak all her arguments died on her tongue. She took the ring back into her hands.

“Thank you, Evelyn.”

Evelyn simply nodded her head. “You’ve raised a beautiful son Regina.”

“Thank you,” she repeated with a grin. “Henry’s the best thing I’ve ever done. Being his mother got me through some very rough times.”

“I can see that,” said Evelyn. “And he adores you… and Robin.”

Regina chuckled uncomfortably. “Yes, well, Robin has been in our lives for quite some time now. Ever since Henry was a baby in fact.”

“He seems like a good man,” said Evelyn.

“He is,” said Regina, nodding her head. “He really is.”

Evelyn was silent for a moment. She appeared to be thinking something over in her head. “Is there something between you two?”
Regina couldn’t stop a nervous giggle from rising up in her throat. She tried to compose herself before shaking her head. “No, we’re just old friends.”

“No you’re not,” Evelyn firmly declared, sending her a knowing look. She chuckled to herself. “Old friends don’t look at each other like you look at each other. All that concern and longing. I’m sixty-one years old sweetheart. I know what love looks like. You are in love with him. And he is in love with you.”

For the third time in ten minutes she’d stunned Regina into silence. She couldn’t find anyone to say in the face of Daniel’s mother confronting her with the one fact she’d been struggling so hard to accept. She could only stand there awestruck by her perceptiveness.

Evelyn tilted her head. “Oh honey,” she drawled. “Are you happy?”

Regina finally found her words. “What?” she dumbly asked.

“Are you happy?” Evelyn repeated. “With your life?”

She asked with no judgement in her voice. No criticism beneath the surface. Just genuine concern and interest in what she would say next.

“I… I’m happy enough.” Regina tried to say her answer with as much conviction as possible but even she could hear it fall flat.

Evelyn raised her eyebrows. “Happy enough? Well… I’ve heard that before. Said it even.”

She sighed. “I know we haven’t spent much time together Regina but… I know you. I’ve been you.”

She paused. “I was 21 years old when I got pregnant with Lydia. End of my junior year, so close to finish line when I ‘tripped’ so to speak.” She chuckled wryly to herself but remained serious. “Now I was just an art major. I didn’t have any future career or purpose set in mind but Lydia’s father… well he was going to law school. He had a plan for his life. He wanted to be a politician, run the state, maybe one day the country he always used to say. When he found out about her… he didn’t want a thing to do with us. Wouldn’t even take my calls.”

“That’s awful,” Regina softly commented.

Evelyn just shrugged her shoulders. “It’s just what happened. I thought I’d spend a lot more time crying over him that’s for sure. But I didn’t. I was too focused on what was going to happen next. How I was going to take care of my daughter. That was all that mattered to me. So I called a cousin of mine. Perpetually single but had her own place. Told her everything that happened and asked if I could move in with her. She said yes. Apparently she needed the help with a rent. So I moved to town here. I got a job, had my baby, fell in love with her and for the next two years every decision I made, I made for her.”

“That’s awful,” Regina softly commented.

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“I stayed home. I didn’t date. I didn’t have fun. It was just work and Lydia and I was always trying to convince myself that it was enough. Told myself that it was all part of being a good mom.” She paused for a moment. “I was lying. I wasn’t trying to be a good mom. I was trying to be a martyr. I was trying to protect myself from ever having to be hurt again. Lydia wasn’t just my daughter. She was my crutch, my shield, my built-in excuse not to put myself out there. I spent years denying myself things thinking that the sacrifices I was making were what made me a good person. It took me so long to realize that they didn’t make me good…they just made me lonely. And that is not the same thing.”
Regina absorbed all that Evelyn told her. It was shocking to say the least. She hadn’t expected her to open up like this. And she had to admit the things she was sharing felt vaguely familiar and similar to her own experience. She could relate to her. Especially the decision to put her child above everything else.

“What changed?” she asked.

A smile appeared on Evelyn’s face. “I met someone. A kind, blue-eyed man who would always try his best to make my daughter laugh when I brought her for check-ups.”

“Daniel’s father.”

“Mm-hmm,” she hummed. “Thomas Colter. I met him on Tuesday night after work when I brought Lydia into the hospital for a cough she couldn’t seem shake. He was about to leave. I could tell. He had on his coat and his hat. He was about to walk out the door when he saw me in my waitress uniform, pacing the waiting room with a coughing one-year old on my hip. Told the nurse he’d give her a quick check-up, wasn’t even upset we’d thrown off his schedule. Told me the next time we came in just to ask for him and not wait in line.”

“He sounds sweet,” Regina said with a smile.

“Oh he was!” Evelyn jovially insisted. She started chuckling. “I hardly gave him the time of day.”

She continued to laugh as she reminisced. “God, he spent a whole year trying to get my attention. After every check-up and every run-in at the park or the grocery store he’d ask me to go out to lunch. And every time I’d say I was a mother. Say I have responsibilities that I couldn’t ignore. But he was so handsome and so kind and funny. I liked him but I just never felt like I could let myself go there.”

“Why did you?”

“My cousin,” Evelyn answered. “She sat me down. Told me I wasn’t living my life. I’ll never forget what she said. She said that ‘sometimes the hardest thing to do in life is find something that makes you happy and let yourself have it.’”

She turned to look Regina in the eyes. “When’s the last time you let yourself have something just because you wanted it?”

Her question gave Regina pause. It seemed a little impossible to answer. She had many good things in her life but nothing that arose simply from desire and nothing else.

She was still racking her brain trying to come up with an answer when she felt Evelyn gently pat her on the hand.

“Sweetheart, if you have to think about it…then it’s been too long,” she lovingly pointed out. “I’m sure you have created a multitude of reasons not to be with Robin. Reasons I couldn’t possibly know or comprehend but maybe it’s time to put them aside and just do what makes you happy. I know that’s what my son would’ve wanted for you.”

And she meant that. Regina could see it in her eyes and she was baffled. How could this woman, who so clearly missed her son, be pushing the mother of his child into the arms of another man so freely?

The answer to her question came within seconds.
It was because she cared.

Genuinely and selflessly cared.

All through the day Regina had been wondering how she could see so much of Daniel in this woman who looked so little like him. Standing in that kitchen listening to her it finally became clear. It wasn’t the lopsided smile or strong chin that made them so similar.

It was their shared beauty.

Evelyn Colter was a beautiful woman… but not just in appearance.

Evelyn didn’t just have beauty you could see. She had beauty you could feel. It came from the inside out, not the other way around. Her beauty came from the warmth, patience and understanding she radiated. There was candor in her voice when she spoke and a genuine kindness in her eyes.

Regina realized that the beauty Evelyn carried was the same beauty carried by her son. The very beauty that had made her fall in love with him on the first place.

A beauty created by sincerity.

Realizing it now made her think back to that moment so many days ago when she’d sat in front of Daniel’s grave asking him for a sign on whether or not she should be with Robin.

This was it.

He had sent it in the form of his own mother telling her what choice she should make. The choice to be happy.

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Compared to the rest of the day dinner goes by quickly.

They sit at the table in the backyard, eating steaks and grilled potatoes. They laugh and reminisce. Regina trades stories about Daniel with them, telling them of the time they shared together. Instances like how he’d hidden roses where she would find them, and planted a garden beneath her window. How he’d been the one to teach her how to drive. His proposal. All the little moments that they’d shared together. In turn they told her about Daniel’s home life. Some of the things he’d never gotten to mention to her. Saturdays spent in the park playing soccer with his father and brother. The time he’d got caught cutting class to go see the Jurassic Park sequel with his friends. And one very embarrassing tale about his fifth grade talent show. Apparently magic hadn’t been a very wise choice for him.

It was everything Regina wanted it to be. The best case scenario. They were welcoming. Henry was happy. And Daniel was honored.

And yet… the whole time all she could think of was the man sitting beside her. The one she loved. The one she wanted.

All she could think of was how Evelyn had urged her to let herself be happy. All she had to do was open her mouth and say the words.

After they split up the cake things came to an end. The sun had gone down, it was getting late.
They all said goodbye on the front porch. Henry hugged Evelyn and said "goodbye Grandma" which brought a tear to her eye. He gave William a high-five and Lydia a simple wave, which she appeared fine with, before climbing into the backseat of Robin’s Jeep, his father’s old comic in hand, while his mother said her goodbyes. She hugged William and Lydia, the latter seeming far more uncomfortable with it than the former, before saying goodbye to Evelyn. She gave the older woman a long embrace with promises of visits and calls to arrange more meetups. She made sure there was no uncertainty in the fact that they would remain in each other’s lives.

Robin’s goodbyes were of course more reserved. He waved goodbye to William and Lydia but was sure to give Evelyn a warm handshake and thank her for inviting him into her home.

“Of course,” she said. “You’re welcome any time.” She had a moment of pause before adding, “I think my son would’ve really liked you.”

It was high compliment coming from her. One he wasn’t entirely sure how to respond to. So he just nodded his head and said the only thing he could say. Thank you.

The two trio’s waved to each other as Robin pulled away from the curb and drove away to start the long journey home. The ride back was just as silent as drive there but certainly less tense.

Henry’s nose was buried in the old comic’s his grandmother had given him, using the light of his mother’s cell phone to read the 90’s tales of Batman and Wonder Woman. Apparently his father had been a DC fan.

Robin was still feeling a bit anxious but not about what had happened before. Only about what he knew was going to come next.

And Regina… well, she was feeling a new feeling. A sense of satisfaction and peace she’d never experienced before. When they were halfway home she finally recognized it for what it was. Closure. She finally had closure.

She’d finally been able to close the chapter on her and Daniel. She’d seen the end of their story, the real one. And while it hadn’t been what she wanted or hoped it had been beautiful in its own way. And it had shown her the possibility of a new story. One she’d stepped into before the first had even ended.

They pulled up to her house an hour later. Quietly they walked inside, the three of them, all a bit tired from the day’s events. Regina takes Henry into his room while Robin waits for her in the living room. He’s chattering like a little chipmunk, her son. Excitedly spouting off all that he’d learned about his father that day. And she listens with a smile on her face, watching as he changes into his pajamas all the while still talking.

Once he finished she tucks him into bed and holds his hand as he continues to talk

“I’m glad I got to meet Dad’s family,” he whispered. “They’re pretty cool.”

Regina nods her head and smiles. “They are and I’m happy you know that now.”

For the first time since they’d gotten home he went silent. She could tell that he was thinking something over.

“Mom?”

“Hmm?”
“Was he as great as they all said he was?”

A sad smile appeared on her face as she nodded. “Even better, sweetheart. Even better.”

Henry smiled at her answer. “I wish I could’ve met him.”

“I know baby,” she whispered. “Me too.”

She plants a kiss on his forehead then, makes him promise to go to bed after just one hour of reading. A content smile is on her face as she closes the door to his bedroom.

*Best case scenario*, she silently thinks.

She finds Robin waiting for her on the couch in the living room. Kicking off her wedges, she sinks into the seat beside him and lets out an exhausted breath.

“Well… that was easier than expected,” she comments.

“Yeah,” he softly agreed. “It was.”

They locked eyes and burst out into a quiet relieved laughter together.

“They were so nice,” laughed Regina.

“Absolutely,” chuckled Robin. “God I feel so ridiculous. I thought they were going to be so cold!”

“Me too!” she said, nodding her head as their laughter died down. “But they weren’t. They were sweet and kind.” She paused. “I’m so glad I met them.”

“Yeah,” Robin quietly agreed. “They seemed to really love you.”

“You think so?” she asked, skeptically pinching her eyebrows together. She let out another relieved breath when she saw him nod his head. “Good. Because I do not want this to be a one-time thing. I want them to stay in Henry’s life.”

“They will,” he assured her.

He spoke with such certainty and like always it comforted her. Robin always seemed so sure that good things would come her way. Oddly, she didn’t think he realized that he was one of the best things in her life. It suddenly struck her that eight hours ago she’d sat on this very couch, shocked by his assertion that he’d wanted to come with her today. How ridiculous that seems now. Of course, he’d wanted to come with them. Of course, he’d wanted to be with her on what could’ve been an extremely destructive day in her life. Of course, he’d stood by her.

He always had.

She sat up and faced him on the couch. “Robin… thank you.”

He gave her a stern look. “Regina…”

“No,” she cuts him off. “I know you think I don’t need to say it but I do. Because I mean it. And I don’t think I’ve ever really said it before. Robin thank you. Not just for today but for all of it.

“You are welcome,” he offered, feeling a bit awkward.

“Thank you for being in my life. Thanks for standing by me through everything that’s happened. You have seen me through so much bad stuff and you’re still always trying to convince me that something good is just around the corner. I don’t know what I’d do if I didn’t have that, if I didn’t
have you. You are so important to me. I just… I’m so glad that I have you. You are…utterly
irreplaceable and indispensable. So thank you… for being my person. I mean it.”

It came pouring out of her. She couldn’t have stopped it if she tried. It’d been an emotional day but
she couldn’t end it without telling him just how much she needed him in her life.

She didn’t know what she expected him to say. And for a moment he didn’t say anything. He
stayed silent, as if he was considering something that had weighed on his mind for far too long.

Finally he spoke.

“Regina… could you promise me something?”

“Of course, anything,” she immediately replied.

“Promise me that no matter what comes next we’ll always be in our son’s lives. You in Roland’s
and me and Henry’s?”

Her head reared slightly back in surprise. “Robin… that would never change. You know that.”

He swallowed hard before reaching out to grab her hand. “Regina… I am about to say some very…
difficult things. So right now I can’t have you just make an assumption. Before I say what I’m
going to say I need an honest to god promise from you about this.”

Her heart is pounding by now. She’s looking into his eyes and she sees it, she sees his fear. He is
nervous and afraid and he needs her to promise. So she does.

She places her hand on top of his own and promises, “Robin… no matter what comes out of your
mouth next you will always be a part of Henry’s life and I will always be a part of Roland’s. I
promise.”

A tiny flicker of relief flashes behind his eyes but she can tell he’s still apprehensive.

“Robin… what is it?”

He starts off quiet. “Regina I love our friendship. Having you as my friend has been… the most
amazing gift I never asked for. And that’s always been enough for me… but lately…”

He pauses and Regina feels like every nerve in her body has been set on fire. Everything in the
world is still but the two of them. She feels like the world is about to tip on it’s axis and she’s
hoping against hell that it’s a good thing.

“But lately what?” she prods, her voice going soft and shaky.

“Lately… I’ve been wanting more,” he admits. “With you.”

She can’t breathe. She can’t think. All she can do is stare and wonder. Truly wonder how they’d
gotten here. When it started. Where it’d go. And how, in the world, was it possible that he
somehow felt the same way about her as she did about him.

“I kept it in,” he confesses. “Because I worried that something might… break… between us if I
said anything but after today… I just can’t do it anymore. I can’t wonder. I need to know. So I’m
here, asking you… do you feel anything for me at all?”

She sees it flash behind her eyes. Their entire relationship from start to present. She remembers
every talk, every touch, every quick glance from across the room. She feels it, the love and the
longing and the hoping she’d felt every day for the past three months and maybe longer. It bubbles up in her chest and overflows into one word.

“Yes.”
“Yes.”

The word slipped from her mouth and her heart pounded in her chest. His blue eyes remained locked on hers, lips parted in barely concealed shock and relief at her admission. It was almost as if he didn’t believe it.

Her voice barely reached above a whisper as she nodded her head and repeated, “Yes, I have feelings for you, Robin.”

Her breath was shaky as she admitted it once more. Her hands trembled as she stared into his eyes, caught in his gaze.

She’d said it.

She’d admitted her feelings for Robin.

And now… the whole world went still.

Everything around her went hazy. The rest of the room faded and all that was left was her and Robin trapped in the bubble of their confessions. Nothing extended beyond them. Nothing else mattered. Only their feelings and the fact that they’d finally said them aloud.

The silence was heavy and deafening. Neither of them knew what to say. It was like they were both afraid that what little stride they’d just made could be shattered by a single sound. So instead they just sat there. Waiting, staring, hoping. Both of them praying at the other would make the first move.

Regina’s heart leapt into her throat when she saw Robin open his mouth and…

Bzzzz! Bzzzz!!!

They both startled at the sound. The world suddenly came crashing back and they were reminded that they were not, in fact, the only two people in the world. Robin’s hand frantically reached toward his pockets for the source of the offending sound: his phone. His eyes flickered to Regina’s face, helpless and apologetic as he wrangled it from his pants fully intending to mute it and continue their conversation. She watched him, pulse still rising, as he finally pulled it out from his pockets and glanced at the screen. His face scrunches up, conflicted.

His distressed eyes darted between the phone and her face. “It’s Tink,” he said weakly. “She’s watching Roland…”

Regina’s eyes went round. “Oh…”

“But I could –”

“No no!” she stammered, immediately shaking her head. “You should answer it, obviously.”

He wanted to disagree, she could tell, but the phone buzzed against his palm once again and in the end his parental instincts won out over his need to see their talk through.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbled.
She just silently nodded her head and waved him off as he lifted the phone to his ear. Their children had to come first. She understood that… even if the timing could not have been worse. As Robin wandered over to the side of the room whispering into his phone, she uncomfortably shifted in her seat, taking a deep breath and trying to process what’d just happened.

Robin had feelings for her.

Just thinking it sounded strange in the best way. Like waking up on Christmas and finding the one gift you thought you’d never get waiting for you under the tree. Sure you’d hoped but you never actually expected you’d get it. And when you do… it’s just a little too hard to believe.

“Mom?”

She nearly jumped out of her skin at the sound of Henry’s voice. She turned to see him standing right next to her, eyes staring at her quizzically as she sat on the couch so lost in thought that she didn’t even hear him come up to her.

She tried to compose herself as she stared at him with wide eyes, still not fully over the shock of Robin’s confession. “Sweetie, what are you doing up? Why are you out of bed?”

“I’m thirsty,” he said, shrugging his shoulders. “Can I have some water?”

“Sure,” she stuttered, nodding her head as she stood up. “Just go back to bed. I’ll bring it to you.”

“You said I’m not allowed to have drinks in my room,” said Henry, dubiously.

“Well tonight you are,” she said, a little too quickly. “Just go back to bed please.”

“Okay,” Henry quietly drawled in a suspicious tone. He gave her one last quizzical look before heading back toward his room. As soon as he was out of sight she let out a deep breath. It was bad enough Robin had to take a phone call, she couldn’t have Henry hanging around too. Not for this moment.

Her eyes flickered to the corner where Robin was still speaking on the phone, back turned to her. She swallowed hard before tearing her gaze from him and heading for the kitchen.

Her hands felt unsteady as she poured Henry his glass of water.

Robin had feelings for her. Real actual feelings. Feelings that mirrored her own. Though it only happened a minute ago she’s already replayed the moment a thousand times in her head, gone over each and every word and she still can’t believe it. A kaleidoscope of butterflies was fluttering in her stomach. Her skin felt like it was vibrating. She’d heard the words she’d always longed to hear and they’d made her more nervous than she’d felt in her entire life.

“Regina?”

She nearly dropped the glass in her hand when she heard Robin’s voice come from behind her. He was standing behind her a cautious look on his face when he noticed her reaction.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you,” he apologizes.

“No!” she said, immediately shaking her head. “I’m fine. You just caught me off guard.” She lets out a soft, breathless chuckle hoping that it reassures him. “Is Roland alright?”

“He’s fine,” Robin assured her. “He just had a bit of a meltdown when he couldn’t find his monkey
for bed. Had to help him remember where he left it last.”

“Oh… good,” she replied, nodding her head.

The silence returns then. Robin stares at her as she stares back, neither of them speaking a word. It’s like they’re back on the couch again. Still staring into each other’s eyes, feelings finally spoken aloud, a mixture of relief and shock clear on both their faces. Again it’s as if the whole world has stopped spinning and neither of them know how to make it move again. Or if they want it to.

So many words are caught in her throat and she has no idea which ones to let out first. Luckily for her, the words weren’t that elusive for Robin.

“Regina… I didn’t mean to catch you off guard,” he says quietly, taking a step toward her. He’s not talking about when he snuck up on her in the kitchen and they both know it.

“I know it’s already been an emotional day for you,” he continues. “But I just…”

“You had to say it,” she softly finishes for him. “I know. And I’m glad that you did.”

Another hint of relief twinkles in his blue eyes at her understanding. It makes her happy to see it and even more so when he joins her by the counter. Her heart pounds again when he stops only a few inches away from her, close enough that she can smell that woodsy cologne that he (and she) seems to love so much.

“Regina… I don’t really know what comes next here but I would like the chance to see where this could lead… if you’re interested?”

There are moments in life where you know there is a chance that nothing could ever be the same again. Standing in that kitchen with Robin Regina knew that she was standing right in the middle of one of those moments. She also knew that left her with one of two choices. Barrel forward and take her chances with something new or turn back and embrace her comfort zone. And after all it’d taken for her to get to this moment she knew there was only one real option.

A small smile pulls on her lips. She takes a deep breath before speaking.

“Robin… would you like to have dinner with me Saturday night?”

A happy grin appears on his face as he nods at her. “I would love that.”

Forwards it is.

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The next morning Regina woke up with a smile on her face. One that she couldn’t wipe off no matter how hard she tried. Well if she tried. Her stomach hadn’t stopped fluttering since the night before and every part of her was tingling with a giddy excitement she hadn’t felt in years.

She and Robin were going on a date.

And she was happy. So happy it felt like her heart could burst at any minute. She couldn’t keep it in if she tried. It’d been so long since she’d looked forward to something this much. It was all she could think about. So much so that she almost forgot that she was supposed to meet up with her friends for brunch that day. They’d made her promise to show up and let them know about how things went with Daniel’s family.
Luckily, she’d remembered in time not to be late. It was close to noon when she pulled up to a popular breakfast spot not far from her house where they’d arranged to meet. Unclipping her seat belt a dangerous question popped into her head.

Will she tell her friends about the night before?

She knew that they’d want to know but she wasn’t sure if she really wanted to tell them. On one hand she was practically bursting from keeping it to herself. A part of her couldn’t want to share her joy with everyone, let them know how happy she was. However, she and Robin hadn’t exactly talked about letting their friends know about the date. They hadn’t really talked about much anything yet, as a matter of fact. If the girls knew what happened the night before they would certainly bombard her with questions. Questions she might not have the answers for.

Thinking it over she quickly decided to keep things to herself. This was between her and Robin, there was no need for anyone else’s opinion yet. It was probably better to just go on the date, see how things felt and then maybe tell a few friends.

She took a moment to relax her demeanor before heading in to the restaurant. When she got inside she found Emma, Snow and Mulan all waiting for her at a corner table with one seat next to the window still free for her. They all looked up at her anxiously as she approached, small amounts of relief playing out on their faces when they saw that she didn’t seem to be in any state of apparent distress. She casually greeted them all before taking her seat next to the window.

Before the menus even came Snow had already leaned forward and asked, “So how did it go?”

Regina instantly knew she meant meeting the Colters. She took a breath before nodding her head and answering, “It was good. Incredible actually.”

Seeing Daniel’s pictures, being stunned by William’s face, her talk with Evelyn – well, most of her talk with Evelyn – and Henry’s new curiosity with his father. She laid out every detail, including her relief that everything had gone well. By the time they’d gotten their meals she’d told them nearly everything.

“So… how do you feel?” asked Emma, cautiously. “I mean now that you’ve met them.”

“Good,” breathed Regina, nodding her head. “I feel… better, I suppose. I’ve always felt really alone when it came to my feelings about Daniel but I don’t feel that way anymore. I feel better knowing that he’s missed by more than just me. Keeps him alive a little more.”

“That’s good,” said Mulan, understandingly. “But it had to be nerve-wrecking, right? Meeting your fiancé’s family after his death. Especially since it was just you and Henry. It must’ve felt like a mine field.”

Regina hesitated before speaking again. She hadn’t exactly let them in on the fact that Robin had gone with them. “Well it wasn’t without it’s awkwardness,” she admitted. “But I guess… having Robin there helped.”

All three pairs of their eyes widened simultaneously at her words. Regina subtly gulped and steeled herself for the onslaught of questions that would be coming her way.

Of course, Snow was first. “Wait… Robin went with you?”

Regina primly hummed in the affirmative as she nodded her head. “Henry was feeling a bit nervous about the whole thing and he asked for Robin to come. Neither of us could turn him down.”
The table went silent and Regina could see the wheels turning in all three of their heads, the assumptions forming, the accusations loading. She saw the curiosity rising in their eyes and knew that her admission had just transformed this brunch into an interrogation.

“How’d the family feel about you bringing him?” Mulan asked bluntly, like the steamroller she was. “It must’ve been hard for them.” Regina narrowed her eyes at her and Mulan quickly added, “You know, because of how close he and Henry are?”

“Right,” Regina mumbled under her breath. She quickly recovered. “I’m sure it was hard for them knowing that Robin got to see moments that Daniel never could but they were still welcoming. I explained that he was Henry’s godfather and they understood why he was there with us.”

“I forgot you’d ask him about that,” Snow drawled, as if she’d just remembered. “How’s that going by the way?”

“Good,” answered Regina. “Now that he’s agreed Archie should have the paperwork drawn up any day now.”

Emma rolled her eyes. “I swear the two of you get closer to married every single day.”

“Emma,” Snow gritted out warningly. She leaned closer so she could stage whisper, “We said we weren’t going to bring that up today.”

Regina rolled her eyes at their allusion to her and Robin’s relationship.

“I didn’t bring it up,” argued Emma. “She did when she mentioned that he came along for the ride yesterday.”

Mulan shook her head in their direction before turning her attention back to Regina. “Anyway, back to meeting Daniel’s family. What did Robin think of them?”

A small smile appeared on Regina’s face. “He liked them. Said that he was glad that they were nice to me.”

“Did he pull his guard dog act?” Mulan asked.

Regina scrunched her eyebrows together. “Guard dog act?”

“You know that thing he does where he follows you around and sort of stares down anyone that comes near?” explained Mulan. “He does it all the time when you’re in situations like this.”

“Like at your father’s funeral,” Snow chimed in.

“Or that day when you were telling all of us who you really were,” added Mulan. She smirked before taking another sip of orange juice from her glass. “You gotta admit Robin has quite the protective streak when it comes to you… and Henry.”

“I know,” said Regina, a blush rising in her cheeks. “But it wasn’t like that this time. This time he was… calm. I mean I could tell that he was worried, but he didn’t let it show. He kept his cool and helped me find mine. Having him there… it meant everything.”

Her voice went soft and another smile returned to her face as she described the effect Robin’s presence had on her the day before. As she spoke she felt that warm feeling spread through her chest and the giddiness return to her blood.
“You’re glowing.”

Torn from her reverie, her eyes snapped toward Emma, who was studying her with a suspicious look on her face.

“Hmm?”

“I said you’re glowing,” Emma slowly repeated, still studying her face with a tilted head. “Why are you glowing?”

Tension rose up around the table as Regina hesitated to answer. “I’m just glad everything went well,” she lied.

Emma immediately narrowed her eyes and smirked. “You’re lying,” she boldly claimed.

Regina gaped at her as Snow turned to Emma with wide eyes. “Emma what is the matter with you?” she hissed.

“Snow, look at her!” she said gesturing to Regina’s face.

Regina felt her face go red as all eyes turned to her.

“She’s all smiley and relaxed. She practically skipped in here she’s so happy,” Emma pointed out, a grin growing on her face.

Mulan tilted her head as she looked over Regina’s face. “Huh,” she thoughtfully drawled.

“Oh my god,” Snow said softly. “You’re right!” A bright smile burst out on her face as she looked Regina over for a second time. “You’re happy!”

Regina scoffed and rolled her eyes as she tried to downplay their accusations. “You say that like you’ve never seen me happy before.”

“Not like this,” said Mulan, shaking her head. “Normally you have a sort of… muted version of content that you live in but this” – she gestured toward her face again – “this is radiant joy you’re displaying and that’s new.”

“What happened?” asked Emma, happily interrogating her.

Regina helplessly shrugged, while she failed to wipe the smile off her face.

“Was it something with Robin?” interrogated Snow, leaning forward in her seat. She gasped at Regina’s continued silence. “Oh my god! It was! What happened? Tell us!”

“I…” Regina groaned, stalling, trying to think up some way to change the subject but looking into their inquiring eyes she felt her resolve crumble. Closing her eyes she let out a soft sigh. “Last night… Robin told me he had feelings for me.”

A trio of gasps came from around the table. They all spoke at once.

“Oh my god,” Snow whispered excitedly, her giddiness bubbling to the surface.

“ Took him long enough,” mumbled Emma.

“Damn it,” cursed Mulan. When all eyes turned to her she waved them off. “It’s nothing. I owe Hook twenty bucks now.”
“Lovely,” grumbled Regina, glaring at her.

“Ignore that,” ordered Snow. “Just tell us what happened. Or how it happened. Anything! Tells us anything.”

“Okay,” Regina nervously chuckled. “Well I think it actually started when we were still with the Colters…”

She told them about her real conversation with Evelyn, their talk about her future happiness. Then about her moment with Robin on the couch, everything that they’d said, how he’d revealed his feelings to her. She walked them step by step through every moment and they listened with their full attention. Even when it came to the awkward parts.

“So the whole romantic confession got hijacked by your kids? That sucks!” complained Snow.

“No I’m kinda glad it happened,” Regina thoughtfully replied. “It gave me a moment to catch my breath, let it sink in. I don’t think either of us really knew what to say yet.”

“Well what happened after that?” questioned Emma, clearly on the edge of her seat. “Did you talk?”

“Did you kiss?” interrogated Snow, curiosity still blazing in her green eyes.

Regina shook her head. “We didn’t kiss.”

Snow groaned and slumped back into her chair, clearly disappointed.

“But…” drawled Regina, regaining Snow’s interest. “Tomorrow night we are going on a date.”

“A date?” said Snow sitting up in her seat once again. “So does this mean that you’re together? Like officially?”

Regina paused before answering her. Ever since that fateful moment on the couch she’d been pondering that same question herself. They’d said what they felt but now what? Admitting their feelings didn’t mean they were automatically in a relationship. Or did it? She was unsure how they would make the jump from words into actions and cross the line they’d both been so careful not to touch.

She didn’t know the answer, so instead she just shook her head. “No,” she said, uncertainly. “We’re not exactly together yet. I think everything’s still a little too new for things to be that certain.”

“New?” scoffed Emma, with a smirk. “Haven’t you been pining over each other for like a year?”

“No!” replied Regina, offended by her comment. It was a lie and she knew it but that didn’t stop her from digging her heels in. “It hasn’t been that long.”

“I’m sorry, I just don’t get it,” said Snow, shaking her head. “You guys both know how you feel about each other. Why can’t you just commit already, and be done with it?”

“Because it’s not that simple,” argued Regina. “This is a really big deal for us. We’ve been friends for so long and these feelings that we have, well, they could complicate everything.” She sighed. “I don’t know, I guess I just want us to have a little more time to explore how we feel. You know, test the waters a little.”
“Which is why you agreed to the date,” realized Mulan, nodding her head understandingly. “I get that.”

Emma shrugged her shoulders with a frown. “Seems to me like you’re just adding another obstacle where there isn’t one.”

“Hey back off,” said Mulan. “It’s their lives. They can take it as slowly as they like.”

“Thank you Mulan,” said Regina, smugly smiling in Emma’s direction.

“Even if this will-they-won’t-they crap does seem to be dragging,” Mulan hastily added under her breath with a grin.

Regina turned to glare at her when Snow grabbed her hand, excitedly.

“Alright, that’s enough of if’s and maybe’s,” she said. “Tell us how he asked you on the date!”

The smile returned to Regina’s face in full force as she tilted her head, a blush rising in her cheeks. “Well actually…”

“‘You let her ask you out?!’”

Robin rolled his eyes at Hook’s dramatic exclamation as he pulled another chair down from atop its table. They were getting the Drunken Monk ready to open and unlike Regina he’d held no qualms about letting Hook know what had happened the night before. At first Hook had been ecstatic – he’d mumbled something about Mulan owing him 20 bucks – but he’d been grilling Robin about the moment ever since. Which is why Robin was currently the only one prepping the dining area while Hook was content to lean against the counter and fire off questions.

“It’s not that big of a deal,” said Robin. “Besides, I kind of like that she asked me. At least this way I know I’m not forcing her hand.”

Hook thoughtfully tilted his head. “That’s a good point,” he conceded. “Might not be traditional but it’s probably for the best.”

Robin nodded his head in agreement. He was keeping a calm exterior but on the inside he was jumping for joy. In the back of his mind all he could see was the look in her eyes when she’d asked him on that date. The hopeful light behind them when she spoke, timidly asking him if he’d come out with her. Of course he’d said yes. There was nothing he’d wanted more than the chance to take her out. And now he finally had it.

And he didn’t want to mess it up.

“Are at you least still planning the date?” asked Hook.

“Oh of course I am,” said Robin, with a twinge of uncertainty in his chest.

Honestly, he and Regina hadn’t spoken much about the actual date itself. The moment had been so fragile he hadn’t wanted to ruin it by getting into logistics. He assumed he’d be picking her up but that’s about as far as he’d gotten.

“So where are you planning on taking her?”

Robin shrugged his shoulders. “I think I want to keep it simple. Maybe take her down to Rosa’s?”
Hook scrunched up his face in distaste. “That little hole in the wall on 16th street?”

Robin shrugged his shoulders. He’d been to Rosa’s Tavern a few times over the years. Sure it was small, aging and usually understaffed but the food was always good and so was the atmosphere.

“You can’t take her there,” said Hook. “It’s not good enough.” He stepped away from the counter and pressed his palms together in a serious gesture. “Robin, this is Regina Mills we’re talking about here.”

“I know that,” said Robin but Hook just shook his head.

“No I mean Regina Mills, not Regina Gardiner.” He emphasized her last name.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“It means that she’s the daughter of a millionaire,” Hook urgently stressed. “She’s flown in private jets for God’s sake! You can’t take her to a restaurant with three tables and wobbly chairs. You need to take her somewhere classy and unforgettable.”

Despite the doubt seeping into his head, Robin scoffed at him. “That’s ridiculous. You know she’s never cared about those things.”

“Maybe not,” conceded Hook, “but that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t be trying to impress her. Hell, even that Jeff guy took her to Poseidon’s Cliff.”

“A date which ended in disappointment might I remind you,” Robin immediately shot back. He still didn’t like the fact that she’d gone out with him.

“All the more reason to out-do him,” pointed out Hook. He grabbed a napkin and pen from the counter and started to write something down. “Take her here.”

He handed Robin the name of one of the fanciest French restaurants in town, along with a number Robin didn’t recognize.

“Call this number, mention my name to the hostess and she’ll be sure to find you a table,” he instructed. “It’s a nice place. Fancy menu, curt waiters. It’s sure to make an impression.”

Robin frowned thoughtfully. “We’ve been friends for nearly a decade now. I think we’re long past the point of first impressions.”

“Which is why you need to make a good one with this date,” urged Hook. “You’ve been her friend for a long time and if this date is about anything, it’s about proving that you can be more than that. You need to show her what you can offer in terms of romance and intimacy. A side of you that’s she’s never seen before.”

Robin always loathed listening to Hook’s advice. It hardly ever led to anything good but he had to admit that what he was saying made a lot of since. If this date went badly he could lose any chance of a future with Regina. He slipped the number in his back pocket, promising Hook that he’d call later. Perhaps he could stand to impress her a little more.

He certainly couldn’t afford for things to go wrong.

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Thanks to her friends’ curiosity lunch dragged on longer than Regina had expected. It was nearly
two-thirty by the time they finally abandoned their table and headed for their cars. Both Emma and Mulan wished her luck before leaving but Snow remained. She’d tossed her car keys to Emma and said that she’d be home a little later. Once it was just the two of them she’d turned to Regina with a determined look in her eye.

“We’re going shopping,” she declared.

After an adamantly refusal from Regina and relentless insistence from Snow they’d ended up hopping in her car and heading toward the nearest shopping mall. As soon as they’d arrived Snow had started pulling her into shop after shop looking at dress after dress, trying to find one that lived up to her ridiculous standards.

Regina shook her head as she watched Snow viciously swipe through another rack of dresses. It was their fifth store of the hour and Snow still hadn’t found anything that she deemed good enough.

“Snow this is ridiculous. I don’t need a new dress for my date with Robin,” she insisted.

“Yes, you do!” Snow shot back, still not taking her eyes off the dress rack. “And I know how much your inheritance was so don’t even pretend like you can’t afford it.”

Regina rolled her eyes. “I have plenty of dresses at home.”

“Yes but none of them are special!” Snow stressed, finally turning to look at her. “You need something special for your date. Something that’ll help capture the memory. So one day when you’re going through your closet you can see the dress and remember ‘that’s the dress I wore on my first date with Robin.’ And you’ll look at it and you’ll feel all warm and gooey inside because you remember what a good time you had.”

Her green eyes went dreamy as she described the feelings Regina would associate with her new dress. It brought a smirk to Regina’s face but also a spark of nostalgia. Not for the feelings that Snow was describing but for the look on her face when she spoke. There was a sparkle in her eyes and a hopefulness to her tone that Regina hadn’t heard since they first met. Listening to her speak she recognized a hint of that young girl who used to spend nights in her penthouse. The one who truly believed in love and happy endings.

“Snow…” she drawled. “You seem awfully invested in this date, given that you’re not actually going on it.”

Snow sheepishly pressed her lips together, embarrassed. “I know,” Snow mumbled, shrugging her shoulders. “But I sort of feel like I should be. Regina, I’ve seen what life’s thrown at you. Hiding from your mother, Daniel and your father dying, having to raise Henry all by yourself.” Her gaze dropped to the floor. “Not to mention everything that happened with… my father.”

A little tension seeped into the air between them and Regina gritted her teeth. She could see Snow do the same. They never talked about Leopold. It wasn’t worth the heartache.

Snow sucked in a deep breath before continuing. “I don’t know, I guess I’m just kind of realizing that I’ve never really gotten to see you happy. Not like this anyway. I mean, look at you.” She gestured toward her face, causing another blush to rise to Regina’s cheeks. “You look so smitten and radiant. I like it and I want to help you stay that way. I can’t think of anyone who deserves it more.”

Regina could almost feel herself getting choked up at Snow’s words. Her tone was so soft and
sincere. It touched Regina’s heart. For a moment she could see her, that young girl with the torn dress and the hopeful green eyes. It took everything in her not to breakdown in relief. She used to think that she’d never see her again.

“Thanks Snow,” she softly replied. Sighing, she turned her gaze to the clothing rack and shrugged her shoulders. “And I suppose, since I’m already here, it couldn’t hurt to get something new.”

“Exactly,” said Snow with a smile. “Now let’s see what they’ve got.”

Together they looked through the racks, swiping and judging whatever came along. Finally Regina lifted out a black structured pencil dress with quarter-length sleeves and slightly capped shoulders. It was classy and understated. The type of dress she could see herself in.

“How about this?” she said holding it up. “It’s kind of alluring, right?”

And it was but Snow still twisted her lips in distaste. “I guess it’s nice,” she mumbled. “If Robin’s taking you to dinner and a funeral.”

“Hey!” said Regina, offended. “I like it!”

“Of course you like it,” sassed Snow. “You have three versions of it in your closet at home.”

She turned her attention back to the dresses on the rack. “We’re looking for something special, remember? Something unforgettable.”

She swiped past a few more dresses before letting out a soft gasp. “Something like this!”

She pulled out a fitted navy blue tank dress with a dangerous slit going up the thigh emphasized with a silver zipper running up the side to around the waist. Grinning as she held it up to Regina she fervently declared, “Now this is a dress for a night to remember!”

Regina’s eyes widened when she saw it and she couldn’t help but let out a disbelieving scoff. There was not one occasion under which she could see herself wearing that dress. “You can’t be serious!”

“Dead serious,” replied Snow. “C’mon just imagine Robin seeing you in this.”

Regina chuckled and shook her head. “I don’t think he’s ready for that much skin.”

“Oh I think he’s been ready,” Snow shot back with a devious smirk.

Regina rolled her eyes. “I’m going to try this on,” she said, gesturing toward the dress she picked. She turned to leave but felt Snow pull on her shoulder.

“Take this one too,” she ordered, handing her the blue dress.

“Snow…”

“You don’t even have to show me,” she promised. “Just try it on and see how you feel.”

Regina groaned under her breath but reluctantly took the dress from her. “Fine.”

With both dresses in hand she headed toward the fitting room where a saleswoman led her to a small stall closed off with a thick red curtain. Once inside she closed her eyes and let out a deep sigh. It was the first chance she’d had to catch her breath since brunch.

Hanging the dresses on the fitting room bar she stared at them both, weighing her options. While
she did love the black dress Snow had been right. It was rather plain and similar to a lot of other things that she owned. Still she found it to be an attractive option. It had a teasingly low neckline and was made of clingy fabric that was sure to show off her form. Plus, she’d always been told that black was her color.

Her eyes flickered over to the blue dress. It was… enticing. Memorable in ways that the black dress couldn’t dream of, it was sure to make an impression. She just wasn’t sure it was the right one. The blue dress didn’t hold anything back and while in any other case that would be helpful she and Robin had known each other for years and she’d never worn anything close to it around him. They’d just admitted their feelings for each other and she didn’t want to risk rocking the boat.

The more she thought about it the more certain she felt that a reserved look was the better choice.

As she lifted her hand to reach for the black dress she felt her phone buzz in her pocket. Taking it out she felt her heart speed up when she saw it was Robin calling. Immediately she went breathless and butterflies filled her stomach. She and Robin hadn’t spoken since the night before. With all that happened since then she hadn’t given much thought to who would call who first but she was glad that he’d been first. Lately, it’d been difficult for her to form sentences around him.

The phone buzzed against her palm once more. She licked her lips and cleared her throat a little before swiping the answer button, bringing the phone up to her ear and letting out a soft, “Hi.”

“Hi.”

His voice flowed the phone soft as her own. Even with the hint of nervousness coloring his husky drawl she could still hear the smile on his face. She felt one of her own growing at the sound of his voice.

After a short pause he asked, “How are you doing?”

She hesitated to answer him. It was a simple question but she felt like there was so much to say. She was still floating on air after the night before. Perhaps a little more apprehensive after the reality of everything had set in but still optimistic about what was to come. In truth she was feeling a whirlwind of emotions, all of them good which was unprecedented for her. As much as she’d wanted to say all those things she figured a simple answer was more fitting.

“I’m good,” she answered, still grinning to herself. “I’m just out with Snow.”

“Oh… should I call back later?”

“No, it’s fine,” she immediately assured him. She paused before softly adding, “I’m glad you called. I like hearing from you.”

A rush of heat flowed through her cheeks at her unprompted honesty. For a moment she feared that it’d been too much until she heard him reciprocate with a happy “likewise.”

She heard him blow out a soft breath before speaking again. “I was actually calling to talk about our date a little more.”

“Oh really?” she replied, a playful lilt flowing into her tone.

“Yes,” said Robin in a cheerful drawl. “I just wanted to let you know that I’ve made reservations for us at seven tomorrow. Does that work for you?”

“Perfectly,” she said without hesitation. Her stomach fluttered at the thought Robin planning a date
for the two of them. “Where are we going?”

For a moment, he went silent again before playfully replying, “That is for me to know and you to find out.”

Regina raised her eyebrows in surprise. “Are you trying to catch me off guard?” she chuckled.

“More like maintain an air of mystery,” he responded. “Thought it might help add a little magic.”

Regina nodded her head appreciatively. “I can get behind that.”

“Good,” he said with tiny laugh. She heard him sigh before sincerely adding, “I’m glad we’re doing this Regina. I’ve wanted to for a long time.”

The flutter in her stomach leapt into her heart at his words. “I know,” she said softly. “I have too.”

He promises to pick her up around six thirty before saying goodbye. Once they hang up she slips the phone from her face and returns to staring at the two dresses in front of her. Her talk with Robin had given her a brief moment of clarity. The black dress was beautiful but it was ordinary, at least for her. And after waiting for this chance for so long she didn’t want to be her ordinary self. She wanted to be extraordinary.

She lifted up the blue and pressed it toward her body, studying herself in the mirror. It did look good.

Perhaps Robin shouldn’t be the only one adding a little magic to their date.
Chapter 38

Regina always found silence to be a dangerous thing.

When she was a child she associated silence with her mother. Cora had always told her that her job a child was to be seen and not heard, even within their home. It was only when her mother left for work that she was allowed to sing and dance and yell like a child should. The rest of the time she was silent as a mouse.

When she became a parent herself silence became even more suspicious. As long as he wasn’t disruptive to others she’d always allowed Henry to express himself with as much noise as he pleased. Banging on pots and pans, singing to himself, whatever he liked. It was the moments when he was quiet that she grew nervous. If Henry was quiet that meant he was up to something he shouldn’t be. Something that might get him hurt.

But the thing she feared the most about silence was how vulnerable it left her to thoughts inside her own head. Without noise there was nothing to block them out.

It was the night of her date with Robin and things were too silent in Regina’s house.

It’d been nearly 48 hours since she and Robin had first revealed their feelings to each other and she’d long since come down from her revelation high. No longer was she glowing and walking on air. Instead she had moved on to fretting and overthinking. The current subject of her her well-founded and not at all ridiculous worries: her attire for the evening.

Standing in front of the mirror, staring at her reflection Regina nervously bit her lip. She had on her new dress, the one Snow had chosen for her, the one she’d been so sure about the day before… and she was frowning. Running her fingers over the fabric she couldn’t help but feel… exposed.

The dress was gorgeous, there was no denying that. It hugged all the right curves. Its color went well with her skin. The slit going up her thigh was just the right amount of enticing. It was perfect, but standing in the mirror, looking at herself in it she didn’t feel attractive or sexy or comfortable. She felt… vulnerable.

As if she were standing on a glass bridge over a deep canyon.

And in her heart she knew, the dress wasn’t the cause of that.

She moved to sit down on her bed and take a deep breath. Shutting her eyes she tries to quell her anxiety.

You will not have a panic attack before this date, she mentally commands herself.

The order works… a little. She can still feel pressure in her chest and she tries to think her way through it. There’s no need for her to feel this way. She’s going out with Robin, the same man who has seen every deep, dark part of her and still chosen not to walk away. The one with charming smile and distracting dimples. The man she loved.

There was no reason for her to be this nervous.

Except that she was.

She was so incredibly nervous. More than anything she wanted this date to go well. She wants it to

So stop being a scaredy cat and embrace your opportunity.

She opens her eyes and lets out a slow breath.

Everything she wants could start this very night.

All she has to do is not mess it up.

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It’s around six thirty when Robin finally pulls his Jeep into her driveway.

And it was six thirty-five when he finally opened the door and got out.

All day he’d been thinking about their date. Now the moment was finally here and he was so paralyzed that he felt like he couldn’t even get out of his car. For three straight minutes he just sat there, hands glued to the steering wheel, letting himself drown in the pressure.

He locks eyes with himself in the rearview mirror and silently gulps. Finally removing his hand from the steering wheel he reaches up to tug on the knot of his tie. From the moment he’d put it on he’d felt as if the damn thing was too tight. He’d adjusted it three times and he still couldn’t get comfortable. Silently he cursed Hook for recommending a restaurant with such a strict dress code. He’d always hated dressing up and the whole tie debacle was just another sign that he was already making the wrong choices for the evening. The restaurant, his tie… even that stupid flower.

His eyes dropped to the long-stemmed pink tulip that he’d gotten for her at the last minute. He’d already been on his way over when he’d spotted the flower shop and realized that he shouldn’t show up empty handed. Of course, he’d immediately gone straight for the roses before remembering that particular flower was Daniel’s calling card and it wouldn’t bode well for him to try and emulate that. He’d asked for the shopgirl’s recommendation and she’d directed him toward the tulips instead. It’d seemed like a good enough choice. Pretty and original. A far cry from roses. He’d considered buying a bouquet of them but thought it might be too much, instead walking out with a single flower in hand.

But staring at it now, lying by its lonesome on the passenger seat beside him, he regretted even bringing it at all. What if flowers were too much? What if it made things weird?

This whole night is going to be weird, he silently admits. He was taking his best friend out on a date for God’s sake!

Best friend who you’re in love with, he reminds himself.

“Right,” he sighs. Sensing himself begin to spiral he takes a deep breath.

Yes, his tie might be uncomfortable. And yes, the peony might be a bit much but it was all for a good reason.

It was for Regina.

He loved her so much and this night was his first opportunity to really show her that. It’s why he’s in this uncomfortable suit and bringing her a pretty flower. It’s because he – or rather, they – have
built up this night so much in their heads and he can’t afford for it to go badly.

He doesn’t know how deep Regina’s feelings are but his are clear. He wants more with her. He wants to hold her hand in public and kiss her where everyone can see. No more keeping all these feelings inside. But most importantly he doesn’t want for this to be the end of them. He wants more than just this date, just this night. He wants a future, one with the two of them together.

And he could have it, starting with this date.

All he has to do is not mess it up.

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She thought she’d calmed herself down but her nerves start to fire when the doorbell rings. The sound echoes through the house and she feels her palms go sweaty and her heart begin to pound.

He was here.

She blows out a sharp deliberate breath, shakes her hands a bit to get rid of the nerves.

*Here we go.*

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Of all the mysteries in his life how he kept his jaw off the ground when he saw her would probably be the biggest. The second she opened the door she took his breath away.

She’d always looked gorgeous to him but tonight… there was just something extra about her. Her silky dark hair fell freely to her shoulders with just the slightest flips near the ends. Her lips were painted with the barest shade of pink making them seem just a bit poutier than usual. Her face looked like a work of art but he barely had the time to take it in before his eyes landed on that dress.

Dear god, that dress.

He’d forget his own name before he forgot how she looked in this dress. It was dark navy blue, nearly the same color of his suit, almost making him glad that he’d chosen to wear it. She wore it perfectly. It hugged every curve, showed just enough skin and within seconds that tantalizing zipper had rendered him mute.

She looked… amazing.

And more importantly she looked happy to see him.

A wide, nervous smile appeared on her face as she greeted him. “Hi.”

“Hi,” he repeated breathlessly.

Her eyes looked over him and he was suddenly grateful for the suit he was wearing, however uncomfortable it might be. God forbid, he allowed her to be the only one who putting in effort for the night.

Her gaze landed on his hands and he suddenly remembered the flower. “

“Oh, I brought this for you,” he mumbled, nervously handing it over to her. “It’s a –”
“Tulip, I know,” she said, smile still in place. “I love these.”

He let out a subtle sigh of relief at her admiration for the flower. He might be a grown man but it was only ten seconds in and he already felt like a fourteen-year-old boy taking his first girlfriend out to a dance. His throat felt thick and he could feel his palms getting sweaty. He was so anxious and the evening had barely even started.

He reached up to tug on his tie and cleared his throat. “So are you ready?”

“Yes.” She nodded before gesturing over her shoulder. “Just let me grab my jacket and shoes before we go.”

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She invites him into the living room to wait while she heads to her room, tulip still in hand, to get what she needs.

Once out of sight she lets out a deep-seated breath.

Damn, he looks good.

Well, Robin always look good to her but tonight he’d reached a whole new level of sexy and it was shaking her to her core. She’d only seen him in a suit on two other occasions – neither were happy memories – but she’d never really taken him in given their context but now….

She didn’t think she’d ever seen him look so handsome. The blue shade of his suit made the color of his eyes stand out that much more. He hadn’t shaved and for that she was grateful. She loved his scruff, had fantasized about the feel of it more times than she was willing to admit. Even with it he just looked so… put together.

It was… heart-stopping.

She looked down at the tulip in her hand, twirling it a bit between her fingers. A small smile crept onto her face.

She’d always loved tulips, ever since she was a little girl and learned the reason they were named in such a way. The fact that he’d brought her one, well, it seemed like a sign. And a good one at that. She grabbed a misplaced cup from her nightstand, filled it with water and placed the flower inside before heading over to her closet.

Standing in front of her shoes she bit her lip. She’d originally planned to go with something simple, a pair of flats maybe, but after seeing how he was dress she was more than certain that heels would be more fitting for the site of their date.

Her eyes fell to a pair of strappy, nearly three-inch-high heels. They were beautiful but treacherous. She’d only worn them once before. It was on a Tuesday when she’d worked at Volante. She distinctly remembered having blisters until Sunday.

She sighed. They were beautiful though and they did match her outfit.

She heard Snow’s voice in the back of her head. *A night to remember.*

“What the hell,” she muttered, snatching them from their place. God forbid Robin be the only one putting in effort.
She returned to the living room three inches taller and with a stylish black leather jacket around her shoulders.

Robin nodded at her. “Ready?”

“Ready?”

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Her stomach was in knots the entire car ride. Robin had put on some soft background music to help fill the silence but besides some early chit chat, the lack of conversation was palpable. They’d exchanged a few words about their sons (Henry was spending the night with Emma and Snow; Roland was having an uncle’s night with Hook) and work (the studio was nearly ready to open; the Drunken Monk was the same as always) but none of their conversation starters really stuck. It led to some very awkward pauses, in which she spent most of her time pondering where they would be spending the evening. She’d asked Robin of course but he said he’d prefer for her to be surprised, which left her feeling more unsettled than intrigued for some reason.

After a short car ride they arrived a small restaurant in a familiar part of town a little ways away from the beach. Her eyebrows lifted in surprise as she read the name of the place on its well-lit moniker.

“Lumiere’s?” she said thoughtfully, turning to Robin.

She knew about this place. It’d opened a year or two ago and quickly become one of the more exclusive, and expensive, restaurants around for French cuisine.

“Surprised?” asked Robin.

“A little,” she admitted, with a soft chuckle. “I mean, I’ve heard about it and I didn’t really think it would be your top choice.”

“Well… it isn’t,” he said, shrugging his shoulders. “But a friend recommended it and, well, tonight’s supposed to be special, right?”

She nodded her head and forced a smile to her lips. “Right.”

Honestly, she wasn’t looking forward to going inside. French cuisine was not her favorite and restaurants like Lumiere’s always had a way of making her feel… exposed. But she could see in his eyes how much he wanted her to like it. And she wanted to try for him. So she kept a smile on her face.

“Can’t wait to see what they have,” she lied.

The inside of Lumiere’s was just as she expected. Bright with vanilla colored walls. A decadent chandelier shined down from the center of the room and piano music flowed from a corner of the restaurant over to the dining area where patrons were seated at small square tables covered with white linen table cloths. Frigid air fell from the ceiling making her grateful for the jacket around her shoulders. At least she was dressed appropriately. Everyone in the restaurant appeared to be dressed to the nines, even the waiters. They all wore the familiar uniform of black slacks, white button down shirts and black bow ties.

The minute she stepped foot inside she felt an uncomfortable tingle go up her spine. She sucked in a subtle depth trying to push it away. She reminded herself of the reason she was here.
Who was currently giving their names to the hostess, a green-eyed young woman with dark skin and a mass of dark curls for hair. She quickly found their reservation and led them back to a table near the center of the room, with a prime view of the chandelier. The light coming down from it felt like a spotlight on Regina as she sat down.

“Your waiter will be with you in just a moment,” promised the hostess. “Feel free to look over our wine selection as you wait. We’ve acquired some excellent additions recently.”

She gave them one more bright smile before returning to her podium, leaving them alone. They eyes shyly drifted toward one another.

“So…” drawled Regina.

“So…” Robin repeated nervously.

And yet another awkward pause.

God, she’d spent hours talking to Robin about the hardest things but for some reason she was struggling to put together even the simplest of sentences tonight. It was frustrating. And not just for her. She could tell that Robin was getting uncomfortable as well. He’d tugged on his tie twice since they’d walked inside.

His eyes drifted up to the ceiling. “Wow. That chandelier must’ve cost a fortune, huh.”

“Yeah,” said Regina, nodding her head. Her gaze drifted up to the fixture along with his. “They’re usually ridiculously expensive. Not to mention they’re always a bitch to clean.”

Robin tilted his head at her. “Sounds like you’re speaking from experience there.”

A blush rose in her cheeks as her eyes dropped back down to his face. “Yeah… well I remember from growing up.”

“Oh so you had a chandelier in your home?”

“Several actually,” she awkwardly admitted.

“Oh.”

She could feel the heat start to travel from her cheeks down to her neck as her embarrassment grew. Though she’d finally come clean to Robin about her past life her subsequent wealth and privilege was a topic they rarely touched. Talking about money always made her feel uncomfortable and even more like a fraud than usual.

She cleared her throat before reaching for the drink menu in the center of the table. “Let’s take a look at that wine menu,” she said with forced enthusiasm.

Her eyes scrolled their wine selection. The hostess hadn’t been lying about its merits. Even with just a cursory glance she found it quite impressive. Perhaps even twice as much given how much she could actually use a drink at the moment.

She looked it over, hoping to ask Robin for his opinion before realizing that drinking was no longer something he engaged in.

“Oh I’m sorry,” she babbled. “I forgot…”
He immediately waved her off. “No don’t worry about it. It’s not like you haven’t had a drink in front of me before.”

“I know but it’s a… date.” She stumbled over the word a bit. “I wouldn’t want it to be awkward for you…”

“It wouldn’t be,” he firmly declared. “You can order whatever you want. I’m fine.”

“Okay,” she sighed, with a forced smile. Her eyes dropped down to the wine list again but nothing appealed to her anymore. Having a drink suddenly felt like she was making a statement of some kind.

“Good evening.”

A waiter suddenly appeared at their table.

“My name is Jean-Claude and I’ll be your server for the evening.”

Jean-Claude was a tall man, a little older than the rest of the wait staff as evidenced by his grey hair and awful haircut. He was a wiry man, with a crooked nose and thin lips. He spoke with a noticeable French accent and Regina couldn’t help but notice that his grim appearance seemed better suited to a funeral director than a waiter.

“Perhaps you’d like to start the night off with some drinks,” he suggested, staring at them expectantly.

“I’ll be sticking with water for the evening,” answered Robin, before looking over at Regina. Both of their eyes were on hers and she suddenly felt very put on the spot. “Um… I think I am also going to stick with water for now.”

Immediately after saying it she felt a flash of regret. As if she’d disappointed Robin in some way.

The waiter pursed his lips as if he disagreed with their decision but refused to voice his opinions. “And would you be interested in hearing our specials for the evening?“

Regina nodded her head. “Of course.”

He immediately perked up. “Well then, I have the absolute pleasure of recommending two very special dishes the chef is offering for the evening. The first is an excellent Coq au Riesling, a traditional dish from his hometown which I can assure you will be braised to absolute perfection and served with the utmost care. The second is our wonderful Moules à la crème Normande, served with mussels you could assume we got them directly from the ocean right outside. Ordering either will be sure to leave you with no regrets.”

Honestly, neither of the dishes sounded truly appealing to Regina. French food had never been her favorite and both of the selections he’d described sounded entirely too heavy for her unsettled stomach at the moment. She looked over at Robin to try and gauge which direction he was leaning toward but found only a confused look on his face.

“Um… excuse me for asking but what exactly is in Coq au Riesling?”

He was so embarrassed to ask she could tell, especially when the waiter all but sneered down at him before deadpanning, “Chicken, sir.”
“Oh,” said Robin, his cheeks turning a light shade of red. “Well that sounds… good, I suppose.”

Yet again his hand reached up to tug on his tie.

Once Regina saw this she raised a finger in the waiter’s direction. “I’m sorry, I’m having a bit of trouble deciding. Would you mind starting us off with a small basket of bread while I make up my mind.”

He forced a smile to his lips before nodding at her. “Of course, madame.”

He drifted away then. As he walked past Regina could hear him bitterly muttering to himself in French. Clearly he wasn’t thrilled with his customers for the evening.

As soon as he was gone Robin grimaced at her. “I’m sorry.”

“No don’t worry about it,” she immediately assured him, shaking her head. “Not everyone knows about French cuisine. It’s fine.”

Robin let out a frustrated sigh. “I just really want tonight to go well,” she heard him mumble.

“Me too,” she whispered wistfully.

His dejectedness clawed at her heart. Not just because he seemed disappointed but because the evening was going decidedly unwell. Things between them had been awkward from the moment they’d laid eyes on each other. Their conversation had been forced, the air had been tense and from the depths of her soul she truly despised this restaurant. She’d dreamed about this night for so long but if it had been anyone besides Robin sitting across from her she knew all she’d be able to think about was how much she wanted to be anywhere else.

God. During all the weeks that she’d struggled over her feelings for Robin the one thing she did the most was try to narrow down the reason how she could’ve fallen so deeply in love with him and not even realized it. It’d been hard to pinpoint just one simple reason but something that stood out was how comfortable she was with him. How honest and safe he was able to make her feel. And sitting in this frigid restaurant over analyzing every little thing in her head it suddenly hit her that she felt like anything but safe and honest. Robin was her best friend but with the way she was acting she might as well have been sitting across from a total stranger. And that’s not who she wanted to be on a date with.

She wanted to be on a date with Robin and maybe the best way to do that was with a small dash of the honesty she’d always been able to share with him before.

Reaching across the table she laid her hand on top of his. Looking up into her brown eyes he seemed startled at her sudden touch but didn’t say so.

She swallowed hard before speaking. “Robin… can I say something?”

He nervously stared into her eyes. “Sure.”

She shook her head at him. “This isn’t going well.”

He continued to stare at her, shell-shocked. “What?”

“This date, it’s not going well,” she firmly declared. She pressed her lips together before continuing. “I don’t like this. I don’t like that I am wearing heels so sharp I could use them as an ice picks. I don’t like that you’re wearing that suit. I mean you looked good but you’ve tugged at
your tie three times. It’s clearly bothering you. And I especially do not like this restaurant. It’s pretentious, frigid and the waiter just called you an uncultured swine in French.”

Robin knitted his eyebrows together as he eyes darted across the room, searching for the man in question. “Did he really?”

“Yeah,” said Regina nodding her head, the small wisps of a smile on her lips. “That along with some other stuff I’d rather not translate.”

Robin scoffed as he leaned back in his seat. “How mature of him.” He paused for a moment before leaning forward and staring back into her eyes. “Regina… can I be blunt?”

She smirked at him gamely. “Sure.”

“I kind of hate this plate,” he admitted, with a smile. “I have thought about what it would be like to take you out many times. Not once did I imagine wearing a noose around my neck or having the crypt keeper as our waiter.”

She couldn’t help it. A loud snort escapes from her nose and she’s pressing a hand to her lips to help hold back her giggles. Robin joins in with a couple of chuckles of his own. It’s the first moment of the evening that the two of them actually feel like themselves.

“What are we doing here?” he affectionately asks her as his laughter subsides.

Regina shrugs her shoulders. “I don’t know,” she says. “But I do know that right now I feel like I’m on a date with a stranger. And I’d much rather be on a date with you.”

Robin nods his head appreciatively, thinking to himself before tilting it toward the door. “Wanna get out of here?”

Regina nods her head with a grin. “Thought you’d never ask.”

They were out of their seats and headed to the door in seconds. When their waiter returned to the table, bread in hand, all he found were two empty seats and lone twenty-dollar bill resting on top of the deserted menus.

It was his best tip of the night.

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The night air was warm as they stepped out onto the sidewalk. Regina was grateful for the warm spring air. It was a nice change from the frigid air inside the restaurant. It hadn’t even been a minute since she left and she could already feel the tension start to leave her body.

Robin stood next to her, hands in pockets, just as happy as she was to escape their intended destination for the evening.

“So…” he drawled optimistically. “Not even fifteen minutes into our date and we’ve already abandoned our plans for the night. Hardly seems like a good sign.”

Regina shrugged her shoulders nonchalantly. “I wouldn’t say we’ve abandoned our plans.” She tilted her head from side to side contemplatively. “More like adjusted them to our preference.”

“Okay,” said Robin, gamely stepping toward her. “So instead of a pretentious French restaurant as our main setting how would you like a moonlit walk instead?”
His flirtatious tone brought a wide grin to her face and goosebumps on her arms. She nodded her head. “I would love a moonlit walk.”

Smiles on their faces they started to walk down the sidewalk together, eager to see where the evening would take them.

And only when they reached the end of the block did Regina remember that she’d chosen to wear three-inch heels for the evening.

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They ambled down the street in silence for a while, their stride in sync as they admired the night air. This time the silence wasn’t as heavy as in the car. Probably because this time it wasn’t filled with the apprehension both of them had been radiating earlier. If anything the silence between them carried the weight of the relief they shared. Relief that they hadn’t forced each other to spend another moment in that awful restaurant. Relief that the ice had finally been broken and they could finally talk to each other like people again. Not that they were. Sometimes it was just nice to bask in the moment.

Robin was the first to break their mutual silence.

“Regina, can I ask you something?” he timidly ventured.

She nodded her head at him. “Of course.”

“When we were back at the restaurant I noticed that you seemed uncomfortable there,” he said. “And not just first date uncomfortable, but trying-not-to-grit-your-teeth uncomfortable.”

Regina pressed her lips together as she averted her gaze from his. She’d hoped he hadn’t noticed that.

“Why was that?” questioned Robin.

Regina sighed before answering him. “Well… for one, I’m not the biggest fan of French food. Personally, I find it a little too decadent for my tastes.” She paused before continuing. “And two… well, I don’t like restaurants like Lumiere’s because they remind me of my old life. More specifically… they remind me of Leopold.”

She said his name softly, as if speaking it aloud ran the chance of summoning him. After nearly a decade out of his grasp she was happy to say that she rarely thought of her old “fiancé” anymore but restaurants like the one she’d just been in never failed to bring him to mind.

“Three nights a week he used to take me out to places like that, showing me off to all his friends like he won me at a fair,” she grimly explained. “After a while all the places started to look the same and I couldn’t stand to be in any of them.”

Their pace slowed as she revealed the source of her discomfort. Listening to her explanation Robin felt his gut start to twist. He hadn’t meant to awaken any of her old demons.

“I’m sorry I ever brought you there,” he apologized.

She scrunched her eyebrows at him, suddenly curious. “Why did you? Bring me there, I mean.”

A quizzical look appeared on his face. “To Lumiere’s?”
“Yes,” she questioned, a small chuckle rising out of her. “Robin I’ve known you for years now. You’ve never once walked into a place like that on your own. And clearly you weren’t there for the food as our waiter so quickly learned. I know it’s not your type of place, so why’d you bring me there?”

Robin sighed, embarrassed, as he shrugged his shoulders. “Honestly? I wanted to impress you.”

She arched an eyebrow at him. “Impress me?”

“Well… yes,” he softly admitted. He could feel his cheeks growing as he tried to think of a way to explain himself to her. “I mean, I know that we’re years away from first impressions with each other but I think for tonight I wanted to show you that maybe I could be… a little more than what I usually am.”

A smile tugged on Regina’s lips. She knew the night wasn’t going as he’d planned but she still couldn’t help feeling flattered by his efforts.

“So that’s why you chose the fancy restaurant and the nice suit? Trying to go all out for me?”

Robin nodded. “Yeah. Didn’t exactly work out for me though.”

I don’t know if I’d agree with that, thought Regina. The restaurant had been an awful choice but at least abandoning it had helped alleviate some of the pressure on them. Plus, the night was still young and though they hadn’t done much of anything yet Regina could say that she was enjoying herself a little. Certainly, enough to be glad she came out.

“Well,” she sighed, “Like I said before, I’ve been in a thousand restaurants like Lumiere’s and I’ll have you know that tonight was probably the best time I’ve ever had in one.”

She looked over at him. “And for the record… I like what you usually are. I’d take you in jeans and a hoodie over a suit any day.”

A pleased smile appeared on Robin’s face as he let out a soft chuckle. “Now I really regret putting on this tie.”

The beginnings of a laugh came from her throat but they turned into a sharp hiss when she stumbled over a small rock in the middle of the sidewalk. She nearly fell forward when Robin steadied her with a hand to her waist.

“Are you alright in those shoes?” he joked.

She grimaced, reaching down for her ankle. “Would you believe me if I said yes?”

Robin smirked before guiding her over to a nearby bench. “Perhaps a short break is in order.”

Thank god, thought Regina. She softly groaned as she plopped onto the cement beach. Immediately her hand went to the back of her foot, massaging what little skin she could reach through the straps. Truth be told, her feet had been killing her since they left the restaurant. Not that she’d planned to let him know that.

A humorous glint shined in Robin’s eyes as he watched her tend to her sore heels.

“I take it those are sitting heels. Not walking ones, right?” he remarked.

Regina rolled her eyes. “Well I wasn’t exactly expecting a moonlit stroll now was I?” She removed
her hands from her feet. “I’ll be fine. I just need a minute.”

Robin affectionately shook his head at her. She’d always been a terrible liar.

Looking around them he spied a corner store at the end of the sidewalk. He held up a hand to her. “Hang on one second. I’ll be right back.”

Before she could argue he’d already headed down the street and disappeared into the store. Within two minutes he reappeared, heading toward her with a mischievous grin on his face and something hidden behind his back.

“Best part of living so close to the beach?” he said walking up to her. “All the stores sell flip flops.”

He held up a pair of cheap blue flip flops he’d gotten from the store. Regina scoffed at the sight of them. They were a bright shade of electric blue with orange straps meant to mimic the shape of starfish and matching green parrots painted on the souls. They were, in a word, ridiculous.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” she laughed.

“Hey, the only other choice they had was my little pony themed and I doubt they’d go with your outfit,” replied Robin.

“And you think those do?” Regina playfully shot back. “There’s no way I’m wearing those.”

“It’s either these or blisters,” Robin reminded her.

Regina groaned as she eyed the ridiculous shoes in his hand. They might be hideous but she had to admit that she’d last a lot longer in them than she would in her heels.

She jutted her chin out in Robin’s direction. “Fine I’ll put on those shoes… but only if you take off that tie.”

Robin’s grinned widened. Her proposal was the definition of a win-win for him. “Deal.”

She held out her hands for the flip flops and he over-graciously handed them to her. “Milady.”

The rolled her eyes at his dramatics but kept a smile planted on her face. “Thank you, kind sir.”

She undid her that straps of her heels, sighing in relief as finally slid them off her feet. As she stepped into the flip-flops she saw Robin undoing his tie and slipping it from around his neck.

She raised her eyebrows at him. “Better?”

“Indescribably so,” he replied playfully. He nodded toward her feet. “How are the starfish treating you?”

“Like a queen,” she quipped, standing from the bench. She was only half-joking. In terms of comfort the flip-flops were leagues of ahead of her heels. Against her feet their foam material practically felt like heaven. She turned to Robin and sassily put her hands on her hips.

“How do I look?”

He ran her eyes over her. “Short,” immediately answered.

She scoffed at him.
“But still stunning,” he sincerely added.

For perhaps the millionth time that night she felt a blush rise in her cheeks at his comments. Tucking her hair behind her ear, she smiled up at him, shyly. “Thank you.”

Robin smiled back at her before his eyes drop down to the heels she’d left next to the bench. “So… what are we supposed to do with these?”

He gestured toward her shoes and held up his tie. Regina pursed her lips trying to think up a solution. In the end she shrugged her shoulders and let out a defeated sigh before leaning over to pick up her shoes and place them on the cement bench as if they were being displayed in shop.

“I’ve worn ‘em twice and they hurt me both times,” she said. “I guess I’ll let them find someone else to torture.”

Robin nodded his head in agreement. “I’ve always thought two ties was more than I needed anyway.”

Regina grinned as she watched him lean down to place his tie next to her shoes on the bench. The sight of them, displayed yet abandoned, was sure to raise some questions for whoever saw it next but to her eyes it almost looked like the two accessories fit together. Perhaps they’d be taken by owners who saw them as more than elegant torture devices.

Robin smiled at her and gestured down the sidewalk. “Shall we?”

She nodded at him. “We shall.”

Together they continued their stroll, not even looking back at the shoes and tie they’d left sitting on the cement bench.

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They continued their walk down toward the beach, changing their direction so they walked parallel to the shore. The sound of the waves and the warmth of the breeze provided the perfect ambience. By now they were full on wandering. No direction, no destination, just…enjoying of the journey.

Side by side they continued down the shore, talking about whatever came to mind. The night sky, their boys, their day jobs. Easy topics. Nothing heavy enough to sink their moods.

They walked close together, practically shoulder to shoulder, but still noticeably, almost purposefully, not touching. Regina’s hands remained by her side while Robin’s remained shoved in his pockets. Not that he couldn’t think of a better place for them.

He was working up the nerve to reach for her hand when she pointed down the road. “What’s happening over there?”

Off in the distance Robin could see a row of trucks and hear the faint sound of music beginning to mix in with the crashing of the waves against the shore. One of the trucks, which stood out due to its bright yellow color, there appeared to be a logo made to look like a pair of hamburgers. “Looks like a couple of food trucks,” he guessed.

No sooner had the words left his lips did a pang of hunger go through his middle. It was sharper than he’d expected and he was reminded that they’d began their date by passing on dinner. It’d been close to eight o’clock the last time he checked his watch, so he doubted that he was the only one starving.
He cocked his head in the direction of the trucks. “Wanna head that way?”

The inaudible grumble in her stomach urged her into nodding her head. “Sure.”

They headed toward the trucks following the sound of the music and the growing scent of spices. The more her nose picked up the more Regina could feel her stomach growling. She hadn’t eaten much all day and was growing hungrier by the minute. Spotting those food trucks had been like spotting an oasis in a desert.

Despite appearances when they reached the cul-de-sac where the trucks were lined up they didn’t find much of a crowd, though clearly one had come through. There were more than a few chairs and fold out tables in various states of disarray placed in the center the circle but only a couple were still occupied. Though only a few people were left a band still played on the stage across the street. Lively music flowed from two large speakers out onto a crudely marked dance floor placed between the stage and the dining area. Confetti covered the street, along with a few walked-over pink fliers, one of which Robin picked up from the street.

“8th Annual Food Truck Festival…” he read. “From 4 p.m. to 8:30.”

He immediately looked at his watch, letting out a relieved breath when he saw that it was only 7:45. Luckily there was still time to eat, and there were plenty of options to choose from. The trucks on the street offering everything homemade pie to Korean barbecue. One of them even specialized in grilled cheese. He asked Regina if she saw anything she liked. Taking a moment to scan the street her eyes lit up when she saw Mexican food truck close by. There wasn’t even that long of a line.

After taking a look at their menu they approached an old man standing by a fold out table placed in front of the truck.

“Hello,” greeted Robin. “Do you take our order here or…?”

The man only narrowed his eyes at them in confusion and shook his head. “Lo siento,” he softly drawled. “No hablo inglés.”

“Oh,” said Robin, disappointed. Robin himself didn’t know much Spanish. Only small bits that he learned in high school and a few curse words. The man continued to speak in Spanish gesturing down the road, the look on his face getting more nervous with the second. It seemed like he was telling them to leave. Robin was about to suggest they do just that when he heard…

“Podemos pagar por la comida?”

The words fell from Regina’s with practiced, almost native, ease. Robin couldn’t tell who was more surprised. Him or the old man?

The latter’s face fell with relief when he heard her speak. A smile grew on his face as he said something Robin didn’t understand a word of but assumed was good, seeing as how a similar smile appeared on Regina’s face. He watched the two of them chat for a minute or two, stunned at how easily Regina had slipped into this other language. The whole conversation it didn’t seem as if she struggled once. The more they spoke, the more relaxed the old man got and somewhere in all their conversation Robin heard her rattle off their orders.

They pay for their food and it comes within minutes, a steak quesadilla for Robin and a bowl of chicken, beans and rice for Regina. The old man hands it to them, a smile still plastered on his face.
“Gracias!” he says, with a nod. After a short moment he adds, “Ustedes dos son una hermosa pareja.”

There’s a knowing look on his face when he says this and Robin sees a blush rise in Regina’s cheeks as she graciously nods her head and thanks him again as they walk away. Once they’re far enough way Robin leans toward her. “What did he say?”

A shy smile tugs on her lips as she answers, “He said that we make a beautiful couple.”

They head back towards the center of the cul-de-sac to find a place to eat. The sitting area is a hodgepodge of mismatched patio dining sets, probably loaned out by volunteers for the evening. They take a seat at a rickety faux-iron table with two matching chairs, close to the dance floor where they can hear the music. The band onstage plays a lively salsa song and a few couples are out dancing to the music. Regina watched them as she ate, subconsciously judging their skills as she did. Some were good, others were struggling but talent didn’t seem to be the objective for anyone that night. Having a good time was.

She felt herself drift away a bit as she watched, swept away by a small wave of nostalgia. She got so distracted reminiscing that she almost missed the fact that Robin was staring at her. From across the table he was watching her with a thoughtful glint in his eye. Upon noticing this she cautiously raised a hand to her cheek, worried that a stray piece of rice had snuck its way onto her face.

“What?”

Robin shook his head and bashfully averted his gaze. “Nothing,” he replied with a shrug.

Regina chuckled at his response. “Not nothing. What?”

Again he shook his head. “It’s gonna sound strange.”

“What?” she repeated, now brimming with curiosity.

“Well…,” drawled Robin. “You just spoke Spanish back there at the food truck?”

“Yes,” she agreed, suspiciously narrowing her eyes at him.

“And back at the restaurant when the waiter was saying all those rude things in French you understood him, right?”

She nods her head. “Right.”

Robin pauses before shrugging his shoulders. “Well it kind of has me wondering… exactly how many languages do you know?”

She can’t help it. A snort of laughter escapes her because she’s so surprised by his question.

He glares at her, playfully offended by her reaction. “Hey, don’t laugh,” he orders, despite the grin on his face. “This is serious. I woke up this morning thinking you only spoke English and now you’re apparently trilingual.”

She let out another but nods her head in agreement. “You’re right,” she concedes. “I can see how that would throw you.” Softly she groans before speaking again.

“And, for the record, I actually speak five languages,” she reluctantly admits.

Robin’s eyes widen. “Are you serious?”
She starts to tick them off on her fingers. “Spanish, French, Italian, Chinese and English.” She pauses for a moment before adding, “But to be fair I really only know polite phrases in Chinese and my Italian pronunciation has always been awful.”

Robin, however, is still in awe of her. “Fluent in almost five languages?” he breathes. “How did that happen.”

Regina shrugs her shoulders. “Let’s just say that private school is not a joke.”

She silently thinks back to the ivory halls she used to roam in her plaid, pleated skirt and maroon blazer, arms full of books and her back watched by ever vigilant teachers and staff members. Her time in private school had not been easy by any standards but she couldn’t argue with the results of their methods. She left school a highly intelligent, highly productive young woman prepared to take on any challenge with opportunities to study at four high-ranking, well respected universities. And if she was honest, her school had always provided her a safe refuge from home.

Robin tilted his head at her, deep in thought. “You know I still find it a little hard to believe.”

She smirks. “That I’m a polyglot?”

“That there are still things about you I don’t know.”

Thinking that he’s alluding to hiding her past she feels her heart drop. “Oh.”

“I didn’t mean it in a bad way,” says Robin, immediately backtracking. “I just mean that after knowing you for so long and finding out about all the big things, the little things I don’t know still come as a surprise to me.”

“Little things like how many languages I speak?” she quipped, with an arched eyebrow.

“Yes,” chuckled Robin. “It just reminds me that even with all the history between us, there’s still a little mystery left. It’s kind of nice to know.”

Regina softly hums in agreement. Suddenly feeling playful she says to him, “Well I’m not the only one with untold stories. What about you?”

“What about me?”

“You’ve learned something new about me tonight,” she points out. “Tell me something about you, something I don’t know and wouldn’t have guessed.”

Robin leans back into chair, a playful grin on his face as he thinks over her challenge. Something about him that Regina didn’t know. It was a tall order to fill.

After a moment, he leans forward in his seat, a triumphant look in his eyes. “I’m allergic to raspberries.”

She immediately scoffs at him. “No, you’re not.”

“Yes, I am,” he asserts, with a firm nod of his head. “Deathly so in fact.”

Her face turns incredulous then. “Since when?”

“Since birth,” he laughs. “When I was three years old I had raspberry jam on toast for the first time. Barely even made it to the hospital, according to my dad.”
“Oh my god,” she breathes. How could she not know this. In seconds she’s scanning through their entire friendship and realizing that she’d never actually seen him eat a raspberry before. He was right. It’s strange knowing there are still little things that she doesn’t know about him.

“Guess I won’t be taking you to the farmer’s market anytime soon,” she jokes.

“Probably not,” he agrees. “Your turn.”

She raises her eyebrows at him. “My turn?”

“Yes,” he insists. “If you ever want to murder me I just gave you a hand grenade of information. I expect something just as juicy in return.”

“Oh,” she says, straightening her shoulders gamely. “What do you want to know?”

Robin hums in thought. “How about something I don’t know… and would also find hard to believe?”

“Something you would find hard to believe?” She took a moment to think over his request, racking her brain for something that would stump him. Finally, she turned to him with a smug look on her face. “Would you believe it if I told you I used to be athletic?”

He narrowed his eyes at her and shook his head. “No because that’s impossible.”

She leaned forward in her seat. “Impossible but true.” She held up her hand and listed off her stats.

“Three years of track, two years of tennis and four years of swimming. Made it to state in all three and had the medals to prove it,” she bragged. “I promise you, I used to be quite the athlete.”

“Are you serious?” said Robin, the disbelief still clear in his eyes. “I once asked if you wanted to go jogging with me and you laughed for a full minute.”

“Well it’s been a while,” she argued, with a chuckle. “I haven’t done any of that stuff since high school, maybe a year or two later.” She shrugged her shoulders. “I’m out of shape.”

“Don’t know if I’d say that,” replied Robin, perhaps more flirtatiously than intended. Truth be told, he’d taken notice of Regina’s body more than once over the past few years. Even a blind man could tell she was easy on the eyes. If this was her out of shape, he could only imagine what she’d looked like before.

“So why’d you stop? With the athletics, I mean,” he asks.

“Well, I got pregnant with Henry,” she reluctantly admitted. “And it was after losing Daniel, so between the weight gain and the grief I wasn’t really in the mood to exercise.”

She feels a spark of sadness in her gut and immediately shakes it off. “Besides even though I liked sports, I only really played them to make Daddy happy.”

“He was the one who encouraged you?”

“Yes, very much so,” she said, nodding her head. Her eyes started to soften as she thought back to her father and how much he’d loved to see her play. “When he was born, he was born very sick. He grew up very frail and because of that he wasn’t allowed to do a lot of physical things. And when my mother was pregnant he was worried that I’d be born like him. I don’t think he was more grateful for anything than he was for my health. So he pushed me to do all the things he couldn’t.
Swimming, running, horseback riding even.” She chuckled to herself before turning to Robin. “You wouldn’t believe the case of equestrian ribbons I earned. He used to put all my medals and ribbons on display near the front door where everyone could see. Mother used to hate it.”

Robin narrowed his eyes in confusion. “Why would she?”

Regina rolled her eyes. “Well Cora never really liked that I played sports. She used to say that athletics were a waste of time and I should be doing something more productive, like learning Latin or business strategies.”

She got that far off look in her eyes then. The same one she always did when she was forced to think about Cora. Her eyes darken for a moment before she banishes her mother from her thoughts.

“But he never yielded to her on it,” she said, a smile returning to her face. “It was too important to him that I got to experience the things that he couldn’t. I think it’s the only time he ever really stood up to her. Well besides the last time, anyway.”

It was always a little jarring to hear Regina talk about her old life. Mostly because he couldn’t imagine the woman in front of him going through something to horrible. Talking about it had a certain way of stealing the light from her eyes, so Robin generally refrained from asking. But somehow when she spoke about her father the light remained, grew brighter even. She’d loved him, that much was clear.

“Sounds like he was an interesting man,” said Robin. “I wish I’d had the chance to meet him.”

Regina nodded her head. “Me too. I think he would have liked you.”

Her comment results in a snort from Robin as he immediately shakes his head. “I guarantee you he would not have.” He sighs. “I’ve never had much luck in the parents department. Older people tended to see me as a bad influence.”

Growing up Robin was always aware that none of his friend’s parents seemed to like him. He always garnered plenty of looks whenever he was brought to anyone’s house. Some adults would look at him with pity, others with suspicion but never with genuine affection. He’d been called a bad influence more times than he could remember. Looking back, he couldn’t even say they’d been wrong.

“I’m sure not everyone saw you that way,” said Regina. “Tuck didn’t, right?”

The mention of the old man brings an immediate smile to his face. “Tuck Johnson was a special case,” argued Robin. “I still haven’t met a person who can live up to his example.”

“Really?” drawled Regina. “You know, for all your affection you’ve never actually told me anything about the original drunken monk. I’m a little curious. What was he like?”

Robin sighed wistfully at the thought of him. “He was… a wise old man who always knew better than everyone else. And that’s not me being bitter. He always knew what was best no matter what the situation. His advice was always sound and perfectly tailored. He used to be a priest, you know?”

Surprise ran across Regina’s face. “Really?”

“Yeah, for a decade until he quit.”

“Why’d he quit?” she asked.
A knowing smile appearing on Robin’s face. “He said that he found the one thing more important
to him than god.” He paused as Regina stared at him expectantly. “His wife.”

Regina’s lips parted stunned. “He left the church for a woman?”

“Not a woman,” said Robin shaking his head. “The woman. Her name was Helen and according to
him she had a smile that could outshine the sun and a heart more valuable than gold.”

“That’s so romantic,” whispered Regina. “It must’ve been hard for him though, leaving the
church.”

“Absolutely,” agreed Robin, nodding his head. “It tore him up inside, knowing that he was
breaking his vows, but in the end, he said he was willing to spend eternity in God’s hell if it meant
he got to spend a lifetime in her heaven.”

[Robin thinking about Tuck.]

“Sounds like he was quite poetic,” Regina commented, a grin on her face.

“Love can do that to a man,” he smoothly replied. “He once told me that love was the most
transforming power on this Earth. That it could change a sinner into a saint or a cynic into an
optimist. It could take your life from a tragedy to a victory. It was truly the only thing that
mattered.” He smirked to himself. “I used to think he was such a bleeding heart.”

Robin thought back to those nights, the ones few and far between, where he’d end up at the bar
after a disagreement with Marian, full of self-loathing and pity, wondering whether he’d held her
back and if he should just let her go. Tuck had never failed to make him see the light, to help him
remember that his love did count for something and Marian wasn’t wrong to think that. God, he
missed that man.

“So how did you meet him?” asked Regina. “Don’t know why but for some reason I’m picturing
something more dramatic than a job interview.”

Robin averted his gaze as shame started to color his face. “We actually met… when I robbed him.”

Regina’s eyes widened. She fumbled for something to say but could only manage a disbelieving,
“Really?”

“Yes,” Robin reluctantly admitted. He sighed before continuing. “It was after Marian had left her
parents and we were still living in my car. She was working very few hours at a grocery mart and I
was not working at all. She made me promise not to stop stealing and I wanted to honor that but…”

“You needed the money,” Regina finished, her tone as sympathetic as her eyes.

“I couldn’t find work,” Robin said dejectedly. “No one wanted to hire me, we were practically
starving and I just grew very tired of seeing her go without because of me. I started thinking to
myself…what’s one more job to get us by. Just until I could find something legit.”

Regina nodded her head silently. She could hear the desperation in his voice as he talked and she
understood. When you’re in a situation and you feel like there’s no way out every bad choice starts
to seem like reasonable one.

“Anyway, I found the bar,” continued Robin. “I cased it for a few days, waited for a slow night
when I knew Marian would be working and made my way in through the bathroom window.
Found the safe behind the bar, cracked it easily, stood up with the cash in my hands, heard a click
behind my head, turned around and realized I was staring down the wrong end of a shotgun.”

He paused, reliving every detail of that moment he knew he’d never forget. He could still remember the way his heart pounded and his hands trembled, the sound of the shotgun clicking in his ear and the sight of Tuck’s angry face behind the barrel.

“I saw my entire life flash behind my eyes,” said Robin. “Not just where I’d been but where I was headed and it was not good. I thought I was about to lose everything that night.”

“What happened?” Regina softly asked, getting swept away with his story.

“Well he took the money back obviously. Called me an idiot which was well deserved. And then he told me to have a seat at the bar and asked me why I was there.”

“And you told the truth?”

“Of course I did,” he said, earnestly. “It’s very hard to lie with a shotgun pointed at your face.”

Regina smirked a little.

“So I told him everything,” continued Robin. “About me, about Marian, the whole situation. When I finished, he sat next to me at the bar. He gave me 100 dollars and said I had two choices. I could take the money disappear out the back door and no one would come looking for me. Or I could bring the money back tomorrow and he’d give me a job and a chance to actually make something of myself. Offer expired at noon the next day.”

A smile appeared on Regina’s face. “And you chose the latter?”

Robin nodded. “Walked in at 10:30 the next day and handed him 85 bucks.”

Regina knitted her eyebrows in confusion. “85?”

Robin shrugged his shoulders with a smirk. “I got hungry on the way back.”

Laughing, she rolled her eyes at him. “Wow, so that’s how you ended up at the Drunken Monk? That’s quite a tale.”

“Well Tuck was quite the man,” said Robin, fondly. “Probably the best one I ever knew. When he was around it kind of reminded me of what it was like to have a father. I miss him… still.”

Regina reached over to grab his hand and a spark of electricity ran through him.

“For what it’s worth,” she said, “I think he would’ve been very proud of her how you turned out.”

A bashful smile tugged on his lips as he replied, “Thanks. That means a lot.”

He ran his thumb over the back of her hand, enjoying the feeling of her hand in his, thankful that finally he didn’t have to let go until he was ready.

They continued to hold hands as they talked, revealing small, previously unknown details about their pasts. The band continued to play as they spoke but neither of them noticed. Too caught up in each other all the songs seemed to blend together until the band finally left the stage with a bow. A young woman with a guitar showed up on stage after them, the last performer of the night. Only when she started to strum and sing did Robin finally notice the band’s absence. Her song – soft, slow, romantic – was a stark contrast from the music before. Couples came onto the dance floor then, old and young they started swaying to the music, holding each other close.
For a moment Robin just watched them, then he turned to Regina. “How about a dance?”

“I’m not so sure about that,” said Regina, shaking her head. “Dancing isn’t something I’m particularly good at.”

“Don’t worry,” said Robin, standing from his seat. “I’m willing to teach you.”

She hesitated for a moment, nervously biting her lip as he looked down at her expectantly. Then she nodded her head and with her hand still in his they made their way onto the dance floor. Robin placed his left hand on her waist gently pulling her closer while letting his other hand hold hers up. She softly brought her hand up to rest on his shoulder. Without her heels the top of her head ended up just below Robin’s nose. A light breeze passed he could smell the remnants of strawberry-scented shampoo she used. Together they started to sway, catching onto the rhythm of the music, relaxing into each other as they moved in sync. She let her grip on his shoulder tighten, wanting to hold him closer. Robin let his forehead fall against hers, moving in so they were dancing chest to chest.

It’s hard to know how it happened but before either of them realized it his lips were pressed against.

In all her life Regina had never experienced a moment so perfect. She never wanted it to end.

The moment ended, as they all have to. Once the singer finished her song they reluctantly pulled apart. The festival was over and the crowd started to disperse, Robin and Regina among them. They started the long walk back to the car, this time arm in arm rather than side by side. They shared a short laugh upon passing the cement bench and finding that the shoes and tie had long since disappeared. The ride back to Regina’s house was shorter than either of them wanted it to be. The night had been so wonderful letting it end felt like a mortal sin.

But eventually they ended up on the curb in front of her house. Robin offered to walk her to the door and she happily accepted. She’d take any excuse to drag this night out any further.

Robin sighed happily once they’d reached the door. Turning to her he said, “Well this has been…”

He trailed off unable to find words to express how amazing the night had been. Luckily the words weren’t needed. He could see that in the bright smile Regina had on her face.

“I know,” she agreed, nodding her head. Still holding his hand, she ran her thumb over his, leaning closer to him. “I wouldn’t mind doing this again some time.”

“Neither would I,” said Robin, stepping closer.

They kissed for the second time on her doorstep and Regina enjoyed it just as much as the first time. She enjoyed the feel on his scruff against her chin and the weight of his hand resting on her hip. She loved the smell of his aftershave and the taste of his mouth against hers. The only thing she didn’t enjoy was when he stopped.

Pulling apart he let his forehead rest against hers. He should leave. He knew he should. It was the end of the date of course but for some reason…

Regina licked her lips. “It’s late,” she said, looking up at him. “Maybe you should come in for some coffee. To help keep you awake on the drive home.”
The suggestion came out of nowhere. She knew it was the end of the date and that he should probably head home but at that moment it felt like she’d say almost anything to keep him from leaving.

And apparently, he’d do anything to stay. “Coffee sounds good.”

They went inside closing the door behind them. Regina kicked off her sandals, chuckling as she looked down at them. They were so silly but she knew they’d be forever etched into her memory now. She would always fondly remember them as the shoes she wore on her first date with Robin.

They head for the kitchen and she opens the pantry to get the coffee. Robin reaches out to stop her, shaking his head.

“I can fix it,” he says. “Why don’t you have a seat? I’m sure your feet could use the break.”

She rolls her eyes but lets him take coffee grounds for himself. Instead of sitting at the table she opts to lean against the counter, not yet wanting to be that far away from him. He starts on the coffee and she watches him from where she stands. He’d taken off his jacket when they’d came in revealing the button-down shirt underneath. Even with the long sleeves she could still make out the muscles that she’d always found so very distracting.

She thought about the night they’d just shared together. Their walk, their dance… their kiss. Looking back on it she suddenly felt the need to kick herself. Hard. She’d denied herself this night for so long. And because of what? Her fears? Her overthinking? God she’d wasted so much time. But then again, she hadn’t wasted it by herself.

“Robin, can I ask you a question?”

He looked over at her. “Yes?”

She nervously licked her lips before speaking. “When did you know that you felt something for me?”

Her tone was hesitant, almost as if she was afraid to know the answer. Crossing his arms and letting out a sharp exhale, Robin leaned against his side of the counter in front of the coffee machine. “You really want to know?”

She silently nodded.

“Honestly… when you left for New York,” he softly admits.

Regina’s eyes widen and her lips part in surprise. “That far back?”

Robin shakes his head a little as if he’s not even sure of the answer he’s just given her. “When you left, I thought I just missed you as a friend but deep down I knew it was more than that. It was like a part of me was gone. I just wasn’t ready to see it yet.”

It was hard to admit but looking back Robin knew his feelings for Regina had started long before either of them were willing or ready to see it. Without even trying she’d found a space in his heart and made it her own. He was just glad that he’d finally taken the time to realize it.

He looked at her with curiosity in his eyes. “When did you know?”

She doesn’t even have to think about it.
“The minute I got off the plane and saw you again,” she answered. “I was sad about my father, and lost and worried. I was starting to think that I’d made a mistake but then I saw you and something just clicked. You put your arms around me and I knew I was exactly where I was supposed to be.”

The memory is crystal clear in her mind. The swirling in her gut and the fear in her veins. And how quickly it disappeared when she saw him. The peace that this man brings to her… well, she’d never felt anything like it with someone who was just a friend.

Robin steps away from the counter and walks over to her. Her breath catches in her throat as he reaches out to brush a strand of hair away from her face, his blue eyes still staring down into her brown eyes.

“My god,” he whispers, “why did we take so long to get here?”

She shakes her head, eyes still locked on his. “I don’t know,” she says, bringing her hands up to his shoulders. “But now that we’re here I don’t think I want to leave just yet.”

His nose is starting to brush against her. “Me neither,” he softly replies, before kissing her.

Sparks run through her entire body as she melts into his embrace. His hands start to grip her thighs and heart starts pounding. Things quickly grow heated. Her arms wrap around his neck pushing him deeper into their kiss. The counter starts the to dig into the small of her back as he presses himself closer to her, pushing her backwards. Heat starts to pool between her thighs.

She needs him like she’s never needed anything before.

The feeling is clearly mutual. Robin’s hands start to wander away from her hips, towards her back then down to cup that glorious ass of hers. It’s a move that has her moaning into his mouth, allowing him the opportunity to slip into hers. Somehow the taste of her mouth is both more than he can bear and still not enough. He wants more of her.

Without her heels she’s considerably shorter than him and throws off the angle of their kiss. But that is easily remedied. His hands move away from her ass, down to the back of her thighs and before she knows it her feet are off the ground. For a split second their kiss is broken as he lifts her onto the counter. Her arms immediately wrap around his neck to pull him back into the kiss and his hands return to her sides. Like muscle memory her legs open so he can step between them. Once he does she presses her thighs into the sides of his hips, the zipper running along her thigh slowly unzipping as she does. Another moan falls from her lips, when she feels his hand running up the bare skin of her right thigh.

His kisses start to trail down toward her neck and her head falls back so he has more to work with. Near the crook of her neck, he takes a moment to run his tongue over her rapidly beating pulse point. Her breathing quickens at the feel of his tongue against her skin. It has her hands running down to his chest, fumbling for the buttons of his shirt. Spurred on by her increasingly desperate desire she undoes them in record time. In an instant Robin’s shirt is on the ground and her hands are running over his bare chest. He’s more muscle than she expected and she’s can’t wait to find out what other surprises he has in store for her. But she is not going discover them on her kitchen counter.

“We should go to the bedroom,” she says breathlessly.

His lips move back to her mouth and she moans into the kiss before he pulls away. “Are you sure?” he asks, his voice husky.
She desperately nods her head. “Yes.” She brings her hands up to his face. “Oh god yes.”

She’s never been more sure of anything in her entire life. It was only their first date and this certainly hadn’t been planned but doesn’t change the fact that if they don’t finish what they’ve started she might actually explode.

She pulls him in for another kiss, one they don’t break even as his hands slip under her thighs and he lifts her from the counter. Her legs wrap tight around his waist as he carries her down the hall toward her bedroom. They cross the threshold and she mumbles against his lips, “Dress.”

She removes her legs from around his waist as he sets her down, so they can remove the dress from her body. Robin’s hands are immediately reaching for her back zipper. This dress has teased him all night, he’s grateful for the chance to finally put it where it belongs. On the floor.

The zipper’s undone and Regina slides the straps from her shoulders, letting the dress fall to the floor, leaving her in nothing but her black bra and underwear. Once it’s gone she finds herself feeling a little self-conscious. Robin is the first man to see her naked in nearly a decade. But before she can even start to spiral with doubt his hands are back on her hips, he’s pulling her close, pressing his lips just beneath her ear and whispering, “God, you’re gorgeous.”

She kisses him hard, slipping her tongue into his mouth, letting her bra-clad chest press up against his bare one. His hands run up her back and hers drop to his belt as they stumble their way toward the back. By the time he’s laid her against the mattress his pants are gone and she can feel him hard against her thigh, only two layers of clothing keeping her from what she needs most. The thought of it reminds her of something very important and she doesn’t want to ruin the moment but…

“Robin?” She lets out another desperate moan as he takes her earlobe between his teeth. “Robin, do you have anything?”

He brings his lips up to her again, barely able to concentrate on anything but the feeling of her skin against his. “Have any what?” he asks mumbles against her lips.

“Any protection?”

The question causes him to pause. Goddamn it.

Still panting he presses his forehead to hers and says the absolute last word she wants to her. “No.”

Her eyes widen as she looks up at him, chest still heaving, silently praying that he’s joking but knowing that he’s not. “No?”

“I’m sorry,” he says, apologetically. “It was the first date. I didn’t want to be…”

“No, I get it,” she sighs, her breathing still heavy as her head drops back into her pillow. Damn it.

“Are you on anything?” he whispers hopefully. But she shakes her head.

“No. I haven’t really had a reason to be.”

Until now, she sourly thinks.

The both let out disappointed breaths, Robin drops his head to her shoulder, pressing a kiss to her collar bone. “We should stop, right?”

His hands are still on her and God, she wants to say no. She wants to be reckless, to throw caution
in to the wind and let him explore every inch of her body until she can see stars. Oh how she wishes she could be that irresponsible.

But she can’t.

Reluctantly she nods her head, licking her lips before agreeing. “Yeah, we should stop.”

Pressing one final kiss to her lips, Robin rolls off her and lets out a deep sigh, trying to ease some the tension that’d been steadily building in the past ten minutes. “I’m sorry,” he apologizes again. “I really didn’t think I’d need it.”

“I know,” she says, running her fingers through her hair. “Neither did I.” She takes a deep breath. “Thing moved… a little faster than anticipated.”

It was a bit of an understatement considering ten minutes ago she’d been sitting in the car fully clothed. As her heart rate starts to even out and head grows ever clearer she starts to reason that maybe what happened is for the best. As frustrated as she is – and she is really frustrated – things had been moving a little quickly. Hitting the brakes was probably better in the long run.

Robin looked over at her nervously. “I know you said it was getting late. Did you want me to – ”

“Stay.” She turns on her side to face him. “Please.”

“Really?” said Robin, pleasantly surprised. “Even if we can’t… continue?”

“I’m not gonna lie that’s… very disappointing,” she admits, with a small chuckle. “But this night’s been really amazing and… I don’t think I’m ready to end it just yet.”

“Me neither,” says Robin, turning onto his side to face her. “I’ll stay as long as you let me.”

Her lips pull into a satisfied smile. “Good.”

As he pulls the sheets over their still undressed bodies, Regina scoots closer into Robin’s body, letting her head fall against his chest and her arm across his stomach. Robin wraps his arm around her shoulders, pulling her closer to him. He presses a lingering kiss to her forehead before resting his chin against the top of her head. Sinking into the warmth of the blankets, slowly letting their breathing fall into sync they hold each other. Right beneath her ear, she can hear the sound of Robin’s heart steadily beating in time with hers.

There – safe in his arms, with his heartbeat lulling her to sleep – Regina falls asleep.

Not suspecting, even for one minute, that her happiness was only days away from being shattered.
Chapter 39

On May 17, 2017 Regina Mills had the most romantic night of her entire life.

14 days later she would have her worst.

But she didn’t know that… yet.

It’s only the morning of the 18th and all she knows is the weight of Robin’s arm around her middle, the warmth of his chest against her back and the steady sound of his breathing against her ear. Sunlight streams past the curtains and onto the bed, causing her to stir in his arms. Reluctantly she opens her eyes to the morning light, her gaze immediately falling to the tulip that still sits in the glass on her nightstand. She sees it and smiles, the whole night coming back to her. She and Robin had their first date and it had gone better than she could’ve imagined.

She gently caresses the arm Robin has laid over her waist, grateful that he’d chosen to spend the night with her. It’s been years since she’s had the intimacy of sharing a bed with someone. She’s missed it.

Robin stirs at her touch, gently pulling her closer. She feels his lips press against her shoulder blade and grins.

“You awake?” he softly mumbles.

She hummed affirmatively in response. Another kiss drops to her shoulder and she hears him sigh contently. She can tell he’s been up longer than her. His voice is steady and clear with no hint of drowsiness.

“Please tell me you’re in no mood to leave this bed,” he begs into her ear.

“No,” she chuckles, shaking her head. Pausing for a moment, she adds, “I’m too busy admiring the tulip.”

Her eyes are still trained on the flower, adoring the way the sunlight flows through its petals almost making them seem translucent. The colors dance in the light and it’s almost as memorizing as the feeling of his hands against her skin. Almost.

Now that she’s awake he’s started to gently stroke the skin between her waist and hip. His touch is light and tantalizing. She feels her heartbeat pick up with every motion he makes.

“Still feels like I could’ve got you something better,” he softly mumbles into her ear.

Immediately she shakes her head. “No, I love it. It’s beautiful.”

“Not half as beautiful as the woman I gave it to,” he retorts.

She nearly rolls her eyes, fully prepared to scoff at him but whatever protest she planned dies in her throat when she feels his lips behind her ear. His fingers move to trace lazy circles on her stomach and his teeth begin to nip at her earlobe. Her thoughts become muddled then. She gently digs her fingertips into his forearm wordlessly encouraging him.

It’s not long before his hand slides from her stomach to her hip, firmly pressing down, pulling her onto her back. She allows this, turns until she’s on her back looking into those sky blue eyes. Talk
about mesmerizing.

He pauses for a moment, lets his thumb run across her cheek as he gazes down at her. “Good morning,” he whispers.

“Good morning,” she softly repeats back, still hypnotized by the touch of his hands and the color of his eyes.

He kisses her, softly, slowly at first, letting his hand continue to roam her body as he holds himself up on his elbow beside her. With his fingers he draws a map up from her hip, past her navel past the valley of her breasts, his lips never leaving hers as he does so. She moans into their kiss, feeling the spark work its way through her body once more.

Good morning, indeed.

They hadn’t gotten to do this the night before. In the kitchen their pleasure had been like a storm, all lightning and thunder, starting suddenly and ending just the same. This time is different. Her desire isn’t coming in overwhelming flash. It’s building slowly and steadily inside of her, like the tension in a rubber band that’s slowly being pulled apart.

She doesn’t know how long they stay in bed together. All she knows is that it’s heaven. Having his lips on hers, having his hands run over her body. It is bliss.

Their kisses grow more fervent and she feels that need growing inside her when… her alarm goes off.

_Beep-beep! Beep-beep! Beep-beep!_

Reluctantly pulling her lips from his she lets out guttural groan of annoyance. Robin chuckles beside her as she blindly reaches behind her for the nightstand where she was so sure she’d left her phone the night before. She finally turns from him when her search comes up empty. Letting out another annoyed moan she sits up in bed, scanning the room for her phone which is still relentlessly beeping for her attention. She sees last night’s dress still laying on the floor with Robin’s pants not far away. Sighing in disappointment she shakes her head. Of course, with all of last night’s activities she’d probably left her phone in her purse in the living room. Which meant…

“I have to get out of bed,” she mumbled, with a twinge of irritation.

Robin’s arm immediately tightens around her waist. “No, you don’t.”

“I do,” she replies, a small chuckle rising out of her at Robin’s reaction. Removing herself from his arms she smiles back at him deviously. “But I will be back shortly.”

She reluctantly pulls back the blankets and step out of bed, strutting out to the living room while Robin watches, clearly enjoying the view. Her purse is on the couch right where she dropped it, her cellphone still beating inside. She taps her screen to look at the alert and her heart sinks.

_PARK WITH HENRY AT 10 AM_

Damn it, she’d forgotten about that. She’d promised Snow and Emma that she’d meet them at the park to pick up Henry. She checks the time. 9 AM.

“Shit,” she curses under her breath.

A pair of hands are on her waist and a kiss is pressed to the back of her head before she hears
Robin’s voice in her ear. “Please tell me that is an Amber Alert and nothing more.”

Seems as though he’s gotten impatient in her absence. He stands behind her, still in nothing but his underwear, pressing his chest against her back. She hums in disappointment as she drops another kiss to her cheek. Turning in his arms she shakes her head. “It is not.”

He grumbles and lets out a sigh. “Henry?”

“I have to get him in an hour,” she replies, running her hands up his arms.

He playfully tilts his head at her. “Are you kicking me out?”

“Trying to,” she says, stepping closer to him. “It’s not going very well.”

She tilts her head up and captures his lips in another kiss. His hands run up from her waist to just below her bra. Again, she feels a spark run from her head to her toes but he pulls back from her, pressing his forehead against hers.

“You have to pick up your son,” he softly reminds her. She lets out a reluctant groan when he adds, “And I also have to pick up mine.”

He gives her forehead a light kiss and takes a deep breath. “So why don’t we take it slow and start with some clothes.”

Robin loves undressing a woman as much as the next man but he has to admit there is something he finds extremely seductive in watching one get ready. Especially if that woman is Regina Mills.

He sat on the bed buttoning up his shirt – which he’d received from the kitchen floor – and watched as she stood in front of the mirror putting herself together. She’d taken a quick shower while he’d made coffee and gathered his clothes. She’d gotten dressed in the closet had emerged wearing a black pencil skirt and purple blouse. Robin studied her movements as she put on her makeup and earrings, brushed her hair into place. To him every gesture she made was a sensual one and he couldn’t look away. He ran his eyes over her body, remembering what it felt like to hold her in his arms. The softness of her skin, the silkiness of her hair, the taste of her lips. Positively mesmerizing.

“You know you’re never going to finish buttoning that shirt if you keep staring at me.” Through the mirror she sends a cheeky grin his way.

Robin smirks at her. “Perhaps if you weren’t so distracting I’d be dressed by now.”

“I could close the door if that’s what you prefer,” she playfully warns.

“If you do I’ll never forgive you.” he replies, with a smile.

She rolls her eyes at him but he can tell she’s pleased.

Somehow they both manage to get dressed and minutes later he’s standing on her doorstep.

“Well, thank you for a marvelous evening,” he says, stepping closer to her.

“And thank you for a marvelous morning,” she says, arching an eyebrow at him. Her hands are on his arms again, lightly gripping those glorious biceps as his hands naturally fall to her waist. They exchange another kiss. This one soft and gentle, neither one of them wanting to tempt their desires.
at the moment.

Still leaving his fingers intertwined with hers Robin starts to head to his car. “I’ll be calling you,” he promises.

“You better,” she says, a blush rising in her cheeks. “Because after last night… we are not done.”

“Oh… I know,” he smoothly replies.

A small giggle comes from her as he finally slips his fingers from hers. Watching him as he climbs into his Jeep, she lets out a slow breath. He waves to her as he drives away and she returns the favor, staying on the porch until she sees his car disappear down the road. He’s gone but his presence still lingers, warming her from the inside out, leaving her floating on air. Their date is officially over but she knows what she said is true.

They are not done. Not in the slightest.

Not long after Robin drives off, Regina follows suit. She hops into her car and heads to the park where she knows Henry will be waiting. It’s a short drive there, no more than 15 minutes with traffic. The park is already crowded by the time she arrives, filled with parents and children trying to make the most of their dwindling weekend.

It’s a nice day out. Sunny and warm with a subtle breeze. It’s bright, just like her mood. Dozens of kids are running around the playground but she spots Henry within seconds. His bright right red Flash t-shirt catches her eye as he wriggles about on the monkey bars. She waves to him but he hardly takes notice, far too busy with the task of keeping his feet off the ground.

Across the playground she sees Emma and Snow watching him as they chat on a nearby bench. She heads over, all smiles, and joins them.

“Good morning,” she happily greets.

Snow replies with a soft hi while Emma lets out a suspicious, slow-drawling hello combined with a knowing grin. Not a greeting that instills confidence but Regina chooses to ignore her, instead nodding her head in Henry’s direction. “How was he?”

“Perfect, as always,” Snow promises. “We had a justice league marathon and make your own tacos night. He was out by nine.”

“Perfect,” Regina sighs, a little relieved. “Thanks again for watching him. It was a big help.”

“No problem,” says Snow, nodding her head before eagerly leaning forward. Her eyes were sparkling with curiosity as she asked, “So… how was the date?”

“The date was… amazing,” she answers with a small laugh. “It was better than I could’ve imagined.”

Emma smirked at her. “Oh I bet it was.”

Regina turned to her, eyes narrowed in suspicion. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing,” replied Emma, shrugging her shoulders. “Just that I brought you this.”

She pulls a small paper bag from her purse and hands it to Regina. Still suspicious, Regina looks
inside and immediately scoffs in response.

“A donut?”

Emma nods her head affirmatively. A single, chocolate cruller sat inside the bag. Regina’s favorite.

“I saved that for you from breakfast this morning,” Emma explained. “I woke up early, went to Eller’s and planned to bring it to you this morning so we could talk without Henry around. But you know what I saw when I got to your house?”

Regina felt her cheeks growing red. Oh god.

“Robin’s car still in your driveway,” Emma smugly finished.

Snow’s eyes went wide, flickering between Emma and Regina’s faces. “What? He stayed over? Really?”

“Mmm-hmm,” Emma hummed, still grinning in Regina’s direction. Regina sternly shook her head.

Oh you are so lucky there are children close by, she thought. Her mood darkened at Emma’s brazen assumption and attitude.

“Well, what happened?” questioned Snow, her voice growing urgent. “I mean did you… did you guys…?”

She trails off, not quite sure how to say what she’s asking.

“No,” Regina answers, shaking her head. “We didn’t.”

Emma’s face falls, shocked. “You didn’t?”

Regina glared at her. “No Emma, we didn’t. Things didn’t exactly get that far.”

“Oh.”

An awkward pause fell over the three of them and they averted each other’s gaze. Snow was the first to recover.

“Well, if he stayed over then things must’ve at least been good, right? Tell us how it went, all the details. What did he wear?”

A smile immediately returned to Regina’s face. “He wore a navy blue suit… and he looked amazing in it.”

With her mood back in order, she relayed to them all the details of the night before. His suit. The tulip. Leaving the awful restaurant. Her flip-flops, their first dance. She relived every moment, feeling herself grow giddy as she did so. Her two friends listened, giving her all their attention only interrupting every once in a while to ask a question or two.

“It was a really good night,” she finished. “Honestly I never knew that he could be so… charming.”

Out of everything that’d happened during their date Robin’s flirtatious demeanor was what stood out the most - well that and the way his hands had felt on her skin. In all the years knowing him, and all the months loving him, he’d never made her feel so beautiful and desirable. It was new coming from him but certainly not unwanted. It was the more she’d been looking for.
“So how was the kiss,” asked Snow, her voice going dreamy. “Was it good?”

“Better than good,” Regina replied, a little bashfulness to her tone. “It was great. It… it felt like the kiss I’d waited my entire life for.”

A blush rose in her cheeks at her sudden outburst of corniness but a smile remained planted on her face. She’d meant what she said. That kiss, their first… it was magic. She couldn’t describe it any other way.

“That so sweet,” Snow softly drawled. “I’m happy for you.”

“Yeah,” Emma agreed. “But what happened?”

Regina stared at her, confused. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, you went out with him and you said had a great time,” Emma elaborated. “Such a good time that you even brought him home. What kept you from… going all the way with him?”

She rolled her eyes at her own use of such an outdated term but stood by her question.

“Well it was only the first date,” replied Snow reasonably. “Even if she let him stay over, she didn’t have to sleep with him if she didn’t want to.”

“Oh I wanted,” drawled Regina.

Both of their heads swiveled toward her.

“You did?” The question comes in unison from the both of them. Emma face has turned smug again while Snow just looks bewildered.

“Yes… I did.” Regina reluctantly nods her head, still not believing that she’s actually having this conversation with them while her son swings from the monkey bars no more than 50 feet away. “Look I invited him in, things got a little… intense. We wanted to go further but…”

“But what?” asked Emma.

Regina sighs, shaking her head. “But we weren’t properly prepared for the occasion.”

Emma’s eyes go wide. “Are you kidding me? He didn’t have anything?”

“No.”

“And you didn’t—”

“Believe me Emma, I’m just as frustrated about it as you are!” Regina sharply cut her off.

“Okay,” said Emma, raising her hands in a mock surrender. “No need to get snippy.” She pauses for a moment before adding, “But for the record, I think it was smart that you stopped. It was a good choice.”

“It was a hard choice,” mumbled Regina. One she honestly wasn’t sure she’d repeat if given the chance. Things had been so good. They had been so close. She should’ve been more prepared.

“See this is why you should never depend on a man to bring the condoms,” Emma said. “You should always stock up on your own.”
“I know,” sighed Regina. “I wasn’t thinking ahead like I used to. It’s just been so long.”

Emma sighed, nodding her head understandingly. “I get it. But hey, look on the bright side. You still had an amazing night together… even if he didn’t get the chance to clear out your cobwebs.”

She snickered at her wording while Snow just rolled her eyes. Regina glared at her from the other side of the bench. “Thank you for that colorful euphemism,” she deadpanned.

Emma only giggled in response while Snow remained uncharacteristically silent.

“Mom!” Henry ran up a few moments later, his face still flushed from exercise. Regina hugs him and presses a kiss to his cheek.

“Hello sweetheart! Did you have a good time with Emma and Snow last night?”

He nods his head. “Yep! We watched justice league and I had three tacos!”

Regina laughs. “That sounds very cool but are you ready to go home now?”

“I guess,” Henry replies, shrugging his shoulder.

Regina tilts her head at him sympathetically. She supposed there would never be a time when going home with mom was seen as more fun than a night with his two aunts.

“Hey Henry, why don’t you take a few more minutes on the playground while I help your mom get your bag out of the car?” suggested Snow.

She was barely able to finish her sentence before Henry ran off causing the three of them to chuckle in response.

After making sure Emma would keep an eye on him Regina followed Snow to where’d they’d parked her the car. It was a long ways away near the edge of the parking lot. Snow seemed a bit nervous at the beginning of their walk, fidgeting more than usual and suspiciously quiet but she eventually spoke up.

“So do you think you’re gonna tell Henry about you and Robin soon?” she asked.

“I really don’t know,” Regina answered honestly. Truth be told she was a little nervous about that conversation. She knew Henry loved Robin and would probably be thrilled that they were dating but she didn’t want to change things for him. He really looked up to Robin, he’d been the only male role model he had for years. Sparking a shift in their dynamic felt risky.

“If I do it won’t be anytime soon,” she responded. “I want more of a chance to see where this goes on its own. Without the pressure of the kids, you know?”

“Got it,” said Snow, nodding her head. She paused for a moment, nervously biting her lip before continuing. “And what about sleeping with Robin? Are you gonna do that soon?”

“God I hope so,” she replies without thinking.

In flash the memories of last night come back to her. The feeling of his hands on her body and his tongue in her mouth. How badly she’d needed him. She wanted to feel that way again. She wanted him to make her feel that way again. As soon as possible.

Snow folded her arms across her chest in contemplation. “But how can you know that you want to? I mean it’s only been the first date.”
Regina chuckled in response. “That may be true but I think the near decade of friendship that proceeded it gives me a bit of leeway in that area.”

Coming from anyone else the question might’ve been seen as judgy or shame-inducing. However, when Regina heard it from Snow she didn’t hear judgment. Only a simple, if a bit manic, curiosity. One that apparently didn’t let up.

“But what if you do sleep with him and then you regret it? What then?”

Her voice sounded almost desperate as she voiced her concern. Regina turned to face her and saw Snow staring back at her as if her answer would carry all the weight in the world.

She raised an eyebrow in her direction. “Now why do I get the feeling that we’re no longer talking about me?”

A blush rose in Snow’s cheeks and she immediately averted her gaze growing silent again. Rather than deter her, the younger woman’s reaction only spurred Regina on. She gently nudged Snow’s shoulder.

“We’ve been talking about me so much lately I’ve hardly had the chance to check on your love life,” she commented. “So… is there a new guy in your life?”

Snow fought a smile and shyly shook her head, as if debating whether she should answer at all. In the end the smile won out as she answered, “Well… I wouldn’t exactly call him new. We’ve kinda been seeing each other for a while now.”

“Define a while,” Regina ordered, an intrigued smile appearing on her face.

“About three, four months,” Snow replied. She paused for a moment. “You might know him, actually. David is his name.”

“How do you even know him?” questioned Regina, clearly surprised. She barely knew David herself. Robin had hired a while after she’d gone to New York. All she knew was that he was young, in school and easy on the eyes. Well, if you’re into that whole Prince Charming look. Still she found it unlikely that Snow knew him. Their only connection was the Drunken Monk and that was flimsy at best. As far as she knew Snow had only been there three times max, all times with her.

“Well remember that one time you wanted to meet with me to discuss stuff for Volante and you suggested meeting at the Drunken Monk?”

Regina thought back a few weeks and shrugged. “A little, I guess?”

“Well, I got there a little earlier than expected and I’d been having a bad day,” she mumbled. “He had called me that morning.”

“Oh,” breathed Regina. She knew exactly who he was. Leopold. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Snow shook her head. “He’s not worth bringing up.” She paused and sighed before continuing.
“Anyway, I must’ve looked miserable because David noticed. He made me a strawberry milkshake on the house. Called it the happiest drink in the world. And… we talked and flirted a little. His shift was over before you got there though so he didn’t stick around for long. Didn’t expect to see him again until I ran into him at the farmer’s market near my house. And we talked again… for a really long time and things just went from there.”

As she listened to Snow speak Regina remembered that day at the Drunken Monk. She remembered the milkshake and how she hadn’t noticed anything off about Snow at all. For a moment, she felt like a really bad friend. Even with all the drama in her life, she should be taking a little more time to check in on everyone else, especially Snow.

“So you started dating,” she said. “And I’m assuming he’s good to you?”

She added a stern look to her question, sending the not so subtle message that he better be.

Snow rolled her eyes. “Yes he is good to me,” she promised. Her voice grew soft as she continued to speak. “He’s really sweet and funny. He listens to me and… I guess, he kind of looks at me in a way that no one ever has before.”

“And in what way is that?”

Snow sighed. “The way that makes me feel like I’m more than just a former screw up.”

She rushes the words out,shrugging her shoulders and averting her gaze as she does but Regina still hears them. They break her heart.

“You are more than that Snow,” she says, sincerely. “Really, you are.”

Snow nods her head. “I know. It’s just easy to forget sometimes.”

They reached the car but instead getting Henry’s things Snow leaned against the bumper and let out a breath as Regina stood beside her. They were a silent for a moment, as if taking a breath from the conversation. It’s been years since Snow had gone through her dark period of liquor and medication but it still managed to make things heavy whenever it was brought up.

Regina cleared her throat before speaking again. “So have you and David had sex?”

“No,” said Snow, shaking her head. “I haven’t had sex with David … I haven’t had sex with anyone.”

She can tell it’s already hard for Snow to admit that fact but Regina still can’t help the shock that flashes across her face. She’s so taken aback that she can barely get a sentence out.

“Oh! So you… you’ve never…”

“No I’ve never had sex!” Snow snaps, frustrated with her reaction. “I know. I’m almost 22. It’s ridiculous.”

“No it isn’t!” Regina immediately refutes her claim but Snow just scoffs.

“It’s not!” Regina insists. She takes a breath. “It’s surprising, I’ll admit that but it’s not ridiculous. I promise you 22 is not that long.”

It was certainly unexpected though. Muddling through her shock Regina realized that Snow had never talked about dating much. Just a cute guy here or there but nothing long term. She’d only
been fourteen when they’d first met and only nineteen when she saw her again in New York. It never occurred to her that Snow had kept her virginity for all that time. She certainly hadn’t at her age.

Snow crosses her arms, still embarrassed. “It’s not like I planned it. I didn’t take a virginity pledge or something stupid like that… it’s just never happened for me.”

“Okay,” drawled Regina, taking a seat next to her bumper. As if on a dime their conversation had turned into a minefield for her. Any wrong move might lead to an explosion. It was best to tread carefully.

“So do you want it to happen with David?” she asks, unsure what answer she’d like to hear. Snow was of course a grown woman capable of making her own decisions on the matter but… she used to braid the girl’s hair for God’s sake! It was still a little unsettling to hear her talk about sex.

“Maybe,” Snow answers. “There are times where I feel like I’m not ready and times where I feel like… I could be?”

She sounds so unsure of herself and Regina feels for her but she has to be blunt.

“Are those times when you’re in bed with him?” she questions, studying Snow’s face.

The minute her cheeks turn beet red Regina knows she has her answer.

“Occasionally,” Snow mumbles.

Regina chuckles and nods her head understandingly. “I see.” She pauses. “What about when you’re not in bed with him?”

Snow shrugs her shoulders. “I’m not sure.”

“Then you shouldn’t have sex with him,” Regina firmly replied.

Snow rolled her eyes. “Is this the part where you tell me I should wait until I’m in love?”

“No,” said Regina, shaking her head. “This is the part where I tell you being sure is the most important thing. And not just for the first time, but for every time.”

She pauses, unsure of how to continue. Snow offers no reply. She just sits on the bumper anxiously twiddling her thumbs.

“Have you talked about it with Emma?” she asks.

Snow shakes her head. “Not really. I would but… well you know how Emma feels about relationships.”

Regina nodded her head understandingly. Emma had always been very vocal about her avoidance of romantic entanglements. When it came to things like sex she was a pragmatist. She got what she needed and expected very little in return. Long-term attachments weren’t her deal.

“She’d probably just tell me to get it over with,” mumbled Snow.

“You don’t know that,” argued Regina, shaking her head. “Emma cares too much about you to take this so lightly.”

Snow sighs. “Maybe I should though. I am 22, practically an old maid in virgin years and David’s
nice and he cares about me. Maybe I should just take the plunge.”

Regina rolled her eyes. “Snow, if you really felt that way you would’ve done it with him by now. There’s no shame in waiting until you’re sure.”

“But what if I’m never sure?” argued Snow. “What if I’m 35 years old still weighing my options, waiting around for some fairytale moment to tell me when it’s right?”

“Then so be it,” Regina firmly declared. “Look… sex can be a big deal. There are a lot of factors that you have to think about before you do it but honestly it all boils down one thing. Certainty. You have to be certain that you’re ok with what’s happening. Physically and emotionally. Not having that certainty… that’s what leads to regrets.”

Snow stared her down, still unconvinced. “And is that what you had your first time? Absolute certainty?”

“Yes,” Regina gently replies.

Snow continues to stare at her, her eyes now silently pleading. “Regina…”

She shakes her head already knowing what she’s going to ask. “No Snow. Please don’t make me do this with you,” she begged. “This conversation is already so awkward.”

“I know,” said Snow, “but I really think I need something to help put this in perspective for me. Please Regina.”

Regina scrunched her eyes closed and softly groaned in displeasure. After a moment she let out resigned sigh and shook her head.

“Fine, I will tell you the story of my first time,” she said. “But to be clear I am only going to tell it to you once. You will tell no one else and as soon as I drive out of this parking lot you are going to forget the whole thing. Understood?”

“Understood,” Snow softly agreed. She paused. “So… what was it like?”

Regina sucks in a breath, still reluctant to share this story. “It was… awkward, a little, but it was still a good experience for me.”

She pauses before continuing. “It happened with my first boyfriend when I was 16. His name was Stephen.”

Stephen Bullock. Just remembering the name brings a nostalgic smile to her face and images of green eyes and thick, brunette hair to her mind. He’d been her first boyfriend, and a good one at that.

“He was always very sweet to me. Gave me gifts, was always supportive of my studies. Perfect gentleman,” she described.

Boring as hell though, she silently added. Though she remembers Stephen being an excellent boyfriend she can’t exactly recall a memory where he’d excited her. In fact, he’d been rather textbook.

“It was the winter break and we were on a class trip to Aspen. His parents actually had a place close to the resort so one day we ditched our counselor to go there and… it just happened.”
“Just like that?” Snow softly asked.

“Well I’d been thinking about it for awhile at the time, especially after the one year mark,” Regina explained. “And we talked and he promised we could wait until I said I was comfortable but there was no grand ceremony about it. No big date or plan made. When the moment came it was a spontaneous decision.”

She can’t remember much about the experience. She couldn’t tell you the exact time or the color of the bed sheets, or even exactly what she’d been wearing. All she remembers is how she’d felt. Nervous but ready. And happy and comfortable.

“Did you love him?” Snow asked.

Regina hesitated before answering. “I… wanted to,” she honestly replied. “I loved how he treated me. I loved having him by my side. But I don’t think I loved him, not really. At least not in the way I loved Daniel or Robin.”

Even as a teenager she’d known that she and Stephen were not some great love story. They were compatible. They got along well, had similar interest and goals, ran in the same circles. But they were never in love. They were in like. And back then that’d been enough for her.

Snow scrunched her eyebrows in confusion. “But if you didn’t love him does that mean you regret not waiting?”

“Not a bit,” Regina firmly declared. “At that point in my life I wasn’t really looking for love. It wasn’t exactly encouraged around the house.”

Since practically middle school Cora had drilled it into her head that love was a distraction, a weakness at worst and a weapon at best. She’d believed her about it all through high school.

“My mother never made sex out to be some great expression of love so I didn’t think of that way,” she continued. “When the time came it was more about deciding that I was ready to explore that side of myself and see what it meant for me. And with Stephen… I suppose at some point I decided that if it was going to do it with anyone it was going to be with him. No one else. I might not have been in love but I was certain and still am.”

There were many things Regina regretted in her life. How she lost her virginity was not even close to being on the list. Her experience had been eye-opening and fun, if awkward at times, and she still looked back on it fondly.

Snow remained silent after she finished her story, quietly taking it in.

“So…” ventured Regina. “Did my history provide you with any clarity?”

Snow let out a soft laugh before rolling her eyes and shaking her head. “Honestly, I think it just left me with more questions.”

Regina sighed. “Like what?”

“Like maybe I should stop putting so much importance on the moment,” she said. “If it’s not about love like you said, but just being with someone you’re comfortable with, then what am I waiting for?”

Regina held up a hand to stop her. “No, you can’t think like that. It wasn’t about love for me. You are not me Snow and I am not you. The choices we make concerning sex do not have to be the
same. Or even similar. All that matters is that you feel certain in your decision and can own your choice. Do you understand?"

“I guess,” Snow said, shrugging her shoulders.

“Okay,” said Regina, nodding her head. “Now I have a question for you.” She paused, turning to look Snow in the eyes. “Do you want to be in love before you have sex? Is that what you feel like you need?”

Snow bit her lip, silently thinking over the question before nodding her head. “Yeah, I think it is.”

“Okay,” said Regina. “Then own that choice. Talk to David and let him know your boundaries and expectations. If he doesn’t respect them then I promise you can do better.”

Snow chuckled, nodding her head. She felt better, certainly more secure than she had before their talk.

“Can I ask you one last question?”

Regina rolled her eyes. “What?”

“Is it different when you’re in love with someone?”

Regina pauses before she nods her head. “Yes it is very different.”

There was no other answer she could possibly give. Now matter how sure she felt of her first time with Stephen she knew that it couldn’t compare to her first time with Daniel. Before him sex had been a purely physical act, a way to relieve stress or pass time. Daniel had been the first man she met who used sex as a way to show love. It’d changed things for her. Him and Leopold.

Going from such an intimate physical relationship with Daniel to being forced to play fiancé for Leopold - being forced to smile as the man she despised groped and kissed her in public - had made her reconsider things. Suddenly, the emotional side of sex grew more important to her than the physical. And of course there’d been nights where she grew lonely and thought of heading out to a bar and going home with the first decent man she met but she couldn’t do that anymore. After she’d escaped him with Henry, before she even realized it, she made a choice. The next man who touched her would love her first.

And while that decision had made for some very long years, she had Robin now. A good man, a sexy man who she loved and who loved her. There was light at the end of the tunnel and she was ready to walk straight into it.

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The morning had run much slower for Robin than it had for Regina. He’d had the time to stop by the store, head home and clean himself up before going to pick up Roland. The entire time he’d been thinking of his date, the night before and the morning that came after. It’d been a long time since he’d experienced anything so blissful. He’d gone years without anything close to the physical intimacy he’d just shared with Regina. And the thought of it left him feeling more pent up than ever before.

Ever since he’d left her house he’d been kicking himself over the whole condom debacle. He’d passed so many drugstores on his way to pick her up that night why didn’t he stop into just one! Maybe if he had he wouldn’t have needed to spend an extra fifteen minutes in the shower that morning.
It was close to 11:30 by the time he pulled into the marina parking lot. Glancing at the clock he realized he was late to pick up Roland. Still he doubted that Hook minded. He’d always been happy to look after Roland in the past and Roland was always pleased to play pirate when he spent nights on the Jolly Roger.

Walking down the docks he heard Roland’s voice before he saw him.

“Ahoy Daddy!”

Robin chuckled before responding, “Ahoy Roland!”

He spotted his son, standing near the railing of the Jolly Roger, still strapped into a life jacket, staring down the docks through an old-fashioned spyglass. Roland enthusiastically waves as his father approaches the boat. Robin climbs aboard and is immediately greeted by one of his running jump hugs.

“Hey, no running!” Hook goodnaturedly ordered from his spot near the railing. “Strong boy like you, you’ll rock the whole boat.”

Roland only grinned as his father picked him up.

“How was your evening aboard the Jolly Roger?” Robin asked Roland.

“Fun!” Roland happily declared. “Uncle Hook took me sailing and taught me how to make knots!”

He pointed to a pile of shoddily tied ropes he’d left on the deck of the boat. Decent but clearly needing improvement.

“He was a perfect first mate,” Hook added, sending Roland a wink. “He’ll make a fine captain one day.”

“Oh I’m sure,” Robin replied, proudly smiling at his son. “Well I’m glad you had your fun but are you ready to spend the day with Daddy?”

“Yes!” Roland eagerly replied.

Robin happily laughed along with him. He lived for Sundays with Roland. It was the one day of the week that he reserved for just the two of them. No work, no daycare. Just him and his son.

“What shall we do today?” he asked.

“I wanna go to the beach!” Roland immediately answered. “I wanna pick up shells for show and tell!”

“Sounds like a plan,” Robin agreed, nodding his head.

“I’ll come along as well,” chimed in Hook. When Robin sent him a curious look he added, “I’ve been on the boat nearly 24 hours. Don’t want to get sea legs.”

His excuse was flimsy at best and Robin instantly knew why he’d made it. He was certain Hook only wanted to come along to grill him about his date the night before. A conversation he was not looking forward to.

It was a nice day out and the seagulls cawed as the three of them made their way down the beach. A few minutes later when they were walking along the shore his suspicions were proved correct. Roland had run ahead of them tossing shells into a small bucket that Hook had given him before...
they left. Robin carefully watched him as he dug through the sand, getting his feet wet whenever
the low tide came in. Watching his son, Robin wondered what his reaction would be when he told
him that he was dating. And if the fact that he was dating Regina would have an effect on that
reaction.

However, it wasn’t long before his earlier suspicions were confirmed.

“So how did things go with Regina?” Hook asked.

“They went very well,” Robin replied. “Better than expected.”

“Good,” said Hook, a genuinely pleased grin appearing on his face. “I take it she liked the
restaurant.”

“Oh no, she absolutely hated it,” said Robin, smugly shaking his head.

He couldn’t help but gloat as he told Hook just how much Regina had hated the restaurant he’d
chosen. He happily recounted how uncomfortable they’d felt there and took pleasure in Hook’s
reaction when he told him about their hasty escape.

“Are you kidding me?” he cried. Groaning, he shook his head. “Esme’s gonna give me hell for
this. She had to suck up to her creepy boss for that table.”

“I’m sorry,” said Robin, not feeling sorry at all. “But it didn’t take us long to realize that the place
wasn’t for us.”

“Fine,” mumbled Hook, still miffed that his recommendation had fallen flat. “But what about the
rest of the evening? You must’ve righted the ship somehow.”

“We turned things casual,” said Robin shrugging his shoulders. “We went for a walk, went to food
truck and danced a little. It was good.”

_Better than good_, he thought. Though he said their night had been casual it had felt like anything
but that. Even looking back on it the night still carried the distinct feeling of an important
beginning. The start of something new, something that could make him truly happy again.

“And did you make up for dinner with an unexpected breakfast?” asked Hook, lecherously
wiggling his eyebrows.

Robin shook his head, a little embarrassed. “I spent the night,” he admitted, “but nothing happened.
I just slept next to her.”

“Why?” interrogated Hook, confused. “Was she not feeling up to it?”

“We were feeling up to it,” Robin reluctantly corrected. “I just wasn’t properly prepared so we let it
pass.”

“Not properly prepared?” Hook pace slowed as his eyes widened in surprise. “Are you telling me
you went on a date without so much as one damn condom on you?!”

“Will you keep your damn voice down!” growled Robin, his eyes flickering over to Roland, who,
gratefully, still remained blissfully unaware of their conversation. “This is not exactly a
conversation I want my son to hear!”

“Maybe he should,” Hook joked. “Maybe then he’ll know to be more prepared, unlike you.”
Robin glared at him. “Nice.”

“Look mate you know I’m only having a laugh but did you really have nothing on you at all?”

Again Robin shrugs his shoulders. “It was only the first date. I didn’t think that I would need it.”

“It’s always better to have it and not need it than need it and not have it,” Hook reminded him. “For christ’s sake Robin, it’s sex 101. Basic stuff!”

“I know!” snapped Robin, growing more irritated at Hook’s lecture. “But I haven’t done this in years and even then it wasn’t like I had a lot of practice with it!”

Hook rolled his eyes. “Are you telling me that you never prepped for spontaneous sex with Marian?”

Robin groaned as he resisted the urge to punch Hook directly in his chest. He tried to remind himself that despite his blunt delivery Hook’s line of questioning did come from a place of concern and friendship.

He shook his head before answering, “Not really. Birth control and spontaneity weren’t really issues for us.”

Between their carefully coordinated sneaking around in the early days of their relationship and the fertility issues in the later ones, lack of contraception had rarely been a concern during his time with Marian.

“Alright,” Hook conceded, nodding his head. “But what about before Marian? With other girls?”

“What other girls?”

Robin’s reply was immediate, he provided it without thought. He was only reminded of the weight of his reveal when he saw the shock written over Hook’s face.

“Wait? Do you mean…”

He’d never felt ashamed of the fact that Marian was the only woman he’d ever been with. It was something that he’d fretted over or tried to hide. It was just a fact. The only bad thing about it was the annoying reactions he’d get in response to it.

Still gaping at him Hook replied, “I don’t know. I guess after thinking about it I’m not surprised but really? Only Marian?”

“Yes,” said Robin, nodding his head. “Only Marian.”

Hook shrugged his shoulders, contemplatively. “Well, that’s admirable, I suppose.”

Robin scoffed. “What, no jokes?”

“Now what type of man would I be if I mocked a unicorn such as yourself,” he replied, with a smirk.

Robin laughed. “Jackass.”
Hook chuckled as the walked along. “So,” he sighed, “You nervous about getting back in the saddle?”

Robin thought back to the moment in Regina’s kitchen. How easy it’d been. How little qualms he’d held. It really had been like riding a bicycle. No thinking, all instinct.

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “It’s been long enough and I’m not just talking about… the saddle.”

“What else is there?” questioned Hook.

“I mean a relationship,” he clarified. “Last night made me realize that I miss… having someone. I miss being a relationship.” He paused. “I’m not like you Hook. I don’t like dating around. It’s not what I do.”

During his engagement with Marian Robin had wondered if he’d grow to resent the fact that he’d never gotten the chance to “sow his wild oats” so to speak. He’d talked with Tuck about it extensively before they’d gotten married and the old man had nearly laughed in his face. He’d reminded Robin that of all the traits he carried loyalty was the strongest. He valued honesty and commitment in all his relationships, platonic and romantic. For a man like him, hopping from bed to bed simply wouldn’t be in his nature.

“Classic serial monogamist,” said Hook, shaking his head. “Well, I can’t say I don’t blame you. People do tend to stick with what they know.”

Robin scoffed but disagreed no further. He couldn’t deny that Hook had a point. He’d found Marian at such a young age that being in a relationship was all he’d ever known. In the years since her death he’d yearned for the return of that security. Of being with someone, knowing that you know them so completely and knowing that they know you in return. He’s missed that familiarity.

“You’re a one-woman man Robin,” said Hook, with a smirk. “I wouldn’t expect any less of you.”

He gave Robin a sincere look of approval before moving on. “So is Regina willing to be that woman for you? I expect you talked about it last night given that you couldn’t do much of anything else.”

Again Robin’s mind flashed back to the night before. The taste of her lips, the softness of her skin, having her pressed against that kitchen counter.

“It didn’t really come up,” he answered.

“Well, I advise you to have the discussion,” replied Hook. He sent Robin a knowing look. “And I advise you to do it before you get in bed with her. Because in my experience putting it off leads to hurt feelings… and slapped faces.”

“It’s only been one date Hook,” Robin reminded him. “A bit early for the commitment speech, don’t you think?”

“Normally yes,” agreed Hook, shrugging his shoulders. “But your situation with Regina is unique. There’s history between the two of you. It changes expectations.”

True, Robin silently admitted. If it had been anyone else he certainly wouldn’t have been thinking of so hard about their future together. Not after one date. And Hook was right, he already shared a lot of his life with Regina. A past, friends, even their children to some extent. With all that at stake it couldn’t hurt to talk about where they stood and where they were headed.
It was night by the time Robin reached out to Regina. The day was over, Henry was tucked into bed and so was she. Dressed in her silk pajamas, she sat up against her headboard swiping at the screen of her ipad as she read through another applicant’s resume for the store. The grand opening was nearly here she’d need to make a choice soon.

Her phone buzzed against her nightstand and a smile appears on her face when she sees a text from Robin.

*Know I promised to call. Hope texting is okay.*

Her smile widens as she sets aside her ipad, fully prepared to focus on their conversation. *Texting is fine. How was your Sunday?*

She knows that he always reserves Sundays for Roland and isn’t surprised by his response. *Wonderful as always*. There’s a short pause before he adds another message. *He’s climbed into bed with me for the night. Didn’t have the heart to turn him away.*

*No wonder he’s texting*, she thinks to herself. A short chuckle escapes at her. She can see him now, in bed with his phone in hand and Roland sleeping by his side. For a brief moment she wishes she was there to see it in person.

*What parent would?* she sends back. *True*, he replies. *What are you up to?*

*Just sitting in bed*, she texts back.

Within seconds he sends back, *you mean sitting in bed while doing work ;)*.

Even though she knows he can’t see her, she can’t help but roll her eyes and shake her head. Robin had picked up on her workaholic tendencies during their short time as housemates. He’d walked in on her buried in paperwork more than a few times.

*Sometimes I despise you for knowing me so well*, she replies. Not wanting to sound harsh she adds a playful emoji to lighten the mood.

He sends back an emoji of his own before saying, *work is what mondays are for. you should head to sleep.*

She glances at the clock. It’s close to 10 now and she does have to wake up early to get Henry ready for school.

*I will* she texts back, *but not because you told me to.*

*As if you would ever do what I say*, Robin immediately replies with a winking emoji. She smiles. Her thumbs hover above the keypad as she thinks of what to say next. Before she can talk herself out of it she fires off another text.

*Bed feels kind of lonely without you in it.*

Her cheeks go red at her own boldness. It takes him a while to respond and she fears she’s gone too far but his response comes.
I know what you mean. Last night was the best sleep I’ve had in years.

Relief washes over her at his understanding. After the night they’d spent together getting into bed alone had felt lonely. His presence had helped lull her to sleep and she’d grown spoiled by the experience.

Plans for tomorrow? , he asks.

Heading to the studio to get some work done , she says. That’s what mondays are for right?

Touché , he replies. Alright I’ll let you go. Goodnight Regina.

Goodnight Robin , she replies.

As soon as the text is sent she leans back against her headboard and lets out a satisfied sigh. How is that a few words from this man can make her feel so good.

xxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Monday morning was not as easygoing as Sunday had been. From the moment she’d woken up Regina felt as though she hadn’t had a single moment to catch her breath. Henry had chosen to have one of his difficult mornings that day, not having gotten a single thing ready for school the night before. And of course as soon as he’d sat down to breakfast he’d remembered that he was supposed to bring something to school for the class potluck, an event Regina hadn’t heard a whisper of until that very moment. Of course rather than let him show up empty-handed she’d sped to the grocery store to pick up a small box of chocolate cookies for him share with the class. A choice that of course, due to traffic, made him ten minutes late to school. After signing him in late she’d headed to the studio for work arriving with just barely enough time to prep for her first interview of the day. The rest of her morning would be spent questioning no less than 10 people to find someone worthy of the receptionist position at the studio. Only three of which would seem even minimally qualified for what she had in mind. It’s after noon when she finally sees the last girl out and she breathes a sigh of relief after she does.

Once the studio is empty she returns to her office and takes a moment to sink onto the chaise next to her desk and bask in the silence. In a few days the studio will be filled with designers, receptionists and, hopefully, clients. The thought of it excites her but she will miss having the place all to herself. Right now, besides the furniture, the only things filling this peaceful space are her hopes and dreams. She wonders if her reality will every be able to live up them.

Luckily she has until the end of the week to make a decision about the receptionist position so she chooses not to think about it now. Instead she reaches over to her desk and picks up a sketch pad and pencil. It’s been awhile since she’s designed anything good. Her brain has been so muddled by her worries over meeting Daniel’s family and her feelings for Robin. But now that both of those issues are somewhat resolved she hopes that her creativity will spike again.

Her pencil touches the paper and she starts to sketch. Slowly her earlier optimism wanes. Sketch after sketch ends up crumpled and discarded on the floor next to her chaise. It’s as if she can see things so clearly at the beginning but loses her way as she goes on. In the end she can’t even figure out how she started or where she intended to go. Still she doesn’t stop. She draws dress after dress, determined to continue until she comes up with something of value. Hours pass as she sits on her chaise, throw blanket over her bare feet, sketching ideas she can never seem to finish, only taking short breaks to respond the intermittent texts Robin sends her way.

They’ve been coming all day, acting as the only the bright spot in this tornado of day. One to day
good morning, another to tell her good luck and more. It warms her heart every time she hears her phone chime.

A knock on the door pulls her eyes away from her sketchpad. Confused, she glances at the clock on her desk. It’s after two. Far too late for any stray interviews and she was sure she hadn’t ordered anything new for the studio in days. Rising from her chaise she slips on her shoes to see who it is. Her lips pull into a smile when she sees Robin through the studio’s glass doors.

Unlocking the door she lets him in and he greets her with a kiss on the cheek. He looks good. Back to his casual wear he’s dressed in a pair of old jeans and a plain army green t-shirt. A far cry from Saturday night’s suit and tie.

“Well, isn’t that a pleasant surprise,” she says, beaming up at him. “What are you doing here?”

He holds up a plain paper bag. “I just wanted to drop by and bring you some lunch.”

At the sight of it a pang goes through her stomach. She takes it from him with a suspicious look in her eye. “Now how did you know that I didn’t eat lunch?”

Robin shrugs his shoulders. “You started sending me one word texts. A clear sign you’ve developed tunnel vision.”

He smirks in her direction and she rolls her eyes at him. Damn, this man for knowing her so well. She looks inside the bag and grins when she finds a cup of Albondigas soup from the deli around the corner of the Drunken Monk. Her favorite lunch when she’d been working there.

“Will be joining me as I eat?” she asks.

“If you’d like,” Robin replies. “I know you’re working…”

“I could do with a break,” she says, tilting her head toward her office. “Come on in.”

Robin smiled. He’d been hoping she’d say that. It’d be a lie to say that he hadn’t had some ulterior motives when he’d brought her lunch. After his talk with Hook on the beach, he’d been looking for an opportunity to get her alone and talk about his hopes for their future together. Maybe set some things in stone.

As he followed her into the office he remembered the day when they’d painted it. Her dancing, their laughter, the paint on both their faces. That was the day he’d realized he’d loved her. It’d only been a few weeks ago but still it felt so much further away. So much had changed since then, with them and the studio itself. It’d been bare bones the day they’d painted it together. Now it was completely put together. All the furniture had arrived, there were paintings and pictures on the walls. Almost immediately he spied one of him and Roland on her desk along with one of Henry. Regina’s office was warm and inviting. He liked it.

As Regina settled back onto her chaise with her soup Robin noticed all the crumpled papers littered across her floor. “What happened here?”

Regina rolled her eyes, frustrated. “Just designs that didn’t work out.”

He picks one up off the floor and uncrumfles it in his hand. It’s supposed to be a dress but it doesn’t look as though it’s finished. He holds it up to her. “Not what you had in mind.”

“I couldn’t even tell you,” she says, shaking her head. “It seems I’ve lost my creative clarity. I haven’t come up with a good idea in weeks.”
Her eyes fall to her soup, despondent, as she admits this. Robin notices and sighs as he takes a seat on the floor next to her chaise.

“Well, that’s unsurprising given everything’s that’s been on your mind these past few weeks,” he says, looking up at her. “Perhaps you should pull back a little. Give your mind a little space to breathe.”

Regina smirks, shaking her head at him. “Robin you know that’s not in my nature.”

“I am aware, yes,” he chuckles, nodding his head. “But it couldn’t hurt to try. Just relax.”

She sighs, letting her head fall back against the headrest. “I’ve tried but the grand opening is in less than 14 days. Every time I sit down I feel like there’s something else I should be doing.”

“Well, you’re sitting down now,” Robin points out with a smile. “Just take a break. Enjoy your soup.”

“Fine,” she mumbles, popping the lid off her lunch. “But only for a minute.”

She starts eating her soup and Robin decides to save his intentions talk for another day. He can tell she needs to relax and a talk about commitment is sure to derail that. Instead, he sits next to the chaise as she eats, looking over the designs she’d dropped to the floor. One by one he uncrumples them, looking them over with curious eyes. She’s determined them failures but to his eyes they’re amazing. Some of them are unfinished and uncolored but he can see a piece of her in every one. Some of which pass from one design to the next. As he flips through them he can sense a trend forming, one that he can’t completely see but does notice.

He lays them out on the floor, tossing behind his shoulder, “Which of these did you draw first?”

“Hmm?” Regina finally notices that he’s been pulling her dead designs from their graveyard. “What are you doing?”

“Just looking them over,” he answers, shrugging his shoulders. “They’re beautiful.”

“They’re worthless,” she sullenly retorts. “None of them are what they’re supposed to be.”

“And what is that?” asked Robin.

She hesitates before shaking her head. “I still have no idea.”

“Then why don’t you stop trying to see what they should be and start looking at what they are,” he suggests. “Come down here with me.”

She narrows her eyes at him and he repeats his direction. “I’m serious, come down here.”

She rolls her eyes but acquiesces, feeling like a child as she sets aside her soup and joins him on the carpet. He hands her the stack of designs. “Try sorting them out,” he says. “From first to last.”

“Why?” she groans, taking them from him.

“Because you called them failures,” he replied. “And in every failure there’s a tiny bit of success. You just have to look for it.”

She scoffs at him. “Where did you hear that? A fortune cookie?”

“A very inspirational poster at Target,” he replied, not missing a beat. “Now sort.”
He stares her down as if challenging her to refuse until finally she rolls her eyes and starts flipping through the designs. As she looks them over she realizes that not all of them are as awful as she’d earlier asserted. Some of them are salvageable, even a little good. Halfway through she paused.

“Huh,” she breathed, staring at the design. It was a simple floor-length ball gown, strapless with a sweetheart neckline. It wasn’t even close to done.

“What’s that?” asked Robin scooting closer to her, looking at the design over her shoulder.

“Just a dress,” she mumbled, still staring down at it. “It’s not finished.”

Robin looked it over with a tilted head. There was nothing wrong with it to his eyes. It looked pretty if a bit plain. Certainly not a failure.

“Why’d you throw it out?” he asked.

“I guess… I didn’t want to see it through,” Regina softly admitted. She dropped the papers into her lap and took a deep breath. Her back went stiff and her eyes turned contemplative as she started to stare into space.

“Regina?”

“What if I can’t do this?” she whispered.

Surprised flickered over his face at her question. “What?”

She turns to look at him, a twinge of fear in her eyes. “What if I can’t do this?” she repeats. “I’ve put so much into creating this place. What if I fail?”

“You won’t,” Robin asserted, shocked that she could even think such a thing.

Regina shook her head. “You don’t know that.”

“I do actually,” said Robin, nodding his head. His arm wraps around her shoulder pulling her closer. “Regina you forget that I’ve been here since the start of this. I’ve watched every move you’ve made since you’ve moved back to town. You’ve done everything right. You’ve thought everything through, you’ve made smart choices. You’re not going to fail.”

There’s sincerity in his words. She hears it, feels it. Running a hand through her hair, she lets out a slow deep breath. “I think I’m just feeling a little overwhelmed now that things are getting so close.” She pauses. “I’ve never been in charge like this before. I’ve never been a boss before.”

“ Doesn’t mean you won’t be good at it,” Robin points out. “This might be your first time with a title but it’s not the first time you’ve taken charge of something that needed direction. You did it with bar after Marian, you taught me how to live my life again, and Snow and Emma. You might not realize it Regina but you’re a born leader.”

She scoffs at him but a smile tugs on her lips. “You’re the only one who sees me that way.”

Robin shakes his head as he looks into her eyes. “No, I’m really not,” he promises.

He reaches out to guide a strand of hair behind her ear, letting his finger fall from her ear to caress her jawline, feeling himself getting lost in those brown eyes again.

“You’re incredible and everyone knows it,” he whispers.
She’s gone breathless. Listening to his soft words, feeling his hand against her cheek, looking into his blue eyes. He’s hypnotized her. Her eyes drop to his lips and she lean forward to kiss him, an action he eagerly accepts. She can feel his hand cradle the side of her face, the tips of his fingers reaching back into her hair as his lips move against hers.

It’s just as good as she remembers. The taste of his of his lips, the smell of his cologne and his scruff against her face. Same as the night in her kitchen she can’t get enough. Before she even realizes it she’s pulling up her skirt to straddle him, forcing his back against the chaise as she slips her tongue into his mouth.

Robin offers up no resistance. He’d come here to talk but her touch has rendered him mute at the moment. His hands run down her side, past her waist, caressing their way to the thighs she’s planted on either side of him. He feels her through the fabric and it’s not enough. He wants his hands on her skin.

She pulls her mouth away from his. “Robin, do you have-”

“One in my pocket and a box in the car,” he says cutting her off. After what happened on their date, never again would he be caught unprepared.

A flash of relief goes across Regina’s face. “Oh thank god,” she breathes. Her lips return to his, a little more urgent than before. Her hands drift down his chest until she reaches the hem of his shirt and starts to lift it up. Within seconds it’s over his head and on the floor leaving his glorious chest open to view. Like the night before she recognizes that Robin is in good shape. She can’t help running her hands over his toned chest and abs as she continues to moan into his mouth.

She’s not the only one yearning for a little skin. A sharp breath escapes her when she feels Robin’s hands pushing up the fabric of her skirt to feel more of her bare thighs. She mentally thanks herself for choosing not to wear one of her more structured pencil skirts that day. Robin’s hands move up her sides until he can wrap his arms around her waist pulling her closer, eliciting another breathy moan from her.

He tilts her back and she realizes that he’s laying her on the floor. She lets him. She wants to feel the weight of him above her as his body presses into hers. Soon her back is against the floor and her thighs against his waist as he hovers above her. His lips leave hers then, starting a journey down her body. Heat pools between her thighs as he kisses his way down her neck, his hands reaching for the buttons on her white blouse. He’s taking his time, going button by button and it’s driving her insane. She reaches to do a few on her own but he immediately pulls her hands back.

She finds herself staring into those blue eyes as he shakes his head. “I’ve waited so long for this,” he huskily reminds her. “Don’t you dare rush me.”

At that moment she loses all ability to form words. The most she can manage is a small nod and a soft ok.

He presses another kiss to her lips before continuing his task. Unlike the night before he wants to take his time. Wants to familiarize himself with every inch of her skin like he’s dreamed of so many nights before. He finishes with her buttons and finally allows her to slip out of her blouse. She’s wearing a lacy maroon bra and he lets his eyes roam over her hungrily before returning his lips to her skin. He kisses his way down her neck, leaving tiny love bites as he travels down to the valley of her breasts. Her chest is rising and falling with every heaving breath that she takes, spurring him on. He takes one in his hand, tugging down on the cup of her bra until her nipple is freed and he can take it into his mouth, causing another sharp moan to fall from her lips.
Regina’s heart pounds harder with every move he makes. She runs her fingers through his hair as he pays tribute to her chest. It’s almost too much and not enough. She wants more of him. Her hips shift as she grinds against him trying to relieve just a tiny part of the ache building inside of her. Robin’s hand rises up her thigh past her skirt - which is still on for reasons she can’t even comprehend - to press down on her hip. She lets out an impatient groan. It’s like he’s trying to drive her insane. Maybe he is.

He moves on from her breast, leaving open-mouthed kisses on his way down her stomach. He stops when he reaches the top of her skirt which is still, inexplicably, on. Her looks up at her, a hungry lust in his eyes.

“I want to taste you,” he whispers, and Regina’s heart skips a beat.

She fervently nods her head. “Do it. Please,” she begs.

Robin sits up to tug on her skirt until it slips off her legs. Once it’s gone he takes a moment to run his eyes over her nearly naked body. She looks so fucking amazing. Her lips are swollen from their kisses, her chest still heaving from her deep breaths. He could’ve spent hours taking in every detail of how she looked in this moment. But he didn’t have time for that.

Instead he chose to explore. Returning his lips to her navel he kissed his way to her hip bone, making his down to her right thigh, feeling her tremble in anticipation as he does so until his head is between her legs. He can hear her breathing heavily above as he slips her panties to the side and allows his breath to fall against her. Regina sharply moans when she finally feel his tongue against her, a soft oh my god falling from her lips to his ears. His hands run along the inside of her thighs as his tongue explores the place where she needs him most. She gasps as he licks from top to bottom, a cry flying from her throat when he swipes against her clit. Every sound she makes only spurs him on, fueling his need to find more ways to make her cry out in pleasure.

Moan after moan falls from her lips as he drives her into a frenzy. Her mind goes blank as the tension between her thighs grows tighter and tighter. Her fevered breaths filling the room as he licks and sucks at her clit giving her no rest from the pressure building inside of her. It grows and grows until her back arches and her palm slaps against the carpet as she cries out his name. Still he doesn’t let up and she’s consumed by the white-hot pleasure that takes over her body. She comes hard and quick around his tongue, seeing stars as he finishes her off.

Slowly she returns to earth, her skin still hot and sweaty and her heart still drumming as Robin kisses his way up her body. A satisfied smile creeps onto her face when she finds herself staring up at him once again as he settles next to her.

“Good?” he asks.

“Amazing,” she breathes.

She sees a flicker of relief pass over his eyes and she’s reminded of how long it’s been for both of them in this area. She finds herself impressed at the realization that this is Robin nearly five years out of practice. Dragging her fingers along his jawline, she pulls his face down to hers for a kiss, moaning in pleasure when she tastes herself on his lips.

A whirring sound comes from above them and a draft of cold air flows through the room. The air conditioner must’ve turned on. It sends a chill over them both.

Robin whispers against her lips, “Blanket?”
She nods. “Should be on the chaise.”

He presses another quick kiss to her lips before pulling away to grab the throw blanket from where she’d left it on the chaise. As they cuddle underneath it Regina feels her heart rate grow steady. Her head is against his chest and she can hear his own heart beating in time with hers as he lazily traces a line down her spine. She sighs contentedly with a smile on her face.

“Well… it appears you’ve gotten me to relax.”

A chuckle erupts from his throat and he drops a kiss to her forehead. “Believe me, I am happy I could help.”

His laughter subsides and he wraps his arm around her middle pulling her closer. She’s warm against his skin and soft to the touch. He can still taste her on his tongue and it keeps his heart racing.

Pulling back, he looks down at her. God she’s gorgeous. Her skin still glowing and her lips plump. She stares up at him with her chocolate eyes a smile still on her face. A smile he’d do anything to keep there.

“What are you thinking about?” she softly asks.

“Just you,” he answers with a shrug. He pauses and nervously licks his lips. “Listen, I know that it’s only been two days, or one date but I want you to know that when it comes to us… I’m all in.”

It was the best thing he could’ve said at that moment. His words fall straight to her heart, warming her from the inside out. Her smile widens as she reaches up to stroke jawline.

“I know,” she replies.

A happy, relieved breath escapes him as he smiles down at her. And for a brief second she thought he might say I love you. But he doesn’t. He doesn’t need to. Instead he kisses her. And in that kiss she feels everything he wants to say but doesn’t. All his love passes from his lips to hers and in that moment nothing else matters.

Not work, not the future. Just them. The two of them in this room is all that exists to her.

She moans against his mouth as their kisses go from languid and loving to fervent and urgent. They lay on their side as he pulls her closer and she hooks her leg around his waist so she can feel him hard against her crotch. His hand travels from the crook of her knee, up her thigh and past her waist leaving goosebumps as it goes, all the while his lips never leave hers. Reaching up he unsnaps her bra, freeing her breasts before moving his hand to her backside, gripping her amazing ass.

They are chest to chest, skin to skin and she can’t get enough of him. She drags her hand down from his shoulder to his chest and torso, letting her nails lightly scrape his skin as she pulls them toward the waistband of his jeans, their denim fabric and her silk panties being the only things separating the two of them.

She swiftly removes his belt and undoes the zipper, slipping her hand into his jeans to feel him against her palm. He hisses at her touch, muttering a sharp Christ, when she takes him in her hand.

“These need to come off,” she mumbles against his lips. Nodding his head, he reluctantly pulls from her to rid himself of both his pants and underwear. She watches him as he strips, taking advantage of the moment to slip off her own panties. He returns to her, condom in hand, immediately taking her lips between his again.
She pulls him on top of her wanting to feel the weight of his naked body against hers, her legs instinctively pull apart as he settles on top of her. His hand reaches between them, slipping his finger between her folds, cursing when he feels how wet and hot she is. Her breath catches in her throat at his touch. God she needs him.

His presses his forehead against her, their breath mixing in the air between and her fingertips dip into his shoulder with anticipation. Every inch of her is tingling in desperation. She wants him inside of her.

“Robin… please,” she moans and that’s all the encouragement he needs.

He presses a heated kiss against her lips and sheaths himself into the condom. She can feel him, running the head of his dick against her, teasing her entrance until she’s practically trembling with desire. Just when she’s about to demand that he fuck her, he pushes inside her causing a gasp to come from her throat.

It takes every ounce of his willpower to pause after the tip, giving her a chance to get used to him. Hot and slick, even through the condom she feel feels so damn good around him.

Panting with need, Regina runs her hand down his back pressing him closer, wanting, needing more of him. Robin slips his tongue inside her mouth, pushing forward to drive himself deeper inside her. She moans into his mouth, as her inner walls stretch welcoming him inside. God, he feels good.

Another sharp gasp falls from her lips when he’s finally seats himself inside her to the hilt. Her thighs tighten around his waist. He feels so good inside her she never wants him to leave. Robin’s hands drift down to her hips, gripping them tight as he starts to rock against her.

Every knock of his hips against hers elicits a moan from her. He gives her steady, deep strokes, taking pleasure in the sounds each one brings from her lips. Regina wraps her legs around his waist switching up the angle so he hit just the right spot inside of her. The heavy sound of their breaths fills the room as the heat grows between their bodies. It’s not long before the Regina feels that familiar pressure rise up in body, filling her from head to toe as they move against one another. The pitch of her moans grow higher and higher as the tension stretches and stretches until finally it snaps, sending wave after wave of pleasure over her. She holds onto him as she comes, the pulsing of her climax triggering his own.

Stars return to her eyes as she clenches around him, panting as the pressure inside her finally bursts. She grits her teeth as she gasps his name, hearing him groan hers in return.

They’re left panting for air as the pleasure finally recedes, their hearts still pounding in sync. Robin presses a deep kiss to her lips before finally allowing himself to slide from inside her, rolling onto his back beside her, they both took a minute to catch their breath and come down from their high.

“Wow,” breathed Regina. It’d been so long, she’d nearly forgotten how good sex can be.

Robin nods in agreement. “Yeah…”

She rolls over onto her side, staring at him as he catches his breath. His chest his still heaving and face is still flushed. “So…,” she ventures. “Was this what you had planned when you brought over the soup?”

A small bark of laughter comes from him as he shakes his head. “Not in my wildest dreams.”

She chuckles along with him at the absurdity of their situation. She’d never had this in mind while
decorating her office but should it happen again she certainly wouldn’t be upset.

Sliding closer to him she rests her head on his chest again, listening to the steady beat of his heart as he presses a kiss to her hair. She thinks to herself for a moment, remembering everything that has lead to this moment.

“Robin?”

“Hmm?”

She leans up on her elbow so she can look him in the eye. “About what you said earlier, about being all in with us… well, I am too. 100 hundred percent.”

Perhaps it’s a little too early and maybe their moving too fast but she wants him to know it. She wants this, she wants them. She never thought she’d have anything like it again and if he’s in then so is she. 100 hundred percent.

A smile tugs on Robin’s lips as he reaches over to rest his hand on her cheek. “I love you.”

Regina feels her heart swell as she smiles down at him. “I love you too.”
How do you know if someone’s a good guy or a bad guy?

Sidney Glass has asked himself this question many times and as he sits in a coffee shop, file in hand, sipping on a lukewarm espresso it wanders through his head once again.

What is it that makes someone good or bad?

When he was young and naïve he’d thought the world was split into two clear columns of black and white, good and bad, innocent and guilty. He used to tout around his so-called principals writing tidbit articles about crooks and heroes, as if life was truly that simple but that was decades ago. Time and experience has taught him that the world is for more grey than he’d previously realized. Human beings are complex creatures, himself included. When you’re kneeling in bushes, taking pictures of naked strangers going to town on their secretaries you can’t exactly call yourself better than them.

Over the years he’s seen soccer moms with pill addictions, embezzling philanthropists and don’t even get him started on adulterers.

Still he’s seasoned enough to know that just because a person does bad things doesn’t mean they’re a bad person. Selfish, maybe. Lying, obviously but not necessarily bad.

In his eyes, everyone’s got a dirty little secret and if you think you don’t just give yourself time.

Take for example, Elena Perez, the woman he was meeting with that day.

He’d done his homework on her. School teacher, orphan. One brother, never married, never arrested. Volunteered at her local community center, even managed to donate a check or two when she had the chance. There wasn’t a bone in her closet, let alone a skeleton. On paper she seemed like a good person. Exactly the sort of person you would trust.
Of course, that’s exactly the reason he’d chosen her in the first place.

He’d doubted whether she’d call him back or not. Their first meeting hadn’t exactly gone well. When he’d approached her outside the hospital she’d almost thrown hot tea in his face. For a while there he actually feared that he’d scared her off but less than an hour ago she’d shown up on his caller ID and told him to meet her here, at a coffee shop he knew was close to her house.

Taking another sip from his mug he almost felt disappointed in her.

He knew Cora would have his hide if things hadn’t worked out but a part of him had hoped that she wouldn’t show up. It would’ve restored his faith in humanity if she hadn’t but he was only halfway through his espresso when the bell above the door jingled and she walked in, half a wreck.

Her dark hair was thrown up in a lazy ponytail and judging by her wrinkled clothes it was clear that she’d put on whatever was closest. Even from across the room he could see that her brown eyes were rimmed with red. She’d been crying. Unsurprising, given all that he knew.

She spotted him waiting for her at the back table and her eyes guiltily dropped to the floor before she shuffled over to him. Uneasily she lowers herself into the seat across from him, subtly ensuring there was as much space between them as possible. Her hand is still gripping her purse and her eyes shift around the room as if searching for hidden cameras. He can tell she’s still wary of him, but he doesn’t mind. Most people are.

For the first few seconds they’re both quiet. She doesn’t know what to say and this is the part of his job he hates the most. Even if it’s the part he’s best at.

Finally, he offers her a tentative smile and asks, “I take it this means you’ve reconsidered my employer’s offer?”

Elena hesitates before responding with a stiff nod.

“So you’ll do as I asked?”

“Yes,” she grits out, harsher and more weary than intended. “I’ll do it. Just… do what you promised.”
Her voice wavers and guilt flares up in Sidney’s chest. He tries to squash it down but he know how she must feel. It’s never easy finding out the price of your own integrity. Especially not for people like her.

“You’ll get what you need as soon as you come through,” he assured her. “I’ll make sure it happens fast.”

Not exactly a promise he can keep but he can’t help himself. He wants to reassure her. His words don’t make the slightest difference. Elena simply crosses her arms and lets out a shaky breath, looking away from him and down at the table.

Before he can stop himself he asks, “How is your brother?”

Her eyes turn to him then, hard and angry as she sets her jaw.

“Worse,” she sharply answers. “But I’m sure you already knew that.”

Sidney only raises his eyebrow in response. She’s not wrong and they both know it.

Pushing away what’s left of his espresso he passes her a thin manila envelope that she hesitantly takes from him. “You’ll need these. Call me when it’s done, then I’ll make sure you get everything you need.”

It would be better if he’d just leave but for some reason he can’t resist adding, “Don’t worry Elena. After a while it starts to fade.”

She looks up at him. “What does?”

“The shame.”

Her wide, hurt eyes are the last thing he sees before walking out of the coffee shop. Without looking back he already knows that she’s probably crying again. Years ago he might’ve even felt bad about it but not anymore. It’s all part of the job, he tells himself. The truth is they both got what they needed tonight and if she wanted to cry over it that’s her choice, he couldn’t care less.
It doesn’t matter to him if Elena Perez is a good person. All that matters is that she’s a desperate one.

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Miles away from Sidney and his machinations, Regina sat on Robin’s couch with a relaxed smile on her face.

It was Thursday night and the day had been long and work had been miserable but none of that mattered now. All that mattered was the cartoon movie on tv, the two boys by her side and the smell of spaghetti sauce coming from the kitchen.

Ever since she’d moved into her own place she and Robin had created a standing arrangement to have dinner once a week with the boys, just the four of them. They’d pick a night - usually Thursday - and get together at his house or hers, pop in a classic Disney movie - something the boys hadn’t seen but they remembered from their childhoods - then have dinner together. At first it was just a nice little way to keep up with each other, nothing extravagant, but their dinners had quickly become her favorite part of the week.

Tonight they were watching 101 Dalmations, a movie she loved more than expected considering she was a fashion designer with an aversion to dogs of any kind. Chuckling along with the boys, she watched Roger and Anita stumble through their meet-cute in the park. Roland’s head was in her lap while Henry leaned against her shoulder munching on the small amount of kettle corn she’d allowed them to have before dinner. As she listened to their giggles she was reminded of a similar night she’d had with her father when she was a little girl. The two of them eating popcorn watching the very movie that she’s now showing her son. It’s still one of her favorite memories. Maybe that’s why she’s come to love their dinners so much. They reminded her that life was good again.

“Is dinner ready yet?” asked Roland, for the third time in fifteen minutes.

Regina smiled down at him and shook her head. “I don’t know sweetheart. Why don’t you let me check?”

Still pouting, Roland reluctantly lifted his head from her lap so she could get up. Standing to her feet Regina made sure to ruffle his hair before heading back toward the kitchen. Once there she
found Robin with his head bent over a pot on the stove, test-tasting the spaghetti sauce.

For a moment she stood by the refrigerator just watching him cook. During their short lived time as roommates she’d always loved watching him in the kitchen. When they’d first met he could hardly boil an egg on his own but somehow he’d become more at home in the kitchen than anywhere else in the house. It was a new side to him. One that reminded her of just how much they’d both changed in the last few years and how happy she was with where they are now.

Gently running her hand over his back, she approached him by the stove. “How’s it coming?”

“Almost done,” he said, stirring the sauce again. He looked over and smiled at her. “Is my son losing patience?”

Regina tilted her head from side to side. “I’d say you have ten, maybe fifteen minutes, before a complete meltdown.”

“Lovely,” replied Robin with a roll of his eyes. “Well you can tell King Roland that dinner will be ready in five.”

“I shall let his highness know,” quipped Regina.

Humming contently, she leaned against the counter taking in his profile. As she ran her eyes over his face she remembered what it felt like to feel his stubble against her cheek and his lips against her own. Biting down on her lip she tried to squash the urge to kiss him. The boys are in the other room and could walk in at any minute. It’s far too risky.

Still, a smile crawls onto her face. It’s only been five days since their date - three days since their moment in her office - and she was still on a bit of a high.

Over the last few years, she’d nearly forgotten the giddiness that comes with starting a new relationship. It was refreshing. After all those months of self doubt and inner turmoil she finally felt light, happy. Like for once there was nothing weighing her down. She hadn’t felt this good in years and, honestly, she was starting to wonder when the moment would come where she’d revert back to her former anxious self.

“So…” drawled Robin. “Can I ask you something?”
“Sure.”

He hesitates for a second. “When do you think we should tell the boys we’re together?”

Regina raised her eyebrows in shock. She wanted to speak but words got caught in the back of her throat causing her mouth to just hang open in shock. Suddenly her shoulders didn’t feel so weightless anymore.

Robin winced at her reaction. “Too soon?”

“I don’t know,” she mumbled, crossing her arms. “It’s early, definitely.”

“I know,” said Robin nodding his head. “I know we agreed to put it off but… it feels kind of weird, right? Not telling them.”

Regina softly nodded in agreement. If you’d have asked her two days ago if waiting to tell the boys was a good choice she would’ve said yes but now that she was here having Thursday night dinner she wasn’t so sure. When Henry had asked her whose house they would be at that week her heart had skipped a beat. And ever since their arrival she’d been sure to maintain an awkward two foot distance between her and Robin because she didn’t want the boys to be suspicious. It suddenly hit her that she was keeping a secret from her son. And she’d never done that before, not when it didn’t concern his safety. It felt… dishonest. Dangerously so.

“You’re right,” she said. “It doesn’t feel right that they don’t know but it’s still so soon.”

“I know and I completely understand if you’re not ready yet.”

She shook her head. “It’s not that I’m not ready Robin… I’m just worried that he might not be.”

Concern flared in Robin’s eyes. “You’re worried Henry will be upset?”

“More like confused.” She sighed, shrugging her shoulders. While things had been wonderful a
part of her balked at the idea of letting Henry know about her new relationship. She knew she’d need to tell him eventually but she had no idea how he’d react.

“I’ve never dated before, not with Henry. I’ve never had to tell him that I’m seeing someone in that way. I mean, how would I even start that conversation?”

“I have no idea,” said Robin, shaking his head. “I haven’t exactly done this either.”

“Well, aren’t you worried about how Roland will take it?”

“Of course I am,” he admitted, with a shrug of his shoulders, “but it’s Roland. He adores you, has always adored you and I doubt that will change just because I happen to kiss you every once in a while.”

Despite her best efforts a blush rose in her cheeks and a smile made its way back onto her face.

He reached out to rest his hand on her shoulder. “Remember our pact still stands. No matter what happens here” - he gestured between them - “nothing changes with them.”

“I know that’s what we said but they never agreed to that pact,” she said, lowering her voice and sending a cautious glance toward the living room. “I don’t want them to look at us differently.”

Robin crossed his arms. “Do you think that they will?”

“I don’t know,” she replied, shaking her head. She took a deep breath before continuing, “I love you Robin but I also love what we have with the four of us right now. I love what I have with Roland and I love what you have with Henry. And the idea of changing either of those relationships...it feels risky. Especially when it comes to you and Henry.”

Regina had always loved how much Henry looked up to Robin. It made her feel good to know that her son had a man he could talk to, especially when it came to things that he felt he couldn’t tell her. She feared that would change once she revealed that she and Robin were together. That Henry would stop seeing him as Robin but as just the man she was dating.
“Change can be risky,” agreed Robin, “but it can also be really good if you let it.”

He shrugged his shoulders. “Truth is, even though I’m nervous I’m also a little bit excited to let them know what’s been going on.”

“Really?”

“Yeah,” said Robin, with a hopeful grin. “What we have is something that makes me really happy, happier than I’ve felt in quite a while. And I think if we shared it with the boys they might be really happy too.”

Regina playfully rolled her eyes at his words. “God…”

“What?”

“Just trying to figure out how a cynic like me keeps falling for optimists like you,” she said, arching an eyebrow in his direction.

Robin chuckled under his breath. “From what I hear we are very good kissers.”

An easy laugh comes out before she can stop it. “Well… can’t argue with that.”

She sighs, silently thinking it over in her head. If it had been anyone else in any other situation she would’ve said no, that it was too soon for her to include Henry in this. But this was different. This was Robin. He’d always been a part of their lives, always would be and Henry loved him. Maybe it would be good to let him in on their relationship.

“I’ll talk to Henry tonight,” she said, with a firm nod of her head.

Robin raised his eyebrows. “Are you sure?”

She nods. “Yeah, it’s not like we can keep it from them for long. And if he does have any issues it’s better for me to know now so I can deal with them. I’ll let him know when we get home.”
“I could talk to Roland when I put him to bed,” Robin suggests, shrugging his shoulders. “Are you sure you don’t want to do it now? We could talk to them both, together?”

Immediately she shakes her head and lets out a short, anxious giggle. “No, I think it’s best that we do this one-on-one. I don’t want them to feel like they’re put on the spot.”

“Right,” said Robin, nodding his head. He lets out a nervous breath and hesitates before adding, “If he does have a problem… you’ll let me know right?”

As he looked at her with nervous, uncertain eyes warmth flickered in her heart. Before she can stop herself she’s planting a soft kiss on his right cheek.

Robin huffs in surprise. “What is that for?”

Feeling her anxiety drift away, she beamed up at him and answered, “Guess I like seeing that you care.”

He stares down at her, with a slightly confused smile on his face, but before he can form a response they’re interrupted by the sound of determined stomps coming from the hallway. Roland appears in the kitchen with an exaggerated pout.

“Is dinner ready yeeeeeet?” he dramatically moaned, throwing his head back and shaking his curls.

Robin sent him a stern look. “Would you like to give that another try your highness?”

Roland glared at his father but grumbled, “Is dinner ready, pleeeease?”

“It’ll be out in a second,” answered Regina, grabbing his hand. “Let’s go wait in the living room while your dad gets it ready.”

“Fine,” he whines, letting her lead him out of the kitchen. As they head into the hallway she turns back and gives Robin one last nervous smile. In a few hours or so they’d be telling the boys about
their relationship. It was a big step, one she was more than a little worried about, but as she held Roland’s hand and plopped back onto the couch with him and Henry she felt a little excited. Steps forward were always a little scary but if there was a chance they’d lead to more nights like these perhaps the risk was worth it.

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Since the day she realized she was pregnant with Henry Regina had only wanted the best for him. The best home, the best family and most importantly the best mother. After everything she’d gone through with Cora she’d wanted something different for her son. She wanted him to have a mother that he could trust, one he wasn’t afraid of, who made time for him, and could give him everything that he needed. Nearly ten years later, and for the most part she’s pleased with how she’s done. Her son is happy, he’s cared for and undoubtedly loved. Almost every night she’s able to lay her head on her pillow and know that she’s done the best that she possibly could for him.

But every once in a while a night will come where a decision has to be made or an action has to be taken and she will ask herself “Am I really doing what’s best for him?”

Tonight is one of those nights.

All through dinner her mind raced with that question. Through all the spaghetti and dalmations all she could think about was her talk with Robin, the decision to tell the boys and wondering if now was really the best moment. Her heart had thumped in chest as Robin kissed her cheek goodbye and whispered a small good luck into her ear. And her anxiety had only tripled as she’d driven home with Henry obliviously sitting in the front seat.

Once she got home and switched into her silk pajamas she fell back on her bed and blew out a frustrated breath. She had to tell Henry, she knew that. They spent far too much time with Robin and Roland for her to keep it a secret but what the hell was she supposed to say?

*Hey Henry, just a heads up I’m dating your godfather?*

God, it was like she’d danced straight into a parenting minefield with a blindfold on. All she wanted was to make this as easy as possible for him. She just wasn’t sure how.

As she went through possible opening lines in her head, her door opened and she saw Henry walk
into her bedroom dressed in his plaid pajama pants and a blue tee shirt. She tilts her head when she sees him, suddenly noticing that it had been months since he’d chosen to wear the comic book themed pajamas he used to be so fond of. Instead he’d been wearing more plain sleepwear ever since they’d moved to California, the cartoon characters and superheroes fading into the background. It suddenly hits her that he probably thinks he’s too old to wear them now. Her heart clenches at the thought of him maturing so fast.

Walking over to her bed he asked, “Hey mom, I forgot to tell you but Owen’s having a sleepover on Saturday. Can I go?”

“Sure sweetie,” she responds without hesitation. Normally she’d say no with such late notice but if she was gonna tilt his world on its axis then she might as well let him get a sleepover out of it.

Leaning forward, an idea sparked in her head. “Hey… how would you like some ice cream?”

Henry’s eyes grew wide. “Now?”

She nodded, unsurprised by his disbelief. No ice cream before bed was one of her stricter rules. She’d never allowed him to break it before but considering what would happen next, it couldn’t hurt to butter him up a bit.

“Well it’s been a rough day and I could use a pick-me up,” she lied. “What do you say? Want to split of a bowl of mint-chocolate chip with me?”

She giggled as Henry eagerly nodded his head. Wrapping her arm around his shoulders they head toward the kitchen where she takes out a tub of mint-chocolate chip ice cream, their favorite. Setting a bowl between them at the table, she scoops out two hefty mounds for them to share and they waste no time digging in. Henry happily hums in delights as eats a spoonful of ice cream and Regina smiles at him.

She can’t imagine him ever being in a better mood so… it was now or never.

“So… did you have fun at Robin’s house tonight?” she tentatively asks.

“Yeah,” says Henry, nodding his head. “It’s always fun over there. I like it.”
“I like it too,” she nervously agrees. “Especially seeing Robin… and Roland!”

She hastily added her godson’s name, not wanting Henry to get suspicious of its absence. She needn’t have bothered though. Henry was far too focused on his ice cream to notice her slip up.

Sighing, she continues, “Hey… do you remember back when we lived in New York and Emma had her friend… August?”

Henry immediately starts to giggle and she knows he’s remembering the very memorable night when the two of them came home from a late dinner to the sight of Emma and August heavily making out on their doorstep. More than a year later Regina would still swear the embarrassed red in Emma’s cheeks didn’t fade for two days.

“You mean her boyfriend?” he mockingly sang.

“Yes her boyfriend,” she chuckled. Unsurprisingly, Henry nodded his head. For five months or so August had been a common sight around the house until he’d left to travel through Asia for a book he was writing. Regina had even allowed Emma to take Henry to the park with him, once or twice.

“You remember how he used to take her on dates and things like that?” She gulps when Henry hummed in affirmatively. “Well… what if I had someone like that?”

Swallowing another scoop of ice cream, Henry just narrows his eyes at her as she continued to mumble, “You know someone to take me out on dates and things like that.”

“You mean like a boyfriend?”

She nodded. “Yeah… like a boyfriend.”

Henry stared at her for a moment before shrugging his shoulders. “Why don’t you just do that with Robin?”
Thank god ice cream melts quickly because she nearly chokes on hers. Internally screaming, she coughs up a storm at her son’s casual suggestion that she date the man she’s already seeing. Clearing her throat she pushes on.

“Well, now that you mention it… Robin and I have been on a date,” she nervously reveals.

Now that manages to get his full attention. Eyes widened, he sets his spoon down. “You have?”

“Yeah we have.” Regina nods her head with a small smile. “It was really nice and we both really liked it. We both... really like each other actually.”

Henry’s silent for a moment before softly asking, “You mean… like you used to like my dad?”

It’s a question that gives her pause, clenching her heart and leaving her unsure of how to answer him. She hadn’t really expected him to bring up Daniel. Talking about him was still a little new to them both and hearing him mentioned in this context was a bit of a gut punch.

“That’s a complicated question Henry,” she answers, honestly. “But… a little bit, yeah.”

Henry presses his lips together, thinking about her answer. “So… Robin’s your boyfriend now?”

“Mm-hmm,” she nervously hums, nodding her head. Her palms are sweaty as she clasps her hands in her lap, awaiting his reaction. “So… how do you feel about that?”

Henry shrugs his shoulders. “I don’t know,” he mumbles.

It’s not exactly the response she’d been hoping for. She takes his hand in her own, hoping to offer up some comfort.

“Henry…”

“Does that mean you guys like… kiss and stuff?”
Her eyes widen at his sudden question, and she can’t help the small, surprised laugh that falls from her lips as she nods her head. “Um, yes. Occasionally we kiss… and stuff.”

His face immediately twists up in disgust. “Gross! Are you gonna do it in front of me?”

“No,” she replies, full on laughing now as she shakes her head. “Not if we can help it.”

Henry sighs, relieved. With a shrug of his shoulders he turns back to his ice cream. “I guess that’s okay then.”

She beams down at him, hope in her eyes. “Really?”

“Yes,” Henry replies, scooping up another spoonful of ice cream. “Robin’s cool and I know you like him.”

Regina narrows her eyes at him, suspiciously. “How do you know?”

“Because you’re always making that face around him.”

“What face?” she asks incredulously.

Henry immediately plasters a wide grin on his face while fluttering his eyelashes like an adoring Disney princess. Regina’s jaw drops at his dramatic impression of her. “I do not look at him that way!”

There’s a smug look in Henry eyes as he nods his head. Clearly, his mother’s feelings hadn’t been as subtle as she’d intended.

Sweet relief flows through her at Henry’s easy acceptance of her relationship. Apparently, so long as she toned down their PDA Henry would be fine. It was the best she could’ve hoped for but she still wasn’t done.
Gently placing a finger under his chin, she turned his head so he could look into her eyes.

“Hey… you’ll always be my number one man. You know that, right?”

He nods, sending her a small smile. “I know.”

She smiles back at him, wondering how she ever managed to raise a son as amazing as the one she had. Letting out a deep breath she presses a kiss to his forehead, relieved that at least for tonight, her best is good enough.

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For Robin, holding a conversation with Roland was usually the easiest thing in the world. At five years old his son was quite the chatterbox. Unfiltered, unyielding and fully capable of talking for hours at time without complaint. Some days it was hard to a get word in edgewise and normally Robin would fine with that but tonight was different.

After drawing him a nice warm bath and dressing him in his fuzziest pajamas Robin still didn’t have a clue how to tell his son that he was dating Regina. It was halfway through storytime and he was still thinking up ways to explain it in a way Roland could understand. As he read aloud, regaling Roland with tales of glass slippers and evil stepmothers, he ran his hands through his son’s curls protectively. Roland was his everything and he didn’t want to confuse him. At only five years old could he even understand the concept of dating? If not, how could he put into simple terms how he felt about Regina?

They reached the end of the story and Robin closed the book with a sigh. “So, what’d you think of they story?”

“I liked it!” said Roland, tucked into his father’s side with a blanket pulled up to his chin. “Especially when the mice turned into horses.”

“I loved that part too,” replied Robin, smiling down at him. “I loved all the magical parts.”

They’d been reading different fairy tales every night for months now. When she’d moved out
Regina had left behind the storybook she’d inherited from her father. Henry had gotten too old for it and she’d said she rather have it stay in the family. Since then Robin had spent every night telling Roland tales of knights and princesses and wicked villains. There were even a few stories he hadn’t heard before.

Running his fingers along the edge of the storybook an idea popped into his head. Even if Roland didn’t understand the idea of dating, maybe he could understand the fairytale concept of love.

“Hey...you know what my favorite part was?” asked Robin, playfully nudging his son.

Roland shrugged his shoulders. “What?”

“I liked when the prince went to the ball and danced with Cinderella,” he revealed. “I thought it sweet when he fell in love with her.”

“I guess,” mumbled Roland, shrugging his shoulders. Robin suspected his son found that part of of the story boring in comparison to the magic. Still he pressed on.

Leaning closer to Roland he whispered, “You know… I went to a ball a little while ago.”

Roland’s eyes widened in excitement. “You did?”

“Mmm-hmm,” Robin hums, with a nod. “I went to a ball and I danced with an beautiful princess.”

“Just like in the story?” gasps Roland, a wide smile appearing on his face as he sat up.

“Just like in the story,” said Robin. He grinned as he thought back to his night with Regina, dancing under the night sky to the sound of a spanish guitar. Perhaps it wasn’t the crowded castle ballroom his son imagined but it’d been enchanting all the same. “Do you want to know the best part?”

“What?” asked Roland, on the edge of his seat.
Robin leaned close and whispered, “I fell in love with her.”

Roland’s jaw dropped. “With the princess?”

“Yes,” said Robin, nodding. “And I was really lucky that night. Do you know why?”

“Why?” asked Roland.

“Because the princess loved me back,” said Robin.

Wonder danced in Roland’s eyes as he imagined his father dancing with a fancy princess like the one in the pages of his storybook. Looking up at Robin, he asked, “Can I meet the princess?”

Robin hesitated nervously. “Well… you already have. You see, the princess is your Aunt Regina.”

Roland furrows his brow, instantly confused. “Aunt Regina’s not a princess!” he argues.

Letting out a nervous chuckle, Robin concedes with a nod. “Maybe not like the one in the book but… to me she is.”

“You mean because she’s pretty?” asks Roland, tilting his head.

“Yes because she’s pretty,” laughs Robin. “But also because she’s kind and nice and she really loves us, both of us, very much.”

Roland grows silent, his eyes dropping down to the storybook in thought. Concerned, Robin runs his hand through his curls once more. “Roland?”

His son looks up at him with curious eyes. “Daddy, if you love Aunt Regina does that mean you’re gonna marry her?”
“Umm..” Robin freezes in the moment. He hadn’t expected such a loaded question from him and he’s unsure how to answer.

“Well… we haven’t talked about it yet,” he responds diplomatically. “And I don’t expect we will for quite a while.”

Roland thinks on it for a moment before replying, “Good… because I don’t want you to marry her.”

He finishes his sentence with a firm nod of his head before settling back down into his blankets, utterly oblivious to the paralyzing shock he’d just left his father in.

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The next day Robin sat a table inside an italian restaurant less than three blocks from Regina’s work with his stomach in knots. They were meeting up for lunch and he was sweating bullets at the thought of it. More than twelve hours had passed and he could still hear his son’s voice, so soft but still so firm…

_I don’t want you to marry her._

It had been echoing in his head, making him toss and turn all night. He’d barely gotten any sleep. Instead he’d lied awake, mentally going over his words, praying, hoping there was something he had missed or understood wrong. There wasn’t. His son, young as he was, had given a very clear message.

He didn’t want his father and Regina together.

But why?

That was the question he stumbled over the most. Roland had always loved Regina. They spent so much time together and he’d never once seemed put off by her presence. In fact, he looked forward to it. Or at least that’s what Robin had thought. Not having a clear reason for Roland’s discomfort only fueled his hesitation to tell Regina what happened.
Sighing, he checked his watch. They hadn’t spoken since she’d left his house the night before. She’d be meeting him any moment now and he just knew she’d want to talk about the boys. Obviously, he’d have to tell her what Roland said and the thought of it broke his heart. She loved Roland like he was her own, he could only imagine how hurt she’ll feel at his rejection.

Not even ten seconds after his watch struck twelve he saw her walk in the door.

Gorgeous. She looked gorgeous and breathtaking in her tight black pencil skirt with a shining purple blouse that was neatly buttoned up except for the last two which revealed some of her perfect olive skin. His eyes would have wandered down further had they not been glued to the beaming smile she graced him with when she spied him across the restaurant.

Just before she reached the table, Robin got up, trying hard to meet her smile with one of his own. Regina greeted him with a hummed “Robin…” before she pressed a lingering kiss onto his lips which was full of promise. This was going to be hard, even harder than he expected it to be.

“How is work?” Robin blurted out, scolding himself immediately for asking nothing more intelligent. However, work was a safe topic. Work didn’t involve them or their relationship. Had he asked about Henry, Regina might have jumped right in for the topic he was trying to avoid for now.

He listened to her talk while they were looking at the menu, but his thoughts were still circling around the best way to break the news to her. They ordered their lunch along with a glass of merlot for her which turned up at their table only moments later. Watching as the sommelier filled her glass, Robin found himself itching for a sip. It had been nearly five years since he’d had a drink. Most days he didn’t miss it but right now he could really use something to take the edge off.

Once Regina’s glass was full she raised it, smiling at him and waiting until he did the same. “To happy beginnings.” Their glasses clinked together softly before each of them took a sip. Robin downed almost half his water, the thought of their upcoming conversation made his mouth go dry. Regina looked so happy and excited it almost pained him to know he was going to shatter her mood before lunch was over.

“Are you free this weekend?” She asked playfully, setting her glass aside and leaning somewhat closer.

“Uh - I have to take care of a couple of things at the bar, but… why?”
“Oh, I was just thinking I could come over with Henry and we could celebrate… us.” Her teeth caught her lower lip which was pulled into a giddy grin. “I talked to him yesterday and he’s fine with the two of us dating.”

Robin’s heart stuttered in his chest. “Really?”

Regina nodded, still unable to keep her glee at bay. “He’s perfectly fine with it so long as we keep the PDA in front of him to a bare minimum.”

She let out a small laugh at her son’s boundaries and despite knowing how his side of the conversation would go Robin managed to add a tiny chuckle of his own. Though it would’ve been easier if Henry had been just as upset as Roland, he was glad that things had gone better for Regina. He knew her son’s opinion meant the world to her. She was practically glowing with relief now that she had his approval.

Regina laughed, swirling the wine in her glass. “I should be glad he still thinks of kissing as gross because he is growing up so fast and the time he will start noticing girls is right around the corner. Gosh, I don’t even want to think about that! Still, I’m happy he’s fine with everything. You know how much he loves you and I was scared of things becoming awkward between the two of you but I’m glad that’s not the case. So… how did things go with Roland?”

Sitting across from her, looking into those excited brown eyes Robin’s gut swirled like a hurricane. For a brief moment he even considered lying. Coming up with some small believable lie to keep the smile on her face almost seemed worth it but he knew he couldn’t do that. As hard as it was he had to tell her the truth.

Reaching out to grab her hand he allows himself a deep breath. Immediately, he sees apprehension seep into her eyes. “Things… didn’t go as expected.”

Keeping her eyes on his face, she gulps. “What do you mean?”

His gaze drops to the table, afraid to see the look on her face as he speaks. “Well, I told him that we were together, said that I loved you and that you loved us.” He paused for a beat before finishing. “And then he said… that he didn’t want me to marry you.”

Regina’s eyebrows scrunched together in confusion as she took in what Robin said. A flash of hurt
went across her eyes as she softly shook her head. “Roland...doesn’t want you to marry me?” She softly repeats his words as if she can’t believe them. “He said that?”

Robin regretfully nods, whispering, “Yeah.”

A sharp breath falls from her lips as she shakes her head again, still in disbelief. “Well… did you say that you were?”

“Of course, I didn’t say that,” he immediately replies. “He asked me about it but I said it hadn’t come up.”

“Then why…”

She trails off with a frustrated sigh, still struggling to wrap her head around this new development. Resting her elbows against the table she pressed her fingertips to her temples. Closing her eyes she takes a deep breath before looking up at Robin. “Well… what did you say after he said that?”

Robin squirms in his seat, uncomfortably. “I… said okay, kissed him goodnight and went to bed.” Even as he rushes his words out he can see her eyes widen in shock.

“Robin!”

“I know,” he moans, ashamed. “I’m sorry. I panicked.”

“You didn’t say anything?” she desperately asks.

He shakes his head. “It all happened so fast. Then he said it and I didn’t know what to say and I didn’t want to put him on the spot. I’m sorry.”

She blows out another dejected breath. “So... Roland’s not okay with us being together?”

“I don’t think he is,” Robin softly responds.
A bullet to the gut would hurt less than the look on her face right now. So many emotions swirl in her brown eyes. Hurt, guilt, confusion… regret. That last one is scaring him the most. But just as he expected she doesn’t let any of those emotions out. Instead, she just sucks in a deep breath, straightens her back and remains silent. Within seconds, he knows that she’s run back into her own emotional vault, ready to throw away the key.

“Regina…”

She lets out a bitter chuckle and shakes her head. “No it’s fine. I’ve been blissfully happy for about a week now, so it was about time that life showed up to kick me in the teeth again.”

“Hey…” he reached out to grab her hand again, “this is not a kick in the teeth. It’s just… a small road bump. One we’ll get past together.”

“Your son doesn’t want us to be together Robin.” She sadly shrugs her shoulders. “How do we get past that?”

“He’s just a kid. He’s probably just confused,” Robin insists. “We’ll figure out ways to make him comfortable. It’ll just take time.”

The waiter showed up not long after with their food but Regina’s appetite was long gone. She hardly took three bites as they talked through lunch, trying to figure out ways to make Roland more comfortable. Less than half an hour later she cut the meal short, claiming she had a mountain of paperwork waiting back for her at the studio. It was a lie, he could tell but he still let her go. He promised her they would find a solution together but he knew that for now she needed her space.

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Good moods were a rare thing for Regina. The days where she woke up with a smile on her face, feeling like she didn’t have a care in the world were always few and far between. So when she woke up in the best of moods that morning a part of her knew that it wasn’t going to last.

After her lunch with Robin and hearing about Roland’s displeasure at their relationship, her mood swan dived off a cliff. She’d cut their lunch date short, claiming she had to get back to work but
the truth was she just wandered around for a bit after leaving.

She took a few minutes to walk around the neighborhood, lost in thought, trying to come to terms with what just happened. A part of her couldn’t believe it while the other wanted to kick herself for not seeing it coming. Then again, she had. When Robin brought up telling the boys about their relationship, a part of her knew it was too soon to say anything. She’d just been so happy and so optimistic she hadn’t been able to see straight. She should’ve insisted they waited, or that they talked the boys together, or just done something that would’ve helped them avoid the conundrum they were in now.

Roland didn’t want her to marry Robin.

Just thinking the words put an ache in her stomach. It wasn’t as if she planned to marry Robin. It was far too soon to be thinking of such things, she knew that but… hearing that he didn’t want it. Well, it was gut punch. Like having a door closed before you even knew it was there.

By the time she got back to work her head was still swirling and her good mood had completely dissipated. Unfortunately, she wouldn’t be the only person to notice that.

Over the past few weeks the studio had become a bit of a refuge for her. A place to find some quiet and be alone with her thoughts. That had all changed four days ago, when all the staff she’d hired had finally started working full time. She missed having a sanctuary but the grand opening was only a few days away. Things were down to the wire and she was grateful to have the help. Though no one would know it by the way she’d started treating them when she came back into work.

Trying to mask her worries with irritation and sarcasm, it was only minutes before she’d started snapping at everyone in sight. She didn’t even notice it until she’d asked her new receptionist for coffee and Snow walked in with a steaming mug in her hands and a curious look in her eye.

Regina narrowed her eyes, immediately suspicious. “What are you doing here?” Her gaze landed on the coffee in her hands. “And why are you bringing me my coffee instead of Anna?”

“Probably because she was too afraid to come in here herself,” said Snow, shutting the door behind her.

“Excuse me?” replied Regina, the challenge heavy in her tone as Snow set the mug onto her desk. Still pissed she lifted it to her lips relishing the taste of caffeine on her tongue. Anna might be a
coward but at least she knew how to make a decent cup of coffee.

Snow took a seat at the chair in front of her desk, the look on her face growing even more concerned as she realized just how snippy Regina seemed to be. “Everyone seemed to be a bit on edge when I walked in. Word is you’ve been on the warpath since lunch.”

A shameful heat flooded Regina’s cheeks upon hearing that news of her bad mood had spread around the studio. But what could she expect she hadn’t exactly done much to hide it. Taking a deep breath, she rolled her eyes and tried to play off her embarrassment. “Well, nice to know the gossip mill is the only thing working around here.”

“They’re just new,” Snow assured her. “You’re their boss, it’s the first time they’ve seen you upset. They’re just not sure what to make of it yet.”

Regina looked away, grumbling to herself, as she took another sip of coffee. She knew Snow was probably right, an upset boss was always cause for concern. Whenever Mal had been in a mood it’d felt like having a ticking bomb in the office. She silently resolved to tone it down a bit.

“So what makes you fearless enough to come in here,” she asked Snow. “I didn’t know you were dropping by today.”

Snow sighed, anxiously leaning forward in her seat. “I actually hadn’t planned on it. I just… I went to see the doctor you told me about.”

Regina straightened up, her eyebrows lifting ever so slightly. “Really? How’d it go?”

“Pretty good,” Snow breathlessly answered, nodding her head. She tapped her left arm. “I got the implant. It’ll take a month to really get started but it’s in there.”

Regina offered her a reassuring smile. Not long after their talk in the park Snow had asked her for some advice on birth control. Regina had immediately recommended her personal obgyn and a few forms of long-term birth control that she’d researched a while back. Though she hadn’t expected Snow to take action so quickly she was proud to see that she’d taken steps to protecting herself.

“How does it feel?” she asked, curious.
“Pretty much invisible,” said Snow, as if she was still a little surprised at it herself. “I thought I would feel it more but honestly, sometimes I forget it’s there.”

Regina hummed, approvingly. “Sounds nice. Might have to get one of those myself, now that I have reason to.”

After the whole condom fiasco on their first date, it might be nice to have some semi permanent insurance now that she was in a relationship again.

“How are things with you and Robin?” asked Snow. “I hope he’s not the reason you’re in a bad mood.”

Regina softly groaned. “Well… at least not directly.”

She muttered the words under her breath but it was still enough to widen Snow’s eyes. Concern clear on her face, she asked, “What happened?”

A part of Regina is reluctant to share the reason for her anxiety. It still seems a bit surreal to not have Roland’s approval. Despite the fact that he’s not her son - as far as blood goes - she still feels a pang of maternal guilt at the thought of it. As if she’d failed him in some way. And talking about her failures has never been easy for her.

Still she sees Snow sitting on the other side of her desk, her green eyes sparkling with worry at her silence. She knows if she doesn’t come clean the girl with will never let it go. It’s best to just let her in on the secret.

Sighing, she leaned back in her seat. “Last night Robin and I told the boys we were together.”

Snow knitted her eyebrows together, hesitating before she spoke. “Did it go badly?”

“Not for both of us,” replied Regina, with a shake of her head. “Henry took it great. He had some questions but potential PDA aside, he’s happy.”
“Well that’s great!” said Snow, a smile breaking out on her face. After a moment though she tilted her head, confusion clouding her eyes. “Wait… does that mean…?”

Regina let out a soft, disappointed breath. “Roland said that he doesn’t want Robin to marry me.”

“What?” The shock is clear in Snow’s tone, as her lips remain parted in surprise. Her eyes narrowed as she fell back in her seat, still trying to wrap her head around what Regina had just said. “He actually said that?”

“Word for word, according to Robin,” confirmed Regina, her eyes dropping down to her desk. The sting is still harsh in her cheeks as she takes in Snow’s reaction.

She’s still shaking her head in disbelief, unable to understand how this could be true. “I don’t understand…Roland loves you! I mean, really loves you!”

“I thought so too… until today,” muttered Regina, with just a hint of bitterness. Ever since lunch she’d been running through every interaction she’d had with her god son over the past year, searching for a hint of resentment or apprehension on his part. She couldn’t find a single moment that could’ve helped her see this coming. He’d always seemed so happy when she was around.

“Well, what does Robin say?”

Regina can’t hold the sarcastic scoff that falls from her lips. “He says that it’s ‘just a bump in the road’ and we’ll deal with it together.”

Snow hums her disapproval. “That’s it?”

“No,” she sighs, still shaking her head. “He wants us to spend more time with Roland, just the three of us. You know, so he can get a feel for the new dynamic. Since Henry has a sleepover tomorrow Robin wants me to spend the night with them.”

Snow’s optimism perks up at this idea. “Good, you should do that! It might help.”

A hesitant groan comes from Regina’s throat at the thought of the idea. “I don’t know,” she
mumbles. “If he’s really that uncomfortable it’s not gonna be something that we can solve overnight.”

“Probably not,” Snow agrees, “but it could be a good start.”

Regina simply shrugs her shoulders, still unconvinced.

A cautious smile appears on Snow’s face. “You know… I always had the best time when you had sleepovers with me.”

Regina looks up at her with a hint of pain in her eyes. Sleepovers with Snow hadn’t been an uncommon thing when she was still trapped under her mother’s thumb. They’d spend hours watching movies, braiding each other’s hair and talking about everything under the sun… all the while Regina’s gut would be swirling, wondering what she’d done to be placed in the hell she was living in.

Snow bit her lip, guiltily shaking her head. “I mean, I know now that it wasn’t -that you weren’t really happy to be there but… you were good to me. Always.”

Regina clenched her jaw, averting her gaze. “Well… I had to be.”

The two of them grew silent, both thinking back to that warped time when they first knew each other. Now that the truth was out they both knew that they had very different feelings about those memories and what they meant. Like always guilt filled the both of them at the thought of those differing perspectives - Snow for her ignorance, Regina for her lies.

Snow let out a soft breath before asking, “Why don’t you just try talking with him?”

“And say what?” asked Regina, tiredly. “I’ve already told him I loved him a million times. If he’s still not happy with me…”

“Just ask him what his deal is,” said Snow, shrugging her shoulders. “If you ask, he’ll tell you.”

Regina internally winced at the thought of having such a conversation. While a part of her was just
afraid of what his answer might be, another felt like the conversation would be too much for Roland. He was only five after all. “I don’t know, he’s so young…” she weakly argued.

Snow shook her head. “He might be just a kid but I’m sure he knows his own feelings, even if he doesn’t understand them completely.”

She pressed her lips together, and sucked in a deep breath. “You know my father never asked me how I was feeling…like, really never. I never got the chance to say aloud whether I was happy with something or uncomfortable with it. At least not until you showed up.”

“You were always asking me if I felt okay or if I was happy with things.” She let out a forced, bitter chuckle. “Of course, now I know that I probably wasn’t giving you the answers that you wanted.”

Once the truth had come out about Regina’s torture, Snow had realized that all those times she’d asked if she was happy with their relationship she was hoping that she’d say no so her father would possibly release her from Cora’s deal. The knowledge that she’d always had an enthusiastic yes on the tip of her tongue made her gut swirl now.

“Still,” mumbled Snow, “I always liked that you asked. It made me feel… heard.”

Regina knitted her eyebrows together. “You think Roland just wants to be heard?”

“I think that it can’t hurt to listen,” Snow replied. With a shrug of her shoulders, she offered her a cautious smile. “And who knows… maybe he’ll help you over the speed bump himself.”

Regina leaned back in her seat, thoughtfully considering all Snow had said. It was always rough thinking about their twisted past together but at least this time it had offered up a helpful perspective. The issues with Roland wouldn’t be solved without effort, and the most certainly wouldn’t be solved by hiding from them. If she wanted the three of them to get past this - and she did - she’d have to face it head on. And luckily, she had a partner who wanted to face things head on with her.
Chapter 41

Robin woke up earlier than usual Friday morning. It was the day of the sleepover and he'd barely gotten a wink of sleep. All through the night he'd tossed and turned, going over hypothetical scenarios in his head. What could wrong, what could go right. It was impossible to sleep with all the buzzing in his mind. Glancing at the clock, he threw off his blankets and he padded down the hall to Roland's room.

When he was younger he never imagined he'd be one of those parents, so easily mesmerized by their child's sleeping form, but he was quickly proven wrong. He used to watch Roland sleep all the time when he was a baby, especially after Marian died. There were whole nights where he wouldn't even go to bed, he'd fall asleep in the rocking chair next to Roland's crib, drifting off to the sight of his little fists clutching and loosening. He'd been so precious as a baby. He still was.

Dressed in his dinosaur pajamas, Roland laid on his side, clutching his old stuffed monkey to his body. He was utterly peaceful, just like his mother used to be when she slept.

Robin sighed, gently taking a seat on the edge of Roland's bed. His son was peaceful now, but he wondered how he'd take it when he told him Regina would be picking him up from school and spending the night. Hopefully, there wouldn't be a tantrum or anything drastic.

For the hundredth time, he mentally kicked himself for announcing his new relationship so quickly. The only reason he'd wanted to tell Henry and Roland about him and Regina was because he'd been sure neither of them would have a problem with it. He'd had no reason to think otherwise. Roland loved Regina. His son always lit up at her name and asked about her and Henry. This reaction to their relationship came completely out of left field.

There had to be a reason.

Gently running his hand over Roland's hair, he prayed he'd get answers tonight.

Light began to spill in through the window, casting shadows across the room. The sun had started to rise and Robin knew his son wouldn't be far behind. Tiptoeing out of the room, he headed down to the kitchen, suddenly struck with the idea he should make a special breakfast to help cushion the blow of today's announcement. Roland loved pancakes. He especially loved making them into faces using bacon, fruit, and other toppings. Normally, Robin wouldn't bust them out on a weekday but he was already up earlier than usual and he'd bought a load of groceries the day before, so he had everything he needed. Must've been fate. Or his subconscious need for this day to go as swimmingly as possible.

He'd just started whipping the pancake mix when the stairs started to creak, straining under the weight of steady thuds.

"Stop hopping down the stairs!" he yelled down the hall.

In return, a mischievous giggle reached his ears. That sound would never fail to put a smile on his face. Over the past few weeks Roland had taken to hopping down onto every other stair - like a big boy, he'd explained. Of course, Robin had immediately told him of the dangers of jumping down the stairs but Roland remained undeterred.

His son, the fearless daredevil.
The thudding ceased - replaced by rapid, even footsteps - and Roland walked into the kitchen moments later, his hair still tousled from sleep.

"G'morning, Papa," he yawned, stretching his little arms.

"Good morning, Roland."

Roland walked up to the counter, his brown eyes growing wide as saucers when he saw his father stirring the batter. "Are we having pancakes for breakfast?" he asked, excitement in his voice and the sleep leaving his eyes.

Robin nodded his head. "Yeah, we are." A happy laugh rose in his chest when his son started dancing with glee. "You wanna give Papa a hand and get the pancake skillet?"

Roland nodded, replying with an assertive okay before walking over to the second cabinet from the sink. Helping out in the kitchen was his favorite chore and he knew exactly where everything was. Sometimes his father wondered if he had a future chef on his hands. In less than five minutes, the skillet was on the stove and Robin was pouring out three small silver dollar pancakes while Roland waited at the counter, still in his dino pajamas, his feet swinging back and forth as he watched his father cook.

"Papa, do we have strawberries?" he asked. "I wanna make my pancakes into clowns."

"Just picked some up yesterday," Robin answered, a grin still on his face. Strawberries were a perfect substitute for a clown nose. Henry taught it to Roland when he lived with them, and the younger boy had been doing it ever since. The mention of it made Robin think back to those days when Henry and Regina first moved back to California, how easy it had been to blend their lives together. He wondered if she'd be willing to give it another try one day, when things were settled with Roland, of course.

"And here are three blank faces for you," he drawled, dropping the pancakes onto a plate and setting them down in front of his son. Roland drummed his fingers against the counter, giggling in anticipation. He was probably thinking of all the different ways he could style his meal.

Reaching into the fridge, Robin pulled out a small box of blueberries, strawberries, and a canister of whipped cream. He passed over the fruit easily, but when Roland reached for the cream he held back. "How much are you going to use?"

"Enough to make me happy…"

"But…"

"Not enough to make me sick," Roland finished, sending his father puppy dog eyes and a pout.

Robin smiled, relinquishing the whipped cream. "Good boy."

As Roland started eagerly shaking up the can, Robin glanced at the clock. They still had plenty of time left before it was time to get ready for daycare, but he knew he shouldn't put off the announcement any longer. If his son was going to throw a tantrum he'd rather him do it before they had to rush.

He hesitated to speak, watching as Roland carefully placed matching whipped cream smiles on all of his pancakes. Grabbing a seat on the stool next to him, he gently taps his son on the shoulder. "So Roland, I have surprise for you."
Roland eyes lit up, excited. "Is it more pancakes?"

"No," chuckled Robin, shaking his head. "It's not about pancakes. It's about tonight."

"What's happening tonight?" asked Roland, his eyes growing curious.

"Well, your Aunt Regina is coming for a visit," he said. "Henry's having a sleepover with one of his friends tonight. So we thought it might be fun if we could have a sleepover with you, just the three of us."

He waited with bated breath, fully expecting to worm his way through a minefield at best or battle a full-on meltdown at worst. But, as always, his son chose to surprise him. After sucking some misplaced whipped cream off his thumb, he simply tilted his head thoughtfully and asked, "Does that mean I get to stay up late?"

Robin blinked twice, stunned. "Umm… sure."

Roland grinned. "Do I get gummy worms, too?"

"Don't push your luck," replied Robin, regaining his bearings. Letting out a subtle, apprehensive breath he asked, "So… you're alright with Aunt Regina coming over for the night?"

Roland hummed affirmatively, turning his attention back to his pancakes. "Yeah, it sounds like fun."

"Okay…" he drawled, still uncertain. Passing his son the syrup, Robin knit his eyebrows together, more confused than he'd been an hour before.

That was far too easy.

In her own kitchen not too far away, Regina was also lost in her thoughts that morning. She'd nearly burned her eggs fretting about the night ahead.

After talking it over, she and Robin agreed that maybe they could do with more time with each other's boys. While she would be spending the night with Roland, she'd arranged for Robin to drive Henry to his sleepover that afternoon. It was a small gesture, unlikely to go awry but she still found herself apprehensive about things to come.

Telling the boys about their relationship hadn't gone as planned, and now she was worried it was all downhill from here.

Tossing out her overcooked eggs, she glanced at the clock. 7:15. She didn't have time to start from scratch again. Looks like it was a morning for cereal.

As she poured Henry a bowl of the far-too-sugary breakfast she normally reserved for weekends only, her phone started to ring. Robin's face lit up the screen and her heart skipped a beat. Wasting no time with preamble, she immediately asked, "How did it go?"

He hissed, apprehensively. "It went... well, I suppose?"

"You suppose?"

Anxiety bubbled up inside of her at the uncertainty in his voice. She knew he was giving Roland the heads up that she'd be coming over this morning and it'd robbed her of sleep the night before. She'd tossed and turned in her sheets for hours, worried her godson would be blindsided by the
Robin sighed. "Honestly, I don't know what to think. He barely had a reaction at all."

"Really?"

"Really," he insisted. "I told him you were coming over and he only brought up were gummy worms and bedtimes. It was like he hardly cared."

Regina leaned against the kitchen counter, her grip on its edge a tad more fierce than necessary. Roland's lack of reaction should be comforting to her but it was the furthest thing from that. He normally got excited for her visits. What if he didn't want to see her anymore? Or he froze her out when she got there?

"How did Henry take it when you told him I'd be picking him up from school today?" asked Robin.

"Um…" She peeked around the corner to make sure her son was still upstairs before whispering, "I haven't told him yet. I was gonna do it on the way to school."

"Are you sure he's fine with everything?" questioned Robin.

"Of course," Regina easily replied. "He told me so himself."

Henry's reaction to their relationship was the only thing that'd gone right in the past week. And he'd given her no reason to question its sincerity. Speaking of her darling son, she could hear his footsteps on the stairs. "Hey, I gotta go. I'll see you tonight, okay?"

"Okay, bye."

She'd barely hung up the phone when Henry walked into the kitchen, dressed in his school uniform but still rubbing the sleep out of his eyes. He lifted his eyebrows, questioningly, as she pulled down two cereal bowls from the cabinet. "I thought we were having eggs."

Regina glanced at the trash bin where she'd tossed the burnt eggs. "Well, I figured it was a cereal type of morning."

Twenty minutes later, after slurping down their cereal, the two of them were in the car headed towards Henry's school. As Regina drove along the roads, Henry reached onto the dashboard to fiddle with the radio, trying to find a station of his liking. In the past year his tastes shifted from the Radio Disney variety to more adult music with lyrics showcasing emotions he'd yet to experience. And a few she hoped he never did.

Turning onto his school's street, she told him, "Sweetie, I have some extra things to do at work today. So Robin's gonna pick you up from school and drive you to your sleepover, 'kay?"

Henry's face twisted up in displeasure. "Why can't Emma take me?"

"Uh… because Emma is busy," she lied, thrown off by his resistance.

Henry sighed, miffed, before turning to his mother. "Is Robin gonna pick me up from school all the time now?"

"No, it's just for tonight," she assured him, growing uneasy.

"Fine," he muttered as they pulled up to the drop off. She could tell he'd accepted the change in plans, but the sullen look on his face said he wasn't okay with it. She wanted to keep him in the car,
question him further on his feelings, but she was already in the drop off zone under the stern gaze of a volunteer mom. As Henry opened the door and climbed out, she stared out at him, helplessly. "I'll be there bright and early to pick you up tomorrow though, okay?"

"Okay," he mumbled. "Bye, Mom."

"Bye."

She'd barely gotten the word out before he closed the door on her, but she chose not to be hurt by that. She was far more occupied with the realization he hadn't given her a chance to say I love you.

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Robin didn't worry often. He wasn't prone to stress or to fixate. Sure, he'd had a rough childhood but in a way it'd inured him to the anxiety most people experience in their day to day lives. He never fixated on his appearance, whether he was "happy" in his job or what others thought of him. None of those things ever threw him off. As far as he was concerned he had a place to call home, somewhere steady to work and good, loyal friends. As long as he had those things he could get through anything. In the whole world there was really only one thing he worried about. His son.

Normally, Roland wouldn't give him much reason to be concerned. He was healthy, happy and well-adjusted. Everyone said so, not just Robin. Perhaps that's why he was fixating on Roland's reaction to his new relationship. It was the first time since Marian's death that he truly doubted if he was doing right by him.

"So, ready for the big sleepover tonight?"

Robin responded with a non-committal grunt as Killian appeared next to him behind the bar. It was midday at the Drunken Monk and Robin was behind the bar for the first time in months. He'd say it was because he was ahead on paperwork for the week, but the truth is he was trying to distract himself from his worries. A clearly impossible task.

"I suppose so," he ventured. "Regina's more nervous than ever, and Roland's still a mystery."

Killian thoughtfully nodded as he wiped down a glass mug. "He still hasn't mentioned the marriage thing again?"

"Not a word," Robin grumbled, leaning against the counter. "I'm starting to think he's forgotten he even said it."

"Nah," Killian shook his head. "Kids always remember the crazy stuff they say. They just don't know how to explain themselves."

"And how would you know? The only kid you've been around is mine."

"And Regina's!" Killian quickly pointed out. "Don't forget I almost changed his diaper once."

Robin rolled his eyes.

Still wiping down glasses, Killian eyed him curiously. "Have you given much thought to it?"

"Thought to what?"

"Marrying Regina."

"There's really no point until I can get Roland onboard first. I need to make sure he's okay."
"Of course, but after all these trials and tribulations are over with, do you think it's a possibility?"

Robin looked away, not wanting to answer him. Honestly, the idea had crossed his mind. He wasn't ring shopping or planning to get down on one knee but there were moments where he imagined being married to Regina. How it would feel, what their future together would look like, a life with the two of them and their boys. In his head, it was a pretty picture.

One he'd never get if he couldn't get his son to be okay with it.

"Anything's possible," he vaguely deflected. "I'm just trying to get through the night for right now."

"Fair enough," said Killian, letting it go with a shrug. "What about your afternoon with Henry today? It'll be your first time seeing him since he found out about you and Regina."

"I'm a little nervous but not expecting any issues. Regina said he was more than fine with everything."

"And you actually believe that?" scoffed Killian.

Robin went still. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"It means he's a nine-year old boy… and you're having sex with his mother."

"Come on!"

"It's true," laughed Killian, slapping a towel over his shoulder. "Young boys can have weird, protective relationships with their moms, especially single moms."

Robin screwed his face up in disbelief. "It's not like I'm some one night stand he found in the kitchen the next morning. Henry knows me - I've been in his life since he was a baby."

"That makes it even weirder," argued Killian. "I know the boy's always been fond of you, but you're his mother's boyfriend now. And if you think it's not gonna change how he sees you, then you're naive."

Scoffing, Robin turned away. "You're crazy."

Killian leaned against the counter, smugly crossing his arms. "Am I?" He scanned the room, eyes lighting up when he found who he was looking for. "Hey David?"

He called out to the newest bartender, David, - a young, strawberry-blonde college senior, who started working in the Drunken Monk half a year ago. Robin liked him. He was dependable, good with the customers and from what Regina told him he'd sparked up a relationship with Mary-Margaret. With a skeptic look on his face, he approached them. "Yeah?"

"You were raised by a single mother, right?"

He nodded. "Yeah, my Dad died when I was ten."

"Did she ever remarry?"

David narrowed his eyes, clearly uncomfortable. "Yeah… she married my baseball coach a few years later. Why are you asking about this?"

"It's for me," Robin sheepishly replied. "Regina and I told the boys we were dating earlier this
week and it hasn't gone well.”

Shaving it down to the barest bones he reiterated the whole situation, with Roland's comments and Henry's response. After listening to Robin's concern, David shook his head and blew out a sympathetic breath. "I hate to say it but… Killian's right."

Robin didn't even register the smug look on Killian's face before the panic crept under his skin. "But Henry and I have a good relationship. I love that boy."

"And I loved my baseball coach," replied David with a shrug. "But when he started dating my mom… it was awkward. The dynamic changed. He started spending more time with my mother than me, he was more on her side than mine. Eventually they became a unit and I started seeing him as just the man who lives in my house."

Swallowing hard, Robin asked, "But it's not like you hate him now?"

"Of course I don't hate him," said David. "He's a good man, my mom loves him. I just don't go out of my way to talk to him, I guess."

Listening to David talk about the deterioration of his relationship with his stepfather, the picture in Robin's head turned dark and murky. The idea of a future where Henry didn't talk to him was certainly not what he had in mind.

After she dropped Henry off, Regina took a quick day trip to Santa Monica. Thoughts of Roland had been swirling in her head all morning and before she knew it she was climbing in her car and telling Anna to forward all her calls. One hour later she was pulling up to Roland's favorite candy store.

As she stood in aisle three trying to decide whether sweet or sour gummy worms would make her more likeable, her cell phone rang. She answered without even looking.

"Regina Mills."

"Are you sure Henry's fine with our relationship?"

She knit her eyebrows together. "Robin?"

"Yeah. I was talking to the guys at work, and are you sure he's okay with us? I mean, really okay. I just feel like I should know before I pick him up."

He barreled on without stopping, the worry in his voice flowing from her phone and dropping at her feet. Biting her lip, she listens to him ramble, thinking of the way her son behaved that morning.

"Well… he told me he was fine with it last week," she softly evaded, not fooling him at all.

"And has that changed?"

She reluctantly sighed. "He was acting strange this morning when I told him you were picking him up today."

"Strange how?" he interrogated.

"Strange like… he was annoyed. He asked for Emma instead," she admitted. Leaning against the
Silence rang from his end of the line and she could picture him, sitting in the chair behind his desk, his jaw clenched, failing miserably as he tried not to let the hurt show in his eyes. God, she wished she was a better liar.

"Maybe you were right," he mumbled. "Maybe it was too soon to tell the boys."

Hearing his dejection made her heart sink into her stomach. Neither of their boys had taken the news of their relationship well and now they were both panicking. Not for the first time that day she wished she had a time machine to go back and tell herself to keep their relationship secret for a little longer. But alas, a time machine wasn't going to appear in her path anytime soon. For better or worse, the boys knew about them now and that meant facing any problems head on.

"Look… I know this hasn't gone as planned," she sighed. "But we are where we are, so let's stick to the plan and try to get past this. It's just a small road bump, remember?"

He chuckled, humorlessly. "Throwing my words back at me?"

"You threw them at me first," she reminded him, a small smile on her face. "Are you still alright picking up Henry after school?"

"Yeah," he sighed. "Any advice for swinging him back to my side?"

"Nothing you don't already know," she said. "I think you just need to talk to him, Robin. Give him some extra reassurance. I trust you."

"Well, one of us needs to," he replied, good-naturedly. They softly bid each other goodbye before hanging up.

Her stress levels roaring through the roof, Regina studied the rows of candy in front of her. Ridiculous as it was, she was sure one of them held the key to winning over Roland's heart. Grabbing a bag of sour gummy worms, she hoped Robin had an equally simple way of getting into her son's good graces.

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In all his years, Robin had never sat through anything as complicatedly strict as the pick up zone at Misthaven Elementary School. Regina had texted him a rundown of the rules the night before. Rules about green zones, time limits, and kinder had his head swirling in minutes. As he pulled into the school road, lining up his car behind the other more punctual parents, Robin sighed, silently cursing the no cell phone rule. He could use a distraction from his worries.

David and Killian had gotten into his head with all the stepfather talk, especially David. Earlier. Maybe he'd feel differently if Henry and Regina were two people he'd just met but they'd been a part of his for so long the idea of changes to their dynamic unnerved him. Especially when it came to Henry. He was Uncle Robin long before he and Regina became close. Honestly, their relationship hadn't been an easy one at the beginning. He was so young when Henry first came into his life, he'd had no idea how to care for a child of any of age, let alone a baby. Add to that, he and Marian had finally started getting past her miscarriage. After that the idea of being around that adorable little boy felt a little painful. He hadn't wanted to get attached, but it was impossible. All baby giggles and hazel eyes, Henry snuck under his skin. And after Marian died, spending time with him - babysitting, going to movies, and reading comics - helped him relearn how to be happy.

Their relationship meant a lot to him, even outside of Regina. It's change was inevitable but he
didn't want it to warp into something cold and unrecognizable. He supposed it was his job to make sure it didn't.

The end of day bell rang and kids started to fly out of the school's double doors, making their way to the parents waiting for them. It wasn't long before he spotted Henry. He trailed near the back of the crowd, flanked by two friends, his backpack jutting out from behind him in a turtle effect. Henry searched the pickup zone, at first overlooking Robin's jeep before doing a double-take. Robin grip on the steering wheel as he made his way over.

"Hi, Robin," he mumbled, climbing into the passenger seat.

"Hey, how was school?"

Henry shrugged. "It was okay."

"Anything interesting happen?"

"Nope."

Well, there went his plan for small talk.

Punching in the address Regina had given him, Robin pulled out of the pick up zone with Henry stoically sitting beside him. The silence between them was palpable. It prickled under his skin, urging him to speak, but not providing a topic to broach. Normally, he'd let Henry guide their conversations - filling him in on his friends and the books and comics he'd been reading that day - but his normally chatty godson appeared to have taken a vow of silence for the ride. He sat with his arms crossed over his backpack, staring out the car window and actively ignoring Robin's presence.

Daring to break the silence, Robin cleared his throat. "So… excited for your sleepover tonight?"

Henry shrugged.

"Any big plans?"

"Not really," he mumbled.

Their conversation continued like this for a while. Robin throwing out questions, desperate to get a conversation going. Henry replying with one or two-word answers, unwilling to throw him a bone. If he didn't know any better, he would've sworn he had a full-blown teenager in the car with him.

Beeping, the GPS instructed him to turn on the next block.

Glancing over at Henry, Robin realized they were reaching the end of their ride and he hadn't even gotten close to talking about the issues on his mind. Ignoring the GPS, he continued to drive straight.

Henry whipped his head in Robin's direction. "Hey! You missed the turn!"

"I know," he calmly replied. "We're taking a quick detour."

He drove for a few more blocks before pulling into the parking lot of a nearby park. Unbuckling his seatbelt, he nodded to Henry. "Come on. You can leave your bag in the car. We won't be long."

Henry stared at him for a moment, skepticism and challenge in his eyes. Robin could tell he was silently debating whether it was worth it to throw a fit or not. Lucky for him, Henry decided against
it, unbuckling his seatbelt and climbing out of the car.

Scanning the park for a place to sit, Robin guided them to a small cement table near the edge of a walking path. As they sat down on opposite sides, he noticed the surface was painted with white and black squares. A chess table. How fitting.

Henry stared at him expectantly, as he folded his hands atop the table. It was remarkable how much he looked like his mother in that moment.

Robin sighed, before speaking. "Henry, I wanted to have a talk with you today. Figured we'd do it on the ride over, keep it light and breezy, but now I see that was a mistake."

"It was?"

Robin nodded. "I see now you're more grown up than I realized. And you deserve an actual conversation, not just a five-minute chat in a car. So I want to talk to you like an adult. Man to man."

Sitting up straighter, Henry pulled his lips into a pleased smile. "Okay. What do you want to talk about?"

"About me and your mother."

Henry's shoulders deflated a bit. "Oh. You mean how you're boyfriend and girlfriend now?"

"Yes," Robin softly replied. Swallowing his hesitation, he pressed on. "See I care about your mother quite a bit, more than I've realized in the past and I like being with her… but I'm starting to think you're not feeling too good about it."

Henry shrugged, averting his gaze. "I'm okay."

Robin grimaced at Henry's poor attempt at hiding his feelings. It was clear he had reservations. "I know you said that when your mother talked to you about it earlier," he said. "But I wanted to check in on you myself."

"Why?"

"Because I care about you, Henry, and I wanted to give you a chance to say something, even if you think it might hurt my feelings, or hers."

Henry dropped his hands in his lap, but remained silent, thinking it over.

Robin leaned forward, resting his elbows against the table. "Anything you'd like to say, you can say right here. You can ask anything you want to know and I promise it won't leave this table if you don't want it to."

Hesitating for another moment, Henry finally asked, "How come you picked me up from school today?"

Robin blinked twice, blindsided by Henry's sharply asked question. "Because I wanted the chance to talk to you," he honestly answered.

"Are you gonna pick me up from school every day now?"

"No," said Robin, keeping his voice steady. "It's just for today."
Robin sighed. Henry had always been a perceptive and curious kid. Looking back, he should've expected for him to see right through the school pick up. It was somewhat out of the ordinary, especially after the news he'd gotten this week.

Henry settled back into his seat, thinking of another question. "Why do you like my mom?"

Unable to hide his grin, Robin lifted his shoulders. "Because I think she's an incredible person. She's strong and beautiful. I like her laugh and her eyes, and she's a really great mom."

"Hmm," Henry hummed thoughtfully. "I guess that's true."

Robin chuckled softly under his breath. It was the bare cliff notes of all the reasons he found Regina so amazing, but he doubted it was appropriate to wax poetic about a woman to her son's face.

"Is there anything else you'd like to ask?"

Pressing his lips together, Henry paused. "Did you… did you only hang out with me because you wanted Mom to like you?"

The smile immediately dropped off Robin's face and concern flooded his eyes. "No… why would you ask that?"

Henry shrugged. "Some of the kids at school said you only hung around me to get close to Mom."

Letting out a soft, angry breath, Robin resisted the urge to demand names and home addresses. Instead, he clenched his jaw and replied, "Well, they're wrong. Henry, I don't spend time with you because I think it'll make your mom like me more."

"You don't?"

"No," he assured him. "I spend time with you because you're one of my favorite people in the world. You like the same superheroes as I do and you always show me those funny videos on YouTube."

He laughed a little, thinking of the last batch of prank videos Henry showed him the week before.

"I know I have something special and new with your mom, but I also have something special with you. And that will always matter, no matter what. Besides… you were my friend first."

Henry smiled, visibly relaxing in his seat. "Okay… are you going to marry my mom?"

Robin chuckled, relieved to be back on a somewhat simpler question. "Honestly… that's up to your mom."

"I thought so," sighed Henry, knowingly shaking his head. "It's okay. I'll put in a good word for you."

"Thanks, that means a lot." Robin smirked, knowing he'd be sure to hear an earful from Regina once she caught wind of this. He glanced at his watch. They probably shouldn't stick around for much longer.. "Okay, is there anything else you'd like to ask before we go?"

Henry stared at him for a moment before averting his gaze and pressing his lips together. Robin's concern spiked at his silent reaction. "Henry… is there something you want to say?"

"Can you promise not to hurt my mom?"
"Henry, you know I'll always do my best to treat your mother well."

"That's not what I mean." He sighed, resting his arms against the table. "Ever since we met Grandma Evelyn, Mom's been talking to me more about my dad, Daniel. And whenever she does, I can tell that she gets kind of sad and when I was little she used to cry on his birthdays."

"Oh."

"I think she was really sad when my dad died and that's why she didn't talk about him for so long. So… could you promise you won't leave her alone like he did?"

Stunned, Robin ran his hand over his mouth. There were so many questions he was prepared to answer. This one was nowhere on the list.

A cool breeze ran over the table and he let out a deep, uncomfortable breath. He wondered how long this question had been on Henry's mind. How much he'd thought about what losing Daniel actually meant for him and his mother. He remembered how much losing his own father had affected him, how much it had changed his life. After that he'd thought about death a lot, wondering when it would show up again.

Henry stared at him expectantly from across the table, clearly hoping for an easy, reassuring answer. Robin wished he could give him one. Unfortunately, it wasn't that simple.

"Oh, Henry, you are such a smart and perceptive kid. So smart and so perceptive that I'm sure you know I can't make that promise."

Henry shoulders slumped, dejected, but Robin continued.

"Look, I know your mom has been hurt in the past because of what happened to your dad. I know because I've been hurt, too. Both of us know how much it hurts to lose someone that you care about. But we also know how impossible it is to predict what's going to happen in the future. So… I can't promise nothing will ever happen to me, but I will promise that I will do everything I can to make sure the time I have with you and your mom stretches on for as long as possible. Can that be enough for today?"

Pressing his lips together, Henry thought it over for a moment and shrugged. "I guess that's okay."

Robin smiled. "Good." He nodded toward the Jeep. "C'mon, I should get you to your sleepover."

As they walked back to the car he sighed, a little relieved. The talk had been rocky, but he was glad they'd had it. All relationships require maintenance. And he'd have a thousand awkward conversations to maintain the one he had with Henry.

Climbing into the passenger seat, Henry smiled. "You know… I actually like that Mom's dating you."

"Thanks."

"But I don't think she's gonna want to marry you for a long, long time."

Robin laughed, pulling out of the parking lot. "That's okay, Henry. I've got all the time in the world."

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Regina was buried in fabric orders when she got the text from Robin that he'd dropped Henry off. If she hadn't been so busy, she would've called him back and grilled him on how it went. Instead, she forced herself to stay focused on her work. Due to her gummy worm road trip, she was much further behind than she liked.

The bright side of being so busy was that she'd barely had a moment to worry about anything else. The grand opening of her boutique was less than a month away. With time running out everything was down to the wire. Next week she'd finally finish constructing on her main dress designs, her assistant had already started made all the final decisions for their opening event, models had been hired, caterers paid. It was all coming together. While that realization carried a lot of stress, it also brought a lot of excitement.

Never in her life had she dreamed of achieving so much on her own. Or that she'd be free to even try. She wouldn't say so aloud, but she was proud of herself.

By the time she walked out to her car that day, she was the last person left in the office. Everyone else had left at least an hour before her, but she preferred it that way. The boss should always be the hardest working person in the room. At least that's what she believed. Snow would argue that she hated to delegate, which might also be true if she was honest.

Climbing into the driver's seat of her car, she paused for a moment and let her hands rest on the steering wheel. Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath, trying to physically remove the clutches of work from her body. She was off the clock now. No more worrying about deadlines, or invitations, or profit schedules. In the silence of her car, she shed her work persona and turned back into Regina.

Unfortunately, Regina had her own set of problems.

Before pulling out of the parking lot she fired off a quick text to Robin, letting him know she was on her way. It was time for a sleepover with her boyfriend and his son.

She tapped her fingers against the steering wheel as she drove. On the outside, she was calm. On the inside, she was mentally going over every detail of the night ahead, like she had for the last twelve hours. In the backseat of the car was a purple overnight bag. Inside was her toothbrush, a makeup kit, face moisturizer, lotion, clothes for tomorrow, and a pair of modest satin pajamas. Oh, how she had agonized over those pajamas. She'd spent no less than two hours deciding which of her pajamas would be chaste enough to wear in front of Roland, yet enticing enough for a night in bed with his father. In the end, she'd settled on a set of blue cotton pajamas with a modest button-down, short sleeve top but with drawstring shorties that were sure to show off her legs, a feature of hers that Robin was quite obsessed with. Though satisfied with her choice, she knew the sexiness of her pajamas would not be the main issue tonight.

Tonight, she would only have eyes for Roland. Though Robin would be present for the sleepover, she'd long since resolved to pay him a minimum amount of attention. Instead all her attention would be centered on Roland. How his day went, how he liked the movie, and if he was ready for bed yet. Tonight was about their relationship, and she was determined to prove it could still be a good one, even if she was dating his father.

It wasn't long before she arrived at Robin's house. She didn't even knock before letting herself in. They were already expecting her and after months of living there it was just habit.

"Anybody home?" she greeted, already knowing the answer.

"Aunt Regina!"
She dropped her bags to the ground as Roland rounded the corner with a big smile on his face. He ran into her, wrapping his arms around her legs. "You're here!"

Regina stumbled, surprised by his easy affection. "Hi, sweetheart! Where's your dad?"

Roland immediately frowned. "He's in the kitchen." Gripping her hand, he asked, "Will you come and help me with my puzzle?"

Smiling, she nodded. "Sure."

As Roland all but dragged her to the living room, his father finally made his appearance.

"Look who's here," said Robin, greeting her with a kiss on the cheek. She noted the oaky smell of of his cologne as his lips brushed against her skin. He looked good, relaxed. After their phone call earlier, she thought he'd be more visibly anxious. Hopefully this was a sign things had gone well.

"How was work?" he asked.

She huffed tiredly. "Hectic, but good."

"Good." He smiled at her. "Well, I'm trying to figure out what the three of us are eating for tonight. Think you can help me cook something up?"

"No!" Roland stomped his foot and gripped both his hands around Regina's arm. "It's time for puzzles! You promised!"

He moaned frustratedly as he dug his fingers into her skin, trying to pull her into the living room. Clearly sensing a tantrum on its way, Regina knelt down to reassure him. "Okay, sweetie, we'll do puzzles first. That's fine." She turned to Robin. "Ordering in, sound good?"

He nodded. "Sure. I'll call in a pizza and then help you guys with your puzzle."

Roland moved to wrap his arms around Regina's waist. "No! The puzzle's just for us. You're not allowed to help!"

Robin stared at him in shock while Regina nodded her head, stunned. "Okay," she whispered, letting him pull her into the living room. As they walked away she turned back to Robin who still had a bewildered look on his face.

It was clearly the beginning of a long night.

Over the next few hours Regina was smothered in affection from her godson. They finished a puzzle together in record time. During dinner he sat on her lap and stayed there all through the Minions movie. His arms stayed wrapped around her, his head rested on her shoulder, and it appeared as though he loved her more than ever. Though the same could not be said for his father.

All evening Roland was determined to keep his father at arm's length. He refused to let him help with the puzzle and insisted he wasn't allowed to sit on the couch with them. It certainly wasn't the night Regina expected. Though she was glad Roland didn't seem mad at her, she could tell Robin wasn't pleased.

All during the movie she snuck glances at him. While she and Roland snuggled up beneath a single blanket sharing a bag of sour gummy worms, Robin was exiled to an armchair by himself. He took his banishment in stride though. Didn't utter a single word or admonishment in his son's direction the whole night. Though his patience made her love him even more, Regina knew better than to let
the night end on such a chilly note between father and son.

Once the end credits began to roll she feigned a yawn and stretched her arms. "Okay, I think it's time for bed now."

"No!" protested Roland, folding his hands together in a pleading way. "Can we watch another movie, please? I'm not even tired."

"Not yet," Robin corrected. "But after a bath and storytime, I bet you'll barely be able to keep your eyes open."

Roland pouted, flopping back onto the couch and crossing his arms. "I don't wanna take a bath."

"Well, I don't want a dirty little boy running through my halls," replied Robin. "Guess who's gonna get what they want today?"

Roland growled at him but Robin stared him down, unbothered. Realizing he wasn't going to get what he wanted, the young boy huffed and turned to his godmother. "Will you come with me to pick out my pajamas?"

"Roland, I already picked out your pajamas. You know that," said Robin.

Roland glared at him. "I want Aunt Regina to pick my pajamas."

"I'm sure the pajamas your father picked are fine," Regina assured him, running her fingers through his curls. "Why don't you run upstairs and see for yourself?" Seeing his reluctance, she added, "We'll be up in a minute."

Put off but compliant Roland stomped his way toward the stairs, giving the two adults in the room their first moment alone for the night. As soon as his footsteps faded away, Regina sighed deeply before walking straight into Robin's arms. Looking up, she gave him a tired smile. "Hi."

"Hello," he softly replied, pressing a kiss to her forehead. Nearly in sync, they breathed together, unbridledly soaking each other in.

Wrapped in Robin's arms again, it struck Regina how much she'd missed being close to him tonight. Though, she supposed it wasn't exactly her decision to keep him at bay.

"What is going on here?" she chuckled. "I've never seen him so…"

"Clingy and possessive?" Robin easily supplied. "Me neither. It is quite a color on him."

Regina sighed. "I don't understand. After what he said before I thought he'd hate me."

"Well, apparently, it's not you he hates."

She frowned, sympathetic. "I'm sorry." Robin hummed dejectedly and she rubbed his shoulder. "I'm sure he doesn't hate you. You've been his hero since the day he was born."

"Yeah, well I might be his hero but you're clearly his favorite," he replied with a shrug. "Maybe he's not mad about you dating me, as he is about me dating you."

"Well that's gonna be a problem because I happen to like you dating me." She smiled. "I should probably talk to him."

Robin, nodded in agreement. "He'll probably listen to anything that comes from his favorite."
Regina shook her head, unconvinced. "Moms and girlfriends are never the favorite."

Bathtime with Roland was always a bit of a hassle but nothing about the last few hours made Robin think tonight would be any easier. He sent Regina off to take a shower on her own, wanting a few minutes alone with his son. As expected Roland didn't take her absence well. Where there was usually splashing and stories made up with rubber ducks there was only silence. Roland sat in his bubble bath, arms-crossed and clearly pouting. He didn't say a word as he let his father rub shampoo in his hair, not even to complain about soap in his eyes.

He'd laughed it off downstairs with Regina but the truth was Robin was hurt. Roland rarely got mad at him, or anyone for that matter. Sure he threw the occasional tantrum but never anything that lasted more than an hour or so. However, this cold shoulder he seemed to be throwing appeared to be more long-term. That worried Robin. He wouldn't say it aloud but receiving the silent treatment from him hurt his heart.

Helping Roland tilt his head back to rinse out the shampoo, Robin asked, "How would you like it if your Aunt Regina read your bedtime story tonight?"

"That'd be okay, I guess," Roland mumbled.

"You know I'm really glad you're being so nice to her."

"I'm always nice to Aunt Regina. I like her."

"I can see that," drawled Robin. "But I'm starting to get the feeling you're not too happy with me."

Sinking deeper into his bath water, Roland offered up no response other than a sorry shrug of his shoulders.

His father sighed. "You know if you don't tell me what's wrong I can't fix it."

"I don't want to talk about it," he said, listlessly pushing away one of his floating toys.

Despite the gnawing desperation for an answer, Robin decided not to press him about it. Whatever the truth was, it would come out in it's own way. "Alright. It's okay if you don't want to talk about it. I just thought it might make you feel better." He paused. "It's usually what helps me."

Roland looked up at him. "Who do you talk to, Papa?"

"Lots of people," he easily replied. "All my friends. Your Uncle Killian and Aunt Mulan. And I talk to your Aunt Regina all the time."

"Does she make you feel better?"

Robin smiled. "Almost always."

Humming thoughtfully, Roland grabbed one of his toy boats. "That sounds nice."

Ending their conversation with a small nod, Robin chose not to push the issue any further. Needling Roland wouldn't work out for anyone. Instead he helped him out of the tub, wrapped him in one of his animal themed towels and prayed Regina would have better luck than he did.
It was a new experience showering in Robin's bathroom. Even in the many months she'd spent living under the same roof as him, Regina had never once stepped into his shower. She was more accustomed to the guest bathroom, to carefully stepping over Roland's squeaky water toys and getting distracted by the colorful sailboats on the shower curtain. Now she was marveling at the water pressure coming out of Robin's dual shower head and watching the steam fog over his clouded glass walls. For the first time she realized being Robin's girlfriend might come with perks. She didn't want to get out, but Roland would probably be finishing up his bath soon and she had to get ready for storytime.

After lingering in the shower, she rushed through the rest of her nightly routine, brushing her teeth and moisturizing her skin at double speed. She blow-dried her hair thinking of what she could say to Roland during storytime. It was clear he was having a lot of feelings about these new changes and she couldn't say she blamed him. She just hoped he would open up to her about whatever he was feeling.

The second she flipped off her hairdryer, Robin appeared in the bathroom doorway, a water stain scattered across his grey t-shirt. "Hey, Roland's in bed waiting for you."

"Okay," she said, running her fingers through her hair one last time. "I'll be there in a second."

Robin nodded but continued to idle in the doorway, his eyes lingering over her bare legs. She smirked, pleased. "Yes?"

"Nothing," he flirtatiously replied. "Nice shorts."

Regina stifled a chuckle as he walked away.

She found Roland in his bed like Robin said he would be. He looked up at her innocently as she walked through his bedroom door, his blankets pulled up tight over his chin. A night light glowed in the corner of his room, overshadowed by the desk lamp on his nightstand. As she cautiously took a seat on the edge of his twin bed, she spied the old book of fairytales she'd left behind for him. She smiled, knowing he still read it.

"Are you ready for your bedtime story, sweetheart?"

Roland shook his head. "I don't think I want a story tonight."

"You don't?"

"Can I talk to you instead?" he hesitantly asked. "Like Papa does?"

She raised her eyebrows, surprised, but immediately nodded. "Of course. You can talk to me about anything, Roland. You know that." She comfortingly ran her thumb across his cheek. "Something's bothering you, isn't it?"

He nodded, pressing his lips together. "Are you and Papa getting married?"

She sighed, shaking her head. "Not anytime soon," she promised. "But he told me you weren't too happy about that idea." Roland shrugged beneath his blanket and she pressed on. "Do you want to tell me why?"

"If you marry Papa… then you won't love me anymore."

"Oh, Roland… that's not true." It broke her heart that she would even have to tell him such a thing. "Why would you ever think that?"
"Because the fairytales say so."

Regina knit her eyebrows together, confused. "The fairytales?"

Stunned, she watched as Roland sat up in bed and grabbed the book of fairytales from his nightstand. Flipping through its pages, he stopped at an illustration of Cinderella's fairy godmother. "See," he pointed out. "The fairy godmother is good and the stepmother is bad."

"I see…" she cautiously drawled, watching him flip to a picture of Cinderella's wicked stepmother.

He passed the book to her with a sad frown. "You said you're my godmother, but if Papa marries you that means you'll be my stepmother and you won't be nice to me anymore."

Regina's grip on the book tightened as she stared at the picture of the wicked stepmother, drawn with a scowl on her lips and hatred in her eyes she directed Cinderella to scrub the mansion floors. A picture of what Roland imagines she'll become. Cruel, callous and out to hurt at it she imagined the stepmother's scowl replaced with her own mother's signature sneer. It was clear to her why Roland was so afraid.

Resisting the urge to burn the book on the spot, she sucked in a deep breath and simply closed it, hiding its pages away. She scooted closer to him on the bed and wrapped her arms around his shoulders. "Oh, sweetheart… there is nothing in this world that could ever make me stop loving you."

"Are you sure?" His brown eyes were wide with uncertainty.

"Of course," she insisted. "Roland being your godmother is very important to me. I'm so glad I get to be that person in your life but it is not the reason I love you or that I treat you so well. I love you because you're my Roland, and I couldn't find another you no matter how hard I tried. It's why I'll never stop loving you."

"But… the book…"

"Is full of wonderful, magical stories which are just that… stories," she gently explained. Sighing, she ran her hand over the cover. "I love how much you love these stories, Roland, but sometimes things in the real world don't always work like they do in the books. Stepmothers can be really sweet and godmothers can be really mean. You'll have to look into your heart to tell you what's true. Do you understand?"

"I guess so," he mumbled. "But the story made it seem so real."

"I know," she said, nodding. "But look at it." She reopened it to the page with the stepmother and Cinderella. "Look how mean she's being. Do you think, even if your Papa and I got married, that I'd ever be so mean to you?"

Roland hung his head. "No…"

"And do you think if we did get married that your father would ever let me treat you so badly?"

"No…" he mumbled thoughtfully. "He'd tell you to be nice to me."

"Of course he would," she said, squeezing his shoulder. "He loves you so much, he'd never let anyone hurt you."

Roland frowned guiltily. "I haven't been nice to Papa today," he whispered.
"No, you haven't," sighed Regina, brushing his hair away from his eyes. "But you can always say you're sorry. It would mean a lot to him if you did."

"Are you gonna tell him about what I said?" asked Roland, his brown eyes begging her to say no.

Unfortunately, Regina nodded. "I think I should, yes. But it'll be okay. I think he'll be happy to know what's on your mind. He's been worried about you."

"I'm sorry," he apologized. "I didn't mean to hurt anyone's feelings."

"Oh, you didn't," she said, pulling him closer. Pressing a kiss to the top of his head, she whispered into his curls, "We were just worried because you wouldn't tell us why you were hurting. I don't want you to feel like you have to hide things from me or your Papa ever. We always want to know what you're feeling."

"Even if it's bad?"

"Especially if it's bad," she insisted. "If we don't know your problems, we can't help you fix them."

Roland chuckled. "That's what Papa said."

"Well, your papa is a smart man," she replied with a grin. Giving him one last kiss on the cheek, she asked, "Do you feel better?"

Satisfied, Roland nodded before settling back beneath his blankets. "Will you stay with me until I go to sleep?"

What else could she say besides Of course?

Climbing beneath the blankets with him, she lets Roland rest his head against her chest as she turns off the lamp. It's not long before his breathing evens out and his grip around her waist slackens. Still she stays in bed with him, not quite ready to leave. In the dark, with only his nightlight to keep her company, she lets her mind wander for a little while.

As Roland drifts off to sleep in her arms, she lets herself think about their relationship. She remembers the day he was born, down to the moment when she'd first held him and suggested his name. She'd never expected it'd lead to this. To sleepovers with him and his father. To loving and caring about him as if he was her own. She thought about Marian for a little while - if she would approve of this role she'd taken in her son's life. If she'd approve of the role she could take. Stepmother. It was such a dirty, ugly word in her head but it hadn't always. Before Roland, before Snow and Leopold, before the fairy tales had shown her how ugly they could be, the idea of a stepmother hadn't sounded bad. As a little girl growing up under Cora's thumb, she'd rather liked the idea of a stepmother. A new mommy. Someone who was kind and sweet, who cared and had time for her and her father. Someone who would never scold or hit her. A woman to love her the way Cora never could. A part of her still fantasized about it.

In the dark she lightly ran her fingers through Roland's hair. She hadn't gotten the stepmother she'd wanted, but maybe she could be that stepmother for Roland.

Though she wasn't ready to fully explore that possibility, she realized she rather liked the idea of it.

Double checking that he was soundly asleep, she gently and carefully extracted herself from Roland's bed. After giving him one last kiss goodnight, she silently crept back into the hallway, making sure to shut the door behind her. All the lights in the house were off except the one coming from Robin's bedroom. Feeling light as air she walked toward it.
Robin was in bed when she walked through the door. Just by his eyes she could tell he was trying not to look worried, even though he was.

"Well that took longer than expected," he hesitantly ventured. "How'd it go?"

She nodded, a somewhat tired smile on her face. "It was good."

"Really?"

She hummed affirmatively, climbing into bed next to him. His blue comforter was warm and soft against her bare legs as she snuggled closer to his side. A comfortable sigh fell from her lips as he wrapped his arm around her and dropped a kiss to the top of her forehead.

"Did you figure out what was bothering him?"

Sheepishly, she sucked her teeth. "He didn't want you to marry me because he thought I would turn into a wicked stepmother."

Robin's head reared back in surprise. "What?"

"Apparently the fairy tales have been getting to his head," she elaborated, crossing her arms. "He thinks if we get married I'll suddenly hate him and force him to scrub our floors because all stepmothers are evil, apparently."

She wanted to take this seriously, to give Roland's concern as much weight and urgency as he did but looking at his father hold back laughter as she explained his ludicrous reasoning she started to crack up. Shaking her head, she tried not to giggle. "It's not funny."

"It is a little bit," disagreed Robin, already chuckling. After days of fretting over what was going on his son's head, it was a relief to hear his reaction was simply a misunderstanding between reality and fiction. "What did you say to him?"

"I told him I loved him and nothing could change that," she answered. "I also told him there was no way you would ever let anyone treat him badly, even if they were married to you. Pretty sure he believed me."

"Thank you," he said, smiling at her. "Feels nice to have someone defend my honor."

She chuckled, rolling her eyes. "Well, you're welcome. And you should know, he feels really bad about how he treated you tonight."

"Aww," drawled Robin. "I'll tell him it's okay in the morning. He's been nearly perfect for almost a year now. He was due for some bad behavior."

She hummed, absentmindedly, letting her head fall against Robin's headboard.

"Are you alright?"

"Yeah," she sighed. "I just never thought I'd be having these conversations. I never expected to be the girlfriend of someone's dad. It makes me feel…"

"Like you got lost somewhere along the way," he knowingly supplied. His touch turns gentler as he sighs in agreement. "I feel it too sometimes."

"Really?"
"Yeah." He shook his head. "I don't know what I expected my life to be when I was younger but I do know this wasn't it. I couldn't have seen any of this coming."

"Me neither," she softly replied. Hesitating to speak again, she lies on her side. "I used to think I'd be married by now. That I'd be living with my CEO husband and our two-point-five kids in some million dollar penthouse with a city view."

"That's what you wanted?"

She frowned. "Not really. It's just what I expected."

It's sad thinking about it now, the life she'd expected to have. Some husband picked out of an appropriate tax bracket, one with a lofty bank account and the right connections. Someone she could give children to in exchange for a cushy lifestyle of private jets, couture dresses and other gifts that would mask his inevitable indifference. A life with enough glitter to distract herself from the emptiness that colored every wife's eyes at every event she'd been forced to attend. She'd never wanted to join their ranks, to become one of the rich, married and medicated but she'd always seen the path in front of her. Both her parents had told her as much. She was supposed to get married, have children, maybe work a little and start a charity or two while she waited for her mother to croak and finally hand over the company. For so long, she'd expected things to turn out that way.

But now she was here. 32 years old, never married, lying next to her boyfriend - a bar owner and single father- after trying to convince his son she wouldn't turn on him.

She smiled, happy that it wasn't anywhere close to what she'd expected.

"How did things go with Henry?" she asked.

"Well… we had a talk."

She sat up at the tone of his voice, both hesitant and unsure. "And?"

"And… he's worried about you," Robin sadly replied. "He doesn't want you to get hurt."

She smirked. "Did he get overprotective with you?"

"No, not like that," said Robin, shaking his head. He paused. "He's worried that I'll die and you'll be sad again… like you were with Daniel."

Stunned to silence, she stares at him for a moment. When she finally she speaks her voice comes out soft and small. "He said that to you?"

"Yes." Robin nodded, a hint of guilt as in his blue eyes. As if he thought he had no right to know her son's private feelings. "I would've told you sooner-"

"It's fine." She cuts him off a little more sharply than intended but there's no condemnation in her words. She says them tiredly, like she needs a moment to force herself to believe them. "It's okay. I just… what did you say to him?"

"I told him I couldn't promise to live forever but that I'd still do my best," he answers, trying to bring a bit of levity back to their conversation.

Regina huffs, allowing herself a small smile. "Sounds like a fun talk."

Robin tilts his head at her, concerned. "Are you alright?"
"I'm fine," she lies. "I just... didn't think he noticed. I thought I'd hid it all away where he couldn't see it."

"Well maybe you did in the past but he's older now," Robin reminded her. "He sees more in people, even if he doesn't say so. And I hate to be the one to tell you but you have a terrible poker face."

"Thanks," she scoffed.

"You know it's not the worst thing in the world for your son to know you have feelings?"

"I know that," she stressed. "But those feelings, they used to bring me down to my knees. They made it so that I couldn't get out of bed. I don't want him thinking about me that way. Worrying I'll collapse again. He shouldn't have to."

"He doesn't have to," said Robin. "He chooses to. Because you're his mother and you raised a caring, perceptive kid who wants to make sure you're okay every once in a while. You've never fallen down on him, not once."

"Yeah, there's a first time for everything," she mumbled. Catching the concern in Robin's eyes, she shook her head. "It's fine. I just miss the days when he thought I was invincible."

"Well, if it helps I don't think he sees you any less because of it," he assured her. "I know I don't."

His hand reaches out to stroke her cheek and she feels herself relaxing into this touch. Falling back onto her pillow, she wonders aloud, "When did our children get so complicated?"

"The minute we got comfortable enough to let our guard down," he quipped, laying on his side to look her in the eye. "Still, even with all the curveballs they throw, I think we're doing a pretty good job."

A smile tugged on her lips. "We are." Her hand drifts between them, yearning to lace her fingers between his. Silently, she takes a moment to revel in how settled she feels. Everything with their boys is handled, there's no more fear of hurt feelings and lingering questions. She'd woken up this morning feeling like the sky was falling. Now it felt like everything was finally its place.

Letting go of his fingers, she let her hand move up to his shoulder, running her palm over all the skin along the way. "You know... if you were anyone else it wouldn't be worth it."

"I know," he whispered back.

Moving closer, he captured her lips in a kiss. In that moment Regina realized she had never been happier.

XXXXXXXX

Miles away in a penthouse with a view of the city, Cora Mills removed her earrings for the night. Placing them on her vanity she sat in front of the mirror and began to wipe away her makeup. She would've gone to bed hours ago but she was waiting for a call. One that would make everything fall in place.

Her cell phone rang and she tried not to sound too eager when she picked up. "Did you get what I need?"

"Yes I did." Sidney's voice was steady and self-assured as he answered. She had to resist rolling her eyes. He was always so pleased with himself for completing the smallest of tasks. "She's signed the
NDA and is willing to make all the calls."

"Excellent. Your check will be in the mail."

She hung up without another word, setting her phone down next to her earrings. A smile pulled on the edge of her lips. It wouldn't be long now before she got everything she wanted.

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