Music of the Heart

by InMyEyes2014

Summary

Granny Lucas loves to be both chef and matchmaker for the town of Storybrooke. When she sets her skills on Liam and Killian Jones, she is sure she has found the perfect matches with Elsa and Emma. While some participants are willing and others reluctant, Granny and her cohorts are determined to make each a match made in heaven or at least in lasagna. A Modern A/U with Ruby, Henry, Regina, Robin, Will, Mary Margaret, and David.
Chapter 1

So I’m working on writing a story on spec for a publisher…yay and scary all at the same time. While editing, I kept picturing some of the characters as OUAT characters and this popped out. I’m in the process of updating my other fics as well, but this one just won’t shut up.

“Henry,” Emma Swan called out, her voice frazzled and eyes burning from looking at the same pages spread out on the floor in front of her. “Henry!”

A noise akin to an elephant being trampled sounds from the bedroom to her right, making her wince at the painfulness of what was probably supposed to be a note in a song. Her son, still clutching a rented trumpet leaned his upper body into the living room with a flushed face and hair that was just a little too long. “Yeah, Mom?”

“I thought we had a deal,” she answered carefully. “You can practice your trumpet until dinner, but after that is quiet time. I really don’t need to fend off complaints about noise from the neighbors.”

He looked down at the brass instrument in his hands as if he hadn’t realized it was there before, quirking up a half smile at the realization. “Sorry,” he said without much sincerity. “Auditions are coming up and my teacher said I need to master another octave on the scales before I am a shoe in for it.”

Emma knew that her son was trying his best, having picked up the instrument for the first time only a few months before when the school year began. He had been reluctant about the switch from soccer to band, but a badly injured ankle had made the former much too risky for him that year. Band fit into his schedule and he seemed to enjoy the friends that also made up the group. However, Emma thought his enjoyment of it might be the new teacher who had taken over the class that year. Everyone raved about the man’s good looks and patience that seemed unequal to most saints. He spent hours every day with 11-14 year olds squawking away on instruments in some attempt to make music, never losing his temper or sense of humor according to Henry.

“I’m sure you’re going to get it, but remember we don’t live alone in this building. Phillip and Aurora just had a new baby. I’m sure they would appreciate a little quiet time to get the kid to sleep without a trumpet lullaby.” She smiled affectionately at her son. “Maybe you can practice more this weekend, okay? Here and at your dad’s?”

“I was hoping to go with some of the guys on the overnighter to the quarry,” Henry said, his eyes shining with excitement. The trip had been planned by the preteens with the idea that they could escape from the confines of parents and rules for an overnight trip with sleeping bags and battery charged video games. Emma had already said no to that idea, pushing aside the feeling that she was stifling him for the better emotions of protecting her one and only son.

“And your father and I already said that wasn’t happening. No wandering around the mines or the quarry. No staying the night with friends with no adults. Do I need to make the list again, kid?”

With a sigh, the 12 year old dropped the instrument into the seat of the chair by his door and smiled. “I could work on my English assignment,” he suggested helpfully. “Ms. Blanchard said my rough draft was pretty good.”

Sitting on the floor of the two bedroom apartment with her back against the couch and her legs crossed in front of her, Emma nodded. “The computer is all yours,” she said. “I’m just going to finish getting these documents in order.”
The two soon fell into their silent work, only interrupted by the occasional mumbled words to themselves or a grunt of frustration when things didn’t go that well. There was also the abject horror when Emma realized she had put the wrong end of the highlighter into her mouth and now was boasting florescent yellow lines around her lips. Henry’s laughing at that incident did not make her feel any better.

The boy sitting at the computer was her entire life, she admitted to herself as she restacked the papers that were beginning to take the form of a contract. Growing faster than she cared to admit, he was no longer the toddling child with the sweet smile and love of fairy tales. She couldn’t count the number of times they had curled up under the covers and read of princesses and fairies, evil spells, and villains. He had friends and interests outside of her now, growing up to be a man instead of a little boy.

“Can I have some hot chocolate?” he asked, interrupting her thoughts as she managed to stand on legs weak from sitting for so long. She smiled. Maybe there was a bit of the little boy left in him after all.

***AAA***

“There is a new invention, brother,” Killian Jones called out early the next morning as he balanced two plates and a glass in his left arm and flipped up the handle on the faucet with his right hand. “It’s called a sink. Marvelous thing really. Water literally pours from it and you can clean all sorts of things.”

The elder of the Jones brothers muttered something unintelligible into the pillow on the couch and threw a bent arm over his head in defense. Liam was not a morning person, nor was he thrilled at his brother’s early morning lesson of cleanliness when he was trying to sleep. He knew that Killian was not fully scolding him for leaving the dishes out overnight, but there was always some truth even in joking.

“We’ll go over the details later,” Killian said when his brother’s middle finger shot up in response to another bellow of his name. “I’m sure there is a schematic some place around here.”

It was a wonder that Liam Jones could even sleep in the noise of the cottage that his brother called home. While the city staff boasted about the quiet and unobstructed seaside views, the living area of the two bedroom cottage was hardly silent. A coffee maker was hissing to life and the garbage disposal growled incessantly at Killian’s command. Fishing ships and tugs just inside the channel all seemed to blow their horns directly down wind of them. Even his brother’s printer was humming in the second bedroom turned home office, probably printing out some assignments for his students.

Killian laughed amusedly at his the sight of Liam lifting his head off the pillow and sniffing the air as if a bloodhound. “Is that coffee?” he muttered, blinking at the bright sunlight that was reflected off the water just outside the windows. “Did you make me coffee?”

“I made myself coffee,” Killian corrected, pulling a red mug from the cabinet. “You’re welcome to the dribbles though. You know how to make your own and it isn’t like you have a boss who’ll be tracking you down if you’re late this morning.”

Liam rolled his eyes in defiance, pushing down the makeshift bed covers to stand in the center of the room. While Killian had readily welcomed his brother to live with him a while, he was sure that the younger of the two was never going to give up a chance to joke about the state of his employment. Newly resigned from the British Navy, Liam had bantered back and forth a few ideas for a job. However, finding none in their home in London, he had traveled to visit his brother in Maine with the idea that maybe inspiration would strike. So far inspiration had led to a few late night poker
games with their childhood friends and Killian’s neighbors, Robin and Will. With his visa in order he’d applied for a few things, but so far no bites.

“You do realize that one of the chief downfalls of unemployment is depression,” Liam said, folding the blankets and sheets for their spot in the closet. “And since when do you drink coffee in the morning? I thought you said you’d never give up your tea.”

Leaving just enough for Liam to have a cup, Killian lifted his own mug in a mocking cheers motion. “Since I have 42 sixth and seventh graders murdering the beauty and serenity of Chopin during my first class this morning. I needed something stronger than a spot of tea.”

“I think we left some rum in the bottle for you. But knowing Will probably not.” Frowning at the table where the card game had been played that night, he ran a hand through the curly hair that made him distinctly different than his brother. “You know we were talking last night after you went to bed.”

“Aye, I heard you three cackling like hens sitting on eggs out here. Some of us have responsibilities.”

“We were discussing.” Liam said, ignoring the second crack about his employment status, “the possibility to trying to put the band back together.”

That did surprise Killian, who held his mug part way to his lips and paused. “Why would you do that? And why bother to tell me about it? It’s not like I’m about to go out on the road with you. That ship has sailed, brother.”

“Killian.”

“No, don’t even try it. I did that for a good part of my youth and won’t try it again. If you want to play in smelly garages and bars for a few coins be my guest.” He found his mouth again with the mug and gulped down the liquid, the frown evident even in his blue eyes.

“Nobody’s asking you to play again,” Liam said softly, circling round the kitchen island to pour the rest of the coffee. “But we could use your voice. You aren’t that bad when you try.”

***AAA***

“We’re running late so no big orders, kid,” Emma announced as she pointed to one of the only empty booths at Granny’s diner. Not in the mood for the morning dose of Mommy guilt, Emma pushed past the other patrons to grab two menus from beside the cash register and signal to Ruby that they were ready to order. If Ruby got their food within five minutes, she could wolf down a few pancakes and drop Henry off at school all before the first bell. However, plans like that seldom worked out, she realized as Ruby sauntered over with more than just order taking on her mind.

“Food first and then gossip,” Emma said hopefully. “I’m in a hurry.”

The statuesque brunette flipped her pony tail over her shoulder and suggested the morning special to both of them. Not waiting for a response, she called out the order to Harold and then nudged Emma over with her hip so she could sit next to them as she poured a cup of coffee for her friend. “So Granny and I were talking.”

Rolling her eyes, Emma crossed her arms over her chest and waited for the punchline. “Not fighting? Because usually your talks end up in an argument.”

“Talking,” Ruby insisted, winking over at Henry who was trying to act disinterested with his comic book. “And she has someone she wants you to meet.”
Mrs. Lucas may have only had one grandchild, but she was Granny to everyone in town. New or old, she was the town matriarch and demanded respect from her patrons and guests. In addition to making the best clam chowder and second best lasagna in town, she was a bit of a matchmaker. If two lonely souls so much as ordered the same side dish, she was busily plotting to put them together.

“Of course she does,” Emma said with no filter on her sarcasm. “And what’s wrong with him? I thought she was saving the best guys for you.”

“I’m a lost cause,” Ruby answered. “It’s not like I’m looking.”

Emma knew that Ruby had no intention of settling down, despite her grandmother’s wishes to the contrary. Working in the diner to please the older woman was about as far as Ruby would go in order to stay in the last will and testament. She worked on her fashion design career at night and in any of her free time, but that wasn’t all. She had an active social life that included dating most all the eligible men in town. Her stories and adventures were legendary. However, Emma always censored her around Henry.

“So who is this guy?”

“He’s English,” Ruby said, her face lighting up as though she was relishing the thought. “He’s living with his brother over by the marina, which is cool since he’s really into sailing. He’s a musician type, Granny said. He’s got the most striking blue eyes and has an accent. He’s tall and lean. Just your type, Emma.”

Henry blew a few bubbles with his straw until both women glared at him. “He sounds like my music teacher, Mr. Jones.”

“That’s his name,” Ruby said with a slap of her palm on the table. “Isn’t that fabulous. He’s a music teacher and you’re a talent scout. It’s fate.”

Pursing her lips into a frown, Emma shook her head. “First of all, I’m not interested in dating right now. And second, he teaches middle schoolers their scales. I am looking for people to record music and win Grammy Awards. That sounds like Mary Margaret’s type not mine.”

The waitress sighed in temporary defeat as she stood and smoothed her apron down with her hands. “Fine, grow old alone and get a million cats. I’m not stopping you. But people offer to pay Granny for her matchmaking skills. And Mary Margaret is happily dating David, which is not going to change.”

“Unless I can get Bono and U2 to come perform in Storybrooke. She’s sort of a groupie.” Emma laughed, hoping that the humor would help bandage the feelings under the surface. “Come on. Why is this guy single? What’s wrong with him?”

“Nothing,” Ruby declared, a hand on her hip. “He and his brother are both dashing and full of fun. In fact, I heard Granny plotting to put the brother together with that client of yours, Elsa.”

Rolling her eyes again, Emma took a long draw from the coffee cup. It wasn’t her favorite, but it was a good way to wake up in the morning. “Elsa is not going to like this either.” Turning to Henry and clearly ending the conversation with Ruby, she pulled down the pages of the comic book with her finger. “I thought you were going to study for your vocab test today.”

“I have a note for you to sign,” Henry said, changing the subject and pulling a crumpled page out of his backpack that had its own seat at the table. “Like I told you, Mr. Jones is recommending me for honor band. Auditions are in a month.”
“And you want to do this?” Emma asked, carefully unfolding the paper. “I thought you were just doing band because you needed an extra class that wasn’t newspaper or yearbook? You didn’t even like playing trumpet last month. You actually asked me to write you a note to get you out of the class.”

Looking at her as though her memory was faulty, he smiled in that patronizing way he had that made him seem 40 years old instead of 12. “I like it now,” he drawled out. “Mr. Jones is kind of cool. He is a good teacher.”

“And how much is this going to cost?” Emma asked after chewing a bit of the bacon was hanging off the plate Ruby slid in front of her. “I’ve already spent like $500 on that writing camp for you this summer. And then there’s the tutor to help prepare you for the advanced math class. Don’t forget we’re still paying off the trumpet.”

“Mr. Jones said that I would be eligible for a scholarship,” Henry said, ignoring the way his mother huffed at the idea. “He’s even going to help me practice for free if you can pick me up. See he has ensemble practice until 4 and that’s when the last bus runs. So he can work with me for an hour after that. I said you’d probably be okay picking me up, but he wanted me to ask to make sure.”

Groaning, Emma curled her hand around her coffee mug and soaked in the warmness of it through her fingers. “And I’m just supposed to take off early to pick you up? No thoughts about my schedule at all?”

The boy’s eyes fell sharply, a light pink on his cheeks. “I just thought…”

“You really want to do this?” she asked again, taking another sip of the dark liquid. “I mean really?”

“Yes,” he assured her. “I’ll even do my homework before rehearsal every day. That way when you pick me up I can help cook dinner.” It was bribery, but she had to smile at the earnestness of it. “Maybe even help wash your car this weekend.”

“Yes, you will do your homework at school before these rehearsals. And yes, I’ll pick you up at 5 each day. But no later than 5. Deal?” Henry shook his head so fast that she was surprised the crumbs of his breakfast didn’t go sailing off his face. “So when does this start? Next week?”

Shifting in his chair, Henry looked down at the plate that was now nearly empty. “Today?”

***AAA***

The benefit to teaching music instead of some of the academic subjects was that Killian Jones did not have lunch duty. He had no homeroom class and few papers to grade, as his classes were more about playing music than the theory behind it. Sitting at his desk, he pulled open the lowest drawer and reached for the insulated bag that was supposed to contain his lunch. Fingers flexing for the smooth material, he came up empty and angry as he realized that he had left it on the counter in his small cottage.

“You’d starve if it wasn’t for me,” his brother said, arriving a few minutes later. “Lucky for you I was sharing a plate of those fries at the diner with Will.” The taller of the two brothers dropped a grease stained bag onto the desk and smirked. “That old woman who runs the place is hardcore.”

“Sounds cozy, but Granny is a different sort,” Killian admitted, tearing into the bag. “She insisted on bringing me soup for the first weeks after I got into town. Said she wasn’t going to have me wasting away because I was too embarrassed or proud.”

“Sounds rather kindly indeed,” Liam noted, plopping down on the shorter of the filing cabinets.
“Actually she was asking about you. Said she had an inkling that she might have found us each a match. Something about two blonde women she said come into the diner quite a bit.” Linking his hands together at the fingers, Liam stretched and grunted loudly. “Could be fun, you know? Double date with the Jones brothers?”

That was hardly a draw, Killian wanted to say. “Aye, we are irresistible. Me with one hand and you with no job.” His teeth sank into the overloaded sandwich, chewing methodically while his dining companion pretended to dig a knife out of his back.

“It’s a date, Killian. Dinner, maybe a movie, or a walk in the park. We aren’t talking about settling down and marrying these lasses. Let’s just consider it. From what I hear, Mrs. Lucas has a knack for matchmaking. And we aren’t getting any dates hanging a bout with wankers like Will and Robin all evening.”

“You’re on your own for this one, brother. I’m not interested.”

***AAA***

Emma propped her hip against the counter in her boss’s office, listening to the latest in an unending succession of recordings that people sent into Storybrooke Records in hopes of being the next big thing. As a scout, Emma had learned to trust her gut instinct on finding talent, understanding that the best artists did not send in their work. No, she had to find them where they played in garages and smoky clubs where she tried to knock off flirting patrons so she could assess the talent better.

“I like them,” Emma said with a nod to Regina Mills, the proprietress and daughter of the founder. “But they remind me of someone.”

Pressing a button on her computer, the dark haired woman smiled into the silence. “Me too, but I’m sure we can figure it out. I hear they are playing in Boston this weekend. Up for a trip?”

“I guess I can rearrange a few things,” Emma mumbled, pulling out her phone to check her schedule. “I’ve got that recording session I need to oversee with the two sisters, Elsa and Anna. But I just need to make an appearance there. It’s just a demo.”

Regina was not into details when it came to her employees, as she believed once she passed an edict that everyone should listen. Tapping a well-manicured finger on the top of her glass desk, Regina smiled to herself. “I knew I could count on you Ms. Swan. And on your way out can you tell my assistant that I’m free to meet with my sister now.”

That was a meeting that Emma was grateful to miss, as the thought of mediating between the warring sisters was something she was eager to avoid. Both attempted to run the company that had been their mother’s brainchild, each declaring that she was more suitable at the helm. Zelena was known worldwide for her ability to produce hit music and be just on the edge of the latest trends. Regina was more known for her business savvy. Each fought over every detail from the logo and stationary to the employees. When the decision was made to promote Emma from assistant to scout, Regina had said it was her who found the young woman while Zelena insisted she had been the one to pluck her up. Emma merely smiled and said thank you.

“She’s in a mood,” Aurora, Regina’s latest assistant moaned as she reached for a phone to call the other sister. “It’s going to be one of those days.”

“I’m sure you’ll manage,” Emma said with a careful smile. She knew that Aurora was known to complain about the conditions at Storybrooke Records, usually over drinks with friends at one of the local establishments. She whined that she was underpaid and overworked, a frequent complaint of
the company’s employees. However, Emma was careful not to join in the discussion. She knew that Regina was eager to fire anyone not deemed loyal and Zelena had her spies everywhere. You never knew if someone you complained to was one of them or not.

“You should join us for drinks tonight. Mulan is buying the first round.” Aurora smiled sweetly at the blonde and looked eager to have her join them.

“I don’t think so, but thanks for asking,” Emma said, already heading toward the stairs. “I have to pick my son up at five and you know I never go out after I get him home.” It was a bit of a lie, especially on a night when her son was having dinner with his father. However, it seemed easier to make an excuse than baldly state she wasn’t interested in work friends.

The mention of Henry seemed to strike something in the strawberry blonde behind the counter. “I almost forgot,” she screeched, digging through a pile of papers in front of her computer. If there was one thing that Emma disliked about the company it was the lack of technology. Recording studios were outfitted with only the best, but an assistant like Aurora was still using pink message pad notes instead of her computer. She waved it in front of Emma with a smile. “A Killian Jones called to make sure that you were aware of the practice schedule. And Mrs. Lucas called to invite you to dinner. Is that what I think it is? Granny always calls it an invite to dinner when she wants to set a couple up. This is so exciting.”

“Thank you, Aurora.” Thankfully Emma didn’t have to add any more as Zelena Mills appeared to be escorted into her sister’s office.
Chapter 2

Thank you for all the favorites, follows, kudos, and comments. I’m glad you are enjoying this. I won’t keep you in suspense over Captain Swan meeting, as that does happen in this chapter. You’ll get to see a little more Liam next chapter, including some of his motivation and background.

Some days were longer than others, Killian decided as he checked his mail slot in the teacher’s lounge. It was nothing more than a few forms, advertisements sent generically through the mail, and a flyer about a rummage sale that one of the clubs was hosting soon. A few of the other teachers were in there, paying more attention to their phones than the live human beings around him. He’d already had lunch so there was no need in getting anything from the vending machines and the thought of directing a conversation seemed a bit much. His decision was made when Mr. Gold entered the room with his eye on each of them.

After greeting the head master of the school with his usual formal curtness, Killian headed down the hall toward his classroom with his bag tossed over his shoulder. If he shaved off the stubble on his face, he could have passed for one of the students in the upper school. As his brother always told him, he had that baby face that seemed to never age despite the years and experience.

“Mr. Jones?” the school’s librarian, Belle Gold called out to him. “Mr. Jones, do you have a moment.”

Killian sighed, shifting the weight of his bag a bit as he turned to face the dark haired beauty. Belle was certainly a dedicated educator who loved her students, but she was also the wife of the head master. Talking to her meant censoring his thoughts, as he never quite trusted her not to tell all to the man calling the shots around the school. “How can I help you?”

“I was going through the paperwork for the honors program and noticed that you haven’t completed your recommendations yet. I know you’re busy, but these students really do really want to know the results. And you…I realize that you only have the one…”

“I’ll get to it by the end of today,” Killian said. “I have them printed out already.”

***AAA***

“I’m just not seeing any of these as a song that can carry a whole project,” Emma said into the speaker phone. Thankfully Elsa and Anna could not see her at that moment with her legs crossed under her and two cartons of Chinese on her desk thanks to her new boycott on Granny’s. “They are too generic. Maybe we should look at the catalog again.”

She knew she was in for a fight when she suggested going to the catalog, as both women detested singing covers and wanted to write their own material. However, none of the ladies’ songs rang true enough to suit the powers that be.

“I have been working on a little something,” Anna said in that overly chipper way she had. “It’s about finding love again after a break up.”

The younger sister sang a few verses of what Emma worried would fall in the category of country – way against her marketing ideas for the duo. Glancing at the clock, she frowned. “I hate to cut this short, but I do need to run. I’ve got to go get Henry. How about you send me a file and I’ll take a listen. But trust me. You don’t want to ruin this. You only get one chance to show yourselves to the
world here. Let’s pick songs that will work.”

Anna must have taken that a bit personally, hanging up the phone before her sister. “Don’t mind her,” Elsa said in that calmer voice she always took. “Anna’s just feeling the pressure what with all the rejection over her song ideas.”

“She shouldn’t take that so personally,” Emma challenged, knowing she’d probably be the same way. “I get that she wants to do her own stuff, but she’s…well…young. You can hear it in her writing. She needs more experience, more heartbreak. Whatever she went through with Hans was bad, but it was rather brief. People want to relate to music and her stories aren’t that common.” She could imagine Elsa nodding on the other end of the phone, her icy expression melting a bit as she thought of her sister’s broken heart.

“It is a strange business wanting her to have more experience with that sort of thing. I try to protect her from stuff like that. She’s dating Kris now, but…it doesn’t seem to offer much fodder for tear-jerking ballads. They are more in the cute stage. Holding hands. Stuff like that.” Elsa’s tone indicated that she found that a bit distasteful but didn’t want to risk offending her sister should she be overheard. “I’m thinking that’s more pop tune that you could dance around your bedroom to with the hairbrush as a microphone.”

Choosing her words carefully, Emma pinched the bridge of her nose with her finger and thumb. “Not really duet material. When it comes to the album, you don’t have to do all catalog stuff, but for now…”

“It’s just a demo to get us out there and see if we’re ready,” Elsa finished. “I get it.” She didn’t add in that her own dating life offered even less material, having avoided that particular social scene as much as possible. Emma wondered if the woman might just be nursing a shattered heart and ego of her own, but settled on the excuse that Elsa was incredibly picky and preferred hiding behind her introverted demeanor rather than spend time out with someone she didn’t like. It wasn’t like Emma couldn’t relate to the concept.

“I guess you’ve gotten the call from Granny,” Emma said, treading lightly. She was relieved to hear the other woman laugh in response.

“Of course. Granny called to quiz me on everything from my shoe size to where I want to go on my honeymoon. I think she might be getting ahead of herself.” She chuckled again. “I don’t think it has occurred to her that I would say no or whatever…” There was a hesitancy in her words that Emma didn’t realize at first.

“Nobody says no to Granny, but I think we should band together and do it. We should say no to dating these guys, no matter who they turn out to be. Are you with me?” Emma felt a bit fierce and almost militant as she suggested a mutiny against the older woman. She was already imagining herself in armor and carrying a sword when she heard Elsa clear her throat nervously. She crashed back to earth.

“Well,” Elsa said with a slight hitch in her voice. “You know, she’s right. I haven’t dated in so long that people might assume I’m a bit frigid. Don’t laugh. You’ve thought it too. I don’t exactly do warm and fuzzy well. And…well, I guess I could use a little experience too. For writing songs and all.”

“So you’re doing this dating thing as an experience?” Emma asked incredulously. If there was anyone she had thought would be on her side in all this, it was Elsa. “You are going to go out with some guy that Granny selected because you think it is going to help you write a better song. Elsa, come on. The catalog isn’t that bad. We’ll find you something.”
“Why are there so many chairs?” Roland asked innocently as he moved from one to the other, swinging his short legs wildly at each pause. “Do you have a lot of children, Uncle Killian?”

Normally Roland went to an afterschool program while his father worked, but for some reason Robin had begged his friend to take on the child for free. He claimed he was going to be too late to pick him up, as he and Liam were headed off to talk to some bar owner about an open mic night that was coming up soon. After a few jokes that they weren’t in college any longer, Killian had promised to watch the boy and even provide dinner.

The kindergartener was hardly big enough to get into the chairs without acrobatics, but Killian appreciated the efforts that the boy went through with seemingly no trouble at all. He was also thankful that he was Uncle Killian rather than Killy – the name that the boy had called him for the last two years with gleeful giggles. His friend Will had found that particular name hilarious and taken to calling the music teacher Killy McStabby with a fake Scottish accent. “I have many students,” Killian corrected gently.

The boy seemed to be turning this information over in his mind, confused by his father’s friend and occupation. Dark hair and chocolate eyes, the boy looked more like his mother than father, but there was certainly evidence of Robin’s influence. From the way the boy held his head to the side and implored his questions with a friendly yet determined tone to the way that he assessed everything that anyone said with an air of cynicism behind a humorous demeanor, Roland had some of his father’s best traits.

“I thought,” Roland said, tapping a finger against his cheek, “that teachers live at school. You don’t. You have a house. I’ve been there.”

Killian chortled at the child’s reasoning, which was not all that different than most of his younger students. “Aye, I do have my own place. I’m lucky.”

Roland accepted this truth tentatively and began his questioning again in earnest. He wanted to know about each of the instruments in the classroom and each of the posters on the wall. Carrying books off the shelves, he would bring them to Killian and plead with him to read to him.

“These aren’t exactly reading books or story books, lad,” Killian explained on the fourth try from his ardent young friend. “They are music books. See, look here.” He flipped open the one the boy was holding and pointed. “These are notes not words. You play them with the instruments over there to tell your own kind of story. It’s like magic.”

Vaguely interested, Roland followed the man’s gaze toward the shining brass and woodwind instruments along the far wall. “You could teach me?”

“I’m afraid we don’t have enough time for that today, lad. I’m about to teach a group of students and then give a private lesson. After that we’ll be meeting that papa of yours at Granny’s for dinner. Perhaps later.” He saw the disappointed look cross the boy’s small features and then suddenly a smile.

“I have a book,” he said, scrambling away from his babysitter toward his Peter Pan inspired backpack. Pulling out two construction paper creations, an assignment sheet with stars, and a math worksheet, he finally unearthed the paperback story of a dog on the loose in the local mall. He held it up as if he had just discovered buried treasure. “See!”

“Brilliant choice,” Killian said, reminding himself that Robin should at least bring entertainment
items if he was going to foist his child off on people. “Let’s see that.”

***AAA***

Emma managed to make it to the Storybrooke Academy with 15 minutes to spare that afternoon, though she was already practicing her excuse for being late. She realized she did not even know where Mr. Jones had his classroom, but she was sure that someone could point her in the right direction after she parked her small yellow car in the first of the visitor spots and took the stairs as fast as she could in her heels. Luckily she didn’t run into Henry’s teacher and her friend Mary Margaret Blanchard. The woman, who gave new meaning to sweet as candy, was notorious for wanting to chat Emma up for information about the latest bands.

“You’re slurring your notes there, Henry,” she heard the teacher saying from the door that was propped open just down from her. Smiling to herself in triumph of finding her son, she rushed in that direction.

She didn’t know much about the young teacher who was currently on Henry’s list of heroes and possibly on Granny’s radar for dating, but she had to admit he wasn’t bad to look at. Dark messy hair and blue eyes were evident even from her spot in the hallway. His clothing was more casual than most of the teachers she had met at the school, but that seemed to add a bit to his charm, as did his accent that Ruby had been right about.

Looking in the classroom, she saw her son there in the first seat of what appeared to be a semicircle. Posters on the wall detailed the instruments of an orchestra, jazz band, and marching band with detailed diagrams of each. There were charts where students’ behavior and schedules were organized, along with a few notices for different groups and clubs. Mr. Jones was seated in the chair next to her son, nodding in time with the beat he was keeping with his foot. “Much more staccato,” he instructed. “Let me hear each note.”

Her son’s hair fell across his forehead, hiding the furrowed brow of concentration as he tried to make each note resonate. She did not recognize the tune, but that did not mean much. She had not ever really studied music, preferring popular tunes much more than classical. Her career in music was not even that reliant on her knowing the difference and names of each note. Instead, she was lauded for her ability to find talent in its rawest form. As her friends said, she really was good at finding people.

She had to admit that Mr. Jones was much more attractive in person than he had been in the gray and small yearbook photo that she didn’t want to admit she had snuck a look at earlier. He had an easy smile that seemed natural and not forced, a defined jaw that she could see was one of his most telltale features to display his emotions. His right hand was splayed out on his thigh, his fingers long and reminding her of some of the piano and guitar players that she had met in her business. She didn’t want to admit it to Granny, but she wasn’t totally opposed to having a drink with him. The one thing holding her back was his role as her son’s teacher. She’d seen the way the other single moms flocked to any male teacher. There had been an actual line outside one of the classrooms with women who usually wore sweats and no makeup to drop of their children now decked out as if going to a club. Emma was proud to say she had taken no part in that.

Henry reached the end of the page and lowered the mouthpiece from his lips, a bit out of breath. Smiling proudly at the light praise of his teacher, it took a moment before he acknowledged her arrival. Even then, he was seeking out more confirmation. “Did you hear me?” he asked. “That was the best run through yet.”

“Sounded great,” she assured him, nodding to the jacket, backpack, and instrument case strewn on the otherwise unnaturally clean floor. “Get your stuff. Your dad’s waiting. And be sure to thank…” She needn’t have worried about him thanking Mr. Jones. The kid was already high fiving with his
instructor and packing up his stuff as the teacher stood to greet the parent in his classroom. She had been right in that the teacher was tall and lean, standing on long sinewy legs. The first words that came to her head were devilishly handsome, which was odd considering the location of their meeting.

“Thank you for allowing this,” Killian said, reaching out his hand to shake hers. His grip was strong and lingered as if protecting her during the contact. “He’s got quite a bit of talent. I’m sure that with the proper practice he’ll be brilliant.” For a moment he studied her intently, which only made her take a step back and look away.

“Thank you for taking an interest,” she said, her eyes landing on the small boy laid out across three of the chairs that had been pushed together in a corner. “I take it your…he’s not a fan?”

Tilting his brow, he looked at her uncertainly, but then realized she meant Roland. “I’m afraid he’s a bit tired out. Luckily he can sleep through anything, including a concert by middle schoolers.” The unmistakable affection in his expression and voice was almost fatherly as he glanced at Roland sleeping under a blanket of his leather jacket. And at that Emma felt her stomach clench at the sight of such a display, quickly shaking it off when he spoke again. “Your son says you are in the music business.”

Emma nodded, struck by the miniature version of Killian with the similar dark hair that flopped over his eyes from that position. “Yes, Mr. Jones, I’m a scout.”

“Killian, please. Aye, that’s what he had said. Seems he is quite a fan of your work. Can’t say I ever thought that a town of this size would have its own production company.” He rocked back on his heels, grinning. “Perhaps we could arrange for a tour as a field trip. I’m sure the students would enjoy that.”

Emma’s next words were drowned out by the chirping of her cell phone, holding up a hand to Killian and gesturing with her eyes for her son to gather his belongings so they could leave. “No, I did not schedule them both for the same time. I’m not an idiot, Regina. I can manage this just fine.”

***AAA***

“We’ll be there in a short bit,” Robin said to Killian as he navigated along the roadway with Liam checking his own phone in the passenger seat. “I trust there have been no issues.”

“None at all,” Killian assured him, balancing the phone on his shoulder as he attempted to lock the door to his classroom. “I’m taking him to dinner now and we’ll wait for you there.”

As Killian carried his bag of paperwork, laptop case and held Roland’s hand, he still balanced the phone to his ear and made it to his jeep. Robin was going on and on about the place they had seen and the owner’s interest in their music.

“It’ll be fantastic,” he insisted with an enthusiastic agreement from Liam in the background.

“I’m thrilled for you,” Killian said, begging off on further details so that he might buckle his young charge in and get them to the diner safely. He had no sooner put the vehicle into reverse when Roland piped up.

“Who was the lady you were talking to?”

Killian could have deflected by mentioning that he thought Roland was asleep or acting like he didn’t know who the kid was talking about, but he went for an honest approach. “She’s Henry’s mother,” Killian explained, shifting into the right gear and leaving the parking lot.
“She’s pretty,” Roland continued, oblivious to the thoughts of his driver.

That she was, Killian thought. He’d met hundreds of parents in his career, including quite a few single mothers. Once they found out he was single they usually found excuses to talk to him, stopping in unannounced with some question about their children or some request for extra tutoring. Emma had not done that, not even when he had volunteered to work with Henry.

She had walked into the room with an effortless style that he quite admired, if he was being completely honest. She was dressed for work in her dark skirt and white button down blouse. Her legs were long and shapely, added to by the heels she wore. Her long hair was the color of gold and had obviously escaped from some more restrictive style with fresh waves that would have been perfect for a day on the beach. Even in the few minutes they had spoken, he had watched with interest her dark lashes that framed her eyes and the slight indentation of her chin.

“I’m going to get a big burger,” Roland announced, interrupting his sitter. Killian was sure it wasn’t the first time he had said it.

“You must be hungry.”

“I am,” the boy said emphatically. All talk of the woman was gone as Roland began to wonder what all he could put on the burger. By the time they arrived at the diner both were laughing at the idea of elephants on a burger or perhaps candy bars.

***AAA***

Granny’s was crowded that evening when Emma slid onto the stool and leaned forward to catch the server’s attention. Ruby was already off for the day and Henry had bounded toward Neal’s table with a shrugging excuse that he rarely got to see his father anyway. She realized that she was breaking her own rule that she was never going to speak to the woman again, but the thought of a grilled cheese with that extra butter that Granny used was too good to pass up at that moment.

“So I hear you met Mr. Jones,” Ruby said, startling her friend. Gone was Ruby’s white shirt and red skirt in favor of a black dress with a wide red belt and a pair of heels that should have given her altitude sickness. “Isn’t he a hottie?”

“I barely said two words to him when I picked up Henry,” Emma said dodging the question. “He’s okay, I guess.”

Ruby was used to her friend’s nonchalance when it came to men. On their weekly girls’ movie or drinks nights, Ruby, Mary Margaret, and Ashley all swooned over the latest action stars or romantic leads. Emma searched for popcorn or more alcohol. On occasion she would throw them a bone with a comment about some guy’s butt or the way he filled out a tight shirt. She even managed to stand in line at a meet and greet to get an autograph from some television star that they all liked. But Emma was not the fantasy type and certainly drew the line at factoring real men into her imagination. “In Emma speak that means he’s a 10 out of 10, maybe an 11. Definitely better than Granny’s other pick for you.”

Emma practically spit her soda on the counter, which earned her a dirty look from the frazzled server who was standing nearby to take an order. “Walsh? Your grandmother set me up on a date with my boss’s sister’s boyfriend. It was practically career suicide for me to go.”

The grin on Ruby’s bright red lips widened as she relived that particular memory in her head. “It was amazing that you did that,” she said in a loud whisper. “I still wish I could have seen her face.”
Blinking, Emma let out a puff of air before taking another sip through her straw. “Of course you do. You don’t turn away from road kill either. I have a bit more squeamish of a stomach, especially in the case of livelihood. Zelena went ballistic and Regina sent me to Singapore for three weeks on some scouting mission just to get me out of there. It was the last nice thing that woman has ever done by the way.”

Ruby gleefully crossed her legs as if settling in for the story. “He wasn’t half as hot as this Jones guy is. Come on. I’ll do the research and make sure he’s not dating anyone. We can even get David to run a background check on him. Make sure he doesn’t have a past or something.”

“He’s a teacher. Don’t they usually have to go through background checks?” She shook her head. “What am I saying? I’m not going through with this. If your grandmother wants to set him up with someone, fine, but it’s not me. I’m not dating material. I am a mom. I have a job. I have…”

“Emma, he’s a teacher not a pirate. He’s not going to want a party girl. Just have dinner with him. Granny will insist on at least that. Then see what happens.” Patience was hardly one of Ruby’s strongest characteristics and it was showing as she tapped her foot irritably. “Granny always gets her way.”

It wasn’t that Emma wanted to be alone, she told herself. She dated on occasion, but she was not big on it. Between raising her son and a job that did not introduce her to men with the most mature character, she had fewer options than some of her friends. You could say that about anyone though, she added bitterly. Mary Margaret was a teacher in a school that’s faculty was 90% female. Ruby’s love of fashion meant she met more gay men than straight. While beautiful and mysterious, Elsa was often outshined by her younger sister who men were naturally attracted to for her hilarity and enthusiasm. Was she really that odd in her life circumstances?

“He has a son, I think,” Emma said after Ruby had waved to half the crowded restaurant like she was the queen of the town. “A little boy.”

“See,” Ruby answered, pushing two fingers into Emma’s shoulder. “More things in common. I’m liking it.”

“What is it you’re liking?” Ruby’s grandmother asked, placing a plate in front of Emma and wiping her hands on the apron she wore over her more conservative outfit. “And why are you dressed like that? You look like a harlot.”

Ruby rolled her eyes to indicate that she was so tired of the conversation already. “I was telling Emma that I like this idea of pairing her up with Mr. Jones. I think it will be a good match for once in your life.”

The woman looked over her glasses at Emma with a little bit of surprise. “You’re going to go along with this? Is Ruby paying you? Did you lose a bet?” She grumbled a bit as she pulled bottles out from under the counter and checked their fullness level. “You didn’t do too well last time I set you up.”

“I haven’t said yes,” Emma protested. “I was just commenting that I noticed that he had a son. Ruby Jumped in with the comments.”

Rolling her lips into a tight line, the proprietress made a humming noise. “Now I didn’t know about that. There are two of them, being brothers and all. Maybe the one has…No, I’m certain.”

“Well, he had a son with him today,” Emma said firmly. “I saw him myself.”
“And that bothers you?” the woman asked, studying the blonde woman’s face. “You think that means he’s going to want a commitment or something don’t you? Looking for a mother for his child? There are women in this town who line up for a guy who is sensitive and fatherly.”

Emma pretended to be quite interested in her sandwich, using her knife to cut it and then pulling it apart carefully before taking a bite. “It’s not the kid,” she finally admitted when Granny had not budged and neither had Ruby. “He’s Henry’s teacher. That’s just kind of awkward.”

Ruby wagged her head. “That does make it awkward. Granny, didn’t you say there are two of them. Maybe the brother is more your speed.”

“This isn’t like ordering takeout. You can’t trade one in for the other.” Granny switched her scornful and judgmental gaze to Ruby. “And you still haven’t explained the getup. Where are you going?”

“I have a date,” Ruby declared, shimmying her shoulders as bit to show off the low neckline of her dress. “And we’re not talking about my sex life. We’re talking about Emma’s.” She raised her chin and coolly stared at the door. “And he’s coming in right now so I suggest that we…”

Granny straightened up and dashed over to greet Killian and Roland as they walked inside. While she could be judgmental and argumentative, she loved children and often made a special effort to welcome children into her establishment. She was bent down taking care of his order before Killian had even managed to sit down.

“Okay, I take it back. Don’t go for the brother. Go for him. If it goes south, transfer Henry to another school. This guy is worth the risk.”

“That’s a bit drastic,” Emma said, not bothering with another denial. “And who do you have a date with? I thought you were giving up on that doctor guy after you found those text messages.”


A mix of awe and confusion was evident on Emma’s face as she watched her friend run a hand through her thick dark hair. “It’s a Wednesday. Who dates on a Wednesday?”

“Friday and Saturday is for amateurs.” Tapping a red painted nail on her bottom lip, Ruby studied the teacher sitting a few seats away from them. “Okay, so I’m thinking you should ask him out. It will make it easier and that way you don’t have to get Granny to try to fix you up.”

For the second time Emma almost choked on her drink. “I’m not asking him out, Ruby. I haven’t even agreed…”

“If you weren’t interested, we wouldn’t have just spent all this time talking about it. Walk over there and say something to him. Come on. Your sandwich and onion rings are cold anyway and Henry’s going to want to go home soon. March.” Using more of her fingers this time, she pushed her friend’s shoulder again. “Or I could pass him a note. He’s a teacher. He’s probably familiar with that technique.”

“I have to work this weekend,” Emma said, cringing as she realized she was entertaining the idea of inviting him out some place. “It wouldn’t work.”

“Your job is going to clubs and bars to listen to bands play. Invite him along.”

Emma wished that she had ordered a beer rather than a soda with dinner. Maybe that would have been the excuse why she actually stood up from the stool and with a wink from Ruby was walking to his table. She could have passed it and went to talk with Henry and Neal if they hadn’t been sitting
in the opposite direction. But she was putting one foot in front of the other and the distance that had
seemed so long was down to nothing before she knew it.

“Ms. Swan,” he said, raising his head up from looking at the picture that Roland was coloring while
waiting on their order. “I hadn’t realized that you were headed here when you left in such a hurry.”

Feeling frozen in the path of the servers, she willed herself to smile or at least acknowledge his
greeting. “Emma,” she said without another accompaniment.

“Pardon?”

“My name,” she said, feeling a bit silly as he stared worriedly at her. “My name is Emma. Instead of
Ms. Swan.”

“Emma,” he repeated. “Well, Emma, it is a pleasure to see you again. Is Henry here with you?” His
bright blue eyes darted around the room in search of his student and finally found him in the booth
-closest to the back hallway.

“I was wanting to talk to you about…Well, this Friday I have to do a work thing. I’m going to
Boston to hear this band. I was thinking that maybe you…” She could feel her cheeks warming as
the words tumbled out without much grace. Legs locked, she felt herself begin to sway as she
nervously wondered if he noticed it too. He did, as his hand reached out to grasp her wrist in a way
that felt almost medicinal rather than friendly.

“That’s quite a drive,” Killian interjected when her words failed her and she was swallowing. “I
imagine you’ll be leaving early in the evening.” His teeth were bright white as he smiled, almost
sparkling like a toothpaste commercial.

“Well, not too early, but yes it takes a while,” she said. Did his interest in when she was leaving
mean that he wanted to go along? Or was he building up to an excuse. Emma did not look back
toward Ruby who was probably flashing a thumbs up or something else at that point.

“I’d be happy to help,” Killian answered with a nod. “I can drive Henry to his father’s or someplace
else. Not a problem at all.”

To be continued…
Chapter 3

I’m glad so many of you are enjoying this tale. Yes, Killian was a bit at a loss for what Emma was really asking in the last chapter. Poor boy didn’t realize she meant to ask him out not to babysit. But you’ll see the fallout of that (from both Emma and Killian) in this chapter, as well as a little more backstory on Liam. Plus there will be some cutie-patootie Roland in here.

Mary Margaret dropped to her knees as she reached an arm under the floral decorated bed, blindly searching for the match to the shoe that Emma was holding in her hand. “I know it is under here,” she grunted inelegantly, pressing her chest to the floor so that she could see underneath the dust ruffle.

“It’s fine,” Emma said consolingly. “Don’t worry about it. I just thought if you had them, I would borrow your yellow shoes.”

“I do have them,” the brunette teacher protested. “I just have to find the one. It’s not like I came home with just one shoe. I’m not Cinderella.”

Ruby emerged from the narrow walk in closet with her arms loaded down with outfits that she unceremoniously dumped on the bed before clearing her throat. “Seriously, Mary Margaret. I know you’re a teacher and you have found your Prince Charming, but there is no excuse for this.” She gestured wildly to the pile of clothes. “It’s like sweater sets go to your closet to mate. The sweater sets are giving birth to other sweater sets.”

Emma laughed at the indignant huff that rang out from under the bed. “Ruby, we’re not all as fashion forward as you are. Maybe Mary Margaret likes sweater sets.”

“I do. They are comfortable and I don’t have to worry about a jacket inside. If my classroom is warm then I can remove the outer one. If it’s cold then…”

“You,” Ruby said accusingly, “just described what is wrong with most people’s interpretation of fashion. Utility over style. It’s a tragedy of epic proportions.” Playfully lifting a hand to her forehead, she spun in a half circle before collapsing on the chair that sat next to their friend’s bed. Her limbs rose in the air and fell with the dramatic display. “I can’t believe the two of you.”

“I’m not the one with the velour track suit,” Emma said defensively, “so no dragging me into this.”

Mary Margaret emerged from her crouched position sans shoe and with a distinct downward turn of her mouth. “It is just something comfortable I wear when I’m exercising here at the loft. I don’t go out in public with it. And it’s quieter than the nylon one.”

“You don’t get any points for that,” Ruby said as if she couldn’t believe that was even an argument. “It has Princess written across the butt of the pants. It’s embarrassing. What if the building was on fire? Would you really want the firefighters to see you in that thing?” Shuddering, she pursed her lips together. “I love you Mary Margaret. You are funny and sweet. You are one of the smartest people I know. You are great with kids and animals. It’s amazing really when you consider that you are beautiful too. But you have no taste in clothing, which is embarrassing for your fashion designer friend here.” Ruby punctuated her speech with a sparkling smile to her disheveled friend who was fishing dust bunnies out of her short dark hair. “And you, Emma, are asking to borrow something from her. I thought I taught you better.”

“Shoes!” Emma said in an exasperated tone. “I was asking to borrow shoes. We’re the same size and
it made more sense than finding a pair to go with this outfit.” Dressed in a black dress with white dots that flared out from her hips and was cinched at the waist by a wide golden yellow belt, the talent scout was holding a perfectly matched golden yellow shoe.

Mary Margaret jumped to her feet in a flash and was headed into the bathroom as though she was in a desperate need. “I think it’s in here!”

Ruby giggled at the sight, lifting her own feet up to the bed to use as an ottoman. “So explain why the panic over the outfit. It’s not like this is a date.” Her eyes sparkled mischievously as she watched her blonde friend blanche at the mention and reminder.

“Who would she be dating?” Mary Margaret asked, her hand triumphantly holding up the yellow shoe and tossing it to Emma. “I thought you had decided to live your life like one of those spinster comedies. You’re dating?”

“I’m not dating,” Emma said, balancing on one foot and sliding her newly acquired shoes on one at a time. “Ruby and her grandmother are trying to change that though. Unsuccessfully I might add.”

“Hey, don’t blame me. I encouraged you to ask him out, which is not that hard of a concept. I can’t help it that you failed miserably.”

Casting the two women a questioning glance, Mary Margaret sat down on her bed, swatted Ruby’s feet down, and then began to fold the sweaters that she had been teased about earlier. “I think I deserve an explanation. Who was this and how did you fail?”

It was Ruby not Emma who gave a run-down of the attempt to ask Killian Jones out just two nights before. She did so in her usually dramatic style, including trying and butchering his accent while Emma frowned, crossed her arms, and blushed over the tale. “Yes,” Emma said with a harsh sigh. “He thought I was asking him to drive Henry home.”

Mary Margaret giggled girlishly at the story, dropping in a few questions and raising an eyebrow when she found out that it was her fellow teacher that Emma had tried to entice. “There are a few teachers and more than a few mothers who have tried and failed,” she said in her best motherly tone. “You’re in good company.”

“Great,” Emma said turning to inspect the outfit in the mirror. “I can add myself to the list of women who made a fool out of herself in front of him. That makes this whole thing so much easier.”

“He honestly seemed okay with Henry hanging out with him,” Ruby said as though that was supposed to be a consolation. “And after Neal flaked, I’d say it was pretty cool of him to offer to take Henry to the upper grade basketball game.”

Mary Margaret went from her head tilted in empathy to smiling. “Wait, so he’s taking Henry to the game?”

“Yes, my son has a date tonight and I don’t. And the thing is that I didn’t even want a date. I was content just working. Then Ruby and Granny got involved and now I’m kicking myself over my social awkwardness and feeling jealous of my son.” She looked critically at herself. “And now I feel like the world’s biggest dork for wishing I hadn’t asked him. Not to mention an even bigger dork for dressing up on the off chance I see him on my way to Boston.”

“Killian’s not really known for dating anyone,” Mary Margaret said, brushing a bit of the dust from her search off the front of her sweater. “He doesn’t really socialize with anyone from work at all. He’s friendly enough, but he’s not out there mixing it up with people. I guess I’m just surprised he
would even be willing to take on Henry. I don’t know, but I think that could be a good sign that you’re at least on his radar.”

Grimacing at her friend, Emma stretched over to grab the yellow purse that they had unearthed earlier. “We all love your optimism, but you have to admit this is bordering on lockers after math class kind of discussion. Next thing you know, you’ll be asking him if he’s ever noticed me. Then we’ll sit around eating candy and analyzing each word and gesture. Let’s just skip this and move on to the part where I realize I was mistaken and I binge on some junk food while thinking up names for my cats.”

***AAA***

“You have the cleanest car I’ve ever seen,” Liam stated as he caught the keys that Killian was throwing to him. He’d rented his own car when he’d arrived in the US, but the cost of keeping it had been a bit much, especially for longer trips. So he limited his use and managed to borrow his brother’s every once in a while.

“It’s because he isn’t a papa,” Roland said as though this was common knowledge. Robin’s truck was rather neat, but it often had small hidden surprises like the lollipop that his son had hidden because he didn’t like the taste or the action figure that was on a secret mission in the side pocket.

“I expect you to return it in that condition too,” Killian said with his best warning look. “Henry and I will take care of your…what is this thing?” He pointed at the sedan that might as well have had a soccer mom sticker on the back of it.

Robin and Will were already climbing into the jeep with waves to Killian, Henry, and Roland and a few laughs from Will. “Bloody hell, you’ve turned into a regular nursemaid,” he told his friend. “We’ve got to get you out a bit more and out of this rut.”

“Language gentlemen,” Robin said as Liam mockingly saluted and called him Papa. “At least in front of the wee ones.”

While Killian was the first to pretend that such banter and teasing was sophomoric and without consequence, he did feel a slight pang at watching his brother and friends pile into his own vehicle for adventure. It had not been that long ago that he was the one traipsing off with his two best mates on a road trip or to see their favorite bands. He had woken up on his share of nights with a horrible hangover and in some pretty awful positions. There was the night that Will got arrested and he couldn’t even remember what city they were in let alone what had happened to his friend. Now he was stuck caring for others’ children while they went off on such journeys without him.

Shepherding Henry and Roland away from the three whooping and hollering men, Killian was contemplating ordering a pizza or allowing the boys to gorge on the snacks available at the game when Henry interrupted him.

“I’m kind of surprised you like basketball,” he said while deftly deflecting Roland’s attempt to spin a web at him just like Spiderman. “I thought you’d like soccer.”

The man raised his brow in wonder at such a question before realizing what the student meant. “Oh the British thing,” he chuckled as the youngest of the trio scrunched his face up tightly to try again with the attempt at the web spinning. His miniature features were a display of determination that Killian found both admirable and hilarious. “I have many interests, Henry, and I’ve been in the States for a while so it isn’t that unusual.”

That seemed to satisfy Henry who extended an arm in a half-hearted attempt to shot his own web at
Roland. “My dad likes baseball,” he confided. “But I don’t think he goes to many games. Just watches them on television and stuff. My mom took me to a Red Sox game in Boston last year. Do you like baseball?”

“I’ve watched a round or two of it before. Can’t say that I follow it regularly though.”

“You’re supposed to be dead,” Roland whined as his arm extended toward Killian. “I am shooting my web at you.”

Taking in the boy’s crestfallen expression, Killian decided that laughter was probably not the proper response. “I must have built up an immunity,” he said, realizing that the concept might be too advanced for his little friend. “You’ll have to give it another go at the game.”

“But you like music,” Henry said, ignoring Roland’s shaking his arm to see if maybe his web was somehow clogged. “I mean you must like it if you teach it.”

“Aye, I’ve been rather fond of music all my life really. What about you? What do you like listening to when I’m not forcing the classics into your ears?”

“My mom is always bringing home different samples of music from different groups and singers that nobody has ever heard of before. We listen to them all the time. In the car. While she’s in the shower. When she cooks. Even after I’ve gone to bed. Some of them are pretty good.” He made a slight robot move when Roland switched his game over to Transformers. “That’s what she is doing tonight, you know. Going to listen to a band.”

“Doesn’t sound like too bad of a job,” Killian noted, wondering if Henry was feeling a bit neglected in his mother’s absence. When their lesson had been over and Killian mentioned the game to his student, he’d seen how Henry’s face had fallen momentarily. Though he had readily agreed, Killian didn’t sense that it was a normal occurrence to be without his mother. “Do you ever get to go along?”

“Sometimes when it is a fair or something like that. My mom doesn’t take me to bars or clubs. I’m too young for that. Usually I just stay with my father or Granny. But my dad had a date tonight.” He made a little face. “I don’t think my mom likes that.”

Having been a teacher for a while, Killian was well aware that students often used him or other faculty as sounding boards for their family issues. He’d heard plenty of laments and questions that to an adult seemed pretty plain to see the answer to but not to a child. “I’ll bet he’d rather be hanging out with you. Besides, I’m appreciative for the help with our little Transformer here.”

Henry rolled his eyes as Killian practically had to tackle Roland to keep him from darting out into traffic upon seeing a car he was sure was from the latest movie. When Killian returned with his hand atop the kindergartner’s head to guide him, the two shared a bit of a conspiratorial look.

“My mom…she likes other things besides music,” Henry blurted out. “You know, she’s not the job or anything.”

“Does she now?” He seemed a bit distracted as he steered them toward the side entrance to the school. “It’s good to have a few interests, as diversity is a benefit too.”

Shuffling inside the building behind his teacher, Henry shot him a sly smile. “You might have more in common with her than music, you know? Like…”

“I’m sure there might be a few things,” Killian agreed, “but I rather think your mother has a full life with you, your father, and…”
“My mom doesn’t have my father,” Henry interrupted. “She’s not been on a date with him in a long time. Since before I was born actually. She has been on a few dates with other guys, but nothing serious. I mean…”

“Henry, I don’t think your mum would appreciate your discussing her dating life with me. I’m practically a stranger to her.” Letting go of Roland, he fished in his pocket for his phone to call for the pizza. “What do you guys say to pizza?”

“She trusted you to take care of me,” Henry said pointedly. “And she doesn’t trust anyone.”

***AAA***

Liam blinked his eyes toward the empty stage, trying to make out the set up before he and Robin made their approach to the club’s manager. He could admit they were probably putting the cart before the horse, but it was hardly unusual. The three friends were excited about the possibility and he was not about to let the opportunity fly by.

While Will was probably just in it for the free drinks and fun of it, Liam had to admit that he missed their days of making music. He enjoyed not only the performing and adoration from a handful of fans, but he loved the process of making music. He enjoyed late nights with Killian and Robin to write the lyrics and test out notes. He never felt quite so excited as he did when he heard a song he wrote being played.

“This place is a little too banker if you know what I mean,” Robin said, his hand wrapping around a beer bottle, which he used to point to the stage. “I can’t quite wrap my head around it – us being up there again.”

Liam’s own hands were clasped together in front of him, his elbows resting on the bar. “We’ve got a long way to go to get there,” he noted. “We’re short a guitarist and, if Killian won’t man up about it, a vocalist too.”

“We don’t need to be mentioning that to Will. The man’s bass skills are up to par, but his voice is likely peel the paint at most of the venues. Perhaps Killian could suggest someone? A graduate of that school he teaches at? A mate from back home, maybe?”

His mouth pulling into a sour grin, he wondered why on earth he had offered to be the designated driver for the evening. “Killian isn’t exactly bubbling over with excitement about this idea,” he confided in Robin. “Lord knows I’ve tried to make him talk about everything, but he won’t. It’s as though his life was split in two that day. There’s his life before it. And then now. He doesn’t like looking backward.”

“Who does?” Robin took another swig before continuing. “I know that I don’t mention her much, but I think of my Marian quite often. Miss her terribly and loathe the days when I fail at being both mother and father to Roland, but it doesn’t change the fact that she is gone from us. I’m on my own and doing quite well if I do say so myself.”

“Modesty and humility were always your strong points,” Liam groused.

“And I’m looking at the future that will be different than any I might have once imagined. She won’t be in it in any tangible way, but she wouldn’t want me to sit about and cry for her and miss out on the opportunities. She might have been the love of my life, but it doesn’t mean I’m never to love again.”

“Is this lecture for me or for Killian? Because I shouldn’t have to remind you that he’s not here.”
The music in the club was loud, but not deafening, another point in Robin’s column for identifying it as more of a banker or white collar location. Few people were actually at the bar and even fewer on the dance floor. Someone was playing music, but Liam would hardly refer to him as a DJ, as the man never spoke and played the original tracks rather than doctored or newer versions. It was early yet, but the locale was somewhat disappointing in that regard.

“You’ve had your share of complicated relationships too, mate,” Robin said, tipping the bottle in the taller man’s direction. “We don’t speak of it much, but…”

“A break up is hardly the same thing as you and my brother have endured. I don’t plan to milk it as such.” His lips protruded as he exhaled sharply. “And I firmly believe that the things, the trials, the tribulations make us much more in touch with our music. It’s not something that everyone has inside them.”

Robin gave a sort of noncommittal nod of his head and then squinted toward the stage. “Isn’t that the woman Granny was talking about to you? Evelyn or something?”

“Emma,” Liam answered. “And I don’t know.” He too squinted at the blonde woman in a conversation with one of the stage crew. She was pointing with one hand and held the other on her yellow belted waist. The sides of her long blonde hair were clipped up on top of her head and the rest cascaded down like a waterfall. “Aye, that is her. No wonder my brother…”

With his mouth full of beer, Robin’s laugh sounded more like a cough or as though he was clearing his throat. “Wait, your brother likes her.”

“I don’t know if the prat realizes it yet,” Liam said affectionately, “but he came home the other night after meeting her and brought her up in conversations no fewer than five times. I wasn’t even talking about anything related to her. I think we were discussing which dishwashing detergent he insists I pick up and he began comparing her hair to lemons. It was odd.” He shook his head to mimic his disbelief. “That kid he’s babysitting tonight? That’s her lad.”

Robin swallowed the beer in his mouth, leaning his head back to contemplate this development. “Wait, she has a kid. Your brother has fallen for a single mom. Or wait is she married? Is he lusting after some other bloke’s wife?”

“No, no,” Liam said. “I distinctly remember Granny saying single. I don’t know though. Does she look like my brother’s type?”

“Can’t say that I’ve given much thought to his type. When was the last time…”

Robin’s voice drifted as the large hand of Will grabbed his shoulder. “I’ll be seeing you two,” the lanky man said with a slight slur to his words. Robin wondered when he’d managed to drink what with the phone calls and all. “Anastasia is a bit peeved I managed to sneak off without her tonight. Got to go and appease her before she gets really irate.” He leaned a bit, losing his balance in the process and bumping shoulders with Liam.

“And how do you propose getting back to Maine from here?” Liam asked. “You are in no condition to drive and have no car in which to do that. Thinking of taking a walk now, are you?”

Will lunged forward a bit to wrap his arms over both of the men. “I hardly have to explain meself to the lot of you,” he said with his chin up in insolence. “But Anastasia has sent someone to take me back. So you two enjoy your music and merriment while I go see to me own matters.” Lips still wet from whatever he had been drinking, he quickly planted his lips on Robin’s cheek first and then Liam’s before bolting away.
“Cheeky bastard,” Liam grumbled, turning his face back to where Emma was talking to one of the band members. Her face, he decided, was in juxtaposition to her in charge body language. There was something soft about the way she could smile. He could see why his brother might show an interest.

“Maybe we should look at replacing him,” Robin mused, ordering another drink before following Liam’s gaze. “Are you sure it’s your brother who is interested in her? You have been staring at her for a while now.”

“I’m just wondering what it is that my brother is thinking? She doesn’t quite look like Milah or any other woman my brother has dated. I’m just wondering if it is some psychological thing. Granny says you are a perfect match and boom you have feelings? Seems a bit like voodoo to me.”

“You could try talking to her and see if she is up to snuff,” Robin suggested. “But you need to remember that Killian is a grown man. He’s capable of finding a lass to date if he so chooses. You are not the big brother raising him any longer, mate. You’re…”

“Maybe it’s high time I was.”

***AAA***

“That you mother?” Killian asked as Henry shoved his phone into his pocket. The game had not been anywhere close to a blowout, but he’d enjoyed the excitement of the parents and other students, including Henry’s commentary. When the game was over and Roland was way too wired on snacks from the concession stand to even blink, Killian had rounded the both up and trudged the familiar way to Granny’s where he had been told that Neal would pick up the older of the two boys. However, there was no sight of the man and Granny had offered up a table for them to wait.

Trying his best to ignore the glass crashing into glass as Roland sent the salt and pepper shakers on an intergalactic mission to save a bottle of ketchup, Henry nodded. “She said to apologize to you about my dad and to ask Granny to take over until she gets back.”

“It’s honestly no trouble to have you about,” Killian answered, his left arm closing over Roland who was expanding his rescue mission by trying to climb into the next booth. The couple occupying it was not looking happy about it. “It’s good to have an extra set of hands to help keep this one under control.”

Henry reached over to the napkin dispenser and moved it to the middle of the table before gently removing the salt shaker from the young boy’s grasp. “A launch pad,” he suggested. “They can refuel here until we are ready to start the mission. But I sense there are agents of darkness about. We’re going to have to be careful and quiet to make sure we aren’t found.” Placing a finger of his own lips, he waited until Roland mimicked the movement and quietly let the pepper shaker rest in a spot next to its mate.

Waving his right hand at the waitress, he ordered them a plate of cheese fries to share and non-caffeine beverages for the boys. She nodded and told him she’d put a rush on it. “See,” Killian said upon noticing the marked improvement, “you are on the same wavelength.”

“Quiet Uncle Killian,” Roland admonished in a loud whisper. “Don’t wake up the dark forces.”

Henry and Killian both stifled laughter and continued their conversation in hushed tones so as to play along. Every once in a while either or both of them would halt the talking and look about suspiciously as though they had heard some telltale sign that danger was near. When the plate of fries arrived along with the drinks (Killian’s being coffee that would help him stay awake), he readjusted in his seat to reach for the sugar packets, tearing one open with his teeth to pour it in.
Henry watched the movement in a bit of fascination, his brow furrowing. “How did you…I mean…Did you…”

Killian’s smile was a little sad as he used the spoon on the side of his saucer to stir his coffee and its added contents. “I suppose you mean my hand. I wear the prosthetic to keep everyone from commenting and noticing, but it doesn’t exactly work the same as a real one.”

“I didn’t mean to ask,” Henry said, looking down at the pile of fries that were practically cemented together with gooey cheese. “I mean there are rumors about it at school and all. I just never really paid attention. It’s true? You only have one? You lost your left hand.”

Roland was inspecting the plate with the same concentration, trying to extract a single fry without much success. “He didn’t lose it,” the boy protested. “It’s right there.”

“I was in an accident back in my home,” Killian answered. “It was a drunken driver who hit my car without so much as slowing down. My hand was caught in between the door and the steering column.”

“I’m sorry,” Henry said, stealing a glance at the glove covered one that had taken its place. He knew that he’d never seen his teacher without it. “Did it hurt?”

“Was quite painful, aye,” he said after a sip of his coffee. “But it was long ago.” He wasn’t about to go into what all he had lost that day. The fact that there were four of them in that car and only two walked out of the hospital. The accident had cost him his hand and two women their lives. It had cost Roland his mother. He didn’t speak of the injustice of the other driver only receiving a small scratch and a limited term in jail that had been cut short for good behavior. None of that seemed appropriate for a boy who was not yet in his teens. Instead, Killian offered to show him how the hand worked and take the mystery out of it. Perhaps then Henry would quit stealing looks and then turning away. After earning a “cool” as a response, Killian protected his coffee from air bound sugar and sweetener packets that Roland was sending to ward off the approaching enemy forces. He was about to switch tactics and lecture the youngest of his charges when a pink packet went sailing and landed just shy of the tall glass in front of a blonde woman. “So sorry, love,” Killian called out to the blonde woman. “Seems my friend here is mightier than he might appear.”

“No damage,” the woman answered. “I was just thinking that my drink could be a bit sweeter. I’ll take this as a sign.” Ripping the packet open and dumping the contents in her glass, she smiled. “I’m sure this will do the trick. And it might even ward off those dark forces.”

Killian didn’t miss the way that Henry blushed at being overheard or the way the boy avoided the woman’s eyes. “They are about, lass, best be careful about it.”

“Of course,” she said, pausing to sip her tea. “But I know from his mother that you’ve got an excellent co-captain there with Henry. He’s well-versed in fighting off the darkness.”

Henry smiled bashfully and tittered with the compliment. Scunching up his face in response to Killian’s silent question, he tilted his head toward the woman. “Mr. Jones, this is my mom’s client, Elsa. Elsa, this is my teacher, Mr. Jones.”

Elsa coughed a bit before biting out pleasantries to the man at the other table. Casting a look to Granny, she silently pleaded for an intervention that came as the older woman lumbered forward and dropped a green, handwritten bill on the table. “Oh so you’ve met,” she said, arms crossed over her chest. “Elsa, this is one of the two brothers I was telling you about. Killian is the younger of the two.”
The woman’s pale white skin became pink almost instantaneously. “And he’s…”

“Not the one I was thinking of, no,” Granny said, reminding the woman that she had no filter or furtive abilities. “I see you as a better match for the brother, Liam.”

It was Killian’s turn to laugh as Roland ducked under the table to come up next to Henry. “My brother mentioned that we were the latest targets of your matchmaking Mrs. Lucas. I suppose I hadn’t taken him at his word on that. Dare I ask who you plan to pair me with since this lovely woman is my brother’s intended?”

Granny pulled an empty plate from in front of Elsa, blindly holding it out to her side as she waited for the busboy to grab it from her. Even without lecturing him for leaving such an item for too long, the young man ducked his head in shame. “I was seeing you as more compatible with Emma,” the woman said as plainly as she would giving someone a list of specials for the day. “And seeing the two of you talk the other evening confirmed my suspicions there.”

“Emma?” Killian asked.

“Yeah,” Henry said with a quick grin to Granny. “My mom.”

_Not to sound needy, but please keep the comments, favorites, kudos, and likes coming._
Chapter 4

I’m continually amazed by the response to this story. I apologize for any continuity errors in this since it was not originally written by me as Captain Swan/Frozen Jewel. I just couldn’t stop picturing the four of them as I was writing this story and decided to edit it and see what people thought. This chapter is a bit more of Liam getting to know Emma and Henry working on Killian, but our couples will both be interacting a lot more in the next chapter.

I hope to have another chapter up in the morning, but it will probably be Sunday before the sixth chapter is up. This Friday is my father’s birthday and I’m headed out to go see him. Since my parents’ internet connection is just a step over dial up, I don’t see me posting much from there.

Hope you enjoy this chapter.

The string of curse words leaving Emma’s mouth was both entertaining and intriguing to Liam as he approached the stage. The softness in the woman’s expression had been replaced with one of violent rage as she glared angrily at the phone in her hand. To be honest with himself, he was quite worried about introducing himself to her after her seemingly spontaneous melt down.

“If you’re going to offer to buy me a drink or ask why I have refused one that you already bought, then I suggest moving along,” she said through gritted teeth, not bothering to look at him. “I’m not in the mood for a drink or a man at the moment. The only thing I care to do is to punch the next jerk who tries to pick me up with some fruity cocktail or cheesy pick up line.”

“Can’t say that I was planning to offer either,” he said. “I was just coming over to introduce myself. But if it going to earn me a punch in the nose, I’ll be getting on my way. By the way, lass, I much appreciated your colorful language there and apologize for whoever was meant for the receiving end of it. Being a former sailor myself, I could probably introduce you to a few new ones to add to your vocabulary.” He stood still for a moment, mentally preparing himself for retreat if necessary.

“I guess I was a little loud,” she admitted, her tone relaxing. “And I apologize for assuming that…”

“You’re Emma, aye?” he asked, shoving a large hand out in her direction. “I believe we are both residents of Storybrooke.”

She offered her own hand hesitantly, her eyes finally studying him a bit more carefully. “And you recognized me in this place. I am not sure if I’m creeped out or flattered. I think I’ll keep my phone handy just in case.”

The appreciative grunt he let out was followed by him pulling out a chair at one of the tables closest to the door to the kitchen area. “I was a bit surprised to recognize anyone so far from that town, but I suppose it was the universe playing a trick on me. By the way, lass, I much appreciated your colorful language there and apologize for whoever was meant for the receiving end of it. Being a former sailor myself, I could probably introduce you to a few new ones to add to your vocabulary.” He stood still for a moment, mentally preparing himself for retreat if necessary.

“I guess I was a little loud,” she admitted, her tone relaxing. “And I apologize for assuming that…”

“You’re Emma, aye?” he asked, shoving a large hand out in her direction. “I believe we are both residents of Storybrooke.”

She offered her own hand hesitantly, her eyes finally studying him a bit more carefully. “And you recognized me in this place. I am not sure if I’m creeped out or flattered. I think I’ll keep my phone handy just in case.”

The appreciative grunt he let out was followed by him pulling out a chair at one of the tables closest to the door to the kitchen area. “I was a bit surprised to recognize anyone so far from that town, but I suppose it was the universe playing a trick on me. What with Granny speaking so much about you and your son being in my brother’s class.”

Lips curling up, she laughed loudly. “You’re Liam Jones?” she asked, catching on quickly. “I should have guessed with the accent and all.”

“Aye, guilty,” he said. “And I suppose the Widow Lucas must have seen to it that you know of me too.”

“Well,” Emma said, waving off one of the manager’s assistants, “she has mentioned you and your brother a few times. Let’s see, former officer in the British Navy, traveling about trying to find yourself, and have a history in the music industry. Did I get that all right?”
“Excellent memory, lass, which is quite impressive. If I was drinking tonight, I’d propose a toast to it.” His grin was a bit more sarcastic than his brother’s, but there was a kindness and sturdiness to his face that she couldn’t help noticing. “And do you know the same of my brother?”

“Let’s see,” she said, twisting her lips to the side as though she was thinking on the topic hard. “He’s also former navy, went to college in Connecticut after he moved to the US, teaches music at Storybrooke Academy, and is probably ready to kill me at this moment for ditching my son on him since Henry’s father seems to have flaked on picking him up.” She moved her phone in front of her to display the time. “And even if I leave right now, your brother is going to be stuck with my son until nearly midnight.”

“I’m sure your worry about that is misplaced. If you like, I’ll give him a call and smooth it over for you.”

She let out a ragged sigh, her thumb hovering over the phone again. “No, that’s quite alright. I’m not sure that I’m all that out of luck yet. I can call Granny or Mary Margaret to go retrieve him. It’s not fair to your brother to have to do this after the…after everything.”

Liam didn’t miss her pause and obvious omission. “I suppose so, but please allow me to help if I can. I hate to see a damsel in distress.”

She probably would have rolled her eyes at that or at least said something snarky about it. However, she didn’t. Instead, she let her thumbs fly across the screen as she typed out messages to Granny and Mary Margaret. Even a text to Elsa came back with no response. She hoped that her face was not telling of her frustration as both answered almost immediately with negative responses to her request. “Damn it,” she muttered, scrolling through her list. “Who can I…”

“You can be more original than that,” Liam insisted. “Try a good old fashioned Bloody Hell or Bugger off.” He tilted his head down to try to catch her eye, keeping up the stare until she laughed and shook her head.

“Okay so it’s between your brother who probably has better things to do and Henry’s grandfather who frankly scares me with what a bad influence he is. I’m not talking leaving the toilet seat up or processed foods bad. I’m thinking more along the lines of organized crime and I may lose my son to the Witness Protection Program.”

“Say no more,” Liam said, pulling out his own phone and loudly talking to his brother. To her surprise there seemed to be no argument coming from either end. Liam worked out the details with the concentration of a military man, keeping track of each of his logistical decisions by checking them off with a clicking sound he made with his mouth. Pushing the end call button firmly with his index finger, he shrugged. “No biggie. Killian’s got Roland until I can get Robin’s sorry arse home and probably later if the git can’t sober up. Henry is not in diapers or demanding a bedtime story so I think it will make for an uneventful night for my brother. Between you and me, those seem to be all he has nowadays. He’s sort of boring.”

“I’ve been accused of that myself,” Emma admitted. “I think it comes with the single parent thing. So tell me, Liam, since I think I confused Granny, Ruby, and myself over this little detail. That little boy with Killian. Is that his son? Because…”

“Oh no,” Liam answered, thrusting his thumb in the direction of Robin at the bar. “That wee lad is Robin’s offspring. My brother has no children of his own. We’re probably a disappointment to our parents, as we aren’t carrying on the family line. Though I suppose there are quite a few Joneses in this world for it not to make a difference.”
She squinted at Robin who was sitting on the stool with his eyes heavy lidded, moving to and fro with the music. “I’d say he looks more like your brother than your friend there.”

“Aye, the lad is lucky to have more of his mum’s features than that bloke over there, but still he’s a great kid. And Killian is merely Uncle Killian – Killy if you want to make him really mad.”

***AAA***

“Well, it appears that we are making more of a night of this than I thought,” Killian said, glancing down at the both of them as he threw his money on the table. “I’m not sure of the protocol here, but I figure we’ll get this one to bed and you and I can have a go at the telly to see what’s good.”

Henry nodded, listening with half an ear to Roland explaining to the salt and pepper shakers that he’d be back. Granny had refused to allow him to carry them home, saying her customers had a right to liven up their food with his rockets. His eyes were already drooping and he yawned a few times on the short walk from Main Street to the waterfront where Henry was surprised to learn that Killian had a small house.

“It’s pretty cool,” he acknowledged when Roland was tucked away on a convertible chair in the office. “I bet you have a good view of the water.”

“Aye,” Killian said, kicking off his shoes into the corner of the larger great room. “It’s one of the primary reasons I picked this place. There is nothing so soothing as staring out at the water after a hard day.”

“We used to live in New York,” Henry said as he backed away from the window. “One time my class took a field trip on one of those ferry boats. You know the type you can drive a car onto. I thought we’d sink with all those cars, but we didn’t.” He glanced around the living room area and noted that like his Mom Killian was a minimalist when it came to decorating. There was a framed photo of him and Liam and another that was more faded of the two boys when they were younger with their mom. A few books were mixed in with some DVDs and the room seemed to center around a stereo system and television that were not quite in agreement with the cottage’s more rustic feel.

They had settled into some science fiction movie that Killian claimed he had seen more than 20 years before. “The bleeding special effects have gotten worse,” he claimed, sending a text to Emma that she could retrieve Henry from there and providing his address. He’d told the boy that he would offer to allow him to spend the night so his mother wasn’t rushing back to fetch him. However, Henry had refused quite adamantly.

“My mother would miss me too much,” he said with the straightest face ever. “We see each other all the time.” While Henry was certainly mature for his age, Killian was struck by how young he looked in that moment. He didn’t argue, but simply said he would get in touch with Emma.

***AAA***

The band playing that night had potential. At least that is what Emma texted Regina along with some demographic information that would help make a decision. She wasn’t sure if they stood out enough but she was willing to give her thoughts on the songs she had heard. That’s what she got paid for after all. Typing the last of the email, Emma slipped from the crowded space and into the cool outdoors where she breathed in a respite from the stale air inside.

“It’s a madhouse in there and that’s not even the main act,” Liam noted from behind her, making her jump. “You’re not staying.”
“I’ve taken advantage of your brother’s kindness long enough. I’m going to head back, pick up Henry and spend the rest of the weekend listening to a few new tracks from a signed artist.”

“All about the work,” Liam said. “I was hoping to catch the next set myself, but Robin’s a bit worse for the sight of it.” Using his head and elbow he gestured to Killian’s jeep where Robin lay sprawled across the backseat. His boots were propped up next to one window and the top of his head at the other. Emma was sure if she got closer she’d probably hear some moaning.

“You’re not already on the road?” she asked, throwing the phone in her purse. “I think your friend would be grateful for a bed.”

“Giving him a moment to pass out before I drive him back. He’s a bit feisty when he’s inebriated and tries to do some pretty inappropriate things while I’m behind the wheel.” Liam looked up at the night sky, frowning at the lack of stars. “Can we give you a lift or at least let me walk you to your car? I should do at least that for the woman Granny says is my brother’s perfect match.” His eyes sparkled in the light of the street lamps and she could resist laughing at the earnest expression.

“I’m fine,” she said, touching his arm gently. “It was nice to meet you tonight, Liam. Maybe we’ll catch up back in Storybrooke.”

She gave him a little wave and moved in the direction of the on street parking just down the block. Instantly she regretted the decision of her outfit that was to Ruby’s delight more about fashion than comfort. The brisk wind was blowing against her bare legs and the thinness of her jacket did nothing to ward off the cold. Keys in hand, she hurried her steps, imagining kicking off the high heels she had borrowed once she was safe back in her apartment. It was certainly a hot chocolate kind of night and she wondered if she might dare go through the drive thru at Starbucks to get one on her drive back. Her mind was turning that tasty treat over in her head when she stopped suddenly with a new string of curse words leaving her lips.

It was not a surprise to her that Liam had rushed to her side, his eyes scanning the area before them and his hands already clenched into fists to ward off whatever was ready to attack her. He admitted later that he knew she could handle herself, but he was always primed for a fight. He chalked it up to his naval days and special ops training that left him itching to use those skills.

“My car,” she said with a dramatic move of her arm, “is blocked in.” Sure enough, the front bumper of the small yellow vehicle was inches away from the rear of a laundry van. There was no vehicle behind her, only the jutted out corner of a stone flower display. She looked toward the closest lamp pole, scouring the signs that dictated parking hours among other rules and regulations. “And they don’t have to move it for another six hours.”

“There’s a number on the van,” Liam noted helpfully, “but, as you said, they are under no obligation.” Twisting to face his brother’s jeep, he smiled. “I suppose my offer of a drive home isn’t that bad of one now?”

***AAA***

Killian was asleep before the end of the movie, his head thrown back awkwardly on the back of the couch and his arms crossed over his chest as his sock covered feet were splayed on the coffee table. Henry had not said anything about the musical note socks that decorated them, but he had made a mental note to tell his mother who had a similar pair that were her go to pair for days when she wore boots.

Being as quiet as he could, he lifted his phone – the one that was just supposed to be for emergencies and carpool updates – and snapped a photo of his caregiver. He texted it to Ruby first with a message
that so far all was going according to plan and that he was still there with his teacher. Next he texted his mother and asked if it was ok if she picked him up there, using the excuse that he missed his bed and that Killian was quite busy with Roland.

His mother’s reply was quick that she was on her way there now and should be back soon. He tried to avoid the question she asked about his father, as he might have accidentally forgotten to check to see if Neal was back yet. Instead he decided to put Granny’s advice to work by letting her know that he was not opposed in the slightest to his teacher.

**Emma:** I’m sorry about tonight. I never imagined that your father wouldn’t be available. Sure you’re fine?

**Henry:** Got it mom. Mr. Jones and I are watching movies right now. He’s really funny and he’s smart too.

**Emma:** Glad to hear it. I’ll be there soon. Be sure to thank Mr. Jones for me?

Henry scrolled through to find the selfie that he had taken with Killian and Roland at the game. His teacher had joked it was probably not a good idea to let the other students see it, as he didn’t need anyone assuming that Henry received special treatment. Attaching it to his latest text, he typed out a message saying that he missed her and would see her soon.

He knew that his mother was an over thinker and would be studying that photo for any nuances she could detect. She would probably measure and weigh each smile or the dimples on their cheeks. There would probably be hushed discussions with her friends as they studied it too, which Henry hoped would help dispel any of the fears she might have about this man.

She worried about him. He wasn’t too young to realize that. She worried about what he ate and when he went to bed. She was concerned about his homework, his friends, and his hobbies. There were nights when he’d seen her going through her budget and muttering things about college educations and cars. Then there were the furtive conversations with his father about responsibilities and loyalty. On more than on occasion she had told Neal that Henry was their son not a pastime to be put away when he got bored.

“You alright there, lad?” Killian asked, rubbing his hand over his face and digging the heel of his palm into his eye. “Is the movie that boring that you’re sleeping with your eyes open?”

Henry laughed dropping the phone into his lap. “Just thinking,” he said, biting on the inside of his cheek. Granny had pulled Henry aside almost a week ago and pointed out his teacher with an animated eagerness. “You have a lot of boat stuff here.”

While the majority of the décor in Killian’s home was utilitarian, there were a few nautical items about. Baskets made of seagrass held items on built in shelving. A weather worn anchor hung between two windows with a faded life preserver on the opposite wall. Even though it was quite dark, Henry could make out the lights of the marina and docks from the windows and knew that they were quite close. Even on their walk up the path to the front door had the most intoxicating scent of the water.

“Aye,” Killian said, stifling a yawn and attempting to stretch a bit while sitting still. “I did some time in the Navy, as did my brother. But even before that I knew that my home was going to include the sea.”

“Do you have a boat?” Henry asked, suddenly wondering if Granny’s assumption that he did was correct. “Do you like to fish?”
Killian chuckled at the double question, but answered in a soft tone. “I do have a small vessel, but she’s not much for a fishing tool. I haven’t the patience to sit still and wait long enough to be much good at that.”

Henry mulled that over for a moment, looking back at the television where the lead actress was running up the stairs instead of outside. “My mom loves boats,” he fibbed. “She grew up around them.”

“Did she now?” Killian asked, mildly distracted by the soft snore of Roland from the other room. “And did you too?”

“Not as much as I would have liked,” Henry said, attempting to modify his sad expression that his mother claimed no longer worked. “Maybe you could show us your boat sometime? I bet my mom would love it.”

“Henry, I know that Mrs. Lucas, Granny, has been plotting something with regard me and your mother, but you do realize that people don’t automatically like each other because some old woman tells them to do so. There is more to it than that. And I’m not sure your mother is of a similar mind as me on many things.”

Henry pressed his thumbs together in a way that he seemed to be fascinated with, his eyes studying them thoroughly. “You have barely talked to her yet. You don’t know.”

“I’m sure your mother is a lovely woman. Perhaps I will find out that she is, but Henry, that is not something she and I will know unless we decide to talk and see each other. No amount of molly coddling my Mrs. Lucas or her granddaughter will make anything happen any faster.” He smiled affectionately. “I don’t want to have you thinking that I…”

“No, I get it,” Henry said, his hopeful smile deflating like a balloon. “But just so you know, Granny is a legend when it comes to this stuff. She introduced half of this town to their wives and husbands. Just ask Ms. Blanchard.”

Appearing confused, Killian leaned forward to pick up his now empty coffee container. “I thought Ms. Blanchard met David when she accidentally got into his truck thinking it was her friend’s. He accused her of stealing and it was a big dramatic confrontation?” That was the story that had been told to him by the rather perky and devoted teacher.

Henry shrugged, looking back at the television before speaking. “Who do you think sent him out to catch her?”

***AAA***

“They aren’t bad,” Liam agreed as Emma played another song on her phone through the jeep’s speakers. “I rather like their rendition of it.”

“You don’t think they sound like every other boy band out there?” Emma asked, sneaking a glance at the man snoozing in the back seat. “I think that is the big problem with every group that asks me to hear their work. It’s all the same. It just sort of blends together after a while.”

Liam merged the jeep into the light but steady traffic on the interstate before he answered. “I’ve wondered about that myself,” he admitted. “There are a finite number of words. A finite number of notes. What happens when they all get used? Will there ever be a day when there aren’t any new songs or new sounds? Aren’t we all just doing what people before us have done?”

His questions were punctuated by the grumbling of Robin as he attempted to turn over to a more
comfortable position in the cramped quarters of the back seat. The man muttered some words about someone answering the phone and then drifted back off without even opening his eyes.

“That’s pretty deep philosophical talk for this time of night,” Emma said with a snort. “I think there are plenty of unique or original ideas out there. Maybe it just takes courage to try to be the one to tame them?”

“And is that your job then, love? Trying to find the courage underneath the repetitive?

“That makes it sound more glamorous than it is. I think my job is to wade through the muck and find the acts that will sell. I may get caught up in what’s good music or what is entertaining, but the truth is that I am looking for the thing or the hook that will sell more songs and albums. That’s what the business side of things is all about.”

Liam stayed silent for a few minutes, another song playing with a hint of country and blues. She could tell that he must at least like it somewhat when his hand began to pat along with the beat on the steering wheel. “Maybe that is why I never found success in the business side of music. I was always too busy trying to make it convey the message I wanted. I was too critical of finding the right note or chord. When Killian and I were growing up our mother encouraged us, but she did worry that we weren’t getting enough sleep when she would find us both curled up and asleep from exhaustion. Me with my notebooks and Killian with his guitar.”

The intermittent light from the highway created strange shadows across them and Emma tried to find a pattern in them. “I never had a sibling,” she admitted, not adding any more about her history and lack of blood relations, “but maybe you were on to something. I’m working on producing a first album for two sisters who sing like angels. We don’t have a complete list yet on the songs, but I’m getting excited.”

A note of realization crossed Liam’s features as he switched lanes to pass a car that was going too slowly for his tastes. “Aye, I think Mrs. Lucas mentioned them. The older sister is Elsa?”

Of course, Emma thought to herself, Elsa was supposed to be set up with Liam. He was probably curious and a bit apprehensive on the idea if he was going through with it. Elsa would be too, her quiet demeanor seeming starkly different than that of the former naval officer. “Yes,” Emma confirmed, her finger sliding along her phone. “She and her sister are recording a few tracks this weekend. Elsa and Anna both dabble in writing too, but I’m not sure they have anything worth recording yet.”

To his credit, Liam seemed to take the idea of being set up on a date in stride. He asked a few questions about Elsa, but let Emma do her describing in peace. When Emma questioned him on that, he laughed nervously. “I’ve always been of the mind that people will tell you what you need to know without probing them with an iron poker, love. I have learned more about both you and her by listening to you than I could by asking about your favorite color or what you like to do in your spare time.”

“And when she asks about you?” Emma queried. “What should I say?”

“I wouldn’t put much stock in what Killian would say of me,” he answered after thinking about the question for a moment. “He would call me the unemployed bloke sleeping on his couch. However, I’m hopeful there is a bit more to me than that. I’m dabbling a bit in my music again, which is why I went there tonight.”

“Have to give you points for creativity if you pitch your songs or band to me while you drive me to pick up my son,” Emma said, gazing over at the access road on the side of the interstate. Businesses
were closed and locked up tight for the night. It felt empty and desolate. “What kind of music do you and your band do?”

“It’s got more of a blues edge than anything,” Liam said in describing his own sound. “Not much of a band though. Will, Robin, and me. Killian used to play too before…So what kinds of music do you lean toward? Is it usually the popular sounds that sell or do you try branch out some?”

“There is a difference in what I like versus what I like for work. I was looking forward to the act that was about to go on stage next tonight, but priorities have to be number one. I did my job. Now I need to do my job as a mom.” She dug into the small purse that she had placed between her thigh and the console. Pulling out a pack of mints, she popped one into her mouth and then offered one to Liam.

“Is this your way of saying I have bad breath?”

“No, I was being polite. I swear you and your brother both seem to take my gestures the wrong way. I’m going to have to watch my step around the two of you.”

Staring out into the darkness of the road ahead, he quirked up an eyebrow in a position that she had already seen on Killian. “Do explain, love. I would be most appreciative to hear how my brother may have insulted you already.”

“He didn’t exactly insult me,” Emma said. “He just sort of…well…I guess I wasn’t clear about what I was asking. I was trying to invite him to join me tonight in Boston. I thought he might enjoy the music and all. But he assumed I wanted him to babysit your kid? I think that my brother may have just won an award for that one.”

Liam laughed so loudly that Robin began to wake from his stupor. Giving him a stilted apology, Liam just shook his head. “My brother is an absolute berk. A beautiful lass invites him out and he assumes like the arse he is that you meant for him to babysit your kid? I think that my brother may have just won an award for that one.”

“I suppose I wasn’t exactly clear on what I meant,” Emma said, not wanting to place all the blame at Killian’s feet. “And I didn’t correct him. I was feeling the pressure of Granny and Ruby and just went for it. I’m not usually the type who asks a guy out, you know.”

“I don’t imagine that you are,” Liam agreed. “ Doesn’t change the fact that my brother is essentially a muppet when it comes to you, dear.”

*** AAA ***

Killian was considering pulling out another blanket for Henry, who was fast asleep in the oversized chair with his feet under him and his head on the arm rest, when he heard the crunch of tires on the gravel just outside his front door. Only a single light was burning in the living room, leaving most of the space dark and shadowy so as not to wake his guests. Roland had woken up about 30 minutes earlier and curled himself on the couch with his feet digging into Killian’s side.

Making his way to the front door, Killian stepped out onto the covered porch and realized he’d made a mistake in not putting on a pair of shoes. Spring might be on the way, but the coldness of the night air seeped through every available place. Curling his arms around himself he greeted his brother who was attempting to help Robin sit up straight and speaking too softly for him to hear to Emma.

“I’m so sorry about this,” Emma said as she jumped down from the passenger seat. “I never meant…”

“Think nothing of it,” Killian said warmly. “Henry’s a great lad and I enjoyed spending time with
him. He helped me keep Roland under control or at least within arms length.”

“Still,” she said, her pace pausing just in front of the steps to the porch. “You probably had better things to do tonight than this.”

“Ahh, but he didn’t,” Liam chimed in, throwing his brother the keys and stating he was driving Robin and Roland home in the father’s car. “It’s not like a beautiful lass was asking him out or anything.” With a wink in Emma’s direction, he disappeared into the house and came back out with Roland thrown over his shoulder and the boy’s limp and sleeping form askew as he walked toward the car.

Killian said nothing of his brother’s not so veiled insult. “Henry’s asleep inside. Should I wake him so I can drive you both home?”

“You could offer her a drink, brother,” Liam suggested in that loud booming voice. “The woman had to ride back from Boston with me and Rip Van Winkle-Rum over there. She could probably use something to take the edge off.”

Shooting his brother a warning glance, Killian gestured toward the door. “I suppose it would be rude of me not to at this point,” he said. “Care for a drink, Emma?”

“I…” she broke off, not sure about accepting a clearly coerced invitation.

“It’s just a drink,” Liam interrupted again, this time guiding a clumsily standing Robin to the car. “It’s not like a request to babysit or anything.” While Robin might not have known the reason for Liam’s joke, he laughed uproariously and almost lost his footing.

“Well,” Emma said, shifting her attention back to Killian, “if it’s just a drink.”
You guys are making me smile so big with the comments, reviews, etc. I’m glad so many of you are seeing the humor in this story. That is a goal of mine with this so I love that people are finding that humor.

Just to clear up a few questions. 1. Killian isn’t an idiot. He just kind of assumed that Emma was hinting at him taking Henry home instead. He’ll find out in this chapter that was wrong.

2. Liam is still in the talking stages of putting the band back together. So Emma was at the club where Liam was to see another group. Just a coincidence.

3. Anna is with Kristof in this. You won’t see them too much because Anna is hard for me to write well. Plus we have plenty of characters to play with. This is a different kind of story for her and for Elsa since there are no magical powers and I needed a reason that Elsa would be a little broken too so she fits better with this Liam.

I’ll be posting an update on Sunday when I get back in town. I’ll also be posting an update to Illusions of Another Life then too.

Happy St. Patrick’s Day! Hope you find plenty of Irish Pirates out there.

The breakfast nook in Killian’s kitchen was just big enough for a small round table and four chairs. Plantation shutters covered the windows that she knew from their placement overlooked the small bay area where many of the fishing ships were kept nestled in their slips. The house was small and cozy, but Emma could see its charms and could picture him reading a book on the overstuffed chair where her son was currently sleeping. It would be a perfect place to spend a rainy afternoon with a fire in the fireplace and some of her favorite songs humming lowly in the background. Shaking her head as she followed him to the chairs, she wondered why she was having such thoughts. Hadn’t she just decided that his rejection and confusion of her impromptu invitation was the universe’s way of telling her that she was not meant to be anything more than a parent in one of his classes?

“I’m afraid my bar is not as well stocked as my brother would have you believe,” Killian said, ducking to the under cabinet and pulling out a bottle or two. “I’ve taken to hiding the good stuff that I had, but he and those miscreants we call friends have found it.”

“I’ll take whatever you’re having,” she declared, averting her eyes so that he did not think she was studying his profile as he debated silently over the contents. “I’ve never had a parent teacher conference with drinks before. Unless you count Mary Margaret.”

“You’re expecting some sort of progress report?”

Returning a few moments later with two tumblers with amber liquid in them, he waited for her to take the one from his hand before settling the on that rested in the crook of his arm on the table. She looked at him curiously and then to his gloved hand. Keeping her face emotionless, she gave a barely perceptible nod. “I know you said I didn’t have to thank you, but I really do appreciate your watching Henry. Usually I have a whole network of people who jump in to help. Yet they all seemed to be too busy today.”

“He’s no bother at all. I rather enjoyed getting to know him a little better. He’s…He’s a big fan of
yours. Bragged about you a few times this evening.” He lifted the glass to his mouth without sipping and then put it down again. “I must admit that sitting here with you after his descriptions of you and Granny Lucas’s words to the same effect is a bit like coming face to face with a celebrity.”

Shelling out a nervous laugh, Emma looked at the liquid. “It is a bit awkward knowing that she is so bound and determined.”

“Aye, as is your son,” he added. “He was encouraging me to invite you sailing.” The dark haired man leaned forward on the table, his bad arm folded in front of him. “But don’t be too hard on the lad. I’d imagine he’s going to be embarrassed enough if he thought you knew.”

Gazing toward the dim light of the living room, she shook her head from side to side. “I should be mortified that my son is trying to ingratiate himself into my social life. Or maybe I should worry that he’s becoming a pimp. So I’ll settle for embarrassed and thank you for the head’s up. He’s been listening to Granny and Ruby so long that he is convinced I’m wasting away for want of a man.”

Like him, she lifted the glass and returned it before drinking. “I’ll admit to being out of practice, but I’m not wasting away.”

He was clearly watching her as she looked at the uncovered part of the window between the shutters and the valances. The stars were peeking out from behind the clouds that seemed to be rolling by and appeared to be winking back at her from that vantage point. Turning her head back to him, she lifted the glass again. “So what do we drink to?”

“To matchmakers who won’t take no for an answer,” he offered, holding his glass out.

“That’s what you’re going with? Stubbornness?” She cocked her eyebrow at him in a way that mimicked his own expression at the moment. “How about to late night drinks orchestrated by your brother?”

“To family and friends who think they know what is best for us,” he said with a smirk, tapping her glass with his own before gulping down the liquid. He called it impressive when she did the same and did not flinch at the burn of the drink. “So… I suppose we should try to get to know each other. Perhaps have another drink in a public place?”

The tip of her tongue ran over her lips. “I might could agree to that,” she said slowly. “But I’m not sure. Do we really want them thinking that we folded that easily. I do have a reputation to uphold, you know.”

“There are things to consider. Your son is my student. You’re a busy executive and I’m a teacher. We are relying upon the expertise of a woman who bases her matchmaking opinions on side items and eating patterns for the telltale signs of compatibility. From my take on it, neither of us were even considering any sort of dating until she began to wave each other’s presence in front of us. What could possibly go wrong?”

“And why weren’t you looking to date anyone?” Emma asked, her hand wrapped around the glass and her pinky pointing at him. “Bad break up?”

“Something like that,” he said. His smile did not falter exactly, but it became tighter. “And yourself?”

“Other than the single parent thing? I’m just not much for it, I guess. I don’t have good luck with people in general. So I spend most of the time waiting on that other shoe to drop. After a while you just get tired of it. You get tired of waiting for the inevitable and decide to fill your life with other things – work, Henry, my friends, music. It isn’t as sad as some people assume, but I get the feeling you know that.”
“Aye, perhaps I do. I suppose I am the same. I fill my time helping my students and trying to get my brother on his feet at least financially.”

“And music? Where does that fit in?” She knew from what Liam had said that he had some interest in it outside of the classroom of students butchering classics.

“You’ve heard that old adage that if you find a job that is your passion you’ll never work a day in your life?”

“Sure. I’ve heard something like that.”

“Well, sometimes it is the opposite. I pour my love of music into teaching. I want my students to love it and love making music just as much as I always have. But then you come home and it isn’t the same any more. You are like the house painter who doesn’t want to pick up the brush or the reporter who can’t write another word. You’ve given everything to that passion and it offers nothing at the end of the day.”

“That might be sadder than my story,” she admitted after a pause. “But I really should go before we turn this into a contest.”

She could see the conflict in his eyes as he contemplated inviting her to stay the night there with Henry. However, it was way too soon for those kinds of offers and he quickly rid himself of it. “Aye, I don’t mean to keep you from your sleep,” Killian said, standing up offering his hand to help her to her feet. “I hope I wasn’t too morose for your liking. I truly would like to share a drink with you. And I can at least drive you and your boy home since you are without transportation at the moment.”

She knew that she’d have to do something about her car in the morning, already planning on calling Mary Margaret for the company and a drive. They could be there and back in a few hours, probably getting in some good gossip time while they were at it. Slowly she nodded her head yes. “I’ll say yes to both,” she agreed, not realizing at first that his hand was still lightly holding hers.

***AAA***

Liam pressed the buttons on Robin’s coffee maker absently, trying to brew up something for the man would be screaming in a loud whisper for it in the morning. He was hardly going to begrudge his friend having a good time and a few drinks, but he had to admit that it was a bit sad and irresponsible to drink in such a way by himself. Laughing lightly, he considered approaching Granny about the situation and asking her to fix his friend up as well.

Determining that he had set the timer on the coffee machine to wake his friend up with the scent of the freshly brewed beverage, Liam threw himself onto the sofa with a grunt. He could walk back to Killian’s later, but he was trying to be optimistic that perhaps his brother was in need of a little privacy at that moment. Emma, was a bit tough to get to know, he admitted to himself. Still he had an unshakable feeling that his brother would more than benefit from her charms. Killian would not take much convincing if the way he had stared at her coming out of the jeep was any indication.

He was lost in the thought of his brother’s potential romance when he saw the familiar jeep pass by Robin’s window. “Ever the gentleman,” he said to the air around him.

***AAA***

Killian returned home that night to find his brother returned to his spot on the couch, the television streaming some movie with a car chase, and the remote control dangling out of Liam’s hand. Kicking
off his shoes, he considered letting his brother sleep in the awkward position with his head bobbing over the arm of the couch and coming within centimeters of hitting the reclaimed wood of the end table. However, that would mean that he would have to listen to his brother complain of sore muscles and headaches over their Saturday morning breakfast. Still, that might be better than the questions that would come regarding Emma and how that drink had gone.

“Can you at least admire me from afar, brother?” Liam asked, lifting his head up off its awkward perch. “I’m sure that I look quite stunning – even with my lack of sleep – but the effect of you standing silently in that doorway is the thing that horror movies are made out of.”

“I was trying to decide how best to murder you,” Killian bantered back, grabbing one of the pillows from the chair sitting next to him. “Suffocation might be best so that I don’t have to hear that mouth of yours. I feel sorry for anyone who has to listen to it for more than a minute.”

“You’re all talk and no action, you prat. And Emma didn’t seem to mind my company too much. Can the same be said for you? I notice you already ran her off. Care to explain?” Liam pulled himself up to sitting, grabbing the pillow from his brother, punching it twice and then folding it behind his back. “Come on with you.”

“I drove her and the lad home,” Killian admitted, the dour expression on his face not changing. “It’s hardly that interesting of a tale. We had a drink and talked. That’s it.”

“And any plans for future talking or were you too busy chatting it up that you forgot to ask?” Liam blinked his eyes. “Or maybe busy isn’t the right word. Coward might be more fitting a description.”

Killian just shook his head, leaning down to pick up his brother’s shoes and put them neatly under the table. “I’ll not have you analyzing each detail. We’ve got enough nosey biddies with their focus on us. Liam, I’m going to tell you what I told Henry and what I plan to tell Granny too. I’m his teacher. While I suppose nobody would fire me for dating his mother, it certainly would not add any points to my reputation at the school. Emma is a lovely woman, but I’m hardly going to dive head first into anything with her until I at least know her a bit better first. Does that satisfy your curiosity?”

Liam yawned loudly, covering his open mouth with the palm of his hand. “Valid reasons, brother, but if I may ask one more question…”

“What is it?”

“When are you planning to see her again? I wouldn’t want to be a third wheel.”

***AAA***

Emma had woken up for approximately 15 minutes when Henry had pounded on her door and said he was heading to his dad’s for the day. If she thought hard about it, she could remember calling out to him about bringing a change of clothes with him and making sure he had breakfast. After that, she wasn’t sure and at almost 1:30 in the afternoon, she was swatting at her cell phone to delay the beeping noise of text messages.

“I guess someone isn’t taking no answer as an I don’t want to talk right now,” Emma mumbled under the pillow she was using to block out the sun coming in from around her curtains. Her phone was ringing and vibrating incessantly, stopping, and then starting over again. “Hello?”

“Ok I get that you had to work yesterday and could just put in an appearance when we recorded that song, but you haven’t bothered to call and tell me what you thought. Then I find out that you’re off on some adventure with the man I’m supposed to have a Granny date with tonight. I’m thinking that
you probably have things to tell me. Important things to tell me.”

Pulling her hair off her face from where it had been matted in her sleep, Emma squinted against the afternoon sun. “You sound annoyingly like your sister right now.”

“If I was my sister, I would have called you last night or asked to Facetime with this guy you were out with. Was that a date? Did you just…”

“Calm down, Elsa,” Emma said, throwing back the comforter and wondering just when had she changed into flannel pajama pants and a camisole. “He gave me a ride to get my son after my car got blocked in. I have nothing to tell you about him other than he is a gentleman and is into music. He even liked some of the test tracks I played him of your singing.”

Elsa let out a little gasp. “You let him listen to my music?” It was clear from the tight cadence of the words that she had locked her jaw. Emma prepared herself for the wrath that would be the woman’s anger. “Seriously?”

“We were in a car together with a passed out drunk man. It was either that or play the license plate game. There weren’t enough cars.” Emma held the phone at her chest, pulling her knees up and running a hand over her face. “It was just a couple of songs.”

“But it’s my music. Mine and Anna’s. I’m not ready for this.” Elsa truly sounded panicked, which made Emma wonder if the woman was going to have issues in performing. She knew that Elsa did not have her younger sister’s sparkling and natural stage presence, but still it was worrisome to think that the blonde woman was this worried about people hearing her sing.

“You do realize that is pretty much the point of recording the demo and the test marketing, right?” Emma cleared her throat, suddenly feeling parched. “In order for you to make money at this, people have to hear your music. It kind of goes hand in hand.”

Even with the phone between them, Emma could imagine Elsa rolling her eyes. “I do realize that,” she deadpanned. “I just don’t like the idea of someone hearing it before it’s ready. You’ve said something is missing.”

“Yes, and I still think that,” Emma scooted back against the headboard of her bed. “I think Liam Jones knows enough about music that he could provide a little help pinpointing what that is exactly. I wasn’t playing it for some stranger. I was trying to get feedback and fill the time on a very long drive.”

Elsa stayed silent from the rebuke. “Sorry,” she said eventually. “I’m kind of nervous about this whole date thing. I guess I was hoping you’d understand.”

Emma’s free arm wrapped around her bent legs, pulling them in toward her. “I think I understand better than you think. And I also know that you have nothing to worry about. Liam was just as nice as he could be. He’s funny and not bad to look at. I think you’ll have a good time.” She tried to come up with a few tidbits of the man’s personality that she thought Elsa would appreciate. After a few she could feel her friend’s tension releasing.

“You know, Killian is a hot guy,” Elsa said. The very fact that her subdued friend and client was using that word made Emma cringe. “I swear he even looked good playing some kind of space invader game with Henry and that other little boy. It was pretty adorable actually.”

Closing her eyes tight against the imagined image of him doing such a thing, Emma let out a little groan. “You know I don’t want to hear this. I need reasons to avoid him. That’s what a friend would
“Sorry, Emma, but I don’t have any of those for you. Maybe try…well, I don’t know who. Most everyone agrees he is pretty darn perfect for you. So what’s troubling you about him?”

“Nuh uh,” Emma said. “I’m not having this conversation with you. You called to freak out about your date. You don’t get to talk me into mine.”

Elsa laughed heartily, at least for her. “Fine, one crisis per call. Should I call back though? Are you having a crisis? I could get Anna. She’s good with these kinds of things. Though I think she’s busy in my closet right now picking out what I’m going to wear tonight. She’s even postponing her date with Kris so that she can be with me until he picks me up.”

“Wait! He’s picking you up? Isn’t that kind of old fashioned? I thought you’d meet him at the restaurant or whatever. Is he borrowing Killian’s jeep again?”

There was a loud crunch as Elsa bit into her carrot stick. “Now who is sounding like Anna? You’re bordering on perky with all the questions. Stop it. I don’t like it. It’s not you at all.”

***AAA***

Killian tapped the pen against the page he was grading, frowning at the obvious mistakes. It was hard to remain objective when grading a subjective topic such as music. Still there were right and wrong answers that should be looked at and used to determine correctness.

Making an X next to the question, Killian’s flourishing handwriting offered an explanation. His supervisor would probably chastise him for being that thorough, but he felt the need to at least correct with information rather than a single mark. He made it through another four questions before he looked at his phone again.

He was weak, he admitted that. Or maybe he was just sensitive to rejection. That morning, as he drank tea since it was Saturday and watched his brother scour through the reviews for all eight restaurants in Storybrooke for the best one, Killian had with way too much thought and second guessing texted Emma. Or maybe he had done it three times. The first time he had told her that he had enjoyed their drink and chat the night before and hoped that she had too. Adding a carefully optimistic emoticon, he sent it. After 20 minutes and no reply, he went for another asking if she might be interested in that second drink that night. Still no reply. The third text had taken the longest to craft after he erased and started over four different times, showed it to Liam and started over again. It simply said, “another time perhaps.”

Now it was three and half hours later and there was not a single reply from her. In fact the only text he had received was one from Robin asking him to thank Liam for the coffee and someone texting him about cheap Viagra. He deleted both.

Lifting the phone and swiping the screen with his thumb, he looked to see if perhaps he had somehow missed the telltale tone of a new message. He hadn’t.

“Three times was a bit worrisome but four would be grounds for a restraining order, brother,” Liam said, sitting down at the table across from him. “Stop batting this about in your head. She’s probably sleeping in or busy with that son of hers. Plus she’s got Elsa and Anna’s work she’s trying to get recorded. The woman’s too busy to hold your hand and tell you that she fancies you after the way you have behaved.”

Like a child caught with his hand reaching for a sweet, Killian dropped the phone with a thud on the
“You sound pretty sure of yourself. Had such a good chat on the way back from Boston that you know her now?”

“It was quite enlightening I’ll have you know. I hesitate to share this with you, but since you’re going to wear down your phone battery waiting on a reply and go grey headed with worry, I’ll spill. Emma wasn’t planning on asking you to babysit her son. She was asking you to join her at that club in Boston. She was asking you on a date, little brother. You jumped in to volunteer to babysit and she assumed you were rejecting her and being polite about it at the same time.”

“Bloody hell,” he muttered, slapping his hand to his face. “I’m a true git.”

“Aye, but she seems to like you a smidge anyway. So wait on her to reply or do something drastic. I have my own lass to woo.”

***AAA***

Liam had to admit that the tip Granny had given him about Elsa preferring classic and simple had come in handy. That was how they ended up at the little Italian restaurant, sitting in a corner booth, watching the subdued crowd of diners in the dim lighting. He watched her from the corner of his eye, saw the way she swirled the red wine in her glass, wondered if she had any idea just how sexy that move was. Probably not, he decided, since she was doing it so absently. “So, Liam, tell me all about yourself,” she surprised him by asking. It wasn’t so much the question as it was the fact that she was speaking first. So far their conversation had been a bit one sided. “I was born, I grew up, I moved here and became the man you see today.” Elsa gave him an annoyed but elegant snort, softening her displeasure with a smile. “Cute, Jones, real cute. I’m serious; tell me something about yourself.” She wasn’t sure why, but she’d suddenly developed an overwhelming need to know more about him beyond favorite colors and where he went to school before. Not that she hadn’t been curious before, it just hadn’t been something she’d thought to ask about on the drive over. But after she had seen him call his brother and encourage him to do something to get Emma’s attention, she’d begun to feel that prickly urge to question him. They stared at each other, gazes locked as Elsa waited for him to begin. Finally, he gave in with a deep sigh. “Fine, fine, fine, everything you ever wanted or needed to know about Liam Jones in two paragraphs or less,” he said. “I was born in a town just outside of London, my mother died of cancer a few months after my brother’s 14th birthday. My father must not have liked his role as a single father too much, as he left my brother and me not too long after. I have not seen him again, but my brother has and tells me that he became ill and married a woman who helped nurse him back to health. I guess he saw it as a second chance, as they named my new brother Liam, which feels a bit odd I must say. I went to a year to at the university and then joined the navy where Killian followed when he was of age. A few months ago after my latest tour ended, I decided it was time for a change and I ended up here.” Elsa raised her eyebrow and studied him, knowing there was more to his story than he was telling her. Normally she wouldn’t have pushed, but tonight she was feeling reckless. “Your father doesn’t sound like much of a father,” she said, watching his reaction. Liam took a deep drink of beer, then looked away from her to stare blankly out at the restaurant. This was a bit of a heavy conversation for a first date, but for some reason the words were coming faster than he could bat them away. “No, he doesn’t, and I don’t think he has since I started crawling,” he answered. “I think that was always the case with me. Even when I was a young lad and not even in school yet, he didn’t quite trust me. Don’t ask me why my dad doesn’t trust me; hell, he doesn’t even really like me. I stopped trying to figure out what his problem was a long time ago.” Probably too damn much like his old man, Elsa thought, but kept her mouth shut. Liam was one of those stubborn, willful people who didn’t give up control easily, and if his father was the same way, then the house would have been a battleground. And a war zone for a home was something she understood all too well. “What about you, Elsa? What’s your story?” Liam questioned, pinning her with his bright blue eyes. “My, curious tonight, aren’t you?” she asked, taking a sip of wine while she stalled. “Hey, I’m
just returning the favor.” The waiter stopped at the table, giving her another moment of reprieve while he placed their dinner in front of them. They ate in silence for a moment, enjoying the heavy sauces and spicy fillings of their dishes. “So, I’m open for dissection, but you’re not,” Liam stated, studying her. “That’s not very fair, Elsa.” She gave a soft, quick sigh, then laid her fork across her plate. She knew there was no way out of this, short of ignoring him, or trying to change the subject. Neither tact would work with Liam, and she knew it. “All right, everything you ever wanted to know about me in two paragraphs or less,” she said, returning his phrase. “I was born nine months to the day of my parents wedding. They never really had time together without being thrust into being parents. So I spent most of my time in boarding schools and special camps and classes while they worked on their marriage. By the time my little sister came along it must have been easier for them, but the damage was already done. They passed away a few years ago and my sister begged me to come live here with her. So home I came with a degree in musical theatre performance and no plan for what to do next.” Liam watched her tightly controlled expression, his mind quickly conjuring up the image he’d had of her as a child in pigtails. She must have been a damn cute kid; why she had not felt that her parents wanted her was a mystery to him. “And where did you go to school?” he asked, lofting up one of the easier questions of the night.

“Tulane,” she said, breaking off a piece of bread that she dunked into her sauce. “I arrived in Louisiana during a great time to check it out.”

“Mardi Gras,” he concluded. “Was Louisiana a conscious choice, or did you just run out of gas there?” “I don’t run out of gas. I’m more of a planner than that,” she said with a smile. “Not that I wouldn’t have stayed any way; I mean, come on, it is Mardi Gras.” “A time to sin and be forgiven for it,” Liam commented, scooping up another cannelloni as he watched her.

***AAA***

“I don’t mind,” David Nolan said to Emma an hour later. “Mary Margaret was wanting to try that new restaurant she saw on television and so we took a little trip to Boston. Henry swiped your key and gave it to me.”

“My kid is getting pretty good at that,” Emma laughed, dumping a bit of salt into the pot with the boiling water and pasta. “I don’t know who he gets that from me or Neal.”

“Either way he comes by it honestly,” David assured her. “So we’re going to have dinner, maybe go dancing or catch a movie, spend the night at this bed and breakfast that she found, and then we’ll have the car back to you by late morning. You’re okay without it? Mary Margaret said she left her spare keys in that plant by the steps. You can use her car if you need to so.” He always sounded so protective and fatherly that Emma had on occasion almost called him dad. It was nice to have someone look out for her.

“I appreciate it,” Emma said, giving the pasta another stir. “Now go and enjoy yourself. I’ve got a Netflix marathon and some fattening carbs planned for the evening. Maybe even a large glass of wine.”

She had no sooner dropped the phone back to the counter when she heard the incessant buzz of her doorbell. Her first reaction was to ignore it, as it was probably someone looking for one of her neighbors. She had few friends who wouldn’t call first and none who would just drop by on a Saturday night. Blaming it on curiosity, she grabbed her phone and headed to the door with the thought that she could always call 911 if things got too rough with whoever it was.

Killian stood there in front of her. A canvas bag looped over his left elbow and his right hand had just left the door buzzer to scratch behind his ear. His smile was a bit crooked, but widened as he saw her.
“I didn’t want to text again since you didn’t seem to be answering,” he said with a sheepish expression. “Bloody impersonal technology to be honest.”

“I was sleeping when you texted me,” she answered, not moving to let him in or push him away. “I was ignoring everyone and then it seemed rude to jump in a conversation that was over hours ago.”

“Aye, you appear to overthink things as I do.” Lifting his left arm higher, he gestured to the bag. “I brought a bottle of wine so we could have that drink. I know I said I would take you out for it, but I thought after you didn’t answer that maybe you didn’t wish to be seen with me.”

Shifting from one foot to the other, she finally stepped backwards and waved him inside. “Maybe we can do the out in public thing later,” she suggested. “I was just finishing up some spaghetti. Could I get you some?”

He was trying not to be obvious as he looked about the main room of her apartment, at last settling his eyes on her. Gone were her heels and skater dress. She was gorgeous, her long hair now tucked up in a ponytail, her round ass tight in her jeans, her ample breasts outlined by the clinging material of her shirt. “I was hoping for a drink, but lucked into a dinner invitation,” he mused. “I should let you ignore my texts more often.”

“Don’t count your lucky stars until you taste it,” she said, walking toward the kitchen. “But I will say that I don’t do jarred sauces.”

She wondered if he would follow her into the narrow room where she stood inspecting the bubbling pot of red sauce. It only took him a moment to follow suit, offering to pour them both a glass of wine while they waited for dinner to be complete. She thanked him for the offer, as she admitted she usually shredded the cork and ended up ruining the taste and look of the drink.

He was in the midst of holding the bottle with his left arm and stabbing the cork with the opener in his right hand when she approached him. “I have a better idea,” she said, removing the bottle from his grip and setting it on the black and white counter. “I hold and you unscrew it.”

He followed her lead and then poured the liquid into the two glasses that she fished out and held up for him. “Most people either think I can’t do things with only one hand or they ignore it all together and let me struggle.”

She held her glass near her chest and lifted her shoulders casually. “I guess I don’t know that I’ve ever thought about it, but I also didn’t want you to have to see a chiropractor because I refused to offer to hold the bottle. We can all use a teammate sometimes.”

He held his glass up and peered at her over the rim. “I think we might make quite a good team at that,” he said.

The aroma of the sauce that she had learned from Granny filled the air and told her that it was almost time to eat. Backing away from him, she turned her attention back to the stove and was busily mixing the pasta and sauce together in a bowl before pulling out a loaf of bread to slice. When she turned to tell him it was ready, she giggled at his stance. His denim clad hip was resting against the counter and he held a plate in his hand for her to place the food upon. “Thanks, Swan,” he said, adding that sports people always referred to each other by last names. “If we’re going to be teammates, it is more than appropriate.”

She sighed as if annoyed, lowered her eyes and shook her head. “Alrighty then, Jones, let’s see the other plate. We’ll do this together.”
Forgoing the dining room table, which was currently covered by the pieces to Henry’s science project and her notes on several new song choices, they both sat cross legged on the floor, using the front of the sofa as their back rests and the coffee table to place their food. By the second glass of wine, Emma was talking more freely about her own musical tastes and Killian admitted that he was tempted by his brother’s offer to reform the band that had been so much a part of their younger days.

By the time the plates were empty and they had rejected the idea of watching a movie – too hard to get to know you during the down moments, he had said – they were both pretty content. She asked after his brother, learning that they were really the only family they had, which led to her thoughts that as adults you build your own family with friends and others that you choose.

That turned out to be the light part of the conversation, as Emma admitted she was worried about starting anything with him.

“You’re Henry’s teacher. I know how things work at that school. If you and I were to get involved, we would both be facing so many rumors and so much gossip.”

“That bothers you?” he asked. “Truly?”

“I wish I could say that it didn’t,” Emma said, drawing a star pattern on the carpet with her finger. “Maybe after Henry’s out of your class. Or maybe…”

“Perhaps we should just try to be friends,” Killian suggested. “As you said, friends are as close as we have to family.” He took a final gulp of the wine and emptied his glass. “So tell me one thing that your other friends don’t know about you, Emma.”

“One thing you don’t know about me is that I’m an expert at Trivial Pursuit. Want to try your luck against the champ?” she asked in a taunting voice. She watched him tuck his hand into the pocket on his jeans, his eyebrows raising as he pinned her with those bright blue eyes.

“You may be the champ in your little world, lass, but here in Storybrooke, I’m the bloke to beat.”

“Challenge accepted,” she said, running to the bedroom closet to get the game out. Killian watched her leave, cursing himself a thousand times. He shouldn’t have come over unannounced and expected her to entertain him. He’d spent more than hour deciding to do it and even more time picking a bottle of wine. All to be relegated to the friend zone. It had started to rain with light taps of the water against the windows. While he was grateful it was rain and not snow, the one halogen lamp in the corner of the living room made the setting a little too intimate. But he certainly couldn’t go now, not after he had promised to stay. He would just have to grin and bear it, he thought. She moved back into the room, a blue box in her hands.

“Okay, Killian Jones, prepare to have your butt kicked!” Returning to her seat on the floor, they broke out the game and got to it with taunting banter that made them both laugh. An hour and a half later, Emma had to admit that Killian was indeed an excellent player. Each lacked only one color piece, and they were playfully battling like pros. “

History, for my final piece,” Killian said, turning an amused sneer to his opponent. His wine glass was long empty.

“Okay,” she answered, reaching for a card. She laughed, covering her mouth to prevent a giggle fit.

“What?” Killian asked in a demanding voice. “What’s so funny?”

“Oh, nothing,” she replied, waggling her eyebrows with less grace than he displayed. “Here’s your question. Which was the final country to agree to the Geneva Convention?
Killian sat back, disbelieving the question. “Bloody hell, you made that up,” he accused.

“I most certainly did not,” she said, trying to sound indignant, her free hand curling around the back of the card.

Killian shot his hand out, wiggling his fingers. “Let me see the question, love,” he said.

“No way,” she responded, pulling the card closer to her chest, “the answers right underneath it. You’ll cheat.

He gave her a mockingly hurt look. “You don’t trust me not to cheat?”

“Nope, she said, grinning in triumph.

“That’s it,” he said, bounding up. “You’re the one who’s cheating, Emma Swan. Give me that bloody card!”

Emma jumped up, too, the card still in her hand. “No way!” she laughed, taking off behind her couch. Killian pursued her, chasing around the dining area and back around the couch, each hopping over the game board. He finally caught her on the other side of the sofa, leaping on her and pushing her over the armrest.

“Give it over, Swan!”

“Uh-uh!” She stretched her hands over her head, trying to keep the card out of his reach. They locked eyes, at the same moment both realizing their position. God, she was so warm underneath him, Killian thought. Her body felt magnificent, her face was glowing from their chase, her breath coming in deep spurts. Her mouth trembled, her tongue shot out to wet her lips. There were a thousand reasons not to do it, but he couldn’t remember even one of them right now. Slowly, he lowered his mouth to hers, giving her a chance to turn away. She didn’t. She watched as he moved closer, her heart racing with feelings she didn’t even know she had. When his lips closed on hers, she simply imploded. The kiss, for all its gentleness, bumped her world off its axis, spinning her into oblivion. There was only Killian, the feel of his muscular body, the touch of his lips, then, shockingly, the abrasive touch of his tongue on hers. She felt herself open to him, knew her body was quickly melting into his, and she gladly gave control over to the emotions swimming through her body. Killian didn’t even try to control the kiss, he let Emma lead him, let her body and mouth tell him where to go. And where she took him was paradise. The fire that had started burning with that first look burst into electric flames, the heat coursing through his blood. He felt his body quicken, knew they would both lose control if he didn’t stop this sweet torture. Slowly, carefully, he pulled away from her, watching her clouded eyes open and focus on him.

“Oh,” she said on an exhaled breath.

He stroked her face softly, needing to keep her mind on him. “Emma,” he said quietly, “I didn’t mean to do that.” Emma watched him, felt his gentle touch. She should be offended by what he just said, she thought vaguely, but she was not. He had said it with caring and ease, with no malice. She responded in kind. “Maybe not, but I don’t regret it.” Her voice had been just as quiet as his.

He bent down and gave her a lingering kiss on her forehead. “Okay,” he answered, “no regrets. We had a wonderful evening together, and we ended it in a mutually pleasing way even if it is a bit more than I planned. It was…”

“A one time thing.”

He gave her a tender smile, then pulled them both off the couch. He tucked a strand of her hair
behind her ear and delicately traced her jaw line. “I’ll concede the game, this time, love,” he said with a smile, “but next time I won’t go so easy on you.”

She looked up at him, grateful for the reassurance of their continued friendship if nothing else. “You’re on, Killian,” she answered, her voice still soft.

She watched him walk out of the door, then plopped down on the sofa. It was going to be a long night.

Killian stood on the other side of the door, his heart hammering in his chest. It hadn’t been easy, God knew, but he had walked away. What he had felt when he touched her wasn’t just lust; no, that would have been simple. There was something more, something there he couldn’t quite name, something that scared the hell out of him. If he were a smart man, he’d just stay away from her. But she had looked at him with those wounded eyes, needing to know she hadn’t lost a friend, and, just like every other time, he couldn’t say no. He had left as quickly as he could, with her taste and smell still surrounding him, cruelly taunting him.
Chapter 6

Happy Once Sunday! Just a quick chapter to see what’s going on with the reluctant love birds. I’m exhausted from my little road trip, but I’ll try to have some good updates for you this week. Love to all!

“So all I get is a ‘thanks for dropping off my car and do you want some coffee?’” Mary Margaret asked, her coat folded neatly over her arms. “Did you go out with him or not?”

“Out?” Emma asked, wiping the counter off with the wet sponge. “No.”

The teacher dropped the coat on the back of the couch and crossed the ten or so steps over to her friend. “You’re playing word games right? Because Elsa said she tried to call you and you didn’t answer. David and I both tried and voicemail. Ruby sent two texts that you didn’t open until after midnight.”

“I told David that I was planning a night in with pasta and Netflix,” Emma protested, turning her attention to the cabinet in front of her. She began to turn the labels to face the right direction. “And truthfully, you all were on dates. Don’t you know you’re not supposed to be on your cell phone during a date?”

The teacher scrunched her face up, spinning in place to inspect the layout and condition of the room. “You stayed in,” she said as if ticking off an imaginary list. “And you had pasta. I see the pan in the dish drainer.” She took a step toward the sink, her hand running along the edge of the counter in a slow caress. “Wait a second. Two plates and two…”

“I do have a son,” Emma protested weakly, taking a step between her friend and the drainer. “Henry’s a growing boy.”

“And you let him drink wine? Because there are two wine glasses there. I know you like your vino, Emma, but two glasses? That would mean that your dining companion was over 21. Plus I know that Henry stayed with Neal last night.”

Emma stayed silent as Mary Margaret ducked to inspect the cupboard under the sink. “Aha!” the petite brunette announced. “I knew it. An empty bottle of wine. And you’re not hung over so you didn’t drink it alone.”

Leaning back on the freshly cleaned counter, Emma watched here friend with a bemused expression. “Are those your two options? I’m having an affair or I’m an alcoholic? Are you taking lessons from David on how to investigate? If so, I’m worried for the safety of this town after that display.”

“Well, we’re not in a soap opera, so no evil twin.” Sighing, she looked at the blonde expectantly. “Killian came over?”

Emma tapped the tip of her nose and nodded as they always did when someone got an answer right playing charades. “Last night. Unannounced. Brought wine. We had dinner. Played trivial pursuit.”

“And…”

“And we decided to be friends,” Emma said as if making a huge announcement. When her friend didn’t respond, she felt her mouth droop down. “Seriously.”

“Is this about the teacher parent thing?” Emma merely nodded. “Oh honey, it’s not that big of a deal.
I mean it’s not like he’s a teacher giving him some important grade. It’s music.”

“Hey!” Emma said, startling Mary Margaret. Using her thumb, she pointed at herself. “Making a career in the music industry here.”

“I’m just saying that he is one of Henry’s elective teachers. If things were that weird, I’m sure Henry could switch to another.”

“I’m not asking my son to give up something he loves so that I can go out with his teacher.”

“I wasn’t suggesting that. I was just thinking that if…”

“There’s no need to worry about it. I told you, Killian and I are just going to be friends. We’ll have a drink and talk about music. It’s not a big deal.” She returned to straightening things up, her hands busily arranging and rearranging. While she didn’t look at her friend, she did hear her breathing and knew she hadn’t left.

“I don’t think that’s what you’re afraid of,” Mary Margaret said, not pausing to let Emma let it sink in fully. “Sure you have to be cautious. It’s your son. It’s his career. But that’s not insurmountable here. And maybe you’re just using it as an excuse.”

The silence between them lasted an awkward second or two, leaving bare the thoughts in her head. “I think you’ve been watching too many talk shows or reading too many self-help books. You act like I’m in love with this guy. I’ll admit to a little bit of a crush, but honestly it’s better that I don’t act on that. Sure this is all sweet and exciting right now, but what happens when it isn’t? What happens when I’m dropping off Henry and trying to duck down low so he doesn’t see me? What happens when I have to go for parent teacher conferences and I end up ducking into the janitor’s closet to avoid him? I don’t want that.”

Mary Margaret didn’t answer right away, pulling away a tea kettle and filling it with water. She had already set it on the stove before turning her attention back to the conversation. “I get that you worry about that sort of thing. We all do. Maybe it’s because every single romantic relationship we have fails before we meet the right person. It’s hard to think that this time can be different.”

“The odds are not in my favor on this one,” Emma said pointedly.

“Perhaps not, but does it feel different?” Mary Margaret moved effortlessly around her friend and stood on her toes so that she might reach the packet of various teas that she had bought during a recent visit. She rooted around and pulled out two packets. “With David it is different. I can’t fully pinpoint how or why, but I know it’s going to be okay. Better than that really.”

Acting in accordance with the teacher, Emma pulled two mugs from another shelf and placed them on the counter. “But the likelihood of that for me is pretty low. You had parents who showed you it was possible. You watch romantic comedies like I watch Law and Order re-runs. Of course you believe in the fairy tale endings and the big romantic gestures.”

Changing tactics, Mary Margaret waited on the water to heat. “Do you know what the most romantic thing that David has ever done for me is?” she asked.

“Serenaded you on your birthday? Threatened to beat up Dr. Whale because he was telling people about you two sleeping together that one time? A candlelight dinner for two at some fancy restaurant? I don’t know.”

Mary Margaret’s eyes flashed with humor. “No, but those were all good moments. It was when he came by one evening because he couldn’t stop thinking about me. He told me then that I was the
one. And believe it not, Emma, I was scared. He let me be scared. He told me he was scared too. It was romantic because it was the first time we were ourselves. The first time we were honest.”

“David’s a good guy.” Emma could hear the buildup of steam in the kettle. “You’re lucky.”

As she usually did when the subject of David came up, Mary Margaret smiled brilliantly. “Maybe Killian’s a good guy too,” she told her friend. “Scratch that. I know he is. And maybe you need to accept that he is too.”

“And when I do and he turns out to be like Neal or…” Emma cringed when she said Neal’s name. Henry’s father and David had been friends for a long time. It was only occasionally awkward, but still she tried not to mention him around either Mary Margaret or David.

“You know, I think you might be exaggerating how bad it could get.” The tea kettle whistled loudly, making both women jump and then laugh. “You don’t duck into closets when Neal is nearby. You face him like the superwoman you are and go on with your life. It’s impressive really. And Graham? You dated him for several weeks, which is a record for you. Yet you are still friends with him. You even co-hosted his birthday last year. I think you might be reaching to think that if something happened with Killian that it would be like World War III.”

Hanging the dish towel back on its hook, Emma considered this. “I think we’re both okay with just…”

“The man came over here, right?” Mary Margaret said slowly and carefully as though talking to one of her students. “He brought wine. I know this because that is not a brand that you buy. You invited him inside. And then boom! You’re friends? Something isn’t computing here.”

“I kissed him,” Emma confessed in a whisper before her voice got louder. “Or he kissed me. We kissed, okay? We kissed.” It took all her energy not to run her fingers over her lips to try to savor that feeling once again. She may have done that a few times the night before as she thought of it.

“Oh okay,” the dark haired woman drawled. “I’m thinking that might just throw the friends thing out the window.”

***AAA***

I’m disappointed,” Liam said as the two brothers shared a late breakfast at Granny’s. Technically it was lunch, but the two had slept in, been too grumpy to agree on much of anything, and found themselves eating in silence at the booth with the table that wobbled a bit.

“You’re going to have to be more specific because I’m lost,” Killian answered between bites. “Is it the bacon? The eggs? The coffee?”

“You, brother,” Liam said wagging his now empty fork at the man. “I’m disappointed that my little brother left after me last night and yet managed to get home before me. Not just get home before me but showered and went to bed before I put key to the lock. Then you are sitting there like a sullen teenager who found out he’s not getting a car for his birthday.”

“You were the one on a date,” Killian pointed out. “I was simply having a drink with a student’s mother and chatting her up a bit. It is not the same thing.”

“I can argue semantics with you, but the fact remains that you obviously have more than a few things in common with the beautiful lass and enjoy spending time with her. I don’t think it is necessary that you protest so much.” Lifting the mug that was far too delicate for his hands, his index finger jutted out to point accusingly at the other man. “But I wasn’t planning to lecture you on that today. I was
rather thinking that we might collaborate a bit this afternoon with Robin and Will.”

His eyelids rose slowly as he contemplated what he could say to his brother. He decided on the more direct question. “What do you mean?”

“I suppose talking with Elsa last night got my creative juices flowing again, brother. I was thinking that we might invite Robin and Will over to see what we could come up with in terms of songs. I know we haven’t written much of anything lately, but I seem to have something germinating up there.” He pointed at his temple. “What do you say?”

“So you’re saying you want the place to yourself this afternoon? I should make myself scarce?”

“Bloody hell, brother, you truly don’t understand social cues, do you? I’m asking you to write with us. I’m not asking you to go for a walk, jog, or shopping trip. I’m not even asking you to watch over Roland. You know, I’m starting to realize why you misunderstood Emma. It wasn’t a ploy to make you seem more likeable. You are an absolute wanker.”

“Is this your attempt to soften me up? I must say you are failing.”

Ignoring the obvious reluctance in his brother’s answer, Liam began to bat about a few of his song ideas. He threw out some lyrics he had been considering and how he envisioned the arrangement of the music. While Killian rolled his eyes and even called over a server at one point to order a refill on his tea, it wasn’t long before he was offering a few suggestions of his own. The two were some of the straggling customers from the mealtime rush when Killian heard someone calling to him.

“Mr. Jones,” Henry said, running up stopping short at the end of the booth. “Don’t you get tired of this place?”

Liam still found it rather amusing when any child called his younger brother by a formal variation of his name. liftin an eyebrow in question to Killian, the older of the two seemed to settle against the vinyl bench as if waiting for the answer himself.

“Good morning, Henry,” Killian answered, quickly correcting that with afternoon. “What brings you here today?” He looked over the boy’s shoulder, hoping to catch at least a glimpse of Emma. However, he was slightly disappointed.

“Been spending some time with my dad,” he explained, gesturing toward Neal speaking to Granny. “You didn’t answer my question though.”

Liam chuckled at the boy’s persistence and his brother’s awkwardness in that moment. Deciding to rescue him rather than continue watching, he tapped the fork on the rim of the plate. “I’m afraid that your teacher and I both slept a bit late today. It was our best bet for some breakfast fare.” He paused for just a half second. “And you are Henry? I am afraid we didn’t meet. You were asleep the other night when I escorted your mother to come fetch you.”

“Aye,” Killian added. “Henry, this is my brother, Liam Jones.”

***AAA***

Emma’s eyes were closed as she listened to the sample track that Elsa and Anna had recorded. Not one to usually let herself be swept away by the music, she did not think she could take the hopeful expression of the younger sister and the more concerned one of the older sister. Sitting on the couch in the girls’ living room, Emma had ended up there under the guise of a daily jog. Hair pulled into a high pony tail and her running shoes accompanied the look, but she felt a bit like a fraud since her morning route had detoured past the Marina and Granny’s where she had spotted Killian’s jeep. Still,
she had ended up crossing the park to the sister’s rented townhome and said she was ready to talk about what they had recorded.

“Overall good tone,” she said as the notes faded away and she realized she had to say something. “Maybe we can adjust the pitch on the background vocals though. It doesn’t quite feel right.”

Anna twisted the ends of her ginger like hair with her fingers, biting her lip. “I knew you’d like it.”

“It’s a good song,” Emma confirmed. “I definitely think we should keep it on the list.”

“But you want us to still go back to the catalog, right?” she asked, her voice sounding more annoyed than hopeful. “You don’t think our other…”

Taking in a deep breath through her nose, Emma looked again at the tracks on her phone. They had recorded four songs all together, the usual amount for a demo. It was by far not enough for a full album and at least two of the songs were completely wrong for the style that the women wanted to portray. “I think we’ll have to do some from the catalog unless we can find some unpublished ones out there some place under a rock. This one is good, Anna. I’m talking winning a Grammy good, but it’s just one song. Tracks three and four are way too immature for the market.”

“And the first track?” Elsa asked, her hand going out to stop her sister from jumping up and storming out. “What did you think of it?”

“It’s got potential,” Emma said. “Maybe work on the chorus a bit more. Perhaps add some bass to the bridge. I don’t know. It’s missing something that I can’t put my finger on.”

Anna bypassed her sister’s second soothing gesture by leaning away. “I know you think I’m too young and don’t have experience, but I’m telling you that I can do this.”

“Emma doesn’t think that you can’t. She’s just worried about the timetable. We’ve been prepping to record for a while now. We need to get something out there in stores and online. We need to move on this.”

Setting her mouth in a determined line, the younger of the sisters marched away from the other two. “I’m going to go see if we have any more cookies. I’m dying for a cookie.”

The look of affection between the two sisters didn’t go unnoticed by Emma, who had never had that sort of relationship. Closing the music app on her phone, she waited until Anna was behind the door of the kitchen before she spoke. “You know we could try working with a songwriter directly? Maybe someone in Boston or New York. I know Anna wants all these to be original, but that might be easier on her ego.”

Elsa pressed her long fingers together and then released them. “What about Liam?”

The talent scout’s brow furrowed as she realized who her friend was suggesting. “You mean Liam Jones? Well, of course you do, we don’t know any other Liam’s. I know he has some music aspirations, but most musicians don’t like to write for other people. I think he’s more interested in getting his band back together.”

Shifting uncomfortably on the love seat, Elsa looked down at her own phone. “He sang me a bit of what he’s done in the past,” she explained. “See, he’s written quite a bit. His brother was the one who would sing, but he’s not exactly…”

“I’m taking it that the date went well?”
The blonde’s long thick braid fell over her shoulder as she nodded her head. “We’re going out again,” she admitted. “He’s been very sweet to me. He even walked with me around the waterfront last night until it rained. Then we sat under the shelter at the docks and talked and talked.”

“He must be special if he got you to open up and talk,” Emma teased. “It took me weeks before you stopped calling me ma’am though we’re the same age.”

“Well, maybe he’s not as prickly as you are sometimes.”

***AAA***

Killian regretted not wearing his thicker coat as he trudged along the sidewalk toward town, hoping that the silence of the day would overtake the chill. He was sure that his brother meant well, as did Robin and Will as they excitedly poured over the two spiral notebooks that Liam was always writing in about song lyrics or ideas. It had become a joked between them that Liam was often listening with only one ear and writing down some quote or word that inspired him.

It wasn’t as thought Killian disliked music, which would have been odd for a man who taught it. He did enjoy the sounds of a good melody and found himself critiquing some of the modern songs for their lack of depth and soul. However, it still hurt to not be able to pick up the guitar as he used to do and strum along in a world of his own. There were many moments when he missed his hand, but none so pronounced as when he felt his fingertips itch to feel the thick strings beneath them. He no longer wore the callouses that came with hours of playing, a fact that he had silently bemoaned for hours when he first realized.

“You can’t be hungry again already,” said a voice that was familiar enough to a bachelor. Standing at the low picket fence that surrounded the back entrance to Granny’s was Ruby. Her arms were holding two large bags of trash.

“No, just taking a walk,” he answered, holding out a hand to take one of the plastic bags from her. “I may love the menu, but a man can only take so much in a day.”

“Emma’s going to be here soon. You could stick around and wait on her unless you’ve got other plans.”

“You Lucas women are not to be messed with. A man can’t even get an order of onion rings here without pressure about his social life.”

Ruby’s bright red lips stretched into a smile. “I was just making conversation. I thought that after you dropped by her place last night and all that an accidental meeting might do the trick. You’re obviously interested.” She feigned such nonchalance that Killian might have believed her to be just an observer, but he knew there was much more to it than that. She was calculating and perhaps a bit manipulative, though in a good way.

“Should I be concerned that you know of my location last night?” he asked, not taking a step toward or away from the diner. “It seems a bit intrusive for you to spy.”

She scoffed as she wiped off her hands on the apron that like her skirt skimmed mid-thigh. “I have much better things to do than worry about you getting your game together when it comes to Emma. Have I even warned you that I will have you murdered and your body chopped into little pieces if you so much as make Emma cry? Have I even tried to guilt you into realizing that you are the only man Granny has ever found suitable for Emma? The only one? No, I haven’t because I’ve got a life and things to do. So you can wander around freezing your butt off or you can come in to sit a bit and avoid whatever you’re avoiding. I was just saying that Emma will be here soon to fetch her son. She
always arrives early so she can have a hot chocolate and wait on Neal and Henry to arrive. What you do with that information is up to you.”

There was no time to react before she was marching herself back into the building and whispering something to the old proprietress of the business. Her long legs carried her back to kitchen where he could see through the serving window that she was scrubbing her hands and bantering with one of the cooks. A few moments later she was sliding a plate of onion rings in front of him and telling him that she’d be back in a minute.

It was around the time that Emma arrived and was greeted by Granny that he realized he’d been tag teamed. Peter, the part-time bus boy was lifting chairs to mop the floors before the dinner rush. In his preparation, he’d left no tables open and even blocked off one row of booths by stacking some of the extra chairs there. The stools were full as normal with a few of the stragglers and those who wanted to glimpse Ruby in her short skirt. So when Granny led the blonde woman to his table he was on the verge of laughter.

“I think this is a set up,” she declared, sliding into the bench across from him. “It’s a little obvious. Peter doesn’t mop the floors until after the dinner rush. And I don’t think that it would have been that much of a problem to clear another spot for me given how much I spend here.”

“I’m not sure how I ended up here myself,” he admitted, leaning forward as though to share a secret. “Ruby found me walking by and next thing I know I’m sitting here and looking at the Mount Everest of fried onion rings.”

“There are worse things,” Emma said with a laugh, reaching out and plucking one off the top. “You know that these go best with…”

Ruby interrupted by sliding two plates in front of them, the steam still rising from the sandwiches. “Grilled cheese,” she said as though the brown bread and melted cheddar needed an explanation. “Anything else I can get you?”

It was Emma that made eye contact with her friend, resisting the urge to either flip her off or hug her. She wasn’t sure how this had come to pass, but she simply thanked her for the food and watched she sashay over to the counter where one of the men leering at her was sure to offer at least a good tip.

“I’d say you were right, love,” Killian said. “It’s all an elaborate plot.”

***AAA***

Henry had student council on Monday morning, which normally Emma forgot. However, she had been awake since before 4 a.m. and when he trudged into the kitchen with that apologetic expression for having to ask for a ride so early he was surprised that she was already up and ready.

“Do you have another scouting trip?” he asked when she placed his breakfast in front of him and returned to her coffee.

“Is it so strange that I am up so early?” she asked. “I’m not always running late.”

“It’s a nice surprise.”

Emma often missed Henry on the weekends he spent with his dad, which was no surprise since they had spent very little time apart during his first years of life. While she did not begrudge her son a relationship with his father or Neal the chance to be a dad, she always felt better to wake up with her son just down the hall. She appreciated the morning discussions of the day’s schedule and even the tidbits of gossip he told her about the happenings in the middle grades at the academy. Though she
couldn’t pick them out of a lineup, she knew who was texting whom, who had gone to the winter
dance with someone else’s significant other, and even which of the boys was responsible for the wet
toilet paper fight in the boys’ restroom.

By the time they were piled into her car, she was well on her way to concentrating her energy on
Henry’s upcoming science test and her two recording sessions that week. Maybe that was why she
didn’t see Killian when he opened the passenger door to her car and greeted her son before sending
him off to the meeting.

“Good morning,” he said, his left arm resting on the roof of her car and his body bent down to peer
inside. The angle at which he was holding himself was too familiar, reminding her of the kiss on the
couch.

“What are you doing here?” she asked before realizing how utterly ridiculous she sounded. He
worked there. Where else would he be?

“Morning carpool duty,” he explained. “We haven’t hit the rush of it yet so I can personally welcome
each of the early arrivals.”

She nodded, trying to ignore the way his blue eyes seemed even bluer that morning. There were no
bags under his eyes and his shirt (a pale blue button down) seemed crisp and fresh. While she was
more put together than some morning when she was tossing pop tarts at her son instead of bacon and
eggs, her hand unconsciously combed through her hair and she wondered if she had managed to
keep her lip gloss on her lips. “It will probably get busier later,” she said. “You know, when all the
kids arrive.”

His bemused smirk was fleeting and replaced with a sweeter and more hopeful expression. “Good to
see you, Emma. I guess I’ll see you this afternoon when you pick up Henry.”

She kept that image in her head as she drove the couple of blocks to the bank of offices that Regina
had acquired a few years ago. Giving a nod to the early arriving assistant and waving off the offer of
pastry and sugar filled coffee, she and hurried into the office that Emma was not all that sure hadn’t
been a storage room at one point. Skipping over the email messages that usually found their way into
her inbox in the morning, she sent a few quick notes to Regina about pending projects and checked
in with the recording team about some ideas that she had. There was no word back on from the latest
singer she’d tried to recruit so she found herself looking at the notes she and the producer had made
about Elsa and Anna’s work. Maybe Elsa had a point, she thought, scrolling through her phone to
find Liam’s number. Not finding it, she sucked in a breath and texted Killian to ask for it. She was
still staring at the phone, carrying on a benign yet ongoing conversation with Killian when Regina
sauntered through the door with a brief apology for interrupting.

“She and Anna’s song selections,” she said, taking a seat in the empty chair across from Emma. Her
black skirt was typical of any business suit until she crossed her legs revealing a high slit along one
side. Despite the fact that the office was usually overly warm, she wore her matching blazer and a set
of heels that Ruby would envy. “Where are we on those? I’ve got some backers ready to hear them,
but not if they insist on singing the drivel they recorded the other day. Seriously, one Taylor Swift it
enough. We don’t need two sisters imitating her style.”

“I’m bringing in a composer to work with them,” Emma said, ignoring the last text that Killian had
sent telling her that he hoped friends could do dinner sometime. She was actually relieved that she
could postpone answering that one for a while. “Maybe someone outside the mainstream so we
aren’t stuck with that generic sound.”

Regina took a moment to consider this, blinking up at the ceiling. “And where are you going to find
this out of the mainstream composer? Do you have someone in mind or are we talking in generalities here, Ms. Swan. I really don’t have the time or money to invest in them if we aren’t ready to go.”

“We’ll be ready,” Emma promised. “Anything else?” Usually Regina gave an order and then either left the room or dismissed her employee to carry it out. She wasn’t the type to linger or wait about for conversation.

“My sister has decided to incorporate herself into the financial dealings with this company,” Regina finally said, a barely perceptible shudder crossing her as she said the word sister. “Now I’m trying very hard to play nicely and let her feel like she’s actually contributing, but you know how she is. Anyway, she has this idea for a backers’ dinner and showcase. It’ll be an opportunity for us to highlight some of our talent to people who can afford to put them in the spotlight. I’ve got a good preliminary list, but I was thinking it might be good to have someone or some group that we can announce that night as having offered them a deal.”

“Any ideas?” Emma asked, her mind running through her recent scouting trips. “I assume you’ll want someone who will wow a crowd.”

“Naturally, but we’ll talk more about it later. In the meantime, I want new songs recorded for those two immediately. I want something to show investors next week. Got it?”

***AAA***

She texted him to find out his brother’s contact information, which he could have blown off as necessity. However, Killian couldn’t help smiling a bit brighter when he saw her name pop up on his phone. Friends or something more, he was not able to deny to himself that he found himself much happier when she contacted him. He’d even managed to throw in a few more texts to prolong the conversation, asking if she had reached him yet and suddenly “remembering” that his brother had a job interview and might not be available. He even responded to her thank you with his own assurance that it was no problem.

“Good thing you’re on your planning period,” the voice from the doorway said. “Otherwise you might lose a student or something. Talk about distracted.”

“Ahhh, Ms. Blanchard. Pleasure to see you. You don’t usually make your way to this end of the building.”

The brunette teacher looked around the classroom, appraising the layout and decorations. “It’s different than when you first moved into it. More lived in than before.” She grinned, crossing over to the platform where he stood to direct the band students. Standing in that position, she stared out at the empty seats in a semi-circle and wildly waved her hands to the imaginary orchestra. “I’ve been a bad mentor, haven’t I?”

Mary Margaret had been assigned to Killian his first year at Storybrooke Academy. He had not required much of her, preferring to keep their discussions limited to where to find the copier and what paperwork was required for grading. Their weekly meetings turned to monthly and then to waves across the faculty retreats and inservice days.

“I don’t think all the blame can be placed at your feet,” he said. “But I’m curious about what brought you here today. Am I in need of mentoring?”

“Perhaps,” she said, turning to face him. “I was just thinking that you and I haven’t really haven’t had a chance to speak about your teaching here. I know that you’re up for your review soon. Maybe you’d like some pointers?” She smiled innocently, but her fingers dug at the hem of her sweater and
revealed her nerves. “Maybe you and a guest could come over for dinner at my place. I could invite my boyfriend.”

He again was amazed by the thoroughness of the Lucas women to even invade the plans of his co-workers. “I’ll have to check with my brother to see what his plans are, but might be fun,” Killian said, smirking as her eyes filled with panic.

“He’s welcome to come, but I meant…well, more like a date.” She frowned. “I meant Emma.”

Cocking his head to the side, he appreciated the worried expression on her face and the way she looked half ready to run from the room in retreat. However, he did have a heart and decided to throw her a bit of a bone. “I suppose I could ask her. I have heard that the two of you are friends.”

The bright and hopeful smile of the teacher grew even bigger. “Awesome,” she declared. “I think it’ll be fun.”
So last night’s episode just about killed me and I’m struggling over the preview, but hoping to survive the angst. This chapter has a bit more Frozen Queen, as well as some Anna and Emma thinking about something to do to help move them forward.

There will be more updates this week, but I should go ahead and say that my schedule is a bit out of sorts. I have a second interview for a job that I really want on Thursday and an interview with someone named Killian Jones on Tuesday (next week) for another job. Keep your fingers crossed for me, as I really need to find something soon. Freelancing and creative work is great, but my family and I need a steadier pay check. Also keep your fingers crossed for me that I don’t say something messed up to Killian Jones or giggle when he introduces himself. Because that is totally something I would do. Anyway, I will update when I can, but both interviews are about 2 hours away from where we live now (we’re hoping to move) so that means a lot of time in the road or getting prepped for the interview.

Thank you all for the comments and requests for certain things. There has not been much focus on the matchmaking with Elsa and Liam yet, but there is a reason for that. They seem to be moving forward on their own. However, you know nothing ever goes smoothly so they will need some nudging soon.

By Friday Emma was sure that she was not any closer to finding the right songs for Elsa and Anna. She and the two sisters had holed up with Liam for long hours, pouring over ideas and trying out different arrangements. It was clear that Elsa and Liam was trying hard to remain professional, especially in front of Anna, but there were certainly enough glances and smiles that it was becoming that there was more than just a working relationship.

When Liam was busy tuning the guitar and was warming up some water to drink with honey to soothe her tired vocal cords, Emma found herself standing on the deck just off Killian’s living room. She leaned her elbows on the well-worn railing and stared out at one of the fishing boats coming in from a morning run. There was something peaceful and picturesque about the view, water bouncing rays of light back up toward the sky and the steady beat of the waves against the pilings of the nearby dock.

“You’ve always liked the water,” Anna said, squinting. “Maybe that’s why Granny thinks you and Killian would be a good match?”

“No you too,” Emma said with a groan. “It’s very sweet and a bit overwhelming that so many people are interested in my love life, but seriously. Can I have a conversation that doesn’t include Killian’s name?”

Anna made a show of pretending to lock her lips and throw away the key, letting the silence stand for just another moment before she turned her head back to the cottage. “So do they really think I don’t know? Besides the whole Granny pushing for them, I have seen the looks he gives her and the way she hums under her breath when she thinks he isn’t looking.” She brushed off Emma’s incredulous look. “What? It’s a thing she does when she likes a guy. Nobody ever notices, but I do. I’m her sister. I know her.”

“They do seem to be getting along pretty well,” Emma said, stealing a glance through the French doors at the two of them. He still had the guitar resting on his lap, but one of this hands was pushing
back some of Elsa’s hair behind her ear. The blonde woman was smiling at him over the rim of her mug as he said something. “Okay better than that really.”

“Do you think they want to go out again? I know he asked, but after this whole working together thing I’m not sure it has happened. They are trying so hard to hide it.”

“I think she worries that you’ll be upset or judge,” Emma answered honestly. “You haven’t been very open about this collaboration thing.”

“That’s different,” Anna huffed into the cold air. “I am picky about the music I sing. It can’t just sound good. It has to be us.”

“It will be,” Emma promised. “Even if you didn’t write it, you can still put your own spin on it.”

Anna seemed to take than in for a minute. “You think he really likes her? And not just as someone he was obligated to see because of Granny?”

“Yeah,” Emma said with a slow nod. “I think he really might. And more importantly, I think your sister likes him too.”

The younger of the two began to fiddle with the zipper on her jacket. “I guess I could go a little easier on him.” Finally winning the war with the metal fastener, she smiled jubilantly. “I could make them dinner. It would be great. I mean I’d need your help, but it would be so wonderful and romantic.”

“Anna, I don’t know…”

“No, it will be great. And you can be on the planning end for a change. What’ll we serve?” Anna was clearly into the planning mode at that point, mentally going through her repertoire of recipes and throwing out a few suggestions to Emma.

“Maybe we should just concentrate on the music right now,” Emma suggested as Anna wandered to the edge of the deck and stairs. “We don’t have to play matchmaker too.”

However, Anna wasn’t listening. She was half way to her car when she suddenly screamed, “Scallops. Elsa loves them!”

***AAA***

Anna had already disappeared under the guise of her own date with Kristof when Killian arrived at the cottage with Henry in tow. After the way that his brother had been secretly but not so discretely been talking over the phone and via text with Elsa, he wasn’t surprised to see the two of them on the couch. They weren’t exactly touching, but his brother’s arm was loosely thrown over the back of the furniture and his hand was within reach of Elsa’s shoulder. Their eyes were locked and the two of them seemed in a world of their own as they shared some joke that had his brother guffawing and Elsa laughing behind her hand.

“You all look to be hard at work,” Killian said as he dropped his bag onto the table beside the door. Henry had already swooped past him to greet his mother.

“We’re making progress,” Emma declared, closing her notebook where she had been scribbling notes. “I think that we’ve gotten a few more options.”

She stood to hug her son and crossed the few steps toward Killian before agreeing that Henry could go down to the docks to see the boats. Killian had already driven Henry there twice that week and
each time her son was eager to see the mixture of cruisers and fishing vessels. She gave him the standard lecture about not getting too close to the edge and not bothering any of the seamen or fishermen who were working, but she knew that they could watch him from the breakfast nook in Killian’s kitchen.

Looking at her there with the evening sun almost red through the windows and glowing around her, his tongue felt too thick for his mouth and tension tied his stomach in knots. “I have something for you,” he said, turning toward the refrigerator and pulling down a book from atop it. “I thought you might enjoy reading it.”

The book he handed her was old and worn, the pages yellow and cover cracked. She could tell that it was love rather than neglect that had left it that way. Smoothing her hand over the cover, she smiled at the familiar sounding title about the ocean. “You thought of me when you saw it?”

His cheeks flushed to the color of the evening sun as he watched her eyes narrow to study him. “I’ve had it forever,” he admitted. “It was one of my mother’s favorites and became mine too. I’ve read it so many times that I could probably recite it from memory. I was looking at my shelf last night and thought to myself that you would probably like it too.”

Holding it in both hands, she smiled first down at the tome and then at him. “Thank you, Killian,” she said. “I will take care of it. Maybe after I read it, we can…”

“I’d like that,” he answered a bit more boldly. Lifting his left foot, he let it hover before taking one step toward her. There might have been more if he hadn’t heard the unmistakable sound of his brother gleefully laughing along with Elsa.

“They seem…”

Emma rolled her eyes. “Yeah, let’s not go there. I’ve already had the conversation with Elsa’s sister.”

Killian chuckled, his eyes shifting back to Emma. “I’ve been meaning to ask you. More like I’ve been told to ask you…Would you mind coming with me to dinner at your friend Mary Margaret’s? Seems she’s trying to be sociable and requiring me to bring a guest who is not my brother.”

She grimaced and then grinned. “They aren’t giving up, are they?” she asked. She knew the answer to that. Ruby had already given her the third degree when she stopped in for a to-go coffees before meeting everyone the other day. Mary Margaret was sending her women’s magazine articles about dating. And Liam was not so subtly selling the benefits of Killian in every day conversation. He’d already bragged about his brother’s dancing and cooking abilities, as well as his knack for learning new things.

“Like a dog with a bone,” he responded, pulling open one of the drawers closest to the refrigerator. “Are you all about done for the day or should I place an order for some food. I was thinking anything but Granny’s.”

Liam’s footsteps were heavy as he passed into the kitchen, pulling the diner’s menu from the same drawer. “And what might be wrong with such a fine diner as Granny’s?” he asked. “I rather like the food, the service, and of course Mrs. Lucas. She’s a fine woman.” He glanced back at Elsa on the couch and winked playfully. “As a matter of fact, I think I’ll take my lovely singing companion there this evening.”

“We really should finish tweaking that song,” Emma protested, looking back and forth between the two brothers for support. Finding none, she sighed. “I guess we could look at it again in the morning. But remember I’ve got studio time scheduled for Elsa and Anna in the afternoon. And Liam you’ve
got those guitarists auditioning too.”

Liam chuckled, giving his brother a playful slap to his chest. “She’s quite the bossy one. Always directing and giving orders. Reminds me of myself in my naval days.”

“I have a boss and she’s concerned about the lack of progress on this project,” Emma reminded them. “But since it is Friday, I’ll tell the two of you to run off and have your fun.”

Elsa joined them, her shoulder brushing against Liam’s as she swayed a bit in his direction. “Are you sure you won’t join us?”

“I should probably collect Henry and get home,” Emma said. “Like I told you, it’ll be a busy day tomorrow.”

“No need to rush off, lass,” Liam insisted, reaching over and grabbing the blue wool coat and holding it out for Elsa to step into. When she did, he smoothed her hair over the collar and gave a tiny squeeze to both her shoulders. “You must be hungry given how long ago we had lunch. If you’re not in the mood for Granny’s, I’m sure my brother can order up something for you and your boy. He’s got a real talent for that.”

Killian hastened toward the drawer. “My brother mocks me, but I can cook, love. Perhaps though you and Henry might prefer some pizza. I have soda for the lad and I might have a couple of beers if Liam and the other blokes he insists on keeping company with haven’t seen fit to abscond with them yet.”

“They are safely inside,” Liam noted, shrugging into his own coat and guiding Elsa out the door. “Weak brew and hardly worth cracking open. Have fun you two.”

Emma didn’t say she would stay, but Killian tried to take that as an affirmative answer when she did not immediately gather her belongings and Henry. Gauging her willingness to stay for a bit, he questioned her choice in pizza toppings and found an agreeable combination of items that the three of them might enjoy. “I’ll make the call if you want to see to Henry,” he suggested, testing one last time if she was staying. She nodded wordlessly and grabbed her own coat and Henry’s scarf as she walked out the door. His exhale matched the closing of it.

***AAA***

Ruby waved off her friend Mary Margaret as she doctored up the popcorn with some hot spices. “I’m telling you this is how the movie stars do it. Everything is so spicy that you sweat. If you are sweating, you’re burning calories. If you’re burning calories, you’re losing weight.”

“You don’t need to lose weight,” Mary Margaret protested, pouring the soda over the ice and carrying them into the living room of her second floor loft. Usually girls’ nights included Emma and sometimes a few other friends, but nobody else had seemed available. “And you’re ruining the popcorn.”

“It’ll be great,” Ruby insisted, carrying the oversized bowl with her. “So are we going romance, comedy, drama, or what? And where the hell is Emma? Girls’ movie nights is nonnegotiable. Bras before bros and all that.”

“She’s working with that duo she’s trying to get recorded and still trying to set up auditions for different groups.” Wrinkling her nose, she sniffed at the bowl of popcorn, which had the scents of lime and red pepper. “I think we can give her a pass.”

Sinking into the cushions of the rattan couch, Ruby popped a few of the kernels into her mouth and
chewed thoughtfully. “Are we sure she’s not at Killian’s?”

“She said no, but I asked. She is still claiming they are just friends. He’s pretending like he has no idea what I mean about her being a date for him to bring to my little dinner party. It would be cute if it wasn’t so annoying.” She reached for her remote and scrolled through the movie selections, pausing on a few before moving past others.

“Speaking of annoying,” Ruby said, a lacquered nail tapping the side of the glass bowl. “We need to talk logistics and strategy. We have too many people conspiring to get the two of them together. I’m setting up forced meetings, you’re encouraging Killian to invite Emma places, Granny mixed up their to-go orders and then told them to sort it out, and Henry has forgotten his backpack during music practice twice this week so that Emma had to contact Killian to pick it up. I hate to admit it, but we might be going a bit hard at it.”

“We probably should confer before we put a plan in place. We wouldn’t want time conflicts to get in the way of romance.”

***AAA***

“Who the hell orders ice cream when it is freezing outside?” Liam asked indignantly as he and Elsa walked from the ice cream shop. He was empty handed, but his date was enjoying a double scoop of mint chocolate chip.

They had already had their dinner, courtesy of Granny, and talked, sometimes laughing, sometimes stumbling over emotions and explanations. Over appetizers of crab pate and toast squares (not typically on the menu at the diner but made upon request), Liam told Elsa more about his mother and her influence over his love of music. For the main course he ordered lasagna and she had grilled chicken and vegetables, allowing them both to share off each other’s dish as she told him her worries about performing in public. The white wine they had sipped throughout the meal had loosened them both, giving them each the courage that only alcohol can bring.

“It’s not that cold,” she protested, taking another bite as he made a show of pulling the collar of his coat up. “It’s not snowing or anything.”

“Mere technicality,” he said, pointing to the sign above the bank on Main Street. “If I’m calculating the way you Americans do your temperature correctly, it’s merely a degree above freezing. We should be snuggling in front of a fire with spiked cocoa or something, not freezing our arses off and nibbling on ice cream cones.” Even in his sternness, he was managing to grin at her, taking the sting out of his words.

“Are you cold, Liam?” she asked, ignoring his speech. “We could do something else.”

Taking her free hand in his gloved one, he continued with their leisurely stroll down in front of the shops. After she had finished the frozen treat, they managed to drag each other into a few and check out everything from worthless baubles to finery that was out of their price ranges. Finding themselves in the pawn shop that was owned by Mr. Gold. Neal ran it when his father was busy, but on that evening it was the older man himself behind the counter. Liam waved off the man’s offer to help and pulled Elsa over to a collection of vinyl records in one of the far corners as Mr. Gold helped a woman who was looking to find a replacement for her mother’s antique china cup.

“I may be younger than you are, Liam, but I’m familiar with records,” she laughed as he began to peruse through them with the attention of someone buying a new house or car. “I even have a few.”

“I knew there was something good about you,” he teased back, pulling a colorful number from the
stack. “This is one of my favorites. Played it as a child until it was warped and skipped through so much that my brother insisted I throw it out.”

A dusty turntable sat there in that corner on a table that Pinterest would probably have a dozen or so plans to turn into a desk or a corner nook of some type. Leaning over it, Liam blew a breath to displace a layer or two of the dust and placed the black vinyl disc onto its surface. As he lowered the needle, the scent of burning dust filled their nostrils and the scratchy sounds of the beginnings of the familiar refrain.

“I would have pictured you liking hair bands or heavy metal more than standards and romance,” she said as the music filled the air. “But listening to it this way does take on a new quality.”

“Aye,” he said, extending his hand to her. “Care to dance, love?”

Twin flags of embarrassment colored her cheeks as she shook her head. “Not here,” she said quickly, stealing a glance at the man still busy behind the counter. “I don’t want…”

“No worries,” he said in a velvet tone, “I’ll find us a more private place to share a dance, if you prefer.”

“If you’re suggesting I go back to your place, I’d think that was a bad idea,” she said as he replaced the record in its cover. “Your brother and my dear friend don’t need gawkers.”

“Are you suggesting yours?” he asked with an eyebrow raised in a mocking display of surprise. “I’m shocked.”

“My sister and her boyfriend are there,” Elsa said with a playful swat at him. “We don’t really…”

“I think I know a place,” he said, tugging on her hand as they bid goodbye to Mr. Gold and hurried along in the direction he chose.

***AAA***

Killian felt like a lovesick teen, he realized as the three of them were nibbling on their pizza and enjoying the conversation between himself and the mother and son. It wasn’t just the way she would smile at him when a joke flew over Henry’s head or the wink when something she said could have doubled as an innuendo. He realized a little bit too late that his own smile was growing bigger every time that he made her laugh, pride radiating through him that he could provoke such a response.

She made one more mention of leaving before Henry jumped in with a request to watch a movie. It wasn’t a school night was his argument that to Killian’s relief worked on the woman. She helped to clear the table, lingering next to the sink where he was rinsing off the plates as Henry plopped down to surf through the channels.

He lost his grip on one of the plates, dropping it into the soapy water with a plop that sent the water sloshing out on both of them. His first instinct was to apologize until he looked toward Emma and saw the way her sweater was clinging even more to her than before. Her request to remain friends rather than explore anything more echoed in his ears. However, those ears were not feeling very connected to his libido at that moment.

“Rather than play a board game we could a wet t-shirt contest,” he suggested, wagging his eyebrows at the idea. “I would give you points for wearing a white sweater.”

“If you weren’t so mature,” she said, dabbing at the clinging fabric with a towel, “I might think you did that on purpose.”
“I apologize, love. You’re welcome to borrow one of my shirts until yours dries. My bedroom’s right through that door.”

She inspected the material again, seeing that her blotting efforts were doing nothing and she was starting to smell of the lemon dish soap. “Thanks.”

She disappeared into the recesses of his room, giving him more than enough inappropriate thoughts of other things they could be doing in there. Left with dirty dishes and her son only feet away, he tried to think of anything else in that moment. He was doing a pretty good job until she came out in one of his blue button down shirts that she had complimented him on the other day. It was then that he cursed the blood thundering through his veins and pounding in his ears.

“Sometimes I don’t know if it is playing the trumpet he likes or the fact that he gets to hang out with you,” she said, reaching for the red and white towel. “He’s…he’s never been one to really hang out with kids his age. He always gravitates toward my friends and wants to fit in with the adults.”

“Common issue of the only child,” Killian noted, handing her the plate to dry. “But if it makes you feel better, he seems to fit in quite well in school with his classmates.”

She looked back at him carefully. “I wasn’t soliciting information about my son at school, Mr. Jones,” she said, using the formal name. “I was commenting that he seems to like you and is comfortable with you. It’s nice to see.”

“He’s a good kid.”

“Yeah, he is,” she agreed, settling the plate into the bamboo holder. “I didn’t really answer you on the Mary Margaret thing.”

“It’s no great shakes, Emma,” he said quickly. “I know everyone seems to have plans for us that don’t match what we’ve agreed upon. I wouldn’t want it to be awkward for you at all.”

She looked back toward the living area and noticed that Henry had selected something to watch. The glow of the set was evident against his skin with no lights on in that area. She was again taken by the hominess of the comfortable cottage, finding herself with no problem imagining herself there with Killian. “It’s not that exactly,” she said, perching her bottom against the edge of the counter. “How well do you know Mary Margaret? I know you work together, but do you really know her beyond that?”

His brow quirked up in curiosity to her question. “I suppose not much better than any of my colleagues. She was assigned as my mentor teacher, but we haven’t ever spent that much time talking. I mean I know about David and how she refers to him as her Prince Charming. Quite nauseating really.”

“You’re not into fairy tales?”

“I have more of a penchant for villains with hearts of gold than I do for boring princes who swoop in at the last minute to save the day. But it hardly seems a reason to be embarrassed to be seen with me at your friend’s for dinner. What is it that you’re avoiding?”

“Mary Margaret is the happiest and most hopeful person you could ever meet. She never says a cross word to anyone and when she has, she regrets it so much that an apology is not far behind. She’s a great friend, but she isn’t like me at all. She’s…Well, I sort of told her that you and I had kissed.” She shook her head vehemently when he moved his mouth to speak. “She’s kind of hardcore with the pressure in a low key kind of way if that makes sense. Anyway, since she heard that, she’s been
on this whole kick with Ruby and Granny.”

“Aye, she does seem a bit more persistent about this than any other time she’s requested me to meet. Perhaps it’s best I speak to her and explain that…”

His words faltered and the two of them looked toward the darkened living room and the glow of the television. “She’s my friend. I’ll do it. I’d like to go with you, but I just don’t want to give her the wrong impression. If they think we’re caving in, they are likely to push that much harder. So I’ll talk to her and explain it again. We’re just friends.”

“Makes sense,” he said. Turning back to the cabinets, he rooted around for some sort of snack for them to share. “Emma?”

“Yeah?” she asked distractedly.

“What exactly did you tell her about our kiss?”

***AAA***

“Your brother is going to kill you,” Elsa said as Liam fumbled for the interior lights on the sail boat that Killian had spent weekends restoring when the weather was better. Still a bit battered and outdated, the boat had been something he had a lot of pride in showing Liam when the older of the two arrived in Storybrooke.

“What he doesn’t know won’t hurt him,” Liam assured her. He flipped a few more of the switches with no success. “Bloody Hell.” In his true sailor fashion, he kicked at the base of the wall that he was standing next to, thinking that might help his plight.

Standing with one foot on the ladder, Elsa clucked sympathetically as his finger caught on a jagged piece of plastic. “Come here, you big baby,” she said. “I don’t suppose you know where he keeps his first aid kit.”

Liam stepped closer to her, overtaken by the electricity that seemed to spark between them but on place else in the boat. “I think he might notice if we took his supplies, love.”

“Better that you should leave blood stains on his boat?” Pulling her phone out of her purse and patting his injured hand, she shook her head. “I don’t suppose you know where he keeps his first aid kit.”

Using the flashlight on her phone, Elsa searched the rather bare contents of the drawers and found a metal box with the words first aid painted in red. She pilfered a bottle of antiseptic, some gauze, and a bandage before returning to Liam.

“You’re a woman of many talents,” he said, chuckling as she knitted her brow together in concentration of the task. He held the phone for her with his good hand to allow her to work with the help of the artificial light and the moonbeams cascading down from the opening.

“I considered being a nurse,” she confessed. “I even got into a program, but I thought better of it.”

“Why is that?” he asked, grimacing at the sting of the liquid she used to clean the cut. “Seems you might have been good at it.”

“I wasn’t thrilled about causing pain. I cringed and cried as much as the patient the day I learned to give a shot.” She laughed, her pulse pounding as he swayed closer to her. “It was a sight.”
“I’m sure you were adorable. And truthfully you are fueling quite a few fantasies at the moment with me picturing you in a little white nurse uniform. Did you wear the hat too?”

She rolled her eyes, wiping a bit harder to clean the small wound. “No, I didn’t wear the orthopedic shoes either. I was in scrubs most of the time. And is that your way of saying you fantasize about me?”

“Maybe once or twice, darling,” he said, grunting as she wound the bandage too tight around his finger. “Okay more than that.”

Her lips pursed carefully, she looked up toward the moonlight. “I’m going to go look at the storage boxes on deck. Maybe your brother has one of those electric lanterns or something.”

“Find anything?” Liam asked, climbing up after her a few minutes later. “I’m afraid I found the problem downstairs. It’s a blown fuse. I’d fix it, but I’m afraid I don’t know what size to get and my brother seems to have no spares.”

“Other than these sparklers and a flare gun, I’m afraid we’re out of luck,” she said, pushing her hands on the cushioned top of the storage bench for leverage to stand. “So much for good ideas.”

“Sparklers?” he asked, pulling the package from her hand. “These are little more than wound wire. What are they supposed to be?”

Elsa explained to him how the sticks worked and that she and Anna had loved them as children. “Every 4\textsuperscript{th} of July my parents had this big party. Anna and I would sneak off and place them in holes in the ground to make a pattern. Then we lit them and were so excited to see our art in lights like that.”

“Not a holiday I celebrate, love, but I’d do anything that makes you smile like that,” he said, touching her cheek and savoring the milky softness and warmth. “So how do we light these things?”

“The normal way,” she said, revealing the lighter that she had found. “I can’t believe your brother had these. Sparklers are one of my favorite things,” she said, gazing at him through the bright light. Liam had just lit his own when he absently answered, “Anything for you, lass.” He stopped cold, realizing what had just slipped.

Elsa stared at him for a moment, his comment echoing in her head. She saw his eyes widen, caught his startled and scared gaze through the flying golden sparks. She had to know, she decided. She had learned how quickly life could change, how suddenly everything could be taken away. Slowly, her tongue darted out, wetting her lips. She deserved to find out – they deserved to find out. Carefully, she leaned toward him, her eyes never breaking their stare.

He had a breathless few seconds waiting for her reaction, holding her eyes with his through the golden haze of flickering light. When she leaned toward him, moistening her lips, he was sure his lungs had frozen. Slowly, he moved towards her, too, their gazes locked in complete harmony. Then her soft, warm lips were on his, the hiss of the sparklers matching the heat growing inside of him. He tasted her gently, pulling at the plump flesh with his teeth, then laving them with his tongue. Her mouth was intoxicating, her quiet moan an exotic sound in his ears.

Elsa melted into the soft pressure of his lips, her mouth conforming to his movements. The sparkler was held in her hand, forgotten, as the lightning quick mercury of need speed into her veins. Finally, with excruciating tenderness, Liam stroked his tongue over hers. The sparkler popped loudly in her ear and hissed as it burned. Elsa thought it was her heart and her soul bending. Readily, she tangled
her tongue with his, their kiss becoming more demanding even as it stayed gentle. Liam slowly ended their embrace, pulling away carefully as he dropped a final, tender kiss on her now swollen lips. Elsa stared at him, her mind hot and vivid. Finally, she reached up with her empty hand, stroking his cheek. He smiled gently, then pulled her against him. Elsa rested her head on his shoulder, sighing as the dazzling twinkles sparkled around them.
Chapter 8

No Frozen Jewel in this chapter, but a little angst and some more Granny. Hope you’re all still enjoying and having fun on this little journey.

Thanks again for your comments and suggestions/questions. I’m trying to get caught up on responding and hope to do that by Friday!

“I didn’t mean to put you on the spot, love,” Killian said as Emma crept out onto the deck and closed the door lightly behind her. Henry was sleeping in the chair that he had slept in the other night, his legs thrown over the arm and a remote resting on his chest in case he woke up. It was cold outside, but Killian is wearing the thickest of sweaters and he had been sure to grab her coat before he stepped outside.

“You just sort of surprised me,” she said, running her hand through her long hair and attempting to hold it back in the growing strength of what had been a normal sea breeze. “Can’t say I’ve been asked that question before.”

“So that’s why you didn’t answer me?”

“No, I mean, well… You asked me in front of my son. I don’t need Henry getting ideas and joining up with the matchmaking brigade.” In the corner of his deck there was a built in bench, l-shaped and big enough for two people. She took one spot and he the other, both turning their eyes skyward at the stars shining back down on them. “I thought we decided we didn’t regret it.”

“Nobody’s regretting anything, Swan. I’m merely asking if you enjoyed it and how you might have described it to your friend’s inquiring mind.” Bending his arms, he laid them out on the railing behind him, taking up a bit more than his fair share of the room on the bench.

“You said it was an enjoyable way to end our evening,” she remarked, giving him a side eye before returning to the heavens above. “I don’t disagree, but that’s not what I told Mary Margaret.” Swallowing, she let her head fall back more, his right hand so close that he could have buried his fingers in the long waves of gold. “I told her it was good and that I didn’t know which of us started it.”

“Good is a pretty weak word,” he said after she stopped talking. “I hoped my kiss ranked above that.”

“You wanted me to give her ammunition just to boost your ego?”

Moving his hand away from her, he placed it on his neck, his pinky making a scratching against the area behind his earlobe. “I wanted to know if I was alone in thinking that perhaps we are…”

“Don’t Killian.”

“Don’t what?” His eyes showed that he was far from the innocent man he was trying to portray, his smile giving way and dimples deepening.

“Don’t do this,” she said, eyes closing against the words and the wind. “Killian, of course I’m attracted to you. Most women are or would be. I’m just not ready for the repercussions here. My son is in the other room and could wake up at any moment. I should walk away from all this based on my being his mother alone.”
“I like your son,” Killian said. “Don’t use him as an excuse.”

“I’m not. I’m just not sure that we need to jump into something here. I like being your friend.”

“Emma, I can respect that you don’t wish for there to be anything romantic between us, but this week has hardly been the picture of platonic friendship. And if I’m going to be honest, I’ve thought about kissing you a hundred times since Saturday. I’ve memorized every detail of how you tasted and felt. It wasn’t enough, Emma. It wasn’t close to enough. Yes, there are things we should take under advisement such as me being Henry’s teacher and you being protective of him, but Emma they are insurmountable things.”

“Mary Margaret already said that was nothing to worry about. She all but called me dumb for using that as an excuse.” She pulled her jean clad legs up onto the wooden bench, using the coat to cover them too. “I guess she’s right. There is more.”

“Then what is it? Because you’re going to have to tell me and not make me guess.” He was teasing her, trying to make her feel more at ease, but the tenderness in her voice made her wonder.

“I don’t want to hate you,” she answered slowly. “And if things didn’t work out…if we ended things badly, I would end up hating you. And I don’t want that. I don’t…”

“You’re worried over us ending things when we have yet to begin anything,” he said as though he expected her to bolt right then and there. “Did it occur to you that we might not? That I don’t wish to ever hurt you?”

Her breathing evened out, a strategic move that she had learned over her time in a high stress industry. When she had counted to nine, she opened her eyes and found his staring into hers with honesty and concern. “Killian, I don’t have the best track record with this.”

“I don’t think any of us truly do, love. If we did, we wouldn’t be having this conversation as we’d both be married and living happily ever after or whatever the words are to end those blasted fairy tales. I suppose I was wrong. I was hopeful that you felt as I did that whatever this is between us was worth taking a chance on and seeing how good it could be. I apologize. I shouldn’t have pressured you to feel anything.” Standing, he stalked to the other side of the deck in about six steps, keeping his back to her.

“You didn’t,” she said, regretting that whatever her qualms and concerns were at that moment, he was no longer comfortable even sitting next to her. “You’ve done nothing wrong at all. We were fine before. You were his teacher. I was his mother. We barely even spoke and then Granny…What does she know anyway? She should stick to lasagna not my love life.”

He didn’t answer her, his head dropping down between his arms that were resting folded at his elbows on the railing. Considering walking over to stand next to him, she realized that she wasn’t ready literally or figuratively to take those steps in that direction.

“I’m sorry,” she managed to say before sliding back into the cottage and gently waking her son to go back home.

***AAA***

Liam was up before Killian the next morning, his mood lighter and his barbs filled with a bit more sting as he attempted to persuade his brother to come to the auditions that afternoon. “You were our guitarist for years,” he reminded the man as he poured cereal into a bowl and then drowned it with the cold milk from the carton. “You probably can pick talent in that area better than the lot of us.”
“I’m busy,” Killian said, his voice somewhat muffled as he leaned his head into the refrigerator in search of something. Liam surmised that he must not have found it, as he slammed the door shut with such force that the canisters next to it rattled in protest.

“Would it make a difference if I said Emma won’t be there? She’s supervising the recording session for Elsa and her sister. She picked out a few she liked from their audition demos, but the final decision is up for us.”

“This,” Killian said, peeling one of the last bananas with a large amount of disdain, “has nothing to do with Emma.”

“Right,” Liam agreed with a long nod. “I know that face. I know that sulking and pouting. You and the lass had some sort of disagreement? Am I right?”

“That isn’t your concern, but if you insist on worrying over the details of my life you can start with my boat. Want to tell me why I noticed lights coming from it last night?” Killian rarely had the opportunity to leave his brother speechless, so he relished the opportunity as the older of the two sat opened mouthed for almost three seconds. “I’m going into town. You’ve eaten all the proper breakfast foods and left us with nothing but this sugary dried stuff.”

“It’s fortified with vitamins,” Liam called after him. “Eight of them or something?”

Killian was three blocks from the cottage and only steps from Granny’s front door when he realized he had left his wallet back next to his bed. While he could blame it on his thoughts of Emma, he was not planning to use that as an excuse to the proprietress when he asked to float a tab until he came by with cash later. To his benefit, the diner was barely attracting anyone at that early hour on such a chilly morning. While the weather reports were calling for a warm up, it had yet to hit.

“I appreciate it,” he said to Granny when she handed him the menu after his story of leaving his wallet behind. The woman did not offer a smile, but that was not something she normally did anyway. Gruff and no nonsense, she tended to listen sharply and speak even sharper. He halfway expected her to hand him off to one of the less than adept servers, as he wasn’t going to be able to provide a tip until he returned later. However, she was the one pouring his coffee a few minutes later and pulling out the dog eared green pad to take his order.

After he had placed his request, she passed the torn sheet off to one of the cooks and returned to stand in front of him on the other side of the counter. She was plump compared to the skinny young servers that she hired, but she wasn’t the one trying to fill out the tiny skirts and tops that seemed to drift higher on their midriffs at times. She was the picture of someone’s grandmother with her gray hair coiled up above the nape of her neck, a floral top, thick wool skirt that stopped mid-calf and sensible shoes. An apron with the diner’s logo embroidered on it was around her waist and a pair of glasses sat on her nose while another hung around her neck on a chain.

“You usually bring that brother of yours in,” she said, not even pretending to have business standing there. “I take it you are wanting to be alone.”

Killian lifted the cup to his lips and took a drink before addressing her. “He’s getting ready for auditioning some people.”

“And I imagine that Emma and Elsa are busy with their music too,” the woman continued. It was uncanny the way she could stare at people, not just observing but dissecting them as well. “Must make for a quiet day for you. Or a bit lonely.”

“I have managed this long.”
Reaching down below the counter, she pulled out a few more of the menus and passed them over to one of the servers who was setting more tables. It was all done wordlessly and seemed an intricate and choreographed dance that had been practiced for a while. “Is that what you call it?” she asked after the woman had walked away. “Managing?”

“Is this where you tell me that my life would be better with someone in it? That I am bumbling your attempts to find my soulmate because I’m too set in my ways. Are you going to lecture me that I will die alone and it will be my own fault?” Dunking the spoon in his coffee, he spun it though there was nothing to add to the black substance. It felt good to have direction for that one moment.

“No,” she said, pushing her glasses up her nose a bit, “but if you’d like to provide me with the script I’ll be happy to give you a good talking to. I imagine that you know you’re floundering when it comes to Emma.”

He wanted to shout at the woman that he was not the one who was floundering. He had kissed her that night and despite his hesitation had wanted to do it again and again. There was no mistaking that he wanted more with her, wanted to see where they could go with this. It was her stubbornness that had left him on that deck wondering what he had done. “Can I ask why you thought…” He broke off and sipped at the coffee again, burning the tip of his tongue with the overly hot liquid.

“Why I wanted to pair the two of you together? I don’t know. I do that. I see two people here at the diner and think how much happier and better their lives would be if they simply spent some time together. I didn’t set out to cure the world of unhappiness with a wave of a wand or a date. I simply wanted to make sure that people weren’t so caught up in themselves that they forget they aren’t the only ones on this planet.” Her fingers brushed off a crumb from the counter to the floor where she would undoubtedly point it out to one of the bus boys later.

“You don’t date though, do you, love?” he asked, suddenly realizing that he had never seen her so much as at a store let alone out from the confines of her businesses.

“That, Killian, is a ship that sailed long ago. I had my husband and a beautiful daughter. Lost them both and took to raising Ruby. It wasn’t a conscious decision, though I can’t imagine being happier than I was when I was with him. He was my everything. Before you know it, you’re old and gray and looking back on years that could have been more.”

“I’m sorry that you lost him. It’s hard to go on after that.”

“That it is, but you know that people would tell you that they want us to go on. They would want us to be happy. I nod and say I know, but truthfully I kind of doubt it. My husband could be a selfish bastard sometimes. Doesn’t mean I didn’t love him. I just think he probably judges me every day for the decisions I’ve made.”

“Sounds like you two were quite a lot alike.”

“We were,” she said with what passed as her most dazzling smile. “And yours…what was her name?”

“Milah,” he said, the name sounding more like an apology than just a name. “We weren’t married.”

“Doesn’t ease the hurt,” Granny told him, turning to grab one of the coffee pots and filling his cup again. “I suppose being married gives you an excuse to miss them. It gives you a title…widow, widower. But none of that matters. You loved her dearly and you probably regret that you didn’t tell her enough.”
“At all,” he said, looking down at the cup. “I never said those words to her. I didn’t have the right.”

She had the decency to not look shocked, as he explained a bit about the circumstances. “I can see how that makes you a bit afraid of love. You’ve seen the loss of it. Nobody wants to repeat that.”

“It seems as though that is something Emma and I may have in common,” he said, allowing himself to speak her name without the bitterness boiling up inside him over her not wanting to explore what they might have. “We both jump past what might become of us and settle on the worst case scenarios.”

The older woman patted his wrist consolingly as she barked out an order to one of the staff just standing there. “If you’ve got time to lean, you’ve got time to clean,” she instructed. “Don’t let me catch you standing there yawning again if you want a paycheck.”

“Do you know that I’ve set up half the couples in this town? I rarely make a mistake. It’s a gift, same as my recipes only more rewarding. Not all of them are conventional or what you would expect. If someone comes in asking for me to find them someone, I rarely take the challenge. It’s got to fit.”

Killian smiled sadly, a few wisps of his hair falling over his eyes. “And you saw that there is a fit with me and Emma?”

“You don’t?” she asked, waving over one of the cooks who carried his order out and placed it in front of him. Not waiting for his answer, she unfolded one of the napkins from below the counter and thrust it at him in a way a mother who knows her child is going to make a mess does. “See, everyone has something they have to do or learn in life.”

“I rather think more than one, but go ahead.”

“One overarching thing,” the woman corrected, looking offended to have to do that. “And there are people, who can help us with that. Now maybe we don’t fully understand why or how we’re supposed to do these things, but the people do. They make it easier. They make it better. And so while the rest of this town thinks that I thought you and Emma were compatible because you both like onion rings and you both eat your food on the plate clockwise, the real deal is that you both have a similar soul.”

“Very poetic,” he said. “But on flaw in that. I see that, but Emma doesn’t. She is too wrapped up in what could go wrong and how I’m going to hurt her.”

“I wouldn’t have suggested it if I thought you would hurt her,” Granny said with a dismissive tone. “And I’ll have you know that I have known Emma since she was a teenager wearing clothes too big for her and glasses that were more about hiding than medicinal purposes. She’s family. I haven’t tried to pair her up with anyone but you.”

“I appreciate your confidence in me, Granny. I truly do, but Emma isn’t interested. She’s clearly coming up with excuses. I can admit to being daft at times, but I am not glutton for punishment.”

Patting at his wrist again, the woman gave him a half smile before ambling off to instruct one of her staff on how to properly unpack the latest shipment of ingredients. She was explaining that the coldest items should not go next to the freezer door when she turned and looked at him with a nearly angry grimace. “I thought you were the type to fight for what you want.”

It took him a moment to realize she was speaking to him. “I don’t think there is much point. I’m not a man who would force her to feel something when she doesn’t, even if it were possible.”

“Pity,” she said. “Besides my track record, there is the fact that she’s worth fighting for in my
opinion. I had hoped in yours too.”

***AAA***

Emma leaned back against the black leather couch in the control room and listened to the playback of the song. While there were certainly tweaks to be made, she was more than happy with the results so far. Anna could learn to not come in so early on her solo verse and the bass would have to be mellowed a bit so it did not drown them out. All in all, she was happy with it.

Complimenting both women, she suggested that they rest their voices for a bit while she spoke with the engineer and producer about the next song. She was humming out the melody as she read through the new lyrics that Elsa and Liam had finished penning that morning. Again, she was duly impressed by the effort and was pleased she could see parts that were clearly her friend’s idea.

“She’s welcome to peek all you want,” Emma said, gesturing at the nearly empty studio where the sisters had been working for the better part of two hours. “Not much to see at the moment.” Taking in Ruby’s annoyed expression made her laugh. “Oh you meant a listen. Nope, nothing is ready for the public yet.”

Ruby’s long legs were covered in a pair of black leggings with an oversized black sweater serving as a practically a dress. A mismatch of gold chains twisted around her neck and a large red belt added that signature color she always included. Her ankle boots stood tall with long thin heels that she navigated with ease as she plopped down next to her friend.

Emma tried to ignore the heady perfume that she wore as she leaned forward to suspiciously inspect the contents of the bag.

“What?” Ruby asked, twisting one of the chains around her finger. “It’s grilled cheese. Nothing shady about that.”

With one finger still tipping the bag so that she could see inside, Emma side eyed the woman next to her. “You have been overly shady this week. Am I going to hear from Killian about how this was supposed to be his? Did you leave me a note in here or something? Are his car keys in the bottom of the bag.”

Nabbing one of the paper napkins, she waved it with her right hand and pointed at herself with her left. “This is me,” she said as solemnly as she could muster, “waving the flag of surrender. You want to be miserable and break that man’s heart. That’s totally up to you.”

Rolling her eyes, Emma pulled out the wax paper wrapped sandwich and began to unfold the corners. “You have never given up so easily. I don’t think you’re about to start now.”

“You skipped movie night,” Ruby said accusingly. “You know tradition and all that. Then I hear that you spent the evening with Killian.” She held up a hand with fingers splayed. “I don’t want to hear excuses. I get it. He’s dreamier to look at than your friends. He probably was very sweet and romantic. He was nice to your kid. He said things to you in that sexy accent. I get the reasoning. It still hurts, but I get it.”

“I didn’t choose Killian over you.”
“No, you didn’t, but you still missed movie night. You will be punished.” There was a distinct predatory nature to the way that Ruby could look sometimes. While she was a loyal and sweet friend, she could flatten people with a single glance. Emma had made it a point not to cross her.

“I apologize. I’ll bring wine next time. I promise.” Emma bit into the sandwich, which was hardly fancy. Killian had joked the other day over lunch that Granny could probably compete with the bigger restaurants if she used a higher quality of cheese than the sharp cheddar that was standard. Even a mix could prove unbeatable. But to Emma there was something comforting about the tried but true standard that went so well with tomato soup and onion rings. He had agreed with her as they both nibbled and talked of favorite movies and books.

“And chocolate,” Ruby insisted. “I guess there is an ulterior motive after all.”

“This isn’t about the wine and chocolate?” Emma pulled the white container of soup out to settle next to her now half eaten sandwich. The onion rings were next. There was even a white cup with a frozen hot chocolate milkshake that was exclusive to Granny’s. “This is delicious by the way. Thank your grandmother for me.”

“You are still talking to my grandmother after she’s been trying to set you up with Killian? I know we’ve been kind of rough on you this week.” She wrinkled her nose as though she was disgusted with herself. “We all want you to be happy.”

Emma did know that. She knew that Mary Margaret was the friend who worried about her and asked her to text when she got home so that she knew she was alright. Ruby was the one who made sure she and Henry always had some place to spend holidays, making them mainstays at Granny’s table. When Henry had a bad case of the flu that turned to pneumonia, it had been Elsa, Ruby, and Mary Margaret who had stayed with her at the hospital. They did love and care about her, even if they annoyed her sometimes.

“And you got carried away,” she finished for her friend.

Holding her index finger and thumb close together, Ruby grinned. “A little bit, but don’t punish Killian for that. We’ve been just as rough on him too. And honestly, he’s a great guy.”

Chewing noiselessly, Emma watched her friend study the onion ring that she had stolen. “You didn’t bring me lunch to apologize or tell me he’s a great guy.”

“Do you remember when you first met Graham?” Ruby asked, her eyes following her fingers as she carefully pulled the fried batter away from the soft onion. “We weren’t all that good of friends yet, but you dated him for a few weeks.”

“I’m aware of this timeline.” Emma had dated him for a few weeks before they called it off. She thought he was getting too serious after a break up from someone else. To her shock and amazement, they had stayed friends. It disproved her theory that she couldn’t handle that situation maturely.

“You were fine dating him until we all sort of butted in. David set you two up to be alone in the station that evening. I arranged for that candlelight dinner. Mary Margaret siphoned off the gas so that you guys were stuck together that night you were supposed to go to that birthday party.”

“Wait! That was her? I thought…never mind. So what’s the point? I’m well aware that my friends seem to derive sick pleasure out of what I do with my dating life.” The producer and engineer were arguing a few feet away from them over the levels on the sound system, but she didn’t stop them. It was their creative vision as well as Elsa and Anna that they needed to capture.
“You were happy,” Ruby said, bringing the focus back to her. “And we pressured you. Once we started you closed down. It was like you didn’t want us to win or something.”

“It’s a little more complicated than that. And I thought you were happy that I didn’t date him that long. It made it less weird when you two decided to give it a go.” Most friendships weren’t strong enough to withstand a partner swap like that. But Emma knew that Ruby was more Graham’s type and the pairing though tumultuous and never very permanent seemed to work most of the time.

“What I’m saying is don’t discount Killian because we got carried away. If he makes you happy and you make him happy, then I think you should go for it. Who cares what the rest of us think?”

***AAA***

“Killian!” Mary Margaret said in surprise as she threw open the forest green door to her loft apartment. “You came.”

He shifted his feet uncomfortably on the landing, looking over her shoulder where David was flipping something in the sauté pan on the stove. He had a dish towel over his shoulder and his law enforcement badge was fastened to one of his belt loops.

“I may be a bit early,” he said as she grabbed his forearm to drag him into the apartment.

“Nonsense,” she said, widening her smile. “I’m just happy that you came. Where’s Emma?”

Giving a tip of his head to David who was acknowledging him similarly from the kitchen, Killian followed his co-worker into the apartment. Her tastes seemed to run deep, he realized, as the décor was quite similar to that of her classroom. Pieces of furniture and decorations that he would have never thought appropriately matched seemed to go together with ease. Framed photographs sat on almost every surface that showed the teacher with friends and loved ones in a variety of locations. In the place of honor next to the love seat that she used as a sofa was a much younger Mary Margaret flanked by what appeared to be her parents. Sharing her father’s eyes and her mother’s smile, it was clear that the woman was doted on from an early age.

“I’m not sure that she is still joining us,” he answered vaguely. After the previous evening, he hadn’t called her. Yes, he had been moved and even inspired by Granny’s speech. However, he had some pride and self-respect. At least that was what he told himself. There was a part of him that needed Emma to make that next move.

“I could call and check,” the other teacher said, looking a little concerned. “But I don’t want to… interfere. You know what, let’s just not mention Emma tonight.”

Removing his jacket and placing it on one of the hooks by the door where she had pointed, Killian followed her into the kitchen area. The entire first floor of the apartment was basically one large room. Screens and artfully hung curtains separated the bedroom space from the rest. A metal set of stairs led to what he guessed was another bedroom or office space. “So this smells very nice – very appetizing. What are we having?”

“It’s a Nolan family recipe,” David said. “My mother was famous for her lamb chops. I’m trying to teach my beautiful girlfriend the secret of good ones.”

“Shall I avert my eyes so that I don’t pick up on this secret?” Killian asked, smiling gratefully as the hostess placed a cheese tray in front of him. “I wouldn’t want to be accused of espionage.”

“No need,” Mary Margaret said, shuffling through a few ingredients in one of the cabinets before plucking just the right one. “One thing you should know about me, Killian, is that I’m horrible at
keeping secrets. If David wants that recipe to stay undisclosed, he’s picked the wrong sous chef.”

The three joked and discussed things from the weather and David’s desire to try deep sea fishing to some of the students at the academy and a new movie that all three thought looked good from the previews. Insisting that he be allowed to help at least with the prep work, Killian was given a few tasks that he accomplished sitting next to his co-worker at the kitchen island. Even with the tasks he was assigned, Killian was able to take note of the ease between the couple. He was feeling a bit as a third wheel despite their protests that they wanted to get to know him better.

Mary Margaret threw in a few topics of work, keeping him in the conversation by asking a few questions about grading and explaining her philosophy on standardized tests. They commiserated over the new state standards and he admitted his worry over an upcoming observation. David chimed in with his suggestions for classroom management that sounded a bit too much like law enforcement strategies, which led to Killian explaining that his brother had on more than one occasion suggested military education alternatives for the students when he had come home complaining.

It was time for the finishing touches on the meal when all three of them jumped at the loud rapping on the door. David was closest to it and wiped his hands on the towel as he crossed the room to greet whoever it was arriving at such an hour. If Killian was surprised to see Emma standing there with a shopping hand in one bag and a sheepish smile on her face, David wasn’t. He enveloped her quickly in a hug and with a slight nudge to her shoulder as he grabbed the bag from her sent her in the direction of Mary Margaret.

“How we’re all here,” Mary Margaret said, hugging her friend and pulling off her coat at the same time. “We are just about ready to eat.”

She still had not acknowledged Killian, her eyes seeming to stay focused on the ground rather than any one person. “I wasn’t sure of the menu, but I brought cheesecake for dessert. I hope that is okay.”

“You know I won’t turn down cheesecake,” David said jovially, pulling the clearly store bought confection out of the canvas bag. “I’m like the Golden Girls. Give me cheesecake, ice cream, or wine, and I’m ready to stay up all night talking about my deepest, darkest, secrets.”

“He’s even got the floral bathrobe and fuzzy slippers to prove it,” Mary Margaret teased. “Killian? Do you mind pouring another glass of wine for Emma? I bet after being in the studio all day that she could use one.”

He nodded as the couple took turns explaining the menu to Emma and pushed away her attempts to do so much as dress the salad. She finally gave and pulled off her gloves as she sat on the stool next to Killian. “I wasn’t sure I was still invited,” she said softly when he told her that he was glad she was there.

“I wasn’t sure you would want to come,” he countered before taking a sip of the wine that David had sworn was a perfect match for the lamb. “I wasn’t sure I wanted to come.”

David and Mary Margaret might not have been as overt in their intentions, but it wasn’t long before they found reasons to leave Killian and Emma alone. The teacher went in search of earrings that she knew she had borrowed and never returned and David took out the garbage before it got to that overflowing status.

Emma kept her eyes averted from him even when it was clear they were alone only looking up when he finally spoke. She had clearly been expecting a bit of sarcasm or even scolding from him after the night before and the way she had summarily rejected his questions of a future for them beyond
friendship.

“You look stunning,” he said, his voice a little hoarse.

“Killian, I’m sorry about last night. I was…”

“Let’s talk about it later,” he suggested quickly with a glance at the bedroom area as if he could gauge how much time it was going to take before they were rejoined. “After we leave?”
This chapter was a bit tricky to adapt, as the relationships on OUAT are hard to match up to real life. So suffice it to say I had to make some changes. Yes, Killian was with a woman named Milah. However, I am not using the part where she is Gold’s wife or Neal’s mother. The age thing just doesn’t work here. I hope that doesn’t confuse anyone.

I hope you are all gearing up for what looks like a great episode tomorrow night. If we all survive, I’ll have another chapter up early in the week. Much love to all of you for commenting, reviewing, liking, sharing, kudoing, etc.

“You’re here late,” Elsa said, shaking out of her coat as she stepped inside Granny’s. There were only a few people inside the diner on a Saturday night, but Liam immediately caught her eye. He was stooped over a stack of notes at the counter, a coffee cup beside him and a half plate of food next to that. “Insomnia?”

“It’s barely 10, love,” he said, flashing her a smile. “Far too early to declare the night a loss in terms of sleep. I was actually going over a few details of today’s auditions.”

“See,” she said, perching herself on the stool next to him at the counter. “You can be a workaholic when you put your mind to it. Next thing you know, I’ll find you asleep with pages of musical notations for hit songs surrounding you.”

“Imagining yourself in my bed chamber?”

“Nice thought, but since your bed chamber,” she said using air quotes, “is Killian’s couch and living room, I think it is safe to say that I’ve been there.”

“And welcome any time, love,” he said, leaning in to meet her halfway as they kissed quickly. “So tell me about your recording session. Anything come of it?”

“We laid down some good tracks I think,” she said softly, her voice timid as it always was when she felt unsure of herself. “Still plenty to do though, but it should be enough for Regina to give feedback on. Emma seemed pleased until she left.”

“I was expecting the lass to put in an appearance at the auditions, but she never showed. I just assumed she had stuck around to work with the two of you.” He had just spent the better part of four hours listening to anyone who claimed to be able to play a lick on the guitar. Most of them were better used to air guitar in their bedrooms, according to Will, who had given up after the first 90 minutes and disappeared. Robin lasted an hour longer before declaring father’s scheduling issues and ducked out to pick up Roland. Liam had sat there and made notes on the rest, texting his brother to join him and receiving no reply other than an apology.

“Ruby said she was headed over to meet your brother for dinner at someone’s apartment,” she supplied. “I gather that she and Ruby had a bit of a knock down over her reluctance to date Killian.”

“I wasn’t aware, but that makes sense, given that my brother looked like hell this morning. She must have said something to him that sent him into a terrible state.” He clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth petulantly. “He was in such a dour mood that I can only assume some miscommunication or affair of the heart could be to blame.”

“Ruby sort of put the nix on any more overt matchmaking. So I guess we have to concentrate on
other things.” She swayed over a bit, brushing her shoulder against him. “Any ideas?”

“A few,” he said. “I think we can certainly distract ourselves and perhaps force my brother to seek comfort and shelter all at the same time.” He crinkled his eyes. “You know I don’t give up, especially when it comes to my little brother.”

***AAA***

David was telling Emma about his latest case, embellishing the details to the point that even Mary Margaret told him to save it for another night. She wasn’t pushing her friend, but she was holding her coat and saying that she should probably get going. When David didn’t take the hint, she actually stomped on his foot and used the time he was moaning in pain to hug Emma goodbye and remind her that there was a man waiting for her downstairs since Killian had walked out a few minutes before.

There were 18 steps from the landing outside of Mary Margaret’s apartment to the front sidewalk. Emma knew this, as she had counted each and every one of them on her retreat from the warm loft to the street below. She had stuck to pretty neutral topics with the three of them, discussing a few musical interests that David had in common with her clients and laughing at Mary Margaret’s famous stories of the adventures in teaching.

So when Emma walked out the doors half expecting him to have taken shelter in his jeep rather than stand there in the cold waiting for her, she knew she couldn’t continue with mundane topics of conversation. She was trying to think what to say when he spoke first, taking away a bit of that gnawing that she had to start this conversation with an apology.

“I know that it’s cold, but perhaps a walk?” His head was thrown back as he studied the night sky with care, eyes darting about in a movement that made her wonder if he was charting a course with astral navigation.

“Ok,” she said, managing not to flinch or melt when he offered his hand and lightly but firmly grasped hers. He was correct that the walk was short, only two blocks to the park just outside city hall. More of a pocket park with a playground and gazebo, it was just for show most days and that night was silent and dark. She may have said something sarcastic about the city trying to cut costs and inviting vagrants and pickpockets to which he laughed softly and continued on his determined path.

“Where did your boy spend the evening?” he asked as they crossed over toward the gazebo. “With his father?”

“Granny,” she said with a wry little smile. “Neal was busy and Granny offered. I think she was planning on having him work. Maybe he’ll bring home enough tips that he can buy that video game he keeps asking me for.”

“You’re lucky to have so many people who love and care for you both. I know my mother struggled with us growing up and always needed a band of people to help her make sure we were where we needed to be and doing as we should.”

“Being a parent, single or with a partner is no easy job,” Emma admitted. “I worry every day that I’m doing the wrong thing and will end up scarring him for life. There is a fine line between raising a good young man and turning him into a serial killer.”

“I see no signs of psychosis yet.”
“Thank God for that.”

“A peaceful place in the middle of everything. Amazing, huh?” Gently tugging at her arm, Killian led her to a small stone bench set to the side of the gazebo. “Wait here.” He turned to walk behind the white structure. A moment later, the gazebo and its surrounding trees were lit with millions of tiny white lights. It was like magic. “I always thought of these lights as little stars,” he said quietly from behind her, “And, since I can’t pull a real one down for you, I thought I’d give you the next best thing.”

Emma’s eyes suddenly began to sting with tears. No one had ever said something so sweet to her. Blinking to clear her vision, Emma said jokingly, “Lasso the moon?” Killian chuckled, walking around to stand in front of her.

“So, you like the classics, too?” he asked.

“Yeah,” she answered, “I ended up in a foster home once with an older woman. She was hopelessly addicted to Jimmy Stewart, Clark Gable and Errol Flynn.”

Straddling the bench, he reached into the inside pocket of his jacket and pulled out the phone there. Bringing up some music, he laughed. “Cheesy, right? I’m afraid I wasn’t really planning this. I just wanted some place quiet for us to talk.”

“Not cheesy,” she said, smiling at the song he chose to play first. It was a cover of a Frank Sinatra tune, which was cliché and lovely at the same time. Somehow, sitting here with Killian, surrounded by the gift of “stars,” she felt more complete than she ever had. It disturbed her on a level she didn’t want to explore. “But why music?”

“It makes the silence a bit more palatable,” he shrugged. “Perhaps we won’t feel so pressured to say something we regret.”

“Like I regret what I said last night,” she surmised. “Killian, please know that my reluctance, if you will, is not about you. I am not exactly used to all this. I’m not exactly…I have excuses for everything. I can find a reason to stop myself from wanting or doing. I know it’s not fair to anyone else, but it isn’t fair to me either.”

“Emma, there is nothing wrong with you saying how you feel. I had hoped that you might feel as I did. You don’t and that is certainly within your rights. I am the one who owes you an apology for putting you in such a position after we both clearly agreed to keep this as a friendly situation and not one that was romantic.”

She twisted the material of her skirt with her fingers, tugging at it as she chose her words carefully. “I’m sorry that I let my fear speak last night instead of being honest with you. Of course I think about that kiss. Probably a little too often. And I don’t know how to make this work as just friends because I think we both keep going back to the way that felt. I can’t believe I’m about to quote Mary Margaret, but we aren’t really doing a good job at being just friends.”

His exhalation was slow and created a fog in the air in front of him. “And you’re truly fine about…”

“I’m fine,” Emma said firmly. “And I would be fine if you asked me out on a date.” She smiled as his shoulders seemed to drop in relief and then raise back up in anticipation of what she was suggesting. “Actually, I think I’d rather do the asking.”

“Would you, now?” he asked, a bemused expression on his face as he placed the phone he had been holding down.
“Yes,” she said with one affirmative nod of her head. “Killian, I’m asking you out on a date. Would you like to go out with me?”

She couldn’t help but giggle at the way his dimples deepened with his wide smile, not even noticing that he had yet to answer. When he finally did, she was only a little surprised that his answer was filled with teasing and a little sarcasm. “And who is planning this date, Swan? Surely you have too much work to do to properly coordinate such an event. Perhaps you should leave that to me.”

“I didn’t realize you like to be in control so much,” she bantered. “I can plan a date.”

“Perhaps, but I think I might like to do so this time. Compromise? You ask me out and I plan?” He lifted her hand off her thigh, pulling the glove from it and placed his lips lightly to the bend of her knuckles.

“Sounds like a good compromise, but do I at least get a hint about what we’re going to do. I mean for wardrobe purposes and all.” She tried to appear stern and thoughtful, but she couldn’t help smiling back at the mischievous smirk and the way that he had yet to let go of her hand. “I’m sure it will be great.”

He chuckled and mocked an exasperated sigh. “You just asked me out fewer than five minutes ago, love. You expect me to have an entire plan all laid out.”

She raised both her eyebrows as the color on his cheeks deepened more due to embarrassment than the cold temperature that was surely going to drive them back inside soon. “You did pretty good with this… the lights, the music. I think you might have talent for improvisation.”

“Shhhh…” he winked. “Don’t tell my brother. He thinks he is the creative genius of the Jones family.” The next song began on his phone, a Michael Buble cover of Moondance that made them both hum a bit at the familiar tune. Standing and throwing his leg back next to the other, he pulled her up to standing. “Perhaps a preview?”

Emma laid her head against his chest, absorbing his warmth and listening to the lyrics. Killian spun her, swinging her out then gently back into his arms. Spinning them both around, he began to sing with the song. Emma snuggled back against him, listening as the words reverberated through his chest. His scent surrounded her, invaded her system and fogged her brain. Leaning back, she began to sing along with him.

Killian stared at her as the last strains of the song began its crescendo and then ended. Her deep green eyes were shining with light, her face soft and flushed from their dancing, her full lips curved into a sweet smile. God, he had known she was hot, but until this moment, he hadn’t realized just how beautiful she was. Reaching up, he smoothed her loose hair back and cupped her cheek. “I had no idea you had such a gorgeous voice, Emma. Perhaps you should be the one behind the microphone.” His gaze stayed intently locked on hers, searching the depths of her soul. He felt her shrug, knew she would be glib about his compliment.

Emma couldn’t pull her eyes away from his. She was still just skittish enough, though, approaching his comment with caution. “Thanks, but I’m more of a shower singer than anything else.”

“That’s a shame,” Killian replied, his stare beginning to heat. They stayed tangled with each other, her arms around his waist, his hand on her jaw. The wind around them began to blow, the breeze stirring the trees. Neither noticed. Slowly, with excruciating deliberateness, Killian lowered his mouth. The warmth of his lips lightly brushing hers was like electricity, the charge shooting through her body and out of her fingers and toes. He didn’t push, didn’t insist on entrance, just gently kissed her, softly pulling on her mouth again and again. Stepping closer to him, she found herself melting
into him, her body starting a slow burn that she had never known before.

Killian had meant for the kiss to be soothing, as gentle and understanding as their night had been. But something was different about this embrace; it was, on some level, more passionate he intended. The tenderness he gave to her was returned tenfold. As Emma moved closer, her body slowly dissolving into him, something inside of him shifted, subtly clicking, inexplicably and irreversibly changing his world. Gently breaking away, Killian stared down at her, holding her face in his palm, his breathing ragged and his libido bellowing. “I suppose we just went a little past a preview there,” he said, his voice quiet and direct. “Let’s get you back to your son.”

Emma shook her head slightly, clearing away the need that had begun to block her thoughts. “I guess we should,” she said, her voice sounding small and unlike the usually confident sound she emitted. He pulled her back to him, wrapping her carefully in his arms. “Can I just ask you one question? Why me? Why are you interested in me when there are plenty of women who would throw themselves at you in an instant? I don’t understand.”

“I know you don’t,” he answered gently, “and that’s part of why I am so intrigued by you. I’m not those other guys. I don’t want to be. There’s something here, Swan, something between us that I can’t explain. You are not the only one wondering why we can’t take the easy way out here. You aren’t the only one feeling frightened and thinking of excuses. Frankly, it scares the hell out of me. But, Emma, I want to know what this is - I need to know what this is, and I think you do too.” They stood together, the sound of Don Henley asserting that this was the last worthless evening whirling around them. Separating himself from her, Killian took a step back, his hand holding hers. “Come on, let’s get Henry and you can send me on my way to plan our date, love.”

***AAA***

“But Mom said I could go,” Henry protested as his father led him down the hall toward the music room. Having forgotten his math book that he may or may not have used to prop up a wobbly legged chair, Henry was in desperate need to grab it and complete his homework before the test the next morning.

“And I am saying that we should wait on your math grade before letting you head off on some social event,” Neal argued. The juxtaposition of parenting styles was not lost on the man nor the fact that he was being the tougher parent for once. Henry had in the span of two breaths worried that he would fail his math test and told his father that he was going on the annual band retreat that Friday night and wouldn’t be back until Saturday afternoon – cancelling out their weekly plans for guys’ night.

Henry let out an exasperated sigh as he burst through the double doors into the band room and called out to Killian. “Mr. Jones!” He had remembered to call him that in school, as both Emma and Killian had suggested it might be better to leave the more personal and informal names aside. He wasn’t sure what had prompted both of them to talk to him about it, but he wasn’t sure that he really minded. “Are you here?”

Killian emerged from his office and grunted out an oomph as Henry ran into him with a sort of high five and hug combination that only a pre-teen boy can do with ease. “Did you forget something?”

Neal stepped forward and gave a once over to the man who he had heard enough about on his visits to Granny’s. Emma had not come straight out and mentioned any sort of relationship with him, but she had alluded to it when Neal mentioned his upcoming plans to take Tamara away for a weekend in the mountains. She had said she had plenty to do and that Henry could always stay with Mary Margaret or Ruby if she had other plans. He’d picked up on that wording right away, as she usually said if she had work to do. “Neal Cassidy,” he said, sticking out his hand at the last moment when Killian offered his.
“Henry’s father,” Killian said with recognition, “Wonderful to meet you. Henry’s quite the musician. A pleasure to have in class.”

Offering a curt nod, Neal turned to stare out at the empty room. “You taught here long?”

Henry rushed up with the book in hand. “Mr. Jones is going to chaperone the retreat next Friday. It’s really important that I go.” Two pairs of similarly shaped and colored eyes flashed at the teacher expectantly while Killian smiled back at Henry.

“It’s a good chance for some of the band students to get to know each other and work together before we begin our spring and summer practices,” Killian said. “Henry’s quite an important part our team here.”

To refer to Neal’s stare as being suspicious of Killian would have been an understatement, but he kept his words neutral with only a tinge of disdain. “And he’ll be back by Saturday afternoon. Seems a bit short for bonding time.”

“Dad,” Henry said, perfecting the way that pre-teens and teenagers could turn the one syllable word into multiple ones. “Of course we’ll be back by Saturday afternoon. Mom and Killian…” The boy stopped short, shifting his gaze back and forth between his father and teacher. It suddenly dawned on him that his father probably wouldn’t appreciate knowing the friendship or whatever it was between the two. “Mom and Killian already talked about it.”

“I wouldn’t want to take up any more of the students’ time with their families than was necessary,” Killian explained after a grateful sigh. “I do hope that Henry will be able to join us.”

Neal smirked, not missing the uncomfortable way that the teacher seemed to take a step backward when Henry had mentioned Emma. “And my father has approved this little outing? Last I heard he had put the nix on frivolous field trips to save money. He’d rather do that than raise tuition again.”

Henry argued that it was not frivolous at the same time that Killian raised a surprised eyebrow at the word father. “Your father is…”

“Robert Gold,” Neal said with a mark of pride that usually wasn’t there. “Your boss, I believe.”

***AAA***

“You have horrible timing,” Elsa said with a frustrated sigh. “I was planning on watching home renovation shows, popping some popcorn, and enjoying some wine with you. Instead you’re at a cheap motel in New Jersey with my friend.”

“Darling, you are adorable when you’re jealous,” Liam said, scrunching up his nose at the stale air on the hotel room. There was nothing wrong with the accommodations per se, but the hotel was on the older side and could use with a refreshing. “I’m far more interested in this guitarist that Emma has found than the woman herself.”

“Still it is strange. I’m tempted to call Killian and invite him over. We can both worry about what the two of you are up to and let our imaginations run wild.”

“My brother would be a horrible bore,” Liam chided, kicking off his shoes and reclining on the still made bed. “He’s had his nose glued to Yelp and a half dozen other sites trying to plan the perfect date for Emma. I emptied the dishwasher and managed to vacuum up the rug in the living room. The twit barely noticed. Putting far too much pressure on himself if you ask me.”

“I think it’s cute,” Elsa countered. “He’s trying to plan the perfect date for them. How adorable that
he’s nervous about it?”

Huffing, Liam folded his free arm behind his head. “I don’t wish to spend this time with you on the phone talking about my little brother.” He scooted into a more comfortable position. “Now what are you wearing?”

“Liam Jones!” she admonished. “I’m not having phone sex with you while I’m sitting in the parking lot of the grocery store. You’re horrible.”

“Wicked,” he laughingly said. “That’s the word you are searching for, darling.” She gave him a rundown of the song she was trying to write, him offering suggestions and asking her to sing a bit to him. She offered to let him get ready for his evening out twice but he was determined to keep talking to her, telling her that he was pretty simple in the getting ready department since he only needed to freshen up. He was fully entranced by the rawness of her singing and playing the acoustic guitar with the phone propped on a pillow that he didn’t even realize the time when Emma banged on his door.

“Sorry,” he muttered to Emma when she looked at him, pointed at the silver watch on her wrist, and then back at him again. “Phone call.”

She invited herself in to sit in the one semi comfortable chair as he ducked into the bathroom to take care of his last minute grooming. “How’s Elsa?” she called out to be greeted by his raucous laugh and similarly framed question about his brother.

“Touché,” she said, picking up a wrinkled guide to the city. “He’s not quite understanding why I thought this was so important.”

The water started and stopped, the man’s voice muffled by the washcloth he had against his face. “My brother will have no issue at telling you that my musical pursuits are the stuff of childish fantasy and not those of a man with responsibilities. He would prefer that I had stayed in the Navy and done my tours as a good sailor. Or perhaps he would like to see me in a corporate position in a suit and tie.”

Emma could clearly see that he had a point about Killian who did tend to feel the need for structure and normalcy. Even if she had not known either of them that long, she could see that difference in their demeanor. “He doesn’t appreciate your talent?”

“My brother and I formed our band back in high school. Robin and Will are both integral parts of it. As time and circumstances dictated, we have all been away from the music for a bit now. Robin has had to master being a father to a motherless son. Will has his own demons and battles. I was tied up in service and then in finding my way again.”

“And Killian?”

Liam emerged from the bathroom. His jeans and sweater were both the same faded blue color that seemed to make his eyes grayer than the shocking azure of Killian’s. The heat of the water had made his skin a bit blotchy and red. “I’m afraid that is his story to tell, lass, not mine.”

“He sang the other night. His voice…he shouldn’t waste it.”

There was a sadness she hadn’t noticed before when Liam approached his overnight bag and dug through it for a clean pair of socks. He found them and had the second one half way on before he spoke again. “This guitarist that you have found. Can he sing or will we need to be searching for that too?”

“I thought you were planning to do the lead vocals,” Emma said, plucking at the hem of her sweater.
“You do realize that I’m not really supposed to be doing this. I just happened to hear about this guy and thought you might want to check him out.”

“Oi, if he’s half as good as you say, we’ll be signed with your label in no time at all. Will serve my brother right for abandoning us to our wits.”

Emma stood from the chair that she had already decided was dreadfully uncomfortable, smoothing down her own sweater. “That’s not a lot of pressure or anything,” she said with a slight smirk. “Then let’s go listen to this guy.”

***AAA***

“And did my brother show you a good time?” Killian asked when Emma had texted to say that they had returned to the hotel. He’d called her immediately, telling her that he’d much rather hear her voice than read words on the screen. “He can be a complete social wanker but I am hoping he at least bought you a drink.”

“He did,” Emma said with a laugh, collapsing onto her bed and where she could hear the low hum of Liam’s television next door. “Had an umbrella in it and everything.”

“The lass likes her drinks sweet. I will have to file that information away for later.”

“I happen to like a beer or shot every now and then,” Emma protested, not wanting to get the label as a high maintenance type with a penchant for weak yet expensive drinks and unable to fend for herself. “But I don’t think you called for a report on my drinking habits.”

He chuckled. “No, I didn’t. I’m actually not sure how to bring this up to you so I guess I’ll just shoot and see where it goes.”

“That doesn’t sound promising,” she commented, kicking off one of her shoes with a little more oomph than she meant. It sailed across the room, narrowly missing the lamp and marking the wall as it bounced off. She cringed that there might be someone on the other side of that wall trying to sleep. “Just tell me.”

“Henry’s father came by today.”

Emma shot up on the bed as though she could somehow stop Neal from saying something stupid or silly. “What do you mean came by? Oh God, I should have warned you. He can be such an ass. I mean he’s a good guy and great with Henry. It’s just…”

“He not so subtly explained about his father being Mr. Gold. As in my boss.” Killian paused. If Emma wanted to back away from their date this would be the perfect excuse. She had already said she wanted him to not have any issues with work that dating a parent might cause and he had brushed off the worry. However, this certainly shaded things a bit differently. It had also occurred to him since the encounter that Emma had to know this already.

“He actually said that to you? He barely acknowledges his father except in business situations. He helps to run the family pawn and antique shop but that’s about all he does with the family. He even changed his name a few years ago so that he didn’t have to be associated with his father any more than necessary.” She sighed, her entire body burning with the desire to fix this. “Oh God…our date. You’re worried that Neal will somehow influence his father…”

“Love, no,” Killian assured her. “I just wanted you to know because I didn’t feel I should keep this from you. If Mr. Gold has issue with me then it needs to stay with me.”
Her laugh was short. “You don’t know him very well, do you? Killian, Robert Gold is a very vindictive man. He’s not the type who is a forget about it kind of guy.”

“Let us not borrow trouble. I have no quarrel with either Mr. Gold or Henry’s father. I just wish to spend my free moments with you or thinking how to woo you on our date. You never said if I gave you sufficient information to plan your wardrobe for the evening.”

Her hand reached up to cup the pendant around her neck, the one she had worn for a long time. It would be easy to fall back into her fear that acting on her wants and desires would cause harm to other people. That feeling of being responsible needled its way up inside her. “I can’t believe you want me to dress that casually. We’re not going to work on your boat or something? I mean this is a date and not slave labor, right?”

“I assure you that it is a date. And I know that you will look stunning no matter what you wear.”
Chapter 10

Anna used her shoulder to knock on the back door of the diner, two boxes balanced precariously on her folded knee and cradled in her arms. Hearing nothing other than a little bit of island music—a standard of one of the short order cooks—she tried again, throwing her slender frame against the door this time.

“You couldn’t have set them down?” Ruby asked when she opened the door and almost sent the woman falling inside. “Seriously?”

“I was trying to hurry,” Anna explained, lunging forward so that the dark haired waitress would take at least one of the packages. “Granny doesn’t want people to know.”

“They are pies not drugs. No need for the cloak and dagger act.” Ruby was well aware that her grandmother had been cutting back lately on the actual work of the diner. While most people her age were retired, Granny split her time between the profitable bed and breakfast and even more profitable diner. However, after decades of 12-14 hour days, she was starting to admit she wanted a bit of a break. So she had started bringing in sources for some of the staples. A local meat and seafood purveyor had been packaging easy to prepare main entrees for her. And the bakery that Anna had been running was starting to provide the sweets and pastries for the diner. That evening she had boxes of packaged pies that would look as though Granny and her staff had spent hours rolling out dough and dicing fruit to mix into compote for the filling.

“You want to get caught?”

“Come in. Good Lord. Don’t make a scene.” Ruby waved her in and past the makeshift desk she had created in the back corner of the store room where she would work on her designs during the downtime. Fabric was draped over a few of the chairs and sketches were taped and stapled to the walls.

“Oooh! I love this!” Anna squealed as she dropped the box and ran to touch the white fabric. “Who is this for?”

“Mary Margaret,” Ruby said as she lifted it so that the younger woman could get a better look. “It’s probably a bit premature, but I have totally been imagining her in this dress. I just had to make it.” The lacy overlay drifted between her fingers. “If she hates it, I’ll try to sell it or something.”

“You totally should,” Anna said, her voice of awe. “I can’t imagine anyone not wanting this. Heck, Kristoff and I’ve only been together a few weeks and marriage isn’t even on our minds, but I’m thinking of asking you to make something like this for me. Would you? I mean if I paid you. I wouldn’t want you to do it for nothing. I mean it wouldn’t be for nothing. It would be for me. I’m not nothing. I wouldn’t want you to not get paid for it. I couldn’t pay much though. I guess that means you won’t. I’m sorry for asking.”

“Whoa,” Ruby said, placing a free hand on her temple as though trying to absorb Anna’s request. “We can talk about designing you a dress. I’ll do it for the cost of materials okay?”

Anna didn’t answer, throwing her arms around the taller woman and hanging on tightly as she thanked her with the world’s tightest hug.

***AAA***

“I don’t know if I have time to do baseball too,” Henry said when his mom entered the diner—
pick up location she and Neal had settled on before. “I mean with band, and my friends, and school...it’s a lot.”

Neal sat across from the younger version of himself, his elbows on the table and a coffee mug cradled in his hands. On the table was a new glove and ball, clearly a present for some good deed that Emma wasn’t aware of and perhaps even a bribe. The man’s face was pinched with what she had dubbed his parental concern expression as he explained that it would be good exercise and much more fun than his other activities.

“But I like band. I like music.” Henry wasn’t exactly on panic mode, but he was nearing the level when Neal lifted and lowered his shoulders as if the discussion needed to continue with some thought. “I’m good at it.”

“No doubt, but maybe it’s the extra attention you’re getting from your teacher that you like.” Neal regretted that statement the moment it left his lips. Clearing his throat, the man looked upward for some sort of guidance. “I just mean that you’ve been getting some one on one attention.”

Henry mumbled through an answer about extra practices and his upcoming audition. However, the joy was clearly missing when his father again suggested baseball as an alternative activity.

Spotting his mother, Henry waved voraciously as she crossed over to him and pecked his cheek softly. “Hey kid,” she said, ignoring the clearly contentious discussion about his after school activities. “I picked up some stuff Ruby wanted in Jersey. Mind taking it to her?” The plastic bag of materials and accessories dangled from her fingers waiting on his grasp. He took it and scampered off to the door behind the counter that was only for employees, a secret joy in his eyes that he was allowed back there.

“I thought we agreed we’d discuss these activities before dangling them in front of Henry,” Emma stated, lifting and dropping the pristine baseball as she slid into the booth. “He’s old enough to know what he wants to do with his time. And for now band seems to be it.”

“I,” Neal said, leaning more toward her with the cup still in his hands, “was good at baseball. I had four colleges recruiting me during my junior year and a minor league scout calling my senior. Henry could be that good.”

She pursed her lips, wanting to remind him that he had run away from home after a fight with his father and squandered those opportunities when he didn’t graduate on time. However, she was trying to not bring up a past that neither of them wanted to remember. “Henry’s choice.”

“There is nothing wrong with trying to give him all the information before he makes his decision. And don’t give me that crap about it being his decision to stick with music. It doesn’t take a shrink to see that he does that to win your approval. You’re in the music industry and he wants your attention.”

She glanced at the door to the kitchen to make sure that Henry was not back yet before she took a deep breath and launched into him. “Henry is capable of making a decision about how and where he spends his free time. He has chosen band for this year. Maybe he’ll change that next year. Maybe not. But his decision is based on his desire and talent and not issues with his parents.”

“Ems,” Neal said warningly, his tone weakening some. “I just don’t think…”

“No, you don’t think. And by the way, your little visit to Henry’s teacher was uncalled for. We decided that Henry could go on the retreat. He’s worked hard and deserves that little bit of a break where he doesn’t have to decide which parent to spend time with and what he can and can’t say
without offending the other one. You should be glad since you keep cancelling plans to spend time with Tamara.”

“And you with this Mr. Jones?”

“Hardly the same thing and I don’t cancel plans on my son,” she said defiantly. “What is going on in my private life is just that.”

“And if I don’t want him around my son?” Neal challenged, physically moving back when she growled out her response at that question.

“You need to watch your own life before jumping in to judge mine.”

***AAA***

Eyes half closed and her feet swinging off the bar stool in the townhome’s kitchen, Elsa smiled blissfully as he played the song. Though it was new to her and she had never before heard the words, she hummed along with him, giving the occasional approving nod to a string or lyric. When Liam stopped the song, a bit abruptly since it was still a work in progress, and looked at her expectantly, her smile grew with pride.

“That’s incredible,” she said, clapping her hands together like a child. “I love it.”

“You don’t think it could use…” He was clearly critical and self-conscious about sharing his work. He’d sung on stages before and played his own work for small to medium sized crowds at some of the best clubs in Europe, but it was not as nerve wracking as sharing it with Elsa. Her approval was important to him, but even more stifling was the feeling that she could crush him with her displeasure for his work.

“It’s perfect,” she declared easily. “I can’t believe you haven’t played that for me before. It’s amazing.”

His blue eyes darted down to the counter. “I just wrote it. Last night actually.”

“You wrote that in a single night,” Elsa said incredulously. “You must be exhausted. We talked until nearly two about that guitarist. It’s…I can’t believe you did that so fast.”

Pulling the strap of the guitar over his head and setting the wooden instrument aside, he reached out to take her hand in his. “I was more than a bit inspired by you, love. It doesn’t take much for you to drag the music right out of me.”

The pink on Elsa’s cheeks matched the soft blue of her top perfectly as she darted her eyes downward. “You and the flattery,” she said, cutting off a bit of the uncomfortable tension she felt at anything resembling a compliment. Her downward cast eyes did pick up on the yawn he tried to stifle. “You should get some sleep. You and Emma had a really long drive. Can I ask why you didn’t fly?”

Looking almost embarrassed by the question, he paid more attention to the guitar that he was leaning against the table than the woman asking it. “I’m not a big fan of airplanes. Emma respected that and offered to drive us.”

“I didn’t think you were frightened of anything.” She shifted a bit on her seat and looked at him. He was, in her eyes, a brave hero who had done tours of duty in the Middle East. He seemed to be bigger than life sometimes.
We all have fears, love.”

***AAA***

Regina was the co-owner of a music studio, not a restaurant. But when Emma arrived that next morning for her weekly update session with the two sisters, she was a bit confused by all the food laid out on two table cloth covered folding tables. There were piles of perfectly cut vegetables that appeared to be out of a culinary school knife exam. Puff pastries filled with jams and jellies, sliced meats, various sweet and pungent cheeses, crackers with hard meats and spreadable dips, and even bottles of freshly chilled wine sat in perfect harmony. Between the two tables was Regina’s expansive desk with the woman working away as if her office did not smell of Julia Child’s test kitchen.

“Did I miss something?” Emma asked, her mouth watering even though she had gotten up early and shared hot chocolates with Killian in her car before his staff meeting that morning. “Is it someone’s birthday? Retirement?”

“My sister is testing caterers for her soiree. These are samples that she wants everyone to try and give her feedback on so that she can select one.”

Standing on her tiptoes as though it would offer her a better view of the spread, Emma inspected the choices and lifted a buttery croissant to her lips. She paused momentarily to ask silent permission of her supervisor. Regina’s eye roll told her that she would not be blamed for trying the item.

“Oh my God, it’s still warm,” Emma said, closing her eyes as the soft bread practically melted in her mouth. “Don’t tell Granny, but I may have just fallen in love with this place.”

“You are comparing a four star chef with that grease pit? Miss Swan, I am beginning to doubt your legitimacy and taste level. There is no comparing Kobe beef with frozen lasagna.”

“Good thing I’m in music and not food,” Emma proclaimed, staking out her normal seat on the unnaturally uncomfortable chair across from Regina. It was as if it was supposed to hug curves that weren’t quite human, leaving Regina’s guests at a disadvantage since they were so uncomfortable. “You wanted to talk about the backers’ dinner, right?”

“Yes, I was wanting to confirm the performers. I’m assuming you’re wanting to highlight those two sisters…Anna and Ella?”

“Elsa,” Emma corrected reflexively. Regina often did that, disorienting people or at least distracting them by calling the wrong name. It was such second hat to Emma that she found herself correcting her boss even if there was no mistake. “Yes, I sent you some samples of what we’ve recorded. I’m really liking it.”

“Yes, there is something usable there.” That was high praise from the usually critical woman. “Let’s pencil them in here. I am guessing we still don’t have a back up band for them. I’m not exactly thinking two long haired women with guitars is what our backers want to see.”

“I’ve been considering a few options, but at the very least they can sing with backing tracks.”

Regina shuddered. “I think not. Have you not paid attention to the scandals of the past 30 years? We don’t do backing tracks. Everything is live. Nothing fake or redubbed. Acoustic is fine for a set or two to show versatility and raw talent, but these people we’re bringing in have deep pockets. They want show stopping and amazing – a step below arenas, but you know what works.”

“The beauty of them is that they don’t need the over production and gimmicks. I particularly like their simplicity. It’s about the lyrics and emotions.”
Regina’s nose wrinkled. “I’m sure it is, but simplicity doesn’t do that well on tour. They are beautiful girls, but guys don’t buy tickets to see beautiful women sing. We need them to be relatable with teenage and young women. That means that those girls need to have a guy in the band they are crushing on or a dancer to watch. They need…”

“I’m not packaging them like that. It’s not worth it. Their music will sell, Regina.” Emma literally put her foot down on the hard flooring, her boot heel echoing off the walls. “I wanted to talk to you about Liam.”

The debate over whether to continue discussions on the two women was clear on Regina’s face until she allowed confusion to take over it. “Wait! Who the hell is Liam?”

Sighing, Emma waited a beat for the clarity to sink inside her boss. When it didn’t, Emma pulled out the phone she carried and played a rough recording of Liam singing along with the guitarist from the night before. “He wrote that song that you like for Elsa and Anna. I told you that he’s got some performing chops and I want to see if maybe I could get him and his group to perform at the showcase. Not a full set, but maybe a song or two. I think that some of the investors might like them.” She was taking a risk there, as she hadn’t even approached Liam about being ready in time. However, this was an opportunity that could push the group into the spotlight if they could throw something together in time. It would mean that producers and investors could see them and possibly want to work with them.

“So you are telling me that the talent you’ve lined up is a band that as of yesterday didn’t have all its members and a sister duo that don’t have any stage presence or experience. Miss Swan, I don’t know if you realize that this is an actual company that needs to make money. It’s not a kiddie talent show. Next thing you tell me, you’ll want your son do a solo on his clarinet.”

“Trumpet and no, I’m not pushing for that. I just thought that the purpose here was to introduce some new possibilities to these men and women. This is our chance to show how we are different and can really make a mark on the recording industry. We don’t have to be cookie cutter.”

Zelena chose that moment to walk in on the stand off as it were. Her smile unnaturally large and insincere, she swooped by the tables and proclaimed them pedestrian. “Honestly, Regina, I don’t understand how you can think that people won’t judge us on the food. It has to be perfect.”

“Don’t you have better things to do than worry about rhubarb and prosciutto? Honestly, Zelena, just pick a freaking caterer. If Emma will do her job then the write ups in the blogs and newspapers will be about the music not the barely warm shooters of butternut squash and pancetta soup.”

Zelena was a full head taller than her petite sister with lighter coloring. Despite the delicate features of Regina, she always seemed more fragile than the demanding and determined younger sister she clearly still competed with on a daily basis. Most people ran for the door when the two really went at each other, criticizing their different fathers and commenting on which one was better loved by their clearly narcissistic mother. One of their better arguments had included the ways they each thought the other was like their mother – a fight Emma had heard from the shelter of her own office.

“And the only thing that will keep those brain dead and talentless deep pockets in their seats is the food. The music this place produces is not exactly earth shattering. They can get similar acts anywhere.”

Emma tried to keep the smirk off her face that Zelena was proving her point of the cookie cutter argument. However, she knew that in a few seconds the older sister would turn on her too and leave her sputtering.
Henry’s practice ran a bit late that afternoon and Emma was more than happy to sit and wait on him to try a particularly difficult few bars more than once until Killian was pleased with the progress. She had warned him that she did not wish to publicize anything regarding their date or intentions to anyone. However, she had to admit that the looks he gave her over Henry’s head and the way that his smile grew a bit wider when she had slid in the partially closed door was a dead giveaway. She might have admonished him for his lack of circumspection had she not found her own smile reflected back at her with the same unabashed amusement.

“Be right back!” Henry called out as he dashed for his last locker run of the day.

“No offense to his father, but I much prefer your company,” Killian said, risking a quick peck to her lips with his arms wrapped loosely around her. “You are so much more pleasant of a conversationalist.”

“I thought we were going for discrete here,” she said, not bothering to take a step back or remove her hands from his chest. “You are terrible at this.”

“Awful,” he agreed, leaning in again for a kiss that she would not allow him to land. He wound up chasing her lips with his own, laughing as she actually broke their embrace and ducked under his arm to step away. “Oh you were serious. Should I invest in a toupee and fake moustache, darling? Or perhaps some oversized sunglasses and a fedora? We could have code names.”

Closing her eyes, she shook her head. “No, toupee, I like your hair. And I thought you didn’t want to risk giving Mr. Gold ammunition to cost you your job.” Her black skirt and green sweater were already in perfect position, but she used that moment to pull at them until she felt in control. “So this Friday?”

“Ahh, yes, I suppose we should talk about your chaperone duties. I’m pleased to say we’ll be spending the night together before our first official date, love. It is quite scandalous, don’t you think.”

“Us and 20 or so pre-teen middle schoolers, two other parents, and one of the students being my son. I’m not thinking romance here, buddy.” She didn’t mention that she had been feeling a bit like someone her son’s age lately with the late night phone calls, random texting, and the sneaky ways she was getting to know some of the intricacies of Killian by asking Liam during their little excursion. Twice she had reminded herself that she was an adult and that was since their little rendezvous with the hot chocolate that he had grinned so proudly about that she had giggled without restraint.

“I hope you won’t find me any less attractive when I’m doing head counts and threatening detention.” His eyebrows waggled playfully as she tossed her head back with another laugh.

“Tell me,” she said, running her index finger up his arm almost suggestively. “Does this teacher side of you come with a clipboard and a whistle around your neck, Mr. Jones?” The move was met with his eyes darkening slightly and his miniscule step toward her.

“If that would please you, then I would, but they are not part of my normal attire, love.”

Feigning disappointment, she backed away from him and tossed her black and white leather bag over her shoulder. After her meeting with Regina and Zelena, she was back to scouring their label for acts for the showcase. Their top talent was currently on tour and most of the other groups were not quite ready for the stage yet. Killian noted the heft of it with her awkward lift and frowned when he asked about it.
“Looking for the needle in the haystack,” she told him. “You couldn’t maybe light a fire under your brother, could you? I’d put them on for a song or two if they were ready.”

Killian busied himself picking up a bit of the sheet music that always seemed to end up trampled on the ground after his last class. Precisely and delicately he sorted it and straightened the shelf. “Didn’t you two just find that guitarist? I doubt they are ready yet.”

“Well, he did pick up on the music rather quickly. It’s a matter of the vocalist.” She paused. “Any way I could convince you to do it? Just one night. It would mean a lot to your brother and to me.”

“That’s a rather large favor,” he said, still training his eyes and hand on the shelf in front of him. “I’m afraid I’m out of practice and my skills in that area are grossly overrated.”

There was a painful finality to his words that she didn’t miss even to argue with him that she had heard him sing. “I think you’ve got more than just skills in that area,” she told him sincerely. “When you sang with me it was great.”

“Perhaps it was your own voice that moved you. Besides it is much easier to sing along with the radio than it is to perform on your own.” He still had not looked up, his once relaxed posture now bowed and tense. “Emma, I don’t think this is a good idea for us to hang our hats on at the moment.”

Killian jerked his arm back as she touched just beside his elbow. “Killian, I know music. I know that you could…”

“You may know music, Emma, but I’m not interested in that life. That’s my brother, not me.”

“But you could be great…”

“This is what I want to be great at,” he said, gesturing around the classroom. “I have chosen my path and it isn’t forming a band and pretending that I never grew up. That’s not what I want. I guess that makes me a disappointment to you and my brother, but I won’t pretend to be anything that I’m not.”

“I should get Henry home. He’s got homework and I’ve got a ton to do.” She shifted slightly, sighing gratefully when her son ran back into the room. The awkward look on Killian’s face was enough to make her feel guilty. Clearly he was uncomfortable with the idea of performing with or without his brother. She was not supposed to make him feel worse about it.

***AAA***

David propped step ladder up just the way he always did and gave it a little shake to prove its stability. “Why do you store stuff up there if you can’t reach it?” he asked Emma, his tone perplexed. “It’s not like this apartment doesn’t have storage places.”

“I only store the things I rarely use there,” she protested. “But don’t I always thank you for coming over to help me out?”

Feet on the second highest rung, David peered into the cabinet over the refrigerator and frowned. “You’re sure it is up here? Because I’m not seeing it.”

Emma stood in the doorway, her arm bracing herself against the wall. “I think so,” she said, sounding guilty as she considered other possible locations. “That’s the last place I remember seeing it. At least…”

David shut the cabinet door and climbed back down, wiping his hands on his jeans. “So you’re wanting to bake. That’s not a good sign, even if you are friends with Mary Margaret. You only
baked when you’re freaked out about something or swallowing your feelings.” He knew her too well, having been there for her long before she even recognized some of those habits herself. More like a big brother than anything, she had found herself bending his ear as much as Mary Margaret’s about things. “Did Neal do something?”

“You know that I don’t pine for him, right? I’m not over here heartbroken that he’s dating someone and probably going to marry her.”

“Can’t say that I’ve ever known you to pine for anyone, Emma. But someone must have said something to you or something, right? Did Neal pull that crap where he’s sure you’re going back to him because that’s just stupid? Not only would Ruby and Mary Margaret physically restrain you for having such thoughts, I might have to kick his butt and your butt too for being stupid.”

She glanced back over her shoulder toward the bedrooms and hoped that Henry was still too busy concentrating on homework to hear her. “It’s Killian,” she admitted, swatting a hand at him when he appeared shocked to the point of clutching his chest. “I’m not going to confide in you if you act like that.”

Taking a look at her pouting, which he had a hard time interpreting the sincerity of, he shook his head. “Sorry,” he mumbled contritely. “I thought things were going pretty well there. I know we are on direct orders to pretend like we are not seeing or sensing anything going on, but…”

Sighing, Emma opened another cabinet to look for the missing mini cupcake pan. “You do realize that your girlfriend will kick both of our butts if we have a conversation about Killian without her.”

David didn’t respond verbally, opening up her refrigerator and pulling out two of the tall bottles of beer that she kept in one of the drawers. He motioned toward the sofa and passed her one after opening it.

“Explain and then I’ll give you amazing advice to the point that you will worship at my feet.”

“So Killian’s brother wants to restart the band that he and Killian had years ago,” Emma explained, telling her friend about the band and the opportunity. David said nothing, only taking a few swigs as she described the search for the final members of the group and Emma’s thoughts that he could be the missing factor. “I guess I sort of pushed Killian a bit much on the whole performing thing.”

“And I take it he didn’t react well?” David asked when he finally spoke. “I don’t really know the guy that well, but I don’t think he has any interest in that sort of thing. If he did, he’s had opportunity. It’s his brother we’re talking about not just some random situation.”

Emma’s one handed grip on the neck of the bottle let the beer slosh a bit. “I felt sort of guilty about it,” she explained. “I felt like maybe I stepped where I shouldn’t have.”

Giving her a sympathetic smile, David paused before he answered. “Emma, you don’t trust people. Hell, you are one of the suspicious and jaded people I know. And before you throw your hands up at me and give me examples that prove otherwise, let me finish. It’s understandable given your childhood and everything that happened with Neal. If I’m being honest, I’d say you’re doing damn good not to need daily therapy or at least some medication to prevent you from going over the ledge.” He took another sip, giving her the opportunity to expel the words that were clearly on her lips.

“And because of that I’m seeing something here that doesn’t exist. He’s not hiding some secret life. I’m not going to find out that he has some secret wife or love child. You know that happens right?”

David chuckled. “I don’t doubt that it does, but I’m not thinking Killian’s that type. But what I am
thinking is that sometimes you are a woman of extremes. You either don’t trust someone or you trust them to the point that you put them above yourself. Killian is a great guy, but Emma, he has flaws. We all do.”

“And you think I don’t realize that he has flaws?”

The quietness of his response made her lean a bit toward him. “Emma, I think that sometimes you want to believe that people don’t have flaws. You can go to extremes with that. You believe that they are hiding something and you must bring it to light or you think that they are perfect and you set yourself up for disappointment. All I’m saying is that maybe you shouldn’t worry how he’s going to be the next one do so. You already know that he’s a great guy. Just go with it. Stop trying to make him the next bad thing.”

***AAA***

Roland climbed on top of the counter and threw his arms out. “Catch me,” he demanded, leaping into Liam’s arms before verifying that anyone had heeded his two word warning about jumping. Thankfully he could rely on the older Jones for quick reflexes, though the position he was held in was awkward and his legs dangled precariously with one arm around his tiny waist and Liam’s large hand grasping one small arm.

“Son, you can’t do that to people. What if he hadn’t caught you?” Robin admonished as his son laughed with delight. “And you don’t even seem to mind that I’m mad about it.”

Liam tilted the boy, flipping him upside down and right side up again to the squeals of joy that bounced off the kitchen walls of Killian’s small cottage. Robin was not sure who was more enthralled in that moment with Liam’s boisterous laugh and Roland’s delight. “Fine, where’s your brother?”

“Couldn’t tell you, mate,” Liam choked out before righting the young boy and sending him in the direction of the living room. “He called to say he wanted to take a walk. That was two hours ago.”

“Your brother has been missing for two hours and you’re not the least bit concerned?” Robin slapped a hand down on the stone countertop. The relationship between the Jones brothers was always something he had admired. Having no brothers himself, he had wanted to fit in with them and feel the protective stance of Liam and the earnest admiration of Killian. The idea that Liam was not being protective in that moment only confused the man more.

“He’s taking a walk,” Liam said with categorical nonchalance. “He’s a grown man not a puppy without a leash.”
Chapter 11

Another chapter for you. I’m still just so glad that people are liking this story. This chapter will give you a bit of insight into Killian and why he shut down when Emma asked him to sing. I also hope you’ll see a little more about Elsa and some of her own fears. Enjoy and let me know what you think!

She was sitting there in the music room when he arrived the next morning, his arms carrying a stack of papers and his bag of cd’s that he had sorted through to share with one of his classes. That wasn’t where he had expected to see her, especially having shut down on her without plausible explanation the afternoon before. So to find her there with a basket and two take out cups from Granny’s was one of the nicer shocks of his life.

Her gloves were still on and the gray beanie covered the crown of her head. While she looked adorable, he was a bit concerned that she also looked ready to escape and run. So instead of demanding to know how she got into a locked room or why she had not returned his one well thought out and agonizingly edited text message the night before, he smiled at her. It took her a second but she returned the smile with a warm one of her own.

“Is this a thing for us now?” he asked, dropping his items beside the office door and walking over to her. “Breakfast in the morning?”

She shrugged, gesturing to one of the steaming cups. “I don’t know about you but I always have breakfast in the morning. That’s the best time to have it.”

He lifted the cup to his mouth and found that she had fixed it his favorite way with half a packet of half and half and no sugar. “I don’t know. I am rather fond of late night breakfast in disreputable diners or while watching bad horror flicks on the telly.” He pulled in another sip. “I rather fancy a good poached egg while nursing a beer, in fact.”

“Classy,” she remarked, pulling back on the tied corners of a cloth napkin that was keeping secret the contents of a basket. “I realized yesterday that we don’t really know each other that well. We’re spending time together, but I don’t know what makes Killian Jones really tick. You know?”

He smirked as she struggled with the knot she had created. “Aye, but I would say we are on our way to knowing each other. Isn’t that the point of our spending time together? Our date?” He ended it on that hopeful note, as he wasn’t sure after her hasty retreat if she still wanted a date with him. Seeing her there helped to ease a few of the doubts, but still it was not in his nature to assume the best.

“Yes,” she agreed, celebrating a bit as the knot gave way. “So you should know something about me. I bake. I’m not saying I’m Betty Crocker or Martha Stewart, but when I get stressed or upset, I bake.”

He had to admit that it was an adorable little quirk when he imagined her with an apron and a bit of flour on her face where her freckles hid. “No worse than breakfast at midnight, love,” he noted, giving himself permission to sit backwards in the chair so that he might face her. “What do you bake?”

“It depends,” she said thoughtfully. “When Henry is being all emo and angsty, I usually go for cookies. And no I don’t buy the refrigerated things you just plop on the pan. I’m not a box cake kind of girl either. I go for it. I mix and measure. I’ve even been known to weigh butter.”
“Color me impressed. I’ve been known to be a talent in the kitchen, but I don’t believe I’ve ever weighed butter before.”

She smiled proudly at his comment. “When I’m feeling sad and morose, I tend to go with cake. I’m talking layers and fruit flavored jam between those layers. I don’t do much in the way of decorating, but I love to dig into it and not think of everything wrong in my life. And when I feel like I’ve done something wrong and that I’ve hurt someone I care about…a friend…I bake cupcakes and or muffins.” She held out the basket that contained a mountain of mini muffins. “That’s why I’m here. I think I may have hurt you yesterday and I didn’t mean to do that. So this is my peace offering.”

“You act as though you need one, love. You don’t. I was not forthcoming with you about my desire to stay out of the music business. You were simply doing your job. If I was another man, I would have seen the compliment in what you were saying and would have been honored at your belief in me.”

“But you said you weren’t interested and I persisted. For that I’m sorry. I should have accepted your word for what it was.” She shook the basket a bit in front of him. “You know what is best for you. I should trust that instead of trying to find ways to fix things for you. So let me apologize and give you some muffins.”

“If you will accept my apology as well,” he said, setting aside the drink to reach in and pluck out one of the lemon poppy seed muffins. Biting into it, he smiled despite the crumbs that stuck to his chin and landed on his dark colored shirt. “I do have to say that you are much more skilled in the art of apology than I am, darling. I was only planning to say that I was sorry. I had no offering for you other than my regret.”

“Let’s just call it even.” She watched as he munched on another of the muffins, cranberry and orange. “Do you have any hobbies or quirks that I should know about?”

He chewed through his thoughts, watching her anxious expression and saying nothing when she removed her hat and gloves with the realization that she was going to stay for a bit. “I suppose gardening,” he said offhandedly. “You already know that I like to sail and I’ve mentioned my love of books. The one you don’t know about is my love of the dirt. It soothes the soul, a bit like the feel of the ocean spray and the sound of a sail snapping tight in the wind.”

“You have a way with words,” she commented, standing up and frowning as he joined her abruptly. “Sit. Enjoy your breakfast. Your students will be here soon and I’ve got work.”

“Thank you, Swan. For the breakfast and the company.”

“Maybe I’m just trying to butter you up for better chaperoning responsibilities. Last field trip I worked, Henry’s classmates threw another kid in the swimming pool at the hotel. He was sputtering like he couldn’t swim and I dove in to save him. My suede jacket and brand new watch did not survive my heroics.”

He chuckled, his hand landing on her waist just inside her jacket as he pulled her closer. “I don’t know if muffins are enough to bribe me. We might have to consider the price.”

Brushing off the crumbs from his stubble and from the front of his shirt, she smiled. “You forget that I’m the queen of negotiating. I don’t think you’re ready to go up against me.” Lifting up onto her toes, since she is not as tall as she usually is without the impossibly high heels, she pressed her lips to his once and then again before he responded in kind, mouths mingling and their bodies folding together as though they can’t get close enough.
“That’s too shiny,” Emma directed as she looked over the woman’s shoulder at Elsa. “I want a more natural look.”

“Emma, I’m wearing 10 tons of makeup and you’re screaming about natural. Are you high?”

Sitting the chair, Elsa’s hands were folded in her lap and her long blonde hair was being curled and styled in an artful and messy way that Emma was directing from her own perch. The woman applying her makeup had two rather large boxes that reminded the woman of fishing tackle boxes filled with shadows, creams, and lip glosses. Two other women were darting in and out of the room with clothing and accessories that Emma accepted or summarily rejected without asking for any input from her friend.

“I’ve done this hundreds of times,” Emma said, scrolling through her text messages. “Trust me. It’s your first photoshoot. You want it to be perfect.”

While Elsa was on edge, Anna was clearly in her element. She instructed her makeup artist to stay away from certain colors and refused the offer of highlights in her rust colored hair. She had cut out pictures from magazines and printed out others from websites that spoke to poses and compositions she thought would work. The photographer was already enthralled by her. He had barely glanced at Elsa, calling her beautiful on his way to chat with Anna about some photoshoot he had just completed in Morocco that Anna had seen on television.

“You’re in a better mood now,” Elsa commented, having called Emma the night before in the midst of her cooking frenzy. “Did you and Killian talk?”

“This morning,” Emma confirmed. “And stop worrying about me. You do realize that you’re the client. I’m supposed to be taking care of you and worrying about you.”

“Friends first,” Elsa reminded her of the toast they had made when Emma first signed the two sisters to a development deal. They had been sitting in the middle of Emma’s living room, lounging on throw pillows and eating popcorn and watching Dirty Dancing when the text from Regina giving the go ahead came in. Grabbing the first bottle they could find, they had toasted on cheap wine and promised that they would not forget that they were friends first and foremost.

“Of course,” Emma said. “I just don’t want you worrying about my dating life when we’ve got a photographer making more in an hour to do this photoshoot than I make in a week. We can commiserate over the brothers later.”

“You think I’m having a crisis?”

“I think you don’t know how to calm your brain down and let things happen. It’s not a bad thing. I do it too, but if I know you, Elsa, you’re freaking out about something right now. He did something. Something nice. Something sweet. And you’re having that internal dialogue about why he did it and do you deserve such things.”

“And it’s written on my face?” Elsa said, wincing as another hot roller is removed from her hair and strands snarl in its grasp.

“God, I hope not because I don’t know how to get someone to Photoshop out love sick fool.”

Elsa did not return her friend’s jovial smile. “Do you think that maybe…”

When Elsa paused, Emma took the opportunity and told the makeup artist to go and look at the
lighting to ensure the finish was right. Sending the hairdresser on a similar mission, she waited until both had left the room. “What’s wrong?”

“He wrote a song,” Elsa said, as if those four words explained everything.

“The bastard,” Emma said with mock horror. “Seriously, you’ve got to give me more than this. What song? What’s it about? Why are you upset about a song?”

Taking a deep breath and concentrating on the luminous pink shine of her nails, Elsa opened her mouth and then closed it again. “He wrote a song about me. About us. About me and him.” She frowned. “It just feels like a bit too much too soon.”

“I see.”

“I should feel honored, right? I should be flattered that I inspire him, but I don’t. I want to. I want to feel normal about this. But right now I’m five seconds from running out the door, changing my name, and starting a new life. I’m acting like you.”

“Ouch. That’s not fair.”

“Okay maybe not, but still. I’m not ready for this. He’s writing songs with titles like Until You and I’m not sure I can handle that. Emma, I’m not…”

“You’re not ready?” Emma suggested, covering her friend’s entwined hands with her own. “I know you’re not. You just need to be honest with Liam about it. Tell him you want to move slower.” She stood up and crossed to the spot where the hairdresser had been standing. Using her fingers she tried to separate a few of the curls in Elsa’s hair. That busied both of them for a moment longer.

“I’m not sure I’ll ever be ready for that.”

“It’s a responsibility.”

***AAA***

“So what was eating at Killian?” Robin asked before tossing the bag into the back of the car. “Your brother is an active bloke, but I don’t see him taking two hour walks often.”

“Woman trouble,” Liam said distractedly. “Don’t you have anything more professional than that to carry this stuff in? It looks like a duffel bag.”

“Forgive me for not having a man purse. I couldn’t even order one on Amazon what with this Regina woman calling us with fifteen minutes to prepare. I can appreciate that Emma is trying to give us a boost, but I’m not sure that us being dragged into a meeting with the head of the label unprepared is much of a help.”

Liam could not exactly disagree. Last time he had spoken to Emma she mentioned that she would try to get them a spot at an upcoming showcase. She couldn’t promise a recording contract, but that performing with other signed acts would be a step in the right direction. He had been grateful for her interest and swore he would do whatever he could to make sure they were ready for the stage. However, when his phone had chirped that morning with Regina on the other end, he was surprised.

Fumbling for his sunglasses, Robin squinted into the deceptively bright sun. It was still cold and there was a threat of snow for the following week, but to look outside and see the rays of light was to believe it to be much warmer. “Emma seems to be fighting awfully hard for us. She fancies your brother that much?”
Liam slid behind the steering wheel and Robin into the passenger seat. “I rather think she does, but it is my brother I question more. He’s not really known for his interest in dating since Milah. It is understandable to a degree, but with this lass… I fear he might lose what is left of his addled mind if he was to not win her heart. I don’t know that we could put together the pieces again.”

“That’s a bit dire given that they only just started seeing one another,” Robin noted, pointing the way to where they were to meet with Regina. “He’s a grown man, as you said yourself.”

“Aye, but Killian is not a halfway sort of bloke. He loved Milah and would have married her had that driver…” He broke off with the realization that same drunk driver had taken life of Marian, Robin’s wife. “I think that my brother has two speeds – hiding from the obvious and jumping into the deep end with all force. I only hope that he doesn’t get his heart broken.”

Robin nodded in agreement, turning the conversation to that of their meeting. They fell into a 10 minute discussion of which songs were their best choices and which would offer the best view of the assets of the band. “I can appreciate that your brother is making baby steps and jumping into this whatever it is with Emma, but I would prefer he have recovered his willingness to sing instead. Those two songs are brilliant, but they would be more so with Killian on lead vocals. Can’t you hear it now? It would be fantastic.”

“Aye, but that’s hardly a battle I’m going to fight. My brother much prefers chattering on about my cleaning habits than he does about the songs I am writing. You remember well enough how he used to have that glow about him when singing or making music on that guitar. He barely even flinches any more when I attempt to drag him into it.”

“Bloody shame.”

***AAA***

“Did you always want to teach music?” Henry asked as Killian passed him a bottle of water before they began their afternoon session. “Did you ever think about doing anything else?”

“It is an enjoyable career,” Killian broached delicately. He was sure that Henry’s question was meant to delve a little deeper than simply career choice. Not knowing the student’s true intent, he was programed to be vague. “Can’t say it was one I considered at your age though.”

Henry looked thoughtful, the plastic of the water bottle crackling as he took a swig. “My dad thinks that music is a waste of my time and that I should do something like play baseball.”

So that was it, Killian thought as the young boy looked hopefully at him. Henry strived for acceptance, not only from his mother but everyone. It was a plight of many children as they began that transition to adulthood, wanting to strike out on their own but also please those around them. “And which do you think you would prefer?”

“I like music. I mean a lot.”

“And you are quite good at it. I told your mother that when I suggested these lessons. What does your mother think?”

“She said it is my choice, but I know she would rather have me play the trumpet.” He looked downward. “My parents are kind of always arguing about stuff like this. My mom will tell me to choose something. I choose because they both say it is my decision. Then my dad disagrees. My mom yells at my dad. My dad tries to tell me that he was just trying to help me. My mom tells me not to listen to my dad. And then I end up feeling like I disappointed someone.” He frowned. “I really
just want to play the trumpet, but not if my dad is going to be upset about it.”

That was a mouthful for a preteen to say, as Killian knew from his teaching experience. Most of the time his students were more of the monosyllabic answer types. He would ask questions and their answers never varied much from yes or no. He had given up expecting well thought out solutions to essay questions or discussions. Instead he tried to interest and involve them in other ways. “It sounds to me as though you are a lucky lad, Henry.”

“Lucky? Are you joking?”

“No, I’m not joking, Henry. You have two parents who love you very much. They want good things for you. And because of that you have great opportunities. Yes, that can be frustrating sometimes. But Henry the great thing is that your parents love you no matter what you decide. They can be disappointed, but they can also be really proud of you. I know I am proud of how hard you’ve been working and how far you’ve come with the trumpet. You can almost play this entire piece brilliantly without mistakes.”

The young boy blushed at the compliment. “You really think I can make it? The audition?”

“I think you have a great chance at it. And if you chose to play baseball, I think that you could be quite good at that too. I’m sure that your mother would cheer you on from the stands.” Killian was well aware of the coach of the younger team. He was demanding but a kindly man who had the respect of most of the teachers and parents. Henry would certainly not suffer.

“But I wouldn’t get to do these practices with you.” He watched Killian’s features soften a bit.

“Perhaps not, but that is the one thing you will see in life that is a challenge. You won’t be able to please everyone all the time. You won’t be able to do everything that you want to do. So life, in many ways, is about balance. You must make time for the things you love and want to do and find a way to not ignore the other aspects of your life. But Henry, your responsibility is to be the best you that you can be. You are not responsible for pleasing your mother or father with your activities and hobbies. They will be happy if you are happy.”

Lifting the trumpet in a move that showed his dedication was toward music, Henry placed it close to his lips. Then he paused, realizing he still had a question. “Did you have to do that? Did your parents make you feel that way?”

A slight cloud fell over Killian’s features. “Not all parents are able to focus so much on their children for whatever reason. That’s why you are a very lucky lad.”

***AAA***

Liam sat in the most uncomfortable chair he had ever experienced, his knees feeling like they would brush his chin in a moment. He could not quite figure out how to rearrange himself to a more comfortable and attractive position though Robin had somehow mastered the technique. The former naval captain was about to ask his friend’s secret when a side door opened and in walked the petite raven haired beauty. While beautiful, he would hardly have called her a delicate flower. Her features were angular and her eyes dark and forbidding pools of power that frankly intimidated him a bit. A plainer looking woman walked in with her, dashing over to replace a half full glass of water with one that was colder and fresher. The assistant even took time to twist a bit of lemon before placing a single dossier on Regina’s massive desk. He was surprised the woman didn’t bow and ask if anything else would be required.

Regina was dressed quite conservatively for a woman running a record label. She wore a steely gray
pants suit with a silk black blouse underneath. Other than a silver chain around her neck and matching silver studs in her ears, she wore no jewelry. Giving the file folder a cursory glance, she gave them a tight lipped smile as she sat and performed a miraculous task of drinking from the water glass without leaving behind her red lipstick.

“Liam and Robin,” she said as if trying to remember their names. “I’m assuming that,” she looked down, “Will can’t join us today.”

“He’s seeing to personal matters,” Liam offered, shocking himself with his own formality. This woman clearly brought that out in him as though she demanded it. “I know he is disappointed at not being here himself.”

Not looking at all convinced, Regina crossed her legs and leaned over her desk with her eyes still on them. “Emma has been bragging about your sound for a few days now. I asked her for a sample, which she provided. I’ve finally gotten around to listening to it.”

Robin eyed the woman a bit warily. “And you liked it?”

“Mr. Locksley, I don’t bring in talent that I’m not interested in promoting in some way, shape, or form. The recording that she shared with me is a bit raw, but I can tell there is something there. I am curious about where you’re wanting to go with this. You aren’t young men by any means. Are you seeing yourself with a contract? Are you just wanting to stay local?”

The question posed was not one that had been ignored in the past. Liam was older than Will and Robin by a couple of years. Robin was a widower and father. Will and Anastasia were trying to start their lives together. None of that would really lend itself to touring and the lifestyle that would be required for it. However, all certainly had a passion for music that they wanted to pursue. Robin tried to explain that the best he could with Liam chiming in that he was open to seeing where they could go with this.

“From what I gather, your guitarist is not original to the group. You just met him this week.”

“Aye,” Liam said. “He’s learning some of the songs and coming around to help put some music with lyrics that I’ve been toying with a bit.”

She nodded, lifting a single sheet of paper up in her hands. It was the run of show for the showcase, penciled in acts and nothing firm. She had it memorized, but the sight of her scrutinizing it did bring apprehension to both men. “Emma has suggested that we bring you in and let you do a song or two at our upcoming showcase. I assume that since you haven’t had a lead guitarist and don’t appear to have anyone capable of carrying the vocals that you haven’t performed in…”

“It’s been a few years,” Robin supplied. “But I assure you that we are ready.”

She gave a haughty but amused laugh. “No vocalist and a guitarist still learning the songs. Yes, that sounds like you’re ready to me.” Both men looked at each other as she paused. “Let’s see what we can do. I have a few studio bands we can pull from. You bring your little group here on Saturday morning. We’ll see what we can piece together. Now mind you this does not mean I’m signing you to a contract.”

“We are appreciative,” Liam said, attempting to stand without a groan or awkward gait. He failed as he almost fell forward onto her desk. Regaining his balance, he flushed red and stuck out his hand. “Thank you for the opportunity.”

***AAA***
Killian draped the tarp over the boxes and used his foot to steady the corners as he tightened the rope and bungee ties. He did not even want to think about what his brother had been doing on his boat, as privacy never seemed to be a stumbling block for the elder Jones. He guess he could understand it a bit, as he had followed his brother around for years and inserted himself into the elder’s life. There were numerous times that Liam had come home as a teenager to find Killian searching through his belongings or reading some note he’d received from an ardent admirer. When Liam had his first date to a movie, Killian had convinced his friends to see the same show, appearing two rows behind with a crooked grin and a look of triumph when Liam turned to see him.

Once it was just the two of them versus the world, the lines of boundaries became blurry. Everything was open and belonged to the both of them. They worked and slaved together to build their lives. It was why Killian’s accident and his early exit from the navy had thrown both of them for a loop. Liam had called them lifers and fully intended to be happily commanding a ship that included his brother for the rest of his life. But without his hand, Killian was not eligible and that meant changes for both brothers. Killian had fled to the United States and fallen into teaching after trying a few ventures. Liam stuck it out a few more years in the navy until he could no longer remember why he was there. He kept his reasoning to himself but after a mistake that threatened and cost lives, he had taken his commanding officer’s advice and returned to civilian life with no plans and no direction.

It was not that familiar of a position for either of the brothers. Liam had been the one looking for stability while Killian sought more. If he was honest, that was what had been wrong in his relationship with Milah. After 18 months of dating exclusively she was not hinting about wanting to get married. She came out and blatantly said it. He told her more than once that he was not looking toward marriage until he was in a place in his career that he could contribute. Milah said she understood, but always there were plans. She wanted him to try out for talent competitions and try to make it in the music business. She encouraged him to sell the songs he wrote, even submitting a few without his consent.

“It can be as bad as all that, brother,” Liam said, arriving with one beer in each hand. He gracefully stepped onto the deck and thrust a bottle out to Killian. “Don’t you have your date with the fair Emma to look forward to and your little excursions with the munchkins?”

“You’re mistaking my look of concentration for one of melancholy,” Killian said, accepting the bottle. “I am simply focusing on the task so that this weather does not do more damage to her.”

“Very well, little brother. Don’t drink yet though. I have some news we should be toasting.” Liam raised one foot to rest on the bench, his smile growing in the artificial light of the boats working electrical equipment. “Your brother and Robin had a meeting today with Regina Mills. It went brilliantly.”

“I would expect no less,” Killian said proudly. “So you are signing?”

“Not exactly, but that could be on the horizon.” Liam went on to tell his brother of the meeting and Regina’s concerns that they had no lead vocals and a new guitarist. “We haven’t really had a true singer in the group since your…you left. I realize it is asking quite a bit, but perhaps you could sit in on a song or two. It wouldn’t be a permanent thing. Just give us a bit chance to show what we can do and buy a bit of a time before we have to find someone. I swear you wouldn’t have to do much of anything. It’ll be a simple couple of numbers. You can sit on a stool and sing them any way you feel most comfortable. The guys and I can play however makes it easiest for you. I know that it is asking a lot, but I’m coming here with nothing more than this favor to ask…”

The coldness of the chilled bottle felt like burning in his hand as he stared hard at the dark glass of it. “I suppose that is what you wish to celebrate? Me blindly following you and your dream again?”
“Is that how you see it? You following me? Killian, I have done everything I can to make sure that you have the opportunities that our father didn’t stick around to give us. I chose my life to keep you safe and secure. I stayed…”

“And other than thank you, what do you want from me? Oh that’s right. You want me to do the one thing I swore I wouldn’t do.” Pushing the beer bottle back into Liam’s hand, he shook his head. “Eventually you have to stop using our father as an excuse. He left. We dealt with it. Plenty of people have crappy fathers. They don’t build their whole lives around trying to forget or show up the man who didn’t care enough to stick around.”

“And that is what you think I’m doing?” Liam shook his head as though the movement would somehow remove the topic from the air. “You think I’m just a little boy looking for his papa?”

Sighing, Killian drew a line through the air with his hand. “I think that you live your life in the hopes that our father will somehow hear about us and what we have done. I think you want him to be proud of somehow regret leaving us. But he hasn’t, Liam. All these years and he’s never reached out. Not even once. What we know of him is from cyber stalking. It’s not a fairy tale ending, but that is how it is. Did we really have it so bad? We had each other. We loved each other.”

“We love each other,” Liam answered in an almost whisper. “Killian, I don’t regret anything I’ve done for you or to help you. I should not have asked. I know that you aren’t ready and maybe will never be ready to face that part of your life again. I only thought that maybe with your dating Emma that you were facing some of those things again. You loved making music, writing, composing, performing, before Milah. I just wanted you to feel that again…to know it isn’t tied to her. Your talent goes beyond that.”

Killian was quiet as he opened the hatch door and began to climb down into the cabin. It took a moment before Liam followed along, using one hand on the rungs of the ladder and one to hold the two bottles. “Do you know what Milah and I were talking about right before that car crossed over the line?” Killian asked after the brothers both sat on the tattered fabric of the dining booth that he had not yet reupholstered. He didn’t wait for an answer. “She wanted me to go on that bloody talent show audition. Said I was too good to be performing in pubs with you blokes.”

Liam tried again to hand his brother the beer, sliding it across the Formica table that was bolted to the wall. “She was right, you know. You wrote the majority of our music. You were brilliant.”

“But I didn’t want to do that show. I wanted to be with my mates and make music. I wanted to play our songs until we all split apart with our lives and responsibilities. I wanted to look back on it as a fond memory like all groups do. But Robin was in the car that night. He and Marian started in on it too. They all put the pressure on me. They all thought it was such a good idea. I wasn’t paying attention to the road or the other drivers, looking at my phone rather than…I was trying to find a reason that I couldn’t. Perhaps I had missed the deadline or perhaps I wasn’t the right age. Something that would prevent this from being a reality. Then I heard the crunch of the metal.”

Liam’s solemn face was testament to the fragility of Killian’s words. His younger brother never spoke of that night, never talked of how it came to be that the driver had struck directly on the passenger side and those final moments when Milah’s eyes closed to never open again. It was at times as if Robin and Killian had some unspoken pact about that night, some accord that they would not speak of the horrors that transpired. And while he had wondered and wanted to ask, he had restrained himself and fed on the tidbits they had shared. “It was not your fault.”

“I know what the authorities said, Liam. I know that the other driver was twice the legal limit and had been observed wavering over the line for a full five miles before we encountered her. But had I not been scanning that phone, I might have noticed. I might have done something to maneuver us to
safety rather than…I may not be the one who was at fault legally, but I do hold some of the blame. I was not doing anything more than I do now. I was looking for reasons to hide. I was looking for reasons that I would fail.”

Liam picked at the bottle’s label, pulling the paper from the damp glass. It took a moment of his concentration. “It wasn’t your finest moment or smartest decision, but I knew Milah. If she was bothered by it, she would have ripped that phone from your hand and done the searching herself. She always wanted what was best for you, brother.”

“Did she?” Killian asked, looking at the strips of paper his brother was pulling off the bottle. There was now a small stack of them. “You see, I’ve done quite a bit of thinking on that these past few years. I’m not sure that I agree. Milah was never quite content with the man I was or the man I was trying to be. She always wanted more. Wanted me to do more and be more. And sometimes I wonder if that was motivation or her own desire to live a life that I could not give her without that push.”
Well after the angst of the last chapter, I thought you could use a little fluff and humor. Thank you all for the messages, reviews, kudos, etc. I am glad that you are liking this version of Liam and that Anna is coming off as close to the original (she’s hard for me). This chapter is pretty heavy on the Ruby and Emma friendship. I am basing Ruby a little on my best friend Jenny who I have known since college. Jenny is my dance on the tables, go meet guys, drink until 4 am and be hung over together friend. She’s also the first one to beat up a guy who dumped me and the first to offer a shoulder to cry on, which is how I’ve always seen Ruby.

Just a bit of a warning. Aurora makes an appearance in this chapter. This is not how I usually write her character, but you’ll see why she was needed when you get to that part.

“Are you sure you are okay with us doing this? I just kind of said yes without really asking you. I can call Zelena and tell her no. I’m sure she would understand.” Anna stood in the center of the townhome’s kitchen still in her flannel pajamas with snowmen all over them. Her long hair was plaited into two symmetrical braids and her face was clear of any makeup as she sipped milk out of a glass through a straw. Elsa knew that anyone walking into their home would have no problem deciding which was the younger sister.

“I told you that it’s fine.” Elsa was not quite as pulled together in her night apparel, resorting to a warm flannel gown and a single braid thrown over her shoulder. “You’re right. If we can’t perform there isn’t much sense in trying to keep this recording contract.”

Looking as thoughtfully as she could with her straw, Anna waited while her sister added just the right amounts of everything to her coffee mug. “Would you rather Emma was there. I know she’s busy, but we could ask…”

“No, she’s doing something with her son tonight and has her date with Killian tomorrow night,” Elsa said, blowing softly on the hot liquid. “I can certainly sing a few songs to some drunk bar patrons without Emma holding my hand.”

Anna looked thoughtful as she swirled her straw through the milk. Elsa was probably the only one who remembered the day when her little sister declared that she didn’t like the taste of the white liquid. Their parents had tried the old trick that it would taste better with a straw. Now grown and with a much more experienced palate, the younger of the two sisters still drank her milk each morning with a straw. “I’m not sure how many will be drunk at 8:30 tonight. It is a bar, but people usually get drunk later don’t they?” She bit down on the plastic of the straw and chewed as she mulled that over. “But then again happy hour is at like 5 or something, right?”

“I’m going to be fine. You’re going to be fine. We’re both…”

“Going to be fine,” Anna finished, taking another sip. “I get that you’re scared. But I’m going to be there with you. Kris will be there to watch. We can call Liam. I’m sure he’d like to watch too.”

Elsa tried to ignore the suggestion and passed her sister to head over to the cabinet. “I’d prefer the smallest audience possible. But maybe. It would be good to have a friendly face.” She let her hand hover over the box of cereal and paused. “I should call and invite him, right?”

“That’s the spirit.”
Things weren’t much calmer at Emma and Henry’s apartment as the sun was starting to break through the early dawn hours. After a reading assignment had stumped Henry and he’d stayed up half the night with Emma discussing what it was the teacher was truly asking in the comprehension questions, he was listlessly throwing his overnight bag together and rejecting her suggestions for a fast breakfast.

“Kid, we don’t have time for bacon, eggs, and pancakes. Your choice is cereal or toast.”

Henry’s answer was lost between his muffled voice as he dug through a drawer in his bedroom and the loud pounding at the front door. Emma was the more dressed of the two with a pair of yoga pants and camisole. Shrugging into flannel shirt as a jacket, she padded into the living room and threw the door open. “I should have ordered breakfast, but thank you for coming.”

Ruby tossed the rolled sleeping bag to her friend and then pulled a large to go bag out from behind her back. “Seems that lover boy already thought of that,” she declared brightly. “Emma, I don’t know what you’re doing, but I should take notes. No guy has ever delivered breakfast for me with a note I might add. I’m lucky to get a piece of toast before having to vacate a date’s apartment.”

“Well you’re usually dodging the guy’s wife so there’s that,” Emma said, closing the door behind her friend who was already on her way to the dining room table. “I didn’t do anything to deserve this.”

“The wife thing was one time and I didn’t know she existed,” Ruby announced with mock anger. “And I don’t know what you did to deserve it, but he certainly thinks it was warranted.” Incredulously, Ruby pulled out a folded sheet of paper and read Killian’s note that he knew she would be too busy for the most important meal of the day. “So keeping our tradition of a morning meal, please accept my offer of waffles, eggs, and bacon courtesy of our favorite match makers,” she recited like a school child giving a report. “That’s so sweet.”

“You read my letter,” Emma said, not dignifying her friend’s assessment of the gesture. “You know how I feel about snooping.”

“He called in the order and dictated the letter over the phone to me. I didn’t snoop. I even made myself some so I could stick around and help you finish packing.” She looked smug as she pulled the foam containers from the bag and began to arrange them. Being such a frequent guest in the apartment, she already knew where everything was and easily got the plates, flatware and cups and mugs. When she even pulled out a container of cinnamon that had been shaved to go over the hot chocolate, Emma’s eyes grew wide and confused.

“He thought of everything,” she said with a distinct bit of awe in her voice. She wasn’t quite sure how she felt about that, as few people took that much time or effort to surprise her in a good way.

“Granny knows what she is doing. And when, Emma, were you going to tell me about this date you have with him tomorrow night?”

Flinching, Emma dropped into one of the seats around the table and stared at the full meal in front of her. “He told you about that?”

“No, Mary Margaret did, but he didn’t tell her either. You did when you asked her to watch Henry because Neal can’t be trusted not to back out and leave you in a lurch. We’re going to chat about that too. But first you’re going to tell me why I’m hearing about this from Mary Margaret. If you tell me that she helped pick out your outfit for this date, I’m going to be really hurt.” The pointed look that the waitress/designer gave her was only partially teasing.
“I haven’t picked out anything because he said it would be casual.”

Ruby was left pondering that clue when Henry emerged from his room, still tousle headed and a bit bleary eyed. He was mid-yawn when the sight of breakfast piled high registered on his face and between the yawn and smile he reacted with a single, “whoa that’s a lot of food.”

Emma yanked a chair out for him and settled a plate into his reach as Ruby tossed him a napkin and told him to eat up. He was already asking where did it all come from as Emma poured some of the rich hot chocolate.

“Ruby brought it when she brought the sleeping bag for me,” she explained, shooting her friend a look to go along with what she was saying. Emma had a habit of being sometimes overly honest with her son, but she and Killian had both decided to not play up the idea of them dating with the boy. It was a fine line, as he knew that they were certainly spending some time together and going on a date, but he wasn’t aware of the late night text messages or stolen moments. She only hoped that her look would silence Ruby, who could be a horrible liar.

“Just call me the delivery girl,” Ruby said between bites. “I’m thinking I should get a tip. How much allowance do you have saved up, Henry?”

***AAA***

Liam’s appearance at the waterside cottage was just as rumpled as Henry’s as his brother puttered about and threw a change of clothes and a few other essentials into his overnight bag. Not having the added task of packing for a child made his efforts much less stressful than Emma’s.

Peering over his brother’s shoulder, Liam feigned a pout of disappointment until Killian asked what was the matter. “You ordered breakfast but failed to get me any. I’m hungry over here. I like eggs. I like waffles.” Protruding his bottom lip into a more pronounced pout, he contemplated the missing food. “I fancy a little cinnamon in the hot chocolate, but that’s it isn’t it?”

“Aye, I didn’t order it to make you happy, you git,” Killian said, slapping down a packet of instant oatmeal and grinning. “I didn’t even order it for me.”

“You’re the git. You order a beautiful lass a breakfast like that and you don’t even appear at her door to share in it with her. Bloody hell, brother, you could have at least offered her a romantic breakfast in bed.” He wagged his finger at Killian playfully. “Must I teach you everything?”

Killian was busy heating water and pulling bowls out of the upper cabinet. “And what romantic gestures are you throwing about today, Liam? I don’t see you doing much to woo Elsa. Have you already tired of her? You’ve never had much staying power with women.”

“I will have you know that Elsa just texted me and invited me to see her and her sister perform. I thought I might pick up some flowers or some such on my way to the Rabbit Hole to watch them tonight.” His proud smile fell at the nonplussed expression of Killian turning up the flame on the stove.

“Amateur stuff, mate. Flowers? Chocolates? That’s the stuff my students do, not grown men.”

“And you’re the bloody expert now?” he asked. “You haven’t been on a date in ages. And I might add that it won’t be very romantic of you to bring her back here with me on the couch or her apartment with her boy in the other room. So your plans include a motel?”

That comment did rile Killian a bit. Pointing to the untidy mess of sheets and blankets on the couch, he frowned. “If you were a good brother, you’d make yourself scarce so that I might invite her back
here. However, I am a gentleman and have not even asked you to do that. I plan to woo the woman, not seduce her on the first date.”

Not intimidated by his brother’s not so veiled slam at the living situation, Liam pour out the dry contents of his oatmeal packet into the bowl. “I think you’re just making excuses. If I wanted to invite Elsa back here…”

“You wouldn’t dare. You’re really going to invite her over to share the couch with you? Are you mad?”

“Well, you won’t be here tonight. I could invite her over and use the bedroom. It will be empty after all.”

The water ready, Killian poured part into Liam’s bowl and part into his own. “I share many things with your sorry arse, but my bed is not one of them. If I come home tomorrow to find out that you had a lass in my bed, I will kick you out and leave you to the street. Brother or no, there are rules, Liam. I am not kidding.”

Giving his brother a wry smile, Liam sauntered back to the living room and plopped down on the couch with his bowl. “Might be worth it,” he called to his brother who was still hurling threats over the idea.

***AAA***

That Elsa sat just to the right of the makeshift stage in the bar that usually played whatever was on the radio instead of inviting in live acts. Her usually pale skin seemed to glow with the sallowness of fear as she drummed her fingers on the table and watched her sister giggle at something Kristoff had said. This was a bad idea, she thought for the fifth time since she had sat down. Emma had encouraged her to perform a few small venues before they released any recordings, but she wasn’t there.

“I think I’m going to get something to drink,” Elsa said, assuming that the two lovebirds would not even hear her. “Be right back.”

Anna reached out a hand and placed it on her sister’s forearm. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to ignore you. We should be concentrating on the songs and not…”

“Anna, it’s fine. I’m just thirsty.” Elsa slid away from the two and walked over to the bar. She wasn’t much for drinking alone and knew that she did not need to consume too much before performing. Still, it would be nice to have something take the edge off. She was waiting for the bartender to notice her when she felt the arm slide around her and a soft nuzzle to her neck. “I’m assuming you’re Liam, but I won’t object if you’re not. You’re too good at that.”

Liam laughed loudly, handing her a flower as he waved over the bartender and ordered them both a glass. “Sorry I’m late,” he said sincerely. “I could make up a story about traffic or something to that end, but it is much more pathetic than that. I was trying to straighten up my brother’s place a bit and the vacuum cleaner ate a bit of the rug. There was smoke and I was afraid to leave it alone.”

“You haven’t missed anything,” she said, waving the tulip under her nose and breathing in deeply. As her eyes flitted over toward him, she noted that there was a vase full of the red, yellow, and pink blossoms sitting there on the bar next to him. “I saved my big freak out for you so you can push me out on the stage like a hero saving the day.”

“I’ll gladly do it,” he said, pausing long enough to push a curl behind her ear. “If it would help I’ll sit
on stage with you and hold your hand. It might make playing the guitar a bit rough though.”

She laughed, dropping her head to his shoulder. Anna and Zelena had told her that the guitar was not necessary, as they had a house band to back them up on the songs. However, the idea of holding nothing in her hand but a microphone frightened her to no end. At least with a guitar she could think about other things and concentrate on strumming out the music while she vocalized. It would not seem quite as scary. “I think I’m going to be okay.”

She was okay it turned out. There were a few tense moments, but Anna was more than capable of reading her sister. When Elsa faltered, Anna stepped in and took over the vocals as though that had been part of the plan the whole time. It was doubtful that anyone but Kristoff and Liam even noticed. When their set was over, she couldn’t even tell that there was a good amount of applause. Instead she was too busy smiling at Liam and his kind way of taking her hand and helping her off the stage.

“You were lovely,” he told her softly when they stepped into the hallway near the restrooms and away from the crowd. “Just lovely.”

“It wasn’t as bad as I thought it would be,” she admitted to both herself and to him. “I didn’t puke or pass out. So that was something.”

He shook his head, still gripping her hand. “Should we get out of here? I’m sensing you don’t wish to do an encore.”

While he kept his promise to stay out of his brother’s bedroom, admitting to himself that he wasn’t quite that willing to cross the line, he did invite her back to the cottage where they curled up on the couch watching movies and snacking on a pizza that he picked up on the way back. By 11 that night he could tell she was ready to nod off to sleep. And by 11:30 he was yawning along with her.

“I am usually more entertaining with a lass than this,” he teased after she pulled one of the pillows into his lap so that she would be more comfortable laying there. “I was thinking our dates would include more dinner and dancing.”

“I prefer this,” she told him. She laced her fingers with his and let their joined hands rest down near her stomach. “I can’t really curl up with you like this in a club.”

“It’s also hard for conversation.” The movie played on with them both only partially paying attention. There were more interesting things to discuss and concentrate on, especially when Elsa admitted that she wasn’t sure if she had ever seen certain movies and he became determined to find them on Netflix. When he admitted that he had never been ice skating, she refused to let that slide and invited him to join her at a rink the very next day.

“I’ll gladly go, but I’m not too keen on breaking any limbs.”

“You think I can’t protect you,” she said, smiling up at him. “I’m pretty good at anything on ice. I even tried my hand at hockey.”

“I’ll bet you looked cute and adorable in all that padding. Perhaps I need that for our adventure. What do you think?”

She called him a wimp and pointed out that his beloved soccer players wore much less in terms of protection. “It’s basically the same sport except for the sticks and a puck versus a ball.” She tried to seem shocked at the way he huffed angrily over her assessment, reaching up with her free hand to smooth the three little lines that appeared at the bridge of his nose.

“I can see that we’ll have to include a bit of football as part of your education too.” He bent at the
waist, kissing the tip of her nose as she squealed half in surprise and half in delighted glee.

***AAA***

“Phillip Jr. just loves your class,” Aurora said to Killian when the group had stopped for dinner that evening. It had been a long bus drive with rowdy children and parents not too sure on the chaperoning duties. Killian stopped to talk to each one, helping them out by introducing them to the students they would be supervising. It appeared that Emma was the last one on his list to talk with about what was expected, which would have been fine if the mothers didn’t seem to want to chat about anything and everything with the teacher. “He talks about it all the time.”

“He’s a fine lad,” Killian said with a smile that if Emma had interpreted it instead of been looking at her plate she would have appreciated more. He was clearly trying not to point out that the boy he’d just called a fine lad had two straws up his nose and was mixing up a walrus with a seal by clapping his hands together and making a honking noise. “Very mature for his age.”

“That’s great to know,” the woman said, leaning in closer and propping her elbow on the table to balance. “His father just isn’t around that much. It’s so hard to raise a boy on my own practically.”

Emma resisted the urge to gag while Aurora made herself sound like a true single parent. She and her husband were still married. While he was a workaholic, Aurora spent most of her time at the country club and playing tennis in the local competitive league. Phillip Jr. was being raised more by a nanny than either of his parents. He was also being raised as a jerk, if she was being honest.

“You are the one having date with him,” she reminded herself when it took a second longer for him to back away from Aurora’s touch than she thought necessary. Thankfully she had her son to worry over since he was currently chomping on his fourth piece of pizza and usually complained of stomach pains after three. She wasn’t wanting to embarrass her son, but she also knew that curling up into a ball and moaning all night was not going to help in any quest for popularity.

She was weighing her options on what to say to him when her phone chirped. It was, of course, Ruby with a request for an update.

Ruby: So how’s it going? Have you two snuck off to make out yet?

Emma: If we had, I wouldn’t be answering you now would I?

Ruby: Testy. You’d feel better if you did. He’s hot. I know you are tempted.

Emma glared at the phone and then back up at the way that Aurora was laughing. It was clearly a staged laugh, as she was doing it in a way that seemed to highlight her low cut blouse and the cleavage that was inappropriate for chaperoning a trip. Hardly a prude, Emma was fighting back the urge to throw the table cloth over the woman. Or maybe it was the fact that she was pointing the rather ample chest at Killian for his benefit that bothered Emma so much.

Ruby: Are you there? Are the kiddos acting up?

Emma: Sorry I was watching something and couldn’t take my eyes away.

Emma dared another look over in that direction and felt her skin grow hot as he smiled in response to something Aurora was saying. Those dimples that she thought were so cute flashed in a way she wished was reserved for her. However, she was sitting there witnessing it and passing napkins over to the boys around her. To top it off she had dropped a dollop of sauce onto her sweater. Using water from her glass and her napkin, she had cleaned up the mess, but it now felt damp and stiff on her
Ruby: So who is flirting with him? That’s it, right?

Emma: Can’t you be wrong for once in your life? Your ability to read into situations is freaky.

Ruby: Who?

Emma: Aurora

Ruby: Oh. Her. I don’t like her.

That was the thing about Ruby, Emma thought with a laugh. Ruby was always blunt and did not pull punches. She offered no reasons for her dislike, though Emma clearly knew the background. Ruby and Aurora had gone to design school together. There had been some drama over a few similarly designed pieces and Aurora claimed innocence despite Ruby’s insistence that they were copies of her own work.

Emma: That doesn’t help. I have children to manage. I don’t need to sit here hating her.

Ruby: You’re actually jealous? You really do like him, don’t you?

Emma: Not helping.

Ruby: If you were to go to the restroom right now, would you have to walk by them?

Emma: No, but I think my locker is over there. Seriously? Are we in high school?


Emma: Who?

Ruby: One of the dads? Not one of the kids. That’s sick.

Emma: Jefferson is here.

Ruby: Perfect. He’s single too. Unlike Aurora.

Emma frowned as she looked over at the father of one of Henry’s classmates. The man was taller than most men and certainly handsome with his chiseled features. She had dated him very briefly after his divorce from his wife, but things ended pretty quickly when she realized he wasn’t ready for anything other than a casual fling and she wasn’t ready to be someone’s rebound. He was leaned over talking to his daughter, a pretty blonde who often competed with Henry for first chair among the trumpet section. Jefferson caught her looking at him and smiled warmly. She didn’t return the gesture and looked back at her phone.

Emma: Bad idea. I can’t fake it.

Ruby: Because you like Killian?

Emma: Because I’m not an actress.

Emma was not the only mother chaperoning the overnighter with the music students, but she wasn’t sure she felt that at ease with the other two women, including Aurora. Mary Margaret had once
pointed out that Emma tended to befriend other single women and men, as she was more comfortable with them than the other parents. Perhaps it was an age thing, as Emma was substantially younger than the other parents of Henry’s classmates. Sometimes she wondered if there was some truth to that, as she did find herself feeling a bit inadequate when she watched how organized and mature these other parents were with schedules and everything else.

Thankfully Killian was much better at that sort of thing. He had purchased matching t-shirts for the kids that had their names on both the front and back. Each chaperone was assigned four students to watch and even their snacks and meals were color coded. She got to know her group on the bus ride in Portland, ME where the group stopped for pizza before heading to a free concert by the state’s orchestra.

When Killian had proposed the idea, Emma wasn’t so sure that the boys in her group would sit still that long. However, he had created a visual scavenger hunt for them and they were keeping their eyes alert for certain instruments, signals, and cues. Being as competitive as boys that age could be, her four charges, including Henry, were bound and determined to find as many of the things on their list as they could.

It was during the third song that Killian switched seats with one of the students to Emma’s left and situated himself beside her. Grinning like he was the same as Henry and his friends, he leaned over and asked if she was enjoying herself.

“You shouldn’t be talking,” she hissed back at him. “You’re setting a bad example.”

“And you’re adorable when you’re jealous,” he countered, his voice low and breath warm against her ear. “I wasn’t even paying attention to her. When she was talking and asking me to tutor her son, I was thinking about you. I was thinking how I can’t wait to be alone with you.”

A grin crept onto her face that she quickly turned into a more sour expression. “Bad example.”

Even that slight reprimand did not dissuade his smile or his whispered attempts at making her join his relaxed state. When he noticed Phillip Jr. using time honored technique of yawning and stretching his arm around the shoulders of a girl in another group, he practically laughed aloud and pointed with his prosthetic hand to the sight. “They learn young,” he said. “But since his mother and her father are both chaperones, I’ll leave it to them to settle it.”

Her lips were in a firm line, but she could feel them shaking with the effort not to grin back at him. “Wimp,” she told him, rolling her eyes as he maneuvered similarly and rested his arm on the back of her seat. He wasn’t exactly hugging her to him, but the warms of his arm was clear against her shoulders. “Seriously?”

“What? I just needed to stretch, love.” He turned his face back to the stage and half closed his eyes as he listened intently to the music. She could not help casting a few glances at his profile, appreciating his strong jaw that she had a strong urge to run a few fingers along. However, she was not ready for the warning glances of the other chaperones or the disgusted expressions of the students. So she kept her hands to herself and tried to keep her attention focused on her four charges instead.

He behaved himself for the rest of the concert, only occasionally letting his hand drift a bit toward her. At one point his fingers brushed where her shirt started at her back and trailed upward on her neck. She didn’t shift right away, letting the pads of his fingers trace a path up under her ponytail. When Henry leaned over to ask a question, Killian pulled back just enough that he was no longer touching her.

It was not until the bus ride back to Storybrooke that he approached her again. The lights over the
seats were dim and there was no organized activity other than a few quiet conversations between seatmates. Henry had joined his friend Matt and the two were looking at screenshots on a cell phone of some new video game. She could hear the occasional words like power pack and extra lives drifting into the air as she counted off her four charges before taking a seat herself. Two of the moms were sitting together up ahead and another was already drifting off to sleep with a pile of coats as a pillow. Killian didn’t make a big deal of dropping down into the aisle seat next to her.

“That’s the hard part over,” he said, leaning over toward her ear conspiratorially. “Now we just keep them from killing each other.”

“And destroying public property, getting jacked up on sugar, or…”

“You are one of those glass half empty types, aren’t you, love?”

Her reply was lost in a yawn as she turned a bit sideways in the seat and tried to get comfortable. His knee sliding up under her bent legs was tempting as he pulled her legs into his lap and asked if that was more to her liking. She wanted to tell him she didn’t mind at all, but the thought of some 12 year old child catching sight of her snuggled up with the teacher and how that might lend itself to teasing for her son made her resist. “Not exactly covert there, Mr. Jones,” she said, poking a finger accusingly into his shoulder. “But you are comfy.”

His mischievous couldn’t be missed in the glow of the passing headlights as he pulled his wool coat off the back of the seat and covered both their laps with it. She said nothing, only stared as he hid from sight the fact that she was half in his lap. “You looked cold. I didn’t want to watch you shiver.”

She shifted again so that it was even less obvious and bit back a sigh as he dipped his hand along the curve of thigh. “So this date,” she said, keeping voice even despite the softness of her tone. “You want me to dress casually. Are we talking…”

“It bothers you to not be in charge, doesn’t it?”

“I like to know what is going on,” she protested. “That doesn’t make me a control freak.” She pouted, turning her head toward the window and the darkened landscape.

“I didn’t accuse you of being a control freak.” He chuckled, squeezing the bit of flesh just behind her knee. “Let’s just leave it at you should dress comfortably. You may need to be able to move a bit and not be hindered by tight material. Does that help?”

“Jeans and a sweater?” she asked skeptically.

“You will look lovely, no matter what.”
Chapter 13

Wow – over 100 reviews on Fanfiction. I’m so grateful and thankful for that. My next update may come on Saturday, as I’m headed on a little road trip to see The Dust Storm in Nashville with a friend. And next week I’m headed back to Nashville for a writers’ conference. But I promise some updates in the meantime.

Liam ignored the sound of the sea birds making their normal morning noises, his eyes comfortably closed and his arms wrapped around…a pillow. One eye opened and the other as he regarded the crumpled bed linens beside him without much surprise. Elsa, who had fallen asleep cuddled up next to him, was gone. He supposed she had tried to sneak out as quietly as possible since he was now holding a pillow instead of her, but still he felt a bit sick that she had felt it necessary to do so.

For all the cuddling, touching, and kisses between them the night before, he knew deep down that she was not ready to go farther than that yet. So he had kept his own desire at bay and simply held her as the light of the television offered the only real way to see her. While he was under no illusion that she was in some way inexperienced or innocent, he was picking up that she frightened very easily. She wasn’t exactly pulling away when he kissed her, even reciprocating a few times herself. However, she did tend to become a bit tense and her muscles tightened in preparation.

Lifting himself up to a sitting position, Liam blinked against the light coming in from the transom windows and saw the mug there on the coffee table with a post it note stuck to the outside. “Wasn’t sure when you’d be up, but I thought you could go for a cup. I left the grounds and water in the machine. Just press start. Thanks for the company and support last night. See you soon. XOXO, Elsa.”

It warmed him a bit to know that she had not dashed out in a panic, though he was certainly a bit concerned. He went ahead and hit go on the coffee maker before he pulled out his phone to text her and check on her.

Liam: Just checking to make sure you are well and safe.

He knew that if she was asleep she’d text later, but he in some ways hoped that her mind might be on him in some small way. His wait wasn’t long as she texted back.

Elsa: Sorry about running out. Anna and I have to meet with Regina Mills. Needed to discuss strategy.

Liam: No worries. Simply checking to make sure I had not scared you away.

Elsa: I’m tougher than you think.

***AAA***

The last student was picked up by 12:33 and despite Killian’s offer to buy her and Henry lunch, she kissed his cheek and told him that she needed to get ready for their date. Truthfully she was having one of the few selfishly vain moments in her life and grew concerned that he had now seen her sans makeup and with tangled and knotted hair that could not in any way be considered attractive. It had not helped that he called her adorable when she arrived at the breakfast table set up in the library that morning with her hair in a ponytail, a shirt that proclaimed her to be the world’s best mom, her cheeks pink and a bit of the mascara she had not gotten cleaned off the night before was smeared
under one eye. Thankfully she had caught that before too long, but still she had wondered how many people noticed. Henry called her out a moment later for smiling like an idiot.

“I am looking forward to it,” he told her just before Henry reached over from the passenger seat and bleated out a sharp note on the horn. “See you then.”

Henry was already pleading his case for a grilled cheese and soup from Granny’s, claiming he was starving and that he needed the energy for that afternoon and evening. She was not convinced by him, but the idea of not having to cook was more appealing so that was where they went. Granny greeted them first, her typical expression that laid somewhere between annoyance and amusement at someone’s expense. Henry had already grown above the woman’s shoulder and was receiving a hug while Emma got the look.

“Haven’t seen you in here in a bit,” she said accusingly as she half led and half dragged the still embraced Henry over to one of the tables. “You avoiding me?”

“Why would I do that?” asked Emma, shaking her head at the offer of a menu. “You have the best tomato soup and grilled cheese in town.” Her weak compliment did not even earn a smile as Granny barked the order over her shoulder.

Turning to Henry, she mentioned that she’d had a new video game installed and that he could be one of the first to try it out. After a nod from Emma he was off and away, earlier complaints that he was tired forgotten. Granny took the seat he had vacated and yanked the glasses off her nose to clean on the apron. “You’re not fooling anyone,” she said accusingly. “I know about the date.”

Sighing in exasperation, Emma frowned. “Okay I get that this is a small town, but you guys have to quit this. If I don’t tell you something, it might very well be because it’s not your business.”

“I’m not arguing with you over what is or is not my business, but I am going to tell you that you are not fooling anyone and offer my babysitting services. You know if Henry needs a place to stay or something overnight.” The woman was still holding those wire rim glasses out as she stared through the lenses for any speck of dirt. “I won’t even ask any questions.”

Emma lifted her right hand to her temple and rubbed, trying not to think of having a conversation with Granny about sex. “I appreciate the offer,” she said in an attempt to end that line of questioning. “I’ll…”

“Just keep it in mind,” she said with a wink as she pulled herself out of the seat. “You know that I love you and Elsa like my own daughters. I just want you to be happy. And I adore those Jones boys even if they do cause a little trouble from time to time. They are like sons to me. So you can certainly see why I want the four of you to be happy.”

Emma accepted the soda that a waitress she had never met before slid in front of her with a slight nod of thanks. “You do realize that as sweet as that is, it’s a bit incestuous?”

Granny’s laugh rang loud and pure in the diner, causing a few heads to turn. “You have a wicked mind, Emma Swan. I think that’s why I like you.”

***AAA***

Henry barely noticed when Emma left him at the loft, as David had pulled out some 1980s video game for the computer that had been remastered. He’d never seen such horrible graphics and was already enthralled by the tinny music and pixel images that David was proudly calling the best of the generation. Mary Margaret already had a big bowl for popcorn ready and was telling David that she
would order pizza a few minutes after she walked Emma to her car.

“You are changing, right?” Snow asked, her arms wrapped herself to ward off the cold and her lack of coat. “You look cute, but that’s not really a date outfit.”

Emma’s long hair was pulled back on the sides and braided until the golden strands met in the back in a soft waterfall of a ponytail. An asymmetrical white sweater clung to her form and a pair of black denim pants hid none of the curves of her backside or legs. She had paired the outfit with a tall pair of black boots and her favorite red jacket. It was as casual as she felt she dared even with his instructions. “He said to go casual.”

“What does Ruby think?”

One foot inside her car and her arm resting on its top, she glowered at her friend. “I can pick out an outfit by myself.”

Mary Margaret raised her eyebrows and silently waited for her friend to respond. It was what they all referred to as her teacher look, which always got her students to stop in their tracks or in some cases admit to wrong doing. David had told the others she had used on him a few times to get him to perform chores. Rumor had it that was how she got him to watch any Nicholas Sparks’ movie. Emma kind of believed it.

“She texted over suggestions and made me send her a pic,” Emma admitted, squinting her eyes closed so that she didn’t have to see righteous indignation staring back at her. “She is a designer. Or a waitress with a sewing machine and a dream. I had to get her advice after you spilled the beans about what I’m doing tonight.”

“I don’t keep secrets from friends. And she really okayed that? I mean you look fine, but it’s not really date material.” Her pixie cut hair flew up and down as she bounced in an effort to keep warm. “I know. Casual. I want details. I need to know what casual meant. Is it a movie? Are you playing pool? Or maybe horseback riding. That could be so romantic. David took me once.” The wistful expression of the teacher was an endearing sight, despite the cold air around them.

“I don’t know, but I’m thinking something less outdoorsy than horseback riding. Not only is it cold, but it’s dark. I’m not knocking the idea, but I don’t think that is his plan.” She looked skyward. “I’d honestly rather not speculate.”

Mary Margaret opened and shut her mouth. “That’s okay. I can be practical. Did you remember a breath mint? What about…”

Emma rolled her eyes dramatically. “I swear to God if you ask me if I remembered to bring a condom, I may have to go to therapy. I don’t talk about these things with you.” It was true that Mary Margaret was the more romantic of her friends. She was the one who suggested date ideas and helped to pick out the perfect gift for when you were dating a guy only two weeks and his birthday was the day after the second date. She was the one Emma curled up with and watched movies and waxed philosophical that romantic comedies were the reason she had unrealistic expectations of men. Ruby was the friend she talked about condom brands and logistics of spending the night with a guy without having the town see her walk of shame.

“I was going to ask about lip balm and shaving your legs, but now that you mention it…”

“Goodbye, Mary Margaret. Call if there is a problem with Henry.” Giving her friend a lackluster wave, she dove into the yellow bug and hoped that the heat would start working before she got home.
Elsa rolled over onto her side and folded the cover of the book back so that it was in half. She already knew that when Anna emerged from her bedroom that there lecture about needing to get some sort of tablet or reading device would commence. Having no objection to them in theory, Elsa was not looking for an argument.

“That one again?” Anna asked, bypassing the couch where he sister was currently residing and heading toward the dining area where the paperwork sat. “Shouldn’t we be talking about what Regina said? She’s not exactly the easiest to deal with and we need to put our heads together.”

“I needed a moment to clear my head,” Elsa said, yanking the blanket down from over the back of the sofa. “I have a headache.”

“Is that what you told Liam? That’s the reason you’re not going out tonight?”

Elsa turned the page in her book, sighing. “I get headaches. You know that.”

“Convenient,” Anna remarked. “You could come out with us. Kristoff and I are going to a sports bar to watch hockey. It should be fun. You need fun. Invite Liam and come on.”

Elsa burrowed herself deeper into the blanket. “I think it’s too late to invite him out. And I have a…”

“Headache. I get it. You said you did.” Looping a scarf over her neck, she grabbed her coat next and tapped her foot impatiently. “So come alone?”

“I’m fine here,” Elsa repeated, her eyes scanning the page. She tried to ignore the fact that her sister was staring at her, the silent version of Anna a new change. “Really, I’m fine.”

Dropping her own phone into her oversized purse, the younger sister placed one hand on her hip. “No, you’re not. You can tell me what’s wrong or not, but you’re coming with. Now get some shoes on and find your coat. Let’s go.”

Emma moved the pillow from one side of the couch to the other and then back again, stepping back to inspect her work. She was hardly the type to get nervous about a date. But the fact was that there were butterflies in her stomach the size of bats and that she had caught at least five times herself checking her phone and the one window that gave the best view of where she assumed Killian would park. She even heard something in the hallway outside of her front door and opened it thinking it was a knock. Her feet carried her to the door faster than she had planned, which made her worry that she would appear too anxious about this. Exhaling, she waved her splayed hands in front of her as if to rid herself of any bad energy, took another breath in, and placed her hand on the doorknob. He knocked again.

Maybe she wasn’t ready for this, she decided when she opened the door. Her last actual date where someone picked her up and drove her to a restaurant was with Walsh. That had ended with a confrontation from Zelena. She was not good at this, as her track record would indicate.

“Hi,” she said, having forgotten the more flirtatious phrase that she had been planning to use. She
had actually practiced it a few times in the shower. She wasn’t going to tell him that part.

“Hi,” he responded back, thankfully not outdoing her with his more extensive vocabulary. “I brought you this.” A single red rose in his hand was jutted out toward her as he smiled nervously. “I choked. I wanted to do something unique and then I ended up getting a rose.” His eyes crinkled adorably. “Forgive me?”

“I like roses,” she said, wondering if she was honestly going to forget how to talk because this was a date and not just hanging out. This was Killian. They had spent hours cuddled up together and talking about anything and everything. Just a few feet from where she was standing on shaking legs he had kissed her. She was not sure why giving this outing a name and label made it feel like she was going to pass out cold on the floor.

Relieving him of the flower, she waved it under her nose and smiled. “Let me get it some water and get my coat. Still not telling me where you are taking me?”

His laugh sounded a little more relaxed and relieved as he watched her retreat and he stood in the foyer of her apartment. “Not yet. You don’t get motion sick, do you? I know you did well on the bus, but I didn’t know if…” He looked down at his feet and turned a shade of pink that she had never seen on him before.

“I don’t think I’ve ever been asked that by a date before,” she teased, settling the flower into a glass and pulling her jacket off the arm of the chair. No need in telling him that she had placed it there after a few tries in other locations had seemed inadequate.

“I can’t believe I was about to discuss your possible propensity toward vomiting.” He chuckled, a bit more at ease. “And if I haven’t already told you, you do look lovely, stunning really.”

“Save it,” she said, slipping into her jacket before he had a chance to offer to help her. “If this goes well maybe we go on a date where we have to dress up. You can comment on my beauty then.”

He frowned in an almost obscene sort of pout. “And here I had hoped you would compliment my ensemble. I did spend a long time picking it out.” He spun slowly in place and she eyed the dark jeans that hung on his hips and flannel shirt that she would have previously turned her nose up at. His leather jacket was worn and looked soft, something she wondered if she would come to know under her hand or with her head on his shoulder or chest.

“Very handsome,” she offered, ushering him out the door as he laughed at her simple kudos.

“I know.”

***AAA***

Will was not a picky man in many areas of his life. He had never once complained about the grease at Granny’s or the fact that her yellow mustard jars boasted a name brand that had been replaced by a store one instead. When Anastasia had begun hinting about moving in together, he had not once complained about the long list of her wants and must haves in terms of their living accommodations. And even their wedding plans were along the same. He simply nodded, had a drink, and told her it was all a great idea. However, the one and only place he currently felt the need to assert his discernable palate.

“I want something more stout than an American beer,” he half whined when the waitress, a youngish woman who appeared to frighten easily, sat the towering glass in front of him. “I never order anything from the tap.”
The woman’s confused expression turned pleading as she spun to face Robin and Liam who were hiding grins. “That would be mine, love,” Liam said, pulling the cold beverage toward him. He had not ordered it either, but he knew that there would be no way of appeasing his friend without making the sacrifice. “The ponce is bloody difficult to understand.”

Robin accepted one of the lagers as Liam’s drink went to Will. The server gratefully ran back behind the bar and out of their way, probably already counting their table as a loss in terms of a tip. The three men soon forgot the issues of mistranslation and settled in to watch the latest match. His insulted palate forgotten, Will was cheering on his favorite team and ignoring the conversation attempts with the other two.

“You could at least tell us that you’ve gotten in a few practices, mate. Nobody’s heard you strum that bass in eons. Might do my nerves a bit of good to know that you have fallen completely out of practice.” Liam’s face pinched with the sourness of his drink and he placed it aside to remind himself not to drink from it again.

As the players on the screen over the left booth disappeared and were replaced by a car commercial, Will slammed the bottle down on the table with a thud. “Bloody hell, mate. I’ve practicing. More than you it would seem. You pluck a bass, not strum it, you git.”

Robin chuckled, raking a hand through his hair. “Stop being such a nervous ninny,” he told Liam. “Will’s always flown by the seat of his pants. Remember back in school? He’d never study and still come out brilliantly on the tests just with luck.”

“Oi, it’s a bit more than luck. I’ve got me talent and brain power working.” Will was right in one respect. He had never let the guys down when it came to music or performing.

“Not to mention your humbleness,” Robin noted, looking down at his phone. There was nothing covert about the glance and Liam’s pursed lips indicated that he wasn’t a bit happy about it. However, in the man’s opinion if Will could lose himself to the screen there, he could certainly exchange a few messages without rebuke.

Tapping the table under the phone, Liam called for Robin’s attention. “We will discuss that later,” he said, his voice deep and almost menacing to the point that even Will brought back around to face the two. Standing up, he was carrying himself to the bar when the anxious server reappeared with a bottle of a pale ale that was more in line with his tastes. Since she was clearly not a woman who was well versed on spirits and such, he was bewildered by this delivery.

“The blonde woman over there sent it,” she said almost apologetically, pointing to a booth where Elsa sat with her sister and Kristoff. If it had been a movie she would have been smiling and beckoning to him, but instead she was dragging a chip through what he could tell was guacamole and nodding mindlessly at the hulk of a man sitting there across from her. Her sister, on the other hand, was waving furiously and even half stood in the booth in case he hadn’t noticed. Giving a bit of a salute back, he muttered something to his two dining partners about good form and attempted to avoid the servers delivering loaded potato skins and beer lest he be wearing it.

“I take it that you are here for the hockey game,” he said when he got to the table.

“Kristoff used to play,” Anna supplied, her wide grin growing when she saw that Liam was watching Elsa more than either of them. “He’s a bit obsessed.”

Elsa’s smile, he determined, could only be described as tense when she looked up at acknowledge him and silently tilted her head to gesture his welcome. Kristoff was yelling at the television and then lowering his tone to explain some intricacy of the game to Anna, who humored him with a pat to his
forearm. “You got the drink,” she said, her face growing pink when she realized that was pretty obvious since he was holding it. “I didn’t want to disturb you since you were with your friends.”

“She’s like that,” Anna said conspiratorially. “When I told her to invite you out tonight she swore you already had plans. She is that way, always assuming.”

Giving her sister a pointed look, Elsa dragged another chip through the green colored dip and then laid it aside. “I’m right here,” she reminded her sister. “I just thought you might be too busy for a last minute invitation to watch a sport that I believe you weren’t that interested in last night.”

Aghast at her sister, Anna snatched the chip out of her hand and chomped down. “You should join us,” she said, ignoring Elsa’s quick shake of the head. “Kristoff would love to have some more male company around.” She dug her elbow into his side to illicit a quick agreement. “And I know Elsa likes spending time with you.”

Liam studied Elsa’s face, finding her smile and eyes to be hiding something. “I would enjoy it, no doubt. But I do have those two wankers to get back to and a match to watch. I do thank you for the drink though, Elsa.”

She let out a long sigh. “I saw that you had that awful stuff on tap. This is much better.”

“Aye, you know me better than you think.” He raked one solid hand through his hair, glad that his latest trim has left him with thick waves instead of the curly mop he used to have as a child. “The match is just starting and my mates seem a bit preoccupied. Perhaps we could have a drink together?”

Without bothering to gain a supportive smile from Anna, Elsa slides out of the booth and gestures toward the heated patio. There is something disconcerting about eating outdoors and feeling the heat of the strategically placed devices. However, it is quieter out there and much more comfortable. Than trying to talk over the various sporting events.

“Elsa,” he said when they dropped into two seats closest to the water. He can see Killian’s cottage in the distance, though that’s only because he knows the scape now. “I don’t want to push, love, but I feel like you might not want to pursue whatever this is. I’ll admit to having a bit of a fragile heart, but I’m a perceptive lad when it comes down to it. Have I done something to make you uncomfortable?”

Her hand gripped her drink tightly, so tightly that she feared she might break it. “You haven’t done anything, Liam. This is me. I don’t do fast or close all that well.”

“And we have moved in that direction rather quickly,” he mused, realizing that she was not yet looking him in the eye. “My apologies.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for,” she told him, looking almost tearful as she reached over to grab a napkin that she used to wipe the condensation from the side of the glass. “I do like you, Liam. And when I’m with you, I feel like you’re a great guy and I have fun. I like being with you.”

“I have a feeling there is but coming in here…” His brow furrowed and his hackles raised as he realized her tone was deliberately calm, a bad sign in such matters. “Bring it on, Elsa.”

“I am not sure I understand why you like me,” she said hurriedly. “God, that sounds so dumb. Liam, you’ve met my sister. She’s cute, funny, so much fun to be around, and has a million and one friends. I’m not like her.” She wrinkled her nose. “She’s always had guys falling all over themselves to date her. Even before she was old enough, she would get calls and beg me to tell our parents that the boys were calling for me.” Her face grew warm as she lifted her eyes to finally meet his.
“I can’t say that our circumstances are all that different in that regard, Elsa,” he said, breaking the momentary silence. “Killian is not quite as…” He paused for the right word. “Perky and optimistic as your sister, but he was always quite popular and much more the social charmer than I was. Perhaps it has to do with being the younger sibling, not bearing that responsibility that we always had to do. It took quite a while of my living without him before I realized that I was a person beyond just Killian’s older brother.”

She let her lips twitch upward in a bit of a smile, soft and unsure as she blinked back at him. “You know it does sound like we might have that in common. But for the record, I think of you as Liam.”

“Aye,” he said, matching her unsure smile with one of his own. “And I think of you as Elsa. And perhaps we have moved a tad bit faster than normal what with the molly coddling from the Widow Lucas, but I do quite fancy you, love. And I suppose that is a trait I have in common with my brother. I do tend to act quickly when I aim for what I want.” He reached out to where her hand was toying with the damp napkin, covering it with his own. “And as for why I like you, Elsa, I would think that is obvious. I’m not sure what is more remarkable, your wit, your talent, your beauty, your impeccable taste in drinking companions this evening, and your wonderful heart. I could go on with my list, but love, you do appear to be blushing under all this flattery.”

Her breathless laugh was barely heard over the noise from inside. “I wasn’t fishing for compliments, so you know.”

“I think you know just what you’re doing,” he chided back. “And if you wish me to be more…”

Her freehand reached to cover their entwined fist. “I don’t. I’m sorry I freaked out. Forgive me?”

“As a beautiful lass said to me, you have nothing to be sorry for, Elsa. And I do try to follow the cues of beautiful and intelligent women.” He winked, taking a swig from his drink. “But what do you say we let you set the pace. I don’t wish to ruin whatever chance we have at this because I was too hurried.” He tilted his head toward the door. “We could go sit with your sister and get a lesson for me on hockey. I suppose being so close to the border of Canada that I should learn about it.”

Pulling both her hands back, she sat quietly and thoughtfully. “And I was about to ask for a lesson on soccer. Or football is it?”

“Aye, it is that. I wouldn’t want those two blokes to insult you in some way. Will is a bit of a wanker and could fool most people into thinking he was raised by wolves most days, but if you think you can handle him.”

“As a very handsome man said to me earlier, ‘bring it on.’”

***AAA***

Killian pointed the jeep northward on the two lane road that ran along the coastline. “We’re in for a bit of a drive. Since you are the professional, love, will you man the radio? I trust your good taste.”

She eyed him suspiciously, her fingers gliding over the console buttons until she settled on a quiet jazz station. “Should I be worried that you’re taking me out of town?”

He had thought quite a bit about where to take Emma for their date, wanting to impress her and show her a good time. The usual suspects of dinner, dancing, or a movie had come up a million times. He’d read reviews and even googled such things as good first date options. None of the ideas were bad exactly, but none of them screamed out perfect for Emma. Liam told him more than once he was putting way too much pressure on himself, which was probably true. But when he thought about
what he wanted, all he could think of was the way she had smiled and even laughed freely as challenged him in that silly board game. She wasn’t the talent scout and mom. She was just Emma, which he found most beautiful of all the sides he had seen of her. If he could come up with a plan that would illicit such a smile, he was all in for doing what it took.

“Will you at least give me a hint?” she asked, watching him intently as if he was going to mouth his plan to her.

He pretended to contemplate it, beginning and starting his conversation as if he was truly trying to give her the most perplexing clues available. Even while keeping his eyes trained on the road, he could see her frustration growing as she combed her fingers through her hair and huffed. “You really wish to know?”

“Of course,” she said indignantly.

“I’m taking you to the boardwalk in Watkins,” he admitted, a bit deflated as he navigated around a turn. “I thought that we had such a fun time at your apartment playing that silly game that you might enjoy a bit of fun and activity such as that.”

Her eyes that had been scanning both the radio and his profile were now focused on him. “Are you…are you serious?”

“Bad idea?” he asked. “Because I do know this little seafood place…it’s nothing special, but the food is fresh and good.” He had selected the town nearly two hours away because it was one of the best locations for such activities and it was highly unlikely that any of the parents from Storybrooke would be there, which was a risk closer to home.

“Can we play skee ball?” she asked, her hopefulness shining through a bit. “Maybe even go-carts?”

“I was thinking we could race,” he confirmed. His grip on the steering wheel loosened. “Might make it a night of contests. Loser buys the funnel cake?”

“You’re on,” she said triumphantly, crossing her arms over her chest. “I’m good at games, you know? Comes from having a son who I taught to play video games. I am going to kick your butt.”

Her challenge was adorable, he thought as she continued telling him of her favorite games. When she asked him about one he didn’t know, her triumphant squeal of approval echoed in the jeep and her hand flew over her mouth.

“That’s why I wanted to do this with you,” he admitted as he pulled into one of the parking spots near the restaurant they had picked. No, it wasn’t lobster and caviar, but the seafood place had fish and chips that she swore she was going to try. She didn’t quite understand his reasoning, looking at him quizzically as she pulled her knit hat down on her head. “You are beautiful when you smile from having fun.”

She looked as though she wanted to say something else, to snark about his wanting this to be a cheap date or that he was letting the middle schoolers rub off on him. But she didn’t, smiling softly before she leaned over the console to kiss his cheek. “In case I forget, what with my victory dance and all later, thank you.”
Another chapter for you all! I don’t have any Elsa and Liam in this chapter, but don’t fret, as their story is not done. This one is Captain Swan all the way and a little Ruby, Mary Margaret, and Emma friendship, as well as a peek at Mary Margaret and David’s relationship.

Emma celebrated her victory over him without pretense that she was the least bit sorry or chagrinned. And to be honest, he found it adorable when she rhythmically shook her shoulders and swayed her hips to a tune that proclaimed her to be the winner. Rosy cheeks and a grin that made her eyes crinkle with delighted cuteness, he had already congratulated himself as she pointed out that she was living up to her threat of kicking his butt.

“You’re going to regret this, Killian,” she said when they approached an ancient game board that resembled a horse race. Each took a separate seat and rolled ping pong balls into holes painted with numbered points. The higher the point total the farther the horse lurched forward. He couldn’t help his own laughter as she cheered on her red clad horse in a way that made it seem she thought it could hear and respond. He could barely aim his own balls into their slots for laughing so heartily at her earnest pleading to the mechanical horse.

“I knew you could do it!” she coaxed the horse when her board lit up in her win. She spun on the metal stool to face him, her green eyes dancing with glee. “That’s another win for me. What’s my prize? So what do we play next?”

He didn’t ask if she was having a good time at the boardwalk, as it was pretty obvious when she began dancing in place after winning a stuffed unicorn. His hope to hear her laugh and to see her smile was multiplied by a hundred, as even he hadn’t expected her to latch onto his hand and drag him into a haunted house that seemed a combination of strobe lights and cheap Halloween costumes.

When the first goblin or ghoul jumped out and made him take a step backwards, she had gripped him tighter and offered to protect him from whatever laid ahead. He did suspect that she was just egging him on, but getting to be that close to her was not without benefits. The zombie looking creature that startled her right into his arms and had her burrowing her head into his neck had his utmost respect and gratitude. And the disembodied voice that told them to move along when that position led to a long and slow kiss that he wasn’t sure he wanted to stop, well, it deserved a stern talking to about timing.

Not all of their adventure was scary. She had ran for the go-karts and after three races around the track (she won two) they had taken her victory round in the same car with her situated between his legs and his chin resting on her shoulder. Skee ball turned into all out war with the two of them nearly neck and neck on tickets and winnings until his unexpected string of 100 point shots took him over the edge.

“You’re pretty talented,” she said, looping one arm over his neck and rising up onto her toes to brush her lips against his. The tip of her nose was brushing over his cheek when he felt her right hand snake down his chest find his fist full of tickets earned from his higher points total. Her lips back on his in an instant unfocused his attention on that prize and left his hand empty when she pulled away with a smirk. “Never underestimate my pickpocketing skills.” To his amusement she skipped away from him with both their booty of tickets in her hands, giving him a sly look over her shoulder as she disappeared into the small crowd there on a Saturday night.

He caught up to her a few moments later, noting on the way a photo booth that included a
computerized way of drawing a caricature of them. Maybe she would be up for trying that next, as it
would give them a chance to cool their competitive nature for a few minutes at least. He found her at
the tent looking structure where one could turn in the tickets for cheap and gaudy prizes, her upper
half leaned over the display case with such treasures as stickers and whistles for the sum of two or
five tickets. She had hundreds in her hand and was looking at a wall of inflatable souvenirs that
seemed to have caught her attention. He was just catching up with her when she pointed to one and
nodded emphatically at the teenager who was struggling to figure out which she meant.

“Found your prize, love?” he asked, sidling next to her and taking in the colorful and overwhelming
display of plastic paraphernalia. She grinned excitedly at him as the clerk struggled to retrieve her
selection from the second to top row. It might have been because the man next to her crowded her
space, but Killian liked to think that she wanted to be closer to him that was the reason she swayed
over to land with her body against his side. Whatever the reason, he took advantage and wrapped his
arm around her waist.

“It’s for you,” she said when the item she had selected appeared before them. The inflatable pirate
ship was a large item with its sails and flags filled with air. A pirate in a red coat stood at the plastic
helm complete with a peg leg, patch, hook for a hand, and a parrot on his shoulder. “You should
have a souvenir.”

He chuckled, giving it a once over. “You used my own tickets to buy me a prize? I was trying to win
you something.”

“Now we both have a prize.”

***AAA***

Henry popped the handful of kernels in his mouth and frowned at the screen on Mary Margaret’s
television. “What is that?” he asked, nose scrunching in a perplexed display.

“It’s a telephone,” David told him, snatching his own handful of popcorn out of the red bowl. “A
payphone actually. Before cell phones, those things were everywhere. You paid like a quarter for
them.”

Staring incredulously at the man, Henry couldn’t quite figure out why that seemed to be a little bit
off. “You mean you had to go and find one?” Why didn’t they just carry them around?”

“Yup. Could be a pain sometimes. You want to know something else? There was no texting. You
could only call someone up and talk.” He laughed at the horrified expression on the kid’s face,
making him feel a bit vindicated despite feeling older than dirt at the moment.

“Alright, Grandpa,” Mary Margaret said from her own seat on the couch. They had already had
dinner of pizza (Henry pointing out it was the second dinner of such in a row) and played a set of
video games that Henry had argued were so old and outdated that they were too easy. And then his
character died. With popcorn and sodas in hand, they were watching Goonies, one of her favorites
and what was turning out to be another history lesson in culture for the preteen. “One of my favorite
parts is coming up.”

The warm glow of the light in the kitchen and the screen of the television bathed the loft space in
shadows. While some might frown that Mary Margaret had her student there in her apartment, the
brunette teacher had known Emma for a long time and considered herself a pseudo aunt to the young
boy. Retro night seemed to be a good plan, though Henry had a bit of trouble grasping the outdated
technology and the reason behind it. She knew it was all for a good cause if Emma’s flushed and
excited expression had been any indication about it.
Ruby: Any word?

Mary Margaret: No and I’m taking that as a good sign that she’s too busy having fun to text.

Ruby: Wonder what they’re doing?

Mary Margaret: I doubt I want to know. But she’ll be by later to pick up Henry. Don’t you have your own date?

Ruby: Yes but I’m bored.

Mary Margaret: I’m not entertaining you on your date.

Ruby: You could call and say there is an emergency.

Mary Margaret: We did that the last two times you went out with someone new. They are going to catch on soon.

Ruby: No worries. I don’t date smart guys.

Mary Margaret: What happened to Graham? I thought things were going well.

David shot the teacher a warning look over Henry’s head and she sent a quick text to Ruby that they would have to talk later. She was curious, not just about Ruby’s current situation but Emma’s as well. Emma’s dating life usually consisted of her being dragged kicking screaming to some event of calling up their writer friend August to serve as a make do date for an industry event where such a thing was required. She knew that it had to be tough on Emma to even think about dating with her son in tow, but for some reason she had admitted that Killian did seem to be worth the risk. That did make the teacher’s heart happy to see her friend not only happy, but embracing the idea of that happiness too. It was probably a tenuous happiness as these things went, but Mary Margaret wasn’t going to complain yet.

She was about to reach into the red bowl for her own fist of fluffy kernels when her phone sounded with another text. Apologetically smiling at David, she swiped her finger over the screen with the expectation of some snarky comment from Ruby. Instead it was Emma asking if she would be shot for needing a little more time before picking up Henry, claiming the drive would take longer than she thought.

***AAA***

“I should have warned you about the length of the drive,” Killian said as she threw the phone back into her purse. “So much for my best laid plans.” Even though she was still smiling and even, if he dared hope, giddy over their fun and games of the evening, she was letting that worried look of motherhood cross her features. He could only guess that things like schedules and responsibilities were being listed in her mind as the sounds of mechanical and computerized games filled the air along with laughter and raucous conversation.

She shook her head vehemently, the blonde ponytail bouncing under the movement. “You are not going to take the blame for that after you have taken me on what is probably the most fun date I’ve ever experienced. I’m probably stroking your ego here, but I must say you surpassed my expectations of tonight. And I won’t even tell you some of the horrible things that crossed my mind when you said to dress down.”

“And what would those be?” he asked, walking them over to one of the seats on the boardwalk. It
was rather cold and a few snowflakes had fallen, but the lights and portable heaters that were used by
the city were keeping them almost comfortable.

“I wondered if you wanted me to volunteer in a soup kitchen or help you paint your house.” She
took a sip from the hot chocolate that he had braved a long line to bring back for her and nodded her
head when he offered her a bit of the caramel corn that he had transported in its bag by way of his
pocket. He held a single kernel in between his finger and thumb and teased her with it by dangling it
close to her lips and then pulling away. “Then I sort of wondered if you were working for the mob
and we were about to put cement shoes on someone.”

“Nothing illegal though.” His eyes caught hers as she reached out and pilfered some of the sticky
treat, popping it into her mouth before chasing it down with her chocolate drink. The slow smile that
spread on her face and the way her eyes seemed to have hints of gold in them as she darted out her
tongue to taste the chocolate was enough for him to haul her away from all the people and kiss her
properly against a backdrop of the lapping water and distant stars. “I do think I made you miss your
curfew though. I will have to apologize to Henry for that.”

Her laugh was tight as she brought the drink closer to her chest. “I’m not sure that I’ve ever had one
of those.”

That statement confused him, his eyes darting upward as his brain recounted the number of times he
had seen her sip on the sugary concoction with cinnamon rather than coffee. “I believe you are a bit
of a connoisseur of them, love. You and your boy are the two pickiest drinkers around when it
comes to your insistence upon cinnamon as a garnish.”

Laughing a bit easier, she raised the cup up in a sort of salute. “I didn’t mean this,” she said, “though
I do have to award you points for noticing the cinnamon. Not many people pay that much attention.”

“I didn’t realize we were keeping score.”

“Don’t be so literal,” she said, nudging into his shoulder. “What I meant was I don’t think I ever had
a curfew. So it’s funny to think of having one at this age.”

While they had both shared bits of their pasts over the past week or so, commenting about lacking
parental guidance and her still shock and surprise at staying in Storybrooke as long as she had, he
was aware that she had kept many of the more delicate and sensitive issues away from his ears. It
happened occasionally that a soft and sad look would come over her when she saw something
particularly sweet and sentimental between a parent and child. Though it could have been that she
was reminded of Henry’s younger years, he realized that she was thinking back upon her own
childhood. He had similar tales of abandonment, but the fact that he had Liam took away much of
that sting. “They are a pesky tradition,” he commented. “But in all seriousness I do hope that Henry
is not too worried about your whereabouts or upset with your being out with me.”

“I think your biggest worry there is that he would be jealous of this place,” she laughed. “He would
have a blast. If he knew that we spent our first date here, he’d probably start persuading me to let him
date already.” Her eyes lit up again talking about the child she had raised, her pride in him evident
and on display.

“I will have to do something to make it up to the lad for not only depriving him of his mother for the
evening but not including him on the outing. But I can’t say I’m all that sorry to not have to share
your attention this evening. I’ve enjoyed getting to see this side of you. I think it might not be one
you let many others see.”

She blushed under the tender and yet intense gaze, choosing to take another sip before answering
him. “I don’t usually do this sort of thing.”

“Play games? Because this is now the second time we have had such fun.” His tone was teasing, but there was a softness there that actually encouraged her to share what it was she meant. Taking out the humor and sarcasm was a scary concept.

“I’ve already told you I am a master at winning games,” she said, keeping her own tone light. “I just meant I don’t usually do these kinds of things just for fun. I am usually busy with work or Henry or trying to get ready for something with work or Henry. When I take time to do something for me, that’s when things usually fall apart. So while I’m having fun with you, I’m expecting to go back and find out my son has a broken bone or our apartment burnt down or flooded or something.” She laughed. “Karma works that way.”

His teeth shone as he smiled and looked out in the direction of the water. “I’m not sure that’s how karma works, Emma. You’re allowed to have a good time. It’s actually encouraged, you know?” Balancing the package of caramel corn between his knees, his raised an eyebrow to ask permission before taking a sip of her drink. “And I must say, again, that I rather fancy this side of you. You are quite beautiful when you let go and laugh.”

She ducked her head a bit in disbelief that he would find such a thing attractive. “Maybe our next date could be a comedy club. Lots of laughter there.”

Passing her back the cup, he grinned. “Are you asking me out on a second date, Ms. Swan?”

Her hand closed over his and she gifted him with a thoughtful pursing of her lips. “I assumed you were going to ask me out again,” she said with a falsely modest sincerity. “Isn’t that what this is leading up to, Killian? The compliments? The noticing that I like cinnamon? The letting me win? You want to go out again?” She shivered as a blast of wind broke through the heaters and past the intermittent walls. He looked at her sympathetically and hugged her to him.

“You seem to think I have dubious reasons for wanting to spend time with you, love, but I suppose you have a point. I would enjoy spending more time with you. And if you would like a comedy club, I will find one and get us tickets. After all, I do have a point to prove too.”

Taking a page out of his book, she grabbed some of the kernels out of the bag and popped them into her mouth. “What would that be?”

“That karma doesn’t work like that.”

***AAA***

The snow had begun to fall more steadily when Emma saw the welcome to Storybrooke on the horizon. The ride back had been a relaxed version of the other events of the evening, both challenging each other to silly road trip kinds of games and trying to list all 50 states in alphabetical order. The fact that Killian, who had lived more of his life outside the country, had named 38 before messing up compared to her 26 was something she was not going to mention to anyone.

“I truly don’t mind,” he told her as he flipped on the windshield wipers to brush back some of the frosty white flakes. “My jeep is better equipped and it will take just that much longer for you to gather your car and drive to Mary Margaret’s loft.”

She shifted in her seat, considering his offer. The very fact that the heater on the jeep was already on and running was reason enough to say yes. Her old yellow bug would still be sputtering out heat in bursts and not even warm by the time she had fetched Henry and returned home. But still she
wondered if it was the most prudent decision to make since she was not sure she wanted Henry to see her coming home from a date with Killian. And leave it to Killian, he read her mind.

“You don’t want him to see us? Or you don’t want Mary Margaret to see us?”

Her head lolling to one side and one shoulder raised, she scrunched her face. “Well…”

“I understand,” he said a bit reluctantly. “But can I point out that she certainly knows that I was a part of your date night and I believe Henry does too.”

“I’m aware,” she said, her hands going in front of her face. “Okay, it’s stupid, but here it is. I was just thinking that usually a date ends with a good night kiss. And if we pick up Henry…”

“Ahhh…” he said, nodding slowly. “We could rectify that I suppose. I could kiss you good night before we pick the lad up. Or we could be quite bold and send him inside your place before I have that honor.” He sounded so nonchalant, as though he were coming up with a business plan rather than talking about a kiss. She wondered if he was trying to negotiate.

“You are persistent,” she said, her hand pulling at her seatbelt. “I kind of like that.”

His eyes stayed on the road, but the small smirk was enough to make her realize that he knew exactly what she was doing. “Or we could be really bold and end the date with a handshake.”

She turned her head fast to stare at him, her jaw lowering as she realized he did not seem to be joking until peals of laughter rang out that he had been trying to hold in unsuccessfully. “Jerk,” she said, slapping his shoulder. “I think you owe me a kiss. The winner was supposed to get a funnel cake, but we didn’t get to the stand before it closed. So I think that my prize should be a kiss.”

“Oh you do?” he asked, obviously noticing that she was being more flirty than usual. She was normally a subtle version of this part of herself, but the very fact that she was asking for affection made him think about pulling the jeep over to properly give her everything she could possibly ask for and more. Yet there was her son to think about and the worsening weather that they had luckily gotten just ahead of to miss the brunt of it. “Well, fair is fair, love. I’ll have to pay up. Though it might be a huge inconvenience.”

***AAA***

Mary Margaret bent and picked up the last of the clean bowls from the dishwasher, adding it to the stack on her counter as David wiped up the old plank table that she had repurposed for her dining room. It was probably a little on the feminine side with the pastel colored paint she had chosen and the mismatched parsons chairs each with floral details, but it was a reflection of her true self. The loft was her first space that was truly her own. She had her bedroom downstairs with screens she had hung with David’s help to block it off from the rest of the space. Upstairs there was a bed for guests, a desk for her computer, and a space for her crafts and teaching projects.

Resting a hip on the edge of the counter, she watched him tuck the chairs under the table and center the flowers just as she had asked him to do a dozen times in the past. He did look at home there, despite the faded blue denim and sweatshirt of some team or rock band that she didn’t even recognize. She’d been to his place before. While hers was practically a garden with florals and live plants on most surfaces, his was more of a mismatch of leather and comfort. Everything in his place was oversized where hers was more delicate. His books did not just rest on shelves, but found their way to every available surface. It was not rare to find that there were stray coffee cups with the remnants drying or a forgotten list of things that no longer made sense written on the back of a bill that he never quite remembered if he paid without doing a little research.
“You zoning out there?” he asked, breaking her daze with a little hip bump as he stepped around her to finish putting away the dishes. “I know we wore Henry out, but are you tired too?”

“I was just thinking,” she said, turning her attention to the silverware that needed to be sorted. “Do you really think that we should…”

“I wouldn’t have asked if I didn’t think it was a good idea,” he said with a shrug. “I know you’re traditional, but living together isn’t a bad idea. The lease is coming up on my place so I either have to re-sign it or find another place. That made me think that maybe we should be talking about this together. Most nights we are at my place or yours.”

He had a point, she thought, lining up the spoons to fit in their slot. Yes, they did spend most nights together, waking up in the same bed and sharing late nights together in intimate embraces. Living together was the practical thing. They would save money and time. Their belongings would all be in one spot and there would not be those awkward moments of finding out that one of them had forgotten a toothbrush or even underwear. It had evolved to the point that they both had a drawer at the other’s place, but that seemed both physically and emotionally small in comparison to the idea of official cohabitation. But she didn’t want practical. She wanted romantic. She wanted a proposal with flowers and candles, not a mention of a lease coming to its end while washing dishes.

“You make a good point,” she said reluctantly.

He seemed to have at least realized she was not totally on board with the idea at the same time her cell phone went off to alert them that Emma had arrived. Leaning awkwardly to get the best view of the street parking from the window, one leg in the air and her hands on the sill, she ignores his request to talk about it more. She instead busied herself gathering Henry’s jacket and backpack, as well as some bag for Emma that she said were things she had found and wanted her to have.

“He’s down there,” she screamed in a whisper to him, frowning when he didn’t mirror her enthusiasm. “Don’t you think that’s sweet?”

He nodded absently, handing her the comic book to put in Henry’s bag and wondering how to wake the kid up without getting slugged because he appeared to be restless with a tendency to throw his arms about in his sleep. Her frustration over his lacking enthusiasm was apparent, but she ignored him as she ran to the door.

Emma reached the top of the stairs at the same time the teacher threw back the door. The two women embraced with both looking over the other’s shoulder to see what was going on without asking. Disappointed, she frowned and simply said, “Killian?”

“Down in the jeep keeping it warm,” Emma said, giving a short wave to David. “Being a gentleman.”

David helped gather Henry for her and sort of pushed on his shoulder until he walked her direction, a sugar, carb, and slumber caused stupor that made him sort of weave and fall into his mother more than hug her. It took both women to put his coat on and David pulled the cap on his head and pulled his gloves on as the boy’s jaw cracked with a yawn.

“Thank you again for this,” Emma said, catching Henry from sleep walking over the edge of the landing by looping a finger through his belt loop. “I’ll call you later?”

David was faster than Mary Margaret at answering. “I’m looking forward to it.” He grinned wildly. “We totally need to catch up on your date. Like are you going out again? Where did he take you? What did you eat? Was there any hand holding?” His imitation of Mary Margaret was perfectly in
sync, but it did not earn him any points with the teacher.

“Text when you’re home?” she asked, giving one more hug. “I want to know you’re safe.”

***AAA***

Ruby was the first one to stop by Emma’s apartment that Sunday, bringing Henry the latest comic book that she had seen at the drug store. It was a bribe, but since she had called twice and received no answer, she was a bit desperate for conversation. With Henry occupied, Ruby disappeared behind Emma’s bedroom door and threw herself crosswise onto the bed.

“Did you get new sheets?” she asked, her sunglasses that seemed out of place with 10 inches of freshly fallen snow on the ground were perched on top of her head. “These seem like new sheets.”

“They aren’t new,” Emma said, her back against the headboard and legs crossed under her. In front of her was her iPad and an angry email from Regina, as well as two newspaper articles she had written about Elsa and Anna’s performance. They weren’t exactly negative or positive, but Regina was upset and that meant it was a priority on a Sunday afternoon.

“I’ve never seen them,” she mused, reaching out and running a hand over the material. “Did you change your sheets because of him?”

“No,” came the indignant response from Emma. “It was a date. I don’t sleep with every guy who asks me out.”

“Unlike me?” Ruby asked, a resigned sigh escaping her chest. “We’ll get back to you and the hottie music teacher in a minute. I need to talk about me right now. Can I be the mess right now?” Ruby’s dark lashes fluttered as she grabbed one of Emma’s throw pillows and hugged it tightly to her chest.

Dropping the article that she had been distractedly reading, Emma nodded. “You’ve got 10 minutes to break down. Five minutes for me to clean you up. And then I have to go and save my job. Okay?”

Ruby bobbed her head once, rolling to her side with the pillow still tightly clutched. “Do you think there is something wrong with me?” she asked after a few false starts. “I mean seriously?”

Emma tilted her friend as she looked curiously at the woman on her bed and assessed the normally over confident friend. For what seemed like one of the first times ever Ruby looked almost vulnerable and insecure as she stared back. “I’m not sure that asking me that question counts since I’m hardly normal, but you seem the same as always to me. What’s going on with you? Why are you asking this?”

“I had a date last night,” Ruby said as if that was some sort of revelation. She was never one to be without companionship. “You know Billy from the garage? Cute, kind of quiet?”

“I know who he is, but I’m trying to figure out what happened to Graham. I thought things were going well there.”

“Billy asked me out. He’s nice. I know I don’t usually go for nice, but he’s nice.”

Emma nodded slowly. “I get it. He’s nice. You gave him a chance.”

Ruby rolled her eyes as if she hadn’t just said the same thing. “You know I like first dates. The mystery. The anticipation. The variety.” She groaned and clutched the pillow tighter. “So when he asked I was looking forward to it. He’s kind of cute. Then we’re eating chicken parm and drinking wine. I was kind of bored with the conversation. You know it all seemed so tired and so done. How
many times can you talk about your favorite movie or where you vacationed as a child? Seriously? I even tried to get Mary Margaret to help me out and get me out of the date. She didn’t. So I turn back to him and he said, ‘I never thought you’d go out with me again.’ Again? As in we’ve out before! I forgot, Emma! I date so many men looking for Mr. Right that I freaking lost track. What if I had slept with him? What if I realized that during sex?”

“Okay,” Emma said with a practiced patience for her friend’s outbursts. She was used to Ruby’s freak outs. “So you didn’t remember. I guess he didn’t leave that good of an impression.”

“I can’t blame the guys,” Ruby said as she rolled onto her back again and groaned. “There are two options here. I’m losing my mind and memory or I am dating too many men. I need help, Emma. Don’t Mary Margaret me and give me lectures. Be Emma. Tell me what to do!”

“Why do you think I know what to do?” Emma asked incredulously. “I have no clue.”

*Thoughts?*
Chapter 15

Another chapter and still not much Elsa/Liam. I promise big things for them in the next chapter or two. However, there is some Captain Swan and a bit of Captain Cobra.

Liam arrived back at the cottage long before Killian had the night before, but he was much more bleary eyed than his brother when the two went for what was supposed to be a morning run along the waterfront yet didn’t happen until late afternoon. Though both men liked to keep in shape and spent a fair amount of time working out, it was rare for the two of them to spend any substantial time together doing such activities. Perhaps it was the rigidity of a morning schedule of physical activity that reminded them both of naval days that kept them from it, but either way it was rare.

“So it was worth the effort?” Liam asked, his legs pumping as he ran in place and allowed his brother to retie his shoe. “She enjoyed herself?”

“You ask that as though you wish to take credit for it,” the younger of the brothers accused. The sun was practically blinding off the snow that was banking along the path. In London the snow was rare, but it usually turned to a gray and ugly slush soon after it fell from the sky. Their sneakers were already damp from it and both had stopped on occasion to shake the white flakes from their heads. He tried not to think of the kiss that he and Emma had shared the night before just outside her apartment building as Henry was already inside and on his way to bed.

The flakes were falling steadily and as his eyes closed he could see one of the snowflakes fall along Emma’s lashes. There was something magically pure about a kiss in the fresh falling snow that had made its way into his very core as his mouth closed over hers and her lips moved in a slow pattern against his. The warmth of her breath on him and the way her hand splayed over his chest and the other toyed with the hair at the nape of his neck warmed him with feelings he did not want to dare name or even consider. He could taste the sweetness of the chocolate and spiciness of the cinnamon that he wondered if he would ever taste again without thinking of her. Her eyes stayed shut as they broke away, a sigh on her lips that seemed to tremble as she finally smiled at him and thanked him for a wonderful date.

“Bloody hell, we’ll never get our rates up if you stop to reminisce every few meters.” Liam broke out into a steadier pace and gave no chance for his brother to do anything but speed up along the route. It was not that Killian was slower, just that Liam used his head start and longer legs to his advantage.

When they finally did stop, Liam looked at the blinking neon sign and groaned. “Granny’s okay with you?”

“It sounds inevitable in this town.”

***AAA***

Henry smiled at his mother when she emerged from her bedroom a bit later, leaving Ruby and the newly arrived Mary Margaret to hash out some of the finer details of dating when one woman wanted commitment and the other wanted nothing of the sort. Looking world weary and a bit agitated, the blonde mother flopped onto the couch next to her son and squinted at the scene on the television.

“You spent all your points on a crossbow?” she asked. “Why not the machete or the semi-automatic?” So what if none of the parenting books that she had read even mentioned playing video games with your child, Emma was happy that he still wanted to do such things with her. “You aren’t
going to get to level 18 like that.”

“I spent the majority on magical potion points, but the crossbow was a good decision. It has more accuracy than the gun and goes more distance than the machete. You should consider it for your avatar.” He said all of this without a single glance in her direction.

She considered telling him to blink, but instead she grabbed the second controller. “What about a round of that racing game with your mom? I could go for a little competition.”

Henry pressed a few of the buttons on the controller and sent the man on the screen through a hallway while expertly dodging flying objects and dangers. His own body shifted and jerked as if that might help the onscreen character do the same. “Is that your way of saying you want to talk about something major?”

He was her son, she thought with a wry laugh. She too was usually suspicious and wondered if she was reading people right when they were being nice to her. “I actually just wanted to play the game, but if you’re too busy…”

Considering the request, he finished saving his game and sent the whirring machine back to the title menu before selecting another of the games. “I guess I can fit you in,” he said. “It’s after 4 and you said no trumpet practice after 4 on Sundays. Something about being able to show your face in the mailbox area without having to apologize for the noise.” Thankfully he did not seem too offended by this.

“You get plenty of practice time with your teacher and at other times. Not to mention there are those finger exercises you could be doing.” Her sock covered feet rested on the table, earning an eyebrow raise from her son who usually was told not to be that comfortable.

“Speaking of Mr. Jones,” he said slowly, his lips quirking up into a smile that seemed older than his years. “Did he say anything about my chances at the audition? Last night I mean.”

Lips pursed as her yellow race car slid a bit on the first curve, she avoided the blatant goading by her son with her usual weapon of sarcasm. “You do realize that it was a date, right? I don’t typically discuss you and your talent on a date.”

“But he’s my teacher.” Henry swept his car in front of hers and gained the lead. “He didn’t have anything to say about me?”

She bore down on the controls and attempted to make up some ground. “It was a date, Henry, not a parent teacher conference. I think you were mentioned twice. Once when I said you would have enjoyed where we went and the other was about picking you up from the loft. Sorry but we had better things to talk about than you and the trumpet.”

Tongue sticking out the side of his mouth, Henry concentrated all his energy on the screen. “Like what? Love?” he asked, eyes shining with a combination of mischief and maybe an inkling of disgust. “That’s what people talk about on dates, right?”

“What kind of dates have you been going on, kid? Is there something I should know? No, we talked about a lot of things. Boring things. Adult things. Not about you or about love as you put it.”

He nodded as though he expected that answer. “So you’re not in love with him? See Violet says when people are in love that they think about each other a lot and spend a lot of time talking about all sorts of stuff. She said that her father’s been dating someone so she knows what she’s talking about.”

Looking at her son’s self-important expression as he continued the course around the race track,
Emma groaned. “And who is Violet? Do I know her?”

“She’s in my French class at school,” he said as though she should have guessed. “She’s just a friend.”

“And you two are getting close?” Emma queried, her eyebrow arching upward in her best silent glare. “Close enough that you’re discussing your parents’ dating lives? I hope you’re including your father’s dating on this too. His is more interesting than mine usually.” She laughed in what she hoped was not a bitter way, as she did try hard not to show her disillusionment toward him and his habit of falling hard and fast for women. Having been the subject of that quick and immediate affection, Emma did have a hard time believing any of his relationships to be the real deal.

“Mom,” Henry said, pulling out her three letter moniker into multiple syllables. “There’s something I need to tell you there, but not until later. I noticed that you didn’t deny that you’re in love with Mr. Jones.”

“Henry, Killian and I just went on our first date last night. We are talking about going out again, but seriously, kid, nobody’s talking love here. I know you aren’t that used to my dating, but it’s not all romance and flowers like in the movies.” She tried to ignore his brief glance away from the screen to the rose over on the table. “Dating is about getting to know someone. That’s it. Killian seems like a nice man and we have some things in common. We even had a good time last night. So yes, we might go out again. Does that bother you?”

The lead of the little blue car that was Henry’s racer lengthened substantially as he all but pulled away from his mother and the rest of the pack. “I like him,” he agreed. “He’s cool for a teacher.”

“I suppose he is.”

***AAA***

Emma finally got an opportunity to talk with Elsa and Anna about their Friday night performance on Monday morning in her office. Both women sat looking rather contrite as Emma explained that doing such things was not against their contract, but did not bode well for the situation either.

“Why would Regina care about such a small thing?” Anna asked. “It’s not as if we went on tour or something.”

Closing her eyes briefly, Emma tried to will away the crick in her neck from having slept uncomfortably on the couch after Ruby and Mary Margaret had commandeered her bedroom for their deep discussion of commitment and relationships. After they had both pounced on her for more details of the date with Killian, she had feigned a headache and left them to their Cosmo like discussion in peace. The retreat to the couch was not all bad, as she, Henry and Killian hate watched a show together with text message commentary and the two adults even had a brief conversation after she had dared to insult one of his favorite characters. However, sleeping there on the couch even after Ruby and Mary Margaret retreated meant that she had slept at an odd angle. She was paying for it now.

“I don’t doubt your intentions,” Emma said, pressing her fingers into the sensitive flesh under her hair. “But I know Regina. This was not in her plans or even her suggestion. You’re going to have to do your best to appear like you’re sorry. I’m going to have to pretend like I knew about this.”

Shooting a worried look to her sister first and then to Emma, Elsa looked ready to either cry or scream in anger. “Zelena arranged it.”
Scoffing at the name of the other boss of the company, Emma tried to find a way to explain it to these two young women. “That’s not going to win you any points when it comes to Regina. She’s not a fan of anything that her sister proposes, especially when it comes to her artists. I’ll deal with it though. Looks like we’re going to try to release your first single next week on download. I’m sure that Regina’s got some ideas about a few local shows for you.”

“I still don’t see why this was such a bad idea.” Anna stubbornly stomped her foot on the floor. “We got publicity.”

“Publicity,” Emma said, pointing at the newspaper article, “that called your singing strained and in need of auto tuning at parts.”

“It said that?” Elsa asked, worrying her bottom lip between her teeth. Her eyes that had previously seemed conflicted were brimming with tears.

“Elsa, it’s not horrible, but this is why you need to clear these things with me. We need to make sure that the locations are good. We need to include the band and check on acoustics. You need me there and a publicist to deal with media.” Emma tempered her tone to sound comforting, but it was clear that Elsa was in panic mode. “You are incredibly talented, both of you. But you’ve not been in this business long enough to know this stuff. So trust me. Confide in me. Talk to me. Don’t hide this stuff.”

“We knew you were busy with your son,” Anna defended, giving her sister’s arm a squeeze. “And so we didn’t want to burden you with all this. We thought it was a good idea. I’m so sorry. We’re both sorry. You’re going to forgive us, right? I mean, this won’t ruin our friendship or the contract? You aren’t going to sue us, right? I don’t even know how that would work. Would it be like Judge Judy or something? I don’t even know how that would work.”

“It’s going to be fine,” Emma said, feeling a bit breathless with the verbal onslaught of Anna’s stream of consciousness. The woman was beautiful and talented, but she was a bit exhausting. “I’ll take care of it.”

“How? Regina is going to be upset, isn’t she?” Elsa asked. That was the big question. Regina was known for dropping acts she saw as troublesome or not worth the effort. She had on occasion suggested that acts look for other labels strictly because she was not interested in representing those not serious about their work or known for being divas.

“Leave it to me,” Emma consoled lightly. “Just promise me that if Zelena or anyone has some major idea for you that you’ll let me know. I don’t need to be blindsided.”

***AAA***

For a music classroom, Killian’s class was pretty quiet on Monday afternoon as they took a multiple choice test asking them to identify various instruments and musical notations. While he appreciated the break, he had to admit that the silence did seem to give way to thoughts of Emma that probably were not all that wholesome for the setting. He wasn’t too proud to admit he had texted her a few times that day, careful not to play up the attention too strong. Thankfully he responses were pithy and flirty, which was making it easier to cope.

“Mr. Jones,” one of the students from another class said, knocking softly on the partially open door. “Mr. Gold asked that you come by his office during your planning period.”

He thanked the gangly boy with a nod and smile, wondering why he was thanking someone who was acting as an agent for the grim reaper. The school’s principal was hardly a man for social calls
and never one to bring someone in with a compliment. It had to be bad news with a confrontation. He supposed it was inevitable what with him essentially taunting Neal’s warning and continuing to build on his feelings for Emma. The older man had laid down so many rules even at the first day of orientation that Killian knew it was only a matter of time before he was caught breaking one. That was certainly the case when it came to Emma. Henry was his student and she was a parent. Even schools with liberal policies would frown on it.

Dating Emma was certainly a risk, even if they didn’t necessarily flaunt it in front of the whole town. Dates out of town or clandestine locations would only go so far. They could sneak away for weekends or even park blocks away from each other’s homes, but it would still just be a temporary fix. At some point Mr. Gold would confront him.

What was the solution? He could quit his job and find another, perhaps in a school nearby or even teaching music lessons through one of the shops. But that did seem a bit extreme for a situation where they had only been on one date and shared a few kisses. Still he didn’t like the alternative of ending things over the threat.

It seemed odd to think that he was about to have to fight for a job that had been a fall back for him. His musical ability had put him on a fast track for a career in that industry. It was something that Milah had pushed for all along. She had even admitted one night that she had fallen in love with him based on his talent before really getting to know him. She was in love with his potential, he realized a bit too late. Emma seemed different, as she was willing to accept him as the teacher who had given up on dreams of more. She did not seem to view that life as one of failure or even settling.

He was still mulling this over when he found himself in front of that door 45 minutes later. Sitting there in a chair across from a man who seemed to wear a sneer as his natural expression, he felt like he might vomit from the thought of having to defend any of it.

Mr. Gold’s hair was a bit longer than most men his age would wear it, graying at the temples but still thick and flowing. He seemed to move with an elegance and style that was well beyond the means of a man of his position. However, Killian knew that the school was only one part of his career. The man also owned the town’s pawn shop that specialized in expensive antiques and one of a kind items rather than the run of the mill merchandise. Nobody knew exactly how many, but Mr. Gold was only the landlord of a great many rental properties in Storybrooke. His hands were in many things, as was his nose it seemed.

“You’re quite the popular teacher, Mr. Jones,” the man said getting up from the massive oak desk to walk to a nearby credenza. His assistant restocked the items there frequently, including an always hot carafe of coffee and a few bottles of Pellegrino. In the morning there were buttery croissants and chopped fruit. The afternoon arrangement included a cheese tray with roasted grapes, hard salami, and wheat crackers. Potential donors to the school were offered things from this stash, but Killian received no such invitation.

“I’ve been here for a short time now.”

“Yes, and I often hear how the students adore your classes. Each semester there is concern that not all of them will get into your more advanced ones. That must make you feel quite good to know that you are so appreciated.” When Killian said nothing, he sauntered back to the desk and picked up a printed copy of an email as though

“My son has some concerns,” the man began, looking down at a single page email purely for effect. “His son, Henry, is one of your students.”

“Aye, in my beginning band and orchestra class,” Killian answered, unsure if the man could even
pick Henry out of a lineup after what Emma had told him.

“And from what I hear you’ve been spending quite a lot of time with him lately?” He formed this as a question though it was clear he probably had surveillance reports of just how much time.

“Henry’s auditioning for the state honor band, which is scheduled for next week. I have been offering him some tutoring in that regard and helping him prepare for it. I included that in my monthly plans that I submit to you so I hope there is no issue there.” He tacked this on with the hope that he could lessen the blow of whatever was next, as he was not naïve enough to believe that the man was only concerned about Henry.

“My grandson’s schedule with music isn’t exactly the most pressing of the concerns, but my son would prefer that he have other outside interests. He seems to think that perhaps you are spending your time with Henry to somehow grow closer to his mother.” Mr. Gold stopped pretending that he was reading this information from the page and smiled in that sickeningly sweet way that he normally did. “It’s clear that Ms. Swan has spent a bit more time here than normal what with her chaperoning and a few occasions that people have said she was around after school.”

“To pick her boy up,” Killian reiterated.

“Yes, well, that doesn’t usually include inordinate amounts of time inside the classroom. Henry’s a bright boy. I’m sure he would be able to find his way to his mother’s car.”

The point was clear that the older man was waiting on Killian to admit to some impropriety in the band room. However, it was not something that was entirely true. They had not misbehaved on school property at all, especially with Henry just steps away. “I suppose you would like me to speak to her about that?” Killian probed, not really sure what the man’s angle was at this point. “Is it not considered appropriate for a parent to pick up her child by walking into the school and retrieving him?”

Mr. Gold’s long sip added to the tension of the moment as he eyed Killian over the rim of his cup. Finally he set it in place and curled his hands into a near fist. “I don’t think I have suggested any such thing,” he said in a fake pleasantness. “You seem quite defensive about this conversation. Are you in some way offended? Have I struck a nerve?”

***AAA***

Emma sprinkled a bit of the chili powder into the pot and then stirred with a vigorous turn of her wrist, quizzing Henry on his vocabulary words at the same time. The air of apartment was a spicy and alluring scent that included fresh bread in the oven and the sauce of the chili bubbling away on the stove. It was hardly a culinary feat, but it was comforting and warm on a cold nearly spring evening. Henry had asked if they could have hot dogs as well, which she was going to prepare next.

“I think that’s all of them,” Henry told her, peering into the spiral bound notebook that he used to write the words and definitions. Deciding that the assignment was complete, he closed the notebook and tossed it aside as he watched his mother seem to lose something in the kitchen and then find it again. “So what’s the deal? Who’s coming to dinner?”

“Hmmmm?” she asked, poking her head into the refrigerator and pulling out a bowl where she had already mixed the lettuce and various vegetables. “What was that? What’s the next word?”

Huffing out his response, Henry rolled his eyes at his mother. “What are you nervous about? Elsa has been here before. She practically lived here when her sister was dating that guy Hans.”
Stopping with her spoon in midair, Emma grimaced. “How do you know stuff like that? We told you that Elsa’s townhouse was being painted.”

“Thin walls,” Henry responded as if that explained everything. He might not have understood everything he heard, but he was getting clearer on a few points. Besides, his mother might be able to detect a lie but she was horrible at telling them. If he had to guess, she was inventing her latest conversations to see if she needed to ground him or send him for therapy with this revelation. “It’s okay, mom.”

“Thanks for the warning,” she muttered, shaking her head before lowering the wooden spoon into the pot again. “I guess I should be thankful that you aren’t blackmailing me.”

“Not at the moment,” he said with a wide smile. “So who else is coming to dinner? Mr. Jones?”

Sighing, Emma looked at the clock that hung on the wall over the sink. “Elsa and her sister will be here with Liam and Killian. I need to talk to them all about something.”

Henry nodded knowingly, gathering the school work that had become spread across the table. “You know I could show Elsa and Anna that new picture we took. Anna loves photography. And Liam could join us.”

Emma raised her eyebrow as she replaced the lid on the pot. “Why would you volunteer that? They are here to talk about something for this weekend.”

“I just meant if you and he wanted some alone time.” Henry laughed wildly as he left the room. Just as he entered his room, he spun around and tried his best wink that came off more as exaggerated blinking. “Ruby said you need alone time. I Googled it and the internet said you should spend lots of time alone with a guy you like. You can have wine and talk about feelings and stuff.”

“Next time you Google something, try asking how to soundproof walls,” she called after him.

***AAA***

“Do you ever wonder why they call it chili when it’s hot not cold?” Anna asked, holding her latest spoonful aloft. She had been entertaining or annoying the group with her questions since they all found spots around the living room and waited for Emma’s announcement. Kristoff sat beside her with a slightly bemused expression, his fingers of his left hand curling over her knee. “Maybe it’s because we eat it when it’s cold outside, but is that how you spell chilly? Is it the same? Killian, you’re a teacher.”

His tongue darted out to wet his lips as he searched for an answer in his head. “I believe it’s named for the pepper that gives it its flavor and taste.”

“Okay that makes more sense,” Anna said, looking satisfied as she took another bite. “This is really good, Emma. But I think we know that you mean more than just feeding us.”

Elsa was sharing the oversized chair with Liam, her muffled laugh barely heard past her hand. Liam was a bit louder with his. “I must say, love, you gathered us all here and served us a hearty meal, but the lass has a point.”

Swirling the food in her bowl, Emma took in a deep breath. “Anna, Elsa, you know that Regina wasn’t happy about your performance the other night. She was pretty annoyed actually.” She waved her free hand in front of her when she heard an intake of breaths from the sisters. “I spoke to her. I explained that you’re just wanting to get some of your music out there in front of a live audience. And she agreed that might be a good idea. So I have you both a stage show this weekend in Boston.
Saturday night at a medium sized club in the city.”

Anna’s eyes widened as she nearly knocked over her bowl as she dove across the coffee table to embrace Emma. “Thank you! Oh thank you!” Her enthusiasm was a bit much for Emma who fell back against Killian and felt her leg swing out and almost kick Henry on the other side of her. Every bit of air in her left her chest in a whoosh as she attempted to brace herself from the impact.

“Anna,” admonished her sister. “Let Emma breathe. Don’t kill her by smothering her.”

Extricating herself as quickly as possible, Emma smoothed the plum colored sweater she was wearing. “So I was thinking that Liam, you and the guys might join them. Do a song or maybe two? It would be good exposure for you.”

When Liam jumped from the seat and nearly dislodged Elsa from the same, Emma wondered if he was about to hug her as Anna had done. However, he picked up Elsa to spin around, which gave Henry a chance to laugh and then make a gagging gesture behind Emma’s back toward Killian who chuckled and told his brother to settle. Liam heeded the warning and called the new guitarist, Robin, and Will before thanking Emma again for thinking of them.

She told him to practice and make sure they at least had the group’s social media in order by the weekend. Most of them had left by the time dessert was finished, leaving Emma and Killian alone with Henry who nudged his mother with an offer to go to his room.

“Given what you said about the walls, I don’t think that is necessary,” she told him. “But I will suggest that you get ready for bed. You still have some reading to do for class tomorrow.”

Henry mock saluted her and Killian before running toward his bedroom, dramatically shutting the door as Emma rolled her eyes. She was going to have to warn Killian to keep his voice low since her sense of privacy was a bit shaken at the moment. “Are you okay? You’re a bit quiet.”

“I’m fine, love, just fine.” His smile was quick as lightning but still didn’t reach his eyes as he watched her study his face. He almost gave up the façade in that moment, feeling the scrutiny of her gaze on him. “I suppose it is a bit hard for me to hear of my brother’s plans and not be a part of them any longer.”

With her hand resting lightly on his forearm, she frowned. “I didn’t think of that. I’m sorry. I was actually going to ask if maybe you wanted to go to Boston with all of us. I could use a fellow fan in the audience.”

His grin grew wider as he swayed into her space. “Are you asking me to sweep you away to some quaint little bed and breakfast for the weekend, Emma? Just me and you and…”

“You haven’t been on the road lately, have you?” she countered, trying to ignore the implications of his suggestion. It was far too early to think about weekend getaways like that, but still she couldn’t help but feel herself grow toasty warm at the thought of cuddling with him in front of a fireplace as soft jazz played in the background and sharing glasses of wine after a day of playful antics in the snowy landscape. “At Storybrooke Music we don’t do first class until your first recording goes platinum. Until then it is cheap motels and fast food rather than four stars and room service.”

He could barely contain the laugh that was bubbling up, but still managed to garner enough restraint to continue teasing her. “So you’re planning to seduce me in a seedy motel with a vibrating bed and questionable reputation?”
“You’re about to find yourself disinvented,” she shot back, joining his laugh and not backing away from him. “I did not bring up sharing a room. I just thought you might be nice company since I think Elsa will be busy with your brother and the thought of being alone with Anna and Kris for the drive is enough to make me question my sanity.”

“She isn’t such a terrible lass,” he defended. “I rather like her innocent naivety. Quite unlike most men or women I know.”

Emma’s nose wrinkled. “That’s because you haven’t been on a road trip with her when she sees something like a beware of deer crossing the road sign. She honestly asked me if the deer knew they were supposed to cross only at that spot.”

He practically guffawed at the idea of a conversation like that. “I would be pleased to rescue you from such questions,” he proclaimed grandly when his laughter settled, lifting her hand in his to kiss the back of it gently. “Consider me you knight in shining armor and traveling companion.”

“Dork,” she hissed, not pulling away her hand. “So now that we have that settled. Want to tell me what’s really wrong because I don’t buy that feeling left out is your only issue tonight.”

“Says the woman with her own issues,” he sarcastically replied.

“I don’t have issues,” she said, slapping her free hand against his shoulder. “I don’t.” Her lips formed into a perfect pout that he couldn’t help leaning in to peck lightly.

“We all do, but I’ll let it slide for now.” He was still holding onto her left hand, his thumb caressing the smooth skin of the back of it. “And since you are putting a bit of pressure on me about this, I’ll concede this one time. But I’ll have you know that I don’t care to spend my time this way normally.”

He tugged on her hand to pull her back into the living room area where he sat and pulled her down next to him. “I would much rather discuss more agreeable and enjoyable topics such as when we might schedule another date?” Her determined reaction to his playfully timed questioned left him regrouping and sighing. “Mr. Gold called me into his office this afternoon.”

He carefully explained the conversation to her, avoiding saying that he was worried or that the man had out and out threatened his job if they continued to see each other. “I think it was more of a fishing expedition, love. Neal has obviously brought up the topic to him and he was seeing what I was willing to say. I’ve told you, darling, that I have no intention of letting anyone dictate my life based on such arbitrary rules. You shouldn’t have to worry about it.”

“I do though,” she managed to say before Henry returned in his sleep pants and an oversized shirt that she was sure she had hidden from him. His feet were bare, which normally she would have reminded him about since it was still relatively cold outside. The ends of his hair were damp from what she estimated might be the quickest shower in history. She said nothing to her son, watching him stand there with an agenda she was a little scared to uncover.

“So this weekend thing,” he said, not even bothering to look a little shy or worried as he spoke. “You know I’m at my dad’s right?”

“You know I’m at my dad’s right?”

“Which is the reason I didn’t invite you to join us,” she supplied quickly, not at all happy that her son was smiling more like Ruby in that moment than her or Neal. “You hate these things. I can’t take you to the club. It would make me a finalist for worst mother of the year to take my son to a bar like nine years before he’s 21.”

That comment earned her a patented eye roll and a hand on his hip. “I was just reminding you.”
“Duly noted,” Emma said. “Anything else? Planning on telling me that I need to provide breakfast in the morning or that you do have school tomorrow?”

Killian looked rather amused at Henry’s dramatic exchange with his mother, all too aware that it was for his benefit. Maybe it was the way that Henry would occasionally shift his chocolate gaze from his mother to his teacher and then back again before it became too obvious. Biting his lip, he knew that the boy was perhaps the most enthusiastic of the matchmakers.

“Well,” Henry began, drawing out the four letter word. “I also have dinner with my dad on Wednesday. You know, like every Wednesday. I thought Mr. Jones might want to know that in case he wanted to ask you on another date. I know you would say yes.”

“Oh my God,” Emma said, suddenly very aware that her hand was still being cradled in Killian’s and whipping it back as though nobody had noticed. “Henry, we’re going to have a talk about that privacy thing from before and about boundaries.”

“It’s not a secret,” Henry said proudly though he took a step back as his mother looked more prepared for murder than parental lecturing. “You always said you shouldn’t hide what you’re feeling because it will cause an ulcer.”

“I think that was Granny,” she muttered, pushing off her legs to stand. Swooping in behind her son, she placed both hands on his shoulders and directed him back toward his bedroom door. “Say goodnight and get prepared for that lecture on boundaries. I’m going to make it a good one.”

“Good night, Mr. Jones,” Henry sing songed with a laugh, narrowly missing the ottoman in his way.

“Good night, lad,” Killian said with his own chuckle. “And thanks for the intel on your mum.”
Chapter 16

The week had passed at what had seemed like a snail’s pace. Liam and the band spent most of it in rehearsals with the older Jones brother taking time to write instead of sleep. Elsa and Anna were rerecording a few of the tracks, trying to capture just the right sound for their debut. While it was a little out of her normal line of scouting, Emma had taken both groups under her wing and was trying her best to package them just right. When she arrived at Granny’s just after the lunch rush on Thursday, she was rubbing her neck again from having spent the night on her couch.

Killian had taken Henry’s hint that he would be out to dinner with his dad on Wednesday to heart, showing up a few minutes after Henry had left. Grinning wickedly, as Emma described that way he would look like he wanted her to seduce him and praise him all at the same time, he had arrived with a DVD of George Carlin greatest comedy hits, a bottle of wine, and a menu for Chinese delivery. She had planned a quiet evening listening to the sisters’ latest tracks, but instead curled up with him and laughed until she could barely breathe. More than once they lost track of the jokes as they found themselves kissing and exploring more than they had before. She would say it made her feel like a teenager, but that wasn’t really accurate in her case. She was going to have to search for a cleaning solution that would get soy sauce out of her rug, but otherwise the night had been great. So great that she was comfortably asleep next to him when Henry got home. At least she assumed he had gotten home because when she woke up the next morning, Henry was already up and getting ready for school.

The lunch crowd of miners from the local site and a few shop owners had dissipated, but still Emma chose a seat at the counter. It was her usual thing, as it took away the obviousness of dining alone and did not encourage visitors. The time also meant that she wouldn’t have to listen to advice on dating from Granny.

Granny might come off as a foreboding woman with a heart of gold, but she was also an avid fan of her daily soap operas. A person coming in on a weekday for a late lunch often had to compete for her attention with the latest woes on her favorite daytime drama couples. When Ruby mentioned that people had noticed her lack of detailed attention at such moments, the widow told her granddaughter that those people on television were her family too. She had mourned their losses, celebrated all their triumphs, and sat on the edge of her seat since long before she had gray hair.

So Emma didn’t take it personally when she had to remind the server twice to put more cinnamon in her hot cocoa, as Granny was not paying attention to get it right. When Emma was first starting out in Storybrooke, she had hidden out with the older woman and watched the shows herself instead of facing the dread of fitting into a new town.

“I thought the Mills sisters must pay you better than eating at this dump,” David said when he took the stool beside her. He gave his order quickly, not deviating from the standard lasagna plate and a glass of half fruit punch and half soda that was his signature. Giving the server a wink that he said ensured a lack of spitting in his food, he turned his attention back to Emma and grabbed an onion ring off her plate. “Must be hiding out to come here.”

She grinned wryly at the idea. “You can’t hide in the one place in town where everyone and their brother ends up at some point in the day. A decent cop would know that.”

“I was thinking about that phrase hiding in plain sight.”

Drawing in a long sip of the chocolate, she waited patiently. When he had not spoken by the time her hands lowered the mug to the table, she rolled her eyes. “So you going to tell me why you parked
you yourself here? I know your schedule. You eat lunch at 12:15. Hot case or are you avoiding someone?"

“I was planning to skip lunch today,” he admitted, wiggling out of the worn leather jacket he wore over his soft plaid shirt and gun holster. “But I saw your car out front.”

“Should I feel honored by that or are you here over my unpaid parking tickets?” She had known and been friends with David since around the same time as Mary Margaret. She’d watched the two of them fight their attraction for years before settling into what she and Ruby often called a state of boring non-marital doldrums that most didn’t hit until their seventh anniversary. But he was more than just her friend’s significant other. He was there for her when she had made tough decisions regarding Neal, even driving her home after a drunken bender threatened her sanity and her self-imposed boundaries from her ex. When she needed a male influence for Henry, David was the man she called despite Neal.

“I need some advice,” he said, closing his eyes at the idea that he was actually asking that question. “And I know that she comes to you for it all the time lately so I thought…”

When he reached for another of the onion rings, she pushed her plate away from him. “You two asking for dating advice from me is pretty desperate. What is it you called me? The queen of the one night stands?”

Balling his right hand into a fist, he laughed behind it. “Rumor was that you were faster at putting on your clothes than taking them off.”

Her maneuver to keep him out of her onion rings did not appear to be working, making her make a near karate chop to stop his swiping motion. “And yet you want my advice about Mary Margaret?”

“I hear you have taken over a new leaf.”

“One dinner with you guys and a successful date and I’m ready to give advice. I’m not sure that I’m qualified. In fact it’s kind of sad that I’m your best bet for that at the moment.”

“I asked for advice not commentary.” He pounded the edge of his fist on his forehead. “I screwed up.”

Sighing, Emma stirred the rest of the whipped cream into the drink, letting it melt into the darkness. “You’re going to have to be more specific. I can think of a lot of things that might be you screwing up.” She tried to get him to smile, digging her elbow into his side. He merely flinched. “What did you do?”

“She wants me to propose, doesn’t she?”

Emma felt that twinge inside as she realized he was asking her to betray a friend’s confidence. Mary Margaret wanted to be married, wanted David and the life they could have together. But she wanted it on their terms. She had cried to Emma the other night that she didn’t want him to feel pressured into proposing. And maybe she wasn’t sure that would ever fully understand her friend’s point of view, it was her decision and hope. Mary Margaret wanted fairy tales and love that songs were written about, not practical decisions about living together because a lease was up at one of their places. But was it Emma’s place to tell David that? He was her friend too. “She wants you to be the one,” she said as solidly as she could. “She wants you to be her Prince Charming.”

“Tall order,” he said with a laugh, “and vague.”

“I think the question is do you want to propose.” She didn’t miss his long breath in or the way he
sucked his bottom lip inside his mouth. “Because as much as Mary Margaret wants her happily ever after to include you, you do matter in all this.”

“I want to spend the rest of my life with her,” he said, hoping that clarified things a bit. “I…she…She’s always been that for me. She’s always waited for me to get settled. For me to get out from my father’s rules. She even put up with me for that brief time I dated Katheryn. She deserves…She deserves so much more than I have done. And I want this to be perfect. I want her to have exactly what she wants. She wants a fairy tale.”

“That can be a tall order, but I think you’re putting too much pressure on yourself. She wants you. She wants to know that you love her like she loves you.”

He sighed, raking a hand through his short hair. “I should just ask her. Is that what you’re saying?”

“You did come to me for advice and I warned you that I’m not an authority on this. I haven’t ever had a relationship that didn’t end in restraining orders, bad feelings, or me in jail.” She laughed wryly at herself. “See why I’ve always stuck with one night stands?”

“I don’t get the feeling that Killian is a one night stand,” David said. “And you’re probably going to throw that plate at me for saying it, but happiness looks good on you, Emma. If he’s the reason for it, I say good for you both.”

***AAA***

“You’re coming in a bit early in that part there, Avery,” Killian told the trombone player. “You have a full four counts before you play your first note.”

Henry gave his friend a sympathetic smile as the young boy reddened at being called out. It was not as bad as it could have been, as Killian rarely made too much of a scene with the students. He merely gave instructions and gentle reminders before moving on to the next issue. When Emma had asked him how he had the patience to teach students, listen to the same seven notes for months on end, and try to be heard over the drama in their preteen lives, he had told her he took things a step at a time. One might see or hear 100 mistakes in a simple piece of music being played by a child, but his job was to break it down into manageable bits. He would point out one or two and work on those until perfected, moving on to the next one the next day.

It seemed that he had done things that way since the accident, broken things down so as not to be overwhelmed. Looking back, he realized it was a nurse who had suggested such a technique that now seemed to be the cornerstone of his philosophy. Maybe that was why he was feeling such an emotional rush when it came to Emma. He told himself time and again to take things slowly, not scare her or himself in the process, but it hadn’t worked. Each time he saw her he felt every nerve ending telling him that he had to hold her, to show her just how much she was wanted and cherished. And despite the voice in his head that told him it was too soon, he was sure that he was falling in love with her each time she smiled at him or any time her slight hand touched him.

“Mr. Jones?” one of the flute students called to him, breaking through his latest thoughts. “When are we going to move on to the next song?”

“Do you think you and your classmates are ready?” he asked. “It’s a more challenging piece. You’ll have to jump right in and give it your all.”

The class struggled through the first eighth of the music, producing barely recognizable notes as Killian tried to guide and shape their efforts. It was going to be a challenge, he thought to himself, but they still had a few weeks before the end of the year recital would begin. He dismissed them just
as the bell sounded and went ahead with the ensemble practice, which went even worse. He wasn’t sure whose time they were keeping but each of the students seemed to have his or her own beat.

By the time Henry arrived, he was raking his hand over his face and staring up toward the ceiling. Silently Henry placed his mouthpiece in his trumpet and took the seat next to Killian. “We don’t have to do this,” he said. “It looks like you’ve had a rough day.”

“Just a long one, a lad,” Killian said, practicing breathing as a way to wash out the feeling that this career was not at all worth fighting for in the scheme of things. “Let’s get to work on this audition piece.”

Henry didn’t immediately reach for his notebook, watching his teacher carefully. “You know it’s okay, right? I didn’t tell my dad that you spent the night or anything. I know he’s been kind of funny about you and my mom spending time together.”

Killian truly thought he might choke on the air he was breathing in at that moment and sputtered like a man drowning. “I fell asleep, Henry. I didn’t intend to spend the night…”

“No, it’s okay. I get it. And believe me, my dad has done worse. One time, he had his girlfriend sneak in through the bathroom window. She fell in the bathtub and he told me it was dog upstairs. He is a terrible liar. I just meant if you’re stressed about it, don’t worry. I can keep a secret.”

The boy’s earnest brown eyes gazed upward at his teacher, showing flecks of hope and helpfulness with his downward sweep of his thick dark lashes. Killian sighed, knowing that Emma wanted her son to be unscathed by any relationship that blossomed for her. He could not ask the boy to lie for him. “I won’t ask you to lie for me, Henry. I’m sure that your father is simply concerned that your mother and I are not behaving appropriately in front of you.”

The young boy’s aghast expression made him look very much like his mother. “It was a nap. You didn’t do anything like kiss.” He whispered the last word.

“Henry, I truly did not mean to be there when you returned. I suppose it was a long day for all involved and we simply fell asleep.” The simplicity of the moment was not lost on him, as he had felt a combination of serenity at the quiet time and honor that she trusted him enough to fall into slumber in his arms there on the couch. “I appreciate that you aren’t scarred by our being interested in one another, but don’t feel that you should have to lie to your father or even take sides in this matter. Your mother and I will deal with such things.”

Looking disappointed, Henry lifted the trumpet again and changed the topic of conversation. “Do you really think I have a chance?”

“Aye,” Killian said with a sincere smile. “I would imagine you have not had many chances to audition before. It can be a bit nerve wracking.”

“What if I forget my music or how to play all the notes?” Henry asked, looking a bit panicked at the thought. “What if the judge asks me my name and I forget it?”

Frown lines marred Killian’s brow as he considered this worry from his student. Holding his hand up to request Henry’s patience, Killian walked to the door and peered into the almost deserted hallway. The teacher just down from him was in front of her bulletin board and hanging up the latest decorations and posters for the spring musical that some of the older students put on each year. He beckoned to her and explained his idea rather quickly.

“Henry please go sit in my office for a moment,” he instructed, pulling the blinds over the window
from his office into the classroom. “Your audition will begin here in a moment.”

Without question, Henry scooted into the office with his belongings and sat in the one chair that wasn’t at the desk. He had spent only a little time in the office itself, as Killian was usually more at ease in the classroom. There was a sturdy desk and computer there along with a bookshelf and file cabinet. Unlike many of his teachers, there were few accessories or coffee mugs proclaiming allegiance to one school or another. A framed photograph of him with his brother both in uniform sat next to some books on musical theory and another of what looked to be the two of them at a younger age with a woman with similar eyes and a smile.

He could hear Killian speaking to someone with a much softer voice and wondered who it was on the other side of the door. His palms felt sweaty and he wiped them on the cotton pants that were part of his uniform. The fear that he felt over this endeavor seemed to bite and claw at his insecurity. Through the nerves, he looked for the familiar in the small space of the office and found himself staring at the printed pages on Killian’s desk. There was a review for some restaurant in Boston and a few handwritten post-its with the names of different clubs and places to go. He seemed to have punctuated each with a question mark.

“Henry,” Killian said, slipping into the room by opening the door in the smallest way. “You can enter now. Your pre-audition is all set.”

He knew that was what was being set up, but still he felt his stomach churn with the information. “Mr. Jones…I…”

“You’ll do quite well,” Killian said, sitting in his faux leather chair. “I’ll be here to hear all about it when you finish. Remember to breathe in during those specific rest spots we discussed. Here is your accompanying music.”

“What!??” Henry asked with terror coursing through his veins. “I have to go in there?”

Killian bit she inside of his mouth to keep from laughing. “Aye, it will make it easier to audition if you do so in the room. I don’t think the judge will be able to fit inside here along with the piano.” One of the older students from Mrs. Ursula’s class was going to act as the accompanist, having done it in past years. “You’re on, Henry.”

Two red spots dotted his cheeks as he grabbed both the sheet music and trumpet in the same hand, crumpling the paper slightly. He readjusted them so that they were in opposite hands and then switched them again before he trudged through the door and stared into the chocolate brown eyes of the other music teacher. The woman was a solid looking woman with russet colored skin and a mane of hair that seemed to fall in perfectly symmetrical waves. Henry had never had classes with her, as she taught in the upper school, but everyone knew she had a voice like an angel and sang at many of the assemblies and such.

She gave him a tight smile, sighing as she looked down at what appeared to be a blank clipboard. “Could you please state your name for me and tell me which selection you’ll be playing today?” she asked almost robotically. He froze for a moment, then gave her that information before heading over to where a music stand was set up near the piano.

From the office and with the door just pushed to instead of closed, Killian could hear him. He could detect the shakiness in his voice and knew that his grip was probably so tight on the instrument that he might leave marks on his palm. But when Henry began to play, Killian could not have been more proud. The boy’s musicality and timing was perfect. There were two notable mistakes, but overall it did not mar his performance in the least. It wasn’t until after the last note had faded that Killian could not resist any longer and peeked through the window where the blind didn’t meet the edge. Henry
was still shaking like a leaf, but the tilt of his chin indicated he was reveling in the praise that Ms. Ursula dished out for him, knowing that it was rare for her to do so.

When Emma arrived about 25 minutes later, he was pleased that Henry still wore the glow of success. Her pride in her son was evident as he whirled himself around toward her and told her in detail of the experiment. She placed both her hands on either side of Henry’s face and kissed his forehead, not having to stoop as far as she used to have to do. “I couldn’t be happier for you,” she said, squeezing his cheeks in playfully until he pulled away. “You’ve worked really hard. Whatever happens in the real audition, I know you are the best already, kid.”

***AAA***

Elsa was plopped awkwardly on the couch as Liam dragged her legs over his thighs and laid in the opposite direction. One of her feet hung in midair and moved with the incessant beat of the music his phone was playing. “Well?” she asked, her tone tight for a person who looked as relaxed as she did right then. “What do you think?”

“Honestly?” he asked, quirking up an eyebrow at the absurdity of the question. “I’m afraid I don’t hear the difference.”

She frowned deeply, one arm reaching out to swipe the phone from him. “You really don’t know the difference?”

“Darling, I’m sure there is some little nuance that I’m not privy to or picking up on at the moment. But for the life of me I don’t know what it is.” The week had been filled with the two sisters rerecording several of the songs they wanted to release and auditioning bands to back them up on the live dates they had scheduled. So far he had not heard much of a difference in these groups, which apparently was the wrong answer for the blonde there beside him.

Robin was sitting at a small sized keyboard that had caused Liam to tease him ceaselessly that it was something out of a teen girl’s room from the 1980s. He played a few notes and frowned. “This is quite interesting, but shouldn’t we be working on our own stuff. I know picking a band is a big deal, but so is getting on stage and performing after years of just fooling around.”

Elsa looked embarrassed as she scrambled up. “I’m sorry,” she said, pulling her phone back. “I didn’t think of it that way.”

“Elsa, my mate here was just showing some nerves. Don’t take it personally. I rather like listening to your work.” Liam winked at her before sitting up straight himself. “And I don’t know what kind of work he’s planning when half the group isn’t here yet.”

“Still, it is pretty selfish of me to ignore that you have work to do too.” She was reaching for her bag when Robin cleared his throat.

“There was no harm meant in what I said. I was only worried that perhaps Liam wasn’t remembering we are not nearly as prepared as we should be at this point. You and your sister will surely be brilliant, but we’re probably about to crash and burn up there on that stage.”

Smiling affectionately at Elsa, he cupped her cheek. “You’re always brilliant.”

“You guys will be too,” she said, blushing deeper over the compliment. “I can’t wait to hear what you perform.”

“I can’t wait for us to figure that out,” Robin groused. “I think every suggestion that Liam makes is met with a resounding no, as are mine.”
The three of them were tossing out names of songs and trying to discern the familiarity of each when Killian arrived. Liam had to jump up and practically dislodge Elsa from the seat next to him as his brother struggled a bit to open the door what with his one hand and opposite arm full of a stack of empty boxes.

“Planning on moving?” Robin asked when he took in the sight.

“You might covet this little house, mate, but I’m not ready to give it up yet. No, I came to a realization today.” He dropped the boxes just to the side of the office door. “I think it is time I changed over that office to a proper bedroom.”

Liam looked at the boxes curiously and back at the partially closed door to the room that his brother used as a retreat. “Planning on a roommate are you, brother? Or perhaps you’re moving Emma and her lad in here? Might get a bit crowded what with me on the couch.”

While she knew Emma would never move that fast, Elsa played along to tease Liam about his insecurity over sleeping on the couch for so long. “Maybe you and Henry could get bunk beds and share the room.”

“That’s a fine idea,” Robin chimed in. “Roland wants a set himself, though he’s not got any siblings. I might have an ad around someplace with a set on sale.”

Killian kicked one of the boxes with the toe of his boot. “I was going to clear the room out for you, brother. I can move a few of the items into my room and we can rearrange a few out here. I just thought it might be high time to get your hairy arse off my couch and behind closed doors. It would do wonders for me not to have to see you snoring and drooling every morning.”

Liam smiled widely, elbowing Robin right in the ribs. “I’m touched, Killian. You want us to be roommates now?”

Killian looked to be chewing that information over in his mouth as he looked upward. “I wouldn’t read too much into it. You haven’t made much of an effort to find another place to live so I thought we might as well make this a bit more homey. First step is to pack up some stuff and rearrange or store it. I’ve got a plan for a bed already. So what do you say, roomie?”

***AAA***

Emma folded the sweater twice before placing it in her overnight bag, ignoring the prattling on of Ruby in her ear from the phone that she had set to its hands-free speaker. It was a work trip. That was all, she told herself as she tried to remember if she had in fact shaved and waxed everything she had wanted to do that week. Deciding that she had, she dove for the phone when Ruby began a familiar yet embarrassing discussion about condom brands.

“I know how they work,” Emma hissed into the phone after taking it off speaker. “And you were on speaker. Henry could have heard you.”

“Henry is exactly why we are having a conversation about them. If you knew how they worked, you wouldn’t have Henry. I’m just making sure…”

Ruby was partially right. Emma had known what condoms were and how they worked, but she hadn’t insisted when she and Neal were younger. She could handle that conversation now. “It’s under control.”

The raven haired beauty’s smirk was audible through the phone. “You’re nervous.”
“No, I’m not,” Emma protested loudly. “I’m fine.”

“How long has it been? Walsh? Ewww…I don’t want to think about him. August?”

“I didn’t sleep with Walsh or August. August is just a friend. A date for industry events that shows up every few months with the idea for a best seller. We haven’t ever really…”

Laughing, Ruby practically snorted. “Okay, okay. So you’re not friends with benefits.” She seemed to be going through some checklist. “And you did wax, right? I don’t want to hear any excuses when you get back. But if it’s been that long maybe I should ask if you dusted or swept out the cobwebs.”

“Ruby Lucas, I’m about to hang up this phone. I have had sex. Plenty of sex.” She realized she probably said that too vehemently and too loud since her son was due home any moment, but she tried to keep her calm. “It’s not like I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“Really? So what are you doing with Killian? Because I can’t quite figure it out.”

“Neither can I,” Emma admitted when she stared at her lingerie drawer. Normally this was easy, as she slept in oversized shirts or flannels when it got too cold. It hadn’t even been decided who was sleeping with whom in their small army of people attending. Will and Anastasia had already called dibs on a room together, as had Anna and Kristoff. Robin apparently talked in his sleep and snored, meaning nobody wanted to room with him. The new guitarist, Philip, had said he planned to bring along his wife. If they were in middle school the rooming arrangements would be easy, as Emma and Elsa would share as would the two Jones brothers. However, that seemed to be the question hanging in the air. “I admit it. I have no idea what I’m doing.”

“Just go slow,” Ruby cautioned. “And enjoy yourself. There’s this website I should send you. Talks about…”

“No, Ruby,” Emma insisted. “I’m not researching this.”

Taking the hint, the waitress/designer changed the subject to their mutual friend, Mary Margaret. “You have to swear to keep this a secret,” Ruby said in a stage whisper that was probably overheard by anyone within 20 feet of her if not more. “David asked me to design her a dress.”

Emma stared distractedly at the matching bra and panties she had pulled from her dresser that sat alongside an oversized t-shirt celebrating miners’ day in Storybrooke. It was faded and the logo of a giant pick axe was starting to peel, but she loved it for those late nights under six blankets and a good book. “A dress?” she asked, throwing both sets into her overnight bag before she changed her mind on either. “For what?”

“He said he wanted something that will make her feel like a fairy tale princess.” Ruby’s voice was a little higher pitched as she nearly squealed. “I’m going to love making this.”
Chapter 17

Tamara sat across from Neal’s son with her hand firmly gripping the spoon. She was not exactly opposed to children, especially since this one was about to become her stepson, but she lacked the natural ease that other women seemed to possess. He was not even 13 yet, but she was quite sure that he already knew she was uncomfortable with the conversation that had not veered off from some movie plot she didn’t quite follow.

“So then the guy,” Henry said, digging his straw into the loaded milkshake, “the one with the invisibility shield, he takes on the other guy. You know, the one that can’t see color.”

She resisted the urge to look at the phone that was sitting next to a napkin, wondering for the fifth time in as many minutes why Neal thought this was a good idea. Without his music practice that Friday, Henry was done with classes early. Since Neal was handling an estate sale for his father’s house and restocking the store with some interesting items, he had asked her to pick his son up. She had agreed before really thinking about it. She had been a girly girl growing up, focusing on dance lessons and playing with her friends. She had not been interested in boys until high school, leaving the mysteries of a middle school aged male as unexplored as a new land.

“Sounds interesting,” she said, hoping that her lack of knowledge of these comic book characters would somehow be masked by her enthusiasm. “And is there a movie you really want to see.”

Henry was nothing if not patient, sipping on his straw thoughtfully as she ran through possible discussion topics. For the life of her, she could not remember what it was that she discussed with Neal even. The boy was endlessly kind, she decided, which was a good thing.

“We could go see the new Captain America movie,” he suggested, his eyebrows shooting up under the fringe of his hair. “It’s supposed to be…”

“I think your dad has plans,” she said lamely, as she wasn’t even sure how long it was going to take Neal to get there. “I know he mentioned a game of some kind.”

Henry nodded, shifting his brown eyes over to the counter and back again. His father always liked to include some sort of baseball or other sport into their weekends together. It was something Neal knew that Emma rarely did. “Of course.” He watched as she struggled to approach other subjects, even falling into questions about the weather and how he liked it. Answering as best he could, he chose to end her misery and took off in the direction of the vacant video game that spoke of past decades.

***AAA***

Killian offered Emma probably the biggest concession in his ability when he threw her the keys to his jeep on Friday afternoon. Winking at her, he claimed that he was too tired to drive and had every intention sleeping as she navigated the roads to Boston. She almost didn’t catch the wink or the way he paused for her reaction, causing her to frown at the thought of chauffeuring him about the eastern seaboard without anyone to talk with as she traveled. Maybe it would have been better to have snagged a ride with Liam or Anna.

“I am only kidding, love,” he said, folding her gloved fingers over the cold keys. “I just thought that we might share the driving. And with my lack of a left hand, it makes it a bit difficult for me to hold yours as we travel.”
Her frown lessened with his explanation, but she noted the hint of sadness at his mentioning his missing hand. She rarely noticed it herself, only occasionally noting his ability to maneuver almost anything with the one. She had even broached the subject with Henry once, who added that many of the students were not even aware since he had always worn the prosthetic one and avoided displays of making it obvious. “And kissing?”

His boots crunched in the left over snow as he stepped even closer, looping his arms around her waist to pull her against his chest. “I can do that.” His lips brushed lightly against hers twice before their kiss deepened and she pressing her hands and the keys against his chest.

She had offered to drive down with him on Saturday so that they could avoid having to take time off from work. However, he had insisted that the early drive would do them good, allowing him to escort her through some of Boston’s nightlife before she was expected to work on Saturday night. His insistence that he would not be bullied by Mr. Gold or Neal was admirable, but she had to wonder if it was a bit foolish. She was not denying that she was flattered by his interest in wanting to get to know her and explore the things they were starting to feel. But she was not used to being put first.

His nose brushed against her cheek as she sighed, running her hands up so that she threw her arms over his shoulders. “We are supposed to be driving,” she said, his lips trailing downward toward her neck. “You’re distracting me.”

Grunting with annoyance, he pulled back after a quick peck to her jaw. “Always practical,” he said, sticking his bottom lip out some. “I thought that was my role.”

“I was just thinking I might enjoy that date night thing in Boston. No worries about Neal or his father. No prying eyes of the PTA. I could get used to that.” She smiled as he yanked her back to him to kiss her hard on the lips and then backed away.

“Let’s see how fast this jeep of mine will travel.”

***AAA***

Liam and Elsa had similar plans for the start of the weekend, as the two had reservations for dinner and were discussing whether or not to go dancing that night or something a bit quieter. That word sounded wonderful to both of them, as Anna was an entertaining but constant voice in the two hours they had been on the road. When Liam pulled Elsa’s car into the gas station, filling up the tank and then joining her inside to peruse the selection of junk food that he and Kristoff had insisted were essential for any trip, he found her staring at four different brands of crackers as if trying to discern a formula from their placement and price.

“If you can’t decide, we can get all four,” he suggested, placing the four selections into the basket she had laid to rest on the floor next to her. “See, darling, problem solved. Now let’s see about some sugary soda to wash down all this salt.”

“I’m sorry,” she said suddenly. When his wide eyed and confused glance made her realize that he was unsure what she meant, she waved her hand in the direction of Anna and Kristoff. The two were standing at the magazine rack as Anna tried to engage him in a discussion of Brad and Angelina versus Justin and Selena. He did not seem too bored though, as he fought back with some discussion of the Stanley Cup prospects. “My sister is a bit much and I sort of forced her on you. We might have been better off riding along with Emma and Killian.”

“I assure you that my brother is no prize on a road trip either,” Liam said with a lift of his shoulders. “He may not have that stream of consciousness thing going that your sister does, but he tends to
focus on subjects that I can’t quite have the same passion about. Then he complains that I am not paying attention.”

“How did we ever manage such horrible siblings?” She moved on from the crackers and was examining a few of the “gourmet” items that if you looked close enough had a layer of dust on them because nobody buys gourmet items from a convenience store. Liam grabbed the basket with one hand and led her over to the sugary snack aisle instead.

“Peanut butter cups,” he said with an emphatic grin. When he let his smile grow like that, you could forget that he had spent most of his adult years so far in the Royal Navy. He was not a forbidding captain, as his carefree side was much more interesting and fun. “You know, I think they are truly my vice.”

“They are good, but I think I like licorice better. Red, not black.” She informed him of this in a quite studious manner, slapping a package of the long red ropes against his chest. “And I like strawberry Starbursts. Lemon and orange are okay, but I prefer the red and pink ones. Do you like the lemon and orange ones?” She crouched down on the candy aisle and he watched as she flipped her hair over her shoulder. “I know a few things about candy.”

“How about we buy a pack and I eat the ones you don’t like?”

She didn’t immediately agree to that arrangement, looking suspiciously at the long yellow wrapper. “Are you trying to butter me up, mister?”

He was about to tell her that he was going to be quite impressed if buttering her up was as simple as eating the more sour candy and letting her have the more popular. He’d be willing to do much worse to win her attention and favor, but all of that seemed to fall away as Anna rushed up to them holding up some new concoction in her hand that was a hot dog wrapped in hamburger meat with a pita bread bun and drizzled with barbecue sauce. When she finally managed to get the point that they were not about to try the disgusting looking item, it was a bit late to continue his discussion with Elsa, who was already in line.

There were two rather scraggly looking teenagers in front of them when Liam stepped behind Elsa and dangled a jar of peanut butter in front of her face. “Important question, darling? Which do you prefer? Crunchy? Or smooth?” She whirled to face him with a surprised look about her, open mouthed and nose wrinkled.

“Seriously?”

“I guess I should ask which your sister prefers,” he clarified, not letting her adorable confusion sway his stoic expression. He didn’t mind the flash of jealousy that crosses her eyes or the way that she practically hit a display of cell phone accessories as she stepped away from him in her confusion.

“You want to know whether my sister likes crunchy or smoot peanut butter,” she repeats to herself as if trying to understand the words for a double meaning. “Seriously?”

He leaned closer to her, the jar of the brown substance tight between their chests. “Aye, sounded like a good plan for a quiet drive. This stuff might just be sticky enough to slow her diatribes a bit?” His blue eyes twinkled with the joke he was making, waiting patiently for her reply.

Elsa looked a bit worried for a single moment, as if she wanted to scold him for daring to speak negatively over her sister. It was a slippery slope since the two women were rather close and did rely on each other, but she wasn’t blind to Anna’s faults. “I think we should buy both,” she said seriously. “And maybe some taffy too. Anything to get her to shut up when she starts talking about
boy bands.”

***AAA***

Henry looked at the woman next to his father and sighed, knowing the conversation was about to enter territory that he both expected and dreaded. There was no doubt that the ring on the woman’s finger had been placed there by his father, a symbol of his love for her and a promise of the future. She was the fifth woman he had been serious about since he had come back into his son’s life, but so far the only one who had not run upon meeting Mr. Gold or finding out that some weekends would include Henry.

“We have something to tell you,” Neal said, barely masking a grimace that appeared to be reflex. Tamara either didn’t notice it or didn’t care, as she stared wide eyed and hopeful at Henry. “Tamara and I are getting married.”

It was all that Henry could do to avoid rolling his eyes, as he had promised his mother decorum. They had talked about it before she dropped him off that morning, spoken about how it was a good thing for Neal and Tamara. It wouldn’t be that big of a change, as Emma was always his mother and Neal’s wife would be a part of his life in only a good way. She had even joked that she kind of liked the idea of another set of eyes to keep him in line as they started to navigate the teen years.

“Congratulations,” he offered with a small smile and a bit of enthusiasm. “It’ll be great.”

Tamara took a tentative step forward as though wanting to hug him and then stepped back as he reflexively covered his chest with his arms. He knew that was a bit of a rude movement, but he honestly didn’t want a hug. He wanted to hear from his dad that things were going to be normal and fine. He wanted to hear that his dad wanted to continue this treacherous and even odd at times relationship. He wanted to know that his father’s wedding was a beginning of a family and not the ending of a chapter. But when you’re 12 years old, it is hard to articulate those kinds of things. So he shrugged and waited for his dad to say something new.

Neal doubled over instead, his skin sallow with the intensity of the pain he was feeling. Tamara clutched onto his bicep and tried to pull him back to standing, her frantic voice asking about his welfare at the same time that he grunted and cursed loudly. There were no questions at that point about Henry’s role in their family as she brushed past him to grab her phone out of her purse and call for help. He was not even addressed until the ambulance was loaded and a neighbor of his father’s asked if he needed a ride any place.

“Granny’s,” had been his reply, ignoring the feeling of abandonment. It was silly, he told himself. Neal was clearly sick. He couldn’t be held responsible for forgetting important things like his own son, but still there was a moment when Henry did blame him.

Thankfully Granny did not seem put out as she ushered him inside the restaurant and then back through one of the backdoors to her private quarters. He’d been there before, but she did not make a big deal of it. Settling him in and asking him a few questions about his dad, she agreed with the EMT who had diagnosed it as kidney stones.

“Dreadful things,” the older woman said, wringing her hands together in front of her. “Made me wonder if I’d ever survive. But once they pass you’re as good as new. Just the memory of them to scare you into thinking they’re back each time you have a twinge of pain in that area.”

Henry felt somewhat better when she mentioned that he’d be back up and around soon. She was not exactly a doctor, but she was as close to an expert on almost everything as the town had. She could tell you how to get out a spot or what food on her menu might induce labor. She’d even been known
to identify a fan belt problem on Emma’s car before it ever began acting up.

“You’ve got the weight of the world on your shoulders there,” she said, positioning herself at the far end of the counter in her kitchen so that she could see him as she prepared them both a sandwich. “Far more trouble than a father with kidney stones. Tell me what’s wrong.”

Henry sighed, finally shrugging out of the wool coat he’d been wearing and leaving it in a lump behind him on the floral sofa. “You’re going to make me call my mom, right?”

Granny swayed as she stood on her toes and reached for two plates. “I was thinking she ought to know where you are, but you have other plans? Is there something you’re hiding?”

Shaking his head sadly, he waited until she placed the plate in front of him before he spoke again. “I don’t want her to cut her weekend short because of me. It’s not just a work thing. See she and…”

“She and Killian went together, didn’t they?” the woman asked, wrinkling her face into a big smile. “I knew it.”

“But if she knows my dad’s sick and that you’re watching me, she’ll come back to get me.” Henry toyed with the crust for a moment and then took a bite, taking his time to chew it carefully. “My dad’s marrying Tamara.”

“You’re just full of information tonight, aren’t you?” Granny asked. “Are you not happy about your dad and this woman? Is that it?” She had seen her own granddaughter have a similar reaction when faced with a stepparent. However, Henry did not seem quite as dramatic as Ruby had ever been.

“Tamara’s okay,” he said, placing the sandwich back down on the plate as though it had somehow offended him. “She doesn’t really like kids though.”

Granny did not try arguing with Henry as most adults would have in that situation, offering suggestions that maybe she wasn’t comfortable with children or maybe she was nervous. She accepted the boy’s assessment and asked him if something had been said to make him feel that way. The preteen’s face went pale as he began to explain.

“I was playing with that video game you got for the diner. You know the really old one. She was on her phone and I guess didn’t realize I was there. I overheard. I wasn’t like spying or anything.”

“And what did you overhear?”

“She was telling someone that she was glad my dad didn’t have full custody of me because she didn’t have time to be a mom to someone else’s kid.” He frowned again, his forehead creasing with the gravity of his words. “I didn’t even tell my mom that. I also didn’t tell her or my dad that I heard her say that she wasn’t sure she wanted to marry a guy with a kid.”

“Not tactful, is she?”

Henry wasn’t sure what that word meant, but he agreed with Granny’s assessment. “Do you think that I’m the reason my mom’s not married? That maybe guys don’t want to date a woman with kids? I know she really likes my teacher and he likes her. I just think that if I have to call her and tell her that I need her to come home…”

“First of all,” Granny said, pushing off with a grunt so that she was standing again and heading into the kitchen, “Killian Jones is about as far from that Tamara woman as you can get. He’s a teacher, Henry. They tend to like kids. And as for your mother’s dating life, I put the blame for that square on her shoulders as well as your father’s. Sometimes when we get hurt by those we love or those we
think love us, we tell ourselves we’ll never let it happen again. Your mom decided that she was
going to focus on being a mom and getting her career off the ground. Both admirable things, but she
didn’t leave room in her life for love.”

“Because of me?” he asked sadly. He let his mind travel through memories. He remembered being
eight and having a fever that meant his mother canceled a blind date. At 10 he had accidentally
dropped her phone in the swimming pool at their vacation hotel and gotten her a severe lecture from
her boss. No child wants to be considered a burden.

“No, Henry. I’m going to let you in on a secret. The love between a parent and child is better than
anything else. And for you mom, it is enough for her. That’s what she’s told herself. See, you’re her
son. You love her because she’s your mom. And that is a good thing for a mom. But your mom
needed to remember that she’s a person too. And people need love and friends. They need other
people to look at them and see good things. They need someone who wants to know how their day
went or care about the things that nobody else has time to notice. That’s why I thought it was time
your mom started dating again. And when I saw that Killian Jones was needing the same thing…
well, I knew they would be a good fit.”

“But he’s going to get tired of her having to cancel plans to take care of me,” Henry noted. “He’ll
find someone without kids…”

“Maybe,” Granny said. “Or maybe he’ll stay. Either way it won’t be all about you, Henry. Your
mom wouldn’t want to be with anyone who didn’t have a good enough heart to want you around,
but it will take more than that to win your mom’s heart. He’s going to have to make her happy,
happier than she’s ever known she can be. That’s the only thing that is going to break down the last
of her walls.”

Grabbing the sandwich again, Henry let himself relax against the cushions of the sofa. “I like that. I
want my mom to be happy.”

***AAA***

Liam picked through the salad as the conversation over music took most of their attention. It was
hard to concentrate on what Robin was saying, as Elsa was sitting right there in a dress that he was
having a hard time ignoring. She was a combination of seduction and innocence that confounded
him and made him eager to learn and experience more. And discussing drum solos with Robin was
doing nothing to solve the mystery of her.

“Be right back,” Robin announced, holding up his phone as evidence. He had been checking on
Roland about every 90 minutes. He was due.

“What do you say we ditch him and find some place else?” Liam asked her suggestively, his mouth
very near her ear.

“You’ve barely touched your salad,” she commented with mock seriousness. “Aren’t you starving?”

“Darling.”

Her giggle was a bit louder than she meant and she quickly covered her mouth with her napkin as
though coughing. “We can’t ditch Robin, but I think you did promise me a walk and maybe a movie.
You know something to get my nerves about tomorrow night in check.”

He moved in closer to her, dropping his face against her exposed neck, as her hair was piled atop her
head in what he assumed a very uncomfortable style for all its work. Kissing just under her ear and
then a bit lower on her neck, he groaned again. “I’d rather…”

“Pull it together, Liam,” she said warningly, wagging her fork at him. “Robin’s headed this way.”

***AAA***

The hotel room was not as bad as she had made it out to be, though not quite first class either. The suite included a sitting area and a bedroom that was taken up almost entirely by a giant bed. Telling Killian that she hoped his plans could wait until she could shower and wipe the grime of the fast food spills and hours of singing everything from 80s power ballads to show tunes together in the jeep, Emma was locked in the bathroom with the steam drifting around her.

“You’re fine,” she told herself as she stepped out of the glass enclosed shower that looked nice but leaked around the edges and left a giant puddle that she almost slipped on with a splat. The not too thick towel was wrapped around her and she stared through the fog of the mirror to her red tinted face and shoulders. Whoever made the unflattering lights in hotel bathrooms should be shot, she thought firmly.

Her hair was slightly damp, but hung in a complicated braid pattern that she had plaited it into that morning after her first shower. The plan was to let it loose before they went out with the thought that her hair would fall in elegant waves that would flow beautifully and yet not look too posed. However, the humidity of the hotel bathroom was making the long blonde wisps frizz within the braided style. So much for plans.

She had thankfully brought her small makeup bag with her into the cramped space. Keeping with her minimalist approach, she skipped the heavy foundations and powders to concentrate on her eyes with a bit of mascara and liner. On her lips she chose a nearly nude color that served more to keep them soft than dye them some vibrant color.

Her dress was hanging on the door, benefiting from the steam by releasing a few of the traveling wrinkles. While working she typically stuck with primary colors of bold reds and blues or the dramatic contrast of white and black. Yet when she had been digging for an outfit to wear, the seafoam green had stuck out to her. It was a simpler dress than she usually wore, less form fitting and more feminine. It had a fuller skirt and a rounded neckline that dipped just low enough to show her cleavage off without revealing too much. Keeping her jewelry simple too, she chose a thin silver chain and small studs in her ears that glinted just enough in the light. The color of the dress picked up on the greens and blues of her eyes and made them pop against her porcelain skin.

She frowned as she touched her hair, considering her options as more errant strands curly cued in wild directions. Unknotting the braids, she brushed her hair furiously and cursed under her breath at the results. For a moment she considered calling out to Killian that she was just going to stay in or even ask him to find her a hat. A few minutes and a few prayers later, her hair seemed to be back to normal and she managed to slip out into the room and find Killian ready and waiting.

“Sorry,” she said sheepishly as he jumped up from the bed where he had been reclined with his left hand behind his head and the remote control resting on his chest. His deep blue shirt matched his eyes perfectly and was unbuttoned a few buttons at his chest. A tailored black vest and pants of the same material completed his look. “I didn’t mean to take so long.”

“You look stunning,” he said, his voice a little tense. “And no worries. We have time to get to dinner.”

She slid her feet into a silvery pair of heels, not taking her eyes off of him as she reached for the small clutch. “Thank you, but compliments don’t help the fact that you still haven’t told me the plan.
Where exactly are we going?"

“Patience,” he teased, grabbing her coat and holding it out for her like a well-choreographed dance. “I found the perfect thing.”

***AAA***

Elsa felt a bit like the girl in high school wearing her boyfriend’s letterman jacket as Liam placed his warmer coat over her shoulders when she had admitted it was a bit too chilly for their walk to the theater. It wasn’t the most original of moments or even the most creative of dates, but she was enjoying the simplicity of it.

Looking at one of the tall buildings that was of the gothic style of architecture, Liam commented how new everything seemed in the United States. “It’s hard to grasp the difference in history timelines,” he admitted. “But it is lovely.”

Her head tilted back and off to the side as she appraised it. “I don’t know if I’d call it lovely. I think it looks kind of dark and scary. Something out of a horror movie.”

“I’m sure the people who work there would agree with you, especially on a Monday morning.”

Talk turned quickly to discussion of the movie they were about to see and to Liam’s love for hot buttered popcorn. She had teased him that he couldn’t possibly be hungry after they had eaten several courses at one of the most talked about restaurants in Boston, even if much of that time had been focused on Robin’s concerns about the live performance.

“You underestimate my abilities to eat,” Liam said with a measure of pride. “From the time I was a mere ensign in the Navy, I had plenty to eat, but it was the blandest and tasteless food you could imagine. Even in the morning when there was bacon, it tasted of nothing other than cardboard. I don’t know how you can make bacon bland, but they managed. I swore to myself that once I was out I would indulge in all the pleasurable foods and drinks that I missed during that time. If I have to increase my workouts then so be it.”

“Did you enjoy dinner?” she asked, as the restaurant had been her suggestion after seeing the chef win a rather tough competition on television. She knew that Liam leaned more toward traditional fare, but the idea of being so close to the place and not trying it was unheard of for her. She wasn’t sure how Liam had managed to snag them a table that they were originally going to share with Emma and Killian, but he had.

“It was rather interesting,” he said, not committing to a compliment or criticism of the unusual dishes. “The salad appeared as it was.”

Elsa had to giggle at that statement, as he had picked through the green kale, arugula and dandelion stems with a quiet yet skeptical eye. “And the salmon?”

“Honestly? I was not entirely sure what that even was. It tasted as it should, but those tiny bubbles or balls around it confused me.” The dish had been a cross between culinary art and science, which seemed to confound Liam’s more sensible tastes. “And I noticed you loved it. Even took a photo with your phone of each course.”

Not usually one for social media or advancing technology, Elsa had surprised them both by trying to sneakily take the photos. She wanted to remember her experience and share it with other foodies who wanted to try such things. Liam had found that to be adorable and even snagged her phone at one point to take her photo with the ornate and strange dessert that seemed more architectural than
edible. He had seen her reluctance slide away as she lifted the plate and smiled brightly for the picture.

“You shouldn’t have let me pick that place if you didn’t want to eat there,” she said with a slight frown. “I would have been happy with burgers and fries if you would have preferred that.”

Thankfully there weren’t any people directly behind them as he stopped their walking short, spinning her to face him. “I didn’t get the reservations merely to get the meal, Elsa. You wanted to eat there. You’ve talked of nothing else since watching that blasted show. If I can make something you want happen, why shouldn’t I be eager to perform the task?”

Her frown was still etched on her face, though not as much as before. “This is new for me, letting someone do things like this for me. I’m usually the one who has to sacrifice.”

Liam’s large hands sat on her shoulders and slid down to where her hands were at her sides. “I’m not going to refer to my eating an interesting meal as a sacrifice, love. And I hope you know that doing something that brings a smile to your face is not a hardship. I’d rather see your face light up and hear your excitement than eat a hamburger.”

***AAA***

“A boat?” Emma asked as Killian smiled brightly and proudly. He had again surprised her with a thoughtful evening out, picking a dinner cruise. While touristy, it was different and romantic at the same time. Their table was inside next to a window, offering views of the harbor. The dimly lit room was accented with rich, dark woodwork and jewel toned accessories. Their table was intimately small, allowing their hands to touch as they waited on their server to bring the wine.

“You said you appreciated the water,” he said as their drinks were poured. “When I came across this opportunity I thought it a perfect solution.”

She knew that he was an avid sailor and tended to schedule his summers around sailing trips and fishing expeditions. It had already come up in their conversations that he took such things very seriously and was already priming her with the basics of sailing so that she might join him.

“Any excuse for you to be on the water?”

“Can’t deny it.”
Chapter 18

I’m going to apologize for the sporadic updates. Between a computer failure and having to buy a new one, job searching, and possibly moving across the country, I haven’t been very faithful in my writing. However, here is a new chapter. There is some angst coming, but for now just a happy date chapter.

Thanks again to all the readers for their patience and understanding.

She was going to blame the wine, definitely the wine that had been sweeter and tangier than any she had before. That was the reason that she was in the middle of the dance floor of a tourist trap of a cruise ship being twirled around under fake electric stars and giggling as though she 14 and talking to a boy for the first time in her life. The wine, red and delicious was the reason that she had left her shoes under the table they shared and reason that he had lip gloss staining his shirt collar from their earlier slow dance. It was also the reason that her cheeks were a merry shade of pink.

Emma Swan was not going to take responsibility for her behavior, she decided as he spun her out and back to him again. Their chests crashed against each other and she breathlessly stared up at him. “You must be pretty proud of yourself.”

“For what reason?” he asked, curiosity unhidden as he gasped for breath too. “My dancing? I’ve been told I’m rather a fine dancer.”

“Making me act like a fool,” she corrected, one hand gripping his and the other on his shoulder so that her fingers mingled with the hair ending at the nape of his neck. “I don’t usually do this.”

He wasn’t sarcastic as he lowered his head to rest it against hers. “I know. And I’m not sure why it is that you allow it with me, but I am honored and grateful.”

The music was still bright and loud, a melding of jazz and latin that neither of them could particularly name. Couples were doing their best salsa and samba moves around them, but in that moment they were swaying. Their feet were planted in place, rooted to the smooth wood flooring as they moved. “I think you say that stuff so I’ll like you.”

“Is it working?”

Humming a bit, she let her hand that was entwined with his be dragged around to the small of her back. She thought he was about to start up the acrobatics again, but he kept their hands there in a sort of embrace and ignored the more pulsing beat. “I’m still here, aren’t I?”

“Aye, you are, but it might be a bit difficult for you to escape on a ship out in the harbor. That may have been part of my plan to keep you from running away.”

Her eyes fluttered shut as he continued to hold her, his breath just as warm on her skin as the heat of the lights above them. She knew that she could pull back and see him looking at her with his eyes darkened and a more open expression on his face than she could even fathom. But for that moment she wanted to pretend that things weren’t moving at a speed way too fast or that it could all go sideways and leave her more broken than she had ever been in her life. “I’m not running,” she told him in a small voice. Lifting one bare foot and running it along his calf, she gave him sort of a half chortle and sigh. “I wouldn’t get very far.”

“Good,” he responded, his voice muffled by her long hair. “I was just thinking how difficult it would
be for me to chase after you after that meal. I’m surprised we’re still dancing.”

Looking up at him through her thick long lashes, she felt the room spin a bit. She decided to blame that on the wine too. “I don’t know that I’d call this dancing. It’s more like swaying. Kind of like what I did when I was in school and there were dances in the gym or the lunch room.”

He managed not to laugh too loudly, picturing her at that age conjuring up rather fun images in his mind. She had told him that money was not something she really had in her teen years, still moving from foster home to foster home. Before she had left for good and ended up meeting Neal, she had been to a few school functions if only to check of that spot on the forms that spoke of her social life. “I would have enjoyed dancing with you then too,” he said, noting the surprised look on her face.

“I was more about sneaking off to smoke and not inhale things. I wasn’t much for dancing.”

Running his tongue over his lips, he considered this. “Then I would have enjoyed finding a dark corner with you. Shall we try that now?”

“You want to find a dark corner?” she asked incredulously. When his gaze didn’t drop she squeezed his hand still behind her. “Why would we do that when we have a hotel room?” She wrinkled her nose and took a fraction of a step back from him. “Did I just say that?”

“I believe you did,” he teased gently. “Should I pretend I didn’t hear it? I wouldn’t want you to combust from embarrassment.”

That earned him an eye roll. “One of us had to mention it. We’re sharing a room. There’s one bed.”

“Valid points,” he commented, nodding thoughtfully. “We have no excuse really. If there is just one bed, we obviously have to use it.” He said it so logically and practically that she couldn’t help but laugh at his earnest assessment. “There might even be a law or something about it. We wouldn’t want to get in trouble.”

“Dork,” she seethed under her breath. “So are you telling me that you aren’t sort of thinking about this too?”

“I won’t lie and say that the thought hasn’t crossed my mind, but a thought is not an expectation, love.” He looked at her a bit more tenderly than the way the conversation demanded, softly taking in the slope of her nose and the way that she expelled a bit of breath through her mouth before tightening her lips and attempting to smile. He liked the way she was not able to completely mask what she felt, giving him insight into her thoughts and fears.

The music slowed a bit, rolling through the air much like the waves under them. They took a cue from it and moved together closer, deliberately elongating their movements. “I should warn you…”

“Love, few sentences end happily after starting like that. But I’m going to go out on a limb here and say that nothing you say will scare me away at this point. I’ve met your son. I’ve met your ex. I’ve seen you at your most competitive and know your horrible tastes in music and movies. So unless you have a deep dark secret that needs revealing…”

She laughed, her hand coming up to the side of his face. “Not exactly a confession. It’s just that I thought I should warn you that my instinct toward running is usually higher after…you know…”

Chuckling, he lowered his lips to the tip of her nose and then forehead. “That’s quite a vote of confidence there, Swan. Perhaps if you are inclined to run away then we aren’t quite on the same page after all.”
Her head leaned backward, neck craning uncomfortably. “I’ve ruined things? I knew I shouldn’t bring it up. It’s just that Ruby made me think and…”

“Nothing is ruined.”

***AAA***

Liam’s uninhibited laugh was quickly becoming Elsa’s favorite sound, especially when she can feel it bubbling up in his chest as she curled up against him in the tight theater seats. They had discussed which type of movie might be best, his own tastes quite different than hers. However, the low brow comedy they chose seemed just the thing. It required little concentration and thinking, which suited her as she let her focus turn to him.

She should not be afraid of him, she had told herself on more than one occasion. He was hardly a scary man, though she had no doubt that he was quite tough when it came down to it. He was charming and sweet, a combination that went well with his natural good looks. There was something always stirring in his mind, another fact that she loved. And he looked at her with a gentle interest that was hard to find anything but flattering.

However, she still struggled to actually let herself believe that he might be interested in her as more than just someone to waste time with before the right one came along. It was hard to struggle between guilt and fear when you felt yourself falling for someone, but that was clearly where Elsa was at. She felt it each time he complimented her or said something so sweet that she wanted to melt. Like instinct, she would brush off his statements with jokes or sarcastic ones of her own. It wasn’t that she wanted to do it.

As the woman on screen made a face that Lucille Ball would have appreciated, Elsa turned a bit in her seat. “This is really nice,” she said, hoping that he wouldn’t be startled by her admission. It wasn’t much on the surface, but she could see that he understood the deeper side to it when his grin grew wider.

“It is,” he echoed. “I think, perhaps, when we get back to Storybrooke, we should make an effort to go out more places. While I like spending a cozy evening with you, this is a fantastic treat.”

It would have been easy to have said something about him probably wanting to keep her hidden, but she bit the inside of her mouth and remained silent. He seemed to appreciate that and wrapped his arm around her tighter and again laughed at the antics on screen. He spent most of the rest of the movie in that position, only taking his eyes from the screen to look at her in a quiet moment before kissing her soundly.

After the movie was over, they found themselves sharing overpriced and heavily whipped coffee drinks in a café that seemed to be a combination of bookstore and someone’s living room. There are no booths or tables, leaving them to sip companionably on a love seat that might have spent the previous 10 years in a garage before finding its way to the café. It was an orange sort of crushed velvet that had long since become worn and no longer a soft as it should have been. His arm was over the back of the love seat and his right hand held the mug that did not match Elsa’s in the slightest. A plate of biscotti, cookies, and other treats rested on his knee with perfect balance. She was holding her mug with both hands, blowing over the steaming contents.

“I like this song,” she said, gesturing her chin toward the lone guitar player on what constituted a stage in the small room. “I’ve heard better covers of it, but it’s still a good song.”

“Aye. Do you ever imagine a day when there will be some talentless bloke covering one of your songs in a coffee house?” The guitarist struggled with the song a bit, going off tune for a few
measures before pulling himself back into the music. Liam tried not to cringe outwardly.

“I think I’m too focused on people hearing me sing my songs. The idea that anyone would want to emulate me is pretty foreign. What about you? I don’t think I’ve ever heard you mention the plans for your band. Are you hoping to do more than a few weekend gigs and gather a few groupies?”

Placing the mug next to him, Liam readjusted the plate and offered her one of the cashew and caramel bites that the barista had insisted were the best. “I’m afraid I’m a bit too old to be thinking of legions of fans and touring the world being one party after another. I would rather concentrate on the music and hope that people will hear it and like what they hear. Maybe then I’ll get bored of it and find another day job.”

It was a standard answer of many musicians and artists that Elsa could easily recognize. Few who truly loved their given medium were drawn in by the allure of fame and fortune. It seemed enough and even too much at times to consider making a living at something that was so much a love and passion for them. “It is hard to imagine though,” she said almost as if talking to herself. “I don’t know that I’ll ever feel secure enough in music that I won’t worry about the instability of it as a career.”

“Someone as talented as you are shouldn’t be worried about anything about when their big break is going to happen,” Liam said, again holding his mug and taking a long sip from it. “I’m going to eat my hat if you don’t make it big and forget about all of us in Storybrooke. We’ll be watching those bloody entertainment shows and seeing you rush past the paparazzi with giant sunglasses and a few beefy security guards flanking you.”

While he appreciated Elsa’s honesty and determination, he had to admit it was hard to tell when she was joking or being sarcastic. So when she slapped his chest and looked a bit pouty, he had to dissect her words carefully. “First,” she said as though she was teaching a lesson, “you aren’t wearing a hat. And second, I’ll always have time for people I care about.”

One side of his mouth rose and then the other, his head tilting toward hers. “Dare I hope that means I make that list? People you care about.”

For a moment she looked embarrassed to have said it, making her feel as though she had just put some invisible pressure on him to say something similar. It was something that all the magazines and articles warned about, a trap in the making. “Maybe,” she said, scrunching her nose at how coy that sounded coming out of her mouth. “Or maybe I’m just trying to make sure I’m first in line when you and the guys make it big. I’ll buy the t-shirts and the keychains. Maybe I’ll even get one of those travel coffee containers so that you’re always right there beside me in my car.”

“And that’s all you want from me?” he asked, his teasing voice barely hiding the probing of the question. “To be a groupie.”

“Number one groupie,” she corrected. “After all, I’ll be making it big too. We can negotiate something like taking turns being each other’s opening acts.” Her lips pursed into an almost smile as she settled into the worn seat cushions with a pleased expression. “I’m thinking world tour.”

“Sounds like a great plan,” Liam noted, kissing her temple before he joined her in the relaxed state. “So all we have to do is make it big?”

“Easy, right?”

***AAA***
“I heard a rumor that you were here,” Ruby said when she entered through the back door of the kitchen at the apartment she and Granny shared. Her overly tall stilettos were dangling from her fingers and her jacket was clearly not hers, as its oversized nature indicated the she had pilfered it from a man. The makeup that she had carefully painted on earlier was fading a bit and she looked tired when she dropped keys, purse, and shoes onto a chair that sat underneath an old-fashioned landline phone on the wall. “You raiding the bar or the snacks?”

Henry looked up from his spot there at the kitchen’s peninsula where he had been nursing a mug of hot chocolate with his chin resting in his hand. “Hot chocolate.” His voice was barely a whisper.

The dark haired woman nodded and pulled a bottle of water out of the refrigerator before joining him in the other stool. Ignoring his pout, she began her nightly routine of removing earrings and necklaces before taking exactly two sips of water and looking back at him. “You don’t have to be quiet. Granny sleeps with earphones and one of those sound machines. She won’t hear you. It’s a deal we made when I was a little older than you. If she doesn’t hear it, see it, or smell it, then it’s not happening.”

“I couldn’t sleep.”

Ruby had already received a call from her grandmother about Neal and the fact that Henry would be joining them for the evening. It wasn’t the first time that Neal had foisted the child of on someone else, but Ruby knew from experience that a diagnosis of kidney stones was not one she would wish on anyone. “You’re your mother’s son. Chocolate helps.”

“Mom doesn’t know I’m here.” The silver spoon was engraved with an L for Lucas and sat next to the red and orange mug. He lifted it and spooned up some of the whipped cream that was doused liberally with cinnamon. “I asked Granny to not tell her yet.”

Gulping a bit more of the water, Ruby nodded again. “But you have to call in the morning, right?”

“Yeah.”

She knew the short version of what Henry was dealing with, having talked to Granny. However, there was clearly something else bothering him as he sat there regarding the chocolate drink for answers. Reaching up both hands, she ran her fingers through the tangled mass of curls and drew the thick long strands of hair into a sort of knot, using one hand to hold it and the other to blindly search for a clip. Finding one and securing it, she gave in and asked him what was troubling his young mind.

“My mom called earlier. She was getting on a boat for a dinner date and she wanted to check on me.”

That sounded like something Emma would do, Ruby reasoned, not taking time to celebrate that her friend was clearly being romanced by Killian. She always thought of her son first, even taking time out of girls nights out to call or send him a message. When she and Mary Margaret had gone on a long weekend trip into the mountains, she had plucked up souvenirs from each quaint little shop and took pictures of things that Henry would enjoy. “That was nice of her?” Ruby asked, wondering if Henry might be feeling a bit too old for his mother’s ardent attention.

“It was, but I…I lied. I didn’t tell her about Dad or Tamara. I didn’t tell her that I’m here. I don’t want her to cut her time in Boston short because of me, but I had to lie.”

Lips turned down and his eyes almost shining with unshed tears, she could see that the idea of being dishonest with his mother was a big deal to Henry. It wasn’t that he was a saint or abnormal child.
She could remember the day that he had lied about some homework assignment, an insignificant little matter that could have easily been swept aside. However, Emma had not reacted that way. She had not yelled or threatened punishment. Instead she had sat him down in their living room and reminded him that it was (at that time) just the two of them. They had to trust each other, she had implored, which meant that they could never lie to each other. It seemed that Henry had taken that lesson to heart.

“I think she will understand,” Ruby offered helpfully. “She would just be worried that you weren’t safe or that you weren’t happy. I know we don’t have the big flat screen like Neal does and we don’t offer you expensive dinners at places other than Granny’s, but I don’t think it is so bad here. We’ll call her in the morning and explain.”

“We’ll come clean?”

“Your mom is going to understand. And she might even be secretly a little glad because I think she’s been looking forward to this date with Killian.”

The boy drank again from the mug that wasn’t quite as hot any more. “I think she’s excited about it. He’s her type, right?”

The water bottle was part way up to her lips when she heard that, causing her to sway back as if slapped. “You are spending way too much time talking to Granny about dating. She’ll warp your mind, kid. Let’s make a deal. If you have questions about love and dating and stuff, come to me or your mom. Not Granny.”

***AAA***

The heat coming from the vents in the cab they were sharing back to the hotel was not exactly reaching the backseat. Unlike the wine excuse, which Killian pointed out didn’t work because she had only had two glasses, the lack of heat meant that it was acceptable to snuggle into his side as the lights of Boston blurred outside the vehicle. She was not really looking at the scenery, as she had seen it more than a few times recently. Besides it was more than a little comfortable close her eyes and rest her forehead just where his neck met his shoulders.

“Tired?” he asked, the one word echoing in his chest and vibrating against her ear.

“Comfy,” she corrected, trying not to think of that one bed waiting back in the room. Ruby was not incorrect that it had been a while since she had spent the night with any man. But David was right too that she had learned to compartmentalize her life to the point that she acted with men without regard to emotion or reason. However, Killian was different. And she still wasn’t sure if she was ready for different.

His left arm pulled her in tighter as he buried his face in her soft blonde hair and mumbled something she wasn’t quite sure she understood. He was holding his phone in his hand and made note that Elsa and Liam had begged off going out to find a nightclub with the others, claiming that Elsa was tired and ready for some quiet.

“Would you be disappointed if I said I was too?” she asked, her lips near the collar of his shirt. “I think we did enough dancing on the boat.”

“I was thinking the same.” He used his thumb to acknowledge the message and then tucked the device into his coat pocket. “Emma, I think that perhaps we should talk about tonight.”

Her head rolled forward, allowing her to bury her face in the soft material of his shirt, inhaling the
scent that was a combination of his laundry detergent, cologne, and the sweat of the evening’s dancing. “I don’t want to,” she said honestly and sullenly. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

There was amusement in his chuckle as he again lowered his face to her hair, kissing the back of her head. “I just don’t wish for you to think I have any expectations. I know that the obvious conclusion of two adults sharing a bed and room is…”

“Sex?” she asked, raising her head to note the driver was not in fact watching them through the mirror more than the traffic.

“Aye. But I have no intention of rushing us along any path that makes you want to run away from me. If you want to curl up and watch your blasted HGTV and try to guess which house these blokes will choose, then I’m more than willing. I hope that it does not come as any surprise to you that I enjoy your company and would rather spend a quiet evening hearing you pontificate about the differences in detached houses and row houses than spend it alone.”

She hardly wanted to have this conversation in the back of a cab, but the idea that he was making it her choice was just another check in his column of good qualities. “Maybe,” she said, moving up so that she was closer to his ear. “We go back to the room and stop planning things. We just see what happens.”

“Do you mean we should plan to be spontaneous?” he asked, mocking her with a look of shock, jaw slack and eyes wide.

“I mean we should do what feels right.” She shifted, her legs finding a comfortable position over his thighs. “And I’m enjoying myself. Maybe we should do less talking and thinking.”

***AAA***

Elsa and Liam had taken a similar route, the two of them curled up under one of the blankets. He was flat on his back with his head propped on a pillow and she laid next to him, using him as her own version of a pillow. The one difference between them and Killian and Emma was that they had taken to watching a cooking competition.

“I wouldn’t even know what to do with tripe,” Elsa said, wrinkling her nose in disgust. “Isn’t that…”

“Stomach lining of a cow,” Liam answered with an equal disdain. “A delicacy I’m sure, but one I’d rather not attempt to cook or eat.”

“There are so many perfectly lovely foods out there. Rich and decadent foods, spicy and succulent. Why would anyone want to go with that?” She shuddered as the man on camera nearly cut himself in the hurried attempt to make his dish in the time limit. She was very squeamish when it came to blood.

She hummed as his hand massaged through her hair, fingers tangling with the length as they continued their not exactly expert analysis of the culinary competition. There was a soothing and soft nature to his ministrations that made her feel warm and gooey from the attention.

“You’re trying to distract me,” she complained when he asked what she would make from the next set of mystery ingredients that included flank steak, cotton candy, boiled peanuts, and kimchi. Just as she opened her mouth to answer, he had maneuvered his arm under rolling them until he was facing her.

“Is that what you call it?” he asked, his look in his eyes lustful not scary.
Lifting her head off the mattress just a fraction, she met his mouth with her own in a sound kiss, before letting it fall backwards and bringing him with her. They forgot the show for a bit, letting the remote fall off the bed as their lips and mouths explored, hands groping but not unintentional in their movements. It was on the tip of her tongue to ask what had prompted such a reaction from him, but that inner voice told her to stop questioning and just enjoy the moment with him.

Liam pulled her close to him and wrapped his arms around her, running his hands along her sides, bunching the fabric of her shirt in his grip. Her tilted back, he placed his lips on hers. The kiss slowly intensified, and became stronger than the kisses they had shared before. He finally broke it off so he could look at her, and drink in all of her beauty. He couldn't believe how much time he had wasted already, and he had no plans to let any more time with this perfect girl in front of him pass him by.

She ran her teeth along her bottom lip, trying not to read too much into his pause. “Liam?”

“Just wondering if you’re real,” he said, laughing at himself. “I am not sure I fully believe it.”

“I am,” she assured, smiling at him again and nuzzling her head against his chest. “I wonder about you though.” Liam stroked her hair softly and smiled. He felt like he could stay like this forever until he heard his Will’s voice through the door asking for the passcode for the locked minibar in his room.

***AAA***

“What are you doing?” she asked as Killian bypassed the main elevator and led her toward the parking garage. “Why are we…”

“I thought you wanted more action and less conversation.” He was gripping her hand solidly, their fingers entwined and his footsteps quick. “Or however that song goes.”

“You’re going to start singing Elvis now?” she teased. However he didn’t answer her as he situated them in his jeep. "Where are you taking me, Killian?" He kept his eyes on the road and remained mysterious, telling her to close her eyes or he would blindfold her. "You'll see in a few minutes, just keep your eyes closed. And, if you open them, I will catch you." Emma nodded and tried her best to keep her promise. She tried to lift her lids only slightly, but all she saw was darkness and streetlights. She sighed and shut her eyes again, determined to enjoy whatever surprise he might have in store for her. Minutes later, she heard the car pull off the main road and she could tell it was driving over twigs and grass. She felt the car pull to a stop, and Killian shut the engine off. "Don't move, love. Don't open your eyes." She groaned in frustration. "Alright..." She could hear Killian get out of his seat and shut the door behind him. She heard a soft rustling outside, and then a draft of cold air as her passenger door opened beside her. Killian placed his hand gently on her arm and kissed her cheek. "Come on, follow me... eyes closed..." She undid her seatbelt and carefully stepped out of the car, trying not to fall over in her state of current blindness. Killian held on to her arm and led her just a few steps away. He stopped and then moved behind her to wrap his arms around her. Leaning forward, he softly whispered into her ear. "Open your eyes..." She slowly opened her eyes and looked out at the city in front of her. From this spot she could see all of Boston. “It’s beautiful here,” she breathed, leaning back into his embrace. “But is this like a make out spot? Aren’t we a little old for this.”

“I didn’t come up here for that,” he said, squeezing a bit tighter as the wind blew. “I just thought that we might enjoy a moment without expectations or choices. A moment where we are just Killian and Emma.”

She stared out at the lights, seeing them for the businesses and residences that made up the town. “I almost made this home,” she said quietly, looking out on it with new eyes. “I lived here for a while.
Kind of liked it. It's different than Storybrooke. Easier to get lost in and to hide who you really are.”

“I'm rather happy you have made Storybrooke your home.” His voice sounded thick and melodic. “I
would not have met you otherwise.”

Her head was resting on his shoulder as she pointed out a few of the places they had not seen on the
boat. She noted where her apartment had been and the things she had loved about living there. There
were the coffee places and a bookstore she frequented. There was the corner grocery where she
could get all her favorite things. So many details that she had not thought of in years assaulted her
senses. Yet even as she reminisced, she realized she did not truly miss them. “It looks smaller now,”
she noted. “Like it isn’t as big and scary as I thought before.”

“Perhaps you are different now,” he said softly. “Perhaps you are braver.”

Emma turned and looked up at him, the reflection of city’s lights were shining in his blue eyes. He
smiled back at her and gently moved his hand through her hair, leaving it to rest at the nape of her
neck. “Maybe I’m realizing that home isn’t a place. It’s the people. I can live anywhere, but if I’m
not with the people I love and care about it doesn’t matter.”

Killian leaned forward and kissed her passionately, until they both seemed to be out of air. He smiled
and clasped her hand, motioning towards the jeep with a tilt of his head. Leading her over, he helped
her onto the hood of the jeep. He leaned back against the window to get a view of the stars, and she
laid next to him to take in the same view.

“Sometimes I worry too much,” she said, breaking the silence again. “I think that the world is going
to come to an end or something bad will happen if I’m happy. Like there is this giant scale out there
and it has to be in balance so I have to pay for the happy moments. And no matter how much I tell
myself to stop, I keep thinking that I’m too happy when I’m with you. Maybe I'm going to wake up
and be back in my apartment, and it will just be some long, weird dream.”

He wrapped his hand around hers and held on tightly. "I know what you mean... But, this is real. Of
course, there's part of my brain that is always worried about the next catastrophe, when it's going to
happen and what it's going to do to all of us. It just seems like things are always going wrong for the
people I care about."

"I guess we have that in common. This worrying thing. We spend more time worrying about things
than we do actually enjoying life. So let’s make a deal. No more worrying. Not tonight. We can sit
here and enjoy this beautiful view and not think that an asteroid is going to come and strike us down.
Okay?"

Killian nodded again and smiled. "Okay... No more worrying."

She smiled in return and laid back down, snuggling closer to him. She had spent far too long mired
in her painful past, and she had decided not to let it get her down anymore. She didn't want to think
too hard about the future either, she wanted to take each moment step by step and enjoy them. She
and Killian laid there on the hood of his jeep for a little while longer, chatting quietly about less-
complicated thoughts underneath the twinkling starlight. And she loved every second of it.

When they returned to their room, there was no question for either of them about next steps or
complicated entanglements. Instead they appreciated the quietness of the moment and showed each
other physically what they weren't ready to say with words.
Chapter 19

Emma had learned many things in her nearly three decades of life. She had learned the basics of walking, talking, and functioning. She’d learned to drive a car when one of her foster siblings stole one and expected her to take it on. She’d learned to swim when there was a party at the community pool and someone threw her in the deep end. She’d learned to be a mother by trying to emulate things and a lot of trial and error. But learning what made Killian tick was quickly becoming a favorite pastime. For one, she realized that his accent was thicker with fatigue, almost so thick that it sounded as though he spoke another language. He was a light sleeper and tended to talk in his sleep, saying such things as his affinity for lima beans and worrying that the bathtub was not draining fast enough. She also learned that his blue eyes somehow glowed with emotions she had not yet described even to herself. If she was silent enough, she could hear them in the way he gazed at her and the way his hand touched her in such a way that she felt for a moment that she might be as precious as he seemed to think. All of that had occurred in a single night, which made her wonder what else she didn’t know.

Liam was the first to have called that morning, his texts having gone unanswered. Killian grunted more than spoke to his brother, but agreed that breakfast did sound good. Then he promptly rolled over, wrapped an arm about Emma and was falling back asleep.

“Your brother is going to wonder where you are,” she said, gently tapping him until he opened one eye to look at her over the corner of his pillow. “You just promised to have breakfast with him.”

“Bloody wanker should have invited us to lunch,” he muttered. “I’m rather content here in this bed.”

“You promised,” she reminded him gently. Her eyes were at least open and taking in the room that was dimly lit around the curtains that were pulled. It was a bit of a mess at the moment with their clothes in piles where they shed them and the comforter from the bed over in a corner as though it was a bit traumatized by what it had witnessed. “And just think. It gives us a reason we don’t have to talk yet.”

His head lifted off the bed so he could look at her rather curiously before a grin cracked through what appeared concerned features. “You mean Emma Swan is wanting to avoid a potentially awkward conversation. I think last night was bloody fantastic. You were…” She silenced him with her finger against his lips.

“Don’t say it was anything bad or awkward. I was thinking it went without saying that I enjoyed last night too. But if you need me to stroke your ego…”

She squealed as he rolled them so that she was splayed across his chest, pulling the sheet up over their heads as though it might protect them from what the morning after always brought and the pending breakfast with his brother. “Emma, I hardly need you to give me a boost of confidence. I am not ashamed to tell you that I’m rather proud that my performance did not send you running for the hills. Though I did consider hiding your shoes so that feat would have been harder to manage.”

“I’m here,” she said, partially to herself. “I don’t want to be any place else.” Even as she said it, she felt that drop in her stomach like she did when she rode a roller coaster. Saying such a thing, even when it wasn’t laced with other words too hard to say, was something that she avoided. It made her vulnerable, something she loathed to be with anyone.
“Aye, me too,” he said, again taking in the sight of her there so close to him. Her hair was more tangled than perfect and her eyes a bit bleary from not quite enough sleep. “But you are right that I did promise that brother of mine. I suppose we should get up and going before he comes barging in here demanding to go for pancakes.”

Rubbing her hand over his chest in a half circle, she flashed her dimples at him coyly. “I’m feeling pretty generous here, tiger. You can have the shower first.” There is a look of genuine pride in offering this to him, though she wasn’t exactly being selfless at the moment. She needed to call her son, check on him, and ensure that everything was fine. He had sounded a bit tense the night before, which she had tried to pass off as her being overprotective. Still, she wanted to hear his voice and even question him a bit on the situation with his father and Tamara. She wasn’t fooling anyone, as Killian dropped a kiss on her full lips and smiled.

“Say hello to the lad for me,” he said with a smirk as he detangled himself from the bed sheets and headed toward the adjoining bathroom. “I hope he’s finding some time to practice.”

The bed bounced with the force she threw herself back down on the mattress, frowning at him and biting back a giggle when he wiggled his hips a bit before shutting the door. Blindly reaching down onto the floor, she pulled back one of his shirts and donned it before digging out her phone and placing the call. Her first assumption was that her son was dining on breakfast at Granny’s, which would explain why the grumpy and yet caring matriarch’s voice was also sounding in Emma’s ear.

“Dad’s kind of sick,” Henry explained, hurriedly running through both what had happened and how Granny and Ruby had come to his rescue. He even apologized, which Emma realized was what had been wrong before. He was feeling guilty.

“Okay, so I need to come get you,” she said, bypassing her initial anger at Neal and Tamara for abandoning her son and not even bothering to update him on his father’s condition. They hadn’t even bothered to call her and let her know that something was wrong. Swinging her long legs over the side of the bed, she went into that professional mother mode where she was making lists and checking them off in an effort to get this done. Storybrooke was at least a two and half hour drive. She’d have to make it twice. If she left now she could be back by dinner. She’d get another room at the hotel for her to share with her son. Maybe she could arrange that before she left. Henry couldn’t come into the club where the two groups were playing, but he could stay at the hotel. Maybe there was a service she could call. Or maybe Ruby could…

“Swan, what’s going on?” Killian said. A towel was wrapped about his hips and he was rubbing his wet hair with a smaller towel as the cloud of steam escaped from the confines of the bathroom behind him. “Is there a problem.”

She quickly explained the situation, including that she couldn’t leave Henry with Granny when it was the woman’s monthly turn to host supper club for some of the older residents in town. Ruby had some sort of plans and Mary Margaret was busy with David for the weekend. She had no choice. Throwing the silvery shoes she had worn the night before into her bag, she smiled apologetically.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I should have known that…” Again her face fell as she realized she couldn’t exactly blame Neal for his condition, but she was not happy to hear that his girlfriend had completely ignored the responsibility to caring for Henry. “Oh God, the bands. I need to confirm…” She dug into her purse again for her notes and was scrolling through them as Killian stepped up behind her. His reaction was much calmer than hers and with a steady hand, he plucked the phone away and waited for her attention. “I need that, Killian.”

“Darling, I know. But you can’t work yourself up like this. I have a plan. You stay here and get the groups ready to go. Do your job. I will head back and retrieve the boy myself. I’ll bring him here and
he and I can spend some time together tonight rather than him having to go to some night club. Sound like a plan?”

He had already tossed his hand towel aside and rubbed his nose against her cheek before planting a kiss there. “Killian, that’s really sweet, but I can’t ask you to do that.” She was still in his embrace, his body damp from the shower and making the borrowed shirt she was wearing cling to her body even more.

“You’re not asking, love. I’m volunteering.” He kissed the side of her mouth. “I am rather fond of Henry. I have no problem spending a little time with the lad. It sounds much more interesting to me than listening to my brother and those blokes struggle through songs that I normally love.”

She looked reluctant to accept his offer, exchanging her glances between his damp features and the phone he was holding. “Are you sure? I can…”

“I have no doubt that you can do anything you set your mind to, Emma, but it isn’t necessary. Now, go get ready. We’ll eat with my brother and your lovely friend. I’ll make haste toward Storybrooke, and you go do your magic to make sure tonight is a resounding success.”

The fresh scent of soap from his skin tickled her nostrils as she closed her eyes and let her head fall onto his shoulder. “I guess I can’t refuse. So I owe you a favor now?”

“We’ll talk about that later.”

***AAA***

Elsa and Liam might have shared much in common when it came to their abilities with music and interest in such, but their breakfast plates told another story. Liam had piled his high with sausages and eggs. Those items and fresh waffles dripping with butter and syrup were at the base of his mountain. By contrast Elsa was sipping on black coffee and picking at a whole wheat bagel with an egg white omelet.

They gave Killian and Emma knowing looks before directing the duo toward the buffet for breakfast and suggesting that Emma might hurry if she wanted a bear claw. Emma was still fussing with the coffee machine when Killian came back to the table and dropped his items. Having already finished what she wanted, Elsa went in search of her friend to help and left the brothers behind.

“Good night, little brother?” Liam said, not lifting his eyes from his plate. “You certainly took your time getting down here this morning.”

In their earlier life it had always been Liam who lectured Killian. He was the one who had expected promptness and cautioned the more impetuous of the brothers to think before he acted. Lately that dynamic had changed as Liam became more free spirited and Killian less so. It was an interesting development to have the roles reversed again, even if just for a moment.

“I could ask you the same, but you look rather frustrated, brother,” Killian said, not bothering to ask his older brother to stop referring to him as little. “So I suggest we keep our business to ourselves? Shall we?”

There wasn’t much time to argue as the women return to the table and wave off the guy’s attempts to get them more to drink or other options. Instead the four of them eat hurriedly so that Killian can get on the road. If Liam had an opinion about his brother again being relegated to caring for a child, he kept it to himself and concentrated more on the litany of requests from Emma. He assured her that he was very much ready for that night and would roust out the other members of the band soon enough.
“I should get on my way,” Killian said, standing abruptly and smiling down at Emma. “Anything else you would like me to fetch on my trip?”

“I think you’re being gracious and perfect enough as is,” she said, rolling her eyes a bit. “Let’s dial it back a bit.” He lifted her hand up and kissed at the knuckles, raising his eyebrows as he looked challengingly at her. “Alright, alright.”

Liam said he still had a bit of work to do on the closing song the band was planning to perform, something about the lyrics not flowing as they should. While Elsa seemed to disagree, she jumped at the chance to spend a bit of time with Emma and promised that she would come find him later. Once alone, she pursed her lips together and stared at her friend until Emma finally spoke.

“What?” Emma asked, her fork cutting through her own waffle. “Elsa, you can’t stare like that and think I won’t feel uncomfortable.”

“You and Killian?” Elsa said wiggling back and forth in her seat, smiling in a way that only she and her sister could. “Come on…”

“Me and Killian,” Emma repeated, dragging the waffle corner through a bit more of syrup. “I need more than that before I can answer. What about us?”

Her hands clenching at the edge of the table, Elsa leaned in and raised her eyebrows even more. “You know what I’m asking.” Clearly the woman was exasperated as she waited for Emma to respond. When none came, she collapsed back into the seat and crossed her arms over her chest. “ Seriously, you’re annoying when you have a secret.”

Licking a bit of the syrup out of the corner of her lips, Emma watched as Elsa practically pouted. “I don’t have any secrets worth all that pouting. But I do have a question. Are you okay with doing an interview with a trade magazine later this afternoon? The guy doesn’t usually do tests or debuts, but I managed to convince him to check you guys out tonight. He wants to do the interview first though since he’s got plans with his family tomorrow.”

Normally Elsa would have been panicked to hear that she had to do another interview. The questions were always awkward and her answers more so. No matter how much media training they had her do, she could never see it as just a conversation, hating the way she either sounded stilted or perturbed. However, she was clearly on a mission for information.

“Liam likes you, you know,” she said, taking another approach. “He said he thinks you are good for his brother.”

Emma hummed as she punched a few things on her phone. “That’s nice.”

“He was a little disappointed that you and Killian didn’t come with us last night to dinner and the movies. But he said that his brother had something romantic planned for you. So was it? Was it?” She tapped her foot impatiently under the table.

“Oh and August said he’d like to talk to you and Anna for one of his blogs. I know he’s not really music affiliated, but that is a huge audience right there. It could be great. Maybe we could provide a few samples that he could host for us. I think that would be a good idea.” Her eyes scanned her email, not bothering to look at Elsa’s petulant expression.

“I would tell you.”

That did it. Emma’s attention snapped to the blonde sitting there with her. “Elsa, you would not. Don’t even try to lie and say you would.”
“Okay I wouldn’t. But I am curious. I don’t need details, but…”

“Things are going well,” Emma said noncommittally. She wasn’t even sure how to describe the comfortable and yet gnawing feeling that she had right now. Trust was a funny thing and here she was again trusting this guy with her son. Never mind that he was a teacher and Henry seemed to adore him. She was usually fiercely independent and hated the idea of owing anyone for favors or assistance. “We… Things… Well, last night was very romantic.”

Elsa seemed to like that answer, wrapping her arms across her chest as though hugging herself. “Anything you can put into words. I’m kind of stuck on ideas for a song that I’ve been writing.”

Turning her attention back to her phone, Emma shook her head. “Don’t you have enough inspiration with Liam? I would think that…”

“Fine,” she answered sullenly. “I was just trying to find some extra something for the song.”

“You’re the musician, Elsa. I’m just the behind the scenes person. Speaking of which. You and your sister need to decide about your outfits for tonight. I want something with small or no patterns. It will photograph better. If you insist on skirts or dresses, make sure they are long enough that you are comfortable sitting on a stool. Oh and make sure you have your stuff ready for my kit. You know… guitar strings, hair clips, tape, aspirin, etc. I don’t want any panic tonight. And go over your answers for these interviews. Got it?”

Giving her friend and manager a mock salute, Elsa pushed back from the table. “Got it. You don’t want to do the friend thing today.”

“Thank you,” Emma added with her own mocking. “Oh and by the way? He turned dancing on a boat and sitting under the stars and talking about everything and nothing from a fairy tale into reality. How’s that?”

The grin that broke out on Elsa’s face was adorable as she practically hugged her friend around the neck. “That’s what I’m talking about.”

***AAA***

Killian could barely contain his smile as he watched Henry bound from the jeep and hug his mother as if he hadn’t seen her in months. She clearly loved her son, as she reciprocated the hug with a tight squeeze and nuzzle before she pulled him close with a hand under his chin. She said something to him that the music teacher couldn’t hear, though he could tell that whatever it was seemed to sit well with the boy. His smile grew and he waved over Killian who had thrown the boy’s overnight bag over his shoulder and was making his way there.

“Glad to see me?” he asked Emma, not fully expecting her to regard him with any sort of affection in front of her son. He received a bit of a surprise when she brusher her lips against his cheek and welcomed him back.

“So I have a plan, if you are both up to it,” she said, throwing her phone back into the pocket of her leather jacket. “I’ve got this concert thing tonight, but we have a little time tomorrow before we need to be back in Storybrooke. Maybe we should try to take in the afternoon game at Fenway or we could go the aquarium.”

Henry snuck a look at Killian, smiling almost shyly at his teacher. “You mean all three of us?”

“That’s what I meant,” she said. “I mean unless either of you have other plans.” To Killian’s surprise she had not moved from his side and even lightly snaked an arm around his waist. “It seems like a
“I’m certainly game for it,” Killian chimed in, realizing he hadn’t agreed and both mother and son were looking at him expectantly. It was not lost on him that Emma did not seem the type to include men in on her family time. She kept a bit of a divider on her romantic life and her son. So an invitation to be included on such a thing was more momentous than even the favor of transporting the boy from Maine to Boston. “I can’t imagine a better way to spend the day than with the two of you.”

The phone that Emma had just discarded chirped again, causing her to roll her eyes. “Sorry. I’m trying to get the local radio station to play a sneak of Elsa and Anna’s song. This might be them. You two discuss what we’re going to do, okay?” She took about ten steps away with the phone at her ear and the other hand covered her other ear in an attempt to hear better in the large and echoing parking garage.

Killian switched his gaze from her to Henry, nodding toward the double doors into the hotel. “So which option do you prefer?”

***AAA***

Elsa buttoned her shirt and then grimaced in the mirror. Nothing she was picking out to wear really suited her, but her options were limited. Turning back to the simple blue and purple dress that was just tight enough to hug her curves and long enough that she could sit comfortably, she settled on it and matched it with a purple belt, matching shoes, and a silver pair of earrings that Anna had given her for Christmas the year before.

From the main room she could hear Liam strumming his guitar, his voice faint through the door. She could barely make out any of the words or notes, but she was sure he was as nervous as she was. Occasionally he would stop, probably scribbling something on that small notepad she had seen him carrying around.

Emerging from the bathroom, she heard none of the music as he stopped his work to stare at her with something akin to awe. “Darling, you look beautiful.”

She wrinkled her nose as she smiled, running her hands along the sides of her dress. “Are you sure? Maybe I should go more casual.”

“You are a vision,” he told her, throwing the guitar aside on the bed and circling round to her. “I want nothing more than to see you perform tonight, but I’m starting to realize how bad I am at this. The thought of sharing you with adoring fans is a bit hard on my ego.”

“More like drunk bar patrons and a few bored housewives.” She looped her arms around his broad shoulders and smiled. “What were you working on?”

“That sodding chorus is doing me in,” he said, looking as tired as he sounded. “Technically it could work, but it’s just off. I can’t get the words to flow like they should. I don’t want to touch the music though. The lads already know it and we can’t change it at this late date.” He kissed one of her cheeks and then the other, stopping to kiss both the tip of her nose and her forehead. When she giggled, he smiled back at her with tired resignation. “Dot to dot snogging?”

“You’re cute when you’re tired, but come on. Try and get a nap before the show. I’m going to go find Anna and see if we’re all set. I can’t believe this is all happening. It feels like we’re making progress. Like this could all be real.” She could feel the heat of her blood rushing through her as she realized how young and hopeful she sounded, full of dreams and aspirations that were not exactly
grounded in practical thinking. But she truly wanted those things, even if it meant she might have to be a little less than her usually pragmatic self.

“I’d love to, darling, but I need to finish this…”

She dropped one of her hands from his shoulder and pressed a finger to his lips, which he promptly kissed the pad of and made her laugh again. “It’ll come to you. But you don’t want to go on stage tonight and appear to be tired or disinterested. So just take a power nap, okay?”

“You’re adorable when you are bossy.”

***AAA***

Emma stabbed the earring through her lobe and ran a hand through her hair. She was used to these sneak peek shows and knew that it would be a small crowd with few who were there for it. The hope was that the girls and the guys could entertain and win over the people there to celebrate the end of the week with a drink or a game of pool. Smoothing her hands over the burgundy top and her jeans, she made her way out of the suite that she had managed to upgrade to for the night and headed down to the heated pool where Killian and Henry were spending some time before their “men’s night out.”

The scent of chlorine was pretty strong as she entered the glassed in area where more than a few families were having races from one end to the other and games of water tag. She couldn’t help but hear Henry’s loud laugh even over the sounds of everyone else as he and Killian did cannon balls into the deep end and came up to the surface with sputtering laughs of joy.

“Don’t you dare get my clothes wet,” she said, holding out her arms for protection when Killian climbed out and headed toward her with a predatory look. “I don’t want to have to explain that tonight.”

“Where’s your sense of adventure, love?” he asked as Henry joined along side of him and waved his head to dispel drops of water from his hair.

“It goes out the window when it comes to work,” she said, taking a step back in her knee high black boots. “Don’t you dare.”

Killian stopped mid trek, water dripping off every surface of him. Henry however took three more steps before he realized his mother was not playing games. “I suppose we should take a note and admire your mum from afar,” he suggested. “Tell her how absolutely lovely she looks.”

Rolling his eyes in a way reminiscent of his mother, Henry muttered a compliment about his mom’s hair and then looked to Killian for approval. When he got no more than a slight twitch of a smile, he turned back to Emma. “You look nice, mom,” he said with a lack of enthusiasm. “Real nice.”

Emma laughed and crossed her arms over her chest. “That wasn’t awkward at all,” she teased. “I think Killian should have you practice on someone other than a blood relative though. Keep the creepy factor down.”

Taking the opportunity, Henry pointed toward the diving board several feet away. “Mom, you have to see this new dive that Killian taught me.” Without waiting for an answer he was headed toward the diving board.

“Killian?” Emma asked, having already discussed what Henry should call his teacher outside the classroom.
“Mr. Jones seems a bit awkward and formal when we’re outside those walls,” Killian said taking the towel from her and attempting to do as much drying off as he could. “And I was sort of hoping that we might be seeing each other enough that he would have the occasion to use it.” The color in Killian’s cheeks stood out as he stared down at the decorated concrete around the pool. “You aren’t upset, are you?”

“Not upset,” she assured him. She stared toward where her son was two away from diving into the water. He waved to her enthusiastically and pointed toward the water in case she had forgotten what he was going to do. “Are you sure you’re willing to watch him? I did not mean for you to end up on child duty again.”

He smiled tenderly at her and waved off toward the pool himself. “Love, this is hardly a hardship. And your son is hardly the worst of the demon spawn I have met in my line of work. He shows no signs of an affinity toward arson or homicide. I’d say that an evening with him will be entertaining and enjoyable. We have some very manly things planned. I am thinking a trip down to the quarter is order, perhaps some beer and burgers. Maybe movie at that little red adult rated movie house.”

“And back in the room by nine?” Emma asked, biting back a laugh. “He does have a curfew.”

“But of course, love. We’ll do the early bird manly thing. We can rent a few things on the telly, charge them to your expense account.”

“Don’t forget to empty out the minibar. I mean if you’re going to live like rock stars.” She could not lean in to kiss him like she was dying to do. Instead she settled for brushing back a bit of his wet hair from his forehead. Henry was now one person away from jumping into the water and she didn’t want to miss it. “But seriously, I’m sure it will be fine. Just don’t let him sucker you into too much. I mean no trips to Disney World or anything.”

Her hand was still hovering beside his face and he tilted his head toward it, encouraging her to cup his cheek. As she did, he twisted a bit to lay his lips at her wrist in a soft kiss. “We’re about to go upstairs and get cleaned up a bit. We’re headed to some little tourist spot that looks like a diner from the 1950s. After that I believe we are about to watch one of the Harry Potter flicks or whatever else we can find. He did mention that Granny has been teaching him to play poker. We may try our hand at that if I can procure a deck of cards.” Thankfully the itinerary left off there as Henry called out to both Emma and Killian to watch him as he jumped into the air and tucked his knees up under his chin to turn a back somersault all before hitting the water.

Emma clapped her hands over her head and cheered as her son came up for air with the proudest grin possible. Even Killian lifted his hand to his mouth, stuck in two fingers and whistled loudly. Trotting back to them, Henry was greeted with congratulations for his efforts and a comment from Killian that it was far better than he had been doing before. The three of them enjoyed a few more minutes of conversation before members of both musical groups stopped in to gather for the ride over to the club for sound check. Will was, to everyone’s astonishment, the first to arrive. He plopped into one of the lounge chairs with his legs crossed at his ankles.

“No one told me it was children’s hour,” he said, giving a sour look at the pool’s occupants. “Seems to me that there would be better places for these lads.”

Killian chuckled, tossing Henry a towel, as the boy kept dripping all over everything. “You do realize that Anastasia is going to expect to have children someday. You’ll be a father of one of these miniature humans.”

“Mate, it will be different when it’s mine. No grousing about for one. I’m going to have me a proper
kid without all the muss and fuss. And since when have you become the expert, mate? Just because
you’re trying to get at the mom by siding up with the son. Don’t worry though. Nobody will see
through that at all.”

Emma, who was sipping on a drink, looked angrily at the man spouting such nonsense. “You
wouldn’t know how to get on anyone’s good side, would you? That’s going to come back to bite
you in the butt.”

***AAA***

Emma wiped off a spot on the table that seemed to wobble a bit too much. In her years working for
the Mills sisters she had been to plenty of clubs on scouting missions and soft openings like this one.
However, it was rare to have two acts to worry about. Between Anna talking a mile a minute – a
sure sign that she was nervous – Elsa turning practically green, and Robin mentioning three times
already that he would rather being on a camping trip, she was about to go crash men’s night with the
boys and forget this line of work. Maybe there was an opening at Granny’s or perhaps she could
become a deputy. Maybe Leroy would hire her at the mines. It all seemed preferable to dealing with
this.

Emma marched in the direction of where Elsa had her head resting against the edge of the bar as
Liam tried to fan her with one of the menus and listen to Anna try to recall in some sort of order what
states she had visited. Kristoff, Robin, and one of the men from the band for the ladies are Googling
some question that Anna had asked at least four times in hopes of finding an answer and putting an
deal to that conversation.

It wasn’t even just the people there in the club that were getting on Emma’s nerves. Zelena had
texted her and sent a request for Facetime twice, saying she had fantastic news to share. Regina’s
messages were less upbeat and reminded her that money and reputation were riding on this little
outing. Squaring off her shoulders and taking a deep breath, Emma dropped her phone into her bag
and signaled the bartender to cut off the members of both bands.

“Anna, why don’t you save your voice for the stage? I want you to have a bit of hot tea. Robin can
you get that for her. Liam, why don’t you make sure that Will isn’t sneaking out of here to grab
alcohol some place else. I see him headed toward the door. And Kris, I need you and Anastasia to
claim some seats. This place gets busy on Saturday nights. I won’t have time to deal with that later.”
The band members scattered about, even the ones without direct orders to follow. Emma took a step
toward Elsa and brushed back a few of the strands of nearly white blonde hair. “Are you okay?”

Slowly the woman’s eyes opened as she stared back blankly at Emma. “I don’t know.”

“You must be getting annoyed with me. I’m not worth all this fuss.”

Straddling the stool next to her friend, Emma requested a glass of ginger ale before turning back to
face Elsa. “You aren’t allowed to say that,” she told her calmly. “Do you remember when I was up
for a promotion from Regina? I told you then that I wasn’t sure if I could do it. I wasn’t sure why I
was going to try because I was afraid of failing. I was so sure that I was going to fail, so sure that I
was going to get fired. But you told me something that night when I was crying on your couch. Do
you remember what it was?” Emma accepted the ginger ale with a nod and mouthed thanks, waiting
for Elsa to respond.
“I told you to believe in yourself.”

“More than that,” Emma prodded, pushing the drink toward her friend. “You told me that sometimes you have to be your own cheering section and you have to be your own cheerleader. You can’t expect people to talk you up and tell you everything you need to hear. Sometimes you have to push yourself because nobody else is going to do it.”

“I’m saying I’m all alone?”

“It’s my way of saying that I have no idea what will motivate you or change your mind that you are worth it. So dig deep and figure out what you need to hear. I’ll be glad to provide the voice. But seriously, if you’re going to puke, please go do it now.”

***AAA***

When Elsa did return from the restroom she found her sister, Emma, and the others at a table off to the left of the stage and out of the footlights. Liam’s band is on the stage, a microphone close to him as he holds the guitar and strums softly.

“Did I miss anything?” she whispered to Emma.

“Not a thing. They just took the stage. I’m glad you’re here though. I didn’t think Liam was going to go out there if he couldn’t see you.” As if he could hear the conversation, the older of the brothers stared into that darkened corner and locked eyes with Elsa for a moment. That seemed to give him a bit of a boost as he sat up a little straighter.

The first two songs of the mini-set seemed to rouse the attention of the otherwise distracted audience. Both featured Liam’s voice well and the other members of the band had their moments to shine. There was just enough feeling in the lyrics and beat to the melody that people were moving in their seats to that same rhythm. By the time the third song was about to be played, Emma smiled in recognition of the titter of applause and a few cheers that began to sound around her.

For the first time since they began to perform Liam looked slightly uncomfortable. He shifted in his seat on the stool a bit and bit his lip before announcing the song’s message. Emma clearly understood that it had to do with Elsa and reached over to squeeze her friend’s hand.

The group at the table seemed to enjoy the song immensely, Anna sneaking looks at her sister and Emma humming along a bit. It was only Elsa who seemed off from the mood of the room. She was pale and her mouth and jaw firmly set. Her fingers curled into fists and she did not even blink as she stared at the stage. Emma tried twice to elbow the blonde woman into showing some other emotion, but it was unsuccessful.

Later Emma would wonder what exactly it was that Elsa had heard, but there was no time to question her as the three song set came to an end and Elsa and Anna were on their way to take their places. Emma managed to mention the woman’s odd behavior to Liam, who merely closed his eyes and shook his head in response. To his credit he cheered her on, but his calls out to her and clapping were largely ignored, as Elsa performed for every other table in the room. When the show was over and the group began dispersing, Emma fully intended to see if her friend might need to talk. She had her bag over her shoulder and was walking backstage to ask about sharing a cab when Liam stopped her.

“She left already,” he said, twin splotches of pink on his face as he shifted his weight from one foot to the other. “Ran is more like it.”
“What? Why would she do that? The set went perfectly. I’ve got half a dozen people demanding the album release now. How can she just leave?” Crossing her arms over her chest, she saw the color of his face deepen and then blanch under her scrutiny. Licking his lips and then looking toward the door, he shook his head slowly.

“It’s my fault.”
Chapter 20

As always I have to thank everyone reading, responding, kudoing, favoriting, liking, and following. This chapter focuses a little more on what happened with Liam and Elsa. It is a step back, but not the end of the road by any means. I hope you enjoy.

Liam entered the hotel room that he had shared with Elsa with his heart in his throat, his large hands shaking as he saw the darkened room and realized that she might not even be there. There had been that fear when Emma had come down on him so harshly at the club, telling him that he was most assuredly at fault for scaring her off. It wasn’t like he had argued.

He wasn’t sure why he didn’t turn on one of the lights, perhaps hoping that the lack of light would continue to bathe the situation in a murky vagueness that would not leave all the blame at his feet. He toed off his shoes and stared at the outline of the bed where just the night before he had held the most beautiful woman in his arms. That’s when he noticed her form there, curled on her side and facing the wall rather than him.

“Elsa?”

“The hotel’s booked solid,” she said, her voice a bit ragged either from singing or crying or both. “And Anna and Kristoff are practically treating this like a honeymoon.”

“Aye,” he said, feeling too uneasy to even take another step forward. “I could call my brother. Perhaps I could stay with…”

“I don’t want to disturb Emma. It’s bad enough that she has to deal with a total head case like me. There’s no need worrying her when she’s got her son there with her and dealing with Killian.” There was an audible sniffle. “You didn’t even say anything.”

“Ashamed I suppose. What should I have said, Elsa? I took the easy way out. I ripped him off. I ripped you off. I’m a bloody fool and a fraud.” He raked his hand over his face and waited for confirmation of his assessment. The silence was worse than any berating she might lash out at him.

“Did you know that I wrote my first song when I was 15,” she said, her voice coming out clearer. He realized that she had shifted on the bed in his direction. He wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or a sign she was about to do her worst. “I wasn’t even sure what I was doing. I wasn’t sure if it was going to be any good.”

“I’m sure it was…”

“You don’t know,” Elsa interrupted. “My parents thought it was just a hobby, told me to concentrate on other things. Things that would pay better. Things that would make them proud. So I put it aside until I heard about this contest. It was a silly little thing, but they wanted song writers to submit music and the prize was $1,000 and you’d hear your song on the radio.”

He knew of those contests, having taken part in a few with his brother before. Killian always had a knack for getting the attention of the judges. They had done pretty well on that circuit, even while they were in the Navy. Then came Milah. She pushed Killian, challenged him, brought out the best in him even when his brother fought back. He’d thought it was a great thing, seeing his brother reaching new heights because Milah believed in him and wanted him to succeed. But then he’d seen the toll it took on his younger brother, the way his brother became increasingly sure that Milah only saw his potential and not his worth. She made him believe that he wasn’t good enough as he was.
Shaking free of the thoughts, he heard Elsa continuing.

“I was too young to enter so I trusted someone to submit it for me. We were going to share the money and my name would be on the song too. But she cheated me out of that. The song won, even got sold to some Swedish singer who loved it. I never saw a dime and my name is nowhere on it.”

He wanted to hold her, tell her that wasn’t his intention at all. “Elsa, I never meant to steal anything…”

“That’s why you wouldn’t play it for me privately, isn’t it? You didn’t want me to know that you used some of the music I wrote and lyrics your brother had penned. Did you? You wanted everyone to think that was your work. Did you do anything on it? Anything other than steal?” She was sitting up, the room still dark except a light outside the window. She couldn’t see the way his head hung or the tears starting to form.

“Elsa, I…I tried. I couldn’t come up with anything. We were using that music as a placeholder, until I could work something out. I ran out of time. I ran out of inspiration.”

***AAA***

Emma did not look much better than Liam did when she entered the suite where Killian and Henry were currently located. The brief and troubling explanation from Liam had left her with more questions and answers. While Elsa had eventually answered a desperate text with assurances she was fine, Emma felt horrible that she had not somehow sensed the problem and fixed it.

“Welcome back, love,” Killian said from the small sitting area where he and Henry had parked themselves. The suite was essentially two bedrooms and baths with a center room that contained a sectional sofa, a television and a kitchenette that left something to be desired. They had been thankful for the extra room, but it was hardly what either imagined it would be when they heard the term.

Henry was asleep on one end of the sectional, one arm and leg thrown over the back of it and his head tilted backward as if he had somehow landed in such a position. That made even more sense when Emma noted the contents of the television program.

“That is not Harry Potter,” she said, taking a spot near the corner of the l-shaped piece of furniture. Killian immediately threw his arm around her and dragged her toward him so that her head rested on his shoulder. “Is that a chicken?”

“Mexican wrestling,” Killian said, smiling that his own accent did not bring any class or beauty to the term. “Your son is quite adept at picking the winners.”

She let her eyes scan the room to find empty soda cans, foam containers from their dinner, a deck of playing cards and a small stack of orees left over from their winnings, and two empty containers of chips from the vending machines. Both males were in their stocking feet, hair rumpled, and traces of nacho cheese powder on their faces. “Looks like I missed quite a party,” Emma commented, closing her eyes for a moment as his grip tightened around her. “Any strippers or gambling debts I need to know about?”

Drawing in a breath as though he was about to make a large confession, Killian let it out in a large whoosh. “I did hire a stripper, but I think the idea scared Henry so we passed.”

Smirking, Emma shook her head. “Glad to hear one of you had some sense. And the gambling?”

“Good thing we were just playing for cookies. The kid wiped me out.” Leaning his cheek on the top of her head, he moaned and stretched out his legs. “How did the performances go? I hope all the
nerves got worked out.”

“Can we talk about that later?” Emma asked softly. “I know you’re curious, but I’m really just wanting to rest right now and unwind. Seriously? Is that really a man dressed as a chicken?”

They watched the fight, if one could call it that, for a few more minutes, as her head became heavy and she slid to his chest where she placed a kiss over his heart. She was quite appreciative that he had not only turned his weekend from one of bars and clubs to one of watching her son. She had gotten a text from Neal a few hours earlier with a quick apology and a question as to where Henry had ended up. She tried not to let that resonate in her head, as she would think that he would be concerned about their son’s well-being long before 24 hours had passed. She’d answered in a short explanation that the pre-teen was with her, but offering no details or even lecture. Perhaps it would serve him right to worry about her reaction without knowing it’s intent.

“Love, are you still awake?” he asked, shaking her a bit.

“Yes, sorry. I was just thinking.”

“No doubt interesting thoughts to distract you, but I was just thinking we might want to get some sleep. You’ve packed us quite a scheduled for tomorrow. Wouldn’t do for us to slumber through an athletic event.”

She checked her phone again, seeing another message from Elsa that said she was fine. “I guess you’re right.” She stood up and began tossing a bit of the trash away as Killian did the same. Half waking her son, she walked him to the guestroom that had the two full sized beds and paused there momentarily as he fell onto the bed with very little grace. He got that from her. Considering her options, she frowned at the idea of sleeping in the empty bed there in that room. Yes, it would be simpler and even more correct by the PTA crowd at school.

But she wasn’t exactly planning bondage with whips and chains in the other room. She was not really planning anything at all other than the warmth of Killian’s body wrapped around hers. For as lovely as the night before had been, she had found the peace of being there in his arms was a feeling that she kind of wanted to replicate.

“Get out of here, mom,” her son said with a pillow partially over his head. “I can’t sleep with you watching me.”

So it wasn’t be resounding sign she might have requested from God, but was permission and with that she blew her son a kiss and shut the door behind her. Killian had already changed to a pair of sleep pants and was resting beneath the covers, a book in his hand when she entered.

He cleared his throat, looking up from the page as she reached into her bag for her small toiletry kit. “I wasn’t sure,” he said, his right foot moving under the cover. “I thought you might…”

“Henry kicked me out,” she said, tucking the bag under her arm and heading toward the mirror. “I could sleep on the couch I suppose.”

“I think that is a bit pointless, especially since the gentleman in me would do that in a heart beat if you wanted.”

She sighed, rocking back on her heels. “I’m sure that this is supposed to be easier. Killian, I should warn you that I don’t know how to do this. I don’t usually stick around for the whole night. So a second night in here with you…it’s not exactly my style.”

“I feel honored,” he said. She immediately noted his lack of sarcasm. “Emma, you may not believe
me, but I truly would be completely happy to hold you. It doesn’t have to be…”

“I’m trying to believe.”

He shifted on the bed, watching her hurry through her nightly routine. It was something he had missed the night before, as they had been a bit more passionate with each other when they had returned. She might not regret anything that had happened, but there was a sense of awkwardness when a couple had been intimate but not ever discussed what either wanted or if there was even a future. He hoped and prayed that there was, desiring the idea more than any in the past.

“Your brother is going to want to talk to you tomorrow,” she said, breaking through his thoughts as the bed dipped under her slight weight. “Something happened tonight at the show.” The sadness that she had worn when she walked through the door earlier had returned as she slid under the covers and stared at the ceiling. “His song…it wasn’t exactly original.”

Killian listened as Emma explained the situation, the only noise he made a grunt when she talked of the lyrics. “Did he say where he got the idea?”

“From some of your writing,” Emma answered, not meeting his eyes as the words drapes over them. “He wasn’t exactly wanting to explain this to me, but he said you had been writing some things lately. He only meant…”

Having been propped up on one arm to look at her as she spoke, the bounced on the mattress when he fell back. “Emma, I want to explain. I never intended for you to read those…”

She exhaled slowly, still staring up at the ceiling that offered no hint as to how to explain this. “I wasn’t sure. I wasn’t sure if that was about me.” Her voice sounded small and almost fragile. When she lifted a hand to cover her face, he felt a clench in his heart for the way she sounded as if she was too afraid to believe it. “Don’t answer that. I don’t want to know.”

“Love, I was writing down some of the things I felt about you. I was perhaps a bit shy about sharing those thoughts with you when you have been clear that you have a tendency to run. I suppose I was waiting on a better time to share those thoughts with you.” In her peripheral vision she could see he was biting at his bottom lip with a nervous tic. “Emma, I’m sorry. My brother should have never used those words. And he certainly shouldn’t have revealed that I…”

“It’s not your fault,” she said, her lower lip quivering slightly. “It’s not your fault that he did that. And it is not your fault that I am so broken and messed up that you can’t be sure how I might take even the suggestion that…well, you know.”

“Emma, surely you must realize I have feelings for you that are beyond a vague interest.” Reaching out, he placed three fingers under her chin and gently guided her to turn her face toward him. “I hope I haven’t been so secretive that I made you doubt that.”

“I guess this would be a good time for me to say I feel the same,” she mused, not fighting the pull of him but not aiding it either. “I’m just not sure I’m…Killian, do you know the first thing that I thought when I found out those words were about me? My first reaction was to think, ‘why?’ Why would you want or care about someone like me? I get that you thought I was a challenge at first. I was too standoffish. I was too dead set against letting Granny be right that you are a great guy. But you won that challenge. So why would someone like you think that I’m even possibly all the things that Liam sang about in that song? Don’t you realize that nobody thinks that about me? Nobody.” She felt a sense of relief to finally say that to him, to reveal that she was not worthy of songs being written about her. There was a sadness to voicing that to him, but it was still an exhaustive prospect of trying to live up to the idea.
“Emma, who ever told you that you were worthy of anything and everything?” When she didn’t answer but didn’t pull away, he let his hand travel from her chin to cup her cheek. “I’d truly love to know. I’d say they deserve a good kick in the arse for ever making you doubt yourself, love. Emma, there isn’t a person on this earth who doesn’t deserve someone who believes in them and cares about them. Maybe we aren’t either one ready to say more than that, but believe me. No matter if you run screaming from this room and I never see you again or if you fall asleep in my arms and I get to watch you fight so hard to wake up that you practically dig a hole in the mattress, I’m going to continue believing you are the most beautiful and special woman I know. Now tell me the truth. Does that make you want to run away?” His eyes scanned down her face for any sign at all that she understood, feeling a bit hopeful as she slightly nodded.

“I think I can live with that,” she said softly. “You know, it’s kind of hard to fight with you or tell you what’s bothering me.”

His thumb was making semi-circle patterns on her cheek with a softness that she could barely detect. “I assure you that I have my faults. If you are overlooking them, that’s perhaps a sign that I am not being as open as I should be.”

“I didn’t say you were perfect,” she said, scooting a bit closer to him. “You talk in your sleep.”

“Aye, I’ve heard that. I’ve also been told that I have cold feet.”

“You do. But that’s kind of cute so long as you keep those ice cubes to yourself.” She slapped her hand over her mouth to mute her squeal as his bare feet rubbed against her calves. “You are so mean. You jerk.” He laughed as she wiggled fruitlessly to get away from him.

“I prefer scoundrel, love.”

She pretended to think on that as he closed that last bit of distance between them, his mouth finding hers and nipping at her bottom lip. Against him as their breath mingled and their bodies wrapped together, she smiled and again wondered if maybe she wasn’t as scared as she was trying to tell herself she was.

***AAA***

Liam dropped his head to his hands, his elbows resting on his knees as he sat in the rather uncomfortable chair next to the bed. “I’m sorry,” he said for he didn’t know how many times. “I don’t know what else…Do you want me to leave you be?”

The dampness on her face was not from fresh tears, but she wiped at them anyway. “No, I understand. I really do. I just wish…If you were having trouble, why didn’t you come to me? Why didn’t you say you didn’t have time to listen to my questions about finding a drummer or a guitarist? You spent all this time with me and let me go on and on about my issues, but you didn’t ever tell me that you were struggling with something. If you wanted to use that composition, I’m fine with that. You just didn’t tell me.”

Somewhere inside he knew that she had a point. He had placed all his concentration on Elsa and wooing her, rather than on his own efforts to perform. Killian was going to be another issue all together, as that breach in confidences was a big issue too. His brother would be livid to learn that he had retrieved those lyrics, crossing lines that they had long ago set in place.

“I did a piss poor job of trying to balance myself,” he said. “All of this…me, you, my obligations to the guys, my brother, everything. Elsa, please know I wasn’t trying to deceive or hurt you.”
“I think I know that.”

“And I hope you know that maybe my trouble was that I was overwhelmed with it all rather than uninspired. I am not this person, Elsa. I’m not disingenuous or fake.”

She placed her hands in a prayer like position over her nose and mouth, breathing in and out. Finally she lowered her hands and pulled in a deep breath. “I’m not looking for excuses or reasons, Liam. I’m not angry exactly. It is more a matter of me being disappointed. You have been wonderful to me, so sweet, patient, kind, considerate, romantic…but this kind of threw me. It’s not so much what you did that has me feeling this way. I scared myself. I let myself trust you and feel things for you. I made myself vulnerable and I hate that. I hate that you can hurt me.”

“I would never try to hurt you, Elsa. Darling, you have to believe that.” His voice broke as he asked her to trust him.

“I don’t think you would ever mean to do that, but the fact that you can scares me.”

***AAA***

Killian sang in the shower. Emma chalked that up to one more thing she knew about the man that made him a little more endearing and wonderful. She knew he had bad habits too, such as rushing into decisions and becoming so head strong about them that the avoided obvious needs to change his mind on even the simplest ideas. She knew that he worked too hard at times, neglecting things that needed to be done. He also had a tendency to judge people too quickly. Then there was his awful taste in television and movies.

Smiling to herself as she heard him belting out some 1980s hair band hit, Emma left the bedroom she had shared with him and made her way to the shared living area to straighten up a bit and throw their belongings into suitcases. Assuming that Henry was probably still asleep, she managed to make the room appear somewhat normal and not like a party had been held in there the night before.

“Mom?” Henry asked as he emerged from his part of the suite. His hair was askew every which way and he was rubbing his eyes. “Do we have anything for breakfast?”

She should have guessed that food would be his first concern. He was always like that, scrunching up his face as she reminded him they would be checking out soon and that packing was the current priority. There were a few grumbles, but he had not unpacked that much since he had stayed overnight. There was a bit of a panic in finding his shoes that ended when she found one in his bathroom and one next to the sofa, but she managed to not ask any questions on the logistics of that.

“I like him,” Henry said suddenly, breaking away from his discussion of the math test that was coming up the next week. “I actually do.”

She raised an eyebrow trying to figure out who it was that her son was referring to when he tilted his head in the direction of the room where Killian was getting dressed. “Oh,” she said noncommittally. “Oh…well…good.”

Henry shifted, leaning over to pull the television remote out from behind one of the cushions. It was amazing that he always seemed to be able to find such devices without much effort. “I think he likes you,” he said, hesitating as he gave a look toward the closed door. “I mean likes you.”

Emma was assaulted with images of notes being passed in class and whispers in the cafeteria as were customary for children her son’s age. “Maybe so,” she managed to say. “And it’s okay with you that…” She wasn’t sure what to say. For as close as Emma and Killian had become, they had not
truly discussed what it was that they were too each other. She didn’t particularly care for labels and designations, but sometimes they made it easier for discussions like this.

Henry’s chocolate eyes dropped downward to the floor and seemed to be studying it carefully. “Are you going to get married like Dad? I know that Mr. Jo…Killian is not like Tamara, but still…”

The amount of time that Emma had spent with Tamara was limited, but she did not have many good things to say about the woman. She was polite and seemed a good influence on Neal when it came to his temper and interest in stability. However, she was at times cold and did not seem to want to bond with Henry at all. “Wait? Your dad’s engaged?”

“We talked about that it was probably happening,” Henry said, seeming somewhat apologetic for breaking the news that way. “They just sort of made it official in front of me right before Dad went to the hospital.”

From the anguished look on her son’s face that he was clearly trying to hide, Emma was sure that Neal’s illness was some kind of poetic justice. However, that was not the question he was asking. “Killian and I aren’t even talking about that,” she assured him, feeling a bit strange that she was thinking it at that early stage. “And if we ever do, it won’t change anything for me and you. The two of us are a package deal, remember? And that means that if you’re not happy, I’m not.”

“I’d be okay with it.”

“Great,” Emma said, sarcasm becoming evident. “If and when the time comes to have that conversation, I’ll be sure to let Killian know. In the meantime, let’s not freak the guy out with the fact that we are even having this conversation. And let’s not forget that I’ve got work to do, a day to get underway for the three of us, and you to get back home in time for school tomorrow.”

***AAA***

Elsa gave a weak and apologetic smile to Emma as the trio entered the breakfast area. If she had been feeling more like herself, she would have laughed at the way Henry nearly leapt over people and pulled Killian with him to explore the myriad of options and called aloud his findings of an omelet station that would provide him with any of the items he could want in his eggs.

“He’s a growing boy,” Emma said, sliding into one of the chairs next to her. “Can’t stop him.”

Humming under her breath, the other blonde circled her plastic stirrer in the coffee and frowned. “I’m so sorry I had a melt down. You’ve been so awesome about promoting us and making sure we were comfortable. Please understand that it has nothing to do with you or what you did.”

“I know. Liam told me what he had done. He’s not exactly proud of it.”

Lifting her eyes, she looked into the concerned ones of her friend and manager. “He’s very sorry for what he did. He’s actually off talking to the band right now, explaining himself.”

Watching her bite at her lip and fiddle with the paper cup of coffee without drinking it, Emma knew that her friend was clearly still upset. “Killian and I were planning to take Henry to a game this afternoon. If you need me, I can send them on their own. I don’t mind. And if you need me to drive you back to Storybrooke, just let me know. We have room in the jeep. I don’t want you feeling uncomfortable or like you have to ride with Liam.”

Elsa shook her head emphatically. “It’s going to be fine,” she said, throwing up three fingers as if giving a scouting oath. “I’m going to be fine. I’m just sort of regretting that I let this bother me so much.”
“You have every reason to be upset,” Emma assured her. “I’m upset. I haven’t talked to Regina or Zelena about it yet, but I think we may pull the plug on the band’s pending contract. You and Anna are fine, but the guys…I can’t risk Liam doing something like this and it being someone else’s music. That’s a big risk and a lawsuit waiting to happen. He’s just lucky that it is you and Killian that he stole from. You guys aren’t planning to sue him over copyright.”

“I told him last night that it wasn’t the music that bothered me,” Elsa explained, her voice sounding smaller than normal. Usually she was bolder with her sounds and even a bit bossy with her demands for things. To hear her timid and demure was an odd juxtaposition. “It’s…I’m not sure how I’m supposed to deal with this. I hate that I let it happen.”

Emma was probably one of the best people to understand, having some of the same feelings herself. “Do you know what I thought when I realized that the lyrics he was singing were written by Killian for me?” There was no response as Elsa dropped her eyes again to the untouched coffee. “I wanted to freak out. I wanted to hide because it all felt too real. Not only was I dealing with Liam’s confession, I was realizing that maybe things with Killian were…”

“You felt vulnerable?”

“Yeah,” Emma admitted, looking over to where her son was clearly giving a long list to the man at the egg station. Killian looked openly amused and nudged Henry with his elbow. Her son’s reaction was to throw his head back in laughter over something that was said. Both of them seem unconcerned by the display and were clearly sharing a moment of entertainment between them. “It completely sucks.”

“Yeah, it does,” Elsa agreed, finally lifting the coffee to her lips. “But it also doesn’t.”

Emma doesn’t answer right away, noting the way that Killian slid his hand under Henry’s plate to prevent a spill when something caught her son’s attention. She could still feel the way that hand had felt on her skin, touching her as though she might somehow disappear in front of him. There was something sweetly protective about him, as if he did not want harm to come to her or her son. That was oddly comforting and disconcerting at the same time. “Yeah.”

“So you haven’t talked to Regina yet?” Elsa asked when Emma looked back at her. “I mean about last night.”

“I got some texts that the blogs and online media are buzzing about how well you two did. Everyone loved the songs, the performance, and everything else. I gather she wants to speed up the release and is even talking about funding a music video to release with the first song. Sounds like we’ll be busy.” She gave her that tight smile that she normally did when conversation turned to business. “Sounds like Regina is on board with really going forward. That’s a big deal. She’s usually very selective and careful. So having her pushing for more…”

“Is a big deal,” Elsa repeated. “I can’t believe it. We’re really making this happen.” She glanced to where Killian was sprinkling cinnamon in the two hot chocolates that Henry was holding. The two were talking and shooting glances toward Emma. “What about Liam and the guys?”

“I don’t know,” Emma said honestly. “I don’t know right now.”

***AAA***

It was nearly 11 by the time the jeep pulled in the parking lot at Emma and Henry’s apartment. Just as Robin had passed out in the back of it on another trip from Boston, Henry was awkwardly positioned with an arm against the window and one leg sort of caught between the two front seats,
his foot near the gear shift.

The two adults had kept the conversation low, talking some of Liam and the situation there but mostly about music and childhood dreams that they had both shared. Killian cut the engine and gave a tender look toward Henry. “I’ll help you get him upstairs,” he whispered. “Looks like it might be a chore.”

Looking like she might protest, Emma was not quick enough when Killian jumped out of the jeep and lugged the duffel bag that contained Henry’s clothes and his backpack over his shoulder. He had her overnight bag on wheels already unloaded as she shook Henry awake enough to guide him toward the building. She relieved him of the bag and basically pointed Henry in the direction, grabbing hold of his shoulder when he nearly ran into a sign post.

“He’s quite a sleeper.”

“He doesn’t get that from me,” Emma mused. “But I guess you noticed that…”

She would blame the wind for the blush on her cheeks when he chuckled. This was another moment that she usually avoided by sneaking out after being with a guy. Second dates and conversations were something that made her stomach turn. She was now getting used to both, but there was still that drop that she likened to riding a roller coaster.

“I think I was just appreciating the company,” he answered, not taking the obvious bait.

Henry was soon enough in his bed and his shoes lined up by the door. His backpack was repacked and Emma was contemplating a note in it to wish him luck on his audition. She hated that he had not gotten much of a chance to rehearse, but Killian had assured her that he was more than prepared. That was where their conversation had gone when Killian poured them both a glass of wine instead of beating a hasty retreat to the door.

“You’re avoiding him,” Emma said, collapsing onto the sofa with a bit of a grunt. It seemed funny that a drive could exhaust someone. “Liam wants to talk to you. He wants to apologize.”

“Other than outing my feelings I have no ill will toward my brother,” he said, taking a sip resting his left arm on the back of the cushions and across her shoulders. “But eventually we will have to have that discussion.”

“I think he is sorry about that.” She could not imagine the panic that Liam must still be feeling. While Elsa was being stoic, she was not fighting with him. The guys in the band had been upset at first, but most were holding off their anger until a decision was made about the fate of the recording contract. Killian had not said much to his brother other than discussing logistics of returning to Maine. It had to be hard not to know if your actions had ruined everything or not.

“No doubt, but there is nothing I can do about it right now. Perhaps that was is punishment, to sit in anxiety and flux.”

She put the back of her hand against her mouth and yawned. “I have work in the morning,” she said, quietly contemplating how much sleep she could get if she went to bed now. “And so do you.”

“Aye, I should leave you to it. Emma, I know this weekend wasn’t exactly as we planned or imagined…”

“I thought it was pretty damn good,” she interrupted. “And if it makes you feel any better, I’m kind of bummed that we won’t be sharing a bed tonight.”
He smiled shyly, lowering his head to rub his nose lightly against hers. “I could stay.”

His mouth was almost touching hers and it would be easy enough to close that gap. She could invite him to stay the night, get up early in the morning to get them both on their way. It would be easy until her mind and heart conflicted on the topic. “I think your brother is waiting on you.”

He didn’t say anything, brushing against her lips with feather like touches three times before deepening his efforts. There was no telling by either of their estimating how long they kissed, curling into each other and holding tightly. When they pulled apart, he dropped another kiss to her forehead and smiled. “Good night, love.”
Chapter 21

Regina was actually smiling when Emma arrived at work on Monday morning. She had been prepping for a confrontation on the drive from Henry’s school to the offices of the production company. While on the surface she could understand that it was not her fault that Liam had presented them with a bit of a problem, she was not so sure that Regina would see it that way. So Emma had prepared no fewer than six statements about the situation, starting with the fact that both Elsa and Killian were not interested in pursuing anything against him.

“I’m thinking we should look at some local television options,” Regina said with her hands folded under her chin. She was leaning forward on that glass desk that served to be more imposing than functional, something Emma wasn’t a fan of in her own life. “Elsa and Anna should do a few of the morning shows and maybe a late night showcase or something. Together with the backers’ showcase that we have planned, I’m seeing good things for them.”

That was as far as Regina ever went toward complimenting Emma for her work, as it was never about Emma but the artists instead. If she was looking for public acknowledgement, working for the Mills sisters was the wrong choice.

“The audience seemed to love them,” Emma agreed, writing down the notes Regina had suggested. “Anna is a natural on stage and Elsa is so talented that it is amazing to watch her get in the zone.”

Regina waited until Emma lifted her pen from the pad and smiled another sort of half hearted grin. “I suppose we need to look at what to do with the guys. Any word on their reaction to Lee’s confession?”

Resisting the urge to roll her eyes with a swift bite to her side of her mouth, Emma recrossed her legs. “Liam has spoken with them and they have accepted his apology. And there seems to be no issue about the music or lyrics that he sampled.” She thought the word stole or plagiarized might be too much.

Mumbling under her breath, Regina’s fingers flew at the computer keyboard. “Ironically that song was the best received according to the critics who were there. Any chance we can get these musicians to sign off and let him have the rights to it? I’d hate to try to explain why the band’s best song is now off the playlist.”

Emma was already bobbing her head, as had previously broached the subject with Elsa and Killian the day before. Even if Liam and the guys never performed it, the song being available would be a better situation than not at all. “Wait, so you’re okay with them continuing.”

The dark haired woman blinked a few times. “Read the trades, Ms. Swan. There is no lack of stories about artists being accused of borrowing from each other. It seems that this man has not offended anyone with this incident. The band isn’t exactly ready for a major deal or contract, but I see no reason why we can’t offer them a development deal. I’m going to want assurances that he won’t do it again.”

“He won’t,” Emma said, breathing out heavily. “I can guarantee that.”

“And this business with him and Elsa?”

Emma felt her chest tighten. Regina was not exactly the type of woman to gossip or get very interested in anyone’s relationship. She had said on many occasions that emotions and business did
not match. It was often a sticking point for her and Zelena, who had more forcefully stated that all
good art came from feeling rather than knowing. Not sure what to say, Emma waited for the woman
to continue.

“I understand that they are dating,” Regina explained, flicking a well manicured hand toward the
screen of her computer. “Every article and blog mentions it. So I would say that business dictates we
play that up. Let’s have them seen together. Maybe consider a duet?”

***AAA***

Liam held the coffee cup in his hands, not drinking or even paying attention to the fact that it had
cooled to the point of room temperature. His blue eyes stared at the silent and dark phone that he had
placed on the ottoman in front of him. “Ring,” he said, as if that would somehow make a difference.

The house was remarkably quiet, despite the chaos of turning Killian’s office into a bedroom for him.
When his brother had lumbered through the door earlier that morning, smiling softly and humming to
himself, Liam had half expected a lecture or at least a dirty look. Instead his brother had told him that
he understood the pressure and was not overly upset over the lyrics.

“I don’t exactly appreciate it, but it’s not going to end the fact that we are brothers,” Killian had told
him that morning. “So get yourself in gear in ready for the move into that room. I have a lead on
some furniture and we need to make sure it’s cleared out.”

That was as close as they had come to talking about it, other than a slight warning that Liam should
stay out of his stuff. Between Killian’s mooning over his weekend with Emma (a condition that his
brother clearly denied) and a busy week ahead, Liam had been left to his own devices that morning.

Even Elsa had not been as anxious to see him. She had to run some errands for her sister, she said, as
well as go over a few details with the production team now that the album release was being moved
up. While she assured him that she was not angry, there was a hesitancy and distance in her voice
that seemed to indicate things were still tense. She had said she would call when she was finished, a
concession to her earlier refusal to meet him for lunch.

However, it was not Elsa’s call that had him threatening to build a shrine and begin doing ritual
sacrifices to the phone gods. Emma was meeting with Regina that morning, discussing among other
things, his fate. The band wanted to continue, though Robin and Will had been quite blunt that they
could continue without him. If his lapse in judgment had cost them a contract, he was going to have
to let them make that decision. It was the not knowing that was the worst part.

When the phone finally chirped, he nearly dropped the room temperature coffee as he dove for the
black device. Hands shaking, he swiped at the screen and grunted out a hello before regaining his
balance on the couch. Emma’s voice was a welcome interlude.

“Consider yourself a lucky guy,” Emma said, clearly heading toward her car with the sound of traffic
and wind in the background. “Regina’s not even that mad. I’m guessing you either have the best
karma out there or you have blackmail pics of her on your computer. Either way, congrats. You guys
have yourself a development deal. I’ll get with you and the guys later this week about setting up
some time in the studio.”

He wasn’t all that embarrassed that he did a little fist pump in the air at the news. After narrowing
down a few details about her schedule and promising again that it was a one time thing about the
song, he cleared his throat.

“Emma,” he said vacillating slightly. “Emma, I know this was awkward for you. I would be lying if I
said I had even considered your feelings when I decided to use Killian’s lyrics. I’m sure that you would have rather that have been more private of a revelation.”

“I could call you all sorts of names for having done what you did,” Emma answered tersely. “But Elsa and Killian don’t seem to have any problem forgiving you. So here’s the deal where we’re concerned. Don’t do it again. Not only are you putting your career and the band’s career at risk, but mine too. Not to mention that you are in danger of hurting two people I really care about.”

“I understand.”

“Good because I don’t forgive as easily as these guys do. And you can ask my son about it. I’m really good at coming up with creative punishments.”

“Duly noted,” he said with a chuckle, feeling his body finally able to relax. “I promise you that I will be nothing but honest. But if I may point something out…”

Emma’s voice sounded distracted as her car cranked with a bit of protest and she was clearly driving out of her spot to her next appointment. “Go ahead.”

“You care for my brother?” he asked cheekily, remembering the sentence she had just shared. “I think that is rather sweet. I know that my brother seems to like you a great deal.”

“Goodbye, Liam.”

***AAA***

Killian had four students auditioning that afternoon, including Henry. While most of his classes had little to do with the auditions, he knew that his attrition was clearly focused on those four and the nerves they were experiencing. He could see Grace chewing on her fingernails while he talked about the difference between concert bands and orchestras. Henry turned positively green when one of the other teachers brought up the audition and noted that there might be an issue with the room reservation. It was Violet who had the most dramatic reaction when she told him that she was sure she could not make it through the process and stumbled into an almost faint there in front of him.

“If this doesn’t kill them, it will certainly kill me,” he told Belle Gold, the school and town librarian that day in the work lounge. “I would have never thought that a simple honors orchestra audition would cause so much strife.”

“It adds up,” the dark haired beauty said, thumbing through the latest catalog of teaching supplies and classroom decorations. “Psychiatrists are saying that we put too much pressure on children today. Just look at this month. Your students have these auditions. The class officers are being elected for next year. The science fair has turned into a contest or reality television program. Mary Margaret is picking the students for the young author awards with me. The physical education teachers are practically running an even on par with the Olympic Games. This is all in addition to homework, pressure at home, and just growing up.”

“I suppose Archie’s got a few more appointments on his books than normal.” Killian had met psychologist not long after moving to Storybrooke. While he liked the man’s quiet nature and affinity for dogs, he always felt as though he was being analyzed. How did you answer a man who charged $150 an hour to talk about your feelings when he asked how you were that day?

“He’s going to need an assistant at this rate,” Belle agreed. “I mentioned to my husband that we should cut back on the expectations we have on these kids, but it is a critical time for him too. The sports teams are all looking at needing more funding next year. Academically this time is critical for
testing and whatnot. It’s a problem. I guess we all just have to push ourselves and hope that we can survive the peptic ulcers and anxiety attacks.”

Just Belle’s mentioning her husband was enough to give Killian heart palpitations. He had no doubt that having Emma in his life was worth any risk to his career at Storybrooke Academy. As he had told both her and Liam, there were other schools and opportunities if Mr. Gold saw fit to get rid of him. The trick to it all was keeping things low key. He would not treat Henry or Emma any differently than any mother and son at his school. They would reserve their more private conversations and actions for other locations.

Since it all seemed to stem from Neal’s reaction to them, Killian was convinced that it merely took them being conscientious around the man. They wouldn’t rub his nose in anything. If what Henry said was true, the man was going to be too involved in his own wife to be’s life to worry about who Emma was spending time with and Henry.

***AAA***

Mary Margaret circled round her desk in the front of the classroom with her left hand thrust out awkwardly and a growing smile on his face. “He asked!”

Still unwinding the scarf from around her neck, Emma couldn’t resist teasing her friend a bit and ignoring the waving hand in front of her. “Who asked what?” She might have underestimated her friend’s reaction as she had to step backwards from the oncoming onslaught of that same left hand slapping against her shoulder. “Just kidding. Why do you think I’m here? I want details.”

The brunette pursed her lips together and cocked her head toward the right. “You’re here because you have a conference with me about Henry’s grade in language arts. Getting the details of my date is just a side agenda.” Her lips seemed to thin as she considered this. “Oh whatever. I am dying to tell you. I didn’t want to interrupt your weekend with Killian though.”

Emma laughed and lowered herself into one of the too small chairs, dropping her coat off her shoulders. “Double duty. Which do you want to start with?” She watched her excitable friend laugh giddily as she looked at her own ring and smiled.

“I’m going to be Mrs. Mary Margaret Nolan,” she sighed. She had already perfected the left handed moves that prominently displayed the emerald and diamond ring that David had inherited from his mother. “I can’t believe it.”

The overwhelmed and disbelieving tone of the teacher was too much for Emma who reminded her that half of Storybrooke had been planning their wedding long before their first date. She quickly turned the focus to the date and the way that David had asked her during a carriage ride he had arranged for them after dinner at her favorite French bistro. If it was anyone but Mary Margaret, Emma might have gagged a little at the pure cheesy romance of that. However, she tried to look enthused instead.

“It was just out of fairy tale,” the teacher continued, pulling out her phone where there were pics of her and David both before and after the proposal. Emma didn’t point out that those same pics were currently on social media for everyone to see.

“I’m really happy for you. Congratulations! I hope I’m invited to the wedding.”

Mary Margaret’s left hand rested on her chest as she smiled brightly. “Of course,” she said in a way that was reminiscent of her students. “David wants you to be his best man, but I’m wanting you to be my maid of honor. And we want Henry in the wedding party too.”
Emma blinked rapidly as her friend started to detail dress styles and music selections. She pointed out to the teacher that she had been engaged for less than 48 hours and was already talking about booking locations and debating the merits of certain photographers and caterers. It was great, but still overwhelming. She quickly realized that if the shoe was on the other foot, she would have no idea how to organize such a thing.

By the time they actually got to the parent teacher conference part of things Emma was grateful if not a bit exhausted. The great thing about having Mary Margaret as a friend was the woman’s undying loyalty and enthusiasm. She could see the goodness in everything. She always wanted her friends to have what she had and then some. Though not really a kiss and tell kind of person, she knew that Mary Margaret wanted to know about the time she had spent with Killian in detail. So Emma threw her a bone and gave a few comments about looking at the stars and dancing after dinner on the boat. She also commented that he was the first guy she had ever really had around Henry for any length of time.

“I know you worry about letting Henry get too attached to a guy you’re dating,” she commented, pulling out a green colored folder and placing it between them. “And that can be an issue in some cases. But I’m telling you that Killian Jones isn’t the kind of guy who’s going to do wrong by you or your son. There are no guarantees in life, but trust me on that.”

“I am trying,” Emma said with a sigh. “So tell me what’s going on. Is my son starting a gambling ring? Did he knock off the lunch room for a bunch of singles? What?”

“You need to work on your optimism, Emma.”

“Fine, tell me.”

Mary Margaret pulled out a sheaf of stapled pages. “Henry’s won the creative writing contest for the school. His work is being sent off for judging at the state level. Do you realize what this means? He’s at the low end of the age bracket. His writing is really amazing.”

Leaning forward, Emma peered over the pages and saw her son’s name typed in the top corner of the page. Below that were paragraphs of a story about wizards and knights that Mary Margaret said was incredible for someone twice his age. “He did this?”

“Yeah and it isn’t just me talking as your friend. He’s quite a little talent.”

***AAA***

The hallway outside the cafeteria looked to Emma like something out of the American Idol audition process. Children and teens from around the district had converged on the small space and that hallway held all of the parents, care givers, siblings, grandparents and others. When one family of about 15 broke out posters and signage to cheer on their little Adam, Emma seriously felt like she was a lone wolf. She’d called and asked Neal to come to show his support, but he was still claiming that his weekend trip to the hospital had wiped him out and Tamara was nursing him back to health. The image of him in bed with Tamara in a naughty nurse outfit fleetingly crossed her mind and turned her stomach.

However, Henry had supporters. Mary Margaret had promised to stop by after conferences and David called in his support too. Ruby and Granny begged Emma to bring him by the diner afterwards for a dinner on the house. Graham said that if Henry did well that he could ride in the sheriff’s patrol car through town as a reward. And though Killian and Emma were trying to play it down at the school, she could see his nervous glances at Henry warming up earlier were a clear indication of his interest. He was now pacing by the doorway and sneaking peeks into the room.
whenever a student entered or exited. Twice he had shot her a look that if anyone was paying
attention would have given his true affections away, but they had not spoken.

Her lips twitched upward as she noted that he again ran his hand just at the base of where his hair
came to his ears and scratched absently. The nervous twitch was an endearing quality about him that
always made her happy to see. It was just another crack in the perfect façade that she both adored
and found intimidating. His black button down shirt was sans vest today and the top button was
undone so that his silver chain and charms nestled into his chest hair. The lack of color was a good
contrast against his skin and inky black hair. It also set off his blue eyes, she thought as she dug into
her pocket for her phone.

Ignoring the three messages from Regina and another from Elsa telling her to wish Henry good luck,
Emma typed out a quick message and hit send.

Emma: I think I like you in all black. It makes you look dark and dangerous.

She could tell the moment he received the message, as he jumped nearly a foot at the vibration in his
pocket. Slowly he pulled it out and stared at the message she had sent, color painting his face as his
lips curled upward. Rather than gift her with another look, he set about responding.

Killian: I wondered if you had a type. Dark and dangerous is what does it for you?

Emma: If that was all that I was looking for, I’m not sure I’d go for the school music teacher. But
I must say you look very handsome today.

Killian: I think I like this new leaf, Swan.

Emma stared at the screen in confusion as she read over that last sentence again. She finally gave in
and asked him what he meant, not quite understanding his quip.

Killian: You don’t usually initiate a conversation or offer compliments. I thought it must be
something new you were trying. I only meant that I was rather fond of it.

He was right, she realized as she let his explanation sink into her mind. He was always the first to
call her beautiful or tell her that she looked especially nice that day. There were few exceptions to the
times that he reached out to hold her hand or initiated a kiss. The only time she really ever did was
when her words failed her. Killian was a very handsome man with a kind soul. He should know that
she felt that way. Her brow furrowed as she considered how to express that over a phone.

Emma: If I haven’t complimented you enough then I apologize. You deserve to know that you are
definitely my type.

Killian: I am blushing, Swan.

Emma: Dork, I can see you, you know.

He lifted those blue eyes from the screen and found her again, smiling widely like a man who had
won the lottery. Mouthing thank you and winking, he hustled over to where the woman was taking
forms from the students auditioning and shared a few words with her before pulling his phone back
out from his pocket.

Killian: It appears Henry and the others aren’t scheduled for another hour or so. I think I might
take a look at some paperwork in my classroom and office.
Elsa was quite sure that the walk from her car to the front door at the brothers’ house was the longest of her life. While the temperature was not quite as frigid as it has been in the previous weeks, there was a bite to the air despite the blazing sun. With her oversized sunglasses perched jauntily on her nose, Elsa still had to use one hand to shield her eyes as she walked past the shrubbery and paused before the weather beaten door.

She was still mid knock when he threw open the door and smiled boldly then let it fall. “Elsa.”

She nodded as if he didn’t quite believe who she was or thought his mind might be playing tricks on him. “I know I said I’d call, but I was in the neighborhood…”

His left foot hovered in a way that indicated he might be considering stepping forward or back. Finally he decided backwards to invite her inside. Thankfully she took the cue and entered the cottage with its heavy wood and leather décor, removing those sunglasses as she crossed threshold. She had not been there in a few days and was a bit shocked by the boxes and chaos of the renovation.

“I forgot you’re moving into that room,” she said, feeling a bit silly to state the obvious. “I should have offered to help you. I am pretty good at packing and organizing.”

“I’m afraid neither of us are much use for it,” he said, a hand raking through the curls he wore proudly. “Killian’s a pack rat at heart. And each time I make a comment about packing up something he comes up with a reason that he needs it. It might have been easier to raise the roof and finish out the attic.”

She was still several steps away from him, but was already breathing easier to have her that close. Looking upward, she smiled. “Property Brothers?”

“Fixer Upper,” he clarified with a laugh. “I watch those cooking competitions with you and go to sleep the sounds of demo and mold remediation with budgets skyrocketing out of control.”

“Whatever happened to budget friendly?” She looked past the boxes at the open door to the office turned Liam’s bedroom. “I would think you are excited about putting down some roots.”

“Aye, privacy will be a nice thing,” he said before doing the good host thing of offering her a drink or a snack. Even though he knew she was not there to see his brother, he told her of Killian’s schedule and mentioned that Emma was probably with him. When she looked at him as though he had lost his mind, he apologized and directed her to the sofa. “I know that I asked you to lunch earlier, but I wasn’t picturing myself feeling so awkward around you.”

“Yeah,” she answered softly. “Liam, I meant what I said yesterday. I’m not angry at you or with you. I’m trying to process all this. It’s hard for me to trust.”

His blue eyes closed slowly and deliberately. “And I fractured that trust.” It seemed twist his heart a bit more to hear her say anything about what he had ruined. He knew that he deserved that, but it still cringed at the words.

“I think,” she said, her fingers splaying and drawing back in repeatedly on the soft leather of her seat, “maybe it is me. My gut reaction is that I do trust you, Liam. I just don’t trust myself.” He contemplated her quizzically enough that she had to continue her justification. “I’m angrier at myself. I’m angry that I was so caught up in me and my performance that I didn’t notice you. It was all about
me, which pisses me off.”

Elsa was usually eloquent and thoughtful in her speech. Though not exactly as potty mouthed as he and Killian could be when they got angry, Liam was no less enchanted to hear that anything pissed off the woman in front of him. “No offense, darling, but that has to be a new kind of forgiveness. I stole from you and you are blaming yourself.”

“A therapist would have a field day with me,” she confirmed. “But I’m not really. I’m saying that what you did was wrong, but it didn’t come out of left field. I should have noticed. I should have helped you instead of having my daily breakdowns. Anyway, I didn’t come here to rehash all of it. I came here because I wanted to see if we could maybe…well, salvage what we were starting to…”

The rest of her words were cut off as he lunged forward to kiss her. All of the air she had been holding inside escaped as their mouths fused. During a rather sleepless night with her sister listening to her recount and dissect everything, including an early morning call to Emma for confirmation, it felt good to let her reaction fit her emotions rather than explain it away. Thankful for the support of the sofa, she felt herself melting against him and knew that if standing her legs wouldn’t hold her.

The worn flannel of his shirt was soft under the pads of her fingers and contrasted to the heat of his hands on her. There was nothing sweet or delicate about the kiss, as it bordered more on desperate and needy. Both of them were pulling at the other’s clothing, shirts freed from the waists of jeans and skirts, legs tangling as they fell deeper onto the couch. Her body was humming with electricity, ears ringing with the sighs and whispers of his voice when the jolt of the doorbell seemed to hit both of them at the same time.

He was holding himself up on one arm above her, the other still lost at where the hem of her shirt was currently residing just under the curve of her breasts. And for a moment it looked as though he was going to tell her to ignore it, pretend they hadn’t heard the melodic tone announcing someone’s arrival. That was until the cherubic face of the voice on the other side appeared in his mind.

“Uncle Liam? Uncle Killian?” Each syllable was drawn into a precise manner that was the result of his age and parents who spoke with far deeper accents than he did. “Papa, are they there?”

Elsa was looking up at him with confused eyes that were nearly as dark as his own at the moment. Her mouth was open and her breaths came in short bursts. “Robin?”

“And his son.”

***AAA***

The handles of the file cabinet dug a bit into his back as he extended his legs out in front of him with her curled into his side. It wasn’t the cleverest of hiding spots, but they had retreated to the office he used just to the side of the classroom and ducked down out of the sight line of anyone walking by the space. If they were being honest, she wasn’t exactly in a comfortable position either, wedged into his embrace with the desk behind her and her legs curled up so that her feet were next to a waste basket.

“I think I much prefer some of the spots from this weekend,” he teased, trying to ignore the sting of his head hitting the metal storage. “Much more comfortable.”

“I don’t know,” she said, leaning her head against the buttons of his black shirt. “This is kind of cozy. Kind of like those tiny houses people live in now days. And the company isn’t bad either.”

“The company is brilliant.”

There was an ease to their conversation that she had to admit was comforting and quiet. He asked her
about her day and talked of his own adventures. There was no dramatic pause before talking about what to do with their alone time or if they would see each other again. The first sign of that was when she commented that she was taking Henry to Granny’s for a celebratory dinner after the audition. “I’m thinking you should get the fries and I’ll get the onion rings. That way we can share both. She’s got that one booth where we can hide out or we could get it to go.” She stopped short, lifting her head of his chest and studying his face to see if he realized what she had just said.

He didn’t seem all that surprised and agreed, noting that they could get different desserts too. When he realized her expression, he paused to let her get her bearings. “Would you rather take him alone?”

“No, it’s fine… he would like to have you there and I would like the company…” She bit her lip. “I don’t want you to think that I’m taking you for granted though.”

“I’m not offended, love. I am fond of the way that you want to include me and that Henry doesn’t seem to mind all that much. I would say it was a step in the right direction.”

“See, here I was thinking that you are always so sweet and considerate with me and that I should do something for you. Show you that I’m not quite the emotionless robot that I appear sometimes.”

He had never considered her anything of the sort, having seen her in intimate moments only seemed to cement that knowledge for him. However, if she was feeling some need to make her feelings more obvious, he was willing to let her. “And what is it that you were planning?”

She scrunched up the features on her face as if to show the exertion of thinking what would be appropriate. “I’m thinking a romantic date,” she decided with a sharp nod of her head in agreement with herself. “Candlelight. Great food. Wine. Maybe a little dancing.”

“Sounds familiar but good,” he grunted when she shifted so that she was straddling him, her foot almost knocking over the waste basket.

“Are you saying I’m not original?” she said, mockingly frowning at him and flipping her hair over her shoulder. “I haven’t told you the best part.”

“I’m all ears.”

“I was thinking mountain cabin with no phones to interrupt us.” She raised an eyebrow as he smiled expectantly. “Or maybe something on the water instead. But privacy is a must. No son or brother in the next room.”

His hand was resting on her hip as she leaned forward, closing the gap of space between them. “And when would we have this date, love? Soon I hope.” Her palms braced themselves on his chest as she let her hair fall back down over her shoulders and create a curtain around them.

“Maybe the weekend after this one coming up,” she said, mentally calculating before bringing her lips just seconds from his. “I have an event this weekend that I’m going to on Saturday night. Black tie thing that will be a bore and a nightmare.”

She was teasing him by ghosting her lips over his and then dropping lower to run her lips and tongue over the long lines of his neck. Stopping at his pulse, she teased a bit more. “Work thing?” he managed to ask.

“Sort of. A friend has a book release party happening at a store in Portland. I promised I would go. Those can be worse than music things. The food is better but the booze sucks. Same hoity people acting like they had something to do with it all. I hate them, but I had promised months ago.” She went back to his neck, which he seemed to appreciate by the way he threw his head back to give her
better access. “But after that I’m yours on Sunday if you want to do something.”

He wasn’t just letting her enjoy the playful assault on his skin, as he repositioned to enjoy her better as well. It was not quite as passionate or romantic as they had been, but a bit of making out never hurt anyone, he told himself. To her credit she was ignoring the texts coming in on her phone from work, telling him that she had scheduled the time off and didn’t want to think about that place.

“I could go with you to Portland, if you like,” he managed to offer at one point. “Perhaps you would find the event more to your liking with a date. I would love to see you as princess ready for a royal ball.”

He wasn’t sure if it was their shared kisses and caresses that made her face redden and her eyes dart away for a moment. However, that was forgotten when she said that wasn’t a good idea. “I am sort of the date of the book’s author.”
One more update for you this week. Next week is a little nuts for me so I don’t know that I’ll have anything to post. I am flying across country for a job interview (dream job) on Wednesday, interviewing on Thursday, and flying back on Friday. Needless to say I intend to sleep for 48 hours after that. I’m thinking it will be quite an emotional week because in addition to that interview, I’m hearing back this week about another job that fits that same title of dream job. Thank goodness for a supportive hubby and family who want me to be happy in my career.

Good guesses about the author date for Emma. It’s not a romantic date by any means, but I wanted to include a little jealous Killian in my story (I find him adorable). I also wanted Emma to realize that someone could feel that way about her. No worries though. This chapter is fluffy with sides of Roland and Granny, as well as a mention of another couple on OUAT.

Roland was probably the most adorable child she had ever seen, not that she had much to compare him by. And when she and Liam agreed to take him to Granny’s during Robin’s secret mission, she was sure that it would be an enjoyable experience.

She was wrong.

Children were not exactly easy to get along with and maintain. Between the two older siblings, Elsa was sure they could manage the precocious child. Then he began a list of demands that would make most bank robbers take note in their negotiations. That left her sitting alone in the booth at the diner with Liam escorting the young boy next door to the ice cream shop because it had better rocky road than Granny did. The old woman did not seem at all insulted by the child’s revelation and even managed to pass off a coupon so that Liam could also get a scoop for free.

“He’s good with kids,” the old lady mused, pointing out a spot for one of her staff to clean. “Has that in common with his brother.”

Elsa nodded, stirring the lemon garnished water with her straw absently. She did not know how long she sat there quietly before Granny slid into the booth. “You and Emma are so much alike it’s scary. I sometimes wonder if you were separated at birth or something.”

“That would be a story,” the blonde answered. She knew she was in for one of Granny’s trademark lectures.

“Both of you have these two great guys trying to get your attention and lavishing you with praise. I dare say that some people would kill for that kind of thing. And you both sit back and pretend that it is not necessarily what you want or on your timeline. Some people would call that selfish, but I call it downright wasteful. You and Emma both push away happiness because you either think you don’t deserve it or you still have to do something to attain it. Life isn’t a set of scales. You don’t get good things or bad because of some force that decides you need a certain amount of both. It’s not a recipe where you can measure the ingredients either.” The woman sounded a bit winded from her speech as she readjusted the glasses resting on her nose. “I’ve been on this earth long enough to see your type before. You aren’t looking for something better. You’re just concerned that you aren’t reading the signs right or that it will all be swept away. Don’t be that way. Just enjoy what you have.”

Elsa dropped her head as she listened to Granny prattle on and on. “You really think I can be happy?”
“I do,” the woman said with an affirmative nod. “Happiness is a choice. You can wake up each day and see all the bad things. They are there if you see them or not. Or you can see the good. Either way your day will go on and your life will too. Not to get too nosey, dear, but I’ve noticed that you smile quite a bit when Liam leans in close to you. What’s that about?”

The heat rose to Elsa’s cheeks as she recalled the way he would nuzzle or nose at her cheek and neck. He had taken to standing behind her with arms wrapped around her waist when he would do it, making her actually giggle aloud sometimes. “It tickles when he does it, the whiskers on his face and his breath.”

Granny nodded as if already knowing the answer to that. “And at night does he snore?”

“Like a bear.”

“And which would you rather think about and concentrate on when he comes to mind?” The woman looked ready to wait for an answer until a loud crash occurred in the kitchen. “Never mind, dear. I think we both know the answer to that.”

***AAA***

“It wasn’t all that scary,” Henry said as the trio sat on throw pillows around Emma’s coffee table with greasy bags from Granny’s tossed about. The plan to eat at the diner was thwarted when Emma recognized Tamara’s car outside and realized that they couldn’t really be discrete. It hardly mattered at all, as her son was currently singing his own accolades and celebrating his victory over his nerves and his success in the writing competition.

“I told you that it would be completely muscle memory by the time you arrived in front of the judges,” Killian said in return. It was one of the few things that he had said since they had left the school earlier. Emma would occasionally look at him quizzically but Henry was more than making up for the lack of conversation. “You’ve practiced hard. You should be proud of yourself.”

Beaming with unadulterated pride, Henry dragged a fry through a glob of ketchup. “Do you think I stand a chance?”

When Killian didn’t answer immediately, Emma stepped in and placed a hand on her son’s obviously tense shoulder. “I am proud of you no matter what. You did your best and that’s all you can do. It’s not in your hands now.”

Henry chewed thoughtfully, his mind clearly moving a mind a minute. After swallowing and taking a swig of his milkshake, he smiled. “Can we call August to tell him about the writing award? I bet he’d like to know.”

She shifted on her pillow and looked toward Killian who was doing his best to appear disinterested. However, the red tint to his ears indicated otherwise. “It’s getting kind of late,” she said compassionately. “He’ll be here this weekend before you go over to Tony and Alex’s for the birthday party. You can tell him then.”

“Cool,” Henry responded, shifting his attention to Killian. “You have to meet August. He writes for a living. Books and stuff.”

“Sounds like quite a fellow.”

“He’s great. He drives a motorcycle. Mom won’t let me ride with him, but she has before. I saw. And he has been all these really cool places. Like Tibet and Iowa.” The young boy looked annoyed when Emma barely covered her laugh at his using two wildly diverse locations as examples. “Mom!”
“Sorry,” she said, leaning conspiratorially toward Killian. He did not sway in her direction at all. “August will be thrilled to hear that you’re doing well with writing. You never know with him though. He’s kind of flighty when it comes to following through on things. He’s supposed to be here this weekend, but I’ve been stood up a few times by him.”

“Yeah,” Henry said knowingly. “Like when he meets a new girlfriend. Remember that woman he met when we visited him in New York. She had this tattoo of…”

“Henry!”

That at least earned a small smile from Killian who was still toying with his food more than eating it. Emma’s rushed explanations sounded more like excuses and apologies than reason for him not to stew in his jealousy. Emma tried to use it as a bridge, letting her right leg fall and brush against his. His reaction wasn’t exactly what she expected, as his muscles tensed and again his jaw ground together.

“Celebrations aside, you’ve got school tomorrow. I trust you still have homework?”

Looking as though his mother had just informed him that he was going away to military school for the next 10 years, Henry dragged himself to his room, feet shuffling on the carpet. Occasionally he looked over his shoulder at them, only be greeted by Killian’s pout and her noncommittal face. “Fine,” he finally said, leaning his shoulder into the door. “I’ll be in here. You know, if anyone wants me or anything.”

“I don’t know where he gets the drama from,” Emma said, rising up on her knees to begin clearing the coffee table. “I’m not that bad.”

She stretched out to reach for the plate that had been Henry’s, the position prone for one of Killian’s teasing gestures. While she would squeal out his name in mock surprise if he touched her or pinched her bottom as he was likely to do in similar situations, she had come to expect and even want that attention from him. While she wouldn’t admit it, she was becoming more likely to put herself into those positions just for that reason. This time he didn’t budge except to stack his own leftovers and trash up.

Not wanting to give Henry and excuse to come back in the room away from his homework, Emma spun on her heel and hissed in a quiet voice. “Are you going to tell me what I did wrong or do I have to guess?”

He had a few things he could have said, snarky comebacks that would have taken the sting out of his feelings momentarily. However, it wasn’t Emma’s fault that he felt insecure enough to be jealous of a man he didn’t even know. At least he was logical enough for that. But he also knew she would see through the lie that nothing was the matter.

“You haven’t done anything, love,” he said carefully. She hadn’t. It was on him. He was the one imagining her with this August fellow. He was the one picturing her riding on motorcycles in a slinky dress with her arms around some leather clad author. They had no agreement or arrangement regarding the exclusivity of their relationship, but still the thought of her with another man was eating at him. “It’s all me.”

“I think I need more to go on.” She dumped a few items into the trash and began clearing more of them. Standing up straight and rubbing at the small of her back, she drew in a harsh breath. “This is about Saturday. Killian? Are you jealous of me going out with August?” She gave a sort of snorting laugh. “Oh my God. I didn’t say it was a date to make you jealous. That’s just what…Please let me explain.”
He shook his head, dislodging a bit of the hair that was growing too long and now looked a bit messy. “You don’t owe me an explanation, love.”

“I do if you’re upset about this. I never imagined that…Okay look. You know that I grew up in foster care, right? Well part of that time was in group homes. August was there when I was younger. He eventually got adopted by an older couple who raised him right here in Storybrooke. We were kids together and used to make plans to run away. We were going to live in the basement of a gas station. I don’t know why we thought gas stations had basements. And we were going to wait until it closed and then get our food. And movies. We were going to see all the latest movies.” She strolled closer to Killian, knowing that he was listening even if he wasn’t looking at her. “He was a friend to me when I didn’t have one. After I grew up and eventually moved here we ran into each other. It was kind of crazy.”

Killian’s blue eyes were staring at the rug there in the living room, focusing in on it with laser precision. “It’s a lovely tale. Something you could tell your…” He stopped. She didn’t deserve that quip.

“Henry’s right about him though. He’s a womanizing, flirtatious, charming, and not too honest guy sometimes. But he’s still a friend of mine. We see each other maybe twice a year and a few emails in between. The last time he stayed overnight here I had to kick him out because he brought home some woman he met at the Rabbit Hole and was attempting to give my son an impromptu performance of body shots.” She shook her head with the memory of it. “It’s a shame because he’s a talented writer. And when he’s not high on life itself or tequila, he manages to bang out more award winning work than most writers do in a lifetime.”

“Swan, I…”

“Let me finish,” she said, having reached his side and placed a hand on his shoulder. “I used the wrong word. See, August has a book coming out this month. I promised him that I would go to the release with him so that I could keep an eye on him and stop him from doing anything stupid. Two years ago at one of these events he had way too much to drink and ended up in a compromising position with one of the reviewers from the Times. Big scandal and horrible review for him when he never called her afterward. So I promised to be his date this time and keep him drinking more water than alcohol. That’s all it is Killian. I would love for you to be there, but it would be distracting.” She squeezed his shoulder. “Okay?”

“Love, I don’t…You didn’t have to explain. I…We aren’t…” He sighed, moving away from her touch in a move that showed more disgust with himself than worry. “I don’t have a claim to you at all. I’m essentially being a prat to even think that way and worry over it. I apologize.”

The corners of her mouth turned downward. “Killian, I know you haven’t brought up what exactly we are to each other. Neither have I, which is not really a surprise, but maybe…Okay, here it goes. I am not dating or seeing anyone else. I am not looking to do so either. And I think that maybe…No, scratch that. I know that I’m okay with you being a little jealous or possessive. It’s kind of nice to have someone looking out for me or wanting me for himself. I mean there is no need to go overboard, but I do like it. I know that if the shoe was on the other foot that I would have been so jealous and worried that you’d found someone better.”

His expression was one of disbelief as he stepped a little closer, bringing his hand up to cup the side of her face. “Emma, that isn’t happening. There is no one better for me than you. Granny even said it.”

“And whatever Granny says goes?” Reaching up, she grabbed his hand around the fingers and tugged him back over to the couch. He let her pull him into a sitting position, not fighting back as she
did so and threw one of her legs over his. Clearly she was saying this incident was coming to close.

“Aye, the woman is wise. Not to mention I may have made up my own mind to that too.” His hang dog expression was much better, the small smile on his lips made it all the way to his eyes. “I’m hopeful that maybe you’re seeing me in the same light.”

“I don’t think there was ever any doubt for me that you are pretty awesome,” she said, taking back up her task of showing him that she was capable of recognizing his goodness. “You’re smart, kind, great with Henry and other kids, a terrific listener, a pretty good kisser…” Her list continued with her lips punctuating each attribute with tiny pecks along his jawline and cheeks. He would occasionally grunt or even snort at her assessments. He did protest her weak analysis of his kissing and other amorous prowess.

“I think the lass finds me rather dashing,” he said, his voice low and gravely as he wrapped his arms around her even tighter. “I’m a lucky man.”

“With no reason to feel jealous,” Emma said pointedly. “You know, if it bothers you that much, I can cancel. August can find another chaperone/wing man.”

For a moment she thought that he might ask her to do that, as relief floods his eyes. But he again surprises her with a quick kiss to her lips before saying that he is not going to ask her to do that. “It means so much that you would be willing, love, but I have no intentions of making that request.”

She considered that for a quiet moment, his forehead dropping against hers. “I’m not exactly sure how good I’ll be at keeping him out of trouble,” she mused. “My mind is going to be elsewhere, specifically here with you.”

“Perhaps after your little soiree you might like to have a drink with me?” He waggled his eyebrows suggestively, which made her titter uncontrollably as she leaned her face into the crook of his neck. “It could be your reward for being a good friend.”

The kiss they shared was not like the others had been, his feelings still raw and just under the surface. There was a neediness to it on both their parts, lips and teeth crashing and tongues meeting. She tried to tell him through that kiss that she was his if that was what he wanted, words she wasn’t quite ready to say or even hear.

Between the repeated meeting of their lips, she smiled into the movements. “It’s getting kind of late,” she said before drawing his bottom lip between hers. When she released him again some time later, she panted out an invitation. “I mean if you want to, you could stay here.”

***AAA***

Liam was not sure he wanted to know why his brother’s text saying he wasn’t returning that night was riddled with three misspellings in the eight words. He was happy for the man he had helped to raise, thrilled that he seemed to have found someone he could really love and let love him in return. However, he did not need the mental image of whatever it was that was distracting him from his usual accuracy and precision with the English language.

Roland had finally tired out after the long walk back from Granny’s and the ice cream parlor. His incessant chatting creating an entertaining and fun mood as he and Elsa both held one of the lad’s hands in their own. While she had said she was not exactly a seasoned babysitter, Elsa had charmed the little boy instantly. It was a bit hard to admit that he found himself jealous when Roland found his way into Elsa’s lap and fell into a near trance of enchanted pleasure at the sounds of the beautiful woman singing him a softly sweet lullaby.
“You could record that and make a mint off these mothers who go on the organic, free range parenting kicks. They could sell your lullaby CD’s and downloads next to the cash registers at coffee shops that serve soy instead of whole milk.”

“I don’t think that is my audience.” She had handed Roland off to Liam who carried him to the oversized and overstuffed chair in corner. It was the perfect temporary bed for someone of the boy’s small stature.

She raised an eyebrow at him for offering her a beer, pointing out that they were on child watching duty. However, he was not dissuaded, pointing out that they had been recruited and not being judged on their professionalism. “I’m not daft enough to suggest getting wasted with a child in our care, darling. I’m simply saying I could use a bit of a nip and so could you.”

Elsa may have called him a dork, but she accepted the brown bottle and sipped from it as he gulped his. When Robin did manage to show back up, he had to knock twice to roust them. After a discussion of color scheme and furniture placement had turned into watching a culinary challenge show had left Elsa sleeping against his shoulder, the house was quiet and dimly lit. Liam claimed he had been asleep too, but had been more interested in watching her sleep than actually shutting his eyes himself.

Gingerly extricating himself from her, Liam had answered the door and carried Roland out to the car. “You going to tell me where you were and why it is such a big secret?”

Robin squeezed his eyes shut and rubbed at one of his temples. “It wasn’t all that much of a secret. I had a meeting to get to and John was too busy to watch the boy tonight. Thank you for filling in.”

“A meeting?” Liam repeated, letting the word dance around in the cold night air. “Nope, don’t buy it. Mate, you’re a horrible liar. Just who was this meeting with? And why was it at night and not during business hours?” Folding his arms across his chest, he leaned his hip into the car. “Hmmm?” The long breath that Robin exhaled reminded Liam of a man requesting a cigarette before going to the firing squad. “Come now, let’s be having it.”

“I met with someone from the production company,” he answered, the telltale squeak of his dishonesty piping up in his tone.

“Ahhh,” Liam said. “And this wouldn’t have been Emma was it?” Liam was aware that Emma was with his brother currently and not meeting clients. All of their meetings so far had been with the band as a whole or with Liam individually. “Because you are digging your hole deep, mate.”

Robin’s answer was nearly inaudible to which Liam asked him to repeat it. Closing one eye and scrunching his face as if ready for a fist, Robin looked toward his friend. “Regina.”

Attempting not to appear too surprised, Liam tried for a thoughtful nod. “I see then. And she would be singling you out to talk about the band why?”

“She wasn’t exactly singling me out. It was more of a social thing.”

“Bloody hell!” Liam raged. “You’re shagging the head of the production company and didn’t think to share that bit of news with the rest of us. What happens when it all goes sideways? Regina Mills and her sister have been known to not renew or back contracts when they didn’t like a haircut a musician got. Are you daft?”

“It’s not like that,” Robin protested. “I’m not putting anyone at risk here. Not like you.”

The groan that Liam emitted was more like a moose and bear hybrid. “I’ve bloody well apologized
for that. But you are walking right into this with your eyes open. Regina? Really? How did this even come about?”

Robin reluctantly told Liam that their earlier meeting with the head of the recording company had led to him feeling attracted to her. He had no intention of acting on it, but things had happened. When out shopping for groceries, he had run into her. The same happened when he stopped for gas. Slowly they had begun to talk and chat. When she accidentally left her phone in his car one day, he had stopped by to return it. He hadn’t meant to ask her out, but it had happened. And now they saw each other a few times during the week. John, the man across the hall from Robin and Roland, was a longtime friend and faithful helper to him. However, this one night he had come in search of Killian who rarely asked questions about his whereabouts.

“You do realize that Will is going to want a shot at you,” Liam said shaking his head. “He’s pretty much anti-relationship with any of us.”

“That’s rich coming from a man who has been involved with Anastasia for longer than most of us have owned a pair of socks.”

***AAA***

Henry did not seem all that shocked to see Killian there that morning. When his music teacher padded into the kitchen to see if he could find a bit of coffee before heading back to his own place to get ready, Henry did not even break his argument that he should be allowed to stay by himself in the afternoons.

“I’m not five,” Henry protested as Emma placed cereal bowls on the counter. Killian was not even sure he could concentrate on the debate as he stared at Emma’s long legs and his shirt covering her upper body. “I won’t burn the place down.”

“I don’t think we’re ready for this yet,” Emma protested, wiping her hand on the cotton capri sleep pants she was wearing. “Between the two albums I’m helping produce, a development deal for four songs, and a new band I’m scouting, you’re going to barely see me as it is. You have a choice… Mary Margaret or Granny and Ruby. That’s it.” When Killian stepped around her to check the level of her coffee maker, she smiled and wished him a good morning. “Or we can call your dad and see if he has a better idea.”

Making a face, the boy sat defeated in his chair. “Is it going to be this way this summer too? Am I going to be stuck with a sitter?”

Emma tore her eyes away from Killian and his obvious attempts to ignore the conversation and appear nonchalant in her kitchen. He was doing a good job except for that nervous scratching behind the ear thing he did. She knew then that she should ask him about that sometime, especially if he ever thought about playing poker. “Henry, this is not the time for this. We aren’t having this discussion. Now finish getting ready so I don’t have to go into the school this morning and check you in through the attendance office. It’s not exactly fun for me to get those death glares from that woman.”

Sweeping his arm over the table in front of him, he dragged away his backpack. “Fine,” he said with his best martyr voice. “If you want to be alone with Killian, you just had to say so. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

She was going to have to have a talk with him about saying whatever should happen to pop into his mind. But that would have to wait, she reconciled as she pulled at Killian’s arm and he came closer to her willingly. The kiss they shared was by far not their most passionate, but the scents of shampoo and soap mingled nicely. She had to admit that while still odd it was a nice feeling to have him there.
in the morning.

“He wasn’t all wrong about my motive,” she said, one arm circling around him as the other hand was still holding the box of cereal. “I know it’s a little awkward, but I did like waking up with you this morning.”

He ran the tip of his tongue over his lips, trying to savor a bit of her taste. “Aye, it is a pleasure, but you didn’t think I’d notice the shirt?” She stared at him blankly until he gestured with his nose at the shirt that hangs on her, buttoned and no longer as starched or neat as the last time he wore it. “Stealing right out of my bag is a bothersome habit, love.”

She squinted down at the shirt as if she didn’t even realize that she had done it and back at him, nose crinkling and her head to the side. “It’s comfy?”

“I’ve always thought so. However, I would think you probably own quite a few comfy frocks. And I am far from complaining. A wise man once told me there was nothing so sexy as a woman wearing a man’s own shirt.”

Her familiar eye roll did not deter his smirk in the least. “I think that refers to a woman wearing nothing but a man’s shirt. And I’m afraid I had to be a bit more dressed than that to avoid the psychiatric bills and trauma for my son.”

***AAA***

Elsa was dressed much the same, except she was able to forgo the sleep pants and leave her long legs bare and curled under her as she blew into her coffee much to the amusement of Liam. He told her that she was such a child to do that, scared of burning her tongue. Then he offered to retrieve an ice cube for her if she should require it.

Her hair was usually tightly wound in a braided design that he had come to view as a work of art or brushed until it shone like spun gold cascading down her back and over her shoulders. Yet there was something about the messy bun she was currently sporting with loose and uneven tendrils that she had to keep pushing out of her face. Without her usual make up she looked younger than her years and sweetly vulnerable with hands wrapped around a mug that bore the word captain from some gag gift from his naval buddies.

“I apologize for the condition of my room,” he said folding the newspaper back into place. “I didn’t intend to invite you to sleep over on an air mattress.”

“I’m not a princess, Liam,” she protested. “I’ve slept in much more uncomfortable places. And besides you made a really nice pillow.”

Beaming at her, he bent his head to kiss the tip of her shoulder that was peeking out from his shirt. “Careful, darling. Anyone hearing that would think you were saying I have turned soft. I’ll have you know that I am still in brilliant shape. Once a sailor always a sailor and all that.”

She loosened her hands on the mug and reached one finger out to poke him in his abdomen, delighting when he sucked in a breath to avoid laughing. “I think you’re just right.”

His eyes sparkled with glee as she her hand linger, running over the taut muscles that showed no signs of atrophy at all. “And that makes you sound like Goldilocks.”

“Better than some silly princess waiting on her prince to save her,” Elsa declared before nipping at his lip and then pulling back. “But if you were the prince I wouldn’t mind so much. We might have to look at saving each other on occasion.”
“It has understandably been a while since I read the classic fairy tales. Killian never much liked me to read those to him as much as adventure tales and the like. But was there a prince in Goldilocks. I only seem to recall three bears.” He snaked his hand over to remove the coffee that she had specifically requested that morning and still not taken a sip from. She didn’t protest as he put it aside.

“You could be one of the bears,” she said, sliding downward on the couch and more into his embrace. “Dangerous, hairy, gruff, I’m thinking those describe you.”

He practically howled with laughter before his mouth was on hers again in that mix of tender and rough that she could only seem to recall being something of him. He was kissing her firmly and yet with a gentle yearning as her mouth opened to the request of his and their tongues danced together. Without explanation or excuse, he showed off those muscles she had teased him about and lifted her into his arms to walk her back to the air mattress of a bed that he was trying not to be ashamed of at his age. Thankfully they made it back to his room minutes before Killian arrived back to change for the day, avoiding awkward conversations and further patients for Dr. Hopper.

*Thanks for reading and all your comments. I love knowing what you’re thinking about these adorable couples. I did make mention of Outlaw Queen here, but it won’t factor much into the rest of the story. I simply wanted to include it because I am going to miss Sean Maguire on the show.*
Chapter 23

Happy Father’s Day! We’re going to do a little bit of a time jump from late March to June in our story right now. Here’s hoping that will make sense as the story continues. Thanks so much for reading and enjoying this little tale.

Fair warning…Neal’s not really likeable in this fic. He rarely is in any of my stories, as he reminds me too much of my ex. When I write dialogue for him it always comes out like my ex used to say things. I don’t have enough therapy to do that often so just fair warning. Neal will always come off like a jerk when written by me. No offense meant to anyone who likes the character or to the actor who I have liked in other things.

“Lift your wrists a bit higher,” Killian instructed there in the living room of the cottage that he owned. “It will help your reach tremendously.”

The windows in the great room were open to allow the cool breeze from the sea to trickle in and mix with the scent of leather and old wood that made the place home. It was just the start of summer in the sleepy little Maine town, leaving behind the bitterness of the winter chill and not yet the heat of the year. Henry was sitting on the piano bench, chewing at his bottom lip as he again spread his fingers across the keys and tried to implement his teacher’s suggestions.

School was out for the year, which had resulted in a few arguments and compromises for Henry and Emma. Piano lessons from Killian (something his teacher had offered) were a respite for days spent with Granny while Emma was working. There were weekly visits and getaways with Neal too, but Henry had not been as anxious to begin those as he knew that many would involve wedding plans with Tamara. There were only so many tuxedo fittings that a kid could take before he was begging for other activities. He had his honor band practice too, having achieved the rank of second chair in the trumpet section. There was creative writing camp at the library and his math tutoring sessions too. All in all Henry was a busy young man.

“Sounding much better,” Liam said, entering the house with a chipper smile on his face. Balancing two bags of groceries on his arm and a stack of mail in his hand, he kicked the door shut and shattered Henry’s concentration. That earned him a frown from his brother, who squeezed Henry’s shoulder and leaned in conspiratorially toward his student.

“Liam wouldn’t know the difference in a right note and a wrong one on the piano. The bloke often skipped out on our piano lessons as a child.”

Wrinkling his nose in disgust, Liam dropped the bags on the counter. “The old lass was just keeping us out of mum’s hair. She drank like a sailor on leave and smelled of moth balls and lineament. She was half deaf and most definitely blind. She mixed the two of us up and called us by the names of children who had long since grown up and moved away.” He shook his head at the memory. “I would go down to the store at the corner and buy candy. When mum asked after my lessons, the woman couldn’t remember that I hadn’t been there and said I was performing brilliantly.”

“He could barely manage to pound out a few scales,” Killian interceded. “Even with more practice he would have been terrible.”

Henry’s hands were still hovered over the piano keys, but he watched the two brothers argue with interest. They exchanged tough words with one another, but there was still a soft affection between the two that was clearly visible. Liam called his brother a name, but still poured sodas for both him
and Henry and carried them over. He also affectionately bumped up against Killian and noted that his brother was always the more serious one when it came to music and performing.

“He has a gift for it,” Liam mused to the young boy as if Killian wasn’t there. “Bloody shame he wastes it on being a teacher.” With that Liam disappeared into the room that was now his, his phone in his hand and the items he had procured at the store still sitting on the counter. Rather than call him back to put the frozen and cold items away, Killian stood and began the task himself.

“Do you regret it?” Henry asked, his chin resting on his folded hands and arms. “Being a teacher rather than a musician.”

“I rather think I am still a musician,” Killian answered. “Just because I teach others doesn’t mean I’m not capable of it.” He looked over his shoulder to see that Henry seemed to be chewing on that answer. “My brother hasn’t always been chasing this dream of performing. He was in the navy and served quite a while. The thing about music or any passion or dream is that you must temper it with reality. When I lost my hand, I couldn’t play the guitar or even the piano in the same way. I realized that if I wanted music to be a part of my life that I had to go about it another way. Your mum doesn’t perform or write music, but she’s certainly very involved in it. So what I’m trying to say, lad, is that careers and passion for something don’t always look the way we think they will. That is neither good nor bad.”

Henry continued to think about that. “I bet if you wanted to sing professionally, my mom could find a way to make that happen. She’s got this one guy who sucked at playing the guitar but he could sing. She finally told him that it was give up the guitar or no contract.” More on reflex, Henry dropped a coin into the cup that Killian extended. Emma had been on him to give up such language as the word sucked, but it was a hard habit to break.

“I think your mother has enough fledglings to worry over without me making a fool out of myself with that,” Killian remarked. His features softened considerably as he took a seat on the stool next to Henry. “I’m not unhappy with my career or life. Is that what this is about?”

Henry didn’t answer right away, looking off toward the windows and sighing. “I guess I just wondered. Your brother is working on recording. My mom is always busy with one of the acts she is helping. I just wondered if maybe you thought about doing some of that instead of being just a teacher.”

Killian felt a pain in his stomach as though he had been punched. There was no real way to describe how utterly useless he felt in that moment, remembering similar conversations when he had told his brother of his plans. He wanted to be careful though, as Henry was his student. “I enjoy teaching, Henry. It isn’t about me settling or hoping to do something else. I enjoy it. And that is what matters.”

“I just thought that maybe…”

“Henry, is there some reason you think that I don’t?”

That must be it, he thought as he watched Henry shift on the stool. Something had made the boy think that this was just a temporary or placeholder type job for him. “Well, my dad said that most people who teach for a living are wanting to do something else. They are just afraid to do it. I thought if you were afraid that my mom could help you because she’s good at that sort of thing. And she knows about music and talent and stuff. It’s okay to ask her.”

That was probably the kindest thing that Killian had ever had a student want to do for him. However, he also felt anger toward Neal for suggesting that Killian’s whole heart wasn’t with his students. The man’s father ran a school. Did he really think that all teachers were aching for more? “You don’t
have to worry about that. Henry, I’m happy being a teacher. I enjoy getting to know my students. I love watching them grow and become musicians or whatever it is they want to be. When you made second chair in the honor band, I was so happy for you and proud because maybe I had a little to do with your success. That’s more important to me than playing music in night clubs and recording music for the internet. I promise you that I am not bored with teaching or my students in the slightest. It’s not an either or proposition for me. I simply have my life and my brother has his. We are not similar in that way.”

Considering that, Henry looked down at the fine grain on the wood floors. “That’s good,” he finally conceded with a reluctant glance back at the piano. “I like having you as a teacher. I guess we better get back to it.”

Killian raised his hand to his right jaw and scratched at the junction where his stubble met the smoothness of his neck. “I think we may have had enough practice for today. Perhaps we should take a stroll for some ice cream. Your mother mentioned having me over for dinner with the two of you and I thought we might pick up a pint of her favorite. What do you say?”

There was no hesitation before Henry agreed, leaving behind the piano and talk of settling for a discussion of rocky road versus turtle tracks.

***AAA***

“Elsa I need you not to look at the camera,” the news producer instructed with a bored tone. “You look like a shifty politician when you do that. Look right at the reporter who asked you the question, okay?” The woman was wearing a black suit with bright orange lipstick, giving off the impression that she was an overly made up duck. It was all that the blonde could do not to quack her acceptance of the instructions.

“You’re doing fine,” Emma said a little more gently from behind the woman, making a funny face for a split second. “Just pretend the camera isn’t there. It’s a conversation between you and this reporter.”

The producer snorted and leaned back toward the cameraman, whispering something that Elsa couldn’t here. “Okay, we’re going to try this again. If we can’t get it, I think we’ll have to move on.”

Even Anna looked uncomfortable and darted her eyes away from the blinking lights of the camera that seemed much closer than the bored looking reporter. She smoothed her hair and gave a thumbs up sign to Emma that she was ready despite her wavering smile. Elsa was another story, appearing colder and much more closed off than her sister. The producer had started counting the reporter down when Emma brushed past her with a tissue in hand and pretended to blot a bit of Elsa’s makeup.

“Just a conversation about the music, okay?” she whispered, squatting next to the woman. “Let Anna take most of the questions. That’s fine. You talk about the duet with Liam and the upcoming show at the Palladium. Everything else is gravy.”

Drawing in a shaking breath and letting it out slowly, Elsa nodded her head and let some of the color return to her cheeks. “I hate this,” she hissed to Emma as the woman stood to head back to the corner.

“No, you don’t,” Emma returned without even looking over her shoulder.

Later that evening with the bottle of red wine that he had brought over nearing completion and the townhome that the sisters shared quiet from a lack of Anna, Elsa sighed loudly as he rewound the
dvr again to watch the interview. “I look fat,” she complained, slapping her hand on her stomach that showed no excess of weight at all. “And my nose looks too long.”

“I won’t have you insulting my taste in women,” Liam protested as he pressed play. “I think you look beautiful, sexy as hell in that outfit, and adorable when you give Anna that look.” He pressed pause and the picture on the screen froze with Anna’s mouth wide open and Elsa looking like a cross between interested and homicidal as she gazed at her sister. “Okay maybe not that moment, but there were some adorable moments, darling. And you spoke very highly of working with me.” He smiled broadly, folding his free arm behind his head with pride. “All in all I think you did brilliantly.”

Elsa reached over and snatched the remote with 1,200 buttons away from him. “Liam, I can’t believe you can say that. I forgot the name of the song we sang. It just flew right out of my head. Did you hear me stutter? I was like a child at the spelling bee without a clue. It was awful.”

“If I was the judge, I would have given you the benefit of the doubt, darling. You would have been an adorable little speller.” Lifting his head off the back of the couch, he swung himself over to kiss her, only to be stopped by her hand. “I’ve done something?” he asked against her splayed fingers on his lips.

“Guilty conscience?” She gave him a sort of snorting laugh. “No, I just wanted to apologize. I’m kind of hard on you when I feel insecure. If I was alone right now there would be ice cream with the wine and I’d be watching this through my fingers over my eyes or with my mouth covered by a pillow. So before I dissect it again, I just wanted to say thank you. Not only are you a fantastic duet partner, but you’re kind of a great cheerleader.”

“I’d say that was a compliment,” he told her, sounding fake in his disbelief. “You’re surely not…”

Pulling her hand away from his mouth, she tugged on his collar. “Oh quit the teasing and just kiss me.”

***AAA***

“It was Killian’s idea,” Henry said in between enthusiastic licks of the spoon. “He said we should get you ice cream.”

“Was it?” Emma asked, knowing full well that while her son was caring and loving, he would not have thought of such a thing. These twice weekly dinners had become quite a thing for the trio, sharing a meal on the floor in the living room instead of the dining table. Since it was summer they had added movies to the list of activities or sometimes a board game. But lately it had been the series of Star Wars movies, which Henry had thought Killian should see. Nobody had the heart to tell Henry that everyone already had seen them. On one evening when such a dinner was planned Emma had been called away for a work emergency. She’d come back to find that her son and Killian were enjoying the Empire Strikes Back and handed her a bowl of popcorn to join them.

“Mutual decision,” Killian supplied with a wink that left Henry wondering.

“What does that mean?”

“It means,” Emma said, settling herself against Killian’s shoulder so that they could begin the movie while there was still ice cream to be had, “you both thought of it together.”

“Oh.”

“Aye, we came to an accord. I suggested ice cream and you supplied the right flavor information. It was a two man job after all.” Killian had to explain the meaning of accord, but the movie was
starting a few minutes after that.

When Emma asked as the opening credits rolled what they would be watching after the Star Wars movies had all be played, Henry suggested the Pirates of Caribbean franchise, earning a groan from the two adults who felt that his new obsession with all things sea related after a few trips out on Killian’s boat was too much. Henry even suggested that Killian could pass as a pirate with the stubble he had and encouraged his teacher and mother’s friend to give it a go with an eye patch or a hook for a hand, who in turn threw a pillow at his young student. Emma tried to miss the pillow fight and protect her bowl of melting ice cream only to get smacked right next to her pony tail with a throw pillow from a laughing Killian.

“Are you 12?” she asked incredulously, feeling the cold as a bit of the melted ice cream sloshed out and hit her chest. “Picking a pillow fight with an actual 12 year old?”

Killian’s answer was cut off by Henry bombarding them with the body pillow that Emma had lined the back of a wooden bench with for comfort. Giving a sort of kamikaze yell, the boy gave Killian enough time to defend himself and Emma and sent them all tumbling to the ground with laughter.

“I’m sure my neighbors are loving this,” Emma said, trying her best not to show too much approval at her son’s breathless and endless giggles and the way that Killian’s hair was sticking out on end and his smile was bigger than ever. He gave her a suggestive eyebrow waggle to indicate he could remember times when Henry wasn’t there that they had been plenty loud, but she ignored it and snapped the remote up off the floor. “Alright, children, we’re having movie time. Everyone keep your hands to yourself.”

There were still a few gasps of laughter from Henry as he settled back and watched the opening credits restarted anew. And a bit of a grunt from Killian when Emma leaned against him and tugged his arm over her shoulders so she was more comfortable. “I thought we were keeping our hands to ourselves,” he whispered, not pulling away in the slightest.

“Shut up, pirate.”

***AAA***

Liam sighed with an exaggerated groan, his guitar resting on his legs as he arched his back and threw his hands and arms over his head with the effort. To his dismay Killian was not paying attention to him, instead reading from some thick book that seemed to have the tiniest print he’d ever seen. It was a bit childish, but Liam threw out another embellished groan of displeasure and half collapsed against the cushions.

“Anything the matter?” Killian asked indulgently, not even looking up from the page. “Because it seems to me that you aren’t getting much writing done.”

“I’m having a moment over here,” Liam groused. “And you aren’t paying attention.”

Rolling his eyes, Killian moved at a glacial pace as he stuffed a long leather book mark in between where he was reading and smoothed the cover over with his hand. “I didn’t mean to ignore you, brother, but you failed to tell me this was a bit of performance art. I was simply trying to do a bit of reading. Something I would be doing in my office if it still existed.”

The guitar hit the rug with a dull thud. “Bloody hell, Killian. Are you going to hold that over my head for eternity? I got a job at the Rabbit Hole serving bar a few nights a week. The band is making progress. If I’d known you had qualms about my living here, I’d have found another place weeks ago.”
Not appearing sorry in the least, Killian rested an ankle on his knee and waited patiently for his brother to quit grumbling and get to the point. When he didn’t, Killian gave his own sigh in retribution. “Have I asked for a bit of rent money? No. I know that you wish to pursue this career. I have done all I can to welcome you. I didn’t even kill you when you walked in on Emma and me the other night.”

“You didn’t need to. She nearly took my head off with that punch she threw,” Liam countered, rubbing the side of his face where the dark bruise had turned a greenish brown. “Regina right nearly killed her after she saw the damage. Some mess about photos and make up costs.”

“And that has you throwing your tantrum? I mean moment.”

Ignoring the fact he had been trying to get his brother’s attention, Liam gestured toward the chicken scratch handwritten page of notes on the table. “I can’t get these lyrics to gel correctly,” he said. “I’ve tried it half a dozen ways, but it all sounds forced and doesn’t flow like it should.”

Killian made no effort to move toward the notes, barely glancing at them in interest. “And I am being allowed the privilege of witnessing this little tantrum because…”

“I need your help, brother. Okay? I admit it. I need your assistance right now.”

He could have snapped back with some comment about sneaking into his private journal and stealing, but he didn’t. There was no joking on such matters, as the wounds were still pretty raw.

“Where is it failing?”

It took nearly three hours before the chorus was what Liam had been hoping it would be, both brothers reasonably satisfied with the result. Liam would strum the guitar and Killian sing a few bars before making more notes and trying a section again. Each of them seemed stunned that there was little fighting. As they sat there in the waning light of the day, beers open and the guitar sitting between them, Killian frowned and inspected the instrument more carefully.

“Is this…is this mine?” he asked, confused since Liam’s guitar was much newer and more expensive. “What the hell?”

Grimacing under his brother’s wary scrutiny, Liam gingerly fingered the strap. “I borrowed it,” he explained, not forgetting how he had borrowed other things over the years. “See, Robin borrowed mine and I needed to finish this song. If I had asked Elsa…well, I would never have finished. And you don’t play any longer so I thought…”

“I didn’t realize it was still here,” Killian said. His hand was pulled back in an effort not to even touch the wooden instrument or strings. The familiar vibration of it had called to him, but he had ignored it until just that moment. “Wait! Why did Robin need yours? He doesn’t play.”

“He’s been learning. Seems he wanted to show off a bit and serenade Reg…his girlfriend.”

“I’m guessing that Reg would be Regina Mills. Either that or we have been wrong about Robin all these years and he’s seeing Reginald?” He laughed when his brother reddened at being caught divulging what had been a secret for weeks.

“You can’t tell Emma,” Liam implored. “Regina made Robin promise, as she has a bit of an issue with her staff shagging the talent. I was told in confidence. Don’t make me look like more of an arse than I already do.”

“I’m not sure I can stop a speeding train, brother, but we’ll see. Now run and tell Elsa you’ve finished after you’ve email Emma your new creation. She’s likely waiting for it.”
Looking a bit tired from the ordeal of writing, Liam nodded. “Should I tell her that you…”

“I wouldn’t expect that,” Killian answered. “I helped my brother. There is no professional courtesy expected or needed.”

***AAA***

Henry threw the balled up socks into the bag on his bed and waited as his mother thumbed through the clothes hanging in his closet. He’d already heard the lecture that he was letting the room get way too messy and didn’t want to hear more.

“It’s just a weekend camping trip with your dad,” she repeated to him, throwing a shirt in his direction that he didn’t bother to catch. When she eyed him with that silent mother stare, he grumbled a bit and picked it up off the floor. “You’ve been avoiding him pretty well so far this summer, but it’s father’s day weekend. So no more excuses.”

“You said hanging out with her was my choice.” Emma had understood when her son explained that Tamara’s words had hurt deep. Though she had encouraged him to talk to his father about the issue and setting the record straight, he’d not yet done it. She had even offered to have Neal over so that the three of them could discuss it together.

“She’s not exactly the camping type. I doubt she’ll be there, but we can call your dad and see.” That was something that Emma could understand – feeling rejected or left out. She hurt inside to think that her son felt that even a little. It was Killian who had pointed out that while the words Tamara had used were hurtful, Henry was still a lucky boy to have so many people who adored and loved him. Emma stepped back from the closet with a pair of jeans in her hands. Softening her expression from lecturing mom, she smiled sympathetically. “Henry, I promise you that if Tamara is there or if Neal says anything that makes you angry, just call me. I’ll come pick you up in a heartbeat. I promise.”

Henry didn’t smile back at his mother, stuffing one of his new comic books in his bag. “You’ll be spending the weekend with Killian. I don’t think you want me to crash that.”

“I don’t think of it that way at all,” Emma said, taking two strides to be in front of him. Lifting his chin up with her fingers, she waited until he blinked at her. “Killian is a pretty big fan of yours. You know he prefers watching movies with you over me. You know what’s going on during them and it takes me a minute to catch on.”

One side of Henry’s mouth lifted up incredulously. “Mom, he’s my teacher. He’s supposed to be nice to kids. It’s his job.”

“Maybe so, but it doesn’t stop the fact that the other day when he and I were out at a theater he refused to see one of the shows because he thought you would enjoy it if we brought you along. I still say you’ve got a big fan there.” She placed a kiss to his forehead. “So you’ll be off in the woods with your dad and I’ll be here trying to find things to do with Killian that he wouldn’t rather include you in on. We’ll both have a great time.”

Okay so she exaggerated a bit. She was looking forward to a whole weekend with Killian and no child. But she wasn’t about to scar her son with that information or itinerary. There was certainly a concern about Henry being away with Neal for a couple of days, especially with the unspoken issue of rejection still in the air.

“Can I call and check in?” Henry asked, his voice cracking a bit from emotion. “I don’t mean a lot. I just mean…”
"I would like that. But I promise, you’re going to have a great time.” She didn’t add that she would kick Neal’s butt if he didn’t.

***AAA***

To his credit he didn’t bring Tamara when he picked Henry up, wrapping his son in a bear hug and asking if he had remembered everything. There was the standard lecture that there were no stores where they were going to which Emma and Henry rolled their eyes simultaneously. The Storybrooke Campgrounds were exactly two miles outside of town. Granny was known to have the staff deliver there if called.

“You brought your game?” Neal asked. “Henry we’re doing the primitive site. There’s no charger.”

Looking a little embarrassed, Henry gave a shrug and ran back up the stairs.

“Don’t be hard on him this weekend, okay?” Emma asked, folding her arms over her chest. “He’s a little sensitive about things lately.”

“Emma, I’m great with the kid. I don’t know what you’ve been saying to him though. He seems almost scared of me. Did you tell him something that I need to combat?” He was leaning up against a late model sedan that looked more like something his father would own than him. She almost asked if that was supposed to be a sign of his maturity, but she resisted.

“Henry’s not coping with the whole you getting married thing. He feels a little left out.” She didn’t want to divulge all of Henry’s reasons, but she also knew that Neal’s strength was not his sense of perception. “Just be careful, okay?”

Neal huffed and stuck out his chest a little. “My son is a part of my life. A big part. I don’t think I need a lecture about balancing that from you when you are sneaking around with his teacher.”

“Nobody is sneaking around, Neal. And that is different. I’m not talking about marrying…”

“Oh that’s what this is. You think that I moved on too fast. You think that Henry is resenting the time I’m spending with Tamara. I’ll have you know, Emma, that Tamara’s great. We really click and she’s going to be a great mother to Henry.” His cheeks sucked in as if he had tasted something sour. “This isn’t the time, but I thought maybe we should have a talk about visitation. Henry should be with me more. My dad and Tamara agree.”

Emma was glad that she had crossed her arms, as it gave her a bit of support for not punching Neal in the jaw. “You’re right about one thing. This isn’t the time to talk about it. And don’t go dragging Henry into that discussion either this weekend. He doesn’t need that stress of knowing we still can’t agree on anything.” The words had barely left her mouth when the door sounded and Henry rejoined them on the sidewalk. In an uncharacteristically affectionate move for a 12 year old he threw his arms around his mother and buried his face in her shoulder.

“I’ll miss you.”

She smiled, peeling him off of her and cupping his cheek that felt warm and soft to her fingers. “You’re going to have a great time. And you’re going to call if you don’t. Nothing to worry about.”

***AAA***

“I have to admit that I miss the lad myself,” Killian said over dinner that night. “But being alone with you isn’t bad either.” The mischievous glint in his eyes was indicative of his teasing nature, but it was met with a blank stare from Emma. “Are you okay, Emma?”
She sort of shrugged, dragging her fork across her plate. Lifting it to her mouth, she realized that it was empty and frowned at it as though the fork had done something wrong. “I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not, he said, sliding his chair a bit closer to hers. “Love, you can tell me. This is more than missing Henry. He’s not more than a few miles away. If you would like we could take a little hike in the woods and see him.”

She shook her head, looking at the plate that was still piled high with lobster and saffron risotto and baked fish so tender that it flaked off with a mere touch of her fork. It had been her idea that they have dinner some place she wouldn’t normally taken Henry. There were no greasy bags or arcade games in the corner. People didn’t seat themselves and there were no napkin dispensers. The menu had no kids’ section. “I’m sorry. I’m ruining our night.”

“No, you’re fine, love. I am just concerned about you. A man’s ego is a fragile thing. I sort of hoped that you might be as happy as I am to be sharing this meal with you.” He touched his fork to his plate and waited for her. “Talk to me, Swan.”

“Neal said something that got to me,” she admitted, hating to even bring up his name. “He basically said I was jealous that he was moving on with Tamara.”

Killian didn’t flinch at the idea like she thought he might. The memory of him meeting August and the audible sigh when her author friend had taken off that night with a side hug and a promise to email and call more often was still fresh in her. The way he had kissed her that night after August had left, a desperate and restrained sort of thing that seemed to indicate he didn’t want to come on too strong and didn’t want to scare her away. However, it had been raw and exposed a truth to his feelings that they had not really spoken of yet. “You don’t strike me as the jealous type.”

“I should hope not. It’s been more than a decade since he and I…”

“I have no doubt that you are hard to forget, love. But I do think that it is simply wishful thinking on his part that you might have any interest in his engagement other than out of concern for your son. Unless you have a secret side to you that I have yet to uncover, I would call his claims to the contrary groundless.”

She smiled back almost shyly as he lifted his glass in a mock salute toward her and took another sip. “I hope you don’t take this the wrong way, but I think Neal might be right in some ways. I’m not jealous in a way that I want to be back with him. That ship has sailed and sunk. No, I think it is a bit that I’m jealous he gets to lead that life. He gets a fiancé and soon to be wife who hates kids. Yet he has no problem with that because he only sees Henry occasionally. I have never doubted that Neal loves Henry, but he’s not exactly the most involved father ever. And now he is doing it again. He wants his new wife and their life to be just as they want and to hell with the rest of us. Henry’s supposed to adapt because he’s a kid without a choice. And I’m supposed to sit back and watch my son feel like he is being overlooked because Neal wants to be happy with Tamara.”

“It is a rotten situation,” Killian agreed.

“And yes, I’m jealous. I’m jealous that while Neal and Tamara plan their dream wedding and complain that I won’t cancel Henry’s school related plans for him to attend on their first choice of a date, I’m at home with a son who feels like an afterthought to his father. I’m the one who has to raise him. I have help. I’m grateful for the help, but sometimes it feels unfair. And then Neal tries to turn it around on me. It’s like he expects me to be this mom robot, knowing I’m going to fail at it. And when I do fail he seems all too pleased with himself.” She swallowed hard, blinking back the tears that threatened to fall. “I know that nobody can ‘make’ you feel anything that you aren’t already feeling, but I feel guilty. I feel like I should concentrate on being Henry’s mom and not try to be
happy in other ways. Then I feel guilty for telling you that because you make me happy and don’t 
deserve to have me whining about it.”

He let her take a sip of her wine and dab at her mouth with the napkin before he reached out to her 
hand, caressing it softly in a way that almost tickled with the light touch. “You’re hardly whining 
about it, love. And truthfully I would be more shocked if you said you weren’t feeling guilty about 
having a life outside of Henry. Why do you think that offer to spend time with the both of you? I 
adore Henry and am very fond of you, but love, I don’t want to take you away from him. I am only 
hoping that you make some room for me in your life if I do make you happy.”

She stared a bit sadly into the glass of wine, the remnants barely rising above its curved bottom. 
“You do, Killian. And maybe I make you happy too?”

“More than I have been in a long time, perhaps ever, love,” he assured her, lifting up her hand to 
touch his lips to the flesh beneath her thumb. “I can’t quite imagine my life without you.”

***AAA***

Ruby carried the last of the plates over to the shelf and dropped them with a clatter, rousting out a 
reaction from her grandmother for the first time in over an hour. “Well at least I know you’re still 
alive,” the dark haired woman said, breathing out a puff of air aimed at the hair that had fallen over 
er her left eye. “You’ve been staring at that spreadsheet for an hour.”

“It’s called keeping the books,” the woman reminded her. “You should be paying attention instead of 
complaining about not having a night off to go off with that little sheriff friend of yours with the 
funny accent.”

“Graham happens to be working tonight,” Ruby informed. “And I don’t want to know about the 
books. I told you. When you decide to retire then I’ll hire a manager for this place. It’s not that I 
don’t want it. I do. I just want a life too.”

Granny’s glasses were hanging from a beaded chain around her neck, dangling near her bosom as 
she pinched the bridge of her nose. “You always think it is so black and white and easy. Life isn’t 
about either or. It’s a balancing act, Ruby. You can have your fun and meet your responsibilities 
too.”

Ruby’s hands fiddled with the knot on her apron as she collapsed into the chair across from the older 
woman. “You say that like it’s possible. You don’t seem to be doing a good job of balancing it, 
Granny. You haven’t been on a date in ages. What about Doc?”

The woman lifted her head from the grip of her extended fingers and glared at her granddaughter, 
forgoing the usual lectures about too much makeup and not enough material covering her body. 
“Doc? I’m guessing you mean that short guy who comes in here with an asinine nickname when he 
probably didn’t even finish high school. Or do you mean that lecherous creep at the hospital who 
you’ve hooked up with a few too many times. He’s not my style, especially since he bleached his 
hair lighter than most women. No, your grandfather and I had a good time while married but I have 
no interest in trying to recreate it. Not at this age.”

Ruby crossed her legs, the heels she had changed into for later dangling off one foot as she 
scrutinized her grandmother’s determined expression. When the old woman got no response, she 
pulled a pencil out from behind her ear and drew another line on the page. “I think you haven’t met 
the right guy.”

Huffing out a grunt of superiority, Granny lifted her glasses to her eyes and kept averted from the
woman across from her. “I did and he died decades ago, missy.”

“So you think Doc is too short and not educated,” Ruby said as if making a list to herself. “And Leroy? No, same problem with the height thing. Plus he has sort of an icky personality. Too grumpy.” She grabbed her own pencil and tapped it on the table in a soft rhythm. “What about Marco? He’s a widower. He’s tall. He’s got an accent.”

Granny braced her hands on the table and for a moment Ruby thought she might stand up and walk out. “That’s a lesson for you,” the older woman said looking over the rims of her glasses. “Never mistake an accent for a personality.”

“You are kidding, right? Fine. No accents. This is really limiting me here, Granny.”
Mary Margaret readjusted the strap on her teal dress and ran a quick hand through her thick black hair as she waited on Emma to weave her way through the crowd with the two drinks she was holding. She smiled sympathetically as some guy cut the talent scout off and nearly toppled her to send the drinks flying. Except from a few errant splashes of cranberry and vodka, the drinks and Emma were both intact.

“I say we wait for Ruby next time,” Emma said above the thrumming music. “She at least has experience as a waitress.”

“Speaking of…where is she? No offense, but this was supposed to be more than me and you. You don’t think I’ve offended her with all the wedding talk? I didn’t mean to do it. I just get so excited with all the planning. I want everything to…”

“Be perfect,” Emma repeated in unison with her friend. “We know. And don’t worry. She’ll be here.” Ruby was never on time for these things, but each week Mary Margaret panicked as though she might be missing in action. It never ceased to amuse Emma, who was usually stuck talking the teacher down from the ledge on these nights. “Anyway, you know that Ruby will try to talk you into something you don’t want. Why are you in such a hurry to see her?”

“True. Our girls’ nights out are different now, aren’t they? You’re dating Killian. I’m engaged. Ruby is trying her best at her own version of monogamy. Do you think we’ve sort of lost the point of them?”

“I don’t think so. We can still drink, dance, and laugh. Plus there’s all the gossiping and life advice to be given. The only thing we’re really giving up is trying to find some guy to buy us drinks and maybe take home at the end of the night. Since you never did that and I only rarely did, I’m not seeing a big change here.” Moving the toothpick lanced garnish around her drink, Emma took another sip, finally noting the smile on of superiority that was evident on her friend’s face. “What?”

“Congratulations!” the teach sang out, throwing her arms wide as if she wanted to hug her. “You didn’t deny it!”

Emma glanced at the martini glass from which her friend had been sipping. Not much of the pink liquid was missing, eliminating the case for an overdose of alcohol. Staring into the bright eyes of the teacher, she saw no signs of drug abuse. There was no history of mental illness, so far as Emma knew. “Okay what are you talking about? Because you’re starting to scare me. I’ve got my phone here and I’m about to call 911.”

Exasperated, Mary Margaret reached out and clasped her hands over Emma’s forearms. “The old you would have denied that you’re in a relationship with Killian. You didn’t. You didn’t even hesitate. It was beautiful.” Lifting her hands back to her face in a prayerful pose over her mouth and nose, the woman looked as though she was fighting back tears. “I’m so proud of you.”

“And 911 is still a possibility,” Emma said, rolling her eyes. “Seriously. We’ve been dating for a while. I thought the novelty had worn off.”

Waving her hands in front of her face, Mary Margaret shook her head. “It’s not the dating. It’s that you’re happy enough that you’re not denying it. I’m so happy for you. Congratulations!”

Emma was about to answer her friend when Ruby swooped in, grabbed the blonde’s left hand and
appraised the bare ring finger with certain scrutiny. “Do I even want to know what she’s congratulating you over? Because I come in here and this one’s crying and you look positively sick to your stomach. I know Granny is very good at all this, but please don’t rush things. I don’t need another friend crossing over and leaving me here alone in dating hell.”

Stifling a laugh, Emma snatched her hand back and put her friends straight. “Nobody is even talking about that step,” she said with a little shudder to illustrate how far off that move would be. “The nun…I mean teacher here…is just congratulating me for not swimming in the river of denial any more. I didn’t panic when she brought up my dating Killian.”

Ruby’s brow furrowed and she waved her hand to get a drink brought to her, a move only she could do in a place as crowded as the Rabbit Hole. “Uhhh…Congrats? I didn’t know this was an issue for you. But I guess acceptance is the first step?”

“It’s dating not a 12-step program,” Emma protested, squirming a bit that she was the center of attention with the ladies. “It’s not like I have that big of an issue. I’m a normal woman.”

***AAA***

The duplex that Robin shared with his son was a bit crowded with toys and musical instruments, soccer paraphernalia on the walls, and the dining room table serving as an office between meals. Liam had been attempting to play the latest rendition of the song they would be recording in a few day’s time, paying particular nuance to some of the notes that had changed and the beat direction that would give Robin a particular issue.

“Sorry about that,” Robin said as he re-entered the room. It had been an hour since Roland was to have gone to bed. However, three stories, two glasses of water, a trip to the bathroom, and a promise to look for monsters had left the boy under the covers for maybe 10 minutes overall. “He’s a bit of a handful tonight.”

“Seems to be glad to have his papa about,” Will said, taking another drink from the brown bottle in his hands. “From what I hear it is all too rare an occurrence.”

“I don’t criticize your drinking habits or taste in women, mate. Don’t come in here with your parental observations when you have no kids of your own to worry about.”

Liam rubbed his hand down his face. “We have a bit of work to do. Can we please do it before the next interruption?”

There was hardly enough time to get out that request before Roland came storming into the room with questions about the moon and some television show that he had been promised that he could watch in the near future. One leg of his pajamas sat higher than the other and appeared that the arms of his top were stretched out from his ministrations at pulling the garment into weird positions on his body. Dark curls bounced and his eyes showed none of the fatigue that surely should have set in by then.

“Bloody hell, Robin,” Will said, falling against the cushioned chair as if he had been the one trying to get some work done. “Did you jack the lad up on coffee?”

“He’s just a bit wired tonight. We’ve got plans for tomorrow.” Apologetically, the father lifted his son’s flailing form and sternly reminded him that it was way past the time for bed. “We’ll play tomorrow. Get a good night’s sleep so that you might enjoy it.”

“Any more plans for interruptions?” Liam groused, his hand hovering over the guitar strings.
"Perhaps I should try myself at writing lullabies rather than ballads."

"I apologize," Robin quipped quickly. "It’s hard on the boy with all the changes and whatnot. He may be young, but he can sense things. And what is with you, Liam? You’re usually much more laid back than this."

Testing out a few chords, Liam grimaced and set to adjusting the instruments tuning. His shoulders were hunched over and his head cocked to the side as he attempted to listen and reconcile what he was hearing. However, even with the child gone from the room, Will’s incessant complaining about the type of food that Robin had on hand and even the comfort of the chair was a distracting noise, as was a drip from the kitchen faucet and the occasional traffic noise outside. "This is pointless," he said, ripping the guitar’s case from the floor. "Our guitarist can’t be bothered to show up. Robin’s too busy being a bloody superhero and Will has the attention span of a gnat. I just wanted to work on this song and get it ready to either record or sell. Is that so bloody difficult to understand?"

Will’s mouth was open to comment, but it was Robin that waved off the pending sarcasm. "Liam, what is wrong? You’re acting as though something big is riding on this. It’s just another song."

It was almost contrite the way that Liam’s blue eyes darted downward and he shifted his weight to one side. "I just..." He floundered, eyes closing tight to block out the idea that he might honestly fail at this. "I’m okay."

"Yeah," Robin said slowly. "Will? Why don’t you head out? We’ve got another rehearsal scheduled for tomorrow. I’ll tidy up a bit and see to a proper sitter for Roland.” Mouth gaping, Will did as he was requested, shooting both men a few looks before settling in and accepting the idea. Once the door had latched shut, Robin gave a quick nod. "It’s more than just the song?"

"I live with my brother," Liam said with a resigned sort of sigh. "I sound like a child saying that and perhaps that is how I should sound. No man past the age of university should be worried about placing a towel or tie on the door to warn his brother that he is inside with a lass. And yet that is what Killian and I have been reduced to because I can’t seem to manage to be an adult and land a job."

It was often joked about among the friends that Robin was essentially someone’s grandmother or elderly aunt. While most of the men enjoyed a beer or two to drown their sorrows, Robin tended to hover and even offer comfort in ways that weren’t exactly bursting with society’s version of manliness. That was again at the front of Liam’s mind when the other man passed him to set the tea kettle on the stove and rummaged through the cupboards for his favorite blend.

"Nothing that a cup of tea won’t fix?" Liam joked, shaking his head. "If you tell me that you’re going to suggest I snuggle up to one of Roland’s teddy bears…"

"I’ll do no such thing, but I thought the tea might make you a bit calmer. Look, I know things have been tough with your career change and the band’s issues. Hell, I’m feeling it too. And I’m sure that it can’t be helpful that Elsa is doing so well in her career. Regina said that Elsa is considering buying her own place away from her sister? Something about a little condo so that Kris can move in with Anna."

"I should be happy for her, right?" Liam frowned deeply. "I should be asking her to get a place together, thinking about a future. But I can’t even manage to pay my brother rent with any consistency. Elsa was so thrilled with the home cooked dinner I made the other night for us, but it was all because I couldn’t afford another pricey restaurant. She would have noticed if I had water and appetizers compared to her steak and lobster."

"You shouldn’t be so hard on yourself, mate. The whole moving across an ocean, giving up your
first career, trying to find out if we have the talent and dedication to this whole music thing – it’s not for the weak, Liam. I daresay that Elsa is not put off by it, but maybe even inspired. And Killian is hardly kicking you out. He’s made more room for you in his life, though I’m sure he would prefer some privacy now and again.”

“So you’re saying…”

Robin chuckled as he poured the water into the mugs and let the steam fill the air in front of him. “Talk to the lass. See if she is on a similar page as you. You don’t have to propose. Just see if she might be thinking about this move as a way to spend time with you too.”

***AAA***

Killian wondered again why he had not yet found a set of curtains for his bedroom that completely blocked out the light. Between a full moon and a streetlamp that blinked incessantly through the fabric that didn’t quite fit together, he was certain that there was some conspiracy against him trying to sleep. He had thought of everything, except disentangling himself from the blonde in his bed and pulling them together with more force.

“You’re thinking,” she muttered, her words a bit slurred and heavy in the haze between being asleep and awake. “Seriously, we need to talk about this in the morning. I can’t sleep with all this thinking.”

He chuckled, lifting up the arm she had casually thrown over his middle. Caressing the soft skin at her wrist with a little kiss and then another, he had her pulling back and yet snuggling closer all at the same time, as she referred to him in her jumbled vocabulary as anything but a very nice person.

Persistent, he tugged on her arm until she rolled into him and opened her heavy lidded eyes to his as she rested her chin on his chest.

“Did I wake you?” he laughed, kissing her knuckles this time. “I do apologize. I thought you might be here for more since you did sort of barge into my home tonight.”

“You said I should make myself at home,” she reminded him. “I think you even gave me a key.”

“Aye, horrible mistake. I’ve been missing certain items ever since.”

“Such as?”

“My shirts disappear one by one,” he told her, feigning a serious expression as he attempted to list the things she had pilfered. “And I believe you took another book of mine when I wasn’t looking.”

She yanked her hand away from his and braced herself to hover over him with fingers splayed on the mattress on either side of his arms. “Sounds like you have a thief, Mr. Jones. I’m thinking she should be punished severely.” She raised her eyebrows up in her best imitation of the looks he gave her, dissolving into what would almost sound like giggles when he mirrored the expression even better than she had done.

“I think I like the girls’ night out things,” he informed her as she threw a leg over him so that he was now fully pinned by her position. “You are always a bit naughty when you come back from them.”

“Please tell me you’re more original than that,” she griped, wrinkling up her nose. “Men and their fantasies of two women together. I assure you that it was nothing like that at all.”

Snaking his hand out from between them, he cupped her face and let his thumb trail happily against her. “Furthest thing from my mind, my love. I was simply commenting that I like how you come here after them a little bolder from the drink, flushed from dancing, and deliciously tired and pliant as you
fall into my arms. It’s a nice treat after not spending the evening with you.” He torqued his neck up as he guided her down to kiss her soundly, catching her moan in his own mouth. “And I don’t mind the taste of rum on those lips of yours.”

“You don’t do much complaining,” she said, repositioning herself again so that she did not have to hold her weight on her hands and knees. “You seem to like everything.”

“About you? Yes, I would agree. You seem to have turned me into quite the optimist when it comes to you, love.”

“There’s got to be something about me that annoys you,” she said, frowning. “I’m not perfect.”

“Nobody is, but I assure you that the good far outweighs the bad with you. You’re beautiful. You’re brilliant. You’re mesmerizing. You’re…”

“Lucky to have a guy as great as you telling me all these things,” she finished for him. She bit her lip as she watched his eyes continue to darken from their usual blue to that of a bottomless ocean. “So lucky that I almost believe this isn’t going to crash and burn.” It was the best she could do to say that she was planning to be in it for the long haul.

“My little optimist.”

“So I was thinking,” she said, pushing back her hair with her hand as it started to fall like a curtain around them. “Henry and I usually go on a little vacation after July 4. Maybe you’d like to go with us? I know it wouldn’t be to any place exotic or luxurious. It’s just a chance to unwind and relax a little, but I was thinking that you could…” His smirk was evident as she floundered about with her invitation. Heat rising to her cheeks, she met his eyes and shook her head. “You’re going to say yes, aren’t you?”

“I love that you still get a bit nervous asking me to accompany you on anything,” he said, dropping the sarcastic smile as he drew her down to his mouth again. “Don’t you know, Emma? I would go anywhere with you.”

***AAA***

Zelena Mills had given up the idea that she should avoid high heels because of her height years ago. She wore them proudly and used her towering frame to her advantage in and out of the office. Sashaying past her sister’s darkened suite of offices, the woman sauntered into the area with the less executive offices and placed a little note on Emma’s door. She’d already emailed and texted the blonde, but having received no reply decided to go a more old fashioned route.

Owning just as much of the company as her sister, the amber haired woman often liked to remind people that she was clearly as powerful. However, most in the industry knew Regina’s name and not the older sister of the two. She barely registered that in her mind though, as the profits continued to come in and serve her well. Still, she got bored just sitting around and letting Regina receive all the praise.

She was not more than five steps from Emma’s door when her phone chimed a message.

Emma: Sorry about that. My phone was on vibrate. I will meet you for breakfast. Any particular file you’re interested in me brining?

Zelena smiled to herself, as the woman had not argued or done much to protest the early morning meeting. The question about the file was clearly a way of asking about the reason for the invitation, a
sign that Emma was not all that dumb.

Zelena: No worries, darling. I just wanted a chance to chat with you about your role here.

That probably sent the young blonde woman into a panic, as any message like that usually indicated layoffs of structural changes. Her sister would probably have been more brazen and honest with the statement, but Zelena preferred playing her cards closer to her chest. She would feel out the talent scout and see if she might be a good fit for what she had in mind. If not, she would move on to the next candidate.

It did an ego good to think about a frazzled and nervous Emma trying to both explain to her sleep addled lover and pull on her clothes why she had to go. She was probably going through a whole litany of reasons why the boss’s sister would want to see her. If she was like most, she would settle on the most worrisome and let it turn over in her mind the whole drive to the little café that Zelena had picked for their early morning discussion. It almost made her laugh to think of seeing Emma, usually so put together, running a hand through her hair as a comb or having a button in the wrong hole.

She shouldn’t have anticipated it though. Emma entered the small café that smelled of growing herbs and green tea without a hint of anxiety. Blonde hair pulled back into a low ponytail and an oversized white shirt over a pair of black leggings, she looked effortlessly beautiful. The only consolation to her hopes of seeing her not as prepared was the fact that the shirt was evidently a man’s, which gave her solace that her image of the woman hopping about and trying to explain what was going through her mind was correct.

“I much prefer the herbal teas here to the sugary drinks at Granny’s,” Zelena said breezily, waving to the white wicker chair in front of her in invitation for Emma to sit. “And I thought this place provides a bit of anonymity compared to the busy bodies there.”

Emma nodded and busied herself with a menu that was needlessly complex as it had diners pick out from which animal they wanted their eggs, the style and age of the cheese, and the geographic location where each vegetable was grown. And that was just for an omelet. Settling on a chai latte and free range chicken egg scramble with enriched toast, Emma replaced the menu and gazed back at the woman across from her.

“I know I don’t really have much choice when one of the bosses tells me to meet her for breakfast, but can I at least know why. I seriously doubt you can even name the acts I’m working with currently and you rarely even show up at the office unless it is an industry event.” This was the blunt Emma that people at the office knew and either loved or hated. She was the woman who had dropped a box of apple tarts in the dumpster when Regina had refused to front the money for new recording space that had promised. She was known to smile and nod about some asinine direction and then tell her artists to do it their own way. Zelena wasn’t surprised that she was lashing out as a caged animal.

“I have decided that maybe the industry like it is isn’t for me.”

Raising an eyebrow in question, Emma waited for further explanation. The woman in front of her showed nothing other than amusement on her carefully made up face. The dark liner around her eyes contrasted with a nearly translucent blue. Lips pursed and in a peach like shade that blended with her creamy complexion, the woman blew a stream of air into the cup of tea that looked as though it had grass clippings in it rather than a tea bag.

However, Emma was aware that this organic and granola version of Zelena was not real either. The woman drank wine by the bottle and was a fan of anything fried and greasy. It was rumored that her
assistant’s one chief job was to keep the files of take out menus organized. It was clearly an act and façade, but Emma knew it was better to comply than argue.

“You see,” she clarified, tapping a natural nail against the painted teacup. “My sister is truly a business woman. She sees numbers and profits where we should be appreciating art.”

“That’s probably a good way to be if you’re running a business.”

“Right you are, but see there is so much more to music. So many wonderful things about it that my sister will never understand because she’s not like us.” Emma held back a cringe that she was anything like the woman that the other employees called the witch. “I’m more into the performance. That’s why I’ve decided to purchase the Rabbit Hole.” A look of glee and pride crossed over the woman as she shimmed her shoulders with it. “Isn’t it fabulous? I’ll be able to turn it into a great performance space and proper night club. None of these cheap little games and dark corners. I’m going to turn it around.” Her amber curls bounced as she spoke. “Don’t you love the idea?”

“It’s great,” Emma said, taking a sip of the recently arrived latte. “I’m sure you’ll make it a success.”

“I knew you’d be excited about it. See I was thinking that maybe you could come over to my side of the company. I need someone to manage it.”

The hot liquid caught in the back of Emma’s throat. “Me?” she half sputtered and almost sent the liquid flying. “But I’m not…”

“I know you’re not a traditional choice,” Zelena brushed off, using air quotes around the word. “But you weren’t very experienced when my sister hired you either. You are good at finding people. That was your skill. But since then you’ve really blossomed. You’re a hard worker and so good at what you do. I know you could do this too.”

“But I…”

The woman reached into her purse and pulled out her phone. “I’m going to email you some numbers. Just preliminary mind you. You take a look and see if you could live with that. I assure you that this is a move up. You wouldn’t have to travel as much. You could spend time with that little boy of yours. It could be great for you. Don’t answer now though. I want you to think about it.”

***AAA***

Liam’s heavy footsteps echoed on the floors of the third floor condo as he moved back and forth doing his best impression of what someone interested in buying a place should do. He wasn’t sure, but he thought that Elsa liked this one that they were looking at with her wistful eyes staring at the view from the French Doors that led to a balcony or the way her hand swept along the stone countertops in the kitchen. He was trying to be more practical, dropping to his knees to inspect the plumbing under the sink and jostling windows to check their locks. He hummed in response to the words about the latest in clean air technology on the HVAC system and pretended to understand the difference in bamboo flooring versus other hardwood.

“What do you think?” Elsa whispered when the agent went in search of a private spot to take a phone call.

“I think you might like it, darling.”

She frowned, looking at the hallway that led to the two bedrooms. “I know how I feel, but I wanted to know…”
“Darling, it looks like a great deal. You wouldn’t have to lift a finger before moving in.” He dropped a kiss on her forehead. “So where do you think you’ll place the sofa? Here? I think this might be good since you’d get the light.”

“Liam!” Her voice echoed and she flinched at the volume. “I don’t give a crap about the sofa location right now. Tell me what you think. Do you want to…”

He smirked a bit at her frustrated little grunt. Like a blonde ball of fury, she paced the length of the open concept living space back to the kitchen to examine the drawers. “Darling, I would be more than happy to spend the night with you here. Maybe we should pick out a spot for the bed. You know not on a shared wall and maybe out of the direct rays of the sun in the morning in case we want to sleep in when I’m over.” He was listing a few things, ignoring the fact that she had yet to soften.

“That’s why you think I invited you over to help me decide which one to make an offer on? So you can suggest bed location and couch selections? Liam Jones, I swear to God. I am capable of doing all that by myself. I wanted you here so you could tell me if you might want to move in with me. I know you just got settled with your brother and all, but I thought we might want to try…” He looked at her with an open mouth and narrow eyes as if he was in shock or confusion about what she was asking. “Forget it. I didn’t mean to ask you this way. Just forget it.”

She could hear the realtor in the other room finishing the call with a series of okays and talk to you soons. Taking a deep breath, Elsa flipped her hair over her shoulder and looked at him.

“You want me to move in with you?”

“I’m not ordering you to or anything,” she said through a tightly clenched jaw. “Anna and Kris are always telling me I’m too bossy. I just thought that maybe this was where we were headed with all this. I mean…Forget it.” She crossed her arms over her chest. “I’m sorry. I just thought that we were getting to that stage and maybe I rushed it.”

“This one?” he asked, looking around the empty room and its cream colored walls. “That room over there could be our music room?”

“Ours?” she asked, hopeful and quiet.

“Elsa, I don’t know what kind of roommate I’m going to be here. I mean you…The money is an issue. I don’t have a big bank account just waiting on me to find a place.”

She pursed her lips together and looked over his shoulder at the empty wall behind him. “I’ve got that part covered. The question is…who gets to hold the remote? Because I think two oldest siblings living together. We might have a power struggle?”

***AAA***

“I like that song,” Emma said as she walked up behind Killian. He was chopping through an onion, his voice rising and falling as he belted out the tune. “I don’t think I’ve heard it before.”

“Bloody hell, Emma, are you trying to kill me?” He spun almost too fast, the socks he was wearing not gripping the polished floors. “Warn me next time.”

She smiled, leaning in to kiss him as she wound an arm around his waist. “And miss out on an impromptu and private performance? Not on your life, buddy.” She was backing away when his injured arm twisted around her and pulled her back in for another firm and yet chaste kiss. “Is my son around here? Or did you sell him off for whatever you have cooking in that pot over there? No
Considered it, but no deal came through. He’s out gathering a bit of wood, as he’s gotten it into that brain of his that we should build a fire on the beach this evening. I believe he may have appreciated the camping trip with his father a little more than he’s letting on.” The knife he was holding clattered to the cutting board and he swatted at Emma’s curious appendage reaching out to inspect the covered pot. “Careful, love, it’s hot. Not to mention not ready for the unveiling yet.”

She pretended to pout as she threw her head back and sniffed into the air. “Do I smell guacamole? Seriously, Killian, how are you real? I thought all English food was all bland and boring. How do you know how to make this stuff? Are you a wizard?”

Snatching one of the still warm chips, he dragged it through the green substance and held it out just in front of her mouth. “One of the trials and curses of being a teacher. I’m constantly feeling the need to educate myself in something new. Tell me if that is too bland for you.”

She reached out to wipe as speck of something off his cheek. “Wait! You made the guacamole? Even Granny doesn’t make her own. She just opens the container and puts it in a bowl.” She finished chewing, darting out her tongue to taste the remnants on her lips. “I’m impressed.” She couldn’t help but notice how adorable he looked relishing her compliments. “You’re my dream come true.”

“Because I feed you fattening foods and keep an eye on your son?” he asked jovially.

“You know that isn’t all I like about you, right?”

“I was only joking, love. You have shown me that I am more to you than a free meal and chaperone. I’m rather fond of you too. In fact, I quite fancy you.” He piled another lump of the guacamole on a chip and fed it to her, licking his fingers after she nibbled near them.

“Good thing,” she said, turning to where she knew he kept the plates and glasses. She noted the three margarita glasses there, already rimmed with salt. “Whoa there. Planning on getting my underage son drunk?”

Killian didn’t turn in her direction, closing the oven with his hip and dropping a spoon down into the pot. “After the three shots of whiskey and a beer he had while playing cards with my mates, I’m sure a bit of lime and tequila won’t inebriate him at all.” He chuckled when she grunted. “Don’t worry, love. The young Mr. Henry will be having a virgin drink with lemon lime soda rather than tequila.”

She laughed, mostly at herself for thinking he would be so foolish and careless. “You think of everything.” Without bothering to ask directions, she set the table and brushed off his complaints that she was a guest. “Guests don’t have keys.”

There was so much food on the table by the time the three of them sat down to enjoy that Emma wondered if he might have invited the whole neighborhood. But it seemed that he had a good gauge on the bottomless pit of her son’s stomach. There was tortilla soup that included fresh beans and corn from the local farmers’ market. Enchiladas were dripping with cheese and sauce and practically melted under their forks. In addition to the guacamole, there was fresh salsa and queso. For dessert there was flan, which Henry was already boasting about helping to make.

She had to marvel at the ease at which they were getting along. Henry was sharing with her something that happened during his writing class – a story that he had clearly already shared with Killian. The two of them shared a little of their adventure shopping and mentioned a meteor shower that was coming up. When she got around to telling them about Zelena and the job offer, Emma was
not sure she had ever confided in someone as easily.

“What do you think you want to do?” he asked as Henry darted into the kitchen for their desserts.

“I am not really sure,” she admitted. “I love my job. I enjoy watching people’s dreams come true because I helped to find them and put them in with Regina. It’s a great job.”

“But…”

“Zelena’s offer is tempting.” Reaching into her pocket, she pulled out her phone and swiped her finger across it. “That’s the starting salary, plus bonuses and benefits.” She cringed as his mouth dropped open.

“I’m afraid as a teacher I’ve never seen a number like that before, love. And now that I’ve been uncouth enough to react to it, you’re going to assume the only reason I’m in love with you is for your money.” He didn’t even realize at first that he had said it, but she did. Her hand stopped mid-motion and he was cleaning up around her when the words seemed to circle back round to his conscious thinking. “Oh bloody hell, Emma. I didn’t mean to…I meant it, but I didn’t want to say it until…I’ve ruined this, haven’t I? You weren’t ready to hear this. Not yet, anyway.”

He closed his eyes and felt a wave of nausea assail him as though the liquor in their drinks hit him all at once. “You’re in love with me?” she asked weakly.

It might have turned into a romantic moment if her son hadn’t bounded over with his endless energy and started stacking plates and asking if they could wash them after the fire on the beach. Emma didn’t even respond, but Killian nodded his head and told Henry that was fine. “Why don’t you go look for a bit of kindling for it? I’ll be out to light it in a minute.”

The two stood and sat in silence until the oblivious preteen had exited. “Are you in love with me? Truly?”

“Aye,” he said, the one syllable seeming to deflate every bit of him. “I am.”

“How long?” she asked, not even sure why that mattered to her. “How long?”

Thankfully there was a chair behind him that caught him when he sat or else he would have landed unceremoniously on the floor. “I’ve been falling in love with you since you first told me there was no way you were going to date your son’s teacher. But I’ve known for sure for a while now, love. I didn’t want you to think I was trying to put that pressure on you, though. So I kept it…”

Her eyes looked watery, which he noted made them appear more blue than green as she held up a hand to his mouth to stop the flow of words. “You love me?”

He wasn’t sure why she sounded so disbeliefing. Did she think he was only mildly interested or even bored with her already? The idea struck him as funny, but he couldn’t miss the odd look of relief and panic that seemed to fade in and out on her face. “Aye.”

Her eyes closed and for a second he wondered if tears were about to shoot out from under the long dark lashes. Her pink lips moved soundlessly as if she was praying or chanting. Perhaps she was, he thought. Perhaps she needed centering or strength. He wasn’t sure how long it took, but her eyes snapped back open and she looked calmer, if not still a bit on edge. “I love you too.”

It was his turn to be taken aback by the seemingly unplanned confession. “You do?”

She laughed, which was usually a sign of his quick wit. This time wasn’t. “You do realize we can
keep this up all night, right? Maybe we should believe each other?"

“Say it again?”

“I love you, Killian,” she said in as strong of a voice as she could muster. Later he would tease her that he usually associated such an admission with AA or some other program of its kind. But right then it was a beautiful sound that he wanted to echo back to her.
Thank you all for your great comments about this and my other stories. We’re about to get to some more drama with a little angst (nothing too major), but writing happy Captain Swan and Frozen Jewel seemed to be the call of the day as I was writing this. While I haven’t raised the rating on this story, it does begin and end in bed.

He was usually awake before her, staring down with a fondness and affection that she would momentarily forget the creepiness of it. So when the early morning light peeked around the corners of the newly hung curtains, Elsa stealthily snuck a look at her bed companion and smiled. His face was half hidden by the pillow that he always hit with a fist two or three times before suiting it. The dark curls of his hair were messily splayed on his head with a few matted to his forehead as the others lifted in the wake of the fan blowing on them in the summer heat. His arm was thrown over her, feet and legs bracing her own as if to hold her back from running away. She wanted to reach out and smooth over the tickly hairs on his face, but she resisted the urge.

“Now who is the creepy stalker?” he mumbled, clearly aware of her staring. Another observation that she couldn’t help but have made was the thickness of his accent when he was half asleep.

“It’s not creepy or stalkerish when I’m not hiding it,” she informed him petulantly. “I’m simply admiring the view in our new bedroom.”

The two had moved in just a few days before, leaving them in a comfortable space with more boxes than Elsa knew what to do with in her life. Most of them were hers. As Liam had pointed out, he travelled light. They had picked out mostly new pieces of furniture, leaving hers at the townhome with Anna under the premise that it was a fresh start and her belongings did tend to be a bit girly.

His hooded eyes dropped to look at her all curled up into his embrace, nearly dwarfed by the fact that he was quite a bit taller than she was. He knew exactly what she had been doing, as he spent most mornings doing the same. There was the familiar pink tones to her cheeks and the way her nose twitched when she fought waking up, her hand swatting away blindly at whatever might be trying to interrupt her. He loved the soft sounds she made against his skin and the way she always seemed to appear so surprised to see him there when she did manage to pry her eyes open to the day.

“What time are they coming over?” he grumbled in question when she made it obvious that the kisses and caresses she was peppering across his chest and shoulders were not incidental. “Bloody nuisance of a brother.”

Elsa laughed silently at his description, knowing that despite his appreciation for living there in the condo, he did miss his younger brother. The two were forever texting and finding time to see each other to watch matches on television or discuss something or other. Then there were their co-writing sessions. Despite the fact that there were only eight miles separating them, she had seen the elder brother looking down right wistful at something Killian was missing. “You invited them.”

“I must have been half mad at the time.” The arm that had been draped over her for most of the night as they slept reached out and eventually fished out his phone from under his pants next to the bed. Keeping one arm and hand lost in her hair, he sent his brother a quick message that perhaps brunch should be postponed for lunch. Without waiting for a reply, he dropped the device back into the pile of discarded clothes and turned his attentions back to Elsa.

***AAA***
“This changes nothing,” Killian had told her that night when they had finally admitted loving each other. “I have loved you for a while now and it is simply the case that the words are now out in the open.”

It was what she had needed to hear since her mind was racing and her pulse thumping wildly at the idea that she was somehow going to have to transform into one of those women who hung on her man’s every word. He was right though. His behavior had not changed drastically with the declarations, other than a hurried and yet passionate kiss before Henry returned to find out what was keeping them. It wasn’t as though the three words had made her somehow fearless about a future with him or turned her into a wedding planning Mary Margaret.

So she tried not to make it too big of a deal that they were at a grocery store in the morning, sharing a shopping cart and not having to ask each other about food brand preferences as they both dropped items into it. It was such a couple-like domestic thing to do that she might have had a moment of panic that would have sent her for a bottle of wine, her pajamas, and a marathon of action movies on Netflix where people didn’t fall in love any more than they killed each other in some mission to save the world. If she had asked, he would have happily joined her and even probably provided popcorn or snacks while her mind tried to forget the incident that had sent her into that state. She both loved him and despised him for it.

“So it looks like wine is not so much out of the question, love,” he said, elbows propping him up on the cart as she did mental calculations over which brand and size of cracker was the better bargain. “We’ve been postponed until lunch.”

Her tongue was firmly at the side of her mouth as she tried to do the math that would tell her if the 20 cent difference was actually a savings. “Did he say why?” she asked distractedly, running her finger over the net weight notations on both boxes she had narrowed it down to in her selection process.

“I don’t think I care to know, love. The man is clearly appreciating his private time with Elsa. We don’t need to picture the itinerary or details.” His eyebrows raised with humorous disgust as he pretended to imagine it. “There were enough close calls when he lived with me.”

“On both sides,” Emma pointed out. “I seem to recall a certain morning when I couldn’t find coffee or my pants.”

“Completely your fault for that one,” he chuckled, shoving the phone back in his pocket. “You got out of bed without me and didn’t let me pamper you. I was fully planning on treating you to breakfast in bed when I heard you trying to make conversation with my brother and keep yourself hidden at the same time.”

“Okay that was awkward.” Emma spun on her heel. “So wine?”

“I thought it was the nice thing to do, but you have another idea?” The summer air was not as hot as it could be, but the morning was already turning rather warm. Henry had complained about it when he had called that morning from a friend’s, telling Emma that he was “roasting” without air conditioning. Still a warm location seemed preferable to spending a day with two amorous couples. “Red or white?”

For the life of her she had no idea what the food selections were going to be, other than take out since her last discussion with Elsa had included complaints that she hadn’t even started to unpack the kitchen items. “Maybe both?”

Flashing her an amused grin, Killian guided the cart away from where they were standing. “Both it is,” he declared.
“You can’t control them, can you?” she asked when they passed the mixers and plastic drinkware. “Your eyebrows. I swear those things have minds of their own.”

Raising both in an imitation of surprise and shock, he laughed aloud. “I don’t know what you mean, Swan.”

“You are a real dork sometimes, Killian.”

He spun her toward him, almost like they were dancing though she felt too clumsy for that at the moment. “I think you love me, eyebrows and all. In fact, I know you do.”

“Do you?” she asked, straining with the effort not to laugh at the childish way that he was grinning at her. His eyes seemed even bluer under the florescent lights of the grocery store and maybe, if she was being honest, the joy of holding her there despite a few stares from other patrons. “And how do you know that?”

"I think I might have heard it someplace.”

They were in the midst of determining a brand and year when they heard the footsteps approaching. Maybe it was their own fault for not being as careful as discrete as they could have been, but happiness was a hard emotion to mask. She realized too late that her hands were on his chest and neck and she was still tingling from a kiss that had her feeling both empowered and weak when the footsteps stopped beside them. Not even looking in that direction, she began that sort of sideways scoot to get out of the customer’s way, assuming that he or she wanted a bottle of wine that they were blocking. However, there was no movement to follow hers, including Killian’s.

“Belle,” he said with a shaking confidence. “I didn’t even realize you were…”

“My husband likes for us to shop early so we avoid the longer lines.” Even standing near Emma, Belle’s petite form would have been short, but her ability to balance on incredibly high heels came into play. Her long hair was fluffed and curled perfectly and her smile radiated. “Well, he usually doesn’t come along, but there was something he was really wanting. I’m assuming this is…”

“We’re visiting my friend and Killian’s brother this morning for an early lunch.” Emma knew that Belle was unlikely to believe the excuse at just that, but she was nice enough to pretend. While she had not had many dealings with her, she knew the woman to be the nicer of Neal’s family members and often a good mediator when there was an issue. “Just trying to pick what we both should bring along.”

He moistened his lips and took an ungainly step backwards, nearly falling into a display of wine. “Belle, I can…”

“Explain?” she asked placating him with a little nod. “Don’t worry. I’m just giving you a heads up that my husband, your boss, is just around that corner.”

Giving them another smile, she turned and teetered off on the heels that made Emma wonder how she could still remain so sweet with such painful accessories. “I guess we better split up for a minute,” she hissed under her breath. “I don’t think you need to give him any more…”

His hand circled around her wrist and he softly shook his head before she had a chance to pull back. “I told you that I don’t care what that man thinks or does so long as you are happy and safe, love. It’s a job. If he chooses…It’s not as though we have been completely discrete. I see no reason to hide and pretend that we just happened to run into each other here unawares.”

“But there is a difference between hiding and flaunting,” Emma said warningly. “You don’t want…”
“I want you. It is simple as that. If having you in my life doesn’t fit in with having a job at Storybrooke Academy then I’ll find another career choice that does work.” His words were clear, but she couldn’t help but have noticed the way that he had seemed to worry at being seen by the librarian.

It wasn’t the place to have the conversation, especially with Mr. Gold looming about some place. She shrugged off his assurance and said she was going to go check on something in the deli. “I trust you to get a good wine, okay?”

***AAA***

“It’s fun,” Elsa protested loudly as Liam suggested for the third time since the other couple had arrived that he was not going to the parade or to watch the fireworks. “Everyone will be there.”

“Darling, I’m not sure if you noticed, but I’m British. This ruddy holiday is about gaining your independence from us. I’m not sure it would be appropriate to attend such festivities.” Emma wasn’t sure if he was joking or not, as Killian was showing no signs of collaborating with his older brother on the matter. “Perhaps we can do something a little less patriotic.”

“But I love the Storybrooke parade,” she stated petulantly, glancing toward Emma for support. “I thought we could all go together this year.” Elsa was not always one for tradition and customs, but this holiday was one that her parents had celebrated with fervor. They would take the girls and several business associates out on a pontoon boat and shoot fireworks until their ears rang from the explosions. That was all after a day of picnics and parades, dance recitals and choral concerts. For three years in a row, Elsa had been Betsy Ross in the children’s theater production for the date.

“Maybe we should plan something a little low key this year,” Emma suggested to the wary eye of her friend and client. “Maybe cook out some hamburgers and have a few drinks. It doesn’t have to be that fancy.” She was about to suggest that maybe Killian would be willing to take over the cooking duties with his underestimated talent in that field. That was until Elsa pointed out that the condo was in no condition to host such a thing and Emma’s balcony was the size of a postage stamp.

“Perhaps we could hold this event at my place,” Killian offered easily. “The deck would make for a great location and we’d be there by the water. Depending on how many revelers we invite, we could go out on the water and enjoy the fireworks from there.”

Looking rather offended and huffing indignantly, Liam groused at his brother’s offer of hospitality. “You’re supposed to be on my side you git.”

“When in Rome,” Emma sing songed, leaning her shoulder into Killian’s and smiling broadly. “I like this idea. We can work on the invitation list while the guys get that curtain hung that you wanted.”

“Wait,” Liam sputtered with his wine glass held near his mouth. “Not only are Killian and I being subjected to this country’s traditions, you’re going to invite half the bloody town over to watch us.”

“I think you must think there is some odd ritual dance or a sacrifice of some kind,” Elsa pursued good naturedly. “We aren’t going to make you sing the national anthem naked in a pit of snakes or anything.”

***AAA***

It wasn’t such a bad event, Liam thought ruefully as he sat on his brother’s deck and watched their friends seem to mix and mingle between the wisps of smoke from the grill and the games that some of the younger set were playing. When Killian had first told him that he had passed his exams and
applied for certification to become a teacher, the older brother had laughed at the idea. Killian had always been so talented and yet so serious that he had barely ever been childlike himself. To imagine the sometimes somber man in a room with dozens of children each day was not something that came to mind easily. However, there was a natural charm that seemed to come out when he was around them.

From his spot on the smooth wood bench that was built into the deck, he could see his brother and Emma’s son, Henry, leaned over some video game that had both of their attention. While anyone could certainly garner the attention of a child by pretending to enjoy the same things, it was clear that there was a mutual respect and admiration between the two. Just the way that Henry looked on with awe as Killian managed to pass through a level that had been particularly troubling to the lad made Liam wonder where on earth his had learned that sort of fatherly attention.

“It isn’t such a bad party, is it?” Emma asked, replacing his empty beer bottle with a full one before she sat next to him. “I’d say most people are having a great time.”

He nodded, not offering any verbal confirmation to her subtle I told you so. “My brother and your son seem to be quite the pair. I would have never guessed that Killian would become so enthralled with an electronic game. Even as a child he was bit more pragmatic than that.”

There was no mistaking the glow on Emma’s face as she turned her expression to the two of them. “Yeah, it’s nice to see.”

“I don’t mean to frighten you with this statement, but I could see my brother being one hell of a father,” Liam prodded, his elbow digging into Emma’s side as she looked a little less surprised than he would have anticipated.

“You may be right on that, but don’t get any ideas.” She cupped her hand over her eyes to ward off the sun rays from her vision. “So on to more business like matters. How’s the new guitarist working for you?”

The one she had found previously had decided that collaborating with a band in Maine while living in Boston was a bit too much. While he had been a good talent and mix of styles, it had not worked as smoothly as they had hoped. Emma assured them that it was not a big deal and set about finding them another member for the band. About a week before she had brought in a man named Jefferson to try out.

“Jefferson seems to be a good bloke,” Liam relented. “He’s got skills and has already put Will in his place a few times.”

“Remind me to come to one of your practices then. I’m dying to see Will taken down a peg or two.”

Liam tipped the bottle back and closed his eyes. When he lowered it, Emma was looking at him curiously. “You should really go into law enforcement. You could make a man confess with the looks you give.”

“So you’re telling me that you feel guilty?” she laughed, her elbow hitting his ribs. “No, I was honestly wondering about you and Elsa.”

“Anna has already warned me that if I hurt her…”

“Good,” Emma interrupted. “I think that is a very sisterly thing to do. But I was thinking more in terms of this duet for the two of you to record. She said you wanted to write it.”

“I thought even you would take a bloody holiday off now and then, Emma.”
“You haven’t written it yet?”

He fidgeted, his thumb running over a loose corner on the beer label. “I’ve been trying. But even that brother of mine can’t seem to help me find just the right lyrics. Can’t blame him though. He’s managed to help me with a few things already. Shouldn’t say it on account of his humble act when it comes to songwriting, but there are a few you have liked actually.”

She had thought she could recognize Killian’s voice in some of the lyrics, though she had not wanted to ask. He was sensitive about such things and even more so about his brother’s work. “I hope you’re going to give him credit.”

“As much as he’ll accept.”

***AAA***

Anna brushed up against her sister and tilted her head toward the mounds of toppings for their burgers and hot dogs. Both girls were sporting slightly pinkish skin from the time in the sun already, though Emma had insisted they wear sun block.

“It seems like a lot,” she said, shifting her balance to hold the plate she was carrying, plastic cutlery, and a cup filled with ice. “But it’s good to have choices. I mean I have been to some parties before and they gave you mustard. I mean I like mustard, but I need more than that. What about ketchup? What about onions? Can you have a burger without tomato? I don’t think so.”

Placing a hand under her sister’s elbow, Elsa gently steered her sister toward another end of the table. “We’re holding up the line.”

She nodded her understanding. “Are you angry with me?” she asked just when her sister leaned in to capture one of the olives. “I know you are upset. I mean the timing does kind of suck. You have been working so hard. And I go and do this. You’re mad right?”

Having a sister with a mouth like a tornado was exhausting. Still Elsa tried to patiently answer her sister. “I’m not angry. Just disappointed. I mean the album is due out soon. We would be going on tour. I was kind of looking forward to that.”

“We could still do some of it. Not every city of course because that would take forever and I don’t have that much time. But maybe a few. You know for a month or so. It would be fun.”

“Look we haven’t even talked to Emma or Regina about this yet. I’m not looking forward to that by the way. Let’s see what they say.” She resisted the urge to pinch the bridge of her nose to ward off the impending headache. “I am sure it will be fine.” She turned from the table, her own appetite waning under the heat and her sister’s chatter.

“Elsa,” Anna called after her, her run a bit awkward with her hands full and the espadrilles on her feet making her gait strange. As she caught her, Anna whimpered a bit, giving the other woman a sad eyed gaze with her bottom lip protruding. “Aren’t you even a little bit excited though? You’re going to be an aunt. Aunt Elsa. Doesn’t that sound great?”

“It does,” the blonde assured her younger sister. “I’m happy for you two. Congratulations.”

***AAA***

Emma scanned the horizon for sight of her son who had dove under the water to fetch the Frisbee that Liam had wildly thrown. The waves were gentle around her waist, her arms spreading out to feel the lapping current under her hands. She wished that she had thought to bring her sunglasses as she
“He’s fine, love,” Killian told her, snaking an around her bare waist and tugging her backwards toward him. “Did I tell you how fetching you look in this bikini?”

She bit her bottom lip as he nuzzled into the juncture between her shoulder and neck. “You might have,” she said, reaching behind to nuzzle his damp hair. “I’ve gotten a few compliments on it. Let’s see there was Liam, and Robin, oh and Will, and I think Elsa said she liked the color…” She squealed as he bent them forward, her upper body nearing the water.

“Bloody minx,” he crowed. “Well, let me be the first to tell you how delectable you are in red, my love. Can’t take my eyes off of you.”

They splashed about in the waist deep tide, laughing at the strange game that Henry and Liam seemed to be playing that sent one or the other of them either into ocean or into the dunes to find the wayward disc. Soon enough they had Roland as their searcher, as Robin and Will attempted to give pointers on the two players’ technique. Kristoff was at one point lifting the vertically challenged child onto his shoulders to reach the Frisbee from a tree branch while David manned the grill and Mary Margaret and Elsa tried copying a few of the dance moves they had seen on some reality show. Anna and Anastasia were heard over everyone with their laughter as they sat on lounges and sipped iced drinks.

The day was long and filled with much of the same. There was good food that everyone ate up with joking about not counting calories, carbs, or fat. At one point Liam broke out the guitar and most everyone had a go with a favorite song or two. The biggest hit was a duet between Henry and Roland that sent both Emma and Robin scrambling for their cell phones to video the memory. Ruby arrived a bit later than most of the crowd with Graham, who though still in uniform belted out two old tunes with her and even spun her around into a flourishing dip as the crowd clapped, cheered, and whistled. Will had them all swooning as he did his best impression of Tom Cruise in Top Gun. However, one of the funniest moments came when Killian dragged Emma along with him to sing, even at one point using a hot dog bun as a makeshift microphone for the Sonny and Cher classic. That alone sent Mary Margaret laughing so hard that David nearly had to rescue her from falling over the rail of the deck.

While there had never been any formal confirmation of Regina and Robin dating, the dark haired woman’s appearance toward the end of the day did not result in any dropped jaws or shock. She merely thanked Killian and Liam for the invitation with quick nods to Emma, Anna, and Elsa before she took a seat next to Robin and got an earful from Roland’s take on the day.

Emma tried to ignore the pangs she felt at her son growing up with one of his classmates and her father came by to drop off a fruit salad. Killian had nodded knowingly as she pointed out that Henry had taken his classmate, Violet on a walk along the water’s edge just as the sun was starting to fade and turn the sky into a pastel masterpiece. “Did you know?”

“First loves are hard to hide or keep secret.”

After the fireworks had been shot and the sun kissed party guests had long left, Henry sprawled out over the end of the bed that had been Liam’s for a short while. Emma was sure that his current position was far from comfortable, but she hadn’t the heart to wake him up given how soundly he was sleeping. She waved off Killian’s protests and set about the living area tidying up from the guests.

“We sort of forced this on you,” she told Killian when he told her that it was not necessary for her to do it. “The least I can do is throw some bottles in the recycling bin and make sure there are no water
rings on the tables.”

There were still occasional booms from neighbors setting off their own fireworks, a few rattling the windows. Still her son slept through it to the amusement of both of them. Coming back in from making one last pass along the deck to ensure there was nothing that would attract any of the area wildlife, she smiled at Killian’s easy expression as he gave up the rest of the cleaning to sit in the oversized chair with his long legs stretched out on the ottoman before him.

“What is that look?” she asked. She hoped that the sun she had gotten that day would make it harder for him to notice the way she blushed when he seemed to look at her in that way.

“Just liking the view of you here, love.”

She huffed as she approached him, shaking her head slightly. “I’ve been here a few times before, Killian. It’s not as though…”

“I’m well aware.” His warm hand circled her wrist. “It’s just that you seem more comfortable here tonight. All day truthfully. You aren’t flitting around in a state because you are here. You know where things are and how things work. It’s like…”

She frowned at the comment, not sure how she should take that. It was true that she was becoming increasingly comfortable there in his small cottage by the water. When Elsa decided that the cocktail she was making needed a dash of honey, Emma had without thought or search laid her hands right upon the substance in the kitchen. That morning she had known that the shirt Killian had planned to wear had yet to be laundered and managed to perform the task before the guests even arrived. When Will had a mishap and landed in the wet sand, she had told him of the tricky way the water temperature would plummet unless he turned the faucet a certain way in the shower. “I guess we have been spending a lot of time here.”

“Aye, which I quite enjoy. Your place is lovely, Emma, but it is always beautiful to see you here.”

She followed his gentle tug down to his lap, curling into his embrace. His hair was nearly dry, standing at odd angles from his playing around and the way that he would run his fingers through it when he was thinking too hard. Her own hands may have added to that on occasion. His stubble was thicker from not shaving at all that day, a slight rust tint showing through from hours in the sun. It tickled as she ran the pads of her fingers along his strong jawline. “Is that your way of asking me to spend the night?”

His eyes crinkled as the smile broke out across his face. “I may have assumed that you would. The lad is sound asleep and it would be a shame to wake him.”

“That’s a pretty practical reason,” she said stoically. “I mean it is like telling me that I should stay because you bought my favorite kind of pancake mix for breakfast.”

He had bought that for her two months earlier and kept his kitchen stocked with items that all three of them liked. “I am nothing if not practical, love. But I’m also aware that you don’t usually stay the night with me here when Henry is in your care.”

“I think he might be on to us,” she said with a grin. “He might have even seen us kiss. I’ve already called in a therapist to help him recover.”

Killian pretended to gasp in horror. “Shocking development.”

“Scandalous,” she added with a silent laugh. “You know? In all seriousness? He likes you. If we ever had an argument, he’d probably side with you over me. That’s how serious this has gotten.”
“I do tend to have that effect on people. But for the record, love, I believe Liam would side with you. It is a good thing we don’t argue too much.”

She sighed, breathing in the scent of the coconut scented sunblock and the clean sweat of a day spent with friends. Nuzzling her face into his chest, she smiled at the comfortable fragrance and realized that she was beginning to associate such things with him. Pulling back, she laughed. “Did you just compare your grown brother with my 12 year old son?”

“Despite their age difference, they are remarkably similar in nature.”

Her fingers trailed down to the shirt he wore, drawing nonsense near his collar and over his chest. “Liam said you were helping him write,” she said tentatively. Her long lashes swept down as she cast her gaze away from his, knowing that the pain she might see at this revelation was not something she could handle. “He sounded very grateful.”

“Aye, he’s suffered a bit of writer’s block. I just throw some suggestions out there for him.”

She didn’t mean to correct his statement, though she knew it was more than just suggestions. “I noticed on one of them,” she said, broaching the topic carefully. “The woman the song is about…”

“Emma,” he said. Unsteadily he lifted her chin to meet his eyes with hers. “Yes, what I have helped him write is inspired by you. I’m not sure that should be such a surprise to you. You do inspire me, love.”

She swallowed, almost feeling shy at asking him about this. “The song in Boston…the one he used your lyrics for…We never really talked about that.”

It was his turn to look away, closing his eyes toward the dark shadows of the room that offered little to him in this conversation. “I would hope you know how I feel by now and those things I wrote are not a surprise to you any longer, Emma.”

“They aren’t a surprise, Killian. I am not very good at this, but I guess I wanted to thank you. I know that you didn’t want to share those with me or more like you thought I would run when I heard. But hearing them and you saying that I inspire you…well, it’s nice to hear.”

His brow lifted slightly and his gaze fell on hers with a questioning stillness. “Nice?”

She slapped his chest and shook her head. “You know what I mean,” she chided. “You’re the writer not me. I just am not used to someone putting me first in anything. And you do it so easily. Sometimes I’m afraid that you’re not real.”

His kiss for her was soft and gentle as she let out a breath she was holding. Unhurried and lazy, the kiss blossomed as they sat in the dimly lit room with the occasional crackle and boom of the neighboring celebrants. When they broke off the kiss, their foreheads still leaned together and breath mingling in between, he whispered his love for her that she echoed in kind.

“I could share them with you,” he said, sounding less secure than the confident man she knew. “It’s been a long time since I have done anything like that. Writing with Liam is more of an exercise, but I have spent some time putting my thoughts and feelings about you into words.”

Tears pricked at the corners of her eyes, which she tried to keep in check. He did not need to think she was upset by the idea. “I would like that.”

***AAA***
Elsa was much more tired than she wanted to admit as she threw herself onto the bed and silently prayed that her clothing would somehow magically turn into sleepwear. Unfortunately her attempts at sorcery were not successful and it was only with a pout and throwing her legs in the air one at a time that Liam unfastened her sandals and tossed them aside.

“My poor darling,” he said as she made a whining noise when her shirt seemed too cumbersome to manage. “You truly are exhausted.”

Managing to bob her head up and down, she threw her arms upward and let out her most pleading and helpless cry for assistance. “Please.”

He chuckled, his fingers lingering a bit where he revealed her skin before she fell backwards again with her hair splaying out like a golden fan and she managed a weak thanks. “I assure you it is no hardship to undress you, darling.”

She smiled up at him as he seemed to pay special attention to her with his fingers caressing and lightly weaving along. “You do realize that there is no reward waiting here, right? I can barely move.”

“Well,” he said, propping himself on a bent arm and holding his own head up in one hand, “I can honestly say that the sight of you in our bed is reward enough for me, Elsa.”

She frowned as his free hand drifted to assist her with the white shorts she had worn over her swimsuit that she had ridden herself of earlier. “Is that code for you watching me and being all creepy?”

“I thought we decided it was not creepy or stalkerish.”

She pretended to think as she lifted her hips to assist him. “Okay, not creepy, but do I have to be awake?”

He helped her into one of his shirts that she had already commandeered since they moved in together, pulling back the sheets and even lifting her to placed her in a more comfortable position. Cradling her against him, he expected that she was already sleeping given her even breathing and general lack of response as he dropped a kiss to her head. She still muttered a good night, nearly inaudible since she was burrowed into his chest when she did it.

“Sweet dreams, my love.”
Chapter 26

I haven’t forgotten this fic or Illusions. I will be updating them on schedule. However, be sure to check out my newest fic called Broken Dreams. I’ll be posting chapter four of seven (I think) momentarily.

Previous Chapters: FF.net and AO³

Zelena intercepted Emma the moment she walked in on July 5. She was only there for what was supposed to be a quick meeting with Regina and to hand off some things that couldn’t be changed before she was on vacation. Killian and Henry were already packed and had stopped at the gas station for both gasoline and what the older of the two referred to as road trip survival supplies.

“You have to see it,” the taller woman breathed, looping her arm through Emma’s and more forcing than guiding her to the table just by her desk. “It’s a schematic of what the Rabbit Hole will look like when all is done. Isn’t it incredible? I hired this designer and an architect from New York. Both are brilliant.”

“It looks great,” Emma responded, drawing her arm back as they stood there a bit awkwardly. The other woman was leaned over the blueprint pointing out everything from the customizable and modular stage to the new location of the HVAC equipment.

“I always hate having to go to the loo in these places, but these are going to be really nice.”

“They look great,” Emma said, glancing out the wall of windows to the hallway where a clock hung amongst the pictures of celebrities with both Regina and Zelena. She had two minutes to get to her other boss’s office to avoid being late. “I haven’t really had a chance to think about all this yet. Maybe we could…talk about it after I get back. I need to get to Regina’s office.”

“Don’t let me keep you,” Zelena told her, half hugging her and half holding her in place. “But you did look at those numbers, right? Dear it is going to be fantastic.”

“They are very generous,” Emma said, backing away from the woman. “I know you’re going to make that place a success.”

Her hand fluttered over her chest as she feigned modesty. “Not me, darling, you. You’re going to make it the success.”

Emma wasn’t sure how her feet carried to Regina’s office, feeling like she had done something wrong to both of her bosses as she tucked herself into the uncomfortable chair and waited to be acknowledged. Just yesterday she had been at the same party as this woman, seeing her hold her fist out to play thumb war with Roland and lean her head against Robin’s shoulder as someone sang one of the slower ballads instead of a party song. Now she was all business with the gray skirt and matching jacket set off by a red silk blouse. While Emma had groaned at realizing she and Killian both still wore the pinkness of a day in the sun, she noticed that Regina’s complexion just seemed to have grown richer from the rays.

“I am assuming that Anna spoke to you already,” the woman began, folding her hands over a freshly printed list that her assistant had just placed on the glass desk as Emma arrived. “I wish these singers would realize that we have plans for them. There’s branding, schedules, tours, photos, hair, makeup, and so many things they just don’t think about. That song that Anna’s supposed to sing lead on, the one she wrote. It’s all about heartbreak and feeling alone.” She scrunched her nose at the trite
subject. “Nobody is going to believe that when she’s sporting a belly with an arrow pointing down with the word ‘baby’ in neon pink or blue.”

It was easier most of the time to let Regina rant before offering up anything more than agreement. So Emma let her do just that until she was sipping water out of the glass bottle and popping a few of her vitamins with head thrown back to aid the swallowing.

“I realize it’s bad timing, but it wasn’t really planned,” Emma said, trying not to throw Anna under the bus too much. She was freaked out enough as it was and had already apologized profusely to Emma during the party and again that morning over the phone. “But I think we can work around it. We’ll shorten the tour. Rush up the filming on the music videos. That will take us up to award season. We feature Elsa on the songs for that time. It’s no big deal. We could probably even get Anna to record some mommy and me songs or lullabies to add to the download selections. We’d be golden.” She sat back in the chair and waited, knowing that Regina was about to rain all over her parade and poke holes in all those ideas.

“Good points,” the woman said, reaching for her phone and scrolling through. “Let’s start shooting the videos in three weeks. I want Dante on this. He’s best of our directors. I don’t care where he is or what else he’s doing. Get him.”

Emma scribbled down the note and waited. “And what about the guys? I found them a new guitarist.”

“I wish we worked with someone other than musicians and artists. They are so finicky.” She was perched at the edge of her chair.

“It would make running a recording business a little hard without musicians, but yes they are hard to deal with sometimes.” Emma wondered when the last time Regina had actually dealt with one of the artists was, as she primarily stayed out of the day to day work except to direct her staff.

Something of a smile broke through on Regina’s lips. “Get new art of the band with this new guitarist. And no more delays. The moment you’re back from vacation I want them in the studio and recording. Robin’s…Robin’s got some idea for that. Talk to him about it.” She went over a few other tasks before sliding her feet out of her inordinately high heels and curling her toes in the fluffy carpet under her desk. “So where are you going on vacation? South of France is always lovely, but it’s a bad time of year for that. You should try Mexico. Great beaches there.”

Emma wondered if Regina was aware that the salary she was being paid would hardly cover trips like that. “I think we’re going to stay a little closer to home. We’re looking for some quiet and peace.”

“Aren’t we all? Very well, let’s reconvene after your little break.”

***AAA***

Elsa’s long hair hung over the edge of the bed as she stared up at the coffered ceiling of the bedroom and let the sounds of Liam shaving and readying himself for the day surround her. The dull pain of a headache was already taking form, reviving itself after it had reared last night and left her barely able to function.

“Are you sure you’re not hungry, darling?” he asked, emerging from the other room with the bath towel low on his hips. The steam and breeze from the overhead fan carried the scent of his ocean smelling body wash to her nostrils.
She blanched at the thought of eating. Long a sufferer of headaches, she was sure that the next stage would be nausea. Food would only speed that step. “I think I’ll pass,” she told him. “Why don’t you see if Killian…”

“The lucky bloke’s headed on a little holiday with Emma,” he reminded her. “Are you truly feeling so poorly? Is there anything I can do? You haven’t had anything yet this morning. I could get us some bacon and eggs? Perhaps some toast and baked beans?”

Elsa practically flew up off the bed, covering her mouth. “I swear, Liam. Don’t even mention food. I have a headache and I may just lay here and die. Let me do it in piece.” Her arm was folded over her eyes. “Just…I need some quiet.”

He nodded, though she couldn’t see him and ducked back into the living room, getting her some water and placing a cool washcloth over her eyes before being kicked out again. While he didn’t want to disturb her with his music, he pulled out his computer and his notebook to see if he could scribble a few things down on paper before the guys revolted and ran for the hills. Plugging in the headphones, he brought the computer to life and found himself staring at the last page that was open.

August Booth’s webpage was not your typical kind of thing. For one he was a novelist and wrote like one, rather than a blogger. For another, he seemed to have issue stretching the truth with his rumor soaked innuendos. Still, it was usually a fun read and stayed pretty local with news about entertainment in the Northeast. He scrolled up from seeing the tidbit about Jefferson joining the group, which he had seen the day before. Elsa had taken a screenshot and told him she was starting a scrapbook. Then he saw the picture of Elsa and Anna. “Powerhouse Vocalist Postpones Tour Dates Due to Pregnancy.”

His eyes bulged as he read the vague but still informative blurb about one of the sisters being the reason for postponing a few dates later in the year. While their manager still hush-hush on the subject, the postponement so far out could only mean one thing, the article explained. It went on to say that Elsa was the odds on favorite to be the one with a bun in the oven, as she was more essential to the girls’ performances than Anna who typically only sang one or two songs a night. However, the jury was still out.

Liam’s heart beat wildly against his ribs and his eyes scanned the article a few more times until he could have recited it from memory. Standing up, the earphones ripped from the plug and he was pacing in front of their bedroom door. Surely she would have told him if this was the case. Even if it was Anna, it would make sense. But he had just seen the two of them yesterday. Anna had seemed her normal self, not eating any more or less and showing no signs of hormones or morning sickness. Elsa, on the other hand, was looking ill and currently hidden away in bed.

Pushing aside the question, Liam twisted his shirt with his fingers as he considered the idea. He wasn’t opposed to fatherhood, though it certainly felt rushed. He would welcome the opportunity and was already feeling determined to be a better father than his own.

His next thought was one of dread. Just as he had felt odd in living with Elsa without a proper job, he felt even worse with the idea of pending fatherhood. He’d have to find something, anything. Half tempted (or more) to run in and tell Elsa that he knew, he went back to his seat on the sofa and pulled the computer to him. She wasn’t feeling well, had asked for a little silence and rest. He could surely give her that and spend the time learning what he needed to know. Fifteen minutes later he had sent out by email four resumes and was perusing pregnancy websites for tips on combating everything from morning sickness to hemorrhoids.

***AAA***
“Hey kid,” Emma said, turning sideways in the seat to face where Henry and a stack of pillows were currently in the back. “Want to do the honors?”

Killian raised an eyebrow and looked through the rearview mirror as an excited Henry caught his mother’s cell phone in his hand and made a dramatic show of powering it off. Mother and son quickly high fived as Henry did the same with his own phone that was supposed to be for emergencies only anyway. “Might as well do mine too,” he offered. “It’s there in the console.”

“You don’t have to,” Emma explained, though she dug in box between them to grab it. “Henry and I just started that tradition because vacation time is our time to concentrate on relaxing, having fun, and each other. No interruptions.”

“Sounds like heaven to me, love,” Killian quipped, tilting his head toward the phone. “Off it goes.”

Emma made a dramatic gesture, winding up her arm then taking her index finger in slow motion to turn off the phone. “And it’s off,” she said, dropping it into one of the cup holders. She raised a hand and placed the back of it on Killian’s forehead. “Are you doing okay? Any shakes? Others signs of withdrawal. Henry? Do we have any chocolate to give Killian? He may need something.”

“I don’t know,” Killian played along, winking at her in that way he did that almost wasn’t a full wink. It was kind of adorable, she thought, as it was an imperfection that even he didn’t accept or acknowledge. “I may not make it. Do you know CPR?”

Henry leaned forward and wound his arm around the driver’s seat to pat Killian’s shoulder consolingly. “It’s gonna be fine. I know for a fact that mom cheats and looks at hers when she thinks I’m not looking. We’ll let you have it a few times too.”

***AAA***

Ginger ale, crackers, a selection of breads to make dry toast, and some peppermint were all in the basket that Liam had on his arm as he maneuvered through the aisles of the pharmacy. It was pretty crowded for a week day, but he was determined to stock the kitchen of their condo with anything that she could want. He threw in a few packs of cookies, pretzels, peanut butter, and anything else he could fit that might help with cravings.

“I don’t even know when they start,” he mumbled. While he had spent the past few hours scouring internet sites, which didn’t always agree, he had also just spent quite a bit of money on Amazon to buy books that would help him navigate these waters.

The purchases he made were pricey and he was not sure that he had even gotten anything that she might like. But it felt good to actually do something. He was halfway back home when he got a call from one of his job prospects and agreed readily to an interview the next day. Things were falling into place, he told himself.

Elsa was still asleep when he returned. Mindful of her need for that rest, he quietly set about his work. He started by getting rid of items that she would not be able to have in her condition. He boxed up the wine and other alcoholic substances, following that with coffee that seemed to be a no go for pregnant women according to the websites he had found. Once he had all of that, plus a few other items that contained anything from MSG to food dyes that he was not sure about, he drove those to his brother’s and left them stacked in the kitchen.

He returned to the condo again with ideas that would not stop. The music room they created would serve as a good nursery for the baby. Though he wouldn’t dare start the decorating process without her, he knew that the room was in danger of becoming a catch all. They had a storage in the garage
part of the building, so he set about removing many of the extra boxes of stuff and placing them there. When he returned after his sixth or seventh load, he found Elsa standing in the center of the living room with a peculiar look on her face.

“Where…what?” she shook her sleep addled head and stared out at him, her eyes seeming a bit brighter than before. “What are you doing?”

“Sorry, darling,” he said, crossing the room in about three strides to pull her into his arms. “I just felt that I needed to do something.”

“So you…I’m not even sure what you did.”

He took her confusion as a sign of awe, pulling her into his side and walking her over to the sofa. “Let’s get you settled first. Then we’ll chat a bit. How is your stomach? Can I get you something? Perhaps some ginger ale or tea?” He dropped his arm and hurried into the kitchen, leaning over the peninsula to inspect his recent purchases. “A biscuit might be good too. Anything you wish.”

“I just want some coffee, thanks,” she said, the heel of her hands rubbing into her eyes. “A little sugar and that peppermint creamer too.”

“Ahhh…well,” he paused at the threshold. “Tea would be better, darling. Coffee’s not the greatest for you. I have some peppermint flavored.” He turned his back to pull out the kettle and began to fill it with water.

“Maybe later,” she said groggily. “I really need that coffee though. I’m dying for some caffeine.” She didn’t hear his answer, her eyes shutting and her head drooping over to the side. Sleep overtook her.

***AAA***

“We should have brought your boat,” Henry noted as they stood in what basically amounted to an almost empty parking lot with an aged wooden dock protruding out from it. At the end of it was a tall and dark haired man. His skin well tanned by the sun, but not to a leathery state. He was wearing a pair of cargo pants with a loose fitting v-neck that billowed with each blow of the breeze. A pair or mirrored sunglasses sat on his thin nose. “It would be safer.” While Killian spoke to the man, Henry leaned closer to his mother and whispered, “Is he like in the CIA?”

“You have too much of an imagination sometimes.” Emma slammed another of the bags into Henry’s outstretched arms, looping the strap over his shoulder. “Come on, kid. We’ll be there in half an hour.”

He didn’t have much of a choice as he followed his mom and Killian, their arms so laden with luggage and supplies that it was the first time he hadn’t seen them holding hands or enjoying incidental touches. The man with the rather small motor boat greeted them with a gruff question of their names and then threw each item into his faded vessel.

“I thought this was a road trip,” Henry whispered to his mom, who was sitting between him and Killian. “Why are we taking a boat?”

Killian laughed, the sound of it catching in the wind. “The lad’s quite perceptive, isn’t he? This island is a bit past the sound here, Henry. No roads or bridges lead to it.”

Henry glanced past his teacher and squinted into the hazy distance. There were a few small islands that dotted the horizon with spires of trees and very little signs of life. “Are we camping?”

Eric let out a hearty chuckle. “You’ll be staying in a house. My wife and I run it. Got about eight
bedrooms. You can have your run of the island though.”

Emma squeezed his shoulder consolingly. “It’s a quiet place where you can do whatever you want on your own. You can Killian can fish. You can explore the woods. I brought you camera so you can take pictures. There’s a place for us to build a fire on the beach. It’s not Disney, but it should be fun.”

To say that Henry was skeptical was an understatement, as he eyed both Emma and Killian warily before frowning deeply. Eric steered the boat in the direction of the island, explaining that things would be quiet but not boring. “My wife and I have a son about your age and a daughter a year younger. They are always up to something. I think they were headed to the other side of the island to build something. A new set of fish traps? A fort? Don’t really know. They’ll be back by dinner.”

Mouth gaping open, Henry stared incredulously at this man. “You mean you don’t know where they are or what they’re doing?”

“Nah,” Eric said, stretching his arms over his head and yawning. “They’ll tell us all about it tonight. So no point in worrying. They know what they’re doing.”

Henry considered it for a moment. “Mom wouldn’t be cool with that.”

“I think you’ll be surprised,” Emma laughed, nudging him with her shoulder. “Plus I know for a fact that Killian has some plans too.”

“Aye, I’ve already arranged for a little fishing excursion for us, though I think your mum has other plans to laze about with a book I saw her packing. Plus I think she packed that camera of yours. Perhaps we all can have a bit of an outing to see what we can capture for posterity.”

Still looking a bit skeptical, Henry nodded his head. “Could be fun.”

***AAA***

Ruby dropped three pages on the table, waiting in what she hoped was a casual pose as Mary Margaret fingered and studied each with careful consideration. Her face was her best nonplussed and humble contortion of her usually confident style. Holding her arms over her chest, she felt that façade crumble with the realization that her usually exuberant friend was silent as well.

“Well?”

“They are beautiful,” Mary Margaret remarked, rubbing the lacy fabric attached to one page between her thumb and forefinger. “Your work is always so good.”

“God, you could have said that earlier. I was thinking you hated them.” Ruby turned in her seat and grabbed the pad of paper from behind her and a pen instead of her charcoal pencil. “So let’s break it down. What are you liking? What are you hating? I need some guidance because fairy tale princess is too vague.”

The teacher’s expression twists with concern. “I like this one best, I think,” she said, pointing to the full skirted dress that would make her waist look tiny. “But the neckline is a bit low.”

Ruby made a note of that and then placed the end of the pen at her lips. “You have a great rack though,” she said as if this was a normal discussion. “I know David thinks so. Are you sure that you don’t want to show them off?”

“I’m not saying it has to be a turtleneck. I would just prefer something where I don’t have to worry
either of the girls is going to pop out and get me sent to confession.” She winked. “And I’d rather not have to wear a push up bra and be uncomfortable all day long.”

Scribbling a few more notes, Ruby reached for one of the discarded drawings. “It would probably work more like this.” She drew out a few lines. “But if you want a higher neck then we need to talk sleeves. These straps only work with the cut this way. I could do a thicker satin strap or maybe even a cap sleeve. What do you think?”

“I don’t know,” the short-haired brunette said after a pause. “This is all very different than I had imagined. I love you, Ruby. I really do. And this is all so awesome with you designing my dress, and yours, and Emma’s, but it’s not quite what I had pictured.” She appeared like a scared rabbit, ready to run at a moment’s notice. “It’s not the dresses. They are beautiful and perfect. You’re so talented.”

Ruby looked around the crowded studio space that she had created and frowned. “It’s the experience, right?”

“I’m being a spoiled brat. I know, I know, I know. You have worked so hard on all these designs, sourced the material, and even drawn them out in agonizing detail. I can’t imagine…or maybe I can. But it’s not like I pictured.” She ran her hand over the fabric again, wistfully lifting it. “Never mind. I’m fine. This is all fine. This is the one I want.”

Ruby snatched the drawing and sample out of her friend’s hand and studied it as if she had not been staring at it for hours while she drew it already. “No, I get it. You wanted the store, and the attendants, the free champagne, the hours of trying on different dresses while Emma and I sit and wait for you to twirl in front of three way mirrors. You want sample veils and us both taking pics with our phones. We should be discussing those different ones while we have cocktails and plan your bachelorette party.”

“I’m a selfish brat,” Mary Margaret said, dropping her head to her folded arms on the table. “Most women would give their eye teeth for the chance to have a custom designed gown. And I’m wanting to go to a warehouse store and fight it out for something dozens of other women will wear that same weekend. You can tell me now. You don’t want to be in the wedding. I’ve ruined it.” Her sleeveless floral dress was capped off by a simple pink cardigan with short sleeves. It wasn’t Ruby’s style, but her friend knew it was traditional just like the bride.

Ruby let her friend wail only twice before tapping her on the back of the head. “So I have tomorrow off. I’m not Emma, but maybe we should go shopping.”

“No, I can’t ask that. I am turning into a bridezilla. You have to just put me down. Tell me no. I can take it.”

“Nope, I’m making the call now. You go home and find your best strapless bra and make sure you’re not wearing granny panties. I’m taking you to Bridal World. I’ll take pics of every dress and text them to Emma. You’re going to find just what you want. And if Bridal World doesn’t serve champagne, I’ll sneak some in. Come on. It’s fine. I get it. You want the real experience. And between me trying to design everything from your dress to the napkins and Granny making out menus without even consulting you, it’s gotten out of hand. So let’s fix it.”

***AAA***

Emma emerged from the second floor bedroom and followed the accented voice of her boyfriend and her happier sounding son from down below. They had already unpacked, but she had wanted to sort a few things out before she went 100% into vacation mode. However, her white dress with black spotches in various designs was made for vacation. Held up by two thick straps and cinched about
her waist, she felt both cool and comfortable with a pair of ballet flats. She dropped onto the couch beside Killian, winking at her son who was on the couch across from them. Henry’s face was the picture of concentration as he stared long and hard at the game board, his tongue poking out the side of his mouth.

“Will you be the judge, Mom?” he asked, not even looking up from the wooden tiles. “Killian’s trying to cheat.”

“You need a judge in Scrabble?” she asked, picking out one of the strawberries from the bowl of fruit that Eric’s wife, Ariel had placed there for the boys. “Since when?”

“Since Killian decided to cheat,” Henry insisted, his hand holding a single tile and then pulling it back when he changed his mind.

Realizing she was going to get nowhere with her son, Emma leaned into Killian, who managed to throw his arm around her and keep his concentration on Henry’s turn at the same time. “How do you cheat in Scrabble?”

“The lad takes issue with my spelling,” Killian said, laughing as if the idea was ridiculous.

“He puts u’s in words that don’t need them. He’s just doing it for points.” Having not found his own word yet, Henry crossed his arms over his mouth. “He tried to claim 20 extra points on that.” He pointed to the word favour that Killian had placed before Emma arrived.

“Not everyone uses the Americanized spellings,” the music teacher groused, taking a break to smile at Emma as she placed a quick peck to his cheek. “Is it my fault that his education has been stifled by his lack of proper spelling?”

“Since you’re his teacher?” Emma asked with a laugh. “I think it is partially your fault. Either way guys, dinner is in like 10 minutes. Might want to wrap it up and go wash your hands.” She realized she sounded very much like the mom of two rather than a girlfriend at that moment. Still she couldn’t help herself.

She detangled herself from Killian and headed toward the kitchen that stood in the back center of the colonial style house. A large dining table was in the area in front of it and two separate living areas flanked either side. Emma sauntered into the kitchen where a red haired woman was pulling a dish from the oven with her eyes checking a faded and stained recipe card at the same time.

“Anything I can do to help?” Emma asked, knowing Killian was probably better at this but she still offered.

The woman laughed lightly, waving off a bit of the smoke from the casserole’s charred edges with her oven mitt. “It usually takes guests a few days to realize I’m in over my head.”

“I won’t tell,” Emma informed her. “But I have to ask about the recipes. I would think that…” She stopped, knowing there was no way to say these things without it coming out wrong. “Sorry.”

Ariel gave a little laugh. “I’m a vegetarian,” she explained with a wry shrug of her shoulders that said even more than the words. “My husband’s parents are not. It’s his mom’s recipe. I have to follow it to make sure everyone is cool with the food we have here.”

Emma nodded, noting the soft light that came through the back windows. “And you can’t just say…”

“Are you married?” Ariel asked, not sounding the least bit testy. “You never quite measure up. I’m
forever trying to prove that I’m good enough. Maybe part of that is in my head, but it doesn’t go away. Now, you’re a guest, so act like one and go put your feet under the table. I’ll have this all ready in a minute.”

Not knowing what to say and feeling like she had intruded, Emma followed Ariel’s orders and landed at the large table. Most of the other guests were families, which made Henry somewhat more comfortable. There were kids of various ages and he was already engaging in conversations about Marvel comics and movies he wanted to see or had seen.

“I thought we might take a walk tonight,” Killian said, when she pushed away her empty plate after finishing. “Would you care to do that?” It twisted her heart a little that he always seemed to ask her permission for things, as though she might for some reason turn him down. She responded with a quick yes and nuzzle into him, telling herself that she was not the only one who doubted things.

***AAA***

“Liam?” Elsa called out from the kitchen at about midnight. “What on earth did you do?”

He was sprawled out on the sectional couch, his head in the corner and one leg straight in front of him and the other hanging off the plush coffee table ottoman they were using. She had seen him there earlier, eyes shut and hands folded on his chest. For a moment she wondered if she had somehow slept through him being shot and left for dead, as his pose looked more like a chalk outline position than a good way to sleep. Disoriented, he lifted his head with hooded eyes in the dimly lit room and searched for the voice that was waking him.

“Liam?”

“Yes, darling,” he said, scrambling up and running a hand through his unruly hair. “Did you need something? I can get you whatever you need.”

She was bent forward over the refrigerator door, his navy t-shirt riding high up her thighs. “Want to explain this?”

The confusion still marred his face as he blinked back at her. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, was it on sale? All this ginger ale? I’ve counted 24 cans in here and three 12-packs in the pantry.” She held up one of the cans in demonstration and tilted her head as if to ask if he wanted to argue with her about it.

“You’re sick,” he answered rather weakly, wondering to himself if this was one of the mood swings he had read about. He’d also read never to call it that or ask about it so he remained quiet.

“Was sick,” she clarified, shutting the refrigerator. “I had a migraine from too much sun yesterday. And where is our coffee maker? Were we robbed?”

Blinking again, he followed her with his eyes as she paced the length of the galley kitchen that overlooked their living room. “Storage,” he said, offering a one word answer that he thought would satisfy her since she was lifting pot holders in search of it or something else she had noticed was missing and hadn’t mentioned yet.

“And the wine?” she asked, pointing at the expensive wine rack that he and Killian had assembled over three beers the other day. He was rather proud of it, though it looked empty and worthless at the moment without a single bottle in it. Briefly he considered telling her about something he’d seen on Pinterest about using a wine rack as a diaper organizer, but he decided against that suggestion.
“At Killian’s.”

“He’s out of town,” she said as though she was truly thinking through what she could only assume was her boyfriend’s nervous breakdown. “You took our wine to your brother’s while he was out of town. Your brother who has more wine than we have. Can I ask why?”

“It was too much of a temptation to leave here and wouldn’t store well in the unit downstairs.”

Her eyes were as big as saucers. “Are you in a 12-step program that I don’t know about? Is this one of the steps?”

He took a deep breath, patting the seat beside him to no avail as she continued standing in the kitchen and looking about it wildly. “Elsa, please come here.”

Arms crossed over her chest, she took what he assumed were the smallest steps in the world to get there. It took forever. “I know, darling. It was in some of the blogs this morning. I was trying to make things easier on you.”

Lips pursed and nose wrinkled, she looked curiously at his profile. “I need a little more than that because I think you just said that you took away both my coffee and my wine to make life easier for me. Did you find religion or something?” She was suddenly having a vision of him in a monk’s robe with a shaved head saying chants over and over.

“I know you’re pregnant and those things aren’t good for the baby.”

Her eyes darted from him to the computer that was asleep in front of him and back again. She was going to give him a little credit, as he was smiling and looking rather pleased and proud. Wrong, but happy. “Honey, no, I’m not. Anna’s pregnant. I’m not.”

“You’re not?” he asked, staring at the stack of papers he had printed out and placed under the newspaper. “Are you sure?”

“Kinda sure,” she confirmed, running the back of her hand against his forehead and cheek as if to check for a fever. “You really thought I was.”

“I cleared out the music room to make room for a crib and changing table.” He was pouting, looking rather pathetic as all the day’s activities came back to him. “I ordered books.”

“You didn’t order a crib, did you?”

“No,” he answered sourly. “I was waiting on you for that. I applied for a few jobs. Even have an interview tomorrow.” He dropped his head into his hands. “You’re really not?”

“I would know,” she reminded him. Opening her arms, she moved to envelop him in a hug, but she wasn’t fast enough. He was already on his feet and grabbing his car keys off the hook they had set up near the front door. “Where are you going?”

“To my brother’s to get back the wine.”

I had to do it with Liam thinking Elsa was pregnant. My late husband did that to me. I was having a bad day and felt a little sick. He looked up the symptoms and thought I must be pregnant. When I woke up from my nap he had gotten rid of everything that might be harmful to a pregnant woman and was half way through baby proofing the house. A few months later I
wanted to tell him I was pregnant and he didn’t believe me.
Chapter 27

It wasn’t quite second nature to Elsa that she had a bed partner now, but Liam was more than patient in letting her remember. However, the morning after his misunderstanding her symptoms as pregnancy, he was sporting a purple bruise on his cheek from where she had hit him during the middle of the night. He wasn’t even sure when or how she did it, other than the fact that she had rolled out of their mutual embrace at some point and then followed that up with rolling back and throwing her fist into his face. He woke up immediately, but she continued to sleep, unaware of the damage she had done.

That was another thing he had learned about her. She liked to sleep in a freezing cold room, complaining that even at 65 it was way too hot for her to get a decent night’s rest. So they piled their new bed up high with blankets and covers that she always managed to use until about 3 a.m. when she pushed them all way.

That night he had woken to find his own nose practically sporting icicles as he clung to the edge of the large mattress. Elsa was spread eagle with only one foot beneath the heavy quilt. He had nudged her and covered her, placing a single kiss against her cheek and wrapping her back up in his embrace.

“Hot,” she mumbled against his neck, placing her palms on his chest and pushing away. “It’s way too hot to cuddle, Liam.”

He sat up to watch her kick at the blankets until her long legs were once again exposed to the cold air of central air conditioning and two fans. She was always like that, pushing such things away and complaining that she was always feeling too hot and never too cold.

“What?” she asked, prying open one blue eye to look at him. “Seriously? It’s the middle of the night. Stop staring.”

“Sorry, I was just going to see if you were about to slap me again,” he said, pulling the covers up to his shoulders, as his internal thermometer was somewhat more sensitive.

“I didn’t slap you,” she said, rolling to her side. “Did I?”

“Aye,” he affirmed, “right on the cheek. I would assume you were asleep during the assault, but it happened nonetheless.”

Both of her eyes were open now, looking toward his face to inspect the damage in the darkened room. “What did you do?” she asked, reaching out a hand and running her thumb over his cheek where the bruise was already forming. “You must have done something to deserve it.”

“Oi, whatever happened to innocent until proven guilty? Isn’t that the motto in this country?” he asked, clamping his hand down over hers and kissing her wrist. “I was just innocently sleeping and wham! You didn’t even flinch.”

She appraised him carefully. “You must have been snoring,” she finally surmised, looking mildly proud of herself for having solved the mystery. His snort told her otherwise. “You do snore. It’s cute, but sometimes…”

“You assault me in the middle of the night and this conversation turns into a list of my flaws.” He huffed indignantly, the ice blue blanket wrapped around him. “That hardly seems fair, darling.”
“I said you snore,” she said after a yawn. “That’s just one thing. If I was making a list, I would have commented on the fact that you are a drama queen and tend to keep me awake on nights when I need my sleep. Then there is the whole assuming I’m pregnant when I’m not.”

“You just had to bring that up again,” he muttered, rolling his eyes. “I had to send a text to my brother explaining why I set off his new house alarm when I went to get the wine back. He’s going to give me a devil of a time about it.” His face reddened. “I was simply trying to be supportive and loving, but instead I have become a laughingstock.”

“I wasn’t laughing,” she asserted mockingly. “I’m sure your intentions were good, but the tact was lacking. You don’t just go around assuming or accusing a woman of being pregnant. I could get a complex about my weight from that.” She yawned again, her long fingers of her free hand wiggling in front of her mouth.

“I apologize,” he said, having already told her the same thing three or four times. “And I will continue to do so.”

“I’m not holding a grudge. I’m just teasing you.” She gave him her best innocent look, which he only scoffed at the insincerity of. “Make it up to you?”

“You better,” he growled, pulling her in for a searing kiss. Their lips slid against each other, warm and slower than one would assume. She wrangled her hand free from him to loop around his shoulders and pull him down on top of her. It was one of the benefits, he thought, slowly running his own along her. They had all the time in the world.

***AAA***

“My brother is an absolute prat,” Killian announced to Emma from his spot on the bed. The overly fluffed pillow was folded behind his head and the blanket thrown low over his hips. “I hope you know that Granny did you a favor by pairing you up with the right Jones brother.”

She leaned precariously out of the bathroom that was attached to their room, a toothbrush in her hand as she scoffed at him. “It’s a bit early for the ego, Mr. Jones,” she told him. He was clearly amused, which had her curious. However, she was also aware that her son was hoping to go for a hike that morning and was probably tying his sneakers at that very moment. “What did he do?”

Killian related the story to her, the abbreviated one that Liam had shared with him over text message. Yes, he had been the first of the three to cave and power back up his phone. “He could have just asked her.”

Holding her hair back with her hand and spitting into the sink, she stifled a laugh about the man running all over town in a panic. Still the image didn’t strike her as preposterous as Killian was making it out to be. Walking back into their shared room, she perched on the side of the bed as she reached for her earrings off the bedside table. “You know, I think it’s kind of cute. I’m sure that he was freaking out on the inside, but his first thoughts were to protect his child and the mother of his child. That’s sweet.”

“But there is no child, love,” Killian pointed out. “He did it for nothing.”

Emma shrugged as she turned the back on one of the earrings. “That’s why I called it cute and sweet, not smart. Anyway, I kind of get the feeling that he might not be too far off base. I could see them having kids in the future. I don’t know if he has that as a plan, but Elsa’s always said she wants one or two of her own.” She bent and grabbed her sneakers off the floor, placing them in front of her and pointing her toes to fit them to her feet. “So are you getting up or are you just going to lounge around
“Momently, love,” he said, dropping his phone to the side and running his hand up her arm. “You know we’ve never talked about it. Do you want kids? I mean, someday.”

“I have a kid,” she told him, leaning down and dropping a quick kiss to his mouth. “A great one who is probably dying to get outside for the day.” She paused at his earnest expression, biting down on her lip a bit harder than she meant. “Why? Do you want kids?”

“I suppose I was just thinking about the subject after this rather humorous tale of misinformation and lack of communication. Is it so odd to wonder if you and I would ever…”

Emma ran a hand through her long blonde hair. “I don’t think we have time for this conversation right now.” She swallowed hard. “Maybe we should do this over a few drinks or something?”

Smiling at her, he shook his head. “I love you, Emma.”

She returned his grin shakily, standing abruptly and spinning off toward the door. “I love you too, but I’m still postponing this discussion. Now get dressed and get your butt downstairs for breakfast and hiking.”

“Emma, I didn’t…”

“I know. Just…let’s talk about this later.” She hurried out the door, closing it behind her before leaning against it and folding her arms around herself.

***AAA***

Elsa tapped her fingers on the table as she watched her sister read the document slowly – too slowly for her tastes. “It’s going to be out of date by the time we sign it,” she muttered, ignoring the way that Regina was looking at her.

The documents regarding the changes to their upcoming tour meant new contracts had to be signed. The first round had gone much easier with Emma explaining everything and answering questions before Anna could even think of them. However, without the blonde to lead them through the process, Anna was showing off her one semester of business law class and attempting to become the Perry Mason of the duo.

“So when it says we will perform live…” Anna began, dropping off. “Does that mean…”

Elsa interrupted her sister and Regina. “It means we perform live. You know, like a concert? The whole point of these documents?” She pushed back from the table. “Regina, I appreciate your having us in, but can I just sign them? I’m sure they are fine from what I read. Anna can read to her heart’s content, but I’d rather just sign and leave.”

Stoically, Regina restacked the papers that were in front of her. “Actually, Elsa, I was thinking we could do the signing as part of a press conference to announce the mini-tour. People are expecting you two to do a larger tour this fall, but we can announce this one and beat the reporters to the story.”

Elsa’s lips pursed into a thin line. “Fine, whatever. Let’s just get this done, Anna.”

Bobbing her head up and down, Anna dragged her finger across the page she was looking at, pausing every few words. “So this says we will have to be responsible for the procurement of costumes. What does that mean exactly? Are we talking about animal costumes or Halloween? I’m not sure that I understand. I mean I don’t have a problem wearing a costume if it fits the songs, but I...
can’t imagine what costume would. A witch, for example, wouldn’t make for a good one at all. Witches would sing about feeling alone, but not about having a broken heart. What do you think Elsa? Should we try to find witch costumes?”

The one benefit to Anna’s stream of consciousness was that she was able to shock and surprise Regina into near speechlessness. “I think it means we are responsible for our own clothes,” Elsa offered, resisting an eye roll. “And I think I’m going to go take a walk.”

Regina told Anna to continue her reading and followed the older sister into the hallway. Closing the door firmly behind her, she gave up a very stilted laugh. “Is she always like that?”

Shrugging her shoulders, Elsa stared at the directory that was printed on the wall. “She’s a good sister, really. It’s just that all our lives I’m the one who makes the decisions and researches everything. I think with the baby coming, she’s trying to prove she can do it.” Closing her eyes, Elsa sighed. “Emma’s usually pretty good with her, but since this pregnancy, she’s been nearly impossible.”

Regina steered Elsa from the conference room down the hall to her own office. “You know, I’m not the older sister but I do have some experience with these things. My sister tends to be the one who relies on me. She wouldn’t even know how to run this company that Mom left us. It can be pretty tedious pretending that I need her assistance on certain things. However, it helps keep the peace, which according to all the business journals is imperative in running a business.” She unlocked the door to her office and rummaged through the minifridge for some water. “I can’t tell you how many times I’ve bit my tongue and let her think that some idea was her own.”

“I thought that was just an older sister thing,” Elsa said tentatively before she took a sip from the bottle that Regina offered her.

“I wish,” Regina lamented. “Do you know how much I wish I could be the one spending a fortune to buy and renovate a bar that has almost folded six times in the past two years? It’s my sister’s pet project that she will probably get bored with after spending half of her share of the budget. What does she know about running a night club? You’d think she came up with the idea after watching reruns of 90210.”

Even Elsa found that idea funny, as she could hardly keep the image of a pajama clad Regina from entering her mind. For whatever reason the pajamas she pictured were gray or black business suit style with fluffy pink slippers. “So she’s serious about wanting to buy the Rabbit Hole?”

“Very. She’s even trying to pilfer part of my staff for it.”

Elsa’s mouth gaped at the news, as she knew of the offer that had been made to Emma, but was unaware that Regina knew too. “I don’t think…”

“Relax,” Regina said coyly. “I have known already. Zelena’s not exactly much for keeping things quiet. She even went to HR here to have the contracts drawn up. Those women aren’t exactly known for keeping secrets from me.” She scoffed, running her hand across the desk to wipe at the condensation. “I don’t blame her. Emma’s quite talented and a quick learner. She seems to have a magic touch when it comes to finding talent and honing it. So while I hope she turns my sister’s offer down, I’m not surprised that it is an issue. Zelena’s using her head for once.”

***AAA***

Henry craned his neck back to look at the tree above them, squinting his eyes into sun just as his mother admonished him for his lack of sunglasses. He gave her the obligatory comment about
forgetting and promising to do better in the future. Normally his mother would laugh at his robotic recitation of such things, but she was quieter than normal.

“Are you okay?” he asked, cupping a hand over his eyes. “Did Killian do something?”

It was one of those moments when she had to remind herself that this was her son and not one of her friends. She didn’t need to have this conversation with a preteen. “No, I’m just in a mood,” she responded. “What’s next on the list?” The two had picked up a set of the laminated cards that Eric and Ariel offered to visitors. They were miniature nature scavenger hunts that were supposed to be conducted with a digital camera. Anyone who got all the items checked off received a t-shirt, keychain, or some other trinket. Henry had chosen the bird hunt, which would net them a free ice cream dessert that night.

“You’re the one holding the list,” he said, crossing his eyes at her in jest. “Seriously, Mom, what the heck? It’s like you’re drunk.”

“I don’t want to know how you know what I’m like when I’m drunk.” She cringed as she tried to recall, but found nothing in her memory banks. That left her feeling uneasy and worried over what she might have forgotten. “I am just having a bad day.”

“You know, he probably didn’t mean it.”

“What?”

“Whatever Killian said to you,” her son elaborated, pointing the camera in the direction of a woodpecker. “I bet he didn’t mean it. He’s never been out and out mean to you before. So why would he start now?”

Emma pursed her lips and waited for her son to snap the photograph. He did and whirled back around at her. “He didn’t say anything wrong. He’s probably waiting on us to get finished with this. We should head back.” She squinted through the haze of the summer day toward the direction of the building. “What?” she asked, noticing the sad expression on her son’s face.

“I had just thought things were getting better for the two of you. I kind of hoped they were anyway.”

Henry took two steps to her every one, trying to keep up with her. It wasn’t as though he had a lot of experience with this kind of stuff, but he wasn’t blind either. Last night his mother and Killian had been fine, sneaking kisses and holding hands beneath the table. It wasn’t the easiest thing to watch, but he could see a happiness to his mother’s behavior and wanted her to have that. And if Killian was doing something to endanger that, he was willing to step up and stop his teacher from being a jerk about it. He told his mother as much.

“You’re a good kid, you know that?” She smiled, dropping a kiss on his forehead. “But I promise this is just one of those adult things. Killian didn’t do anything wrong. I promise.”

“Hey better not,” Henry said gruffly, adjusting the strap on his backpack and heading back inside.

Emma waited a moment before she followed, finding Killian sitting at the counter with Eric and looking over some sort of brochure about a boat that the bed and breakfast owner wanted to buy. He was laughing over something, the melodic tone carrying about the wood paneled room. Throwing his head back, he caught her eye and stopped, a slower and more tender smile replacing the easiness of his conversation with Eric.

“I wasn’t sure if you’d be back before dinner or not, love,” he said as she approached. “You and the lad had a good time?”
She didn’t lean in as she usually did, choosing to stay a step or two back. “You could have come with us.”

“Aye, I suppose that would have been ideal, but after you had a bit of a moment this morning and Eric invited me to go fishing, I thought it might serve us well to do separate things today.” He muttered a thank you and a see you later to Eric before placing his hand under Emma’s folded elbow and guiding her over to the sofa nearest the cold fireplace. “I apologize for this morning. I completely spoke without thinking first.”

He looked sad and almost worried, she thought as his blue eyes searched her face for any sign of forgiveness. “You don’t have to do that,” she said warily. “You don’t have to apologize. I’m the one who had the moment, not you.”

“Don’t I?” His perplexed expression only served to cut her a little more deeply. “I’m afraid I’m a bit confused, Emma. I assumed that we were quite well with each other and then I brought up my brother’s mistake this morning. If there is anything I should have picked up by now, you don’t appreciate being rushed. And that was clearly me rushing you.”

The jumble of thoughts that flew through Emma’s mind almost crippled her with fear. She recognized the symptoms from the sweaty palms to the way her heart was beating way too fast and then too slow. Her eyelids felt as if they were moving independently and perhaps even spasming out of control. It was in her head, but she knew the symptoms well enough. “I hate this,” she said finally, not exactly being specific about her current dislike. “I hate that you have to be so careful around me because I’m a broken mess who can’t have a conversation about normal things. Do you know what the conversation Neal and I had about Henry was like? It was him saying he didn’t have a condom and one time wouldn’t possibly hurt. I’ve never had another conversation on that scale. None. The closest is that I always insist on a condom. If a guy doesn’t have one, I have my own pack. I am as faithful to my birth control as anyone could be. I have alarms set up on my phone to remind me, but I don’t need them because I have an internal clock to tell me too. When Henry was eight, he asked Santa for a brother or a sister. I got him a goldfish because my apartment didn’t allow furry pets.”

Killian’s lips twitched at the mental image of a young Henry getting a fish rather than a sibling. “It was way too soon for me to have brought up such a thing,” he said, curling his hand into a tightly wound fist. “I honestly didn’t mean for it to start a discussion, love. I was merely laughing over my brother’s folly. I should have been more sensitive to your plight.”

She closed her eyes briefly and sucked in a deep breath. “I don’t want that, Killian. I don’t want you to have to hold back on a perfectly reasonable question because you’re afraid I’ll freak out. Yes, I’ve thought of having children, but it hasn’t been exactly something I was counting on or planning on. Maybe someday, but right now I’m kind of enjoying just being with you.” She offered him a wavering smile. “Are you having thoughts like that?”

“About marriage and family?” he asked, still keeping his voice to the low tempered pitch. “I assure you that I am in no rush to hurry along that path. Most of my thoughts are not quite that far into the future, love. I prefer to think a little more short term in the way of considering where we might spend our nights or what movie we might watch with your boy.”

She let her head loll back on the couch, her cheek sandwiching her hand between it and one of the cushions. “You do realize I hate it when you do that?” His blank stare told her that he didn’t. “You always seem to know just what to say. It makes me feel like an idiot sometimes.”

He reached up and drew his finger against the spot behind his right ear. “Sorry, love?”

She laughed, reaching out and pulling him closer by his collar. “I don’t think you can help it,” she
said before pulling him the rest of the way to meet her lips. “You quit with the apologizing and I’ll work on my panicking over the future.”

***AAA***

The next morning was not nearly as bright, Emma realized from the muted light coming through the window. It was overcast and the clouds were building for what the forecasters predicted as an afternoon of rain showers. Killian had been up earlier, promising to take Henry for a walk on the beach to capture photos of the sunrise that was sure to have been more colorful with the clouds mixing with the light. She’d been fast asleep when he snuck back in the room and curled up behind her to catch a bit more sleep while Henry posted his newest pics to social media.

His breath was warm on her neck as she tugged at the cover and thought about the book she was hoping to read. All three of them had brought rainy day activities like books or a deck of cards, but she was a bit disappointed in a way that she could be cooped up inside for a while. Bending her knees, her feet snuggled in between his legs and her arm closed over his around her waist.

“Good morning,” she said groggily as he pressed a kiss to the nape of her neck. “Have fun?”

“Lovely morning,” he said, moving himself closer to her. “Lovelier still to find you still in bed, relaxed and waiting for me.”

She smoothed her fingertips over the back of his hand. “And it would be even lovelier if you brought me breakfast, but I guess nobody’s perfect.”

“We are quite the pair, you know?” he whispered against the shell of her ear. “Ask and you shall receive.”

Turning her head, looked over her shoulder at him, noting the smirk and raised eyebrows. “What the hell did you do?” she asked, her next question cut off by a quick kiss.

“Look over on the side table,” he instructed, running his fingers over her hips before rolling away so that she might get a better view of his accomplishment. Sitting next to the old fashioned alarm clock was a covered plate and a steaming cup of coffee. And atop that was a folded note.

“You even wrote a note?” she asked, scooting up to a sitting position before reaching across him to grab her breakfast. “Why bother with it when you were going to be here?”

“Well,” he said, grunting a bit when she accidentally elbowed him in the stomach during her reach, “I had planned to leave it for you to wake up to, love. However, seeing you all curled up in this bed alone did things to me. I couldn’t resist climbing back in myself.” She wondered if he had gotten too much sun the day before or if he was blushing.

“This is very sweet of you,” she remarked, breaking off a piece of bacon and handing it to him. “Have you already eaten?”

“Well, I had planned to leave it for you to wake up to, love. However, seeing you all curled up in this bed alone did things to me. I couldn’t resist climbing back in myself.” She wondered if he had gotten too much sun the day before or if he was blushing.

“This is very sweet of you,” she remarked, breaking off a piece of bacon and handing it to him. “Have you already eaten?”

“Henry and I did earlier.” He chewed thoughtfully before eyeing another piece of the succulent breakfast treat. “I dare say he hardly left anything in his wake.”

“Growing boy.” Drawing a fork through the cheesy scrambled eggs, she hummed. “You know, the first thing I ever learned to cook was breakfast. It was at one of my foster homes. The husband used to bring his wife breakfast in bed every Sunday. I would get up early and he taught me a few things like scrambling eggs and making pancakes. I don’t know why I just thought of that.” She closed her mouth around the fork.
“Feeling nostalgic perhaps?”

“Maybe,” she said, lowering the fork again. “You’re a good cook though. Where did you learn?”

He ran a hand through his messy hair, curling them under at he reached the apex of his head and keeping it there. “I suppose from my mother,” he said offhandedly. “I can remember her making these amazing meals and preparing a table for our father. He was usually late or didn’t show at all, so Liam and I didn’t each like most children our age. Where other children had starchy comforts, we had prawns and lobster. She was quite good at cooking and wanted to pass it on to us. Liam was too busy, but I...I liked seeing her turn the ingredients into something. It was a bit like magic to me. I think she even told me that a few times, called her recipes magic tricks.”

Putting the plate aside, Emma slid back down in the bed to his side, placing a single kiss where the neck of his shirt met his skin. “She must have been a great mom, raising the two of you like she did.”

“We were a handful to be sure,” he chuckled. “She would have liked you. As I recall, most of her friends were strongly independent lasses who came from good stock or so she would say. I don’t even remember all their names, but can certainly remember the tales mum would tell us of what they had overcome and how they made the world better for it.”

She laid her head on his chest, ear over his heart. “I wish I could have met her.”

They did not have the luxury of staying like that long, as she wanted to shower and go find Henry. It did not turn into the rainy day that she had imagined with her book and a cup of coffee. Instead, the three of them played with an old version of video game console and had tournaments where the stakes included chores back at home. After it was decided that Henry had trash duty for at least two weeks and that Emma would have to make both of their beds, Killian was up for the racing game against them both. Two rounds later, Henry and Killian were both tied at one race each. Emma used that as an excuse to scrounge up drinks for them.

“You know,” Henry said, folding his legs up under him so that he sat even taller on the sofa. Killian had noticed that it was a move Emma often did too, right before she was going to say something that made her nervous. Maybe it was the added height that made them more comfortable. “My dad is taking flying lessons.”

“That must be a fun thing to do,” Killian responded, confused as to why this was such a big deal to Henry. Perhaps he was idolizing his father, but still it was odd.

“He wants me to go flying with him. Next week when we’re back in Storybrooke.”

The alarm went off in Killian’s head, realizing that Henry was bargaining for this little adventure. His mother wouldn’t approve of it. “Ahhh.”

“That must be a fun thing to do,” Killian responded, confused as to why this was such a big deal to Henry. Perhaps he was idolizing his father, but still it was odd.

“He wants me to go flying with him. Next week when we’re back in Storybrooke.”

The alarm went off in Killian’s head, realizing that Henry was bargaining for this little adventure. His mother wouldn’t approve of it. “Ahhh.”

“Do you think maybe you could talk to my mom? I know that she doesn’t like me to do anything dangerous, but it’s my dad.”

Knowing that it is a fine line between being Emma’s significant other and a father figure to Henry, Killian looked concerned. If he stepped in, Emma might see that as him usurping her power as a parent. However, he knew that Henry was seeing this as a way to get what he wanted. “Have you spoken to her about it?”

Henry shook his head, lifting a finger to his mouth when he saw his mother coming back to join them. She plopped down on the couch next to her son, winking as she handed him a sugary drink that she proclaimed was only okay because of vacation. He sipped it eagerly.
“So another round to proclaim the champion?” she asked. “Or more if I happen to whip you two.”

***AAA***

Elsa strummed the first few chords, nodding her head as if approving of the melody silently. She repeated the chords twice more before pulling the pencil out from behind her ear and made a notation on Liam’s notepad. Three little lines appeared above the bridge of her nose as she wrote. “What?” she asked him, looking up into his cerulean eyes. “Why are you looking at me like that? You know that Emma’s got me on a schedule. We need to have this ready to record when she gets back.”

“You’re bloody gorgeous when you’re working,” he teased, the corners of his mouth twitching. “I can’t help but stare, darling.”

Her pale skin quickly turned a blushing shade of red as he did just that. “Liam, I can’t work like this. Look here. I changed my intro to this octave. It’s easier for me to hit these notes.” She scribbled a bit more, then pierced her braid with the pencil. “Let’s try it this way.”

Their voices and instruments melded together seamlessly, his a richer tone to her softer and yet still strong one. She warbled a bit on one of the end notes, frowning afterwards as her hand slapped on the wood of the acoustic guitar body. “I’m not sure I like that. What do you think?”

“I think you did it beautifully,” he told her. “How can I not when I clearly fancy you?”

“Liam, everything I do isn’t perfect. Come on now. Let’s try it again but with you doing this part, okay?”

He didn’t put up much of an argument, performing it as she wished and offering no suggestions when she wasn’t happy. Clearly frustrated, she put her guitar aside and frowned at the now messy notes in front of her.

“You seem vexed?”

Tilting her head to the side, she turned that frown to him. “Aren’t you going to offer anything here? You’re not working with me at all. I just want to know what you think. You wrote this. Isn’t there anything…”

He cleared his throat. “Killian and I wrote it, but to be honest, he’s better at the lyrics. I’m not quite sure what you were going for here, darling. The bridge seems to be tripping us up a bit. Maybe we should look at it.” He spun the spiral pad back around to face him, reading through the notes she had made and his own scribblings of lyrics. “Perhaps…” He began to strum again, each chord getting a bit stronger and more confident.

Her frown melted away as she noticed his half closed eyes and the way that he was singing so low both in register and in volume. She was scared to pick up her own guitar, opting to hum along with the newly arranged melody and letting him take the lead. He wasn’t even looking at the page, When he finished, his eyes drifted back open to catch sight of hers.

“That was beautiful, Liam,” she said softly. “Absolutely beautiful.”

“It’s not quite right yet. I don’t like the verse here and I think it needs a bit more flourish there at the intro to the chorus.” He still smiled proudly though as she picked up the pad and threw it to the side. To his amazement, she pulled the guitar out of his arms with very little effort and scooted over to sit between his splayed legs, her head resting back on his right shoulder.

Placing his guitar on her lap, she motioned for his hands to join hers on the strings. “Sing for me
again?”
Chapter 28

No Frozen Jewel in this chapter, but some fun moments nonetheless. I realize this is a short chapter for me, but I wanted to leave it like I did for reasons…

So on with the story…

“So I have it narrowed down to four,” Mary Margaret announced as she arrived at Granny’s. Her pale blue dress and matching shrug were covered by a yellow raincoat that was decorated across the hem with rubber duckies. She pushed back the hood off her thick dark hair and sighed. “But I kind of like this one too.” Her phone album was almost filled with photos that Ruby had snapped the day before during their shopping trip. Most of them had been sent to Emma with comments and questions for the woman on vacation. Emma sent back short notes with her thoughts, but warned that she was not going to spend her week away looking at wedding dresses.

Ruby nodded as she went through the robotic motions of brewing a new pot of coffee. “That’s good…wait? Four? I thought we had it narrowed down to two.” The trip into the nearest town with a large sized bridal boutique had been 90 minutes each way. Add to that four hours of trying on and dissecting each and every look that Ruby, Mary Margaret, or the two sales consultants suggested, another hour and a half for lunch and then a trip through what could only be described as a bridal gown warehouse. Ruby had been exhausted and her fashion morals and rules thrown to the wolves. She had never seen so much tulle, fake lace and satin, and imposter designs in her life. And she didn’t even want to think about the suggestion of dyable shoes for her and Emma.

“I was looking at them again last night and I think I was a bit hasty so I changed my mind.”

The industrial sized coffee machine hissed to life as Ruby hit the last button. Twirling around on her heels, she pushed her dark hair over her shoulder and placed one hand on her hip. “That’s not how this is supposed to work.”

“I know,” Mary Margaret whined, her head hitting her folded arms on the counter. “You’ve got to help me.”

Ruby’s face and body didn’t move, not falling for her friend’s theatrics at all. “I thought that was what I was doing yesterday,” she said a bit too harshly. “Sorry, but you do realize how much I hate box stories and imitation design. You barely even listened to my advice yesterday. What makes today any different other than it being one day closer to the wedding?”

“I have special needs that I didn’t tell you,” she said into her arm, green eyes blinking up over her elbow. She wasn’t sure that Ruby had even heard her.

“You’re special needs?” Ruby teased, pulling out her trusty bar rag to wipe so that Granny wouldn’t complain about her standing around and doing nothing. “I already knew that, Blanchard. Out with it. What’s going on? Why are you at a nine on the panic meter when you’re usually about a six?”

The mumbled response from the teacher was clearly not understood.

“Try again?”

Mary Margaret lifted her head from her folded arms and sighed before cupping her hand around her mouth as though she was going to divulge a huge secret. “I’m pregnant,” she stage whispered, looking about furtively to see if anyone had overheard. Nobody else was paying attention to her
“Oh my God,” Ruby deadpanned, slapping her hands against her cheeks and dropping her jaw Home Alone style. “Have you told David? Is it even his? Oh my God, it’s not. You slut!” She playfully slapped her friend’s folded arm and let loose a big laugh. “Seriously though, congratulations!”

“Shhhhhhh,” Mary Margaret hissed, sounding very much like her young students after she returned to the classroom. “I’m not ready to go making big announcements. I don’t want people to get the wrong idea.”

Ruby picked back up the rag and swiped at the nonexistent dirt on the counter. “Are you sure your name isn’t Mary Sue? So what if you’re pregnant at your wedding? I’d bet half this town has fudged a little on the due dates of their first borns, if you know what I mean.”

“I don’t want David’s father to get a bad impression of me,” Mary Margaret said in that whispering tone. “Like I’m trying to trap him or something.”

“Screw him. It’s not that big of a deal. You two have wanted marriage and children. You’re just getting both pretty quick. And if this is why you’re freaking out over the dress, don’t worry. I bet that place we went to yesterday has some with some elastic in the waist or something.”

Mary Margaret rolled her eyes skyward and stuck out her tongue at her friend in her best display of immature behavior. “I won’t be able to hide it. I’m 11 weeks now and the wedding is in eight weeks. For those of us who are mathematically challenged, I’ll be 19 weeks on my wedding day. That’s my second trimester. That could mean so many things in terms of a dress.” She made a small half circle with her hand and then a bigger one. “How am I going to find a dress that will accommodate that?”

“So you knew yesterday?” Ruby asked, exasperated at the amount of time they wasted. “I was voting for sheath dresses and form fitting. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“It’s bad luck to tell someone before the first trimester is over?”

Ruby huffed and dropped the rag into the box for laundry. Shouting out a be right back to her grandmother, she motioned with three fingers for Mary Margaret to follow her back into the private quarters. “Bring your phone,” she hissed, holding the door open with her hip as she felt behind her ears and in her pocket for a pencil. “You owe me.”

She led the nearly weeping friend into the makeshift studio and flipped on the harsh overhead lights. “Show me the ones you like,” she said. “Maybe I can design something that will look similar and be a little easier to alter as the date gets closer.”

Stunned, Mary Margaret pulled up the photos and handed them to Ruby with a shaking hand. “You’d do that?”

“I told you I would. You’re the one who decided that you should get a copycat dress and not an original. Thank God you told me before we wasted any more time. If I push it, I’ll have it ready.” She scrutinized the photos. “You’re really serious about this whole fairy tale thing aren’t you?”

“I want to feel like a princess,” she insisted unapologetically for the first time since she’d arrived. “Yeah, yeah, but you do realize that white is a little unforgiving in terms of baby bumps. Maybe we should look at a cream or even a pale yellow.” Ruby looked up to see the teachers face becoming pale and tears already forming. “Chill. I’m not putting down your morals, just your fashion choices.”
A few days later Killian’s jeep pulled up in front of the condo that Neal and Tamara had rented on
the west side of Storybrooke. The setting sun reflected off the lobby windows as Emma and Henry
both jumped out of the jeep. Before Henry could even grab his suitcase, which was filled with dirty
clothes that Emma was not all that sorry that Neal would have to deal with, she pulled him into a
tight hug and kissed his temple.

“I’m going to miss you, kid.”

“It’s four days,” Henry reminded her, ducking under her looser arm so that he could avoid a repeat.
“You’ll have Killian and work. I bet you won’t notice I’m gone.”

“I always notice,” she said, looking up at the building. “You know the drill. This is your dad’s time
with you. But if anything doesn’t feel right or you want to come back to our place, call. I’ll pick you
up. No running off to Granny’s or joining a cult or anything, right?”

He gave her a little salute before turning to face Killian. “Thanks for coming along on our vacation,”
he said, his grin a little crooked. “Mom’s a lot more sane with you around.” The week had been fun,
according to his 12 year old sensibilities. They had managed more than one fishing trip, including
one where he was able to show off his skills to his mom who seemed more than anxious to get that
over with as soon as possible. Their game nights had expanded to include others at the house. And
he’d even found a large stash of sea glass during his beach walking. Killian had been the perfect
buffer between his over protective mother and having a good time.

He even had to admit that he liked the photograph that Ariel had snapped of the three of them at the
pier. It wasn’t one of those staged shots with all of them in matching shirts or staged sitting on a log.
Instead sat on one side of his mom and Killian on the other. Both of the guys were wearing t-shirts
that were faded and not suitable for anything other than walking on the beach or maybe painting. He
was wearing a ball cap to cover his uncombed hair that stuck out at weird angles. His mother’s
freckles were showing with her lighter makeup and her eyes nearly shut with laughter exhibited
across her face. She had one arm around her son and her head had fallen on Killian’s shoulder.
Henry was the only one looking at the camera, as a clearly amused Killian’s eyes were fixated on
her. They had looked like a family, Henry had thought when he saw it on the screen of his camera.
A real life family.

He wouldn’t and couldn’t tell his father that.

Killian’s laughter sounded extra loud with the only other sounds those of the evening bugs coming
out. “I’m afraid to ask what she’s like when I’m not around then, lad.”

Emma ruffled up his hair as Henry agreed that Killian didn’t want to know. “Hey!”

“Mom, you know you’re crazy,” Henry said, sighing with exasperation. “Killian and I both know it
too.”

“If I’m crazy, it’s because you made me that way, kid,” she said, handing him the bag with his video
game, books, and camera in it. “Every bit is due to you. Just remember that.” She smiled good
naturally at her son, placing a finger and thumb on either side of his chin and turning him to face her.
“Be good for your dad. I don’t want to hear about sulking preteens being all emo and stuff.”

“Emo?”

“Never mind,” she told him. “Just be good. And keep your dad out of trouble.”
“It’s just four days, mom,” he reminded her. His hand gripped the rolling bag with superhero logos emblazoned across it. Leaning in, he brushed his lips on his mom’s cheek. “Just ask him, okay?”

***AAA***

Killian’s lips descended on Emma’s as they stood just inside her apartment, his arm around her waist and her leg hitched up on his hip. Her head was tilted back as she opened her mouth, both of them exploring and tasting with urgency. He always wanted to laugh at the way she tried to multitask, her hand reaching blindly behind her to place her keys on the foyer table while her other hand was tugging at his shirt to pull it from the waist of his jeans.

Giving up, she let the keys fall to the floor, returning both hands to the task of divesting him of his shirt. The moan that she let loose was half pleasure and half frustration as one of the buttons caught on his belt. “Damn it,” she muttered, pushing him away from her so that she could see what she was dealing with in terms of the shirt.

“We should go to your bedroom,” he offered, pushing back some of the hair that had escaped her ponytail. “Privacy and all.”

“Remember, we just dropped Henry at Neal’s,” she managed to say, yanking at the plaid fabric. “We have the place to ourselves.”

His eyes lit at that statement, eyebrows lifting obscenely high. “Oh really?”

She would have giggled at his not so subtle display of desire if she hadn’t just ripped a hole in his shirt and sent the white button God only knows where. “Come on,” she said, tugging on his arm. “There are more comfortable places than my front door.”

He took that as a challenge, pulling her to him and spinning her around toward the door. Her backside hit the solid surface with a thump, hands bracing themselves on his shoulders. With a lecherous look at her, he pulled at her top until she raised her arms to let him divest of the material. Her lips were more red than pink as they parted in an effort to speak. The words were lost as he buried his face into her neck with a series of open mouthed kisses and nips along the expanse of skin.

There was another thump as he head hit the wood door, her leg again climbing onto his hip. “You’re so beautiful,” he said against her, pulling back to view the flushed woman he was touching.

“Shut up,” she managed to say, her fingers lost in his thick dark hair and pulling his mouth toward hers again.

His hand was at the button to her jeans when the vibration of her phone alerted both of them that vacation was over. She dropped her head to his shoulder and groaned. “Can we go back on vacation? I kind of liked that.”

Running his hand along her side, he reached into her pocket to withdraw the phone. “Perhaps a wrong number,” he suggested, his breathing short and indicating he was not any happier than she was at the interruption.

She laughed, keeping one arm and leg around him as she stared down at the screen. “Your brother.”

“I’ll bloody kill the wanker,” Killian grumbled as she said hello into the phone. His appreciation for her ability to multi-task came back into play as she cupped his cheek as she spoke of recording schedules and expectations. Her thumb was glancing off the scar on his cheek when Liam clearly said something that surprised her.
“Oh really?” she asked, her eyes flashing at Killian. “No, he didn’t tell me about that.”

He mouthed a question to her only to be rebuked with a shake of her head. He wasn’t quite sure what Liam was telling her, but he was sure that it wasn’t going to be something he liked. Instead he concentrated on the feeling of the skin just above the top of her jeans, running the tips of his fingers there. The softness of her skin and the delicate way it pebbled made him want to touch her everywhere, experiencing the way that she seemed to bow to his efforts.

When she disconnected the call, her eyebrow raised provocatively, not offering any hint as to what she was about to say. He gave her his best humble smile that he hoped was both contrite and concerned.

“You’re writing again?” she asked softly. “Music, I mean.”

“Aye,” he said, squinting shut his eyes as if the admission was one that would draw a physical punishment. “My brother was struggling a bit so I tried to help him. I suppose it just opened up a few more thoughts that I wanted to get down on paper.”

She nodded, her leg slowly sliding down his as she righted herself a bit. “You do know that if you wanted to share those with me, I wouldn’t mind.”

“It’s not exactly anything more than the ramblings of a man trying to put order to his life, love. I tend to think that way before I have the guts to speak to you about my feelings. They aren’t secrets so much as incoherent thoughts.” His cheeks reddened as he backed away from her and looked at the dark living room with only the light from outside giving any clue as to the layout that he truthfully already knew. “I’ve no intention of making a career of it.”

She pushed off the door with her hands, pulled back on her shirt, and grabbed the rolling suitcase that he had left there in the foyer. “You realize I’m not asking you to do that, right? I was just saying that if you’re writing, I’d like to see the result. I would like to see and hear what you’re interested in and what you’re doing. Is that so wrong?”

“Do you remember asking me how I could be with someone who was so broken that she couldn’t speak of the future without feeling her heartbeat in her ears? I seem to recall that conversation just a few days ago.”

She nodded, not turning to face him as she took another step with her bag toward the bedroom.

“Perhaps it is because I’m broken too, love. Maybe my issues aren’t thinking about a future or freaking out at the idea that someone could love me. But my issues are just as real as yours. No matter how your mind may spin it, I’m not perfect. I’m in quite a few pieces of my own.”

She spun about slowly, still almost kicking her bag over. “Because you can’t play the guitar any more?” she asked, feeling as if that might have been the catalyst.

“Love, I don’t miss that. I miss my hand. I miss it when I’ve got a load of papers to grade and have to drop my pen to get another stack. I miss it when I’m trying to cook and have to find balance I didn’t even know I had. I miss it when I am driving and would love to hold your hand, but I can’t because of the bloody steering wheel. And I surely miss it when we make love and I would love to touch you even more than I can because I can’t get enough of you. But no, Emma, my missing my hand has very little to do with music or wanting to play a sodding guitar.” He rocked backwards onto the couch, head thrown back and his hand over his forehead and eyes as if the very effort of the conversation was giving him a headache.
“Then why don’t you want to talk about your music?” Emma asked, stepping back onto the rug and into the space where he was. “Why is it that you look like you want to strangle someone when I mention that perhaps you should consider writing for more than just yourself?”

“Milah loved to look at houses and flats that we couldn’t afford,” he said lifelessly. “She watched those design shows on television and spent hours online marking pages of furniture, decorations, and layouts for things that we’d never even come close to being able to afford. When I asked her why she did that? Why was it so important? She would tell me it was because she believed in me. She would tell me that she thought I would make it big in music someday and that I would be able to afford all that and more.”

Emma lowered herself slowly to the side chair, wanting to reach out to him but not able to muster that courage. He rarely spoke to her of Milah, preferring to keep that information locked inside as she did with parts of her past. It wasn’t keeping secrets as much as it was not wanting to drag those things out to the light of day again. “And you didn’t think you could make it as a musician?”

“I don’t know? Perhaps not, but I guess we won’t know that. As much as I wanted music to be a part of my life and my career, I was always feeling that perhaps I wasn’t good enough for her as I was. She wanted more and better than I could have been. It’s a weight to be sure.”

Emma felt the sour taste in her mouth of what she had felt before when the Swans gave her back to the state after deciding they couldn’t care for her and a newborn. She had felt it when Neal had abandoned her. The fear of not being enough was one that tainted her and made her doubt herself at every turn. It made her work harder and later. It made her bake two different kinds of cookies for Henry’s bake sales. It made her agree to do things with her friends when she would much rather sleep or read. “Did she ever say that to you?” she asked. His descriptions of Milah had been about her beauty and talent with art. She had never imagined her being judgmental or demanding.

“I don’t know? Perhaps not, but I guess we won’t know that. As much as I wanted music to be a part of my life and my career, I was always feeling that perhaps I wasn’t good enough for her as I was. She wanted more and better than I could have been. It’s a weight to be sure.”

Emma nodded. “And you think that I…”

“Oh no, Emma, I just don’t want to find myself in that situation again. I don’t want to put so much pressure on myself that the words and music that I write aren’t my own. I don’t want to feel like they are written for someone else.” He smiled. “They are about you, you know? They are yours. If you wish to hear them, I have no problem with that.” He scooted forward on the couch, reaching his hand out to bridge the gap. “I don’t wish to keep anything from you. I just don’t want to disappoint you. My job is being a music teacher. I have no designs on being more or better than that.”

She swallowed hard, feeling the tears prickle the corners of her eyes. Tentatively, she reached her hand out to link their fingers together. “I love you, Killian,” she said as plainly as she could without her voice cracking. “I love you, Killian,” she said as plainly as she could without her voice cracking. “I don’t care what your job is or what you do. I love the way you manage to make me smile by just raising one of those damn eyebrows or the way you treat my son. I love that you try to make me feel like I’m important to you. I love that you want to help your brother so you put aside your feelings and help him write. I love that you pretend to have never seen sci fi movies so that Henry thinks he is showing you something new. And I love that you never make me doubt that you love me, even if I don’t always think I deserve that. So I don’t care if you ever write again if you don’t want to do it. You can lock all the songs up if that’s your plan. Or if you want to do something with them, then I’m here for that too. If being a teacher makes you happy, then be the best damn teacher you can be. I know Henry adores you and would say you already are pretty great.”

Killian squeezed her hand, his eyes threatening to water as well. “I love you too, Emma.”
“Good,” she responded, launching herself from the chair into his arms. “I’d hate to be in this alone.”

“You shouldn’t have to be,” he answered, his forehead dropping to hers and their joined hands clutched at her chest just above her heart. “I have no intention of leaving you, love.”

She drew in her breath, her eyes wide and a bit fearful as she pulled back. “Do you mean that?” she asked. “Really mean that?”

“I rarely say things I don’t mean, Emma.” She loved the nicknames that he had for her, but there was something about the two syllables of her name rolling out with his accent that always made her feel special. Before her name had seemed plain and not that of a woman she wanted to be, but with him it felt like more.

“Then maybe neither of us should leave;” she said, closing her eyes after she finished the words. “I mean…”

“Love, I think my brother, your friends, our employers, Henry, might come looking for us,” he laughed easily. “But if you would like to lock yourself away with me for a while. I have no complaints.” He tilted his head, drawing near her with the intention of kissing her obvious. He was surprised when she pulled back. “Emma?”

“I don’t mean that,” she said, her cheeks tinged with pink as she realized she had just jumped into this conversation without so much as a safety net. Usually she would have broached the subject with Ruby and Mary Margaret. Given how close Elsa and Liam had become lately, she might have talked to Elsa too. She would have normally planned out her speech, practicing in the car when she was alone. But it was too late now. “So I was thinking that maybe…” She closed her eyes tight and then pried one open to look at his perplexed expression. “Oh God…”

“Emma, love, you’re confusing me. What are you trying to say?”

“I guess I was thinking that maybe we should stop…with what we’re doing. It doesn’t make sense.” She frowned at her own words, knowing they weren’t right and that she was giving him the wrong idea. “I don’t mean to stop seeing each other.” That at least earned her a sigh of relief and his hand gripping hers tighter than before. “I’m just going to say it.”

“I really liked our vacation,” she said in a rush, barely even breathing as the words tumbled out. “I liked waking up with you every morning. I liked sharing the day with you and knowing that there wasn’t an end to it. You weren’t going to leave and neither was I. And maybe I’m nuts. Maybe I’m a horrible mother and person for thinking that this could work, but I don’t want that to end. I don’t want to say goodbye or have to think through plans for us to spend the night. I want those breakfasts to be the norm. I want you to move in with me…with us.” She cringed again. “That’s not exactly as romantic as I would have liked for it to have been.” Falling backwards dramatically against the pillows on the couch, she watched the realization of her words hit him.

“Let me try to understand this,” he said gently, biting down on his bottom lip as he considered her words. “Are you asking me to move in with the two of you?”

“I might be,” she answered with a squeak. “But if you’re going to say no, I’m just kidding.”

_I wonder what his answer will be…_
Chapter 29

Going back to work after vacation is always an exercise in self-control and relaxed expectations. Emma liked her job, even lived for it sometimes, but it was hard to extract herself from Killian’s embrace that morning and harder still to leave him sleeping in her bed as she readied herself. She was in the shower when she heard him moving about so she shouldn’t have been surprised that he made her breakfast and was sitting at the dining table when she emerged fully dressed with damp hair and her phone already dinging out alerts about calendar items and emails.

It was then that she realized living with him wasn’t a bad idea at all, even though he hadn’t exactly said yes when she had bumbled her way through asking him. She was still pretty sure that he was up for the idea, as he had said yes in other ways, including pouncing on her and making good the claims that he wanted to ravish her thoroughly.

Still there were unanswered questions such as where would they live if he was in fact up for it. How would that affect his job since their dating seemed to be an issue for Neal and his father? Which location would they live in, as her place was bigger but his was owned and offered other things like a yard and access to the beach and water? But she didn’t ask those questions at breakfast, focusing instead on his playful banter about the number of toppings she put on her waffles or the fact that she liked hot chocolate in the summer.

She was considering those questions and a dozen others when she realized that she had not listened to a single note of Elsa and Liam’s recording session. The sound guy and producer both were looking at her expectantly as she was typing out pro and con lists on her phone about keeping her apartment or letting it go.

“Sounded great,” she said weakly, knowing she must have missed something by the way that the producer looked at her with utter confusion. “But maybe we can tighten up that one part.”

That was either the right answer for her to have given or the producer was giving up on her. He turned back to the glass partition and spoke into his microphone with a few instructions about timing and pitch, leaving her to her thoughts. She promised herself that she would pay attention to them this time, even pulling her legs into a better sitting position and placing the phone to her right as she looked at the couple in the small studio space with a smile. It was not professional of her to be distracted with the cost of studio time, staff, equipment, and talent on the line.

However, before the first chorus of Liam and Elsa’s song was even complete, the phone was back in her hand after she threw the producer an apologetic look for the ring tone that she really should have had on silent. Killian had texted her again, a selfie on his boat with some piece of equipment torn apart and different gears and greasy items strewn about on a tattered sheet. His expression was sad and pathetic, overly exaggerated pout on display.

Killian: Missing you.

Emma: I miss you too.

Killian: Plans for dinner tonight?

Emma: Dinner with the girls tonight. Ruby is feeling neglected since we’ve skipped the last two weeks.

Killian: Perhaps dessert then?
Emma: I'll call when we're done. You could have dinner with your brother since Elsa is coming out with us tonight. I'm sure he'd like the company and you can keep each other out of trouble.

Killian: Liam is a poor substitute for you, love. He doesn’t look or smell as nice. I find cuddling with him rather awkward since his whiskers scratch me.

Emma: I’m going to tell him that you said that.

***AAA***

“So you’re moving then?” Liam asked, looking at the boxes that sat in the corner of the living room space. He’d arrived just a few minutes after Killian had pulled the lunch leftovers from the oven. Adding in his own take out from Granny’s, the brothers were having a filling and eclectic meal of seafood lasagna and hamburgers. “To Emma’s?”

“Or she is perhaps moving here,” Killian responded, scanning through the channels on the television at lightning fast speed in search of the latest Manchester match. “We haven’t exactly worked out the details. Either way, we’ll be combining households and that means some of my stuff and some of her stuff will be duplicates.”

“Always practical, little brother,” Liam chuckled. “I think it is a good thing though. That lad could certainly use a father in his life.”

“Henry has a father. I’m not going to take over that role just because we’re under the same roof. It should take some thought and discussion, but I don’t want to infringe in that way.” While he had distracted himself earlier in the day with thoughts of whose toaster they should keep and which of them had the more comfortable mattress set, he was also plagued with thoughts of his role in Henry’s life. It was a big step for them, but even more so with Henry. There were bound to be questions. Would he need to step in and provide a back up to Emma’s parenting? If the boy misbehaved, which he rarely did, would Killian need to step in and provide some source of punishment or redirection? He knew that the line between father and whatever it was that Killian was would be a fine one that he didn’t want to cross. He’d seen it from Emma’s end that she was not that comfortable with Neal’s girlfriend being a parental figure in her son’s life.

“All part of that modern family unit,” Liam said knowingly, recalling his one class in psychology that he had taken while in the Navy. “The roles of parents and step parents are a balancing act that is always in flux.”

“Prat,” Killian muttered, settling on a channel. “You always sound like a combination between a fortune cookie and a textbook.”

Liam shifted his now empty plate away from him. “You know when I thought I was about to become a father…”

“Given how that worked out I wouldn’t start any advice with that phrase, brother,” Killian said flatly. “It did not make you look all that smart.”

“I was going to say,” Liam groused, “before I was interrupted, that the brief time I had to think about it gave me some insight. I realize that you are taking a big step with Emma. I’m happy for you. Not all men would be so willing to have a serious relationship with a single mother. And you have never shied away from that with Emma. It’s good for both of you and Henry.” He ran a hand through his hair before lifting his beer in an almost salute to the air. “I told you the night that I met Emma that she was a beautiful and stubborn lass, fiercely independent and determined to do everything on her own. That’s admirable, Killian, but I’m hoping that it isn’t necessary any longer. Perhaps she has come to
trust you. She could do a lot worse.”

The smile on Killian’s face is proud as he turned his attention to the game on television, his cheeks pink with the unexpected compliment from his brother. “I’d say we are two of the luckiest blokes in Storybrooke.”

“I would have to agree, brother. I would have to agree.”

***AAA***

Emma had not told anyone other than Elsa and Killian about the offer from Zelena, which she was still letting play through her mind. The woman would want her answer soon, but for now she was content to view it as an option and not something that would be an idiot to reject. She had spoken to Elsa just that afternoon about an idea that she had, which would solve a few problems. However, she had no intention of going public with it yet. And she had no reason to reject Ruby’s suggestion that the girls have their night at the Rabbit Hole that week.

The music was thumping, pounding in every part of her body as they found a somewhat crowded booth for the four of them. It made conversation a bit hard to maintain, but it felt nice for the four of them to just enjoy each other’s company. Ruby was determined to have a good time, pulling them out onto the floor to dance and ordering drinks that seemed stronger than the watered down concoctions the establishment usually served.

“So you’re not freaking out,” Emma said to her teacher friend over the loud bass. “I know you want kids. Nobody’s cut out to be a better mother than you are, but I expected a freak out.”

Mary Margaret could have been a model for the perfect lipstick as she sipped on her ginger ale with a straw that had no telltale pink mark. Emma wasn’t sure how she did it, but she’d loved to have known. “I had my freak out last week to Ruby.”

“I’m glad I missed it,” Emma said, stirring the coconut rum flavored drink with a plastic snake stirrer absently. “Ruby needs to be the voice of reason every once in a while.”

Flipping her long hair over a shoulder, Ruby pouted. “I’ll gladly stay out of it next time. You all make me feel like such a loser. I’m wanting to celebrate my new shoes and the fact that I got through another week without killing my grandmother or any of the customers. And you three are here with your grown up problems and triumphs.”

There was a collective aww from the trio surrounding Ruby as they explained that they weren’t trying to make her feel bad. And she did have plenty to celebrate. One of the local shops in town had picked up one of her dresses to sell, which was giving her good experience and a bit of extra cash. She’d submitted her portfolio for a design competition and made it to the next level. And, to her own shock and amazement, she had been out six times with Graham with absolutely no arguments or fights. “I’m well on my way to becoming one of those boring couple people,” she said mockingly as she raised her glass. “At least I still sort of have Emma on my side. She may be dating, but she’s the first to run at the sight of trouble or someone getting too close.”

Elsa and Emma both dropped their heads and lowered their drinks at that comment, knowing that Ruby was about to have another melt down moment over the news. “Well, about that…”

“Oh God,” Ruby moaned. “I jinxed it, right? You broke up with Killian? Poor guy. I knew that going on vacation with him was too much. Too much togetherness, right? He snored? Slurped his soup? Didn’t wash out the sink after brushing his teeth? And he’s so cute. Granny’s going to be so disappointed.” Her glass hit the table top with a thud and she crossed her arms over her low cut
bodice. “I’m so sorry, Emma.”

Emma’s green eyes shifted to Elsa who did not meet her gaze, instead looking toward the empty stage as if the canned music was coming from there. “Not exactly a break up,” Emma announced as though she was breaking bad news to her friend. “We’re sort of discussing moving in together.”

Jaw dropping, Ruby stared hard at her friend before downing the rest of the drink and giving a half-hearted signal to the server to bring another round. “Why? Why would you do that? You know that you’re my last hope that we don’t all have to do the fairy tale thing, right? You were the hold out, Emma. Granny sees you as the settled down and married type, but me…I know that you’re not. You’re like me. You want your freedom. You want your independence. You want your life without complications. Why are you doing this to me?”

“What happened to poor Killian, Ruby?” Mary Margaret interrupted, reaching over to squeeze Emma’s hand on the table. “I thought you were upset she was breaking his heart.”

“He would have gotten over it,” Ruby responded sourly. “I can’t deal with this.” She threw her head back as if it was all too much for her to handle.

“I think it’s great,” Mary Margaret said, squeezing Emma’s hand again. “You two are good for each other. And you’ll see how great it is to be in love and really committed to each other.”

Scoffing at her friend, Emma pulled her hand back and returned to stirring her drink at the ice melted. “It’s a joint lease or sharing a room, not an engagement ring, Mary Margaret.”

That seemed to hurt Mary Margaret’s more traditional sensibilities as she twirled her engagement ring around her finger. Clearly she was trying to think of her best argument for such a position, but found nothing.

“It’s still a big step,” Elsa offered. “I was nervous about asking Liam, but it’s been great. And I know that Killian is crazy about you. He must have been so excited when you agreed to this.” She lifted her shoulders as she smiled to nonverbally ask for more details.

“He didn’t exactly ask,” Emma said sheepishly over the music and Ruby’s moaning about pod people taking over her friends. “I asked him. And he hasn’t exactly said yes.”

“Wait,” Mary Margaret said, rubbing at her temples with her fingers. “He didn’t say yes? And yet you are moving in together. I’m confused.”

“I sort of bumbled my way through asking him and that resulted in him kissing me then other things.” Emma’s voice trailed off as Ruby’s head raised, clearly interested in this part of the discussion.

“So you took it from his…um…actions…that he’s not against the idea?” Elsa supplied, her own cheeks a bit pink from the visuals she was experiencing in her head. “I mean I don’t see him saying no. I actually thought you two would take that step before Liam and I ever did.”

“Neither of you have a 12 year old son to consider,” Mary Margaret defended, still rubbing at her temples. “I think Emma was smart to hold off. But I’m still confused. If he didn’t say yes, how are you assuming that you’re moving in together?” Emma was the practical one in the group. She wasn’t the romantic that Mary Margaret seemed to be. She wasn’t the wild child that was Ruby.

Ruby nudged her elbow at the teacher and smiled knowingly. “He may not have said yes with his words, but his body was telling you he was all in, right?” Her eyebrows raised and lowered suggestively as she leaned forward to encourage Emma’s answer.
The only response was a nervous laugh from Emma. “Okay then,” Emma said, folding her hands in front of her. “So a baby, Mary Margaret. That’s great news. I bet David’s excited.”

***AAA***

“You didn’t have to do this,” Emma stated as Killian turned the key in the ignition of her car. He’d had only one beer that night compared to her sampling of cocktails. So when she called to tell him that she was going to take a cab, he and Liam had come to her rescue. Liam proceeded to drive his girlfriend home while Killian was doing the same. “A cab would have been fine.”

“I rather like playing the dashing knight and rescuing the fair maiden,” he said, wiggling a bit in the seat to adjust it to his height. Her older car didn’t have the power settings and required a bit of physical finesse. “You so rarely allow it.”

“I can take care of myself just fine,” she informed him, clumsily pitching herself over his lap to pull the bar that would set the seat back. She groaned as she did it, sounding vaguely weak in her attempt to right herself. “I can rescue myself.”

“Of course, love,” he said, pulling the seatbelt around and clicking it into place. “I love you for that streak, but it is still a wonderful treat to be needed.” He looked blankly at the dash for the switch that would turn on the lights, which she easily clicked on from her spot beside him.

Shrugging in response to his quiet thanks, she laughed. “It’s nice to be needed.” She rolled down the window to breathe in the fresh air that she hoped would settle her stomach. While drinking to excess was not her thing, she could feel those familiar twinges of alcoholic gluttony churning in her stomach. She was about to ask Killian to stop at the 24 hour convenience store when she noticed that he had brought a bottle of water with him.

“This isn’t the way to your house,” she noted as he turned past the pharmacy and headed toward her apartment. “I thought we were having dessert at your place tonight. I wanted a cookie.”

“It’s a work night for you, love,” he pointed out casually. “Your clothes are at the apartment and it will save you a half hour at least in the morning to have your own stuff nearby.”

“I like your house,” she said in what almost sounded like a whine. “It’s cute and cozy.”

He wrinkled his nose, still staring at the dark road ahead. “That’s what I was going for, love, cute.”

She giggled lightly, a sound that was rare in itself as she reached over to trail a finger along his jaw. “You can’t help it,” she slurred seductively. “You’re too cute as it is.” His uncomfortable chuckle turned into a moan as she replaced her finger with her mouth on his jaw and then neck.

“Emma,” he warned, turning into the parking lot of her apartment complex. She was clearly more amorous while drinking, which was a benefit to him. However, she was also decidedly unsteady – a fact he learned trying to get her out of the car and into the apartment. It was again a moment he wished for two hands. Aside from throwing her over his shoulder, he had no way to get her to the door, unlock it, and get them both inside.

He was fumbling a bit with her key ring when he realized she was no longer leaning on his shoulder. His neck craned to catch sight of her, which he did two doors down. Her hand was poised to knock and wake her neighbor at that obscene hour.

“Bloody hell, get back here,” he hissed, jogging over to her. “You don’t need to be waking your neighbors love. They are likely sound asleep.”
“I don’t socialize enough,” she informed him, nearly dropping the half full water bottle on his feet. “I wanted to ask them over sometime.”

“We’ll do that at a decent hour,” he promised, plopping his left arm around her waist and again sliding the key into her door lock. “But for now I think I’d like to keep you to myself.”

“And do what?” she practically sang, stumbling into the apartment. “You like my bed, don’t you? You always look so comfy there.”

“Do I indeed?” he asked, pulling her along with him after locking the door. She was more inebriated than he had first thought upon picking her up that night. However, there was an adorable openness to her state that he did appreciate. Still he had to get her settled in and ward off any chance of a hangover. She was somewhat agreeable and certainly pliable as he undressed her and got her into the fluffy bed. Her protests died down when he returned with more water and some aspirin.

“I don’t take drugs,” she said pointedly as he closed her hand around the little white pills.

“They are simply aspirin, love.” He couldn’t help but smile at her innocent expression that he was sure must be a clue to how she appeared as a child. “You don’t want to awaken with a headache.”

“So they aren’t funny drugs?” she asked, holding her hand closer to her eyes to stare at the two tablets.

“Nothing funny about them, Emma. Now drink up like a good girl.”

She was sleeping before he returned, hugging the pillow that he would have normally used to her and curling herself around it. Her blonde hair spread out around her, something that she would complain about when she tried to style the tangled mess in the morning. However, he was not about to try to braid it for her. They still needed to talk about their plans, but he was content to slide in next to her and replace the pillow in her arms with himself. She took to that easily, burrowing into his neck and whispering something about wanting a cookie.

***AAA***

Liam had an easier time with Elsa who had not had nearly as much to drink. Still, he took advantage of the state and carried her bridal style to their bedroom as she laughed at his antics.

“So dramatic,” she stated when he dropped her unceremoniously onto the mattress. She kicked off the heels she had been wearing and spread out as if to make a snow angel on the covers. “I like that about you.”

“I would think there are a number of things you fancy about me,” he said, disappearing into the adjoining bathroom and pulling his shirt up over his head. “And someday I may have you enumerate them for me.”

“Your ego doesn’t need the boost,” she told him, scooting up to a sitting position. “But I might offer a few suggestions at some point.”

When he returned back to the bedroom, she had undressed and replaced her tight dress with one of his shirts that she had commandeered. “I might have been planning to wear that to an interview tomorrow,” he said with a laugh. “I wasn’t, but I might have.”

She watched him through the mirror on the dresser as she finished readying herself for bed. “I don’t know about you and the guys, but I’ve only ever worked with Regina at the label. Her sister hasn’t been very involved in everything. I probably couldn’t even pick her out of a line up.”
“She’s her half sister?” Liam said, trying to conjure up an image of the woman while trying to decide why Elsa was bringing this up now. “Accent, strawberry blonde? Zelda or something, I think.”

“Zelena,” Elsa corrected, removing her earrings one at a time. “Anyway, Emma was telling me before her vacation that Zelena has bought the Rabbit Hole. Isn’t that interesting?” She was facing the mirror, but caught his gaze in the image and smiled. “And I was just thinking…”

“I know I need to find a job, but I’m not sure I’m up for being a bouncer in a bar, darling.” He laughed at himself as she shifted her weight and set about removing the rest of her jewelry. “Out with it, Elsa. You know you can tell me anything.”

“Not many people know this, but Zelena offered Emma a job managing the club. There are a lot of changes going to happen and she needs someone who is a good manager and capable of keeping the place afloat. Emma’s not so sure she wants to change jobs and well, we thought you might be interested. No guarantees, but Emma said she would talk to Zelena about the possibility.” With the moonlight streaming in through the transom windows, Elsa’s hair was almost white with the glow. She looked ethereal as she spun around with her lips slightly parted and her eyes downcast. “I don’t mean that in a ‘will you please get a job and get off the couch’ kind of way. I just thought that it might be something you are interested in doing until the band really takes off.”

He dug the heels of his palms into his eyes. “I don’t know that she would consider me a good choice. I tended bar for a bit after I left the Navy, but I haven’t exactly been a regular in the industry. Wouldn’t she prefer someone with a bit more experience?”

Elsa shrugged, crossing over to slid between the pale green sheets. “Emma doesn’t really have any experience with that sort of thing either. I think she is more interested in someone she can work with than one with loads of experience. Either way, think about it. I know it would be a load off of Emma to be able to recommend someone rather than just turn it down flat.”

***AAA***

Emma was dragging a bit the next morning, more from lack of a full night of sleep than an actual hang over. Slipping into an oversized dress with leggings and a pair of ballet flats, she emerged to find that Killian had made her coffee.

“I might just have to keep you around,” she muttered, holding the mug up to her lips and breathing in the aroma slowly. “You’re almost better than Granny.”

“So much for your compliments, love,” he said, dropping a kiss to the crown of her head before sitting down next to her. “Last night I was cute.”

“Last night I was drunk,” she clarified. “You’re lucky I didn’t serenade you with some Celine Dion as I’ve been known to do with a few too many.”

“I would pay to see and hear that, love. Any plans for tonight? I will be sure to provide the libations.” He waggled his eyebrows and unfolded the paper. It was one of the things she had learned about him on vacation. He loved to read the actual newspaper, page by page, story by story. Online news sites were useful, but he much preferred the rattling crinkle of unfolding the paper and the soft gray newsprint on his hands. She called it old fashioned, but it was something cute about him that he did as he sipped on black coffee and slowly woke from the night’s sleep.

“I was thinking we could talk,” she said after a long drag of the coffee. She felt much like an addict taking that first hit of their drug after months of sobriety. There was guilt for needing it, but so much pleasure in consuming it. “About moving in…I don’t think we’ve settled everything.”
“Aye, it would be good to know what are plans are in terms of that. So what do you say Granny’s take out and a little planning session?”

“Are you going to pull out a white board and color code everything?”

“Perhaps,” he answered, popping the last p as his eyes sparkled back at her. “I know you want to talk to Henry about what he wants, but it wouldn’t hurt to lay out our options in the mean time.”

Emma hummed her appreciation, closing her eyes and trying to will the coffee to do its magic. It was usually about this time that she reminded herself why she didn’t drink that much and why she was way too old to deal with night clubs, bars, and trying to drown her feelings at the bottom of a glass. However, reality had other issues when her phone buzzed with Henry’s distinct ringtone. Even though it was only a text, she twisted her face into a smile as she went to read it. Perhaps it was the same thing as turning down the radio when looking for a specific address.

Henry: Dad is doing a flying lesson today. He said I can go if I ask you. Can I?

Emma hesitated over the message, her mother instincts not liking the idea at all. Henry was a kid and kids were safer on the ground, not in small aircraft piloted by a man who could actually count the number of hours he had been behind the controls. Grunting her displeasure at the phone didn’t exactly give her son the answer he wanted, but it was all she could muster as she reread the message.

“Something the matter, love?” Killian asked, looking up from the newspaper’s front page story about the upcoming mayoral election. “Work?”

“Henry,” she bit out. “Neal wants to take him flying. If I say yes, I may be endangering my son’s life. If I say no, I’m the mom who won’t let her son do anything fun and stood in the way of some male bonding with his father. I’m not sure which one of those two I am right now.” She set the phone aside and took another gulp of her coffee as if it would act as some liquid courage to do the right thing.

“Ahhh,” Killian said, wiping away at some crumbs on the table. “He mentioned something about his father’s interest in obtaining a pilot’s license last week. I suppose he must be going through with it.”

“You knew about this last week?” she asked, studying him hard as he maintained his focus on the newspaper. “You didn’t tell me?”

“I encouraged Henry to speak to you on the subject. Was I wrong to do that?” He looked almost confused that she would consider this some breach in protocol.

“No, it’s not that,” Emma explained, not sure how to word her discomfort. She hated that Tamara seemed so adverse to Neal helping to raise Henry. While she wished the woman was more supportive of her son, she knew she wouldn’t like it if Tamara was more like Killian either. Killian had a bond with Henry already as his teacher, but the idea of secrets and conversations that she was not privy to made her feel uneasy. Yet she didn’t want it the other way either. “I’m being silly I guess. It’s not like he stole the plane and is doing this alone for the first time. There’s an instructor and it should be perfectly safe.”

“Aye, but you’re the lad’s mother. It’s only right that you worry about his safety.”

She frowned as she typed out her acquiescence reluctantly. “Neal’s not a bad guy,” she mused after hitting send. “I mean he has to realize that Henry would love this. And he’s being that weekend fun dad.”

“But you…”
“I wish I got to be that sometimes. Henry’s quite lucky that way, you know. He has a father taking him flying. You take him sailing. I make him eat his vegetables and do his summer reading. I’m not sure I rank.”
Chapter 30

Henry wrinkled his nose and threw back his head in preparation for the sneeze that was coming from the saw dust that seemed to float through the air like a thick fog at Killian’s seaside cottage. After a short debate over the subject, it was decided that Emma and Henry would move there and that Killian would bring in a few workmen to convert the partially complete attic space into two additional rooms and a bathroom. With the goal of being settled by the start of the school year, the three of them had been in a state of flux for more than a week.

Killian’s former home office turned Liam’s bedroom was emptied out for Henry. The navy walls were lightened to a cool tan and the 12 year old’s familiar bedroom furniture was now placed against the walls. It wasn’t done yet, but he’d spent two nights there already and had begun to consider it his own. However, Killian could tell that the boy was lacking total comfort in the situation. Two of his friends were vying for invites to hang out, but he’d yet to actually invite them despite Killian and Emma assuring him that it was fine.

“Maybe over the bed a little more that way,” Henry said, pointing his finger to the left.

Emma had left on a short trip with Anna and Elsa to Vermont for a show, leaving the two guys alone in the house for the first time. She had spoken at length to both of them about the arrangement, offering to get Granny or Neal to watch Henry instead. However, they had both insisted they would do well and have a few extra things unpacked by the time she returned. Skeptical, she had already checked in three times in the first 12 hours of her business trip.

That morning’s agenda had included unpacking Henry’s collection of comics and accessories that now sat organized on the shelves from the room’s office days. When Killian came across a few lithographs and prints of some of the boy’s favorite super heroes, he had headed straight to the art store to buy frames. They were attempting to hang the newly framed pictures on the freshly painted walls, which had Killian balancing on Henry’s mattress with a nail between his teeth, a hammer under his arm, and his hand stretching to hold the frame in position for approval.

He shifted the frame a bit and asked for a check around the precariously positioned nail.

“I think that’s good,” the boy said, relieving Killian of the frame before hopping up onto the mattress himself to hold the nail. His movements bounced the bed and Killian nearly fell from the momentum. “Sorry.”

The two worked well together as they hung those couple of prints and then turned their attention to the photographs that Henry had taken on their vacation. Smaller versions were placed on the shelves along with books and action figures on stands. Two others had been framed and hung in the living room in the place of more generic landscapes that Killian said were far from being as special. Henry had been a little shocked by the gesture, but it was Emma who had hugged them both and declared the photos perfect. Mixed in with those were pictures of Henry with his friends and a few of him and Emma. On his night stand was a faded photo of his parents. Emma looked much younger, as did Neal, both curled together, noses touching and eyes crinkling in a shared laugh.

Henry caught Killian looking at it twice while they hung up clothes to go in the closet. “I could move that someplace else. It probably makes you sad to see that.”

Killian shook his head, reaching into the cardboard box for another shirt. “They are your parents,
Henry. I think it is quite special to have a photo of them looking happy together.”

Thoughtfully, Henry pulled the hanger through the neck of the shirt and stared at Killian’s hardened expression. “Do you have photos of your parents?”

“Not together,” Killian admitted. He actually had no photo of his father, though he knew that Liam kept one in a drawer. A portrait of their mother, young and still full of life sat in a simple silver frame. Her reddish hair sat curly and piled up on top of her head, her dress soft and billowing. She was looking over her shoulder as if startled out of some thought. Her bow shaped lips were parted and a number of freckles were scattered across the bridge of her nose. After she had died, he had found himself speaking to the photo sometimes, as it looked like she might talk back.

“I’m pretty good at Photoshop,” Henry offered, standing on his toes to hang another of the shirts. “Violet taught me. I could put one together for you. It would look real.”

Unsure how to explain his lack of a photo of his own father, Killian instead focused on another part of Henry’s monologue. “Violet? You mean the young lass who…”

“We’re just friends,” the 12 year old told him defensively. “It’s just a friend thing.”

Killian’s first thought was that Henry seemed an awful lot like his mother in the way that he denied things that had not even been mentioned. Considering quoting Shakespeare, Killian shook his head and then threw another shirt to his student. “I wasn’t aware that the two of you were such good friends.”

Much like his mother did, the boy’s cheeks turned a distinct shade of pink as she dug down for another hanger. “She’s nice and we talk sometimes. I have texted her and she’s texted me.” He wrinkled his nose. “My mom doesn’t know though, okay?”

“My mom would object to your having a friend?” Killian prodded, biting back a smirk. The boy was clearly infatuated with her and unable to properly express it without embarrassment. “I see no issue with Violet being a bad influence on you or anything.”

Henry huffed a bit at the mere idea of his mother objecting to Violet as a person. “My mom thinks I’m too young for a girlfriend.” He spun around, his sneakers making a loud protest on the wood floor. “She said that I shouldn’t be worried about that stuff yet.”

“Aye, mothers do tend to think that way, but there is nothing wrong with being friends with the lass. In the future though…”

“Don’t tell me to wait until we’re both older. You know that isn’t what will happen. She’ll meet someone who doesn’t have a mother who thinks he should be 35 before he goes on a date. I’m not wanting to marry her. I just want to go to a movie or hang out at Granny’s.”

Killian knew that look as one that would send him back to Emma with a request that he was not all that comfortable making. He wanted to tell Henry that Emma had her reasons. He wanted to speak of patience and respect for his mother’s wishes. He knew that the right answer was that if it was meant to be then they would be able to wait with no issues at all. He couldn’t though. He had nothing to offer Henry but a sad smile and a promise that he would see what he could do.

***AAA***

“It feels weird,” Emma admitted, doubling the second pillow behind her head in the hotel room and leaving the television on mute as it replayed cooking competition shows over and over. She had checked in with Henry earlier, learning that the guys had nixed the idea of fishing for their supper in
favor of Chinese take out and some movie marathon that she wasn’t supposed to know about. When she called back to talk to Killian, she learned that her son was in bed and that the house was quiet for the first time that day without workmen banging and sawing. “I know I get to come home to you, but it’s still just not feeling like it’s real.”

“I can assure you that it is quite real, love,” Killian said softly. She didn’t have to think to hard to realize that he was entering his, make that their, bedroom and was keeping his voice low until he was in there. “And I can assure you that I miss you quite a bit, as does Henry.”

“You’re really okay with this?” she asked, her voice muffled momentarily as she took off her shirt. “I didn’t mean for us to invade your house and put your on babysitting duty.”

“Love, it’s perfectly fine. Henry and I are getting along well and we already have plans for tomorrow night with Robin and Roland. I believe my lout of a brother may be joining us as well.”

“Men’s night with booze and broads?” she teased. “Just remember that my son may act like he’s all grown up and say that he is, but he’s still a kid. You stick him in front of a stripper and he might freak out. That’s on you.”

There was a silence that seemed a beat too long before Killian spoke again. “So about that, Emma,” he said, pulling out her name rather than some term of endearment.

“You didn’t,” she moaned. “Was it a movie or a website? Why am I even asking? He found some website and you stepped in to have that birds and bees talk that I keep avoiding because I don’t know what to say other than please don’t.”

“Nothing like that,” Killian said, amusement peeking through his nervous titter. “I’m afraid the boy has been suffering for a young lass he fancies. He’s quite afraid of your reaction and asked for my assistance.”

The long puff of air sounded a bit like static on the phone. “Violet, right? I mean it could be Grace, but I’ve sort of noticed that he spends a little more time at his day camp stuff with Violet. So I’m guessing it is Violet.”

“Aye,” Killian confirmed. “He seems to fancy her quite a bit. And I was thinking that perhaps you would be agreeable to some outing with the two of them.”

Coughing, Emma struggled to respond. “You want to go on a double date with my 12 year old son and his crush? Are you serious?”

“I’m hardly speaking about a romantic weekend in a mountain cabin, love. I just thought that perhaps we could take them to a movie or the arcade. Every young lad should have the opportunity to woo a young lass that he fancies.”

He knew that she running a hand through her hair and scrunching up her eyes and nose in preparation for a battle. The image of her in such a state was as clear to him as if she was next to him in the all too empty bed he was reclined on top of at that moment. “And what are we supposed to do while he’s doing all this wooing? You think I can handle this? I want my baby boy back.”

“Love, I will do my best to distract you from the trauma of your son’s first courting experience.”

“Oh no you don’t,” she said with mock seriousness. “If you’re going to put me through this then we’re going to spy and make sure everything goes according to plan. I’m talking conversation starters, daylight rules, and certainly no kissing.”
“Emma, it’s 2016 not 1816.” He was chuckling at the overprotective vibe he was getting from her and enjoying the distress in her voice a bit too much.

“I’ll think about it,” she muttered. “And if this goes badly, I’m blaming you.”

***AAA***

“I’m afraid I’m not quite what you’re probably looking for,” Liam said, not sounding at all confident as the woman across from him scrutinized him carefully.

“And what is it that you think I’m seeking, Mr. Jones,” Zelena queried, her hands folded under her chin and his resume face up in front of her. “Because Emma seemed quite certain you were the perfect choice.”

“I would assume you want someone with experience and management training,” he answered honestly. He had risen through the ranks of the British Navy, but managing civilians at a bar was hardly the same thing. He’d never had to remove a rowdy customer from a submarine, nor made purchasing decisions based on event schedules that included ladies’ night, special performances, and two for one drink specials during happy hour. He told her as much.

“But can you learn?” she asked, tilting her head to the side. “See, Mr. Jones, I am well aware that Rabbit Hole is in Storybrooke. This isn’t New York or London. We’re never going to have a line down the street or a movie made about us. It’s a bar in a small town where the sidewalks are rolled up by seven. It’ll be mostly the same customers every night, ordering the same things, and ignoring whatever live talent we bring inside. I’m not looking for a renowned restaurant manager because I won’t find one willing to live in this town.”

“So you’re settling,” he surmised. “I’m not sure that is all that complimentary toward me.” It was strange to be in a bar at 9 a.m. when the scents of spilled beer and other spirits lingered over empty tables and dim lights. There hung an invisible cloud in the air that he was not all that convinced didn’t hold laughter and voices of patrons. “But if you are willing to take the chance that I won’t completely muck things up…”

“You want to sing though.” She knew who he was and that he had already recorded several songs with his band already. However, she also knew that despite the dreams of the young, most in the music industry worked an assortment of jobs until they were able to support themselves on the craft alone. “I suppose I should be worried that you will make some big success of yourself and quit. However, you come with good recommendations and I think you can do it. Is that enough for you?”

“More than,” he said, sticking out his hand. “When do I start?”

“Now if you like. I’ve got to get the tables and chairs cleared out of that area there for the contractors. I’d say it would be a good chance to delegate, but you don’t have a staff yet. You should get on that too. Part of the old crew hopes to stick around, but if you don’t want them then deal with it. There are files and stuff in the office. Good luck.”

***AAA***

The stage at the amphitheater was larger than Elsa was used to working on, which could have made her nervous. However, it was hard to feel that way when her sister was offering a running commentary on her latest pregnancy cravings. It was like a hormonal infomercial on a cooking channel.

“I like fudge sauce the best,” the younger sister was saying as she paced out the distance from where
the stage manager indicated microphones would be placed to the edge of the sage. “But there is something so good about caramel and butter scotch. I know I could combine them into this super sauce thing, but I love chocolate. Is it wrong for me to like the others too? Is it like I’m cheating on chocolate?”

Emma was seated on the third row of the empty audience section, nodding as Elsa spoke into the microphone for the check. She seemed to know just when Elsa and Anna needed a moment apart. “Anna, why don’t you go check and make sure the dressing room has been set up for you two. I don’t want to have to unpack everything like in Connecticut.”

“Oh my God, I don’t want that either. I think we should invent something that automatically packs and unpacks for you. Or is disposable! I could totally see disposable clothes being a thing. What do you think? We could develop something. Then we could be on Shark Tank!” She grabbed her sister’s arm and bounced for a moment until she remembered that she had a task to attend to at that moment. Still talking, she headed backstage, leaving a wake of crew shaking their heads.

“Thanks,” Elsa said, blowing a few of the errant hairs that threatened to fall over her eyes. “I love her but…”

“Small doses,” Emma said consolingly, pushing her hands on the end of the stage to pull herself up. “I know. I think she’s gotten worse.”

“It’s the pregnancy. She has all these weird cravings that have her eating strange things and feeling the need to tell everyone and anyone about it. Last night she wanted tacos and hot dogs plus dessert of marshmallows, chocolate, and soda crackers. Kristoff tried to tell her that s’mores are made with graham crackers, but that’s not what Olaf wanted.”

“Olaf?” Emma asked, confused who this mystery person with the funny name was and why his cravings mattered.

“That’s what they’re calling the baby. Don’t ask. Anyway, I’m sure Regina is going to freak when she sees the room service bill. Anna orders all this food, changes her mind, orders more, and then eats both orders because it’s rude and wasteful not to do so.”

“Remind me to hire her a personal trainer after Olaf is born,” Emma said, disbelievingly. Anna’s pregnancy was far from showing yet, but eating like that would certainly add to her waist line.

“She burns off the calories by talking.” Elsa tapped on the second microphone to test it, finding no feedback. She frowned and did it again. “So what’s going on? I know you didn’t send my sister away to let me have a moment’s peace. You’re nice, but you’re not that nice.”

Emma lifted a stool and carried it onto the stage to place where Anna usually sat during some of the slower songs. Arranging it like she wanted, Emma perched on the edge of it. “It’s Henry,” she admitted, sighing deeply. “He has a crush. He hasn’t even told me about it. He told Killian.”

“Isn’t that what you wanted?” Elsa asked taking a seat on the other stool. “I mean you were worried about how they would interact with the whole living together thing. I thought you were worrying over nothing, but you still worried.”

“It’s what I do best,” Emma snapped. “It’s just that Killian thinks we should let him ask this girl out for ice cream or something. We could go with them. I mean Killian is honestly suggesting a double date with my son and some girl.”

Emma was rubbing a spot just above her left eyebrow as if the whole idea was causing a tension
headache. Perhaps it was, she thought as the pain shot through her.

“I’m going to repeat something you told me after Liam went all baby daddy on me,” Elsa said, looping her feet over the rungs of her stool. “That’s kind of cute. Adorable even. I bet Killian’s giving him some good advice how to flirt.”

“Elsa, that’s so not what I need to hear right now.”

The white blonde braid of Elsa’s hair flew over her shoulder as she threw it back from the peasant blouse she was wearing with an older pair of jeans. Even in this casual look, Elsa held herself in a regal stance that screamed of her coming from money and privilege. Regina and Emma had both been working with her on looking more comfortable, as it would be more relatable to the audience.

“Maybe not, but it’s true. Emma, Henry’s not a child any more. He’s going to be 13 in a few weeks. And we both know that liking a girl is hardly the worst thing in the world for him. It won’t be much longer that he’ll even let you go out on a date with him. Instead he’s going to be begging to borrow car keys and arguing about curfews. So enjoy it.”

“You’re saying that like you’re a mother and have been through this,” Emma said sourly. “I love you, Elsa, but seriously. That little boy is my son. I’m still not over the fact that he figured out about Santa Claus and that he’s got his own cell phone that I know he uses for more than emergencies.”

“And he’s going to keep growing up like it or not.” Elsa leaned in her seat to ram her shoulder against Emma. “Take pics and enjoy it.”

“So I’m about to encourage my son to ask a girl out?” Emma asked weakly. “I don’t know that I can do this.”

Elsa giggled, hugging herself a little tighter. She hadn’t been around Henry all that much, but she had seen him enough to know she liked him. He was smart and polite, clearly a good kid who loved his mother and wanted to make her proud. “Yup,” she said, popping the p at the end of the word. “So what do you think you four should do? What did Killian say?”

“Movie or arcade,” Emma said with a sigh. She knew she was being overprotective. When she had decided to keep her son rather than place him with the state or an agency, she had known it was for one main reason. She wanted him to have a better life than she had growing up in foster homes. At his age she had already run away twice. She didn’t have first date memories or school dance crushes. Her scrapbook, had anyone cared enough to make one for her, would have included her first time stealing or the first night she slept in a public location. “I feel like that’s kind of boring though.”

Elsa nodded thoughtfully. “You know,” she began, drawing out the word as she raised her eyebrows. “You could be the really cool mom here.”

“You work in music and can get tickets to any show. Maybe you could take them to a concert. I think at 12 I would have been really impressed by that. Get two seats for them. And two seats a row or two back for you and Killian. That way you don’t embarrass him and he’s not worried about you two holding hands or kissing in the dark. Plus if you’re a couple of rows away, Killian has a better shot at holding back when Henry tries that yawn and stretch move on the girl.”

Emma put her hand over her mouth like she was about to get sick. “I don’t want to think about my son putting moves on girls.”

“One more tip,” Elsa said, hopping down from the stool as Anna’s footsteps and voice came closer.
“Don’t watch them through the rearview mirror on the drive. You’re likely to cause an accident.”

***AAA***

“You’re speaking with your gainfully employed boyfriend, darling,” Liam announced when Elsa called a few hours before her show. “It’s a glorious thing.”

“Hmmm,” Elsa said, her free hand playing with the belt that tied her robe together. “It makes it so confusing though. My other boyfriend has a job. Now you have a job. I’m going to have to come up with new nicknames for the two of you. Why is everything so hard?” She hoped that she sounded as pouty and despondent as she was trying to sound. From his brief laugh, she knew she had nailed it.

“Darling, one of these days I’m going to believe you on that. And then where will you be?” He chuckled. “And here I thought you might tell me how proud you are of me and how much you miss me.”

Her voice dropped a bit lower as she complied. “I do miss you, Liam. And of course I’m proud of you, but you know I wasn’t pressuring you to do anything else other than be happy.” She was happy for him, hoping that this new career would offer him some purpose and satisfaction that waiting for a music career to take off never did. “So when the girls and come out to the club are we going to get free drinks?”

“But of course,” he said. “Just how often do you and the ladies make it over though? I thought that such outings were meant to entice men. You are already spoken for.”

“Options. I have to have options. Never mind that though. Congrats. Tell me about it. I want to know where you’re going to be spending your time and more about Zelena. Is she really the witch everyone says she is? I know Emma finds her a bit scary.”

Liam filled her in on his new duties and the way that Zelena had remained quite formal with his last name instead of his first. He was clearly enjoying the challenge, stating that she had already scheduled him time off for the upcoming recording of their song together. Emma had wanted to redo it, finding the first version a bit rough.

“Sounds perfect,” she told him.

The conversation was light until she admitted her nerves over that night’s performance. It wasn’t so much stage fright as it was the realization that she was doing what she was meant to do.

“It feels like a big responsibility,” she admitted to him, inwardly cursing the clock on the wall that told her it was nearing time to have her hair and makeup done. “Anna’s depending on me. Emma’s depending on me. Sometimes I wish that I could just sing and play my guitar and forget all of the pressure and the responsibility.” She sighed. “I wish it was just about the music.”

“I know, Elsa,” he said, sounding reluctant to end the conversation. “I am not there, but perhaps you could sing for me. I do love to hear your voice.”

“I love you, Liam.”

***AAA***

Emma threw the bottle of water toward the stage hand and reminded him that Anna was to have a bottle after every second song. It was one of the strict rules of her pregnancy and concerns over performing. Dehydration was not something she wanted to be responsible for in terms of a pregnant woman. As flighty as the young singer could be, she was still a hard worker and determined to keep
She shot a wave to Kristoff, who was smuggling in mini turkey sliders that the venue’s chef had refused to make and Anna insisted she needed. Like normal, his lumbering form looked slightly awkward around all the musicians who tended to be much smaller and dainty. However, he wore a happy smile as he tossed a few of the burgers to one of the security guys and clearly lit up when he spotted his fiancé looking beautiful in a lavender sleeveless dress and black ballet flats.

“Doing alright?” Emma asked when she made her way to the mirror where Elsa sat. Two different women were brushing through the white blonde tresses and remarking how soft and perfect her hair was for the style they were planning. Her nearly violet eyes were blank as she nodded slightly in acknowledgement and whispered a thank you. Hands around a cup of hot tea and honey, she caught Emma’s eye in the mirror and slowly smiled.

“As well as I can for a performance night where I feel like crawling in bed and pretending this isn’t happening.” She frowned. “I’m horrible, right? A million girls would kill for this opportunity and all I can think is that it is too much.”

Sliding between one of the stylists and the counter in front of the mirror, Emma sat on the ledge and crossed her ankles. “It’s not too late to quit, but I think you’d miss it.”

“I would,” Elsa agreed. “Sounds like a great crowd.”

“It is. And a certain someone in Storybrooke is wishing he was here. He’s texted me four times already about making sure you’re not freaking out.”

She huffingly laughed at the idea of Emma adding Liam wrangler to her list of duties. “Distract me,” she demanded. “That will make me feel better.”

Leaning back against the cool mirror, Emma hummed a bit. “So I told Killian your idea about the concert. He loved it. He is planning to help Henry come up with a way to ask this Violet girl. I swear if he teaches my son pick up lines, I may have to have a chat with both of them. Liam’s gotten in on it too. Killian said he’s going to suggest a roleplay for practice with Liam being Violet. I told him to take pictures.”

Elsa’s laugh was lighter and easier. “I want to see that. Can we get him a wig and maybe a bow?”

“Oh I’m thinking all out drag costume with video to haunt him forever.”

“He would hate you forever, but you might win a few points with Killian for that one.”

Emma winked conspiratorially. “Oh and the wedding plans. Mary Margaret wanted to confirm that you will sing at the reception. I told her that we would have to get her a quote on that what with the extra security, equipment, appearance fees and all.”

“You didn’t,” Elsa giggled. “You know I’m willing to do that for free. I just need to figure out the song.”

“Let her squirm. She has me wearing a yellow dress as her maid of honor. Yellow…I am going to look like I’m wrapped in caution tape. Let her sweat out a few days of thinking she can’t get what she wants.”

“Did you talk to Killian about the song?” Elsa asked, cringing in anticipation of an answer.

“Yeah, no, I didn’t. I know you and Mary Margaret liked the idea of something original and Liam’s
too busy what with the new job. But asking Killian to do that is a bit tricky.”

“Anna and I can come up with something,” Elsa promised, waving her hand as if brushing off the idea. “It’s going to be fine.”

Emma smiled gratefully and tried to think of something else to say and talk about with her friend. She’d dealt with her fair share of nervous performers before, but Elsa was a special case. The woman seemed to have no issue with the performance itself. It was the overthinking that did her in each time. She was not sure that she was equipped to deal with it. Parting her lips to start a conversation about a television show, she felt the vibration on her thigh from her phone. Lifting it, she shook her head at the goofy picture she had taken of Liam for his contact listing.

Swiping her finger across the screen, she read the message to herself.

Liam: Would you mind giving Elsa that little present I entrusted to you?

Emma responded yes and dug into her pocket to pull out a tissue paper package. “So Liam got this for you for tonight. He had hoped to give it to you himself, but I guess I’m standing in for him.”

She held it out as the two women working on Elsa’s hair and makeup tried to appear disinterested with their eyes still firmly on the small gift. One even said it looked like jewelry to them.

Reaching for it tentatively, Elsa smiled. “He really does care about me, doesn’t he?”

“I’d say so,” Emma said softly. “And he’s not the only one, you know? Anna adores you. I’m a big fan myself. Ruby and Mary Margaret are talking about replacing me with you because you’re less prickly. Killian thinks you’re a saint for dealing with his brother. Regina is in awe of your talent. The guys in Liam’s band have already asked me to replace him with you. You’re getting quite the fan club, Elsa. And that isn’t pressure. It’s people loving you and wanting good things for you.”
Chapter 31

The amount of feedback I get on this story continues to amaze and humble me. I realize this isn’t much of an action fic, as I have concentrated more on the characters and their relationships (friendships, parents, love, etc.). It is a departure for me, as my other writing (novels and screenplays) tend to be more about plot. So I’m glad that people seem to be enjoying my experimenting with this. I realize that I need to balance character and plot, but this story is helping me develop that other side for a moment.

That said, this chapter does have a bit of angst. And I know I have warned about this before, but I am not a fan of Neal. He’s never going to come out as a good guy in my fics.

Henry was seated at the counter with Liam and Killian watching on from a table off to the side. Clearly nervous, he had torn apart the paper napkin that Ruby had given him and was well on his way to tearing up a second. His eyes flitted to the door even when no bell rang to signify someone’s arrival, disappointment evident when it was one of the miners or some other random resident he didn’t really know.

“How long is he going to sit there and pretend we don’t exist?” Liam asked, sipping on the coffee that Ruby continuously refilled. “The lass isn’t even here.”

“I told you that he wants this all to appear natural and unrehearsed,” Killian answered. Over a breakfast of pancakes and bacon, he had informed Emma’s son that she was agreeable to the idea of him inviting Violet to a concert. After a few nervous questions about what to say and how to ask, they had arrived at Granny’s to meet Liam. That had led to a few stories of Killian and Liam’s antics around the same age and how they were not the best at offering advice on the subject.

“You do realize that he’s going to have a heart attack if she doesn’t show up soon,” Ruby said, delivering a bowl of creamer and sweetener to the table. They had requested it 15 minutes before, but nobody mentioned that. “A dead 12 year old doesn’t do much for business, especially since I’m in charge today and have to clean that mess up.”

Liam chuckled. “I think you have more to worry about that he may vomit, love. The lad’s gone from pale white to green sitting there. I’d say that is a bit of an advertisement problem given your business of food and spirits.” He smiled brightly at her, allowing her to huff her way to another table before he looked to his brother. “I’m a bit worried about the lad. He’s looking quite a bit greener than many of the ensigns in the Navy on their first voyages.”

Killian sighed, gesturing with his head toward the still closed door. “He’ll be a bit better once the lass arrives. At least then it will be settled once and for all. Nothing worse for the ego or the confidence as anticipation.” He knew that feeling well.

“Aye. You’re doing a good job for him, brother. I know you don’t wish to take over his father’s role in his life, but you’re becoming quite paternal in your own way.”

“That’s not a good thing in the eyes of the lad’s father. I told him to call the bloke this morning for a bit of encouragement and advice on this topic as well. From the way Henry reacted, I take it that he’s not exactly too keen sharing this particular milestone.” He had spoken to Neal for nearly half an hour before coming back in with a pained expression. Not wanting to pry, Killian had not asked too many questions and merely confirmed that they were still on for the morning trip to the diner.
“Well I think it’s already known the man’s a prat for losing Emma’s affections. His advice was likely tainted with that.”

Killian wasn’t sure what to say to that, as he was trying hard not to speak negatively about Emma’s ex and Henry’s father. He did have opinions, but he kept them quiet in order to let Henry not feel that he was being torn between the lot of them. Thankfully he had a reprieve as the dark haired student entered the diner with her father in tow. Morgan searched out a table for them as Henry stood to greet her. Standing too quickly, he swayed and nearly got his foot caught in the foot rest of the stool.

Liam cursed under his breath and threw out a hand to stop Killian from running to the boy’s rescue. With the two splotches of color evident on Henry’s face, he gave a half laugh half grunt as he said hello to the girl who sported a pinkish tint of her own when she breathed his name.

Henry darted his eyes toward the two brothers and gave them a pleading look to leave him be. They both in a clumsy attempt to be inconspicuous lifted their menus and stared hard at the items listed there. Ruby, looking rather confused since they had already eaten at home and another helping at the diner earlier, sauntered over to see if they were suffering some fate such as a tape worm.

“I know the oatmeal is good when the cook puts fruit on top, but I’ve never seen anyone order as much as you. And that include Leroy who expects us to have his food ready when he arrives at 7:03 every morning.” She stuck a hip out and glanced over at Henry, realizing what was happening. “Scoot over,” she hissed at Killian. “Does Emma know about this?”

“Aye,” Killian confirmed, passing her the menu so that she too could hide behind one. “The lad’s about to ask Violet on a date.”

“Holy shi…” Ruby began, her eyes wide over the top of the laminated menu. “So are we rooting for her to say yes or no? And why wasn’t I brought in on this?”

Liam chuckled, grabbing for his mug of tepid coffee. “We looked for Granny, as she seems to be the expert, but apparently she left you in charge today.”

“She had a date last night,” she responded offhandedly. When both brothers lowered their menus at the same time to stare at her in that revelation, she swatted her hand at them. “Focus. Henry now. Granny later.”

They could not hear what either Henry or Violet were saying, but tried their best to read the young people’s expressions. A smile from Violet sent Ruby squeezing Killian’s forearm and a slight nod had her kicking Liam. However, when Henry’s shoulders dropped, Ruby was ready to scream out not to give up hope. Of the three of them, it was Liam who was the voice of reason. “We are way too invested in this,” he muttered as Ruby swiped Killian’s phone from him and took a couple of pictures for him to send to Emma.

When Henry returned to the table a few minutes later, he looked both happy and shell shocked as he slid in the booth next to Liam. “She said she wants to go, but she has to ask her father.”

***AAA***

“When you even remember your first date?” Elsa asked Emma that morning as they stopped on the way back from Vermont. They had another performance at the state tomato festival in New Hampshire that afternoon – not exactly the glamorous schedule they had anticipated.

“I didn’t really date,” Emma said vaguely as she stared at the phone and looked at her son’s grainy
image. She was grateful that Killian was there for him, even more so after an angry phone call earlier from Neal. Despite the objections that she had earlier, she knew that her son was mature and would not do anything inappropriate. He was clearly infatuated with the girl and from the pictures it looked as though she felt the same. If she reminded herself that they were merely 12, she was happy in knowing that it was just as innocent as Killian claimed. “It’s a bit hard to muster up the romantic spirit in foster care.”

Elsa looked slightly embarrassed, her hand closing over the necklace that Liam had given her through Emma. “I’m sorry. That was rude of me to ask.”

“No, it’s fine,” Emma assured her. “I want Henry to have that experience. I want him to hold hands with a girl and get those butterflies in his stomach. And I don’t want him to feel like there is something wrong with him because it is happening at 12 rather than some other age. Yes, I miss having my son being a young boy who was more excited over cartoons and superheroes than cell phones and dates. But he’s growing up. That’s what he is supposed to do.”

“Very wise,” Elsa remarked sarcastically. “You know you could always have more kids. That way you get to relive all the cuteness and fun of toddlers.”

“Yes because this conversation won’t freak me out at all.” Emma picked a bit of the wrapping off her bear claw and bit down on it, eyes closing in appreciation for the treat.

“Fine,” Elsa said in exasperation. “I can change the subject. I owe you a thank you. You really helped last night with my whole stage fright thing. I thought this would get easier.” She curled her fingers over the pendant. “You and Liam.”

“All part of the job.”

“Of manager or friend?”

“Both,” Emma said, curling her lips up into a smile before returning her gaze to the phone. “Ugh. Neal wants to talk about this whole date thing. I appreciate his occasional interest in our son, but he really reminds me of his father sometimes. I can do without the dramatics of telling me he wants to talk to me. It’s like he wants me to worry about it for the rest of our time on the road, ruining whatever concentration I’ve got left in me.”

“And will you let it?” Elsa asked gently. She knew that Emma harbored quite a bit of resentment toward her ex in terms of co-parenting. She often felt that she was left with the heavy lifting and Neal made occasional snide remarks. Other than speaking to his own father about cutting the amount of tuition for Henry at the exclusive private school, he rarely paid for anything that wasn’t his own idea. When Emma had been sick enough to burn through her accrued time at work, he had not even bothered to offer any assistance. Rather than let Emma go begging to him, Mary Margaret and Ruby had banded together to help out with both running Henry where he needed to be and Granny providing meals.

“Not a chance,” Emma said. “I know he’s doing what he does, but it’s not me that I worry about. It’s Henry.”

***AAA***

“Want to tell me what’s going on, brother?” Liam asked as he walked the length of the reinforced attic floor. The once dark space was brighter with the new windows at either end, as well as two dormers that would provide great views of the water. “You’re putting on quite a show for Henry, but I know you.”
Killian grunted his response, his hand pressing on one of the new wall studs that he was inspecting.

"Out with it."

"I received a letter from Mr. Gold and the faculty committee yesterday. Usually these letters give you your room assignments date to report for preplanning, as well as any changes to your contract. Mine asks me to meet with them next week." He gave his brother a half-hearted shrug. "I can’t say that I’m surprised."

"No, I suppose you can’t. You and Emma were aware that your dating and now living together would have repercussions. So have come up with a plan yet?" It was as consoling as Liam knew how to be, stepping back into his role of big brother and trying to guide the younger Killian on the right path. He could recall doing it many times in the past. Lately the shoe had been on the other foot.

"I’ve applied at a few other schools," Killian admitted. "I was aware that this would come sooner or later so I wanted to be prepared. I have an interview next week in fact." He seemed emotionless as he listed the other institutions.

"Have you spoken to Emma about it?" Liam queried, leaning forward to look out one of the dormer windows. "Perhaps she could talk to this Mr. Gold about things. She is the mother of his grandson."

"I don’t think that means much to Gold." He gave a bit of a shrug and crossed over the unfinished window seat that he had asked the contractors to build after Emma mentioned wanting to watch a storm over the water while reading a book at one. Slowly he lowered himself to the wood. "Brother, I’m sure that I could come up with 100 different things to say about it, but I knew the risk. Emma and Henry are worth it to me."

"I’m glad to hear it. You deserve to be happy, which I don’t think you would be if Emma wasn’t in your life."

Killian’s blue eyes scanned the empty space that he knew would one day soon be a library/office space for them. It would be filled with books and shelving. A two person desk was already being designed and built by Marco. While the floors would be hardwood, he knew that Emma was already thinking about plush rugs that would soften their footfalls. He was refinishing two oversized rockers – both the size of small loveseats that would flank either side of the largest window. The window seat would serve as storage as well as a cozy nook with overstuffed cushions and pillows. He could already see it taking shape.

"I don’t know that I can attribute it all to her," Killian said, hoping his brother would not interrupt the explanation. "She certainly makes me happy and keeps me on my toes. And she is far more than I ever dreamed of loving in my life. However, it is dangerous to put all your life’s happiness at the foot of one person. Sometimes I think that is what our mum did, placing her worth and her heart in the care of her husband. When he left…"

"Emma’s not like our father, Killian. And neither are you. She loves and adores you. You can’t doubt that."

"Well," Killian said, his lips curling up into that roguish smile that he usually only used when he was being overly confident, "I’m undoubtedly hard for her to resist."

"And a cheeky bastard at that." Liam laughed, forcing his brother to scoot on the unfinished window seat. "But don’t shut her out on this, Killian."

***AAA***
Later that night Liam entered the condo he and Elsa shared at nearly 3 a.m. He had to admit that it felt good to feel that bone weariness from a hard day’s work as he dropped onto the sofa and wondered again why there were so many throw pillows there. Elsa had done all she could to make the condo comfortable for both of them, going with a darker color scheme rather than pastels and agreeing to the brown leather sectional rather than the floral couch and love seat she had shared with Anna. However, the woman loved throw pillows. There were some that were large enough to sit on by the fireplace. Others were the soft peachskin material and still others boasted fringe or ruffles. He was not totally convinced that they weren’t mating and having other pillows while he was away.

He threw two of them from behind his back to the other end of the large sectional and grunted in appreciation for how it cradled him as he fell asleep to the glow and hum of the television. While he could have gone straight to bed, he had hoped to wait up for Elsa, who was due in at any moment. She was actually late, but her texts indicated that Emma had needed to stop somewhere on the drive back and they were already in Maine and close to the town line.

His intentions were to be there waiting for her when she entered, pampering her after two performances and time on the road. However, it didn’t quite work that way. She quietly entered the condo, placing her keys just inside the door and toeing out of her shoes so that her footsteps wouldn’t echo on the floors. There was something so adorably immature about the way he would sleep on that couch, she thought, staring at his messy curls and way that his shirt was half tucked in. His socks were drooping and one arm was raised bent over his head as his other hand was splayed on his chest.

She left her bags just outside the door to their bedroom and crept over to him where she dropped down to her knees. The stale beer smell of the Rabbit Hole tickled her nose, but she couldn’t help but smile at his full lips and the way that his nose would scrunch when he was dreaming. The television was running some advertisement for a juicing machine and twice he whispered the word juicer as she watched him.

Unable to resist any longer, she lowered her mouth to his for a light peck, feeling a bit like a fairy tale character waking her true love from a sleeping curse.

“Hello there,” he said, his dark lashes fluttering over his cheeks. “I was wondering when you’d get home.”

“Just a few minutes ago,” she told him, raising up on her knees so that she might hover over him. Her long white blonde hair fell over one shoulder like a thick curtain. “I might have missed you a little.”

“There is no doubt I missed you, darling.” He blinked twice as she lifted her hand to her necklace and smiled back at him. “It looks even lovelier on you.”

“The only thing missing was you not being there to place it on me,” she said, lifting the silvery snowflake charm to her lips and kissing it. “I take it you spoke to Anna.”

He nodded, pinching the bridge of his nose between this thumb and forefinger to try to push back the grogginess. “Aye, she said that your mother had one very similar that you always fancied. However, neither of you have seen it in years. She drew a picture of it for me and I took it to the local jeweler. I suppose it might have been more fitting a gift for a birthday or Christmas, but I thought…”

“I love it,” she reiterated, holding it under her palm. “Nobody’s ever given me something so special. Thank you.”

“You know that I’d give you anything, my sweet Elsa,” he said, pushing himself up on one elbow. “Anything you ever want.”
“What I want right now is to fall asleep in my own bed being held by the man I love,” she said, not taking the time to think that she was not quite used to vocalizing what she wanted. It was something they had both discussed before, that older sibling thing of always feeling like they had to be more concerned with Anna or Killian than their own needs. Thankfully, he agreed he wanted the same thing.

***AAA***

Emma didn’t find Killian asleep when she arrived at the house, her tires crunched against the gravel announcing her arrival. However, she could see his outline on the deck with a single light burning softly. His head was cocked to the side and he was regarding the trail of light from the moon over the calm waves.

She did not unload her car, climbing the steps up to join him and stifling a yawn as she did so. “I knew I’d find you looking at the water,” she said softly, dropping a kiss to his cheek. Her intention had been to sit on the Adirondack chair next to him and maybe steal the bottle in his hand for a swig of the bitter tasting beer that he liked. However, his arms opened and he pulled her down onto his lap instead. She laughed as she folded herself into his embrace.

“How are you, love?” he asked, looking at her with a measure of concern.

“If I had any doubts about living with you, I think that coming home to being greeted like this would erase them. Missed you.” She nuzzled against his neck, dropping a kiss against the skin there. “I’m glad to see the house is still standing by the way.”

“Is that a compliment toward me or toward my childcare skills?” he asked, holding his left arm around her back help hold her in place. Briefly he lifted his bottle of beer to his lips and took in a bit of the amber liquid, chuckling when she pulled it away from him and drank even more. “By the way, I missed you too.”

They sat there quietly, the sound of the waves and the lapping water the only noise other than the occasional sound of a cricket. It was quite different, Emma had to admit, than the time she had spent in larger cities. Even her time at her apartment had included slamming doors and cars at all hours. She had learned to drown it out, but there was a softness to this that she was learning suited her quite well.

“So what has you out here brooding?” she finally asked, lifting her head from his shoulder and studying his profile. “Don’t deny it.” She swiped his bottle again.

“Gold sent a letter,” he told her, reaching down to grab the creased sheet of paper. He could have recited it to her from memory at that point. “Just thinking about my options.” He handed her the letter, trading it for the nearly empty bottle.

She read it at quickly as she could in the dim light, squinting at the page first in confusion and then anger. “You do know I hate that jerk, right? I have to keep it civil for Henry, but I hate that jerk.”

“Love, you and I both knew this was coming,” he said, tapping the page with the bottle and dampening it with the condensation. “It’s hardly a surprise.”

“She leaned her forehead against his temple. “I know you were expecting it, but it’s still pretty incredible that you think I’m worth going through all this. It is hard to believe actually. I’m more used to hearing that I’m not enough or not worth the trouble.”

“You and Henry are worth any hiccup in my career, love. I assure you that I’m fine with this. I’ve
already…”

“You will be great,” she interrupted, forcing his face to turn with the palm of her empty hand. “You are too awesome not to be.” She kissed a line down his cheek and then a peck to his lips.

For a moment he didn’t respond with words, letting her pepper him with tiny kisses as his stoic expression lightened even more and he found himself laughing at her ardent attention. He twisted for better access, pressing more firmly to her mouth and deepening the friendly kisses into a more determined display.

“Quite the poetic situation, love. My out of work brother finds employment and I may be begging him for a job when this is all over.” He laughed acridly. “Or perhaps that is why I had you move in here. I may have an interest in being a kept man.”

“Whatsoever you want to do is fine with me,” she assured him. “So long as it includes sleep. I’m exhausted and could use a few hours away from the world.”

“I’ll be inside in a moment, love,” he said when their lips parted. “I’m sure you want to check on Henry. I assure you he’s no worse for the wear.”

She hesitated, hand still cupping his face and the letter still in her hand. “You know that I hoped this wouldn’t happen, right? If I could stop it, I would. I am not asking for validation here, Killian. I just want you to know that if you want us to take a break so that he calms down or if you think that you can save your job by…”

He dropped the now empty bottle beside the chair with a clanging thump and placed a finger over her lips. “Don’t even finish that. I told you that you are more important to me that a stupid job. I suppose I was just reflecting on the situation when you came up. It will be a bit tough. I have no other teaching experience other than Storybrooke Academy. It is a bit tough out there to find a music teacher position, as most schools have one or two at most. But I’ll find something, love. I am not so much worried about change, as I am a bit sad that I will miss the students and the friends I have made there.”

“We’re going to work this out,” she told him. “After a good night’s sleep?”

***AAA***

She had slipped out of bed that morning and dressed in the semidarkness of their room, not wanting to wake him for a discussion about where she was going. She’d even carried her shoes with her until she was at the door so as not to wake Henry either. Scribbling a note about running some errands, she hurried out to her car and tried to ignore the feeling of betrayal in the pit of her stomach. It was just a few blocks to Neal’s place, but it felt longer with the self doubt and second guessing.

Emma looked at the stale bagels that Neal set out in front of her with a tray of toppings and two rather bland coffees. It was clearly Tamara’s influence, she decided, as Neal was usually a bit more brown paper bag than porcelain tray. She frowned, not at the food, but the fact that he was acting as though this was some sort of social visit.

He sat in the dining chair next to her, rather than the one across the table from her and began to slater cream cheese onto his sesame seed bagel and add to it a plethora of toppings. “I thought you’d bring Henry when you came over. I mean that is what you claim this is about.”

“He’s out with some friends this afternoon, something about a waterslide opening at the lake.” She chose one of the cinnamon raison bagels and began to pick at it. Usually she was one who ate fast
and cleared her plate, having learned from an early age that hesitation was not acceptable if you wanted to eat in a group home. “And I think this is a conversation we need to have without him hearing it and feeling like he needs to pick a side.”

Neal snorted, picking up a few of the pieces of salmon that fell from his bagel onto the plate. “That makes it sound like we’re at war, Ems. I wasn’t aware that you declared war on me.”

“Well, haven’t you been the one starting battles?” she asked. “Did you really think it was appropriate to tell our son that I was allowing him to go to a concert with a friend only to piss you off? And what about you grilling the kid for information about Killian? If you have a problem with me dating and being in a relationship, then you come to me, not the kid.”

Smirking, Neal wiped away a few of the crumbs from his unshaven chin. “My expressing concern about my son is somehow viewed as war,” he said, nodding to himself as if trying to understand where she was coming from on this. “You know my son living in the same house as his teacher and his mother. My son being left alone with this man, who you don’t really know anything about.” He threw up his hands in a mock surrender. “Forgive me for wanting to protect Henry from a potential…”

“Don’t finish that sentence, Neal,” Emma said firmly. “You’ve made your case known. And you’ve shown yourself to be quite the hypocrite. But I’m not here to fight with you over who is morally right or wrong in living with their significant other. I could belittle your relationship with Tamara all day, but it wouldn’t solve anything. Just as you won’t change my mind when it comes to Killian. So we,” she added, pointing to herself and then him, “have to figure out a way to make this work with them. And it starts with ending this hostility. Because as much as you might enjoy being passive aggressive when it comes to Killian, you’re hurting Henry in the process.”

“I have done nothing to hurt my son.” He nearly spilled his bottle of water as he slammed it down on the table. “If my son is hurting…”

“He’s hurting because of both of us, Neal,” Emma clarified. “He’s hurting because we put him in the middle of things. He doesn’t think he can tell you what he does when he’s not here because of how you speak about Killian. He thinks that if he mentioned that Killian was giving him piano lessons or that Killian spent the day with him watching the Pirates of the Caribbean movies when he was sick and I had to work, you’d be mad at him. He doesn’t tell me about Tamara’s wedding planning because he thinks that I will be upset that he’s involved in the ceremony. Our son should not have to censor himself to keep you or me happy. He’s a kid, not a diplomat, Neal. And we need to start realizing that.” She took a bite of the piece of bagel she was holding to punctuate her statement.

“Tamara isn’t like Killian. She’s not a teacher in an inappropriate relationship with a student’s parent. She has…”

“Don’t finish that sentence, Neal,” Emma warned, her greenish eyes darkening as she stared him down. “Killian being a teacher isn’t the issue and you know it. You use that as a weapon. But what it all boils down to is that you don’t like Henry having another guy in his life. You complain about David spending too much time with him. You complain about August. And for what reason? You take Henry to a ball game or two a month. You eat pizza with him once a week to grill him on the details of my private life. You pressure him to do the things you think he should do like baseball because you’re wanting him to have a childhood like yours. But Neal, you hated your childhood. You ran away from your father. Is that what you want for Henry? Because I sure as hell have been trying to make sure he has a childhood unlike mine.” She looked past him at the view out the window of the clock tower at the library. “Henry’s a kid. And he loves both of us. Why are we making it harder on him by making him think he has to choose?”
Neal’s bagel was gone, the plate containing only a few stains to indicate it ever existed. He stared at that plate with an intensity that would have made most students jealous of his focus. “Are you sure that this guy is who you want, Emma?”

She sighed, knowing that it was always going to come back to the idea of who was dating whom and not how they could co-parent. “Neal, I love Killian. He’s a good man. And what you and your father are doing to him, isn’t right or fair. But you know what? I should probably thank you for helping me see that he’s not the kind of guy who takes the easy way out. He’s sad about the fact that he’s going to lose his job – one that he loves. But he would rather drive 16 miles each way to teach somewhere else than be without me and Henry. And maybe that’s selfish of me to like. But damn it, Neal, I love that feeling. I love that he’s putting me first. I love that he doesn’t just tolerate my son, but loves him and wants the best for him. And if that makes me crazy, then I am. I know you’ve interrogated Henry over our living arrangement, but have you actually talked to him about it? Have you asked him how he likes living on the water? Did you ask him about the fishing trips they take in the morning? Or did you know that Henry even liked this girl? I didn’t know. You didn’t know. Killian knew. Killian is the one who called me and asked if I would be okay with this date thing.”

She looked at Neal’s pinched and sour expression and sighed. “Look, neither of them even know I’m here. You said you wanted to talk about this date thing between Henry and Violet. So let’s do it. Let’s have this conversation.”

Balling his hand around a paper napkin, Neal sighed too, his lips pursing to let out the stream of air. “You’ll be there at this date,” he said, not really asking.

“Killian and I have tickets three rows behind them. We’re picking Violet up and dropping her off after the show. I spoke to her father on the phone and he’s fine with it so long as we’re with them.” She cocked her head hopefully. “You know that he played that song for her…sent her the Yaz one over the phone.”

He huffed a little shocked and proud at that news. “I told him about that. Told him how I played it on a cassette in that yellow car of yours.”

“I remember,” Emma said softly. “He loves you, Neal. He wants to tell you things about his life. But sometimes he feels like he can’t.”

“I…He probably thinks that I’m going to use it against you or Killian,” Neal offered, raking a hand over his face. “And maybe he’s right. Maybe I’ve been…I want to spend some time with him. Maybe I could…Maybe he and I could have dinner a day or two before this date? I could offer him a few pointers.”

“I bet he would like that.”
I realize many of us are still enjoying all the goodness and details from SDCC, dying over the
cuteness of pics, and enjoying spoilers, teasers, and such. However, I finished this chapter last
night and wanted to share it with you. Apologies for the long length. Thank you again for all your
support over this. Your reviews and comments are so awesome and make me smile every time.

When David returned from work that Wednesday he was not greeted by the sight of his enthusiastic
and affectionate fiancé who was usually anxious for his return. Instead her normally smiling face was
frowning as she looked past his shoulder to see if someone or something else might be behind him.
He shook it off, along with his gym bag that he had situated on his shoulder while looking for his
keys.

“You’re expecting someone,” he said, bending to brush his lips against hers. Even that didn’t garner
much of a response as she apologized and headed back to the cluttered dining table where Emma and
Killian both sat. “I’ll try not to be offended.”

“Sorry,” she muttered again, settling in with a once white binder and flipping through yellowed and
crackling pages with the clear intention of finding something. “I called for reinforcements. Regina’s
friend, Katheryn left a little bit ago. She offered some legal advice.” It was clear that she was not all
that happy to have to entertain the woman who had once been engaged to her own fiancé, but she
had put on a brave face for it.

It wasn’t that he was surprised to see the other couple there, as Mary Margaret had spent the last few
days on the phone with them or some of the teachers she worked with or had once gone to school
with talking about Killian’s meeting with Mr. Gold. He could appreciate that stubborn set of her jaw
and the way that she was so focused on finding a loophole that she was not even worrying over the
wedding details. Just a few weeks ago there had been the influx of cake flavors that had taken over
the space. He liked cake as much as the next guy, but she had been obsessed with the selection
process and created score cards for each and provided palate cleansers between each tasting. When
she asked which flavor he had liked, she was disappointed that he only responded with, “the
chocolate one.” According to her, at least 11 of the 20 were chocolate.

However, the stationary sample books, menu ideas, and craft projects had been placed in a far corner
to make way for present and past employment handbooks and a variety of print outs from schools
and school systems. The trio were each approaching the task in different ways. While Killian had a
neatly scribed pad of notes with his findings, Mary Margaret was using highlighters and little flags to
mark important passages. Emma’s approach was a bit more haphazard, as she wrote notes in the
margin that were in a shorthand only she understood.

“Any luck?” he asked cautiously, grabbing a bottle of water from the refrigerator.

“Not as such, mate,” Killian answered for the trio, taking a moment to straighten up from his
hunched position. “I rather think this is like that search for the allusive needle in the haystack. We’ve
found no precedent of anyone overcoming the disregard for the rules. Katheryn was of some
assistance, but she admitted that Gold probably already has all his t’s crossed and dotted all the i’s.”

“We also can’t find a lot on the rule itself,” Emma added, her vague smile indicative of her confusion
whether that was a good or bad thing. “It’s all a lot of talk of teachers adhering to a moral code that
will not impugn their character or seek to dissolve the sanctity of the relationship between parent and
child. Whatever that crap means.”
David nodded, gesturing to a box that was sitting in the otherwise empty fourth chair. “Started on these yet?” he asked. Moments later he was bent over the same dusty and faded documents.

They were all pretty silent about their work, an occasional hum of appreciation for some tidbit would turn to a frustrated grunt as they turned the page and moved on from the false hope. One or another would occasionally get up to grab some of the snacks that Mary Margaret had laid out on the kitchen island, an assortment of her own cooking and some items Ruby had dropped off. And far less frequently one of them would interrupt the others to read a passage aloud and briefly discuss or discount it just as quickly.

“I think…” Mary Margaret announced, running her finger across the text in a way of double checking herself. “I think I may have an idea.”

Killian leaned closer to the spiral bound handbook that she was reading, hoping to glimpse a clue as to her findings. However, she was holding it close and rereading it silently before she spoke again.

“This,” she said, thumping the page, “is a handbook from Storybrooke Academy in 1982. I’ve already checked 1981 and no such rule exists in it. So I think it is safe to say that this is the original version of the standard on the issue.” She looked at the three inquisitive faces and preened a bit, feeling like a star attorney. “It only states that personal relationships between any teacher and parent should be considerate of the student’s wellbeing and emotional health.”

David’s brow furrowed as he let the words sink over him. “That’s…uhhh…vague.”

Tongue darting out the corner of his mouth, Killian accepted the handbook from the other teacher and began to read the passage himself. However, Emma’s reaction was a bit more positive. “That’s kind of the point,” she said, dropping her pen on her stack of items. She leaned closer to Killian, her head almost on his shoulder as she skimmed over the material. “We know that Killian disregarded Gold’s warning that he should not date me. However, if the rules themselves don’t specifically say that we can’t date…”

“Then he didn’t break a rule,” David finished. “Good point. People often get out of speeding tickets because the signage is damaged or nonexistent. You can’t break a rule or law if you are not given adequate notice of it.” His fiancé looked at him appreciatively. “I’ve had to testify in traffic court enough to hear that statement from the judge.”

Killian handed the handbook back to his colleague. “That’s a brilliant find, love, but it’s also pretty dated. We need to see if the rule has been amended or updated since then.”

Reaching out and squeezing his hand, Emma smiled. “But it’s a place to start.”

Discarding the other boxes for a moment, the gang dove into the box marked handbooks and rules, each trying to find the similar notations. They were up to 1995 with no clear change to the rule, which was making Mary Margaret giddy with the idea that they had finally found their magic bullet for the case. However, Emma and especially Killian were more cautious. They still had more than a decade to go in the books. Panic ensued when there was a slight edit to the wording in 1998. However, it turned out to be a typo that had to be changed. By 2003 there was no substantive change other than to add online communications to the list. In 2010 there was an added section about social media and befriending or following students or parents there.

“It looks like we might have just proven our point,” Mary Margaret announced smugly when they reconfirmed the text in the latest edition. She folded her hands on the slight swell of her abdomen and grinned. “We did it.”
“Forgive me, but I don’t think we should celebrate prematurely. This is lovely that it does not say that the only way to break this rule is by my dating or living with Emma, but it still doesn’t condone our relationship. I’m afraid I don’t share your enthusiasm.” Emma’s fingers were wrapped in Killian’s palm and her thumb stroked his skin.

“But don’t you see,” Mary Margaret said, still beaming despite their skeptical stares at her, “if the rule is too vague, it means that most all of us have broken it at some point. Henry’s spent the night here at this very loft. That’s against the rules as they are written. John from the horticulture classes—he is practically a nanny to Robin’s son, Roland. There are dozens of examples.”

Emma sat perplexed as she considered this. “So you’re suggesting that Killian’s best defense is to throw other teachers under the bus? That seems a little low.”

“Emma, it is the best defense we have so far,” David chimed in, scrolling through his phone. “The theory would be that if so many people were breaking this vague rule that it would be impossible to enforce.”

“It seems like a long shot, mate,” Killian muttered. “I’m not sure I trust Gold enough. What’s to say he won’t fire me anyway, claiming that I am the example for the others?”

Mary Margaret, smiled even brighter, leaning in as if she needed to whisper her ideas to them. “That’s where my other part of the plan comes into play.”

***AAA***

Zelena’s thin frame moved easily through the crowd over to the bar, settling at the end of it where she leaned precariously forward. With her low cut top, she was clearly on display as she smiled pleasantly at the young bartender that Liam had hired.

“Is it wrong that I don’t like her?” Elsa hissed to Ruby, the two women situated at the coveted corner booth. “I appreciate all that the label has done for us, but she’s just so…”

“Slimey?” Ruby supplied, grinning behind her drink. “I don’t trust her at all. She’s got that way about her.” The brunette scrunched up her nose. “Look at that. She can’t even talk to that guy without touching him. What’s that about?”

It was a catty conversation, but Elsa had to admit that she found the other woman’s take on the situation refreshing. Emma was much more reserved about her distaste for the woman who was technically still her boss too. And Mary Margaret rarely spoke ill of anyone. With Ruby it was open season. “She’s done a pretty good job with this place. With Liam’s help of course.”

The bar had been a tired and dirty location, its walls and floors stained with many a drunken night. The bottles behind the bar had been dusty reminders and the taps a boring combination of beers that had long since gone out of favor. Even the stage and its equipment were relics that rarely worked and according to Liam cost plenty to repair. Now things were not only newer but higher quality. He was very proud by the results so far.

“I used to love this place, as dark and gloomy as it was,” Ruby said, giving a small wave to an old friend across the room. “But your boyfriend has done marvels with this place. I’m almost not afraid to go to the restroom here.”

“Almost?”

“Well, it’s still a public toilet.”
The women both laughed as Liam approached and widened out his arms to stretch around both, giving one a kiss on the cheek and then the other before settling himself next to Elsa. “Nothing makes this place better than a few beautiful lasses enjoying libations and music.”

“You just like that we’re paying customers,” Ruby teased back. “Unless Elsa’s status as your girlfriend earns me a free drink or two?” The table already held a few empty cocktail glasses and a half eaten basket of appetizers.

“I think more than two in your case, Lady Lucas. So what do you two think? Are we ready for the grand re-opening?” It was not as though the bar had been closed during the renovations, but as they neared completion, the plans were to hold a very large celebration of the new ownership and look. Zelena was already entertaining several offers for live performances and Liam had been interviewing new staff all week. If the remaining details held up, the place was going to be a hit. And both ladies told him as much.

“As much as I’d love to throw a few back with the two of you, I best be seeing to my work. Anton can only work behind the bar for so long without needing reinforcements.” He pushed his lips against Elsa’s form a brief but searing kiss, holding to her hand even after he pulled back and then placing a kiss along her knuckles. “I’ll be back in a bit. I’ll also see about having someone clear this table for the two of you. Can’t have anything detracting from the beauty over here.”

Elsa watched as Liam sauntered behind the bar, slapped Anton’s back in a friendly sort of way and began to fill orders from a few of the louder patrons. She was smiling, which must have been amusing to Ruby by the way she cleared her throat. “What?”

“You two are just so good together. I can’t find the right words though. You’re not Mary Margaret and David fairy tale cute. You’re not opposites attract and ignite cute like Regina and Robin. And while I don’t even want to know what goes on in the bedroom, you’re not hot and steamy like Emma and Killian. No, it’s something else.”

Elsa blushed, looking back over to where Liam was pouring something from a blue bottle into a martini glass. He caught her eye and winked. “Are you really trying to analyze it?” she asked. “Didn’t you do that enough with Granny when you two decided we were a good match?”

Humming over the rim of her glass, Ruby appraised her friend. “Granny is better at that than I am. I just sort of help push people together, but were we wrong? He’s hot as hell and he thinks you hung the moon. Good match.” She snapped her fingers like that was all that it took. “Were we wrong?”

“No,” Elsa drawled out. “But I do wonder sometimes how she saw that and we didn’t.”

“Well, you were pretty closed off, but according to Granny, you were also lonely. All you had was your sister and your music really. I mean you had your friends, but you were pretty much a loner. Liam was surrounded by his friends and had the same passion for music. You both are older siblings who love and adore your younger brother or sister. And you both seem to fit well. He’s brash and loyal. You’re reserved and fiercely protective of those you love.”

“I guess I owe the two of you a thank you then,” Elsa said, nodding to the drink. “If we were paying, I’d buy you one.”

“Not a problem,” Ruby laughed. “Besides, you know the deal. When the two of you get married, Granny does the catering. She’ll charge you a fortune for buffet food, but you’ll be too gloriously happy and in love to care.”

***AAA***
Emma half pushed and half dragged a nearly comatose Henry to his bed, fighting with him to get his shoes off and giving up before getting him any more undressed. He could do it himself when he awoke later, she considered as he flopped into a heap on his unmade bed. Tucking his shoes under his bed and turning out the light on the nightstand, she crept out of the room with a final glance at his innocent face. She was grateful that she had such a good kid, one who was kind to others, smart, talented, and loving. She was lucky indeed. While she was standing by Killian the next day, she was glad that David had agreed to bring him along and distract him. She was lucky to have friends who cared for her son and became the family that she had lacked.

Killian was just getting back from walking Robin and Roland out to their car when she emerged back into the living room. His movements seemed more like reflex as he picked up a few out of place things and righted them, even finding a stack of pillows under the piano bench and an empty juice box tucked inside. “I believe Roland may have been trying to build a fort,” he mused as Emma wiped up the counter in the kitchen.

“Probably. Henry loved to do that at that age. He’d have me help him build one with pillows, the dining chairs, and sheets. Then he’d spend all afternoon in there looking at his little storybooks. He always wanted me to say that we could leave it up forever and that he could spend the night in it.”

Killian smiled at the memory she was sharing of her son, his mind trying to conjure up an image of a younger Henry and his mother. While he was sure that young and single motherhood were not easy for her, he did not doubt that she was quite lovely even then. And though she had rightly said it was too soon to discuss, he couldn’t help but picture the idea of one or two of their own someday fashioning forts in the living room and having indoor family campouts as they roasted marshmallows in the fireplace. But he shook off that thought as the reality of his life crashed back into him.

“Thank you for standing by me through this,” he said, rather clumsily for a man who usually had a way with words. “I know it can’t be easy to deal with Neal and his father after everything you’ve…”

“This isn’t about how I feel about Neal or his father,” Emma said, wiping her hands on the red dish towel. “Mary Margaret is right about it being unfair to the other teachers too. If he wins this round against you, then who is to say it won’t stop? What if he decides to go after someone else?” She frowned, shaking her head. “But I’m not in it for that totally either. Killian, this whole thing against you is all because we fell in love. And as insecure as I can be about someone loving me, I’m not about to give you up because my ex is upset and his father is a power hungry jerk.” She lifted her chin up defiantly, arms crossing over her chest and her eyes narrowing in preparation. “I’m good at fighting and we will win.”

“You,” Killian said, stepping purposely over to her, “are brilliant at fighting. You’re a bloody soldier when you are determined to get what you want. I would not wish to cross you and find it a comfort to know we are on the same side here.” He tugged at her wrist until her arms fell away from their protected stance. “And as for you being insecure about my love for you, I will do everything I can to prove it to you. I’m in this for the long haul, Emma. And I hope that you will be there with me.”

Her eyes cast downward, she gave into his embrace, one arm around his back and the other hand over his chest. “You know that I don’t doubt you love, right? I don’t. Not really. I just sometimes wonder how it is that you can love me when I don’t feel that I deserve that.”

“That’s when you need it most. And I know that you love me too, even when I am at my most unworthy. I think that is what makes us work so well together. Don’t you, love?”

She rose onto the balls of her feet, bringing herself into better eyelevel with him. “Whatever the outcome of that meeting, Killian, I’m going to love you. You’re willing to give up so much for what we have and that absolutely floors me. I’m sorry that I could ever doubt you because of what others
have done in the past. If things got hard or even looked like they might, they ran. But you’re staying with me is probably the most romantic thing I’ve ever seen.”

He scoffed at the compliment in that way he often did when people spoke well of him. Lifting her hand off his chest, she turned his face toward her again and encouraged him to look at her. “I love you.”

“I love you too, Emma,” he echoed. “I am concerned about that meeting tomorrow, but knowing I get to come home to you no matter the outcome is a far cry better than any alternative.” They kissed languidly, both seeking a bit of solace and reassurance after their confessions of doubt and insecurity. His mouth slid over hers with a graceful glide as she breathed him in, her fingers lightly delving into the short hairs at the nape of his neck.

With an orchestrated lift, he hauled her up into his arms, ready to carry her back to their room and neglect the other small tasks of closing up the house for the night. She stopped him and found herself at the receiving end of one of those questioning, eyebrow lifting looks.

“I have something for you,” she said shyly, shaking her head at the absurdity of her nervousness. “That sounds so ominous. I have a gift for you. I was thinking to give it to you after this whole meeting mess was over, but I changed my mind.”

“Did you now? I’m not ashamed to admit I’m intrigued.” He lowered her to the ground, not quite stepping out of her reach as she steadied herself. “What have I done to deserve a gift? My birthday is not for a few months and the holidays are at least five months away.”

“I know,” she said, biting down on her lower lip and worrying the flesh with her teeth. “It’s just that…well, it will make more sense if you see it.” She gave him another tentative grin before grabbing his hand with her own and pulling him along up the stairs to the attic workspace. He had not been up there since the day before and took a moment to marvel at the progress. Much of the drywall was now hung and the rooms were beginning to resemble actual rooms. She gave no hint as to what she was doing, crossing into the new office space and stopping at the window seat. Hand still connected with his, she pulled open the lid and revealed a cardboard box longer than his arm with a burlap bow and a card with only his name scrawled in her print.

It seemed redundant to ask if it was for him, but he did anyway. That made them both laugh at the absurdity of it. With her help, they pulled off the bow and he lifted the lid to expose the polished and intricately designed telescope. It was brandished with wood and brass, a true antique that was the type to have sat in houses up and down the east coast from the time when sailors would be away for months at a time and their wives and loved ones kept watch for the horizon and signs of their return. She was cradling the box in her arms, fidgeting as he ran a finger along the metal ring.

“I picked it up the other day when Elsa, Anna, and I were traveling back. You see, I was thinking, and I realized that lately when I think of you that I can see a future for us. Not just living here, but maybe…maybe even more of a future someday. And I know it’s scary and that I freak out at that sometimes, but I want that future, Killian. So I thought that maybe if you wanted that we could take that step and look at our future together. God, this sounds so cheesy.”

“I want that too, Emma, more than anything.” He scratched at a spot under his jaw before reaching back to lift the instrument out of the case. “Thank you, my love, it’s a fine one. A perfect gift.”

“The man that sold it to me said it’s pretty old, but that it still works perfectly. I thought that maybe…” Her voice faded as she disappeared out of the room and returned a moment later with a heavy stand. “I thought that maybe we could put it in here and have a space to look at the stars.”
“Aye, another brilliant idea,” he said, helping her to settle it onto the rigging and adjust its position to point over the boats and fishing cabins that dotted the landscape. When it was finally stable, she stepped back and gestured for him to have the first look. He looked toward her with a bit of hesitancy about the propriety of going first, but accepted the lead and squinted one eye shut as he looked out onto the moonlit water. “There is no sight like a full moon on the waves. The view is why I picked this house when I moved here. To be able to enjoy its splendor from inside the comfort of our home is a wonderful gift.”

“You are most peaceful when you are on the water or near it,” she observed, backing away from him to sit on the bench on the opposite wall. “See that is what I meant by the future, Killian. I want that with you. I want a home. And while moving in together has been a great thing in terms of a place to stay, I realized that what you are really offering me and Henry here is a home with you. You’ve been so thoughtful to include parts of us in everything, from hanging pictures that Henry has taken on the walls to switching to my bed sheets because I find them more comfortable. Don’t think I haven’t noticed that you stopped buying two types of coffee and started only getting the kind I drink. And you’ve turned your schedule and days upside down so that Henry can stay at home and not be shuffled all about town while I work. And so I wanted to give you a piece of that, a symbol, if you will, that when I look out at that horizon I see the future – our future.”

“Emma…”

“And you once said that this home together is our future. So I wanted to make sure that you could see it just as clearly as me.” She wasn’t all that shocked when he tilted the telescope back to resting and joined her on the bench. “You’ve been fighting for us, fighting for our future. I wanted to thank you for that. And I wanted to show you that you’re not alone in that fight.”

***AAA***

Liam sat with Elsa in the diner, the back corner having been reserved for those who were not able to attend the meeting for Killian’s job at Storybrooke Academy. Ruby was there as well, as she had told her grandmother she was too nervous to wait tables that morning, flanked by Anna and Kristoff. Robin and Roland came in a little later, the younger unaware of the reasons for their visit other than he got his smiley face pancakes and plenty of attention. Having taken a special liking to Elsa and Emma, he had headed straight for the blonde, settling into her side as they waited for both his breakfast and any word.

“Killian might be too angry to call,” Liam thought aloud, “Someone might should have…”

“Emma and Mary Margaret both have instructions to text me the moment the meeting is over,” Elsa said with Ruby echoing. The two women were just as anxious for the verdict so to speak as the rest of them. Perhaps the only inhabitant of their little enclave that wasn’t on pins and needles was Will.

“So I’m thinking we should start a betting pool,” he told Jefferson, slouched down in the seat like it was just too hard to sit up. “Could make a tidy sum.”

“Put it to rest, Scarlet,” Robin groused from his spot. “We’re talking about a man’s livelihood here, not the latest friendly.” The widowed father was balancing his son’s backpack of crayons, coloring books, an electronic game, and a couple of picture books as he searched for his own phone in the mess.

“I was only trying to make some fun out of this bloody mess,” Will threw back at him. “No need in us all looking down in the mouth while waiting on the news.” He continued muttering to himself about nobody listening to him and the lack of ability to actually change the outcome for Killian. That might have been why Jefferson headed over to the counter and ordered a breakfast platter for his
daughter and found a new seat with her.

“Roland, I don’t think the sky is supposed to be purple,” Elsa said as the boy slashed marks with his crayon across the top of the page. “Let’s look outside. See that’s blue.” Actually it was more gray than blue, but her point was the same.

“Emma likes purple and red. Henry told me.” He never looked up from the page, only occasionally sneaking a hand out to snag one of the fried potato tot hashbrowns that Granny had included with the pancakes.

“Are you drawing that picture for Emma?” Elsa inquired quietly, wondering what Emma’s color preferences had to do with the drawing and finding no other possible conclusion.

“Papa said that Emma and Killian needed to do something about the walls in their house,” he explained with the exasperated patience of most six year olds. “So I thought a nice picture would do.” He threw down the purple crayon and picked a green one next for the grass. His little tongue tipped out of his mouth as he concentrated on his art.

“You don’t want ask about that,” Robin said, dropping down in the seat across from where Liam was scrolling through his phone and Elsa was pondering the artistic interpretation of a rising first grader. “There are four basic rules to parenting and childcare, milady. First, if they say they don’t feel well, get out of the way before they can succumb to that illness and shower you with it.”

Elsa glanced at Roland, who was paying no attention his father at all. “What about the other three rules?”

Robin caught one of the crayons as it began to roll off the table, knocked out of place by Roland’s reach for more food. The dark eyed boy wrinkled his nose and passed the tot to Elsa, who accepted it with a surprised look. “It has syrup on it,” he said as if he couldn’t believe he had to explain that.

“Rule two is that food should not touch each other. It’s quite alright to mix the food in your stomach, but not on your plate.” The father chuckled, plucking a similarly doused tot from the plate and popping it in his own mouth. “Rule three is don’t say anything in front of a lad that you don’t wish misinterpreted and or repeated.” He leaned over the plate, nearly dragging his arm over the half eaten pancakes. “Henry and I were discussing that perhaps he would benefit from the upstairs room at the house, as it appears there is little insulation in the walls.”

“Oh,” Elsa said, realization dawning on her. “Oh!”

“No, no, no. There hasn’t been an incident yet. Nothing too damaging anyway, as the lad said, but best to be safe about it.” Liam stifled a chuckle and muttered something about his brother’s lack of control when it came to Emma.

“And the final rule? Do I even want to know?”

Robin barely got that rule out as he chased down Roland, who was headed to the restroom. “Never let them out of your sight,” he yells, nearly colliding with Ruby as she returned.

Elsa sipped at her iced coffee, leaning her head over on Liam’s shoulder. “You’re worried, aren’t you?”

Sighing, he tilted his head so that it rested on hers. “Killian loves that job. When Milah died in that crash, I worried for my brother that he might shatter. He came here, had no plan, no goal other than moving past that heartache and pain. And the first thing he found was that job. It saved him. He loves his students. Brags about them as if they were his own lads and lasses. If this git honestly
thinks that he can take call this away from Killian because his jealous son…”

“You know that whatever happens, it’s going to be okay,” she soothed, covering his hand with her own. “He’s got Emma and Henry fighting for him. He has friends. He has you.”

“I just want him to be happy. He’s worked hard to be happy.”

***AAA***

“I think it might rain,” Emma said absently as they waited in the outer office. It’s dark blues and rich burgundy décor seemed almost dreary with the lack of light coming in through the shuttered windows. The whole school had taken on that musty odor of disuse from the summer and this area was no different.

Killian nodded absently, tapping his fingers on the table between them. He wasn’t really ignoring her as much as his mind was filled with possible conversations and scenarios. This could all go in so many different ways, he thought. He had a list of things he could say to Gold, a plethora of insults and jabs that might not save his career but would feel damn good to get off his chest. However, he had promised Emma to do his best to stay on track and play up the plan that Mary Margaret had laid out for them.

“Killian, look at me,” Emma said, trying to snap him out of the stupor of panic and near catatonic state he seemed to be in at that moment. “You can’t let him see you like this. He has to see you as the confident and strong man you are.”

“Aye, it’s just getting to me. The waiting? I much prefer to be a man of action.”

The square shaped room was filling up quickly with other teachers who Mary Margaret and Killian had spoken to about being their either to speak or to show support in other ways. John, the bear of a man who ran the horticulture classes, looked gruff and tall as usual, but had changed out his normal flannel and denim for a crisp pair of pants that could have used a swipe with an iron and a shirt with a tie that didn’t quite reach his belt. Gwen, one of the math teachers, was there also. Her smile tight but comforting as she shook Killian’s hand and took a seat next to Lance, a history teacher. Mary Margaret was one of the later ones to arrive, a bit out of breath and profusely apologizing and thanking each of them one at a time.

Merida, one of the office staff at the school, gave the group a polite nod, informing them that she could open up another room to allow them to be more comfortable. Everyone refused, preferring to stay together in the smaller space. Her ginger hair was the color of a blazing sunset and wild with untamed curls that seemed to overtake her slight frame. However, Killian knew from experience that anyone who underestimated the feisty woman was in for a surprise. She was one of the few to talk back to the school’s head master.

The meeting, which was supposed to commence at 9:30 a.m., but by 9:45 there was no sign of life behind the closed doors to the conference room other than the occasional shadow passing underneath. Killian was watching the doorknob intently as Mary Margaret gave him encouraging nods and whispered with Emma about different things. He saw it move slightly, coming to the jarring realization that this was about to happen. He sat up straighter and saw the figure of the man pass through the door with no acknowledgement for the assembled group.

Mr. Gold’s impeccably tailored suit was a dark charcoal with a silk tie and matching handkerchief. His slight limp was almost nonexistent as he leaned upon an ornately designed cane with gold accents. No one knew just how he had become injured, but rumors persisted over the years that included old war injuries – nobody agreed on which war – and even heroic acts of saving a child
from peril. Killian had always assumed it was something far more mundane.

“Your wife called, Mr. Gold,” Merida said, passing him one of the old fashioned pink phone message slips. “She asked that you wait for her, as she would like very much to speak with you before this morning’s proceedings.”

“Oh yes, well this shouldn’t take long and then I shall be at her disposal,” the man said, turning slowly toward the door. “If you could have my coffee waiting when I return.”

“She was quite insistent,” Merida continued, undeterred by his obvious lack of concern. “Said she was on her way here. I believe the lass is quite anxious.”

“All the more reason to get this out of the way,” he said. “Please hold all my calls. And see to it that my car is parked out front. I don’t intend to be here all day. Has my son arrived yet?”

Emma bristled, feeling in her gut that Neal had not done anything to stop his father. She knew that he must not have, as the meeting was not cancelled. Still it was disappointing. She said as much when Mary Margaret asked if she was angry.

“No,” she said quietly as the man retreated back into the conference room with a comment about starting in just a moment. “I’m just disappointed. In him for being such a jerk. In me for actually believing he would do the right thing. How many times am I going to believe that and be surprised when he doesn’t?”

***AAA***

Killian had been inside the conference room maybe three times that he could remember. There was his initial interview, a process that had been remarkably simple and painful all at the same time. And then there was the meeting about one of his students being removed from the school due to parents being unable to pay. He seemed to recall a third time when he’d sat in the burgundy chairs that felt remarkably unstable if you leaned too far, but the details were hazy.

“I’m glad you could join us, Mr. Jones,” Gold said in welcome to him. There were four other teachers there in a sort of semicircle in front of him. Their hands all folded behind yellow legal pads and manila folders containing his personnel records. He gave them each a nod. “It appears you have brought quite a few friends with you.”

So it had surprised the man, Killian thought. It had been hard to read when Gold had walked through the crowded room if he was shocked to see his faculty coming together for another colleague. “I am quite surprised and humbled by the support as well.”

“Yes, I’m sure you are. And are all these people planning to be your character witnesses today, Mr. Jones? Because I don’t think we are in need of that. After all, the facts are quite straight forward.”

“They are here for their own specific reasons,” Killian said, trying not to smirk at the man. He was far from winning and didn’t want to ruin his chance by seeming arrogant. Still it was hard not to show a bit of brashness when it came to his taunts. “I suppose you will have to ask them each yourself, as I couldn’t possibly know the full details of their reasoning.”

The school master’s lips twisted a bit as he frowned down at the sheet of paper in front of him.

“Well, I don’t think we need to waste any time. As the files indicate,” he said, addressing the others on the panel. “I have already spoken to Mr. Jones about the inappropriate nature of his relationship with the mother of one of his students. At the time, Mr. Jones made no indication of stopping the relationship. And it has now come to my attention that the relationship has not only continued, but
progressed. The couple is currently living together with this student. And while we can all be sympathetic to his plight, it remains that his behavior is in violation and disregard of our code of conduct for faculty.” He smiled, a sickeningly sweet grin of a man with hidden secrets of his own. “Would Mr. Jones care to comment?”

“Aye,” Killian said, realizing from the group’s reaction that they were expecting him to stand to address them. He didn’t. “There are a few things, but first I would have a question of my own that I would like addressed.”

“A question,” Gold repeated, looking slightly amused. “And that question would be?”

“Which rule in particular am I accused of breaking?” Killian asked, his eyebrow arching up with sardonic undertone and the crinkled skin around his eyes showing his own brand of amusement. “You see, I have spent a bit of time reading and studying these books of rules and regulations only to find no specific mention of domestic situations and dating. Perhaps you could enlighten me so that I might be able to better defend myself.”

“I should think that would be very clear, Mr. Jones.” Gold turned to Archie Hopper, who sat in the corner as the representative of the well-being of the child. “Would you please make note of the rule for him?”

Looking a bit startled at the request, Archie thumbed to the page he was looking for and read the same passage that the group had been pouring over before with the vague wording about the student’s wellbeing and emotional health.

“I see,” Killian said, as if he had never even considered those words. “But I didn’t hear anything about dating or cohabitating with someone. How am I supposed to know that it should be interpreted that way?”

“In what other way could it be interpreted?” Gold asked, flicking his eyes down at the page again. “Surely you must see that it is referring to any inappropriate relationship.”

“Forgive me, but I don’t see any of my relationships as inappropriate.” Killian smiled back, trying to remember the tips that Katheryn had given him. Admit nothing. Keep asking questions. Play up the confusion.

“There have been complaints.” Gold waited as the others turned in the file to a letter that sat there, signed by Neal several months ago. “And the main concern here is one of our students, not the state of your relationships.”

“I see,” Killian said, pretending to think this over. “Could you be more specific? I suppose I’m just a bit confused about what we are talking about here.”

***AAA***

With the sky ready to open up, a suited Neal placed the newspaper under his arm and pressed the unlock button on his key fob twice. The battery was low, he decided, hitting it against his hand to reactivate it a bit. Pressing it again, the car door released.

“Dad?”

Surprised, Neal spun around to see Henry standing there a few feet from the car. His face was flushed and hair damp. He’d obviously run all the way there from wherever he had been. “Henry? What are you doing here?”
“I…Everyone thinks I’m with Mr. Nolan…David. He was going to let me watch stuff at the station today, but…I wanted to talk to you.”

Neal gave a glance at his phone screen, looking at the time. “Yeah, okay. What’s going on, kid?”

“Mom and Killian – they haven’t really said, but they are at the school today aren’t they? Grandpa is trying to fire Killian because of me?” Henry held to the strap on his backpack, searching his father’s face for any sign that he was correct about this.

“No, Henry, this isn’t about you. It’s about…” Neal stopped, unsure of what he could say at this point. Emma had already asked that he back off, which he had done to a certain degree. He had not asked his father to stop the proceedings, but he had stopped adding to the trouble. “Killian broke certain rules when he started dating your mother. How do you even know about this? I thought that…”

“Mom loves him, you know. And he loves her. If I wasn’t around then it wouldn’t be a problem. So I have to fix it. I have to.” He dipped his head a little lower. “I need your help.”

Breathing in sharply through his nose, Neal regarded his son with a soft wonder about when his son had become so grown up. “I don’t think you can, son. It’s too late.”

“Maybe I can’t, but you can. You’re his son. He’ll listen to you. He’ll stop this for you. He’s your dad. You always say that you’ll do anything for me because I’m your son. It’s the same thing. Please, Dad, just go talk to him. Tell him that it isn’t a bad thing. Killian isn’t doing anything wrong. He’s not.” Henry sounded quite desperate as he pleaded, stepping closer to the car and his father. “What if it was you? What if someone was trying to keep you apart from Tamara? You’d fight back, wouldn’t you?”

“It’s not the same,” Neal managed to say, not adding what he was thinking. He wasn’t sure if he was responding to the idea that his father might do anything for him or if he would defend his own relationship. “Henry, I don’t think this is what we need to do.”

“Mom’s happy with Killian,” Henry continued. “I’m happy. He takes me out on his boat. I’ve already learned how to do three different kinds of knots and he’s teaching me more. He taught me to play the piano. When I was missing Mom the other week, he was there. He’s a good guy. I know you don’t like him, but believe me. I don’t want him to be punished because of me or mom. That’s not fair.”

It was on the tip of Neal’s tongue to say that life wasn’t fair, but he held back. “Henry, get in the car. I’m going to drive you back over to the station before David sends out a search party. It’s about to rain.”

“Not until…”

He wasn’t expecting an ultimatum from his son. “Henry, I have to ask why this is so important to you. Why do you want to live with your mom and Killian? You have clearly shown that you hate it when I include Tamara in on things. You ignore her or you roll your eyes. According to your mother, you would prefer she not be around. Yet with your mother and Killian Jones, you’re all over that. Why? Why should I…”

“Dad, Killian isn’t like Tamara. She doesn’t even like me.” Henry blurted that out without really thinking, cringing the moment the words hit his ears. “Tamara sees me as a bother, a problem, just part of your baggage.”
“And Killian doesn’t?” Neal said, shaking his head in disbelief as the air shifted and the scent of impending rain further assailed his nose. “Guys sometimes act that way to get a woman to…”

“Dad, do you even care that Tamara said those things in front of me? Do you? Because she did. I heard her. And my wanting to live with Mom and Killian has nothing to do with that. We’re a family. A real family. And I want that with you too, but not if it means breaking everyone apart.”

“Henry, Killian’s not your father. I am. And I want you protected. I want you healthy and happy. I honestly think it is best if we let your grandfather handle things at that school. What Killian has done is against the rules. What kind of school master would he be if he allowed it to continue?” He was grasping at straws.

“Fine,” Henry said, hiking his bag higher on his shoulder. “I thought that…I thought that you would understand. But you don’t. That’s not going to stop me.” Without waiting, Henry turned almost 180 degrees and darted from the parking lot in the direction of the school.

“Damn it,” Neal cursed, slumping into his car and throwing it into gear after barely cranking it. He needed to catch his kid.
Chapter 33

Apologies from under a pile of packing boxes and tape. I’m moving for the third time in about 12 months. However, I have wonderful news on the job front, as I am starting a new job this upcoming week at a nonprofit that works with abused children and children/teens in foster care. I’m so excited that my new career will be all about telling their stories to the public and helping to secure funding to make their lives better.

I’m not sure of scheduling right now, as I have to finish packing and get settled in our temporary home. However, I’ll try to not make you wait too long.

Granny spotted Henry first, the boy dodging fat drops of rain that were splattering down on the pavement as he hurried in the direction of the school. Knowing that her own feet would not carry her fast enough to catch him, she involved Liam and had Elsa calling David with the discovery. “That boy doesn’t need to be there,” she told Killian’s older brother. “He’s likely to hear and see things from his grandfather that won’t exactly…”

“I understand,” Liam said hastily, ignoring the ruffled umbrella that had been left behind in lost and found and darting out into the growing rainfall. It took him nearly 10 minutes to catch up to Henry and another three to convince him to step out of the rain and give him at least a moment to talk to him.

“You’re trying to stall me,” Henry complained as Liam’s grip on his tender bicep was tight. “I need to get over there.”

Liam cursed as thunder rumbled, not really feeling all that safe to be standing in a puddle. Under the thin awning, he raked a hand through his hair and looked down at the student who Killian had described as steadfast and determined. “I am simply trying to get you to realize that running off from an officer of the law in the midst of a thunderstorm might not be your brightest move. Now lad, tell me what it is you’re in such a hurry to do.”

“My grandfather and father have it all wrong,” Henry explained, pointing off in the vague direction of the school. “They want to fire Killian all because he fell in love with my mom. That’s not fair. It’s not right. And it’s my fault because if I wasn’t his student…”

Hearing echoes of Killian saying something similar when their father had left, Liam could only shake his head. “Lad, listen to me. Why would this be your fault? Your mother and my brother are the two facing this man. They are prepared for it.”

“If I wasn’t his grandson, he wouldn’t care about them being together,” Henry said, the woeful words riddled with guilt. “My mom doesn’t say it now, but if they have to break up because of me…”

Liam closed his eyes, breathing in and feeling a sense of compassion for the boy who just wanted his mother to be happy. He waved Henry over with the wave of his hand and pulled out one of the metal chairs that normally sat on the patio when it wasn’t raining. “Come here. We’re going to fix this, but first we need to talk.”

Henry dragged his feet and dropped to the chair, defeated and wet. If it had been any other time of the year, Liam would have ordered him a tea or hot chocolate or something else to warm him up.
Drops of water dripped from his hair and down his cheeks as he pushed back at the wet strands fruitlessly. “You’re going to try to talk me out of this too.”

“Lad, I’m only trying to understand why it is that you think you’re responsible for their happiness and relationship. While I’m certain that you are quite important to them, you can’t put that on yourself. My brother and your mother are capable of making sure they are happy. And as for this little tiff with your grandfather? Well, perhaps it is a good thing in its own way.”

“He could fire Killian. That’s a good thing?” Chocolate brown eyes blinked back at the man.

“I suppose it might not seem that way,” Liam explained delicately. “I only mean that sometimes it is good for us to know our obstacles. If you were to climb a mountain, you’d want to know many things about it, wouldn’t you? How tall is it? The terrain? The best routes? It is the same here, I suppose. And Henry, I believe your mother has her reasons for not having included you today. It’s not that she doesn’t trust you, believe in you, or thinks that you’re but a child. That man in the office today is your grandfather, Henry. When the dust settles on all this and my brother lands on his feet in a new job or at the same one, that man is still your grandfather.”

“Shouldn’t I be allowed to go to speak to him?”

“I suppose, but perhaps your mother doesn’t want you in that position. It’s a hard position to be in, you know. Going between two people you care about can tear the strongest of men apart.” The bakery’s owner emerged, handing both of them towels and offered to bring them out something to eat or drink if they liked. When Henry went ahead and ordered a one of the vanilla and banana smoothies, Liam knew that at least the boy was listening to him a little. He shot a text to David that he was with Henry. “I’m perhaps going to sound far advanced for my years here, Henry, but I assure you that I’m only telling you this story to help. You see when I was about your age and Killian a bit younger we lived with our mother and father just on the eastside of London. One day my father was working on his car and asked for my assistance. I was busy with something and said no. I didn’t just say no, as I was quite a cheeky lad and smarted off to the man who I thought was never around and treated our mother quite badly.”

“Oh,” Henry said with slump of his shoulders. “I guess this is that lecture about respecting my elders, right?” He looked annoyed but still sat and watched Liam.

“Actually no, my father didn’t deserve respect, Henry, but that’s a whole other story. What I’m saying is that the fight between us became quite rough. I thought I was defending my mother and my brother. Killian hated seeing us fight. So he went and begged our father to forgive me, to forget that we ever had that dreadful row. He was proud of himself for stepping in to stop it. But the next day our father was gone. He packed up and left us there, didn’t hear of him for years. And while it is all my father’s fault for not being the man he should have been, not being the father and husband who would protect his family, Killian blamed himself. He thought for years that if he had perhaps stayed out of our disagreement that our father would have stayed.”

The boy’s eyes dropped downward to the table. “I didn’t know that happened,” he said softly.

“Aye, it was a rough spot for us, one that we aren’t too fond of speaking of. But I think you can see why Killian would not want you to feel like you needed to go between him and your father or grandfather. He would never wish for you to feel the way he felt. Your father is a part of your life Henry. Don’t let this whole mess of a thing come between that.”

“Would he do it for me, do you think?” Henry asked, his brown eyes narrowing in regard to the man across from him signing a credit card slip. “I think Killian would because he cares about all his students. He would stand up for us. So I think I should stand up for him.”
Liam felt torn between keeping the boy there and helping him, as he too was pushed to the periphery in this whole mess. “If there is bloodshed, you’re mother’s going to kill me for this.” He downed the rest of his drink and pulled his phone out. “David? Hey, it’s Liam Jones. Henry and I need a ride to the school. Think you can get us there fast?”

***AAA***

Emma tapped the pads of her fingers together one at a time as the waiting area that had been filled with teachers, paraprofessionals, other parents, and even one of the custodians seemed to wax and then wane. One at a time they were pulled into the conference room, the door opening and allowing her to catch a glimpse of Killian sitting there. As they each emerged, a few spoke to her and others went to find other places – more comfortable – to wait or to hurry off to home. She thanked them, earning a few smiles, a hug or two, and one sour look that she couldn’t quite discern.

Mary Margaret had dragged a chair next to her and would occasionally pull her hands apart as if to say that she need not do such things to calm herself. However, her pregnant friend was tapping her foot and had checked the screen on her phone more than a dozen times.

“You sure I can’t get you something to drink?” Mary Margaret asked again. “I know where the good vending machines are located.”

“I’m fine,” Emma said, licking her lips that were quite dry. “I just want to know what’s going on in there.”

“More than likely it is Gold staring emotionlessly at employees he can’t even remember hiring. He’s already made up his mind, Emma, but the aim here is to change the mind of the others.” She held up her left hand, the green stone of her engagement ring shining under the artificial lights. “I picked a horrible time to stop biting my nails. I wanted a natural manicure for the wedding, but this is hard.”

Emma blinked at the brunette beside her, unsure that it was entirely appropriate to be talking about this sort of thing when her boyfriend’s career was at stake. However, she realized that Mary Margaret was just trying to keep her mind off the situation as calmly as possible. “Your phone’s going off,” she stated when her friend had not reacted to the vibration sound coming from her lap.

Smiling gratefully, the brunette scrolled across the screen with a curious fixation and sighed. “Emma, I hate to tell you this, but Henry is on his way here. David texted to say that he and Liam are bringing a, and I quote, very upset boy who is determined to tell his grandfather not to fire Killian.”

She couldn’t help but curse. “Of course he is,” she said, letting her eyes scan the room. “Do you think I have time to go out and meet them?”

“I’d do it myself, but I think Henry needs to hear it from you.”

Emma knew that her friend was right, as Henry had obviously been bolstered in his efforts by gaining the assistance of both David and Liam. While she did not want Killian to look from his spot as the doors opened and not find her, she was sure that her son needed her too. So with a quick squeeze to the teacher’s hands, she slipped out through the still substantial group and down the hall to a side door. It was hardly a good feeling to see her son emerge from the back of a sheriff’s cruiser, but she hugged him nonetheless, placed both hands on his shoulders and looked as stern as she could. Standing under the breezeway, she tried to remember the last time she had held her son there, but the image was of a younger boy so excited by a first day of school.

“You aren’t supposed to…”
“If I’m not supposed to be here, you aren’t either,” Henry challenged in that forceful way he had that was combined with a lopsided and apologetic grin. “Killian needs us to stand up for him.”

Emma looked helplessly toward Liam and David who were standing side by side in front of the cruiser and just under the awning, both a bit sheepish as they shifted their weight. “Killian is fine. I’m fine. We’re all fine.”

“Then let me talk to my grandpa. Let me tell him that I’m not emotionally scarred or whatever.” The earnest way he wanted to help people was a trait he earned from her, but the stubbornness was a cross between her and Neal. The way his eyes were turned down in the corners was his father, a sad commentary that she hoped was just a matter of nature and not because he was hiding some pain that she had somehow caused.

“He’s talking with a bunch of people right now,” she explained weakly, not asking why he thought this was necessary or how he even knew that this was a situation where his grandfather could do something. “I think we have it…”

David and Liam both exchanged looks and stepped forward to flank her son. “I know it’s not your plan, Emma, but perhaps he should let his grandfather know his feelings,” Liam said, a defeated expression telling her that he had wrestled with this on the ride over. “You and I can’t make much of a difference, but Henry perhaps can.”

She wasn’t convinced, Henry knew that from the way she looked back at the school and then at him again before even parting her lips. “Does Neal know you’re here?”

“I tried to convince him to come,” Henry said, lifting a hand to her elbow. “I wanted him to talk to Grandpa too. But he wouldn’t…”

“You’ve been busy.” Emma hugged him again, kissing his forehead as she released him. “You know this might not work, right? Your grandfather doesn’t change his mind easily.”

“I know, but what’s the worst that can happen? I could change schools. I don’t have to go here just because Grandpa pays for it. We could move and start over some place else – me, you, Killian.”

“Nobody’s asking you to do that, Henry,” Emma said sternly. “We’ll make this work. I promise.”

***AAA***

Belle Gold slid the raincoat off from her shoulders and hung it over the coat rack just outside her husband’s office. Her hands smoothed the full skirt of white with teal flowers that cinched at her waist with a similarly colored belt and flared out to a few inches above her knees. Even her shoes matched the belt and lining of her rain coat. Long and thick chestnut hair was perfectly coifed in a style that framed her face and rolled over shoulders.

“I know he’s busy, Merida, but it is imperative that I see him immediately. It pertains to this whole thing with Killian Jones.” Rarely a woman who interrupted her busy husband, Merida was a little shocked at Mrs. Gold’s request. Still, she pushed back from the l-shaped reception desk and padded down to the double doors with Belle at her heels.

Her knuckles rapped twice on the door, but she did not wait for a welcome. Instead she pushed her way in and gestured for Belle to follow her. “Your wife insisted,” she said without greeting nor apology. She did not wait for any instruction either, nodding again at Killian and then Belle before she retreated into a room where the whispers about why the woman was there were even louder.

“I am afraid this is taking longer than anticipated, dear,” the head master said to his wife with what
everyone could tell was his softer tone. There were no edges to his words, no witty sarcasm meant to sting. “If you would be so kind as to…”

“I want to address the committee,” she said, pushing back her hair from her shoulders. “I…I have something to say that you probably won’t like.”

Killian had tried his best all morning to be stoic with his emotions, reminding himself that the man in charge was hardly a fan of demonstrative displays. He had quietly thanked each person who spoke on his behalf, but kept his face as impassive as possible. Gold had been less pokerfaced, at times appearing annoyed or bored by the displays and testimony. Otherwise it was impossible to read him, which had made Killian worry that they were not getting through to him.

“Dear, perhaps it would be best if we spoke privately,” her husband stated, his hand fluttering a bit over the neatly folded handkerchief in his breast pocket. Killian had seen him make that same gesture a hundred times at least. It always reminded him of a magician readying himself to reveal a card of a coin.

“No, I need to say this now to everyone,” she said, pulling out the crookedly sitting chair and sitting in it gracefully. “I think that you’re making a mistake. Your rule about teachers and faculty fraternizing with students and their families is not exactly something you have enforced over the years. And I’m sure you don’t see it this way, but you broke it yourself by being with me.”

Hoping that nobody noticed his gasp of surprise, Killian placed a fist at his mouth as though he had coughed. He had not been expecting that when Mary Margaret suggested that Belle could shed some light on this.

“We weren’t married. I was teaching then, not done with my library science degree. Henry was in my class. Henry is your grandson. You used to come to my classroom to visit during the children’s specials and lunch times. We dated all during that year. Yet you never once showed any concern over this rule, not even when I brought it up to you. You said that it wasn’t even that important, as the rule was outdated and meant to discourage teachers from breaking laws regarding interaction and relationships with students.”

“No, it’s not the same…”

“No, it’s not the same thing. But it is close enough. You’re many things, Robert. You’re a great leader. You’re a visionary when it comes to business and law. You keep the financial records of this school in the black. You’re my husband and I love you. Yes, you’ve got flaws, but you’re not a hypocrite. So why are you doing this? Why are you trying to destroy a man’s career and life simply because he is breaking a rule that you broke yourself? That I broke? That you said was not even enforceable the way it was written.” She swallowed hard. “I know that your son was upset by Emma and Killian dating, but that is not a good enough reason. Your son should settle his own affairs outside of this school. Henry not suffering for having Killian Jones in his life. So stop making it about him and realize that this has been a witch hunt.”

***AAA***

Merida rolled her eyes and let out a very accented complaint as she watched Emma and Henry enter the waiting area. Not relishing the idea of disturbing the meeting again, she sincerely hoped that they had enough decorum to avoid such a scene.

“Can you add Henry to the list of those wishing to speak to his grandfather,” Emma said, an arm still pulling her son into her side. “Not the whole committee, just Mr. Gold.”
Nodding curly, the woman scribbled the name on the pad and then stared up to Emma’s green eyes. “No more family, right? His wife and son are both here. Now his grandson. The man may be positively batty if anyone else shows up.”

Emma didn’t respond to the woman, spinning sharply and nearly toppling Henry in the process as she stared into the long room where Mary Margaret was now seated next to David and Liam was pacing in front of them. Sure enough Neal was seated where she had been earlier, eyes trained on the floor and his hands folded over his stomach as though he were in pain. She felt frozen watching him, unsure what his motive for being there was since he had not bothered to do anything earlier.

“Mom, he came,” Henry said, nudging her in the ribs. “He actually came.”

“I know,” Emma said, hoping the awe in her son’s voice was not in vain. Neal could very well be there to rub salt in a wound. However, she had to admit he did not appear to be his normal self as he sat there with his untrimmed facial hair and odd pallor to his skin. “Do you want to wait here while I go talk to him?”

Henry didn’t need to tell her that was not going to happen, as his incredulous expression did enough. He further proved his point by walking ahead of her and calling out to his father.

“Henry,” Neal said, rising up from the chair in an ungainly way. “I was wanting to see you before… well, that woman said Belle is in there now, but I told her I want to see my father. I will talk to him, Henry. If this is what you want, I will talk to him.”

Emma hung back about two steps from Henry, trying to objectively view her son’s reaction. The boy didn’t launch himself in gratitude at Neal, which would have been a normal reaction. Instead he watched for a moment before speaking.

“Are you here because of me?”

“Why else would I…Henry, you’re my son and I want to have a better relationship with you. I understand that you and Tamara aren’t getting…I have made mistakes and maybe I’m just thinking this could be a way…” The words weren’t coming easily for him, especially given that everyone seemed to be staring or at least listening to what he was saying.

Feeling sorry for the man in front of them, Emma placed a hand on Henry’s shoulder and took a step forward. “I appreciate that you’re here, Neal.”

“Yeah, I guess I don’t want this to be the thing that drives my son away. I don’t want him to think that I didn’t stop this because I was jealous or not able to move on from us. I don’t know this guy, not really. But Emma, but if he managed to win your heart and Henry’s, he must be a good guy. You don’t usually let the bad ones in.”

It may have been mature to accept that from him, even to thank him, but she couldn’t muster that. Instead she smiled slightly at her son and thought at again how wonderful it was to have a boy who was so determined and dedicated. Henry’s heart was bigger than anyone’s she knew.

***AAA***

Belle held her head high as she watched her husband drop his down a bit. She was not a woman to back down, which was something he knew about her. He had not said anything directly to her since she explained her thoughts, whispering once to Archie.

“I can see that this statement along with the others in defense of Mr. Jones is somewhat problematic in light of the rule and its language. And while I can sympathize that there may have been confusion
over it, the fact remains that a parent has complained and we have investigated. As any criminal court would say, ignorance of a law is not a valid defense.”

Killian drew in his breath, the tiny and tenuous threads of hope shattered under the man’s words. He could tell that despite their best efforts that he had not swayed the head master’s opinion.

“I also recognize that your working relationship with myself and with this school would be a bit tarnished after this incident. So I am prepared to offer you the opportunity to resign.” If Gold noticed the lack of appreciation for his words, he did not let on with his face that remained stoic.

“Resign?” Killian asked as if he had not heard. “You are telling me that my choices here are to resign or be fired?”

“Well, yes,” Gold said without hesitation when his wife’s eyes grew wide in surprise. “I believe it is referred to as resignation in lieu of termination.”

Belle held a delicate hand up toward Killian in an effort to interrupt. “Robert, that’s ridiculous. How can you think that is a solution? You and I both know…everyone knows…that when you apply for a job they ask if you have ever resigned in lieu of being terminated. It’s regarded in the same way. That’s no deal.” She flipped her thick mane of dark hair over her shoulder. “You are the king of deals, Robert. You should know that he wouldn’t accept that one.”

Giving his best impression of a man who was shocked, Gold flipped to the next page in his pad of paper. “I agree it’s not ideal, but my hands are tied really.”

Killian knew that the plan was for him to remain emotionless and calm, as anything else would provide his boss the leverage in the situation. However the bile was rising in his chest and the thought of slinking away with a box of his belongings simply stung. Blinking a few times, he shook his head. “I don’t think that is a deal I can accept. You may not approve of my relationship with Emma, but I won’t apologize for my feelings for her.”

***AAA***

Neal released his son from the sort of awkward hug that they had shared, his hand scrubbing over his face as he stared at the door to the conference area. “I don’t even know that my father knows I’m out here.”

Feeling a bit like a traitor and even more like someone at her wits’ end, Emma glanced at a shrugging Mary Margaret. She fought the urge to roll her eyes at the fact that her friend was now discussing honeymoon ideas with her fiancé and that Killian’s own brother was on the phone with Zelena to track down an alcohol shipment that had not been accounted for yet. Everyone had lives to lead and was being more than kind an attentive to this whole debacle. It wasn’t like she knew what to say or do anyway.

“I suppose you could talk to Merida,” Emma suggested, digging for her phone and checking the time again. “She doesn’t seem to have any problem getting your father to listen to her.”

Chuckling at the idea of the sprite of a woman not being afraid of her boss, Neal traversed the assemblage of people and headed toward her. Emma wasn’t sure what was aid, but the woman looked only slightly more annoyed than normal as she pushed away from her desk and parted the group like Moses before rapping on the door again and not waiting for her invitation. Casting an angry look toward Neal, she waved him inside and followed with her thick accent explaining to Gold that Neal was waiting to see him.
“Dad’s going to fix this?” Henry asked, looking up at Emma with concern. “He’s not going to…I don’t know…make it worse?”

“I’m sure it will be fine,” Liam interrupted, leaning toward Emma. “I don’t get this guy at all. His own wife is in there telling him that this is ridiculous. Why won’t he just give up?”

Emma wasn’t sure what to say, as she had limited her interactions with Robert Gold from the beginning. This was a man who had never shown her any kindness or regard when she had come to him and Neal for help with Henry. He had even said to her that he was concerned that she had gotten pregnant on purpose merely to get her hands on his money. While it was as far from the truth as possible, she still heard those words and saw that on his face with each interaction. The man had gone so far as to rewrite his will, placing money in trust for Henry with some lawyer in Portland as the guardian of it rather than her.

“When do I get to go in?” Henry asked, looking at her with his jaw set in determination. “I can convince him.”

“We’ll see if we need you to do that,” Emma stalled. “I think your grandfather has a lot on his plate right now with Neal and Belle both in there.” She wished she had been there to see his face when Mary Margaret’s secret weapon of Belle had entered the room. The normally reserved and quiet woman surely had to have some effect on the man.

Henry appeared ready to protest his mother’s delaying tactic, but Liam jumped in to her defense. “You’re the secret weapon, Henry. Nobody is expecting you, least of all your grandfather. We have to make sure every other weapon is deployed before we bring you out.” It was a weak argument, but one that Henry took some pride in as they waited.

***AAA***

“Neal, this really is not necessary,” Gold told his son, trying his hardest to look and behave as a man in control. He was already pleased that Killian seemed thrown and torn about the offer of allowing him to resign. However, his own family kept interfering to the point that the room seemed to erupt each time there was an outburst.

“No, father, it is,” the younger version said with a resigned sigh. He had earned himself a nod of encouragement from his stepmother. “You’re doing this because I said that it was necessary. I was so sure that Killian Jones was intent on ripping my son away from me, but I was wrong. I was capable of doing that all by myself. I wasn’t doing this to protect my son or our relationship. I was doing it because jealous and worried that he would somehow get my son to…love him more than he loves me.”

Neal’s father showed no signs of softening, but Belle touched his shoulder and whispered for him to continue with what he was saying.

“My son isn’t a prize. He doesn’t have a limited amount of love to give. And maybe I was the one who couldn’t see that. But whatever the case. I want to withdraw my complaint to you as the head master of this school.” He stood a little taller when he said it, hoping that his father wouldn’t balk.

There was a moment when Killian wondered if his boss might just throw them all out of the room, but he remained silent. Watching from what had seemed to be the seat in the center of the room now felt like he was a spectator on the sidelines. As he often did when confronted with watching Neal, he wondered what it was that Emma had seen in him. But today he saw a bit of the humanity that she had spoken about and the love that the man had for Henry. And despite the fact that he would have loved to have punched Neal for ever causing a moment’s pain to either Emma or her son, he was
taken aback that they were actually on the same side.

“He’s been a great teacher to Henry,” Neal continued almost reluctantly. “I know that he’s put in extra time with him and other students to get them ready for concerts or auditions. Henry’s always telling me how Killian encourages him and never lets him feel like he isn’t good enough. And maybe I took that the wrong way but isn’t that what we’re supposed to be doing with our kids?”

Gold lowered his eyes to the fine grain of the table, a hand smoothing over the satiny finish. “You can go,” he said firmly in a quiet voice. Everyone stared back at him, not sure who he was speaking to in that moment. “You, Neal and Belle, can go. You’ve had your say.”

“But Mr. Jones hasn’t had the opportunity to question…” Archie began to suggest as Gold’s wife and son retreated toward the doors.

“I don’t think it will be necessary,” Gold interrupted. “Clearly we cannot continue to discuss this if the parental complaint has been rescinded. So I suggest that the committee be dismissed so that Mr. Jones and I can have a conversation about further steps in this process.”

When Killian emerged from the room a few minutes later, he appeared a bit shaken and grateful as Emma wrapped her arms around him and Henry looked at him with hopeful eyes. They had already discussed the fact that they would not put any emotion on display, especially given the nature of that day’s meeting and discipline hearing. Yet when he had stepped into the waiting area to the smiles and calls of happiness, it was too much not to find himself wrapped up with Emma and her head burrowed into his shoulder as he thanked friends and colleagues for their support.

“You get to still be my teacher?” Henry clarified, breaking away from his father and side hugging Killian so as not to dislodge Emma. “For real?”

Killian nodded slowly, still not sure how to process that question. Gold had offered him his job and said that without the complaint of Neal there was nothing to stop him from remaining a teacher. However, it had seemed way too simple and neatly tied together. He had Emma had spoken at length that whatever the outcome there would potentially be repercussions. There was no telling what Gold would try next, but for the moment he was going to celebrate it as a victory.

Not seeing Belle there with the others was not a surprise, as she was not about to celebrate her husband’s loss even if she did feel partially responsible for it. However, Neal was standing awkwardly to the side of Mary Margaret and looking very much as Henry did when there was a pending lecture or punishment.

“I think that I owe Neal a thank you,” Killian told Emma, loosening his grip on her waist as she tucked herself against him even more.

“Later,” she insisted. “I just want to be happy you’re here right now.”

“I wasn’t going anywhere. I hope you know by now that I’m in this for the long haul. I’m not leaving you or Henry, love. Not ever.” Like her, he knew that it would take a while to believe those words. It was especially true since they both automatically assumed abandonment was a way of life rather than a horrible ending. “But Neal…”

“He came because of Henry,” she said, not yet explaining Henry’s determination. She would later. “Let’s say goodbye and thanks to people so we can get out of here. I want to go home.”

Before they left, he found the way to approach Neal, both men looking rather sheepish and unsure. Finally, Killian extended his hand. “I appreciate what you said,” he offered. “I’m sure that wasn’t
Neal’s eyes lingered on Emma where she was standing talking to Mary Margaret. “I didn’t want things to wind up the way they did with her, you know. I mean, I realize it’s easy to see me as the villain here. I’m the absentee father who is jealous and wants to destroy your life all because she loves you and so does my son. But I’m really not that guy. I don’t want to be anyway.” He shrugged. “It bothers me, you know? Seeing my son want to spend time with you instead of me. And seeing you with Emma…I’m not in love with her, but still…you make her happy. And that hurt. Not because I don’t want her to be happy but because I didn’t know how to do that. Still don’t. So for what it’s worth…I’m sorry.”

“I didn’t intend to fall in love with her,” Killian said by way of explanation. “It’s just impossible not to love her. And as for Henry, I do love him. And I’m honored that you and Emma have allowed me to get to know him better. I’m not out to replace you. Henry has a father, but perhaps you will allow me to be a part of his life.”

***AAA***

Elsa and Liam carried in the bags from Granny’s, a present from the woman herself to celebrate that her matchmaking had not gone awry because of a rule that could not be clearly defined or explained. She had hugged Killian twice and then complained that the dust from not having enough help around was making her eyes water. She also might have mentioned that it would be nice to cater their weddings if the brothers ever got around to that.

“Are you sure we’re not intruding?” Elsa asked as she watched Henry and Killian settle in with the video game that the younger boy was now obsessed with and try to explain it to Liam. “I thought you might want more family time.”

“You should realize by now that we can’t keep those two brothers apart. I think we should just accept that you and I are practically sisters now.” She nudged her friend with her hip as she dug into the cabinet for actual glasses for their drinks. “And coming from a person who a few years ago didn’t have any family – this is pretty damn nice.”

Elsa nodded, agreeing that she was pretty happy too. However, her smile was short lived as she realized the ice they had brought was now frozen into one giant mountain. “Got a hammer?” she asked, ignoring the irony since the house was still a construction zone.

Emma pulled the bag from her hands and called out to Henry. “Hey kid, before you get too involved in that game, can you take this out on the deck. Break it up, would you?” It was one of Henry’s favorite tasks and one that he had not done much since they had moved. Killian’s refrigerator made ice of varying sizes and provided them no reason for the bought bags from the local gas station. Just as she predicted, her son jumped over the coffee table and scampered out the door to do some of his best wrestling moves to drop it from over his head and break the ice into manageable pieces.

“So you’re still employed,” Liam said, sinking down next to his brother in the vacated spot. “I’m mighty glad about that. Thought I might have to offer you a job bussing tables at the Rabbit Hole.”

“From one tyrant boss to another, no thanks,” Killian joked with his expression still serious. “I’d rather not. But yes, it appears as though I will be teaching a bit longer.” He looked fondly toward the foyer console table where there were pictures of Emma with musicians, Henry with his scout troop and band friends, and him with colleagues and classes on field trips. “Not sure how long the cease fire will last.”

“That Neal bloke seemed to regret his decisions,” Liam offered thoughtfully. “I rather think he will
settle a bit and not cause any more ruckus.” Not one to laze about, he began to stack a few of the
magazines and whatnot to make room for the dinner they were to share right there. “And that Gold’s
wife won’t let him get to you either.”

“I think we both know how men like Gold operate,” Killian said warily. The video game remote was
hanging loosely in his hand. “I suppose as long as I stay there, I’ll always be watching my back a bit.
As we were leaving, Mary Margaret warned that the committee is considering meeting to strengthen
that particular rule. So I could be back…”

“You could marry her,” Liam said, his voice as flat as if he were suggesting adding mustard to the
hamburger he had ordered from Granny. “If she was your wife, this rule wouldn’t be an issue.”

“You’re a bloody fool to think that I would…”

“Don’t get all upset,” Liam soothed. “It was merely a suggestion. “Emma is clearly the love of your
life, brother. I wouldn’t think you’d want to move that fast, but it’s a possibility.”
Chapter 34

The music, if one could call it that, was louder than what Killian had anticipated when Emma explained the tickets she had procured for Henry’s date with Violet. It wasn’t exactly legendary stuff, but there was a steady thrumming beat that was infectious if not catchy. His navy blue t-shirt and dark vest paired with jeans seemed to be a hit, as even two of the young members of the boy band have on similar attire. Emma was quick to point that out with a smirk as some of the young ladies in the audience stared at him as though he was a member of the group that was the opening act.

“You’ll be signing autographs in a minute,” she teased as she rose onto the balls of her feet to look four rows ahead at where her son and Violet were seated. It had taken six trips to the store and a visit with Neal before Henry settled on a vintage Bon Jovi t-shirt that Neal still had hanging in his closet. It was a casual and stark contrast to his date’s pink dress and matching shoes, but neither seemed to mind as he offered her some of the candy he had purchased at a concession stand and looked mesmerized as Violet accepted it.

“He’s fine, love,” Killian said, not even looking in that direction. “The lad’s been nervous enough about this date without you watching over him like a hawk.”

“He didn’t seem overly nervous to you?” she asked, frowning with concern as she tried to lean over to peer around a gangly teen in front of her. “I thought the conversation between them was a little stilted.”

“Aye, but it is to be expected, Swan,” Killian told her with a chuckle. “The lad’s on a double date with his mother and his teacher. It’s a wonder that he’s handling it as well as he is. And it wasn’t that odd of a conversation.”

She whipped her head quickly at him, staring down incredulously. “They were talking about horses for two thirds of the ride here. Horses. My son has never ridden a horse in his entire life. What does he know about horses?”

“He may have read a bit about them in his efforts to woo the lass.” It may have been his smirking grin or the way his eyes danced at the sight of her flustered annoyance. However, she pouted for a good five minutes before returning his gaze.

“He really likes her doesn’t he?” There was a defeated quality to her statement, a resignation that her little boy was growing older despite her attempts to ignore it. “I mean as much as a 12 going on 13 year old can.”

“Aye, a bit of puppy love I would suppose. And you, my love, have done quite well with your mothering to allow him the chance to show her his feelings.” He laughed. “I assure you that he is not going to perish over sharing a few sweets with her and maybe holding her hand during a ballad.”

She glanced back through the teenage girls at her son who looked a little red in the cheeks but otherwise happy as he laughed at something Violet was saying to him. It was just a crush, she reminded herself. Yet still it hurt a bit to see him giving away a part of his heart. She had been his mother for so long, the only woman in his life. It was a role that she both loved and regretted, sometimes feeling that she had isolated him too much. What if this Violet girl broke his heart, she mused to herself, thinking that very few of these childhood romances ever had any staying power. He would be devastated and she would have to pick up the pieces.

“Emma?” Killian asked, his face showing mild concern over the fact that he had called out to her
three times with no response. “What do you say we go walk about during the actual show? I’m not entirely sure that my music sensitive ears can withstand such noise as this.” Pretending to be in physical pain from the pulsating beat of some cover song being massacred from a popular radio station playing in the arena at that moment.

“Would you kill me if I said I wasn’t ready to go away yet?” she asked, twisting her face into an imitation of innocent concern. “I know he’s fine, but…”

Sitting back in the hard folded seat, Killian lifted his arm to invite her into a semi-embrace, still cognizant of the teens and preteen audience surrounding them. He wasn’t that shocked when she barely relaxed in his arm, practically climbing over him for a better look.

“He’s not trying to kiss her, is he?” she asked with her neck straining for more length. “Oh okay, good. It was a false alarm.”

“Emma?”

“I know. I know. I said I’d be okay. I’m really not though.” She fell back into the cold plastic of her chair and stared at the empty stage, her shoulder and head against his chest where she could feel the combination of the low rumble of his laugh and the bass from the piped in music. “Can you please distract me? Make me think of anything else other than Henry and Violet.”

***AAA***

Liam lifted his left leg as Elsa scooted between the sectional and ottoman to sit between his thighs as she went through the stack of mail that the building manager had said didn’t fit in their narrow mailbox in the entryway to the apartment complex. She smiled to herself as his leg lowered and he ran a hand absently through her loose braid that was coming unwound from the workout they had shared earlier.

“Anything interesting?” he asked, changing the channel on the television to some 1970s sci fi flick that made her cringe with the horrible special effects. She swore she could actually see the strings holding up the tennis ball serving as earth as a replica of a space ship sort of flew by it.

“Fan mail,” she said with an incredulous wave on the heavily stamped envelope. “Who does this? I thought it was all email and social media.”

“You have an old school fan,” he announced with an amusedly crooked smile. “Impressive. May I, darling?” Plucking the envelope from her hand, he pried apart the folded paper. Enclosed was a note from a child saying she was beautiful and talented, along with a crayon drawing of her on stage. They looked at the stack together, him cracking jokes and her smiling at the sweet and sometimes thoughtful comments about her music and abilities.

“Wow,” Elsa said as he dropped the last one on the pile. “Those are pretty amazing.”

“Aye, it appears I may have to share you more than I first thought.” He chuckled as she spun her face around to stare at him in horror. “No, no, no. I just…I’m proud of you.”

Elsa’s nearly violet eyes narrowed at his confession of sorts, trying to understand the idea that she could earn his appreciation for having old fashioned fan mail forwarded to their condo from the label. She was flattered by it, even if a bit mystified by the response. However, she never really considered that to be something that important or unusual. She had written fan mail when she was young too, usually to guys in boy bands or even a cartoon character once. Yet she had never considered what that meant for the person receiving it.
“I should answer them,” she said, thinking back on the form letter responses that she had received once upon a time. She didn’t want to do that, include a form letter with a computer generated signature and a copy of an autographed photo. “Maybe…”

“We should form a fan club for you,” he offered, sounding nearly serious with his intentions. “I have no idea how that works, but it shouldn’t be too hard.”

“I don’t think those exist now,” she answered back just as seriously. “I think people just follow you on Twitter or Instagram or something. Maybe look at your website. I don’t know. Do you think I need a website?”

Leaning forward, he dropped a kiss on the top of her head and pulled her up from her cross legged position on the floor to his lap. “I would love you having a website. I could look at pictures of you all day and listen to your voice. I am your biggest fan after all.”

“You’re just hoping to be a groupie who gets lucky,” she spat back playfully. Her fingers were winding around the curls of his hair that he had allowed to get a bit longer over the summer. She could smell the scent that was a mixture of spilled beer and some fried concoction that they had been experimenting with at the Rabbit Hole. She was beginning to associate those scents with him, along with the way he usually had ink between two of his fingers when he was writing. It was a comforting feeling to know someone that well.

***AAA***

Emma looked at Killian with an incredulous stare that would have put even the most critical of patrons to shame as he repeated his brother’s explanation of how to avoid future issues with Gold’s rules. “You can’t be serious,” she said, following it with a shake of her head. “You want to get married?”

“I didn’t proclaim that, love,” he chastised gently, trying to pull her back into his embrace so that they did not have to shout the conversation amongst the increasingly impatient crowd. “And if I was to propose at this juncture, I doubt I would do it at such a venue.”

Features scrunched, she tentatively moved her head back to his shoulder. “I told you to distract me, not send me into panic mode for another reason all together.”

“Well, it did stop you from spying on your son for a moment. And I merely hoped it would amuse you as it did me. I fully intend to marry for love not for the convenience of being able to keep my job without worry about future rules or retribution.”

It was far too soon for that sort of conversation to take place, she thought as she felt his thumb running along the spot where the material of her sleeveless top met her shoulder. However, some might think that their plans to cohabitate might have been rushed too. Still she was not sure she was ever going to be ready for a conversation with words like forever. It was a stumbling block that she knew she might never recover from, as even when she thought about her career there were fears about words and phrases like saying that something was for the rest of her life.

“I’m grateful,” she commented with as much sincerity as she could muster. “But maybe next time open with the weather or some movie we might like to see. Much less dangerous.”

With her head at his shoulder and her eyes closing under the gentle caress along her arm, she did not see the look of disappointment that flashed in his eyes. Had she seen it, she could have interpreted that he was upset he had worried her. Or maybe she would have thought that he was actually wanting to get married. Neither were exactly true, though his ego was certainly bruised by the abject
horror she displayed at the mere thought of it.

“Perhaps,” he said, trying to maintain a soothing tone that battled against the increase in volume as backup band took the stage before the group was to join them. “The last two movies we have seen have been picked by Henry. I was thinking we might be due a date night of our own.”

She gestured toward the young lady in front of them who already had tears on her cheeks from the digital images of the young men of the group. “This isn’t romantic enough for you? You would rather have comic book movies and pizza?”

She couldn’t hear his chuckle, but the vibration of it in his chest mingled with the thrumming bass and tickled her ear. Ignoring her urge to peek around the girls now up and out of their seats to watch her son, she closed her eyes and let Killian hold her in the midst of the chaos. It seemed a perfect symbol of their relationship lately, one supporting the other amidst a sea of noise and distraction. And he was being perfectly understanding about it, even if he was teasing her over going into mother bear mode.

He continued through the show, though she might have caught him cringing a time or two over the insane lyrics that sounded more like bubble gum pop than anything he would listen to even in his free time. When the lead singer – a floppy haired 16-year-old with a crooked smile and a couple of freckles across a too large nose – belted out the group’s newest ballad, Emma laughed with her head thrown back as Killian attempted to dance with her. A few of the girls nearby were in near hysterics over the performance, but their mothers were swooning at the romantic gesture in front of them.

“You’re a dork,” she said into his ear as he lifted her out of a dip. Even bathed in the green light from the stage show, she had to admit that his bright smile and flashing of his dimples were cuter than any of the eye candy on stage.

“And you love me for it,” he said, not forming it as a question.

“Of course.”

***AAA***

“I’m thinking Leopold for a boy,” Mary Margaret said as the mattress sagged with David’s weight. “After my father. I know you don’t really have a desire to name him after your father, but I was kind of a daddy’s girl.”

Running his finger over his phone to set the alarm, he dug his socked feet under the covers. Despite their temperate climate in the loft, his fiancé seemed to need it to be freezing cold at all times. Some might blame that on the pregnancy hormones, but he knew better. She always cranked up the air and then hid under a mountain of covers as a fan blew directly on her.

“And that is an adorable quality that you have, but Leopold. No offense, but that name is a little…”

“Old fashioned?” she supplied, folding her hands on her barely discernable swell of her stomach as if to shield the baby’s ears from the possible assault on his future name. “It was my father’s name. I think it sounds regal.”

“It sounds like he’ll run a pizzeria with his brother’s Mario and Luigi.” David looked pleadingly at his future wife. “Besides, we don’t know if this is a boy or girl yet. Isn’t it a bit early to worry about names.” “Fine,” she said, reaching a hand out blindly for her book on the side table. “What do you want to name her if she’s a girl.”

“I was thinking Ruth, after my mother,” he offered. “It’s simple and classic.” He looked proud of
himself, rolling to his side to monitor her reaction to his announcement.

“Ruth? Now talk about old fashioned. We’re having a baby, not starting a bridge group. I was thinking something a little trendier.” She pursed her lips as she flipped to the marked page in her novel, giving off every indication that she was reading and done with the conversation.

“Wait just a minute,” David argued. “You suggest your father’s name and I shouldn’t question it, but my mother’s name is off the table in favor of Tiffani with an i or some phonetically mismatched mess of a name that will probably get legally changed by our child in a few years.”

“I just think that you’re right that it is too early,” Mary Margaret said without lifting her eyes from the page. “We still need to decide about our married name.”

“I thought we were going with Nolan,” David muttered, still swimming in the land of baby names and not able to let go yet. “You said when I proposed that you couldn’t wait to be Mary Margaret Nolan.” His faded police academy shirt was wrinkled as he folded his arms over his chest and flopped to his back.

“Well, I was thinking that professionally it might be easier to go by Blanchard,” she said, carefully broaching the topic. “I mean I know teachers get married all the time, but all my paperwork is under my name.”

“I don’t care what name you go with,” he said, sounding only a little sullen. “It’s not that big of a deal to me.”

“But I don’t want us to have different names,” she said, free hand again caressing over her floral night gown covered abdomen. “And hyphenating is not really fair to the baby when he or she is learning to write. So maybe…” She trailed off, flipping the page in her book as she seemed to search for the right word.

“What are you thinking?” he asked, as if afraid to know the answer. “An alternative last name. What do the letters of Nolan and Blanchard even spell out together? Does anyone really do that?” “No, I’m not thinking that’s right either. I am proud that I’ll be a Nolan. Let’s just go with that.” His gray-blue eyes darted over to gauge her feelings on that topic. “Are you sure? I don’t mind considering…”

“No, it’s traditional. I was just being silly.” She did not turn fully on her side, but dug her right shoulder into the mattress so that she was a bit more turned away from him. “It’s just that I’m an only child. My father is gone. My mother is gone. And Blanchard is the last thing I have left of him. It’s silly, but I wanted something of him to be carried on even now. But if we use Blanchard then you’re going to feel the same way about Nolan. So there isn’t a good answer.”

Raking his hand over his face, David stared up at the ceiling. The good news was that his wife to be was not crying – that had happened enough lately. Doubled with crippling indecisiveness, Mary Margaret was not exactly easy to deal with lately. “What if,” he pondered, more to the ceiling than to her, “What if we used Nolan or Blanchard as the middle name? People do that, right?”

“Like Leopold Nolan Blanchard?” she asked as if she hadn’t thought this through already.

“I suppose…” He watched as her shoulders relaxed and then tensed with held back laughter. “It’s still too early though.”


***AAA***
“I’m going to walk her to the front door,” Henry said through a clenched jaw as his mother and Killian sat in the front of the jeep like two children being scolded. “Wait here.”

Emma could not even look her son in the eyes, as he had already laid into her about the way she and Killian had danced and cuddled during the concert. Embarrassed by the PDA, Henry swore they would discuss it later, sounding just like his mother in that moment. Killian merely nodded, feigning a shamed expression as Violet bid them both goodnight and thanked them for including her on the outing.

“Thank you again, Ms. Swan and Mr. Jones,” the brunette said before hurrying after Henry who was five steps closer to the front door.

“I hope you’re proud of yourself,” Emma hissed as she dug out her phone and switched it to camera mode. Chastised or not, she had promised Neal that she would send a few photos of the date. He’d not been in favor of it, but relented and even took Henry shopping for the casual t-shirt and jeans combo that according to her ex, took four hours to select, not counting the break for a pizza lunch. “Henry is embarrassed by us.”

“We kissed during a concert, during a song about kissing,” Killian whispered back, not sure who he was keeping his voice down for since they were alone in the jeep. “The lad’s attention should have been on the stage or his own date, not me snogging with his mother.”

“He’s 12,” Emma said, the sound of the photo of the two younger people standing in front of a cardboard display of the band being sent to Neal making laser like sounds. “The fact that I convert oxygen to carbon dioxide is probably worrisome to him in those terms.” She sank lower in the seat. “I can’t look. Is he kissing her good night? No, don’t tell me. I don’t want to know.”

Killian chuckled. “I have many talents, my love, but x-ray vision is not one of them. There is a tree in the way of my view.”

“Good,” she said firmly. “I don’t want to know.” It was so resolute that it sent Killian into another fit of chuckles at how determined she was to be okay with everything.

***AAA***

Granny’s was busy when Liam popped in to meet with Robin about the upcoming open night for the song writer showcase at the Rabbit Hole. Thankfully the widowed father had procured one of the tables and was entertaining his son with crayons and a sheet of butcher paper when Liam threw himself into the chair and pretended to steal one of Roland’s favorite colors.

“That’s mine,” the child cried out as he stared forlornly at the man’s fingers wrapping around the green shade.

“Mine now,” Liam challenged, ignoring his friend’s indignant huff. “I need it.”

“But…but…” The elementary student looked near tears until his father plucked the wax crayon out of Liam’s hand and placed it on the table again.

“Don’t pick fights with children,” Robin said with a sigh that said it had already been a morning from hell. All it took was one look at Roland to realize that the fighting had begun earlier since he was dressed in a faded pair of cargo shorts, an inside out superman t-shirt, two different shoes, and no socks. A man’s tie was clipped onto his shirt and sunblock decorated his nose in a bright yellow color that reminded Liam of a toucan. “And don’t ask why my son looks that way. He seems to find himself at the height of fashion – ready for Carnaby Street. I didn’t have the will or the heart to stop
him.”

“Is that why he’s got a sausage patty on a hamburger bun instead of a breakfast food?”

“Mate, you try arguing with a six year old about when hamburgers are appropriate. Thank God that Granny is a sucker for the wee ones or we’d still be arguing that point of fact.”

Liam waved down Ruby and with her usual half flirting and half sarcastic tone, she took his order and managed to bring him breakfast with only one or two remarks that he should have brought Elsa with him if only for her company. It wasn’t that Liam disagreed, as he would have much preferred his girlfriend’s company to Robin’s, but it was a work thing and Elsa was headed into Regina’s office even on a Sunday morning to discuss marketing plans. He had been reluctant to leave her like that, her blonde hair still damp from the shower and skin still pink. She had padded over to him as he hung by the door and stood on her toes to kiss his cheek and tell him to hurry back, as she was hoping to have a movie marathon that afternoon.

“Sunday is our day together,” she had proclaimed a few weeks earlier. “Whenever possible I say we hide away from the rest of the world on just this one day a week. We can watch cheesy 80s movies or cooking shows while we experiment in the kitchen. Nobody has to know we didn’t get dressed or that we stayed in bed past noon. It’ll be our day to just be ourselves and not think of the rest of Storybrooke and the world. Promise?”

He had promised, stolen another kiss, and then laughed as she swatted his butt before pushing him out the door. It was a remarkable change from the prim and proper woman he had met on their first date. She was playful and funny, shy at times and sensitive. He loved each and every layer.

Robin must have noticed that his mind was wandering, as he cleared his throat and waved a crayon in front of his eyes to garner his attention back to the conversation. “Thinking of Elsa?”

“I like Elsa,” Roland proclaimed before Liam could come up with a viable excuse for his inattentiveness. “She likes ice cream just like me.”

“Is that all that is required to win your affections there, lad?” Robin asked his son, clearly amused at the boy’s bluntness.

“Regina likes ice cream too,” the boy seemed to ponder. “But she always says she shouldn’t before she orders some.”

That revelation sent Robin tittering uncontrollably and Liam sputtering, as he noticed the bright red of Robin’s own cheeks. Roland was too unaware of his audience’s reaction to stop at that point, noting Emma and Henry often bought him Rocky Road while Ruby was partial to chocolate and Killian to mint chocolate chip.

“What about your papa?” Liam managed to ask, arching an eyebrow severely at his friend. “Does he even partake in ice cream with you?”

“He used to,” the boy said, tapping a tiny finger against his chin like a lawyer trying a case. “But now he shares with Regina. Didn’t you know you can share germs that way?”

***AAA***

“Sounds good,” Emma said as she climbed the stairs to the nearly finished attic. There was a bit more painting to do and of course the moving of items to the space, but Killian had already staked out a spot in the soon to be library/office that was his little nook as he wrote the song for Elsa to sing at the wedding. The oversized chair had been moved up to the space by the guys a week before and sat
proudly in the corner of the room where the bookshelves met. It was an older piece that had once been in his bedroom and seen much better days. It was faded and patched, smelled vaguely musty and seemed to be his favorite spot, despite his more fastidious nature.

“You say that about everything,” he muttered, harshly underlining a few spots on the page. Without his ability to play the guitar, he was stuck using the electronic version on his laptop and typing in the chords and notes that he was considering.

“Maybe I’m a big fan.” She had managed to climb the steep stairs with two cups of hot chocolate, hers with cinnamon and his without. However, as she attempted to sit on the arm of the chair, she nearly spilled the steaming liquid on them both. He dropped his pen hastily to shield them from getting burnt.

“Are you suggesting it is time for a break?” he asked, removing the dark blue mug from her hand and taking a sip before it sloshed out. “Because I would certainly agree to that, love.”

“Henry’s on the phone with his dad and I felt like hot chocolate,” she explained, laughing as he pulled her legs around so that her feet rested next to him. “And I sort of missed you this morning.”

Smirking back at her over the lip of the mug, he hummed amiably. “I wanted to get this done before Elsa asked after it again. Did you know that there are very few words that rhyme with Mary Margaret or David?”

“You’re making it rhyme?” Emma asked, concerned that maybe her message about a sincerely heartfelt song had not gotten through to him. She didn’t want something akin to the Wheels on the Bus, no matter that the bride was a teacher.

“No, but I enjoy making you worry,” he said, chortling. “You look absolutely adorable with the way your forehead scrunches up and your eyes become like slits.”

“Dork,” she protested, slapping her palm against his shoulder and earning an inelegant grunt.

“Seriously though. If you are having trouble writing it, Elsa’s going to have to be okay with doing a cover. I didn’t really want to have her sing one of her and Anna’s songs because that felt too much like work disguised as a gift.”

“No, I think they will love the gesture, especially if you get Elsa to record it for them so that they can listen to it whenever they want. I’m just a bit rusty at this, but it will be fine.” He let the paper fall to the ground. “I must say that I’m more inspired by you, love. I could write about you all day.”

“I would suggest imagining Mary Margaret as me, but I’m not sure how that would work,” she laughed, sipping at her drink between blowing on it. “But if it makes any difference, I like the things you have shared with me that you’ve written. I know you don’t like considering doing it professionally, but I would hate if you gave it up all together.”

His head dropped back on the indented cushion and he placed the mug on the table beside him before reaching his hand over to caress just behind her knee. It was a spot that always made her smile, one of the secrets he had unlocked in her. “As long as you continue to inspire me.”

She pretended to consider that, sliding her arm behind him so that her fingers played with the tufts of hair that had become so long that they curled easily. “I’ve never been anyone’s muse before you. What exactly is involved? I mean, I’m a pretty busy person. I have a son who is always having me do something. And then there’s my boyfriend. He’s very demanding.”

“Is he now?” He tilted his head toward her much like a cat when being petted. “He’s a rather cheeky
bloke, is he?”

“The cheekiest.”

“You must be an absolute angel to put up with such a man. If you were my girlfriend, I’d make sure you knew you were appreciated and loved.” His eyes watched her grin grow even wider as he pulled her mug from her hand to set it aside and then pulled her down into his lap. “A woman like you deserves a man’s full attention.”

“You seem to know a lot about how I should be treated.”

“I’ve always appreciated studying topics that interest me,” he teased, closing the gap between them so that his breath was warm against her slightly parted lips. “And you, love, more than interest me.”

“Good.”

He could still feel the teasing smile on her lips as he moved in to kiss her, the softness of her lips feathery against him and the subtle way she breathed in as if trying to fully appreciate his being that close. Nipping at her lips at first, he teased her back, pulling away and then rejoining her mouth with his as if it were a game of one-up-manship that he was going to win. However, when she sighed and melted a bit into his embrace, he felt the last of his own teasing resolve breakaway and his mouth fused against hers with more urgency. They broke momentarily for air, but stayed there in that in between state of lazy kisses and ardent affection that was only interrupted when Henry called up to them that he wanted to go sailing.

“I’m half a mind to tell him to take the bloody boat out himself and leave us be,” Killian said to a laughing Emma. She dropped her head to his shoulder with a defeated groan.

“I could come up with a reason to punish him, tell him he has to stay in and do chores or something.”

“I suppose we should humor the lad. Won’t be long before the autumn has us too bundled up for such excursions.”

She called down that they would head out later, which seemed to satisfy Henry. Not moving from his lap, she tilted her head back and kept her eyes half closed. “I don’t mind the fall. Maybe we can build a bonfire on the beach to stay warm. I bet you look cute in flannel shirts and thick sweaters.”

“I assure you that my looks have been described as rugged or handsome, dashing even, but never cute.” He spat the word in offense. “You on the other hand…”

She swatted at him again. “Don’t even try it, mister. I’m not falling for the cute talk either. But I would like to point out that I just managed to talk about the future…maybe a month or two away, but still I did it.”

He chewed at the corner of his mouth in consideration of her declaration. “Aye, that you did. You seem to be doing quite well at that.”

“Practice,” she said. “You never know. Your brother might have been encouraging you to propose, but it might just be me who breaks down and does it.” With a saucy wink, she disentangled herself from him, grabbed her mug, drank down the rest of the chocolate and smiled. “See you downstairs, sailor.”

The music, if one could call it that, was louder than what Killian had anticipated when Emma
explained the tickets she had procured for Henry’s date with Violet. It wasn’t exactly legendary stuff, but there was a steady thrumming beat that was infectious if not catchy. His navy blue t-shirt and dark vest paired with jeans seemed to be a hit, as even two of the young members of the boy band have on similar attire. Emma was quick to point that out with a smirk as some of the young ladies in the audience stared at him as though he was a member of the group that was the opening act.

“You’ll be signing autographs in a minute,” she teased as she rose onto the balls of her feet to look four rows ahead at where her son and Violet were seated. It had taken six trips to the store and a visit with Neal before Henry settled on a vintage Bon Jovi t-shirt that Neal still had hanging in his closet. It was a casual and stark contrast to his date’s pink dress and matching shoes, but neither seemed to mind as he offered her some of the candy he had purchased at a concession stand and looked mesmerized as Violet accepted it.

“He’s fine, love,” Killian said, not even looking in that direction. “The lad’s been nervous enough about this date without you watching over him like a hawk.”

“He didn’t seem overly nervous to you?” she asked, frowning with concern as she tried to lean over to peer around a gangly teen in front of her. “I thought the conversation between them was a little stilted.”

“Aye, but it is to be expected, Swan,” Killian told her with a chuckle. “The lad’s on a double date with his mother and his teacher. It’s a wonder that he’s handling it as well as he is. And it wasn’t that odd of a conversation.”

She whipped her head quickly at him, staring down incredulously. “They were talking about horses for two thirds of the ride here. Horses. My son has never ridden a horse in his entire life. What does he know about horses?”

“He may have read a bit about them in his efforts to woo the lass.” It may have been his smirking grin or the way his eyes danced at the sight of her flustered annoyance. However, she pouted for a good five minutes before returning his gaze.

“He really likes her doesn’t he?” There was a defeated quality to her statement, a resignation that her little boy was growing older despite her attempts to ignore it. “I mean as much as a 12 going on 13 year old can.”

“Aye, a bit of puppy love I would suppose. And you, my love, have done quite well with your mothering to allow him the chance to show her his feelings.” He laughed. “I assure you that he is not going to perish over sharing a few sweets with her and maybe holding her hand during a ballad.”

She glanced back through the teenage girls at her son who looked a little red in the cheeks but otherwise happy as he laughed at something Violet was saying to him. It was just a crush, she reminded herself. Yet still it hurt a bit to see him giving away a part of his heart. She had been his mother for so long, the only woman in his life. It was a role that she both loved and regretted, sometimes feeling that she had isolated him too much. What if this Violet girl broke his heart, she mused to herself, thinking that very few of these childhood romances ever had any staying power. He would be devastated and she would have to pick up the pieces.

“Emma?” Killian asked, his face showing mild concern over the fact that he had called out to her three times with no response. “What do you say we go walk about during the actual show? I’m not entirely sure that my music sensitive ears can withstand such noise as this.” Pretending to be in physical pain from the pulsating beat of some cover song being massacred from a popular radio station playing in the arena at that moment.
“Would you kill me if I said I wasn’t ready to go away yet?” she asked, twisting her face into an imitation of innocent concern. “I know he’s fine, but…”

Sitting back in the hard folded seat, Killian lifted his arm to invite her into a semi-embrace, still cognizant of the teens and preteen audience surrounding them. He wasn’t that shocked when she barely relaxed in his arm, practically climbing over him for a better look.

“He’s not trying to kiss her, is he?” she asked with her neck straining for more length. “Oh okay, good. It was a false alarm.”

“Emma?”

“I know. I know. I said I’d be okay. I’m really not though.” She fell back into the cold plastic of her chair and stared at the empty stage, her shoulder and head against his chest where she could feel the combination of the low rumble of his laugh and the bass from the piped in music. “Can you please distract me? Make me think of anything else other than Henry and Violet.”

***AAA***

Liam lifted his left leg as Elsa scooted between the sectional and ottoman to sit between his thighs as she went through the stack of mail that the building manager had said didn’t fit in their narrow mailbox in the entryway to the apartment complex. She smiled to herself as his leg lowered and he ran a hand absently through her loose braid that was coming unwound from the workout they had shared earlier.

“Anything interesting?” he asked, changing the channel on the television to some 1970s sci fi flick that made her cringe with the horrible special effects. She swore she could actually see the strings holding up the tennis ball serving as earth as a replica of a space ship sort of flew by it.

“Fan mail,” she said with an incredulous wave on the heavily stamped envelope. “Who does this? I thought it was all email and social media.”

“You have an old school fan,” he announced with an amusedly crooked smile. “Impressive. May I, darling?” Plucking the envelope from her hand, he pried apart the folded paper. Enclosed was a note from a child saying she was beautiful and talented, along with a crayon drawing of her on stage. They looked at the stack together, him cracking jokes and her smiling at the sweet and sometimes thoughtful comments about her music and abilities.

“Wow,” Elsa said as he dropped the last one on the pile. “Those are pretty amazing.”

“Aye, it appears I may have to share you more than I first thought.” He chuckled as she spun her face around to stare at him in horror. “No, no, no. I just…I’m proud of you.”

Elsa’s nearly violet eyes narrowed at his confession of sorts, trying to understand the idea that she could earn his appreciation for having old fashioned fan mail forwarded to their condo from the label. She was flattered by it, even if a bit mystified by the response. However, she never really considered that to be something that important or unusual. She had written fan mail when she was young too, usually to guys in boy bands or even a cartoon character once. Yet she had never considered what that meant for the person receiving it.

“I should answer them,” she said, thinking back on the form letter responses that she had received once upon a time. She didn’t want to do that, include a form letter with a computer generated signature and a copy of an autographed photo. “Maybe…”

“We should form a fan club for you,” he offered, sounding nearly serious with his intentions. “I have
no idea how that works, but it shouldn’t be too hard.”

“I don’t think those exist now,” she answered back just as seriously. “I think people just follow you on Twitter or Instagram or something. Maybe look at your website. I don’t know. Do you think I need a website?”

Leaning forward, he dropped a kiss on the top of her head and pulled her up from her cross legged position on the floor to his lap. “I would love you having a website. I could look at pictures of you all day and listen to your voice. I am your biggest fan after all.”

“You’re just hoping to be a groupie who gets lucky,” she spat back playfully. Her fingers were winding around the curls of his hair that he had allowed to get a bit longer over the summer. She could smell the scent that was a mixture of spilled beer and some fried concoction that they had been experimenting with at the Rabbit Hole. She was beginning to associate those scents with him, along with the way he usually had ink between two of his fingers when he was writing. It was a comforting feeling to know someone that well.

***AAA***

Emma looked at Killian with an incredulous stare that would have put even the most critical of patrons to shame as he repeated his brother’s explanation of how to avoid future issues with Gold’s rules. “You can’t be serious,” she said, following it with a shake of her head. “You want to get married?”

“I didn’t proclaim that, love,” he chastised gently, trying to pull her back into his embrace so that they did not have to shout the conversation amongst the increasingly impatient crowd. “And if I was to propose at this juncture, I doubt I would do it at such a venue.”

Features scrunched, she tentatively moved her head back to his shoulder. “I told you to distract me, not send me into panic mode for another reason all together.”

“Well, it did stop you from spying on your son for a moment. And I merely hoped it would amuse you as it did me. I fully intend to marry for love not for the convenience of being able to keep my job without worry about future rules or retribution.”

It was far too soon for that sort of conversation to take place, she thought as she felt his thumb running along the spot where the material of her sleeveless top met her shoulder. However, some might think that their plans to cohabitate might have been rushed too. Still she was not sure she was ever going to be ready for a conversation with words like forever. It was a stumbling block that she knew she might never recover from, as even when she thought about her career there were fears about words and phrases like saying that something was for the rest of her life.

“I’m grateful,” she commented with as much sincerity as she could muster. “But maybe next time open with the weather or some movie we might like to see. Much less dangerous.”

With her head at his shoulder and her eyes closing under the gentle caress along her arm, she did not see the look of disappointment that flashed in his eyes. Had she seen it, she could have interpreted that he was upset he had worried her. Or maybe she would have thought that he was actually wanting to get married. Neither were exactly true, though his ego was certainly bruised by the abject horror she displayed at the mere thought of it.

“Perhaps,” he said, trying to maintain a soothing tone that battled against the increase in volume as backup band took the stage before the group was to join them. “The last two movies we have seen have been picked by Henry. I was thinking we might be due a date night of our own.”
She gestured toward the young lady in front of them who already had tears on her cheeks from the
digital images of the young men of the group. “This isn’t romantic enough for you? You would
rather have comic book movies and pizza?”

She couldn’t hear his chuckle, but the vibration of it in his chest mingled with the thrumming bass
and tickled her ear. Ignoring her urge to peek around the girls now up and out of their seats to watch
her son, she closed her eyes and let Killian hold her in the midst of the chaos. It seemed a perfect
symbol of their relationship lately, one supporting the other amidst a sea of noise and distraction. And
he was being perfectly understanding about it, even if he was teasing her over going into mother bear
mode.

He continued through the show, though she might have caught him cringing a time or two over the
insane lyrics that sounded more like bubble gum pop than anything he would listen to even in his
free time. When the lead singer – a floppy haired 16-year-old with a crooked smile and a couple of
freckles across a too large nose – belted out the group’s newest ballad, Emma laughed with her head
thrown back as Killian attempted to dance with her. A few of the girls nearby were in near hysterics
over the performance, but their mothers were swooning at the romantic gesture in front of them.

“You’re a dork,” she said into his ear as he lifted her out of a dip. Even bathed in the green light from
the stage show, she had to admit that his bright smile and flashing of his dimples were cuter than any
of the eye candy on stage.

“And you love me for it,” he said, not forming it as a question.

“Of course.”

***AAA***

“I’m thinking Leopold for a boy,” Mary Margaret said as the mattress sagged with David’s weight.
“After my father. I know you don’t really have a desire to name him after your father, but I was kind
of a daddy’s girl.”

Running his finger over his phone to set the alarm, he dug his socked feet under the covers. Despite
their temperate climate in the loft, his fiancé seemed to need it to be freezing cold at all times. Some
might blame that on the pregnancy hormones, but he knew better. She always cranked up the air and
then hid under a mountain of covers as a fan blew directly on her.

“And that is an adorable quality that you have, but Leopold. No offense, but that name is a little…”

“Old fashioned?” she supplied, folding her hands on her barely discernable swell of her stomach as if
to shield the baby’s ears from the possible assault on his future name. “It was my father’s name. I
think it sounds regal.”

“It sounds like he’ll run a pizzeria with his brother’s Mario and Luigi.” David looked pleadingly at
his future wife. “Besides, we don’t know if this is a boy or girl yet. Isn’t it a bit early to worry about
names.” “Fine,” she said, reaching a hand out blindly for her book on the side table. “What do you
want to name her if she’s a girl.”

“I was thinking Ruth, after my mother,” he offered. “It’s simple and classic.” He looked proud of
himself, rolling to his side to monitor her reaction to his announcement.

“Ruth? Now talk about old fashioned. We’re having a baby, not starting a bridge group. I was
thinking something a little trendier.” She pursed her lips as she flipped to the marked page in her
novel, giving off every indication that she was reading and done with the conversation.
“Wait just a minute,” David argued. “You suggest your father’s name and I shouldn’t question it, but my mother’s name is off the table in favor of Tiffani with an i or some phonetically mismatched mess of a name that will probably get legally changed by our child in a few years.”

“I just think that you’re right that it is too early,” Mary Margaret said without lifting her eyes from the page. “We still need to decide about our married name.”

“I thought we were going with Nolan,” David muttered, still swimming in the land of baby names and not able to let go yet. “You said when I proposed that you couldn’t wait to be Mary Margaret Nolan.” His faded police academy shirt was wrinkled as he folded his arms over his chest and flopped to his back.

“Well, I was thinking that professionally it might be easier to go by Blanchard,” she said, carefully broaching the topic. “I mean I know teachers get married all the time, but all my paperwork is under my name.”

“I don’t care what name you go with,” he said, sounding only a little sullen. “It’s not that big of a deal to me.”

“But I don’t want us to have different names,” she said, free hand again caressing over her floral night gown covered abdomen. “And hyphenating is not really fair to the baby when he or she is learning to write. So maybe…” She trailed off, flipping the page in her book as she seemed to search for the right word.

“What are you thinking?” he asked, as if afraid to know the answer. “An alternative last name. What do the letters of Nolan and Blanchard even spell out together? Does anyone really do that?” “No, I’m not thinking that’s right either. I am proud that I’ll be a Nolan. Let’s just go with that.” His gray-blue eyes darted over to gauge her feelings on that topic. “Are you sure? I don’t mind considering…”

“No, it’s traditional. I was just being silly.” She did not turn fully on her side, but dug her right shoulder into the mattress so that she was a bit more turned away from him. “It’s just that I’m an only child. My father is gone. My mother is gone. And Blanchard is the last thing I have left of him. It’s silly, but I wanted something of him to be carried on even now. But if we use Blanchard then you’re going to feel the same way about Nolan. So there isn’t a good answer.”

Raking his hand over his face, David stared up at the ceiling. The good news was that his wife to be was not crying – that had happened enough lately. Doubled with crippling indecisiveness, Mary Margaret was not exactly easy to deal with lately. “What if,” he pondered, more to the ceiling than to her, “What if we used Nolan or Blanchard as the middle name? People do that, right?”

“Like Leopold Nolan Blanchard?” she asked as if she hadn’t thought this through already. “I suppose…” He watched as her shoulders relaxed and then tensed with held back laughter. “It’s still too early though.”

“Oh course,” she agreed. “Way too early.”

***AAA***

“I’m going to walk her to the front door,” Henry said through a clenched jaw as his mother and Killian sat in the front of the jeep like two children being scolded. “Wait here.”

Emma could not even look her son in the eyes, as he had already laid into her about the way she and Killian had danced and cuddled during the concert. Embarrassed by the PDA, Henry swore they would discuss it later, sounding just like his mother in that moment. Killian merely nodded, feigning
a shamed expression as Violet bid them both goodnight and thanked them for including her on the outing.

“Thank you again, Ms. Swan and Mr. Jones,” the brunette said before hurrying after Henry who was five steps closer to the front door.

“I hope you’re proud of yourself,” Emma hissed as she dug out her phone and switched it to camera mode. Chastised or not, she had promised Neal that she would send a few photos of the date. He’d not been in favor of it, but relented and even took Henry shopping for the casual t-shirt and jeans combo that according to her ex, took four hours to select, not counting the break for a pizza lunch. “Henry is embarrassed by us.”

“We kissed during a concert, during a song about kissing,” Killian whispered back, not sure who he was keeping his voice down for since they were alone in the jeep. “The lad’s attention should have been on the stage or his own date, not me snogging with his mother.”

“He’s 12,” Emma said, the sound of the photo of the two younger people standing in front of a cardboard display of the band being sent to Neal making laser like sounds. “The fact that I convert oxygen to carbon dioxide is probably worrisome to him in those terms.” She sank lower in the seat. “I can’t look. Is he kissing her good night? No, don’t tell me. I don’t want to know.”

Killian chuckled. “I have many talents, my love, but x-ray vision is not one of them. There is a tree in the way of my view.”

“Good,” she said firmly. “I don’t want to know.” It was so resolute that it sent Killian into another fit of chuckles at how determined she was to be okay with everything.

***AAA***

Granny’s was busy when Liam popped in to meet with Robin about the upcoming open night for the song writer showcase at the Rabbit Hole. Thankfully the widowed father had procured one of the tables and was entertaining his son with crayons and a sheet of butcher paper when Liam threw himself into the chair and pretended to steal one of Roland’s favorite colors.

“That’s mine,” the child cried out as he stared forlornly at the man’s fingers wrapping around the green shade.

“Mine now,” Liam challenged, ignoring his friend’s indignant huff. “I need it.”

“But…but…” The elementary student looked near tears until his father plucked the wax crayon out of Liam’s hand and placed it on the table again.

“Don’t pick fights with children,” Robin said with a sigh that said it had already been a morning from hell. All it took was one look at Roland to realize that the fighting had begun earlier since he was dressed in a faded pair of cargo shorts, an inside out superman t-shirt, two different shoes, and no socks. A man’s tie was clipped onto his shirt and sunblock decorated his nose in a bright yellow color that reminded Liam of a toucan. “And don’t ask why my son looks that way. He seems to find himself at the height of fashion – ready for Carnaby Street. I didn’t have the will or the heart to stop him.”

“Is that why he’s got a sausage patty on a hamburger bun instead of a breakfast food?”

“Mate, you try arguing with a six year old about when hamburgers are appropriate. Thank God that Granny is a sucker for the wee ones or we’d still be arguing that point of fact.”
Liam waved down Ruby and with her usual half flirting and half sarcastic tone, she took his order and managed to bring him breakfast with only one or two remarks that he should have brought Elsa with him if only for her company. It wasn’t that Liam disagreed, as he would have much preferred his girlfriend’s company to Robin’s, but it was a work thing and Elsa was headed into Regina’s office even on a Sunday morning to discuss marketing plans. He had been reluctant to leave her like that, her blonde hair still damp from the shower and skin still pink. She had padded over to him as he hung by the door and stood on her toes to kiss his cheek and tell him to hurry back, as she was hoping to have a movie marathon that afternoon.

“Sunday is our day together,” she had proclaimed a few weeks earlier. “Whenever possible I say we hide away from the rest of the world on just this one day a week. We can watch cheesy 80s movies or cooking shows while we experiment in the kitchen. Nobody has to know we didn’t get dressed or that we stayed in bed past noon. It’ll be our day to just be ourselves and not think of the rest of Storybrooke and the world. Promise?”

He had promised, stolen another kiss, and then laughed as she swatted his butt before pushing him out the door. It was a remarkable change from the prim and proper woman he had met on their first date. She was playful and funny, shy at times and sensitive. He loved each and every layer.

Robin must have noticed that his mind was wandering, as he cleared his throat and waved a crayon in front of his eyes to garner his attention back to the conversation. “Thinking of Elsa?”

“I like Elsa,” Roland proclaimed before Liam could come up with a viable excuse for his inattentiveness. “She likes ice cream just like me.”

“Is that all that is required to win your affections there, lad?” Robin asked his son, clearly amused at the boy’s bluntness.

“Regina likes ice cream too,” the boy seemed to ponder. “But she always says she shouldn’t before she orders some.”

That revelation sent Robin tittering uncontrollably and Liam sputtering, as he noticed the bright red of Robin’s own cheeks. Roland was too unaware of his audience’s reaction to stop at that point, noting Emma and Henry often bought him Rocky Road while Ruby was partial to chocolate and Killian to mint chocolate chip.

“What about your papa?” Liam managed to ask, arching an eyebrow severely at his friend. “Does he even partake in ice cream with you?”

“He used to,” the boy said, tapping a tiny finger against his chin like a lawyer trying a case. “But now he shares with Regina. Didn’t you know you can share germs that way?”

***AAA***

“Sounds good,” Emma said as she climbed the stairs to the nearly finished attic. There was a bit more painting to do and of course the moving of items to the space, but Killian had already staked out a spot in the soon to be library/office that was his little nook as he wrote the song for Elsa to sing at the wedding. The oversized chair had been moved up to the space by the guys a week before and sat proudly in the corner of the room where the bookshelves met. It was an older piece that had once been in his bedroom and seen much better days. It was faded and patched, smelled vaguely musty and seemed to be his favorite spot, despite his more fastidious nature.

“You say that about everything,” he muttered, harshly underlining a few spots on the page. Without his ability to play the guitar, he was stuck using the electronic version on his laptop and typing in the
chords and notes that he was considering.

“Maybe I’m a big fan.” She had managed to climb the steep stairs with two cups of hot chocolate, hers with cinnamon and his without. However, as she attempted to sit on the arm of the chair, she nearly spilled the steaming liquid on them both. He dropped his pen hastily to shield them from getting burnt.

“Are you suggesting it is time for a break?” he asked, removing the dark blue mug from her hand and taking a sip before it sloshed out. “Because I would certainly agree to that, love.”

“Henry’s on the phone with his dad and I felt like hot chocolate,” she explained, laughing as he pulled her legs around so that her feet rested next to him. “And I sort of missed you this morning.”

Smirking back at her over the lip of the mug, he hummed amiably. “I wanted to get this done before Elsa asked after it again. Did you know that there are very few words that rhyme with Mary Margret or David?”

“You’re making it rhyme?” Emma asked, concerned that maybe her message about a sincerely heartfelt song had not gotten through to him. She didn’t want something akin to the Wheels on the Bus, no matter that the bride was a teacher.

“No, but I enjoy making you worry,” he said, chortling. “You look absolutely adorable with the way your forehead scrunches up and your eyes become like slits.”

“Dork,” she protested, slapping her palm against his shoulder and earning an inelegant grunt. “Seriously though. If you are having trouble writing it, Elsa’s going to have to be okay with doing a cover. I didn’t really want to have her sing one of her and Anna’s songs because that felt too much like work disguised as a gift.”

“No, I think they will love the gesture, especially if you get Elsa to record it for them so that they can listen to it whenever they want. I’m just a bit rusty at this, but it will be fine.” He let the paper fall to the ground. “I must say that I’m more inspired by you, love. I could write about you all day.”

“I would suggest imagining Mary Margaret as me, but I’m not sure how that would work,” she laughed, sipping at her drink between blowing on it. “But if it makes any difference, I know you don’t like considering doing it professionally, but I would hate if you gave it up all together.”

His head dropped back on the indented cushion and he placed the mug on the table beside him before reaching his hand over to caress just behind her knee. It was a spot that always made her smile, one of the secrets he had unlocked in her. “As long as you continue to inspire me.”

She pretended to consider that, sliding her arm behind him so that her fingers played with the tufts of hair that had become so long that they curled easily. “I’ve never been anyone’s muse before you. What exactly is involved? I mean, I’m a pretty busy person. I have a son who is always having me do something. And then there’s my boyfriend. He’s very demanding.”

“Is he now?” He tilted his head toward her much like a cat when being petted. “He’s a rather cheeky bloke, is he?”

“The cheekiest.”

“You must be an absolute angel to put up with such a man. If you were my girlfriend, I’d make sure you knew you were appreciated and loved.” His eyes watched her grin grow even wider as he pulled her mug from her hand to set it aside and then pulled her down into his lap. “A woman like you
deserves a man’s full attention.”

“You seem to know a lot about how I should be treated.”

“I’ve always appreciated studying topics that interest me,” he teased, closing the gap between them so that his breath was warm against her slightly parted lips. “And you, love, more than interest me.”

“Good.”

He could still feel the teasing smile on her lips as he moved in to kiss her, the softness of her lips feathery against him and the subtle way she breathed in as if trying to fully appreciate his being that close. Nipping at her lips at first, he teased her back, pulling away and then rejoining her mouth with his as if it were a game of one-up-manship that he was going to win. However, when she sighed and melted a bit into his embrace, he felt the last of his own teasing resolve breakaway and his mouth fused against hers with more urgency. They broke momentarily for air, but stayed there in that in between state of lazy kisses and ardent affection that was only interrupted when Henry called up to them that he wanted to go sailing.

“I’m half a mind to tell him to take the bloody boat out himself and leave us be,” Killian said to a laughing Emma. She dropped her head to his shoulder with a defeated groan.

“I could come up with a reason to punish him, tell him he has to stay in and do chores or something.”

“I suppose we should humor the lad. Won’t be long before the autumn has us too bundled up for such excursions.”

She called down that they would head out later, which seemed to satisfy Henry. Not moving from his lap, she tilted her head back and kept her eyes half closed. “I don’t mind the fall. Maybe we can build a bonfire on the beach to stay warm. I bet you look cute in flannel shirts and thick sweaters.”

“I assure you that my looks have been described as rugged or handsome, dashing even, but never cute.” He spat the word in offense. “You on the other hand…”

She swatted at him again. “Don’t even try it, mister. I’m not falling for the cute talk either. But I would like to point out that I just managed to talk about the future…maybe a month or two away, but still I did it.”

He chewed at the corner of his mouth in consideration of her declaration. “Aye, that you did. You seem to be doing quite well at that.”

“Practice,” she said. “You never know. Your brother might have been encouraging you to propose, but it might just be me who breaks down and does it.” With a saucy wink, she disentangled herself from him, grabbed her mug, drank down the rest of the chocolate and smiled. “See you downstairs, sailor.”
Chapter 35

“Do you have any idea what we are looking for, lad?” Killian asked as Henry meandered through the store, his fingers occasionally dragging along some item or counter. “I did promise your father I’d have you over there before long.”

“Violet’s birthday,” Henry mumbled, having to repeat himself when Killian asked for clarification. “Is it indeed?”

The nearly 13 year old blushed, explaining that her birthday was one week before his. After much discussion with two of his friends, his mother, his father, and even Ruby, he had determined that he had to buy her a gift. While none of those confidants could give him a suggestion about what to buy, they had all agreed it should not send too bold a message, be too expensive, or too intimate. He wasn’t sure what that meant, but he had about two weeks to figure it out. The fringe of his hair falling over his eyes, he pushed it back. “I don’t know what to get her?”

“I see,” Killian said, taking a better stock of their surroundings. “Perhaps we could look for some bauble or trinket over in the jewelry section?”

Henry blanched at the mention. “Not jewelry,” he said, offering as explanation that he didn’t want her to get the wrong idea.

“I’m not sure what wrong idea she would get given your ages, but I wouldn’t wish either of you ill with it.” He sighed and began to throw out a few suggestions. All of them met with rejection and growing panic in the chocolate eyes of the youngster. “I am about to suggest a gift card to Granny’s, but I doubt that would suit your needs either.”

Leaning against a display of running shoes, Henry appeared near tears over his lack of progress. With the weddings, back to school shopping, and the final performance from the honor band summer program coming up, he was running out of time. “What did you get your first girlfriend?”

Killian lifted his eyes upward and considered that for a moment, trying to recall. “I wasn’t very popular with any woman until I was older than you,” he admitted. “But I believe I did give one young lass a mixed tape. Stayed up all bloody night coming up with a list of songs to record.”

“A what?” Henry asked, confusion wrinkling his nose and forehead.

“Basically a playlist.”

“As a gift?” Henry asked incredulously. “What are you getting my mom? Her birthday is in October.”

Killian scratched behind his ear, staring over at the store across the way. “Perhaps something in the form of jewelry might be appropriate for your mother. I don’t quite have the same fears that you do over the message.”

Nodding thoughtfully, Henry walked over to a display of shirts with different funny sayings. He fingered one that spoke about the dark side and cookies. “Like an engagement ring?”

Happy that the boy was looking at the shirt rather than him, Killian tried not to cough in surprise. “I didn’t say that, Henry. I’m not sure that…”
“I think you guys should get married. Then you’d be like my dad. I mean I have a dad, but then I’d have two. It’s kind of cool when you think about it. And my mom loves you. You love her. What are you waiting for anyway?”

“It’s a bit more complicated than that,” Killian said, grateful for the pole in the center of the aisle that allowed him to find his balance against the mirrored surface. “We are in love, but I’m not sure that we are ready…”

“My dad and I talked about him and Tamara,” Henry interrupted, clearly bolstered by this change in conversational topic. “He said that once he knew he loved her, he knew he wanted to marry her. So was it like that for you and my mom?”

Clearing his throat, Killian wished that he was not alone with the boy. Emma had run off with her friends on wedding errands and Neal had to work at the pawn shop a bit later than expected. So that left Killian to watch him. Normally that was fine, but the questions of relationships and dating were not exactly comfortable ones. “I don’t know that it has progressed quite that way,” he answered vaguely.

“I think she’d say yes.”

“And if I should desire to ask that particular question, I’ll be sure to include you on the decision,” Killian answered back, hoping that he had ended the conversation. “Now what are we going to find for you to buy Violet?”

***AAA***

Elsa hummed the song that she was supposed to sing at the wedding as she twisted and braided Emma’s hair in an intricate pattern that had both Ruby and Mary Margaret worried for the end result. The bride made two comments about not wanting any bald attendants, making Anna laugh from her spot and almost sputter the fruit smoothie over the magazine cut outs that were littering the table at Killian and Emma’s house.

“I don’t get why you didn’t just do all this on Pinterest,” Anna said, tossing the dark haired woman her phone to show her own inspiration for her wedding. “It’s so much neater and easier. No papercuts. Don’t have to worry about storage.”

Dusting Mary Margret’s cheeks with a glittery pink concoction, Ruby laughed. “Pinterest didn’t exist when this one started planning her wedding. Rumor has it that she’s been considering bands and cake flavors since kindergarten.”

“I wouldn’t doubt it,” Emma chimed in amusedly. “While the rest of the world sang along with Sesame Street or learned Mary Had a Little Lamb, she was memorizing the Wedding March.”

The living room at Killian’s had once been a comfortable and yet neatly tidy place before his brother’s arrival. Now that Emma and Henry had moved in there was still a comfortable air to the room, but it was more lived in and natural. Magazines seemed to breed on the end tables, mixed with junk mail and some of Henry’s graphic novels that Killian pretended not to peek at when no one was looking. Throw pillows had multiplied and never seemed to be in the right spot, along with softly knitted throws and usually a shoe or two under the coffee table. Cell phones were always charging and cords dangled from odd spots on consoles and shelves. Henry’s gym uniform shirt was draped over a dining chair as a reminder to Emma to get his name sewn onto it before the first day of school. Emma had apologized to Killian numerous times, stating that despite her best efforts it was hard to keep the chaos under control with a near teenager and a job that required odd working hours. He had told her he could hardly mind it, as he much preferred the liveliness of living with them than alone.
“You guys make me sound like I was wedding obsessed since I could walk,” the bride pouted before laughing. “Maybe I was. Do you think that’s why David asked? I wore him down?”

“Of course not,” Ruby answered quickly, leaning back on her haunches to inspect her handiwork. “He loves you. This is just the natural continuation of an epic romance.” No one made a sound at the wistful observation that was so out of character for Ruby. “What? You guys told me that when I complained about still being on the dating scene when everyone was settling down with someone. It’s not like I’m secretly reading romance novels under the covers or anything.”

It was Anna who laughed first, but soon each of them were tittering behind their hands or in the case of Ruby and Emma with their heads thrown back in raucous laughter. The quintet of women were not exactly the usual group to hang out. However, when Mary Margaret had run into Anna earlier that day, the curse of the mysterious lace had been cast. The two brides to be had compared notes, leaving both desperate to find new trim for their wedding day accessories. Calls to Emma, Elsa, and Ruby were made and the five had abandoned their Saturday plans to pile into a crowded SUV and drive two hours to a fabric store. It had taken more than two hours for the two women to find what they wanted, change their minds, and then be convinced by Ruby that they were right the first time. A late lunch at a roadside diner, two hours of driving back, and they were left spending a final girls’ night before the wedding at Emma and Killian’s. He had been dozing on the sofa with a book when they came through the door, fresh from having dropped Henry at Neal’s. Despite their protests that they could go to another location, he had packed himself up and headed to visit his brother at work rather than break up the party or send them in another direction.

It was going to be a busy couple of weeks. Anna and Kristoff were getting married just a week after Mary Margaret and David. Henry’s birthday party was planned for the week after that. School was starting back and Elsa’s duet with Liam was scheduled for release in the midst of it all. Looking at the calendar one evening, Emma had told Killian that she would be collapsing in October from exhaustion and stress. He’d sweetly promised her foot rubs and hot chocolate as the leaves turned from green to brilliant reds and yellows, as well as other things to beat the stress and distract her from the world around them. As she thought about the dirty things he’d whispered into her ear, she blushed and hoped that the other ladies didn’t notice.

Elsa did. “So Liam was saying he suggested to Killian that you two should be the next ones to get married.” It was as subtle of a suggestion as the blonde could muster, as at times she did come off just as brash as her sister. “Has he brought that up?”

“You knew about that?” Emma was still not a big fan of her life, especially her love life, being discussed so casually even among friends. “I am still trying to find a way to shove my shoe up Liam’s butt over that one. Seriously? He thought we should get married to get Gold off our backs?”

Elsa’s smile didn’t budge, but she shrugged her shoulders casually. “You know how Liam is. He still has that naval officer thing in him. He sees a problem or a potential problem and he goes for a logical solution.”

It was true in a way for both Jones brothers. They were artists with their music, creative thinkers in terms of performance and writing. However, they both had a practical side that was annoyingly correct at times. Killian shopped and planned that way, visiting the grocery store once a week and buying things for multiple meals while Emma threw things that appealed to her into the basket and then made meals from whatever it was she had procured. When they had vacationed over the summer, Killian had searched out reviews and itineraries before making a decision, Emma just said she wanted to go to a quiet beach. Liam was excellent at his new job for his ability to estimate the needed alcohol and food, keeping costs down and never running out of an item or having too much. Even his reaction to thinking that Elsa was pregnant bordered on the needed logistics rather than the
“I think that when Killian and I get married that I would prefer it to be something a little more emotional. I’m not saying I need to do the whole princess thing like these two.” She waved a hand toward Anna and Mary Margaret squealing over something on Anna’s phone. “I just think that love should take a higher place than practicality on some things.”

Tying off the end of the braid, Elsa’s hand rose up to Emma’s forehead. She used the back of it to check and see if her friend and manager had a fever. “Emma Swan? Are you aware that you just said what I think you said?”

Green eyes rolled upwards with exasperation. “Yes, I said when we get married…I know…big step from the girl who won’t even buy a Halloween costume until the day before because I’m afraid I’ll change my mind. And no I don’t have anything to announce. Just call it a feeling.”

The smile on Elsa’s face widened as she dove for her friend and enveloped her in a giant hug. She didn’t let go right away, swaying back and forth on the leather couch until the others noticed and made comments.

“Killian is thinking about proposing?” Mary Margaret asked, her hands clapped together just below her chin. Even without x-ray vision, Emma knew that her friend was already coming up with color schemes and seating charts. She had to put a stop to that.

“No, no, no,” Emma said. “I was merely saying that…”

“She’s just open to the idea,” Elsa interrupted, saving her friend a bit of embarrassment. “We all know that he will eventually. I mean, have you seen him. He is writing songs about her and his love for her. Maybe we should consider starting a betting pool about when. I think it’ll be at her birthday.”

Anna chimed in that she thought Christmas or Thanksgiving would be a more natural choice, which led to discussions of whether or not Liam and Killian even celebrated the holiday that was not really their culture. Ruby seemed rather quiet, giving an opinion that it might not be a special date at all and might happen in bed on a lazy Sunday morning or something like that. However, she was not quite as invested in her guess as the others.

“I sort of,” Emma began, blushing furiously as all eyes turned to her. “I sort of told him that I might be the one proposing.” She did not wait for any of them to respond before burying her face in her hands.

“You did what?” Elsa screeched, not sure she could picture her friend doing this. “You actually said it. Like a joke or…”

“A threat?” Ruby chimed in after a long sip of her beer. “What? That’s how I would have said it.”

“It just sort of popped out,” Emma said, her voice still muffled from her hands. “I don’t know. Maybe I was just trying to tell him that I’m not going to freak out and run away.” Parting her fingers to peek through the space, she was not surprised to find Mary Margaret and Anna smiling proudly and Elsa looking almost sympathetic. Ruby, on the other hand was trying to smile past what one could assume was a horrified realization.

“Oh, Emma,” Anna said, the excited immaturity of her way coming out full force. “When and how are you going to do it? Are you going to get down on one knee? Do you have to buy him a ring? I mean if he was the one proposing then he has to get you a ring. Do they sell engagement rings for men? Or maybe you get the ring and give it to him to give to you. That would work. You could pick
out the color and cut that you want. No worries about him picking the wrong thing.” She glanced at
Mary Margaret who was nodding emphatically. “You could do it over dinner. But don’t put it in the
champagne. I’ve seen people choke on it that way. No, it’s best just to hand it to him. How did
David ask you, Mary Margaret?”

Ruby threw herself backwards and landed on one of the floor pillows that Killian had found absurd
when Emma first unpacked them. However, he had been using one almost every night to join Henry
in a tournament of video games. “We’ve all heard that story a million times. Can we focus on the fact
that Emma is not acting like Emma at all? You didn’t even want to go out with him. People were
trying to convince you. I’m not going to have a melt down over another friend getting engaged, but
seriously, Emma. You were on my side.”

Mary Margaret patted her troubled friend’s knee and scooted a bit closer to Emma and Elsa. “How
did he react when you said it? Killian doesn’t seem this way, but you know how men can be about
women trying to take the upper hand sometimes. Did he seem okay with it?”

Lowering her hands, Emma sighed. “I don’t really know. He had his mouth open and I sort of ran
downstairs to the bedroom.”

“Wait,” Ruby said, shooting back up to a sitting position. “You said to him that you might propose to
prove that you wouldn’t run away. Then you ran away?”

***AAA***

“So what would be the trouble?” Liam asked his brother, wiping up a spilled drink at the bar. “You
love her, right?”

“Aye, we’ve established that.” Killian knew he was scraping the bottom of the barrel but with days
to go before the wedding, his choices of confidants were slim. Emma and the ladies were busy with
something each night and even Henry had been spending more time at his father’s in the wake of the
new understanding over both Emma and Neal’s relationships. Roland had a late summer cold that
had Robin sleep deprived and making very little sense. So that left his brother or Will for love advice.
Liam seemed a more logical choice. “I rather think she fancies me to what with us living together and
whatnot.”

“And you do plan to ask her, do you not?” Liam had not quite given up on the idea that marriage
would somehow preclude his brother from future trouble with Gold. While Killian had said quite
vehemently that he would not propose to Emma out of convenience or protection, Liam had
continued to persist that it was the right thing to do. “Don’t lie to me, brother. I’ve seen the way
you’ve looked with all this wedding goings on with a mixture of longing and fear. You’ve clearly set
your way for her.”

“I think she might have some say in the matter.” Killian nursed his beer and pretended to ignore the
pointed look of his brother’s lighter blue eyes. Of course he had thought of proposing to Emma,
practically from the moment he realized that he loved her. There was no doubt in his mind that she
was the only one for him, which had no ill effect on him at all. Instead, he dreamed of their future
together and saw no need in making a big deal of it. Lately though he’d felt a bit more of a tug in that
direction. There was his brother’s insistence and Henry’s questions. Then there was Emma’s
declaration that she might propose herself. “As a matter of fact…”

“Liam,” Zelena’s voice rang out with that insincere song to her lips. “I have a VIP group about to
arrive. Might you straighten up a bit and polish the table over there. I know it’s the job of some of the
lesser men around here, but do be a dear.”
Offering his own slight smile of acquiesce, he nodded and followed suit with the directions. Once Zelena disappeared in the office, Killian followed his brother with a raised eyebrow.

“It’s not a career, brother,” Liam declared giving the nearby round oak table a single wipe with the rag before returning to check the top shelf items. “I am only doing this while the band takes off.”

“Much like the Navy and Porter’s fish mongering,” the younger of the brothers noted. “I’ve often said you needed to learn a bit of humility. This job certainly gives that to you.”

“Aye, it surely does, but that’s not what you’re here to discuss. And I’d bet you were not here for my company either. So out with it, little brother. What has you so vexed tonight?”

Killian slumped forward at the bar, his hand wrapped around the damp bottle and his ears ringing from the loud music and conversation around him. He was not much for clubs or bars, having spent far too much time in them in his younger years in an attempt to drink away the memories that had sent him reeling without direction for a bit. And brother or not, the cliché of opening up to the man tending bar was not exactly something he was seeking at that moment. “Emma said something that has me thinking.”

The distracted hum of acknowledgement from Liam wasn’t comforting, but it was enough that Killian knew his brother was at least partially listening. “She said that she might propose to me.” The younger of the brothers cringed as he waited for an answer.

“You think she’s putting the pressure on you?” Liam asked, his face scrunching into a thoughtful expression as he played the possibilities in his mind. “Maybe she wants you to propose and is threatening to do so if you don’t hurry along with it?”

Killian shook his head with his frown deepening. “She’s not like that at all, Liam. She said she is content with the way things are at the moment, but…”

“But she’s throwing around a pretty big threat there, brother. I know it may not seem like her, but she has two friends about ready to marry. Perhaps it has put the idea into her head that she would like more than a bedmate. A lass can act quite loony when it comes to marriage and commitment. I have my own worries about Elsa with her sister marrying that Kris bloke.”

Killian knew his brother was only joking that Emma might be pressuring him. He felt none of that was true, but still he wondered and replayed that statement in his head. If she wanted to marry quickly, he felt that she would just tell him. She did not play games, as that was one of the things he liked about her. But still it must be playing in her mind somehow that two friends and even her ex were on the verge of such commitments. While Emma had lost many of the walls that kept her at bay from commitment, she was still a bit skittish. Perhaps her way of retaining a sense of control was to be the one deciding the when and where of a proposal. If she needed that role to be hers, he’d give that to her too.

“If she is the one to propose, do you think she’d offer you a ring?” Liam interrupted, scratching at the underside of his jaw. “I’m just trying to picture it, brother. She could get on one knee…”

“I should have known better than to confide in you,” Killian seethed, downing the rest of the beer. “Even Will would be a better sounding board.”

Chuckling and backing up to go check the register, Liam winked. “You’ll be sure to tell me, right? I want to oooh and aww over your engagement ring.”

***AAA***
By the time Killian arrived at the seaside cabin, Emma’s friends had left already. He’d stopped at Granny’s after he had driven around for more than an hour and sat in the car for a bit longer before deeming it safe to return home. Thankfully there had been clues, the largest of which was Granny receiving a call from her granddaughter that she couldn’t find her keys and needed to be let into the private residence.

The older woman had scoffed at his reluctance to talk, telling him that she came from a time when men knew what they wanted and went after it. “I wouldn’t have dreamed of proposing to my husband, but if he had waited too long I might have found another.” He had listened to that and wondered if there was warning in that worth heeding. Emma might not leave him another, but she might leave for a more solitary life out of frustration.

The last thing he wanted was for things to feel awkward between them, as their comfortable life was something he wanted to make permanent. Yet despite that wish, he felt a knot in his stomach as he let himself inside and found her curled on the sofa. Her feet were under her and legs bent. Her head rested on the sofa’s arm and her own arms were folded underneath like a pillow. Her hair had been loose and flowing earlier, but now sat plaited in at least four braids that were intertwined and twisted into a knot at the nape of her neck. Tiny wisps of golden hair escaped and her lips were parted as she breathed in and out with her eyes closed.

Toeing out of his shoes, he padded past her on the couch to turn off one of the lights and make it a bit dimmer for her. She was an infrequent napper, but at that late hour it hardly mattered. She had taken the time to straighten up, he noticed. The dishes were in the dishwasher and the trash can almost full of rubbish. Still a few of Mary Margaret’s magazine clippings had been left on the table, with colorful post-it notes dictating comments. One closest to his girlfriend showed a smiling woman in a strapless knee length dress of soft layers that were gathered and tucked. In Emma’s handwriting was a note asking if the dress came in red.

He dropped the paper down and sank into the center of the couch next to where Emma was sleeping. It had never crossed his mind to wonder if she had such a collection as Mary Margaret. The stereotype that all women have planned their wedding since childhood seemed a bit off in terms of Emma, but she had probably thought about it. Did she want something as big and lavish as her friends? Or would she want a quiet gathering of just a few at the beach. Perhaps she would rather forgo all that and get married at the courthouse. Or maybe her style was more of a destination wedding with just the two of them and Henry. He would be up for any of it, if she only gave him a clue.

His eyes felt heavy as he watched her sleeping, falling shut with the thoughts of her dressed in white approaching him down a long aisle. He had to admit that the sight was one he would not mind seeing in reality, feeling the adrenaline build like the music and sliding a ring over her finger as everyone in town watched with envy at the sight of them proclaiming their love for each other.

He might have had more visions of weddings if she hadn’t woken saying his name. “Killian?”

His eyes shot open to find her blinking at him in a state of disbelief he didn’t quite understand. “Love?”

“I didn’t hear you come in,” she said, pushing herself up to sitting and almost losing her balance into him. “How long have you…”

“Just a bit,” he said, offering a steadying arm about her waist. “You looked quite peaceful.” Maybe it was the exhaustion that she was feeling or maybe she just gave in to the comfort of his embrace, but she left herself curl into his side.
“I’m glad you’re here,” she admitted a bit huskily. “Girls night is fun, but I like being here with you and Henry best.”

With a peck to her temple, he settled back against the leather of the sofa and matched his own breaths to hers. “Wedding plans going well? Or are you tired of the brides already?”

“They are getting a little nervous, but nothing I can’t handle. Granted I usually deal with cases of stage fright and not pre-wedding jitters, but it’s all good.” She sighed, breathing in the scent of laundry detergent on his collar and cracking her eyes open to see that he had opened the curtains to let the moonlight in as it played off the waves outside. “I like this.”

“It is a spectacular view,” he consented. “Or was it something else that you liked?”

“The view, the company, the quiet,” she listed. “But I do think we need to talk.” She regretted saying those words instantly as she felt him tense his muscles. Reaching a hand up, she ran her fingers over his clenched jaw in a soothing pattern.

“I don’t have the best track record with that request, but if you insist.”

“I think that maybe I am giving you mixed signals,” she admitted, pulling away to sit up. She was still within grasp of him, but he did not pull her back. Instead he watched her, reach behind her head to pull at the knot of hair there, carefully unpinning and twirling it by touch. “I hope you know that I wasn’t pushing you for a proposal…you know, with what I said the other night. I only meant that…”

“I didn’t think that you were, love,” he echoed softly. “I will admit that the idea took me by surprise. You’ve always shown yourself as quite independent and a bit reluctant to be with anyone long term. So I was shocked that you would be…”

“Did you know that when Neal and I were young and so in ‘love,” she made air quotes around the word, “that we did live together. It was in my car. Long story, but that was our life for a little while. We talked about places to go. The future. But we never talked about anything that would sound at all like marriage and family. We were going to start over in another town. Tallahassee. Marriage? It wasn’t ever mentioned. And since him? I’ve dated a few guys. Three dates has been my limit. Mostly one date or a hook up. Nothing serious. We didn’t even know each other’s middle names, let alone anything more intellectual. And then you…”

Smiling fondly, he tilted his head as he listened to her with the realization that she wasn’t having a moment at all. “And then I…”

“You made me realize a lot of things that I had settled myself into thinking weren’t necessarily true. I told myself that I wasn’t the relationship kind of girl. I wasn’t sure if I’d ever get past those first date pleasantries. And here I am with you. You know my middle name. You know that I have really cold feet in the winter and that I love to turn a fan on full blast and still sleep under the covers. You know that I love eggs and bacon, but hate oatmeal and gag at the sound of its name. You know that I hate loud noises in movies because they make me jump. You know that I sing along with boybands and that I like to paint my toenails different colors.” She reached over and took his hand from his thigh, covering the back of it with her own. “You know all of that and still say you love me. I’m not saying that in a freaked out way, but it does still surprise me sometimes. It surprises me that anyone can love me.”

His eyes fluttered shut for a moment. “I wish it didn’t surprise you, Emma. As many things as I regret and wish I could change about my own life, I wish that I could help you see that you are far from unlovable. I only wonder what was wrong with those who did not fall instantly in love with you. But I suppose I’m grateful to them too, as they helped you be led to me. I also suppose I can
understand how you feel in a way. I wonder how you can love me as you do when it seems that I have never fared very well with that either. Perhaps that is what makes the love we do share special? We are able to fully understand and appreciate it better because we both have felt as though it might never come to pass?”

She rolled her bottom lip over her teeth and leaned her head back on the cushion of the sofa. “I think I want to stop analyzing it,” she admitted in a breathy voice that was barely audible. “I want to enjoy being with you and stop waiting on the other shoe to drop. And I want to stop protecting my heart from you when you have never done anything to hurt it.”

“I would never do anything to intentionally hurt you or Henry,” he assured her, mimicking her head position with his own. “I hope that you…”

“I know that. And I would never want to hurt you either. So maybe that’s why I’m ready to stop fearing the future. And I just want you to know that I wasn’t fishing for a proposal or trying to pressure you…”

“I know that,” he repeated her words back to her. “Love, if you wish we could get married at any time. I can propose in a lavish fashion or as simply as you desire. The only thing holding me back is the fear of making you uncomfortable.”

She smiled at him with her eyes shining. “I think I’ll leave that up to you. You do what you want and I promise to consider it.” She laughed lightly at herself.

“Consider it?” he questioned, head lifting up. “You mean it is not a guarantee?”

She shrugged before snuggling back into his side. “I don’t know what I’ll say. Nobody’s ever asked me before.”
Despite the fact that her nose was half buried in the pillow that smelled of the spicy scent of her boyfriend, Emma was also quite sure that she could smell the coffee percolating. In addition to its heavenly aroma, she knew it was a sign that things were transitioning from summer to fall in their sleepy little town. Normally she bought her latte or some other concoction on the way to work, saving Killian the trouble of getting up too early on his summer break. However, preplanning meant that she was up and about, fixing breakfast and shaving time off her commute.

“You look comfortable,” he said, obviously having come to check on her. Her hours were not usually that firm, but a morning meeting with Regina meant that she needed to be in the office earlier than she normally made it. Still, he seemed quite amused that she was burrowed into his pillow with tangled hair crowning her head and one of his shirts riding up her thighs. “Can’t convince you to laze about this morning with me? Call in sick?”

She grunted in reply that he could be up at such an hour, showered, dressed, and looking collected as she pushed her hair from her face and looked about the crowded room as though she wasn’t sure where she was for a second. “Meeting with Regina…”

“Ahhh,” he said, placing the black mug on the night stand like a hunter setting a trap. He ignored the rumpled sheets and comforter that was barely on the bed’s corner, sitting amidst the mess and cupping his still warm from the mug hand over her cheek. “I hope that meeting goes well, love. I know you worry about them.”

“She can be a bit of a pain,” Emma confided, leaning in for a quick kiss that quickly dissolved into a succession. “Drives me insane with demands that no human could possible perform. It’s like she’s the queen and we are all just her subjects doing her bidding.”

“And what does the queen wish of you today, love? Monuments in her honor or some other sacrifice?” He had met her a few times, usually when she came as Robin’s date for some event or another. The two of them had a strange relationship, as far as he could tell. They were clearly in love and spent more time together than apart. Robin’s apartment was rarely used and rumor had it that even Roland had a newly decorated room in the mansion that Regina had purchased some years ago. However, they were secretive about their relationship, rarely sitting together in public and displaying no affection at all. Liam compared it to one of those relationships that Killian saw of his middle grades students who were couples in name only and spent most of their time with friends rather than each other.

“I think it is about the song you wrote,” Emma said, tilting her head into his palm and feeling a bit like a cat seeking out friendliness and attention. “She likes what Elsa was doing with it and suggested that it might have some commercial appeal.”

He tilted back, staring out through his impossibly dark lashes at her. “Seriously, love? I thought that was just a gift for the bride and groom.”

She shrugged, fishing her hand out for her drink. “It is, but Mary Margaret said that if it helped Elsa or you, she’s all for selling it to the label. It could mean a nice royalty check for you. I know you aren’t…”

“Don’t let me be the one to stand in the way of something for Elsa,” Killian assured, pulling the mug out of her hand and taking a sip himself. “I don’t think my brother would forgive me for that. And it might be a bit exciting to think that something I wrote is being so well received.”
Killian shoved the phone back into his pocket and turned back to the stack of chairs that would soon be spread out in a semi-circle for his band and orchestra classes. Normally he did these tasks himself, a bit difficult with only one hand but he was capable. This year several of his current and former students had volunteered. Reluctant to accept their help, it was Henry who had said it would be fine and jumped in to schedule everyone. That left the task of emailing lesson and unit plans to the office, as well as ensuring that the names on the rolls and rosters matched the electronic gradebook.

Despite the tension of dealing with Mr. Gold, it felt so much better to have his relationship with Emma out in the open. Not only did he have a photo of the two of them, as well as one of them with Elsa and Liam, he knew that he would not have to deal with the suggestions of dates and awkward moments from co-workers who happened to have extra tickets to every event imaginable. While his phone had quite a few photos of him with Henry on various summer adventures, he had elected not to display those in the idea that other students might get the wrong impression of favoritism.

Belle Gold interrupted his thoughts, stepping into the large music room and scanning her eyes across the forming space. “Are you here?”

Most of the faculty appreciated the fact that the dress code was not enforced for these days, allowing jeans and flip flops instead of more business attire. Belle’s dress was hardly casual though. She wore a flowered peasant dress that flared out over her hips and maintained its full shape to just above her knees. Her petite frame was heightened a good three inches by her impossibly tall shoes. “Of course,” he said, poking his head out of the supply closet that would soon be the resting spot for all his students’ instruments between classes. It was probably the neatest at this point that it would be all year. “Looks as though it has been a restful summer for you.”

The raven haired beauty smiled brightly, smoothing her dress with one hand. “It was, but way too short. I had all these plans for novels I was going to read. And I wanted to take a few day trips to a few places where some of my favorite authors were inspired. There’s never enough time though.”

“No, there isn’t,” Killian agreed, stepping into the room with a gesture toward a few of the unstacked chairs. “So what has you visiting this end of the school?”

Belle sat very primly in the chair that was designed for younger students, her years in the school and small frame making it easier than it was for Killian to fold up into it. “Get right to the point, I suppose. Robert…I hope you know that he does mean well. I know the business this summer was unfortunate.

But no grudges, right?”

Arching an eyebrow, he fought the urge to laugh. “Are you asking me if I have any or telling me that he doesn’t?”

“I suppose that would be a bit much to expect. Anyway, I hope that if anything, you came away with the knowledge that you are loved and respected here. We all want you around. Everyone was eager to help.” She laced her fingers together on her lap. “So when I say this next part, I hope you understand that we all want you to stay.”

He didn’t argue that Gold clearly didn’t, instead waiting curiously for her to finish. “Aye, the support is quite overwhelming.”
“Yes, it often is when we realize how important we are to people. I know that you were looking at other possibilities when your job seemed in jeopardy. Nobody can blame you for that. It could have gone quite badly for you.” She bunched and released a bit of the material. “I have a good friend in Boston. She and I studied in graduate school together. I haven’t seen her in years, but we keep in touch on Facebook and such. I mean it’s not the same, but you know…Anyway…she told me of a position they have open for their public school system. Coordinator and director of music programs throughout the system. Very prestigious and quite well compensated too.”

“Sounds as though it would be.”

“And you are familiar with it,” Belle prodded. “Don’t worry I haven’t said anything to anyone. But I know you interviewed.”

“Aye, but I have not heard anything on it and assumed…”

“She said they are going to call and offer it to you today,” Belle interrupted in a rush. “She’s very reliable on these things and well…I hope you know that you are very much loved and respected here. It’s not easy, but we are a family here and I hope…I hope you remember that when you’re making a decision. I’d hate to see you leave.”

***AAA***

Killian was the most punctual and organized person Emma had ever met, sometimes to the point of annoyance. He arrived everywhere a few minutes early – not enough to be obtrusive, but just the right amount of time that he was settled before the scheduled meeting or activity. His mind was sharp with an itinerary and alternate plans just in case of an emergency. He claimed it came from his brief stint in the Navy – though he couldn’t explain why his brother didn’t share that fortitude.

So when Emma arrived at Granny’s to meet with Elsa and Liam that afternoon to discuss plans for the wedding and recording the song Killian had written, she was surprised by her boyfriend’s absence. Throwing a furtive glance around the half-filled diner, she did not see him at all. Frowning, she scooted into the booth and leaned in to kiss Liam’s cheek and then Elsa’s.

“Did I get the time wrong?” she asked, her lips tightening in confused sort of smile. “Were we supposed to meet an hour from now?”

Liam lifted two fingers to signal the server to bring another menu. “As amazing as it seems, he is late. I am quite worried about the bloke.”

Elsa looked over Emma’s shoulder and smiled sympathetically. “Maybe traffic is bad? He could be hung up with something at work.” Pre-planning had already started with the teachers racing about to finish their classrooms. Even Mary Margaret was pushing off duties for the wedding to make sure that her classroom was perfect for the substitute and eventually her return. However, Killian was a little more utilitarian than any of his co-workers. His bulletin boards were typically schedules and seating charts. There were no behavior posters or motivational sayings. His students sat in assigned seats based on their instruments and chair placement so there was no need for name tags. His lesson plans were nearly complete. So Emma did not even consider that it could be work holding him up. Still she seemed hopeful as she scrolled through her phone for a missed message or other clue. “Maybe?” Finding no clue or message, she was attempting to call him when he rushed in through the door. His hair seemed to curl at the ends from both its length and sweat. His breathing labored, he muttered an apology and buried his face in the menu as though he had never seen it.

“Are you okay?” Emma asked, clearly worried at his frazzled appearance and dazed expression.
When he didn’t answer, she nudged him gently and then a bit harder. “Seriously? Are you alright?”

“Fine,” he said, widening his eyes to indicate his readiness for this conversation. “So what is it that Regina said that has you…”

“She’s ready to move forward with the song,” Emma said after a sigh and another curious glance at her boyfriend. “Of course Elsa would sing it, but she was saying she thinks it might sell better as a duet. I’m afraid with the duet between Liam and Elsa dropping next week that we might be pushing it to add another with you two so soon.”

Liam chuckled, rubbing his thumb across Elsa’s hand. “You want her to sing a long song with someone else? Isn’t that…”

It was Elsa’s turn to laugh as she reached over and pinched her boyfriend’s cheek. “You’re so cute. You really think that every duo singing a duet is in love? I can give you hundreds of examples of just the opposite.”

Emma glanced over at Killian who was scrolling through his phone and humming under his breath. “Regina actually suggested Killian since he wrote the song and she’s heard the rough cuts with him. I told her that he wasn’t interested, but she’s insisting that I ask.” This won no response from him, which certainly concerned her. “And I didn’t know if Elsa would be okay with that either…”

The other blonde peered over her menu at Killian. “I don’t think it would be a bad idea. He and Liam have similar enough voices that on the road…”

“You’re going to sing a love song with my brother?” Liam demanded, clenching his jaw tightly. “I know you might collaborate with other acts, but this is a bit…I don’t know…incestuous.”

“He’s your brother, not mine,” Elsa insisted back. “I’m not singing a love ballad with Anna for goodness sakes.”

Liam continued to grumble as Elsa reassured him and Emma watched Killian with concern. “Are you sure, you’re okay? Did something happen at work?”

“Fine,” he said, leaning over and planting his lips against her cheek. “I’m sorry, love. I need to go and talk to someone. Look whatever Regina wants to do with the song is fine. I’m up for it. Just let me know.”


“I’m sure it will work out. Just let me know,” he repeated, throwing his hand up in greeting and almost dropping the phone. “I can’t stay.”

***AAA***

“It was weird, right? I mean he was late. He’s never late. But he was weird.” Liam slathered a thick layer of mustard on the bread, inspected it and then dipped the knife back in the yellow substance before adding more to it. “My brother is a bloody fool…”
“He was distracted,” Elsa agreed, stealing a chip off of his plate and crunching down on it loudly. “I don’t think it means anything. Something probably just happened at work.”

“Right,” Liam said, nodding in an exaggerated slowness. “It’s hardly our concern right. Except that Emma looked like…”

“I’m sure it is nothing,” Elsa repeated. She didn’t want to add that she had listened to Emma wonder all afternoon about the lunch incident. Clearly something was up with Killian. She knew that despite his need to call Killian out on it, Liam would eventually side with him and Elsa with Emma. It could throw a wrench into their relationship.

“He’s a bloody fool,” the man repeated. “Did Emma seem…I mean I know she plays it pretty close to the vest, but did she…”

“She was concerned, but very business-like. Professional, you know…”

Lifting the sandwich up, Liam stopped just short of taking a big bite of it. “Elsa, I don’t mean to harp on this, but that man who was nervous and jittery. That wasn’t my brother. My brother holds Emma’s hand under the table. He stares at her like every word she says is bloody brilliant. He’s fascinated by her. But that man today wasn’t him. He was barely paying attention, dismissive, uninterested in her. He avoided her eyes, barely acknowledged her, rushed out there without even…I don’t get it. She didn’t say anything about a row, did she?”

Elsa twisted the long chain of her necklace, frowning. “No, but I don’t…Well, she’s pretty private about her private life. I mean I know you’re his brother, but…”

“She looked surprised by his behavior. If they had been fighting, you’d think he would have been all over her to apologize. He thought she was angry about him buying a different brand of cereal and practically wept at her feet over it. My brother is not subtle when it comes to those things.”

“I suppose not,” she agreed. “Why are you making dinner? We have the rehearsal dinner tonight.”

Throwing the sandwich back down on the plate, he frowned. “I needed something to do with my hands.”

She uncrossed her feet and swung one out to kick him lightly. “Come on, chef. Let’s get ready and
get to the banquet hall. I’m sure that there will be food there. And who knows? Maybe your brother will be back to his old self.”

***AAA***

“What’s up with Killian?” Henry asked as he took a break from pouting that his mother wasn’t going to let him wear a Star Wars shirt and board shorts to the dinner. It had been a short but intense battle that Killian had missed as he paced on the deck and talked on his phone.

“What?” Emma asked, digging in her purse to make sure she had everything she wanted to bring with her. “I’m sorry, Henry.”

“Is it contagious? You and Killian are both really weird tonight.” Her son was perceptive, but he was also kind and caring. Still, the fact was that he was annoyed that both adults were ignoring him. “Mom, I’m not a kid. I’ll be 13 in a week. I can handle it.”

“Sorry, kid,” she said, emphasizing the three letter word. “I’m not sure I know what’s going on myself. But I promise to tell you anything that affects you, okay?”

He nodded, shooting his gaze in direction of where Killian was still pacing. “We’re going to have to move again? You’re breaking up?”

She dropped the single earring back into her bag. “Nobody said anything about that.” She dug her hand back into the leather recesses. “Why don’t you check in with your dad? I think he said he would pick you up after this thing.”

When she heard the door shut behind Henry, she made her way with purpose toward the glass doors. Eavesdropping wasn’t really her thing, but she was prepared if necessary. Thankfully Killian’s phone call was over. Standing with his shoulders hunched, he was staring out at the water lapping up on the shore, though she had to wonder if he was seeing anything at all with the distant look in his eyes.

“Killian?”

“Aye, love, it’s me,” he said, laughing momentarily at his little joke. “I’m sorry. I know I have been a bit out of sorts.”
“You have me worried. What’s going on?” She pushed her hand through her hair to hold it in the growing wind from a storm somewhere off shore. It seemed a shame to try to clip or tie it back since she had worked so hard to curl and fashion it to fall in waves down her back. The style seemed to match her soft green dress with the crisscrossing straps over her shoulders that created an almost web of material that culminated at the small of her back. The layers of filmy skirt swished around her thighs and a silvery necklace hung just over her cleavage. He was looking at her appreciatively and maybe a bit hungrily when he turned to face her.

“You know that job I applied for…” It came out in a rush, all the details of Belle’s visit and the phone call offer that he received just as he was leaving to meet them for lunch. His words were practically stringing together as he explained that it was more money than he could ever have dreamed of earning.

“I wouldn’t expect you to pack up and move,” he added hastily. “I know Henry’s settled here. I mean we could look at that in the future, but for now we could see each other on the weekends and holidays. Just for a bit until we decide…”

She closed her eyes, not wanting to see his hopeful expression or the way he was talking around the fact that he was essentially saying that he was leaving her. She knew those words, knew the tone of a man who was about to talk about how it would be hard but he owed it to himself to try this. And she had no doubt that he would try. There would be rushed weekends together until their schedules wouldn’t allow. Phone calls would become shorter and more distracted. He would mention friends she would never meet. There would not be a big blow up or fight. It…their relationship…would just wither on the vine until he would admit that he had met someone new. She drew in a breath before congratulating him.

“That’s great,” she said with as much enthusiasm as she could manage. “I know you will be great at that. And Boston…I lived there once. It was great.”

“So you’d consider it?” he asked, a bit taken aback when she literally stepped away from him and toward the door. “Moving there with me? We could go down and look for places next week. There are some great schools for Henry. I thought you might want more time, but…”

“I can’t move Henry right now,” she said, looking back to where the boy in question had draped himself over the chair as he waited with his handheld game. “He’s got another year of middle school left. And his dad’s here. They are just getting to the point…it wouldn’t be fair.”

“No, I’m sorry. I understand, love. I was just thinking that perhaps…”
“But this job…this opportunity is great. I think you should do it if you want to do it. I mean what is the point of working if you aren’t happy and making a living at it, right? And you’ll love Boston. Right there on the water. So many great people. Bars. Nightlife. You’ll have a blast…And I know Liam will love visiting you there. He’ll probably come up with a million reasons to visit without ever admitting that he misses you.” She hoped that her smile was not wavering, but her bottom lip seemed to her to tremble uncontrollably.

“And you, love?” he asked hesitantly.

“I’ll miss you too…”

He raked his hand over his face and frowned, turning back to the water. “I’m an arse for even thinking that I could disrupt your life and Henry’s. Love, I’m sorry. I’ll turn it down. I love my job here…”

“No, you shouldn’t turn it down. It’s too good. And who knows. Maybe things…”

“Emma, if I took the job, it’s not going to change how I feel about you. Bloody hell, I’d travel every weekend and every night if I had to do it. I want you in my life. That’s not changed.”

Using the tip of her finger, she touched at the corner of her eye. “We can talk about it later,” she said firmly. “We need to go. Mary Margaret and David are expecting us.”

***AAA***

Elsa felt slightly out of place sitting with Mary Margaret’s two attendants since she was performing and not standing up with the bride and groom. They may have been friends, but it still felt a bit like a mismatch as the two women discussed their dresses who would hold the bride’s flowers during the exchanging of the rings and who would try to keep the flower girl, Alexandra, from running back down the aisle screaming.

She did not even get to talk to Emma until Ruby disappeared to check on plans for an impromptu party at the bar. Sensing that time was of the essence, the blonde singer scooted her chair closer and placed a hand over Emma’s. “Is everything…”

“I really can’t talk about it right now,” Emma interrupted, pulling her hand away. “I appreciate the
gesture, but if I let myself think about it or talk about it, I’m going to go nuts. And then I’ll start crying. Besides the fact that I hate letting anyone see me cry, I’m not entirely sure I can stop this time.”

“He’s an idiot,” Elsa confirmed more to herself than Emma, slumping back against the padding of the chair. “I thought he was going to propose and he wants to break up?”

Emma dropped her head to her folded arms. “No,” she said in a muffled tone. “Not exactly.”

“What exactly is going on?” Elsa asked, attempting to wave away Ruby who had returned. It did no good, as Ruby joined them with curiosity dancing in her bright eyes. “What did he say?”

Despite her protests that she didn’t want to talk about it, Emma found herself telling both of them about Killian’s job offer and subsequent plans. She shrugged though her eyes brimmed with unshed tears. “I don’t know. Maybe it could work.”

Ruby cast a glance over to where Killian sat with Henry. It was clear the man was suffering, probably aching to be closer to Emma. However, he was relegated to that table while Emma suffered more than 100 feet away. “What did he say when you told him you wanted him to stay?”

“I didn’t,” Emma said. “He wants the job. I can’t stand in the way of that. What kind of person would I be if I…”

“So you’re moving then?” Elsa asked, looking downward. “I’m sure Regina would let you keep managing us. We could skype and talk on the phone. Once Anna has the baby, we’ll be touring all the time anyway…”

“I can’t move Henry,” she said, her voice cracking. “Neal’s just finally stepping up to the plate as a father. I can’t pull them apart now. It wouldn’t be fair.”

Ruby snorted, earning a stern glance from her grandmother and a few of the more proper women. “You think that Neal wouldn’t rush off to another state if given the opportunity. You’d be lucky if he sent Henry a postcard on the way out of town. No, you’re not using that jerk as an excuse. Why are you really freaking out? Is it because this could be it…forget proposals and happily ever after in the cottage by the sea. You and Killian and Henry could really have a real life together without friends, Liam, and the rest of Storybrooke?”

Emma waved a hand in front of her face. “It’s not that. I’m not scared…”
“Petrified?” Ruby suggested to a frowning Elsa.

“Maybe you aren’t,” Elsa considered slowly. “Maybe it’s just that you know that this is a big deal and you’re realizing that for once in your life that you’re enough.”

“I thought you studied musical theater,” Ruby groused, throwing her head back to down the rest of her drink. “Seems more like psychology.”

“No, I just come from a situation where sometimes I didn’t feel like I was enough. My parents had me and my mom almost died giving birth. But I wasn’t enough so she risked her life to have Anna. They were always happiest when Anna was with them. With me it was like they were waiting for Anna to arrive. I was never enough. When I dated I wasn’t enough. The list goes on, but I think that maybe Emma has those feelings too.” She reached back to squeeze Emma’s hand. “And I’m here to tell you that you’re more than enough for that man. He is crazy about you. He’d do anything for you, including giving up that job. So just tell him what you want.”

As Emma remained silent, Ruby narrowed her alcohol fuzzy eyes back at her friends. “That’s it,” she said in a softer voice than most inebriated people used. “Neal…when he left you. He said you weren’t enough. He needed something more…”

Emma nodded almost imperceptibly and said one name. “And the Swans.”

“Oh God,” Ruby said, placing her own hands on top of Elsa’s that were on top of Emma’s. “That was all them. They were stupid and moronic people. The Swans, the foster people from hell, the group homes, the kids, that asshole, Neal. All of them were looking for something that doesn’t exist and never saw you for who you are, Emma. Killian Jones sees you. He knows you. And the fact that the man keeps coming back for more means that he isn’t going to run. He loves you. You didn’t doubt that until today. So quit it. Quit letting yourself think that what happened with Neal is going to happen with Killian.”

“Now who’s sounding like a psychologist?” Elsa teased. “But Ruby’s right.”

“If I ask him to stay, he might regret it. He might blame me.”

“He might,” Ruby agreed, managing to miss Elsa’s kick to silence her. “But he will still be there with you. And I bet that your future with him will be better than any silly job. I get that your childhood
sucked. I know what it’s like to get rejected by your parents – biological or otherwise. But you can’t live your life trying to predict when that is going to happen. You’re not always going to know. And if you try, you’re going to miss out on some great things. Not everyone rejects you, Em. I haven’t. Mary Margaret, Anna, Elsa, Henry, my grandmother, David, Graham, August, Liam, Robin, and the list goes on. But at the top of it is Killian Freaking Jones. So get your head out of your butt and go tell him what you want. You might figure out that it is what he wants too.”

She shook her head. “I can’t be the reason he isn’t happy,” she said, standing up. “I know you mean well, but this isn’t something you can fix.”

***AAA***

“Emma, I think we should talk,” Killian said suddenly as the jeep hummed along the seaside road that wound through the thick trees with occasional glimpses of the water. Not even the radio was playing, the couple sitting in relative silence as the distance between them and Neal’s place became greater.

She was not really responsive, sort of shrugging her shoulders as she twisted to face her window. A quick glance in her direction afforded him to see the deep set frown reflected back in the window. “Maybe grab a bite and eat on the deck?”

“Killian,” she said, laboring over the name. “We don’t have to drag this out. I know you want to take the job.” She still didn’t turn, tugging on the shoulder strap of her seatbelt in frustration. “I can understand that. It’s more money. More prestige. I get it. I would want it too. And maybe we can work things out in the future. You know, Henry’ll be starting high school soon. I could look for…”

“Emma, I’m not taking the job,” he answered firmly. “It isn’t worth it.”

She whipped her head quickly toward him. “You don’t want it?”

“I want you. I want Henry. I don’t want to watch you from afar and feel like I can’t smile at you or kiss you. I don’t want phone calls and hurried trips. It’s a job, love. Just a job. I can find...I can find another one if it is something we both feel I should do. But I’m okay staying a teacher. I rather like teaching.” He tapped his thumb erratically on the steering wheel he was gripping. “I know you would rather I had some other sort of…”

She cranked her neck back and closed her eyes. “Can we just stop? I don’t want you to be anything other than who you are? If you want to write music, great. If you want to perform, I will help set that up for you. But if you want to teach, then I’m happy you are doing what you want to do. Damn it, Killian, stop acting like I am pushing you into something more. I fell in love with Killian the teacher who has an amazing heart and loves me and my son. I fell in love with the man who thinks about lesson plans in the middle of the night and can’t wait to write them down. I can’t live without the man who considers it a bad day when his students don’t understand a concept and celebrates good grades. I adore the man who sings to me when we’re out on your boat and tells me that I inspire him. That man is you, Killian. And so no, I’m not pushing you to change. The idea of you changing scares the hell out of me. But what I want most of all is for you to be happy. And if you want to change, then do it. I will happily comply. I’m just saying that you can’t blame me for it. I didn’t ask it of you…”
The tires on the jeep protested as he swerved off the road and locked down the brakes, both of them lurching forward and back again with grunts. “I can’t drive and have this conversation.”

She looked confused by that, but she didn’t ask. Instead, she stared into the darkening thicket with feigned interest. “Ok.”

“Milah,” he said, stopping for a moment at that name. “She…she had plans, dreams really. We were going to be rich and famous. I was going to be a musician and she was going to do all of my publicity. She wanted…she wanted me to be more than I was. And that’s lovely, I suppose because she pushed me. Then…then it was too much.”

“Too much?”

“There was a reality show, sort of like the ones here that pit you against others and the prize is cash and a contract. She signed me up for it, never asked. I asked her that night if we might consider moving our relationship forward and getting married. She told me that I wasn’t ready for that. Said I couldn’t support myself, let along someone else. Then she launched this idea about the show as we were driving back with Robin and his first wife, Marian. I was furious.” Though they were stopped, Killian’s eyes were still trained ahead and his hand gripped the wheel tightly. “I was bloody well furious at her, told her as much too. She was adamant that I wasn’t good enough yet. I wasn’t worthy of her. Marian was trying to calm us down, told us to be quiet before we said something we regretted.”

Realization hit Emma suddenly. The car accident that had taken Killian’s hand had taken Marian and Milah that night too. He was telling her about that night, explaining that haunted look in his eyes that was eclipsed by one of her own. Reaching a hand out to his forearm, she was not all that shocked when he pulled away from her.

“I told Milah that I would never be good enough and that we should end it. I started that night with a ring in my pocket for her and yet there I was telling her that I couldn’t be with her anymore. I couldn’t keep beating myself up over imagined failures in her eyes. It was just too much.” His eyes dropped downward as he swallowed hard. “I didn’t hear her response. I didn’t see the other car cross the line and hit us. We spun to the left and the passenger side was hit by the lorry that was behind us. Milah and Marian took the brunt of it.”

She knew why he stopped the jeep, not wanting to have the same conversation with her as he had with Milah in a moving vehicle. She breathed out, attempting to cease the pictures in her mind. Liam had shown her a picture of Milah before, commenting that his brother had gone against type in falling in love with her. The woman had been tall with dark curling hair and eyes so bright they seemed to glow from within. Her head was tilted and the grin on her full lips was one that seemed friendly and flirty as she sat perched on Killian’s lap, her hand over his around her waist. “It wasn’t your fault,” she offered weakly. Platitudes, she supposed, were the worst form of sympathy. She knew from her own past that people offered them like candy.

Exhaling through his nose, he finally turned his head toward her. “It was a tragic accident. It was the other driver’s fault. I know all that. I bloody hear it all the time. I moved here after I recovered enough and became a teacher. It would have pissed her off to know that I gave up performing to teach. And yet I…”

“You’re good at it,” Emma said with a firmness that didn’t overwhelm the care she was trying to show. “Henry used to come home and tell me how awesome you were in the classroom that day. I…I’m proud of that, Killian. My job may have a bigger salary or a glitzier title, but it doesn’t do anything. I don’t have the opportunity to change things like you do. I don’t get to see the things you see. So if Milah would have been ashamed of that, it’s on her. Teaching makes you happy. I know
that. You know that. And if anyone thinks otherwise, well, they are idiots.”

“A teacher is good enough for you?” he asked hesitantly.

“You’ve always been good enough,” she said back emphatically. “Damn, I think you just proved Ruby right. Maybe we’re both good enough but we just don’t believe that about our selves.”

“I know you hate it when she is right,” he teased. His hand finally left the steering wheel, for a moment reaching for her and then retreating as he brushed his it over the front pocket of his jacket. He smiled. “You wouldn’t mind being married to a teacher?”

She realized what he was about to do, and smiled back at him encouragingly. “I don’t think I would mind that at all,” she said softly and he fished the box out of his jacket. “I am pretty sure I fall in love with a certain teacher more every day.”

“I wasn’t planning to ask you in a car.”

“Or a bar or with a jar? Sorry, being around Roland at the rehearsal dinner has me quoting Dr. Seuss.” She grinned at the nervous and yet frustrated way he fumbled with the box. “Ask me.”

He ran his thumb over the seam of the box, not yet opening it, his eyes following his own movements. With a gentle lift of her fingers under his chin, she forced his gaze up and repeated her two word request. “Emma? Will you marry me?”

She nodded, not speaking at first, the bobbing of her head almost frantic. “Yes,” she finally managed. “Yes, Killian. I will marry you.”
Chapter 37

So I am taking a moment from flailing over NYCC spoilers and snippets to post this. This chapter is pretty long, but I had to set up the next chapter that is going to have a bit of drama. But now with some wedding fluff. By the way I was asked how long Killian and Emma have been dating. In this fic about 7 months.

Emma wasn't sure that she would ever truly be over the fact that she had said yes to marrying the man she loved, as she had been so sure earlier that evening that they were going to mutually decide to end things. And yet there in the bedroom with her head resting on his bare chest and her fingers making nonsensical shapes in the wiry hair, she could catch the glint of sapphire and diamond ring that caught the light.

"Should I be worried that you keep staring at that ring as though it is on someone else's hand?" he teased, startling her with the fact that he was still awake. They had arrived home several hours before from the rehearsal dinner and wasted no time pouncing on one another. Taking advantage of the fact that Henry was at Neal's, they had not really talked out any details of anything. Instead they had appreciated the privacy and each other on a few surfaces that were usually off limits.

"Just thinking," she said, twisting her head to prop her chin up and meet his gaze. "You already had a ring?"

He chuckled, running his hand down her bare arm slowly, caressing her left hand and then lacing his fingers with hers. "I purchased it about a month ago. It's not my mother's, though I did have that in mind when I had it designed. I knew I wouldn't find anything in a store that came close to what I would want for you."

Lifting their joined hands toward her, she smiled. "I love it," she told him. "But you didn't answer my question. You have been carrying it around on you?"

"I had a plan," he admitted sheepishly. "Before all this business about the job in Boston, I had arranged with Henry for me to ask you. I was going to take you out on the water for a midnight sail, profess my love to you, and ask you to marry me. I thought that doing so on the water would provide me ample opportunity to beg you if you were hesitant. No place for you to run." He couldn't have missed the way her muscles all tightened at the mention of her tendency to run, but he was patient as she let it course through her. "Love, I didn't do this on a whim. I want to marry you. I want to spend the rest of my life with you."

She blinked back her tears. "I want to marry you too," she said, appreciating that his smile grew when she said that just as plainly. His flowery speeches were nice, but he could appreciate her frankness just as much. "We do need to figure out this Boston thing though."

If his hand had been free he probably would have raked it through his hair and or at least given that characteristic swiping scratch behind his ear that he did when nervous or uncomfortable. "I don't wish to take it and be separated from you. I'd rather stay here."

"I hate the idea that you're giving up something so important for me…"

"Some day," he said, lifting their hands to his mouth and giving hers a gentle kiss, "Some day you will realize the depth of my love for you. There is nothing in this world that would make me happier or more content than to spend the rest of my days waking up with you in my arms, laughing and enjoying our time together, making love to you, and wondering what I have done to deserve such a
beautiful and brilliant lass. The location and circumstances don't matter at all to me. Neither does my profession. There is nothing I wouldn't do to be with you, my love. I would slay dragons, give you foot massages every night, scrub toilets, procure onion rings for every meal – anything."

She squeezed his hand in hers. "Even sing a duet with Elsa?"

If he had seemed surprised when she agreed to marry him – he may have asked twice more to be sure before driving them home – that question sent his normally cream colored complexion to nearly snow white. His blue eyes grew to the size of saucers and his lips parted wordlessly as he stared at her. "What the bloody hell?"

"I knew you were distracted at lunch," she teased, glad to be on the more knowing end of things. "Regina suggested that your song might do better commercially as a duet. We also decided that it was too soon after releasing the one with Liam and Elsa to do well. So everyone sort of thought you should do it. I told her that you wouldn't, but she insisted that I ask."

"And I agreed to this?" he stammered out, giving his best impression of how he had worried she would wake up and feel seeing the engagement ring on her finger.

"You didn't disagree," she clarified, waiting a beat before laughing. "You don't have to do it. I was just wondering if you were even aware of that conversation. I told you that I'd never pressure you into performing or anything with music. That's your choice what you do with your talent..."

His eyes had been watching her intensely, looking for any sign that she was just teasing or exaggerating. However, there was none and his memories of the awkward lunch only seemed to confirm that she was telling the truth. "When?"

"Killian, you don't have to do it," she said, losing that mischievous glint and tone.

"I'm a man of my word. And perhaps it wouldn't be horrible."

They made no firm decision in those wee hours, instead agreeing only to talk to Elsa and see how she felt. The song, even with Regina's excitement, was first and foremost a wedding gift. And the wedding was only hours away. As soon as that topic changed, his own mannerisms seemed lighter and less taut.

"Should we tell Henry today?" she asked after they decided that announcing their engagement to everyone might be in his words "bad form" at the wedding of another couple. She was not willing to take the ring off, but they had no plans to stand in front of the assembled group and formally declare anything. What could they tell people anyway? They had no wedding plans and there were still things to work out with all of the details.

"I suppose he would like to know how it turned out."

Her brow knitted together as she watched him again pull her hand up, this time adding her wrist to the spots that he brushed his lips against with a smile growing each time. "You told him you were going to ask?"

There was a shyness to his smile as he again pressed his lips to the pulse in her wrist. "I promised him that he would be included on my decision to propose. He may have even accompanied me to the store about your ring."

She tried to recall where they had been over the past few weeks, questioning herself about what she had missed. "The day you shopped with him for Violet's present? Please God tell me that you didn't encourage him to buy her a ring too."
"No, not that date but not long after. And our conversation was quite the opposite, love. But we did discuss my procuring this bauble for you and when I might ask. Plans were for your birthday, actually." He wrinkled his nose. "I suppose I grew impatient."

"That's just next month," she noted. "But I am glad you did it anyway. And apparently my son approves and won't freak out when he finds out you did. Wait…you didn't think you had to ask his permission or something. He's my son, not a parent."

"It wasn't permission as much as it was asking for his blessing. I love you and Henry both. I would not wish to insert myself into your life without his acceptance. And if he had disapproved, I would have just worked harder to win him over. I can be very charming, you know." Thick and dark eyebrows raised and lowered wildly as he teased.

"I guess I have to give you that," she challenged back, squealing as he rolled them so that she was on her back and he hovered over her. "You did make me fall in love with you despite my wishes not to."

"Forced to love a man you can't keep your hands off of," he teased with a click of his tongue against the roof of his mouth. "Such a horrible fate. To look at that beautiful smile one would never believe that you are in love with me due to duress. Perhaps I should stage a rescue mission, my love. Should I arrive on a trusty steed and whisk you away, fair princess?" He lowered his mouth to hers, nipping at her bottom lip as their joined hands ground into the pillow next to her ear.

"I don't need rescuing," she breathed out against his mouth, "but I wouldn't mind seeing you on a horse."

The stubble tickled her as he dropped kisses along her jawline and chin before returning briefly to her mouth and back in the line again. However, it was her tiny sighs and moans that caught his attention rather than her giggles. "You sound quite like a lass in distress. Perhaps we should rethink this."

Her freehand found the hair curling at the nape of his neck and buried there as he kissed her slowly and languidly. She pulled him toward her more, but he did not speed up his movements, eliciting frustrated and intense moans from her. "We need to get some sleep," she protested as he again pulled back to appreciate the glow of her skin and her panting smile. "I have to stand up in front of all those people to support my friends. I don't need to look as though I've been doing this all night."

He teased her more both with his body and words as he mentioned that some of her friends might be a bit jealous. It was something that the two of them could experience that she had never felt before – the way they could bring the sass and playfulness into their lives in even the most intimate of moments. Nothing was ever normal or the same about them, both holding onto each other intensely one moment and stifling laughs the next.

And despite the fact that she did have to speak to the makeup artist privately the later that morning about hiding some of the marks he had left, she didn't regret a moment of her time alone with Killian.

***AAA***

Emma ran the tip of her index finger over the back of her earring, checking it again out of fear of losing it. One of the gifts that Mary Margaret had given to her two attendants and Elsa was a set of matching jewelry. The earrings, which were called shooting stars, climbed up her ear with a series of small diamonds. They seemed a bit loose when she first put them in, leaving her to worry about their placement.
"Did you see the loot?" Ruby asked, the dark haired woman looking every bit the fashion model even in her terry cloth robe that matched Emma's and had her name on the back. "She freaking got us personalized baskets of stuff as a thank you for dealing with her melt downs and dramatics. It's like we're celebrities at an awards show getting swag bags."

Emma had seen the overflowing basket of goodies on the table, but had yet to look at it closely and had assumed it was just a generic gift. Curiosity got to her with Ruby's enthusiastic description and sent her scrambling to check. Sure enough her basket was filled with trinkets that probably had not cost that much but were filled with sentimental value. There were notepads with her first initial, a pen with their names and the date of the wedding, photo frames that were filled with shots of the girlfriends having fun at various occasions, a photo that Emma had never seen of herself and Henry from his very first day of school. And a photo that Emma had assumed would be too awkward for the light of day that had been taken the night she and Killian had first had dinner together with the other couple. The stiffness of their poses was evidence of their discomfort, but she could see past it the warmth in Killian's eyes as he looked at her rather than the camera and the way couldn't even hide the smile at his arm strategically hugging her shoulders.

Ruby peered over her shoulder, scoffing a bit. "You look ready to run. I hope your engagement announcement photo is something better than that."

Emma smiled back at her photographed self. "I think we have a few that might work. But honestly I don't think we're going to go through the whole announcement…" She stopped, dropping the frame back among the gifts. "You know?"

Ruby shrugged, sauntering over to the clothing rack where their dresses were hanging. "You forgot to take your ring off until after you got here. And you totally have started that whole throw your hand around like you're the only one in the world to have ever snared a guy and landed a ring on that finger. I mean congrats and all, but you're not fooling anyone."

While she had told Killian that morning that she didn't want to take the ring off, he had pointed out that keeping things under wraps meant no new jewelry on display. Besides, he had promised her, kissing a line from her ear to her mouth. He would appreciate the opportunity to slide it back onto her hand that evening without the nerves of the proposal.

"Yeah, about that," Emma said, her eyes squeezing shut as she steadied herself for the onslaught of Ruby's diatribe about remaining single and not letting a man convert your name. "I was going to tell you soon. I swear. I just didn't want to ruin…"

"Congratulations!" Ruby said, throwing her long arms around her friend. "Seriously. I feel like I'm partially responsible. I mean I did help Granny set you two up."

Emma leaned back out of the embrace and placed the back of her hand against Ruby's cheek and then forehead. "What have you done with Ruby Lucas? You must be an imposter."

"Maybe it's the bottle of champagne in the other room," she said nonchalantly. "Or maybe I'm not the crazed single woman you claim." She pursed her blood red lips. "Or maybe it's the setting. I mean this is pretty sweet and perfectly matrimonial."

Shaking her head, Emma looked toward her friend with mock horror. "I'm going with the champagne and cutting you off. No more drinking until the reception. I don't want to have to roll you down the aisle with a bucket just in case."

"No chance of that," Mary Margaret announced, walking in with as sardonic of a grin as the eternal optimist could muster. "Do you really think that I would tempt my friends with the real stuff before
my wedding? You two are giving toasts later. I don't need to worry that you have drank too much and turned into truthful but vindictive little monsters." She lifted the bottle that was in Emma's basket. "See, genuine and 100% fruit juice."

"There goes that theory," Ruby slurred for effect. "Anyway, get this over with. Tell the bride your news so that she can test out this water proof makeup stuff." She swept her arm out grandly and grinned. "And go ahead and promise us now how you won't be abandoning us…"

"Abandoning us?" Mary Margaret asked, looking thoroughly confused. "Wait! Killian isn't…I mean you guys aren't…" She sighed. "You're moving away, aren't you? Killian found a job someplace else and we're going to have to be those friends who Skype and call and eventually just become names on a Christmas card list." She pinched the bridge of her nose with her finger and thumb. "I know this is all part of us being adults, but I hate it. I am going to miss you so much…" She broke off, emitting a strangled sob before launching herself into Emma's arms.

It was Ruby who rolled her eyes first. "Just tell her already."

"I didn't want to ruin your special day," Emma said, glad that the terry cloth robe was so thick that it was absorbing the tears. "But Killian and I got engaged last night…he proposed after your…"

"Engaged?" Mary Margaret asked, her head popping up from where she had buried it in Emma's shoulder and her voice perking up at the word. "Seriously? As in getting married?"

"Unbelievable, right?" Ruby chimed in, pulling Mary Margaret away like the bride was a hysterical fan crushing on an entertainer. "Emma, go get the ring and show her."

Looking back and forth between her two friends, Emma gave in with a sigh and turned to dig the ring out of her bag. She slid it onto her finger, the weight of it already feeling like a familiar friend. As she expected, Mary Margaret oohed and ahhed over the ring, asking questions about the proposal and offering suggestions.

"You mean he didn't get down on one knee or anything?" Ruby asked, pulling her friend's hand over for a better look. "I thought he was more traditional."

"It didn't seem necessary. I'm not big on the whole ceremony for the sake of ceremony." She threw her hand over her mouth with a gasp. "I didn't mean that about today, Mary Margaret."

"No, I get it," the teacher said pulling Emma's left hand back toward her. "You aren't me. You probably would have been okay with the living together forever thing without worrying about getting married. You're more independent than me. And that's one of the things we all love about you."

"I think you're confusing me for you," Emma teased. "I can't have a wedding like this one. I couldn't even halfway fill up this church. I don't have the family and friends…"

"You have more than you think," the bride said with a knowing nod. "I don't have sisters. But I have the two of you. David and I know we won't ever have nieces or nephews because of that. But I have Henry and whoever else comes along. I never knew my grandparents, but I have Granny. We all lack for blood relatives, Emma, but we find our own family. And it is so much more special because we choose each other. That's more important than a crazy cousin or aunt getting drunk at your reception."

***AAA***

The church where they were holding the ceremony was the perfect New England sort of place with
its stone façade and towering trees around it. The pews were packed with friends and distant family of the bride and groom, leaving almost nobody in the town itself. Killian and Liam managed to snag seats together, wanting to see Emma and Elsa without worry. And while Elsa was behind the wall waiting for her cue, Emma made the long walk down the aisle on her son's arm and carrying a bouquet of fresh flowers. The slow march toward the front seemed to last forever, but she locked eyes with her now fiancé and couldn't help but smile at the wink he gave her in indication that he too was having thoughts about the day he would see her walking toward him.

Wearing the light lemony dress with her hair half up in a braided crown and the rest curling precisely down her back, Emma seemed to practically float. Only her occasional tugs at Henry's arm for walking to fast were evidence that she was not actually some sort of professional bridesmaid. She smiled at Killian just as the photographer snapped another shot from his kneeling position just to the side of the aisle.

Killian felt his chest practically bursting with pride at seeing her and catching the occasional glint of the ring that seemed quite at home there. And it seemed to overflow at the way Henry counted out his steps with focus he usually reserved for playing his trumpet. His eyes felt wet and he worried that he might make a fool of himself by crying in front of all these people. It wasn't even the wedding that was making him emotional, but the thought that these two people were now part of his life forever. Thankfully his brother could be counted on to lighten the mood.

"When did we get so lucky?" Liam stage whispered as Emma continued and they could no longer even see her profile. "I know that I'm quite the catch, but you…You are one lucky bloke to con a woman like Emma into loving you."

So much for family loyalty, Killian thought wryly as Ruby came into view next. The demure yellow dress seemingly clinging to her even more than it had to Emma. "There's something I need to tell you…"

Liam laughed, probably too loudly for the inside of the church with the cheerful strains of the string quartet ushering in the attendants. "You mean you're going to admit you finally proposed and she was either daft enough or snockered enough to say yes? I saw the ring, brother. But congratulations. Like a said, lucky bloke."

The large muscular arm of his older brother crushed around him and earned a few dirty glances from others in attendance. "We haven't announced it yet, but I thought you'd wish to know. After all…"

"We're family," Liam finished, finally remembering his inside voice. "And I'm about to have a sister and nephew. I am quite pleased with this development."

Puckering his lips as if he had tasted something sour, Killian whispered furtively to the other man. "Don't say that to Emma, mate. I don't want her to realize that you're part of the package deal. You may find yourself charming, but I know the real you."

Mary Margaret's entrance silenced the two as she glided into view in what Emma had called a mash up between the traditional princess dress and the modern gown of a woman who was trying to hide the slight indication of her pregnancy. Ruby had worked tirelessly on it and even spent four hours finding the perfect combination of pearl headband and glittering tiara to sit nestled in the pageboy style haircut of the bride and hold the lacey veil in place. Only those closest to the couple knew why she held the cascading bouquet the way that she did.

Killian noticed that Emma was wiping at her eyes when Elsa sang, as was his brother. The song, which had come easily to him when he let himself think of Emma, spoke of finding a home not in a place but with a person. The lyrics told the story of broken lives repaired and finding yourself again
in the eyes of another because they believe in you when nobody else does. And though Liam did not often offer praise, a squeeze to his leg and solid nod said more than flowery words could. He caught Emma’s gaze while Elsa crooned out another bit of the chorus, the green eyes of his fiancé dancing with delight as he winked at her. She had once told him that he was a terrible winker, something he denied though knew was true.

It might not have been very traditional, but those assembled broke into applause as Elsa finished the song. Even the bride, who had heard it already (something she insisted on since her pregnancy hormones had her very emotional and likely to break down sobbing at a surprise), threw her arms around the blonde singer and enthused about how wonderful it was. It took the priest another few minutes to settle everyone down before the couple could exchange vows.

Killian was quite impressed that both the bride and groom spoke clearly and expressed their love so well. Neither stumbled over their words as the pledged themselves to each other and promised each other a future filled with love and family. He knew from the bachelor party and rehearsal dinner that David was more than a little nervous about this development, but he had told Killian that the nerves only stood to prove how important this all was to him. Had it meant nothing, he wouldn't have cared so much about it all.

Liam was fiddling with his phone and took the annoyed glare of his brother in stride as he tapped out a message. The fact that it wasn't Elsa on the receiving end was enough to earn a jab in the ribs. "What on earth?"

"It's work," Liam hissed back. With the church filled, it was hard to imagine that anyone was left in Storybrooke. However, Killian knew that David's ex, Katheryn had not attended, nor had Zelena, Mal, and Lily for their own reasons. Regina had been a reluctant guest, saying she felt as if she was betraying her friends. However, Robin needed a date to the wedding where his son was a ring bearer. She had recoiled at the suggestion he take someone else.

Killian waved his hand at the couple standing at the altar. "You do realize there is a wedding going on. Show some respect."

***AAA***

Taking the stage, even in a church that was filled with people she knew, was not something that Elsa liked to do alone. Her eyes first scanned the few rows of the church in search of Liam or her sister, but could not locate either. Singing the song that Killian had written was not exactly impromptu. Yet she felt that surge of adrenaline hitting her and sending her careening toward near panic levels as the pianist and other musicians played the first few notes.

Thank goodness for Emma she thought, as the other blonde woman gave her a tip of the head that seemed for all the world to be encouraging. She did not flinch as Elsa began to sing of finding love in ordinary circumstances that contradicted the strength of its emotion. The singer could only hope that her voice was steady and did not warble among the notes. With each phrase her confidence grew and by the chorus she had spotted Liam and shared a look before turning her attention back to the bride and groom. Finally the song was over and Mary Margaret's tearful expression was not unexpected as she pulled Elsa in for a hug.

Elsa took a grateful seat on the front pew after the song, watching gleefully as Mary Margaret and David exchanged vows and Emma tried valiantly to hide her left hand beneath the cascade of flowers. That had done nothing to hide the smile she won't stop flashing at Killian or the way that she practically sighed at moments in the ceremony.

She was certainly happy for her friend and already considering how to congratulate her. There was
just one thing that weighed heavily on her. Liam. Was he going to take a cue from his brother? Would he want to get married too? She wasn't opposed exactly, but she wasn't in a hurry either. She did not have a son like Emma or a baby on the way like Anna and Mary Margaret. She was happy with her life. And the step of getting married seemed best for the future not the present.

However, how could she explain that to Liam without him seeing it as rejection? It was silly she decided, as she smiled through Mary Margaret's personal vows about having always imagined a life with him and all her dreams coming true. She did love Liam, but marriage was not something she was even ready to consider. It was silly, she told herself. He wasn't even hinting at it, but still... He and Killian were competitive as brothers. Would Killian's engagement spark something in Liam?

Shaking her head slightly, she concentrated on the fact that Roland had spotted his father and was waving enthusiastically in the direction of his parent. Both Henry and Graham had hands on the boy's shoulders to keep him place. On the other side of the altar stood both Emma and Ruby, as well as an impossibly blonde Alexandra. The little girl had nearly dislodged her crown of flowers off of her golden ringlets as she rubbed up against the skirt of Emma's dress and at one point wrapped her arms around Emma's legs and plopped to the floor with her basket of flowers tumbling over.

Leave it to a teacher to find nothing that unusual about the children's behavior, as Mary Margaret smiled and laughed adorably at the scene playing out. Her voice was steady as she slid a platinum band onto her husband's finger and she seemed to breathing in the moment to remember everything as he slid one onto hers. Unscripted, David lifted her trembling hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles, a move that left half the women in attendance swooning. Elsa was close enough to hear Mary Margaret's gentle sigh and then her teasing words that called him Prince Charming, an inside joke between the two.

However, it was all back to smiles and excitement by the time it was over. To the sound of her delighted squeal, he yanked her into his chest and lifted her off the ground as he kissed her solidly and without restraint. Everyone jumped to their feet and cheered the couple's new union and affectionate display, even Mary Margaret's pseudo uncles who were all sitting rather uncomfortably in suits that didn't quite fit. One in particular was cheering loudest of all, a short in stature man named Leroy who was the grumpiest man Elsa had ever met. He called all women sister and tended to snarl rather than smile. But even he was celebrating the wedding with loud calls and whistles.

***AAA***

The reception itself was a short distance away at the town's country club. The long driveway to the spacious estate like building was lined with colorful oaks that provided a beautiful canopy that would be lit with thousands of twinkle lights after dark. The guests rode past the impressive golf course and polo fields that would have normally been a hotbed of activity. Rolling fields of green spread out for what felt like miles. Even inside the impressive building, the outdoor views coincided with natural looking displays of flowers on the tables and a homier atmosphere than most assumed from the location.

Once the photographer had finished with the obligatory photos, she settled in to snap candid shots until the first dance of the couple, the cake cutting and throwing of the garter and bouquet. Emma took the opportunity to leave her post at the head table to share a dance with her fiancé before being summoned back to duty.

Liam couldn't help but feel happy for his brother, who was most clearly in love with the woman and even more so now than he had ever seen. Elsa danced with her boyfriend, commenting on the same and asking if he had noticed Emma's ring.

"Worst kept secret ever," Liam mused, dramatically dipping Elsa to her delighted squeal. "But they
are trying so hard to act like everything is normal."

"It's kind of cute." She smoothed her hand over his lapel. "The good news is that I think they will
have a smaller wedding than either this or my sister's. I could see them eloping."

"Over my dead body," Liam argued emphatically. "I fully intend to be standing next to my brother as
he sees her walk down the aisle."

"You're such a protective big brother."

"Killian always called me a bit bossy," he confessed. "I imagine that Anna did the same with you?"
He slowly lowered his hand along her back.

"You would be right. Though that mostly came out when we were playing pretend. I wanted to be a
queen and tell everyone what to do. I find myself still having that desire sometimes."

"Is that so? Perhaps this is something we should explore further? In private?" The crinkle of his eyes
and his lopsided grin practically did her in. "Bloody hell but I best not tease you for risk of winding
myself too tight. Zelena's been texting all day with concerns over orders and such."

The blonde frowned, her hands running down the lapels of his jacket. "She's awfully needy. Have
you noticed that?"

"She's a businesswoman," he said with a lift of his shoulders. "I know she is a bit of a perfectionist,
but it is all in the name of her entrepreneurial spirit."

***AAA***

Ruby attempted to pull her dress into the right position with one hand as she emerged from the dimly
lit corner. Her other hand was assessing the damage to her hair from the quick tryst that had gone
unnoticed as far as she knew. Graham would be following momentarily, having heeded her warning
to wait at least two minutes before emerging.

"Forget the hair," Emma said, sidling up to her friend. "The smeared lipstick and the fact that you
can't quit smiling is making you look more and more guilty."

"At least the photos are over?" Ruby commented out of the corner of her mouth as she let herself be
led to the ladies' room. It wasn't like it was the first time that the friends had done this sort of thing. "I
mean they seriously can't take any more of us?"

"Don't count on it," Emma said with a serious tone, stepping over a stack of shoes people had
discarded to continue dancing. "That woman keeps lurking around here. I halfway expect her to pop
up out of a potted plant or something."

Ruby allowed her friend to repair the damage to her once intricately styled hair as she reapplied a bit
of the lipstick and powder. She was eternally grateful when near disaster struck that she had lost an
earring. However, Emma found it perched precariously on the yellow fabric gathers and threatening
to be tossed to the floor.

"Shouldn't you be...I don't know...taking notes or pics for your Pinterest wedding page?" Ruby
asked, catching her friend's eye in the mirror. "I know you don't want this big of a thing..."

"Don't even suggest that."

"I know. I know. But you need to do something. I mean Granny is going to have a coronary if
another of her set up couples get married without her in attendance. She practically strung up the last ones that eloped."

"Your grandmother is too much sometimes," Emma muttered, a bobby pin between her lips. "Too much."

"Don't I know it? The woman lives vicariously through you guys. I'm a lost cause and she…"

"She's looking pretty cozy with the good doctor out there." Emma's eyes sparkled as she nearly impaled Ruby with the pin. "And I heard Marco asking her to dance."

Eyes wide and hand over her chest, Ruby gasped for breath. "Are you calling my grandmother a player?"

"Just saying she may have been distracted enough to not notice your little disappearing act with Graham. It was Graham, right?"

"Alright, Emma, I'm not going to bring up the fact that Killian kissed you more passionately than David and Mary Margaret earlier. I mean that was a big ole smooch." She laughed at the pink already rising on the blonde's cheeks. "Do I need to take Henry tonight? Or are you two done celebrating?"

Though she couldn't really come up with the words to deny it, Emma came up with the next best retort. She stuck her tongue out at the reflected image of her friend and turned quickly on her heels. "See you out there in a few?"

***AAA***

Elsa sighed against Liam's shoulder, her eyes fluttering shut as the noise of the reception seemed to dull in her ears. She knew that she should be mingling, as even Emma had pointed out that Regina and Zelena (fresh from the bar crisis) had made an appearance at the event. "It's good for business," she had said with a wink before disappearing back onto the dance floor with Killian.

"I never know how long we are supposed to stay at these things," Liam muttered, his voice echoing in the nearly empty glass he was holding. "Not that I don't love a good party, but I kind of want to sneak you off back to the condo and not answer our phones or the door until Monday."

"That sounds lovely," she said, meaning it whole heartedly as she sank further into his side. "Think we can get away with it."

"Aye." He replaced the empty glass back on the table and kissed the top of her head in one fluid motion. "I'll go make our excuses." He scooted out of the tan padded chair and made his way over to where Anna and Kris were chatting with Ashley and the flower girl, Alexandra. She could see him having a quick word with both and her sister shooting her a concerned look at the excuse Liam had obviously offered. She tried to appear both tired and contrite as she smiled back.

"They'll tell Killian and Emma," Liam told her, helping her to her feet. "Look weak, darling. Your headache is something we must attend to immediately."

They slipped out largely unnoticed, having already given their best wishes to the bride and groom and made their excuses. Anna would have no problem representing the sisters, as much of the attention had already shifted to her and her own pending nuptials. Given that she never met a stranger, Elsa felt comfortable enough to leave her.

Having already situated her in the car, Liam jumped into the driver's seat and pulled out a hat he
usually wore when running. In an elaborate display of stealth, he yanked it down over the upper portion of his face and crouched down in the seat. "Don't want to get caught," he said in a stage whisper. "Maybe we should come up with code names?"

"Just drive," Elsa said between fits of laughter. "You really are a dork."

"Am not," he proclaimed in his best impression of a four year old. The car rolled to a stop at the end of the drive. "But you love me for it, right?"

"Sometimes," she agreed, her head bobbing studiously. "It can be pretty annoying. But it's also pretty cute."

The banter continued as he drove them back toward the condo, the music of some classic rock station playing just loud enough and the windows on the car down to let a cool breeze blow. She was coming up with some sort of classy but zinging retort when she realized that he had passed their usual turn and was headed to the edge of town.

"Did you forget something?" she asked, assuming that there had to be a reason he would not be driving them home.

"Nope," he explained, turning the wheel to take a narrow road just before the sign about leaving town. "I just thought we could use a break from the day to day."

Incredulously she took in their attire – his pressed and tailored suit and her dress that was similar to Emma and Ruby's. Even her shoes gave her pause, as they were not the type to wear for a hike through the woods. "Where are we going? Are you planning to murder me? Am I getting on your nerves this much?"

His eyes stayed on the still narrowing road, but he reached over a hand to clasp hers. "Just taking you to a little spot I like. And before you freak out, look in the back there, darling. I packed us some clothes and even snagged a bit of that wedding cuisine."

A stickler for the rules, she tried to ignore the knot in her stomach as they sped past two no trespassing signs and a gate that had at one time been put up to keep people out. It now hung rusting into nothingness. He could sense her discomfort as he squeezed her hand reassuringly. "I found this place when I first arrived at Killian's. It was a bit of a sanctuary for me."

"Come here often?" she asked as the car rolled to a stop at the end of the road. She saw nothing but trees and brambles that would impede them. It did not look like anyone had been there in years.

"Not too," he confessed, letting go of her hand to pull the bag of clothes up to the front seat. "I have never shared it with anyone. Not even Killian."

"I'm honored, I think."

He couldn't help chuckling at her discomfort a bit. "Get changed and we'll head to the real spot. It's worth it."

She didn't argue with him, though she wasn't sure that she could recall the last time she had changed clothes in a car. It made her feel quite young, as her only memory of such activity was skinny dipping after the prom with friends. That had been so unlike her, but the memory was still one of her favorites in terms of that time. "You brought my bathing suit?" she realized, noting the lack of underthings.

"Aye, I didn't wish to presume," he said, yanking his tie off with glee. "There's a quiet little spot with
a pond. It's spring fed so the water stays just the right temperature nearly all year." The interior of the sedan was small, but they both managed to dress without too much trouble. That was especially true after she warned him that she wasn’t going to go old school and make out in the back of his car.

Once ready, he led her down the path toward the spot he was talking about. The two stepped over roots and rocks with ease, stopping twice in small clearings to take a picture together on his phone. He swore he wasn’t about to hit up social media with the pictures, but wanted to remember their quiet moments together. Soon enough he showed her where the abandoned spot was located and marveled that the sun seemed to take the chill out of the already fall like air.

"There's even a bench," she said, noting the weather worn bench that was still sturdy if a bit discolored.

"Not even the best part," he chuckled. He waved an arm in gesture to the crystal blue water of the smallish pond. There was barely a ripple on its still surface. "Do you dare?"

Skeptical, she drew a line in the dirt path with the toe of her shoe. "Are you sure it's safe? Is there something living in that water? Alligators? Piranha?" She laughed shakily. "Am I sounding like Anna?"

"Perhaps a bit," he said, fingers skimming the hem of her shirt. "We don't have to, but I thought it might be fun. And while I cannot assure you that there is nothing alive in the water. I have yet to be mauled, maimed, or even slightly injured in my many swims here."

"Trust you?"

"Trust me."

She crossed her arms in front of her and pulled her shirt up over her head. "Last one in's a rotten egg." Without hesitation, she yanked off her shoes and shorts and was half way to the water as Liam's voice echoed after her to slow down.
Chapter 38

It was a rare occurrence for Elsa to be cold, but she felt it during the change of seasons. So that was why she looked a bit like a burrito, wrapped in the comforter as she contemplated if it was honestly too early in the season to try out the heater. Despite the moderate temperatures from the day before, a cold front had pushed through and left a soggy mess of a day that begged for soup, warm socks, and a crackling fire. Rolling over in the giant bed she shared with Liam, she was only somewhat surprised to find him gone, a vague memory playing at the edges of her mind. There had been a phone call, a hushed conversation, and a quiet apology as he kissed her head.

Her own phone held the answer with a text message.

Liam: Good morning, darling. I wanted to let you sleep. The mess of the new ordering system wasn’t addressed and my assistant not harangued enough yesterday. So I am doing a spot inventory before Zelena decides to take matters into her own hands. You looked so lovely in your cocoon of blankets that I surely hope to find you in a similar state upon my return. All my love to you.

She knew it was a bit silly to feel a bitterness rise in her at the sight of Zelena’s name, but the bile still rose with the thought of the woman. Ruby had first pointed it out, noting that the ginger haired beauty often stood a little too close to Liam and her eyes lingered too long. She tended to trail a finger along Liam’s forearm as she spoke, uplifted lips almost flirty and eyes dipping downward in a demure and yet open sort of way.

She didn’t mention this feeling in her text back telling him that he couldn’t truly expect her to stay in bed without breakfast. While she was completely sated from their night before, she was sure that food would become more of a necessity. She was mentally inventorying the contents of the cabinets and refrigerator when her phone buzzed again.

“Hi, Ruby,” she said with certainty that the call from the kitchen at Granny’s had to be her friend and not the elderly proprietress.

“I just saw Liam saunter in and get a to-go plate to take back to the bar. Don’t tell me he left you alone today.”

“He got called into work,” Elsa said, struggling to untwist the blanket and comforter so that she could at least sit up. “I’m not co-dependent, you know. Anyway, I was still sleeping.”

“I gathered,” Ruby said, the sound of dishing clinking behind her and other audible evidence of a busy restaurant with sizzling, bubbling, and servers calling out orders to the cook. Even without being able to see her, Elsa knew that Ruby was probably seated on the prep counter that was only used for baking, legs crossed and her fingers combing through hair that was still damp from her shower. Ruby was forever sleeping until the last minute and finishing her makeup and hair on the go.

“Wait, I thought you and Graham were staying overnight at the country club. You said you were excited about the hot tub. Don’t tell me he got called back to work.” Elsa managed to detangle herself from the bed linens and half stumbled out of her room to the kitchen, thanking Liam, God, and her lucky stars that the coffee was still hot in the machine.

“Granny was complaining about her arm. You know how she gets whenever a storm is rolling in. Anyway, I drove her home. She sort of half asked and half ordered me to take over this morning’s rush and she would work tonight.”
“Is she okay?” Elsa asked, stepping onto the balls of her feet and stretching for a mug. None of them liked to talk about it, but Granny was getting older. She was still energetic and cantankerous, but she had slowed a bit in her age and struggled sometimes to meet the daily demands. Ruby filled in where necessary, but everyone knew that Granny worried about the businesses’ fates once her granddaughter was left to run them.

“Probably yelling at those Sunday morning shows on politics. She takes this whole idea of interactive mediums way too seriously.” Ruby covered the mouthpiece and instructed someone to clear the tables more quickly. “Either that or the weather channel. She’s convinced that she can predict storms better than the meteorologists with this trick arm of hers.”

“Well, tell her I hope that she is feeling better soon. I was thinking to stop by later with Anna to go over those last minute details on Anna’s dress with you, but if you’re too busy…”

“No, that’s what I called to tell you. It’s supposed to storm horribly today. Let’s put that off until the morning. I don’t want Anna risking catching a cold or something right before the wedding. And Granny will be back on duty so I can concentrate on the alterations.”

Elsa balanced the phone against her shoulder and ear and held her mug of warm dark liquid in her hands as she made her way to the plated windows overlooking the town. A thin misty fog hung low to the ground making her view mostly whitish gray and big drops of water were cumulating on the windows. That explained the chill in the air that normally didn’t bother her, as the cold front was moving through. “Good idea.”

“So anyway…when I finish up here, want to catch some movies or something? I’m bored and could use a good veg session. If Liam’s still working, I could come over there.” Ruby was clearly wanting to talk about something, some sort of confession or admittance. “I’m not that delicate that I can’t manage a few raindrops.”

“I don’t know how long Zelena will keep him today, but come ahead if you want. We own more than one television. He understands the need for girl time.”

“You do realize that you sound very…I don’t know…tense when you say her name.”

Elsa grimaced, the windows reflecting back her sour expression. “No, I don’t realize. I’m not jealous. I don’t have a jealous bone in my body.”

“Right,” Ruby drawled, the sound being cut off by the dropping of a pan or something in the background. “Got to go, but I’ll see you later. We’ll talk about this then. Girl talk is a great time to get these things out in the open.”

***AAA***

Rain beat against the windows of the house with a steadily intensifying staccato, drowning out the sounds of music from Henry’s room as he practiced the song that was giving him the most trouble. Emma wrapped her legs in the knitted blanket that Granny had given her not long after Henry turned five. While she was a bit disappointed that their boat trip down the coast before dry docking for the season was rained out, she had to admit that she enjoyed the warmth of the fire in the fireplace and scent of muffins cooling as she read from the novel that Mary Margaret had suggested a few weeks earlier.

Thankfully Mary Margaret and David had gotten off to their honeymoon location with no issues at all. And while they were all still recovering from a night of dancing and laughing with friends, she was in no mood or condition to do more than laze about that early afternoon. Having already popped
a couple of aspirin for her headache – a dull pain that was more annoyance than symptom, she was content to let herself sink into the near fall like weather.

Their life included few quiet days like this, she realized as Killian joined her at the other end of the sofa and opened his own book with a lazy sigh. “Sounds like quite the gale out there,” he said when he caught her looking at his profile. “Perfect day to stay in and curl up with a good book.”

She lifted the thick novel as evidence that she was doing just that. “I thought you were going to suggest cooking some more. I don’t think my stomach can take it though.” Already they had baked muffins, a loaf of banana bread, cinnamon scones, and a pie that she couldn’t quite identify. Killian had also been furtively chopping vegetables and adding herbs to his crock pot without explanation other than saying it was his mother’s stew recipe. She wanted to ask more about it, but the sight of him in his anchor socks and stained but still serviceable apron had been so adorable that she snapped a photo with her phone. He had not seemed to mind, posing for the picture with a wooden spoon held up like a scepter.

“My original intent was to invite Liam and Elsa to enjoy the stew with us, but I am rethinking that. No need in getting them out on the road in this mess.”

Her feet were sticking out from the blanket and a bit chilly despite her striped socks that he had smiled at when she put on that morning. Instead of readjusting the blanket, she wiggled her toes and wormed them under his thigh, giving him an innocent smile when he noted her movement. “I’m sure they will be busy with Anna’s last minute plans.” She yawned, stretching one arm over her head. “At least I’m just attending that wedding and not an actual bridesmaid or anything. Much easier work.”

“It will be much better to sit with you through the exchanging of vows and rings, love. Though you were a vision yesterday. I have rarely seen you look more beautiful.”

She slid down the pillow on the sofa, resting her book on her bent knees. “Flatterer,” she accused with a wagging finger. “But I’ll take it. Just don’t get any ideas about me dressing up like that more often. Mary Margaret was clearly going for the princess theme.”

“And you were the perfect royal.”

A sudden gust of wind assaulted the house, howling and rattling with a wailing that sounded of ghosts and goblins. It was hard to believe that just the day before had been a warm and comfortable temperature that had not required even the lightest of jackets until nightfall. Emma couldn’t help but smile at the two warm mugs of tea that Killian had set in front of them, the steam still rising and a gingery scent wafting upwards.

“You’re trying to turn me British, aren’t you?” she asked. “Tea and scones?”

“I simply have a fondness for them and thought you might appreciate them too. You have said you are a fan of my accent.” She had on more than a few occasions told him that he could make even the most mundane of texts sound positively sinful when he dropped his voice and let his accent roll over the syllables with lilting and clipped tones. She wasn’t sure if it was just his accent or the way he would speak right at her ear, breath warm and tickling her skin, but she appreciated it all the more.

“Oh so now you’re fishing for compliments too. I knew you were missing the water, but fishing?” Her grin was wide as he rose up and over her legs to kiss her, their laughter mingling just before their mouths touched. The book on her knees fell as she straightened to make room for him.

“You know I shouldn’t have to knock to come out of my room,” Henry complained, startling them both with his presence. The lack of his music might have been a clue if either had been paying
attention. “I’m hungry.”

“Big surprise,” Emma said, pushing Killian back to his side of the couch with the palms of her hands. “Save room for dinner, but there are a few things in the kitchen.” She named a few of them as he dug about, rejecting most of the ideas. Finally he settled on a bag of chips and a soda, lingering tentatively near the chair in the living room.

“Sounds like you’re finally getting through that section pretty cleanly. I could tell the distinction in the notes.” Killian gestured toward the chair in a way that said there was no reason to hide from them. “Perhaps with a bit more practice you’ll pick up the tempo?”

Tugging sharply with the bag, Henry nodded. “Do you think maybe later you can test me on it? I want to get that part right before group practice.”

“Aye, it’ll be a pleasure,” Killian said, turning his book back in his hand to the proper position. “Are you wanting a break or should we set to work now?”

“A break,” Henry breathed out as though exhausted. His head fell back against the chair and the chip bag rattled in his lap. “Maybe we could watch a movie now? I’m bored.”

“Why don’t you watch something upstairs?” Emma asked, knowing well her son’s penchant for loud movies and entertainment. “Killian and Liam hooked up that television and the cable guy was here the other day.”

“This television’s bigger.”

Obviously willing to go along with the idea, Killian shoved aside his book and was leaning for the remote when Emma stopped him. “Hold it kid,” she said, lifting her book again as evidence. “We’re reading in here. Don’t you have some reading to do? Are you done with all that summer reading you were assigned? What about…”

Head rolling back and forth on the cushion, her son groaned in an attempt at agony. “It sure didn’t look like you were reading earlier.”

“Yes, well, that was us taking a break.” She pushed her feet back under Killian’s thigh. “I just bought you two new comic books before the wedding. You can’t tell me you’re done with them already.”

“Graphic novels,” he said out of habit of correcting people who demeaned their existence. Groaning again, he rose and walked over to the table just inside the door. “You know that we pay a lot for cable right? We should use it. It’s not like we pay less for using it less.”

Killian lifted his hand to his mouth as if to cough, hiding the smile at Henry’s blatant attempt to argue. He could feel even from the way that her muscles were tensing that Emma was not about to let that go without a comeback. He was not planning to get involved.

“We,” she said, emphasizing the word and gesturing her thumb toward herself and Killian, “do pay for cable and Netflix, as well as all the utilities, the mortgage, and a great many things you don’t have to think of because you’re 12.”

“I’ll be 13 in less than a week,” he said, not taking the hint of his mother’s response.

“And that’s still not an age where I’m going to argue with you about bills to be paid and if we are getting our money’s worth. We are reading. You are welcome to join us or you can sulk in your room. You can practice some more. You can go and text Violet, Avery, or one of your other friends
if you don’t have anything else to do. Complain about how unfair this all is or something. Or you can review your summer reading before I get a call from your teacher the first week complaining that you remember nothing and failed your first test of the year. But we aren’t watching a movie right now.”

Henry sat back down, reaching into the bag of chips. “What if Killian wants to watch a movie?” he asked, the sarcasm evident. “You just don’t want me to because we like different movies than you do.”

“What if Killian wants to watch a movie?” he asked, the sarcasm evident. “You just don’t want me to because we like different movies than you do.”

“Henry,” she said warningly. “If you’re trying to test me, right now is not the time.”

He didn’t respond, flouncing back into his room and throwing himself on the bed. Emma waited for the inevitable slam of his door. “I think we just got a preview of the teen years. You sure you still want to marry me with the knowledge that you’ll have to share your house with a teenager?”

“I’m in this for the long haul,” Killian said, running his hand on the backside of her calf. “And I am a teacher, love. A bit of teenage angst doesn’t scare me.”

“It scares me,” she admitted, wrinkling her nose. “I know it is only going to get worse. At his age I had already run away from a group home and been labeled as troubled. Neal wasn’t much better at that age, what with his relationship with his father and wanting to run away.”

His hand continued the soothing run down her jean clad leg. “You had a horrific childhood by any standards, love. And one that left you with a few wounds and scars that I’m sure will never fully heal. Henry is not subject to those same traumas so you can’t really compare your childhood with his in that way. Yes, you are likely to see a bit of moodiness from him and more than a few outbursts. But you forget that you are a brilliant mother. He has a father who loves and supports him and is even more determined now to be a great father to the lad. I think that you will be able to steer him through any of the turbulent seas ahead.”

“And he’s going to have a pretty terrific stepfather,” she said, her voice shaking on that name. She peeked over at him with a questioning concern. “You’re okay with that, right? I don’t know how else it would work with us if you…”

“My love, I have every intention of being whatever support that you and the lad need. If you want me on the periphery of the decisions you must make as a parent, then I will sideline myself. And if you wish me to be alongside you on those, then I will do that too. I think my role and Tamara’s should be something that you, Neal, and Henry discuss with or without us involved. I can’t speak for her, but I won’t shy away from any involvement in the boy’s life – even in the angst filled years to come. I may not have had the most involved of fathers, but I did have Liam who served that function and showed me how important it is to have those sorts in your life.”

“You are lucky to have your brother,” Emma agreed, smiling a bit lazily as he continued the soft massage of her leg. “I always wondered as a kid what it would be like to have a brother or a sister.”

He could have told her stories of their fights as children or the way that Liam had forgone much of his own teen angst to be that surrogate father that Killian had needed. “And Henry? Do you think the lad might like a sibling of his own someday?”

She appreciated that he worded the question that way. No, she wasn’t ready to even consider such a step and hoped to keep that at bay for at least a year or two until they had truly settled into their relationship. However, it was something that couples did discuss and needed to be considered as they moved forward. “Maybe someday,” Emma agreed vaguely. “Who knows? Neal and Tamara might be on a faster track with that. What about you? Do you want children?”
His blue eyes had been so determined earlier, a steely gaze that had told her he truly wasn’t scared of anything that the future might hold for them. It was a reassuring change from others in her life who had seemed to only seek excuses why things wouldn’t work. She was just as guilty of that, but still she had come to realize that in her effort to predict someone’s betrayal of abandonment of her, she had looked for signs that weren’t there. Now those eyes looked almost hopeful and nostalgic.

“I can’t deny that I would love to have a child or children with you, my love. But I would never presume to consider that without your wanting it too.”

“In the meantime,” she said, pulling herself up so that she could better access him, “we can always have fun practicing. Plus with Mary Margaret and Anna, I think we may have ample opportunity to babysit. See if this is something you really want to consider.”

He told her that it sounded like a plan, pulling her closer to him before she stood to go check on Henry and see if they could settle the drama over watching a movie. She was already feeling a bit harsh, having snapped at him. The boy was experiencing a lot of change lately. Acting out was his way of gaining a bit of control, as Killian and Mary Margaret had both explained. She was part way to his door when her phone blared and vibrated from her pocket. She instinctively answered without even bothering with the caller id.

“How?” Ruby said, sounding breathless and frantic. “It’s Granny. Something’s wrong. We’re at the hospital now.”

Ruby paced the distance between the vending machines and the elevators in 14 long strides. Emma knew this, as her own head had started counting them as the woman took each step and nearly knocked into the other poor souls stuck in the purgatory of the waiting room. Her rain coat had done little to protect her against the storm that was still pounding the coastal town, her jeans damp and sticking to her and the weight of her shirt feeling heavy against her skin. Killian had taken particular notice of her chilled skin and begun to rub one hand and then the other as he tried to keep up a steady but light conversation.

So far he had commented on the weather six times, the selection in the vending machines four, and countless references to the video game that Henry was playing from his seat over by the window. It wasn’t a disregard for the obvious concern over the woman behind the swinging doors, but more of an attempt to distract her and Ruby from completely losing their minds in worry.

“I didn’t call Mary Margaret,” Ruby said, pausing in her pacing long enough to stop in front of Emma to announce this. “I didn’t think…”

“We won’t disturb them unless we have to,” Emma agreed. She wasn’t saying the words, but she knew from Ruby’s frantic call and Victor’s hurried questions about Granny’s wishes that the news could be worse than she wanted to face. “Is there anyone else we should call? I know the staff is trying to run things while you are both here, but any friends?”

“Aye, she’s not the most pretentious or self-serving, but it is a kind gesture,” Killian offered. “And Graham? Is he coming to sit with you?” He and Emma both rattled off a list of names that Ruby either conceded to call or rejected flatly. Killian took on the task of his brother and Elsa, while Emma notified Ashley, Aurora, and a few others, including Neal of the situation. When she finished, Ruby was still talking to someone and Killian had found a three-year-old magazine that promised such
things as softer skin and a sneak preview of a movie that had only stayed in theaters for a week or two.

“If all these people come, it’s likely to fill this place up to the rafters,” Emma remarked. The thought didn’t really surprise her, as Granny was a popular person in the town of Storybrooke. While she was nosy, judgmental, and sometimes grouchy, she was a fixture in their lives. She couldn’t even begin to count the number of times that she had found herself musing over the challenges of life with a milkshake and a plate of onion rings between them.

“Everyone loves her,” Killian agreed, resuming his place holding her hand. “It’s not likely there is one person in Storybrooke who she hasn’t influenced in some way. For myself it was her push that had me apply for my teaching position in the first place. That and pushing me to you, my love.”

She nuzzled her head against his shoulder and then pulled away just as abruptly. “We really have to work on this flattery thing. It’s a bit thick.” Giving his leg a squeeze as she stood, she made her way over to Henry and dropped beside him. “Your dad is on his way over to see about Granny. He said you can come home with him if you want. That way you get a good night’s sleep before school in the morning.”

Looking up from the small screen of his game, he looked a bit shocked to have her talking to him. “Is she going to be alright?”

“Dr. Whale is back there now,” she reminded him. “And you know that Granny is tough. How many times have we seen her fight off Leroy for the last of the lasagna or a pork chop. She keeps Ruby in line every day. She’s practically a gladiator.”

The corners of Henry’s mouth twitched at the comparison. “Yeah. She ran the block the other day when she was chasing Leroy with a broom. She wasn’t even winded when she came back.”

Emma’s laugh was tight and forced, but she patted her son’s arm consolingly. “That sounds like her. Hey, kid? About earlier. I’m sorry about saying you couldn’t watch the movie. I had a headache and didn’t think…”

“I should have been reading for school. You were right, mom.”

“Can I record those words? I might like to replay them sometimes?” Both of them laughed, looking at his game screen. She pointed out a way that he was missing to make enough points to get past the next obstacle. “I know you’re going through a lot right now. Your birthday, school starting, your dad getting married, me and Killian…”

“I’m happy for you,” Henry said a bit robotically. “Really, I am. Killian is great and I like living there. And getting married is the next step.”

“Why do I feel like there is a giant but coming up here?”

“It’s nothing, mom,” he said, lifting the game a bit closer to his face. “I’m fine.”

“Clearly not,” she said, crossing her arms over her chest and waiting for him to pause. He didn’t. “You know that you can tell me anything.”

Chewing and then releasing the fat part of his bottom lip, he shot her a quick look before returning to his screen. “Sometimes I feel like I’m in the way. You’re always pawning me off on dad, or Granny, or Mary Margaret. I have spent the summer with Killian, which is cool. We used to do stuff just the two of us. Me and you. And I heard you before tell Ruby and Granny that you were busy because it was our time together. Every Thursday night we watched old sci fi movies. And we used to have
those tournaments with video games during the summer and keep the scores on the wall. But now it’s the three of us.”

She checked to see where Ruby was, not wanting to miss an update. However, her friend was talking to Killian and one of Granny’s friends about setting up the DVR with her phone so that none of Granny’s shows would go unwatched. “You feel neglected.”

“Not exactly.”

“You feel like a third wheel on a bike?”

That made him smile a bit at the image in his head. “I know you want to be alone with him. And I feel like maybe you are just waiting for me to go to bed or leave. I mean Tamara wasn’t really subtle about saying those things to dad, but you are Killian at least nicer about it.”

Emma pushed back on her seat. “Okay, here’s the thing, Henry. If you ever feel like you’re not wanted or loved, I want you to tell me. Because that means I’m doing a lousy job as your mom. I love you, Henry. I want you around. Do you want to know something? When Killian proposed? The first question I asked him after was if he thought we should go to your dad’s place to tell you. I wanted to see you then. When you were taking piano lessons from Killian this summer? He used to shoot video of you and send it to me because I missed getting to be around you and was jealous of him getting to do that. When Killian shops for groceries? He calls or texts to ask if you might like a certain brand or item better. You’re always in our thoughts and we do things for you, okay?”

Looking a bit contrite, Henry nodded that he understood. His dark eyes appeared to water slightly.

“And as for our time together, maybe I have gone a little overboard with including Killian. So let’s change that. You and I can go back to dinner at Granny’s just the two of us on Thursdays. And then we’ll watch a movie or work on your homework together or whatever. Just the two of us. Killian can grade papers or whatever. But those nights are for us.”

“He doesn’t have to,” Henry said, lowering the game back to his lap. “I mean he’s kind of lacking on his movies. Did you know he didn’t even know there was a second Back to the Future until I told him?”

“Seriously?” Emma feigned easily. “And you think you know a guy. That’s it. The wedding’s off. I can’t marry a guy who can’t list every single Michael J. Fox movie there is without having to use IMDB or Wikipedia.” She twisted the ring on her hand like she might take it off. “I appreciate you telling me because I can’t…”

“Mom!” Henry rolled his eyes elaborately. “I like Killian, okay.”

“Second chance?”

“You got it.”

***AAA***

Elsa arrived a bit later sans Liam, her blonde hair sticking to her black and royal blue shirt as she hugged Ruby first and then Emma. Like she always did, the blonde quickly asked after Granny and then pulled a few items like more up to date magazines out of her bag before taking a seat with the gang and waiting. However, her patient smile and her preparedness did not mask the tension in her eyes when Killian asked after his brother and said that he had received no text back from him.

Emma recognized it too and shooed Killian off in search of an orange drink that she knew was only
available on the third floor. With Henry in tow, he disappeared into the maze of hallways as Ruby and Emma grilled Elsa on her demeanor.

“I think we have more important things to worry about right now,” Elsa declared, primly picking a bit of lint off her pants. “How is Granny?”

“Probably driving half the staff crazy wanting to go home,” Ruby said, brushing off the doubt in her own mind. “Is this about before? Your whole not being jealous thing?”

“What aren’t you jealous about?” Emma asked, leaning forward over her knees. “You’re not worried that Liam’s doing something with someone else right? Because the guy is crazy about you?”

“No, I’m not jealous,” Elsa responded with a pointed look at Ruby. “I just don’t really care for Zelena.”

“Oh,” Emma said knowingly. “I kind of wondered about her. She’s kind of touchy feely with guys and tends to be flirty with a lamp post even.” Emma flung herself backwards as if shocked. “Oh God! She didn’t do anything to Liam did she? I could just see her…”

“Whoa, she tried to seduce Liam?” Ruby asked, her hands clenching into balled fists. “I will take care of this. Where is she? She doesn’t want to mess with me.” Halfway out of her seat, Ruby was subdued by Elsa pulling her back down with a gentle tug.

“She hasn’t done anything, exactly. She’s just…she’s just Zelena.”

Ruby was still planning her attack as Emma gently prodded for more information. “I called Liam to tell him about Granny. I guess he was carrying something and she answered his phone.”

Nodding knowingly, Ruby forgot her plans for a moment. “I hate that. You call a guy and some other woman answers. That’s the worst feeling.”

“She said she’d tell him and then kind of giggled and asked who this was. I heard her tell him that his girlfriend was on the phone. It wasn’t that she said that. It was that little laugh of hers. Like she forgot I even existed.”

“Did he talk to you? Did he call back?” Emma asked, peeking toward the door to see if Henry and Killian were back. She had worked with both Regina and Zelena for years. While she had never fell victim to them in that way, both women were not above using their sexuality and looks to get ahead. And Zelena tended to view men as conquests. The joke going around the office was that she had their heads and private parts mounted on a wall somewhere.

“No, I don’t know. I turned off my phone.” Elsa looked sheepish as she pushed her drying hair over her shoulder. “I don’t want to be that woman, okay? I don’t want to come off as needy and attention seeking.”

“None of us do,” Ruby agreed. “But come on. You versus Zelena. It’s hardly a choice. Liam loves you. And he probably hasn’t even noticed Zelena. Turn on your phone and check okay. We’re here for you.”

***AAA***

The nurses took pity on the women when Ruby explained that they were essentially the woman’s grandchildren as well. So with linked arms, Ruby dragged Emma and Elsa (a bit reluctantly) into the curtained off quarters of the emergency room where Granny was supposed to be resting. The woman was giving hell to a technician administering and EKG and informing a medical assistant that quite
enough blood had been drawn that day already.

“Who on earth is watching the diner if you’re here?” Granny said, snapping her head to Ruby.

“And hello to you too,” Ruby said with a measuredly exasperated sigh as she loosened her grip on the other two women and took the one and only chair. “I know it may be a surprise to you, but some of your staff is actually skilled and quite capable of running a restaurant without you breathing down their necks. How hard is it to heat frozen lasagna and fill a few soda orders?”

“You don’t have to reveal all my diner’s secrets,” the woman scowled to the amused grin of the technician’s hurried movements to get out of the way of this argument. “And these two. Please tell me that you didn’t invite half the town here to see me being poked and prodded like a prized cow before auction.”

“We’re here because we care about you, Granny,” Emma said, taking a small step forward and bracing her hands on the foot of the bed. “You’re sick. We were worried.”

“Do I look sick?” Granny muttered, trying to hide her pleased expression. “My granddaughter has no real understanding of money. This little check up is going to cost a fortune. Did you know you she wanted to call an ambulance?”

“You had fainted,” Ruby protested, her arms over her chest as she sat in a plastic chair that was the same orange of what appeared to be a racing stripe that disappeared behind the greenish curtain. “I was worried about you. We’re all worried about you.”

“I tripped,” the woman protested with an offended air. “I’ve been telling you that rug was a hazard. It curls up at the ends and I’ve almost bit it a dozen times. This time I did.”

“You were on the floor, holding your arm, moaning, and had your eyes shut,” Ruby listed in defense. “What was I supposed to think? Never mind. I’m sure you have an answer for that.”

Elsa joined Emma at the foot of the bed, her own voice a bit softer and her eyes clouding with memories of losing her parents. Hospitals were not a welcoming place for her and the sight of the woman had done little to assuage those issues. “You look like you’re doing well now, Mrs. Lucas. Any word from the doctor about what it is that is the trouble?”

“That doctor,” Granny said, practically spitting as she mentioned his title. “He’s nothing but a hack. He keeps checking my heart. I think it’s just so he can feel around on my chest. Must think that my granddaughter and I were made of the same cloth.” The woman shivered and crossed her own arms over her chest in a mock display of disgust and terror. “I don’t know what Ruby does when she goes on a date with that leech, but I have a good idea. And I don’t want him thinking he can do it with me.”

Ruby rolled her eyes as the other two women laughed and the technician slipped away hurriedly. “Granny, I haven’t been out with Victor in a while. And he’s a good doctor. He’s just doing his job.”

The older woman huffed indignantly. Her usual sweater set and skirt were replaced by the standard issue hospital gown with the words property of the hospital placed in several locations. Why did they do that? Did people really want to keep those oddly sourced and uncomfortable garments that much? Granny’s eyes shifted to the two blonde women. “Speaking of men? You two here alone? I didn’t set you up with those two just to have you enabling my granddaughter to spend a fortune in unnecessary medical tests. Shouldn’t you be off on dates or something?”

“It’s a Sunday afternoon, Granny,” Ruby said with a sigh after Emma and Elsa explained Killian
was in the waiting area and Liam was at work. “You do realize that they aren’t attached at the hip.”

“Relationships are a lot of work,” Granny said with her own matching sigh. “You can’t just call it love and then go about life as usual. You must work for it. Love doesn’t just fit into your life like a missing puzzle piece. We must make room for it.”

“Granny,” Ruby admonished. “Can we focus on you, please? You’re sick. Let’s get you better. Besides. Emma and Killian are getting married. You have to get better so you can drive Emma insane with requests for their wedding. I bet if you asked right now she’d tell you that she wants grilled cheese and onion rings for the reception. Surely you have better ideas to share.”

Granny certainly did.
Chapter 39

“So they are getting married?” Neal asked as he navigated the narrow lane through the hospital parking lot. He had barely had a chance to speak to Emma and Killian at the wedding, hanging back and keeping his distance as he sat with his stepmother and fiancé near the rear of the church. He had not even gone to the reception, as he knew that Mary Margaret’s invitation was probably just a courtesy.

“Yeah,” Henry said, sinking lower into the seat. He and Killian had driven back to the house earlier to get a few items for him, including his school uniform since school would be starting the next day. “I think everyone is.”

Neal said nothing, only giving a soft grunt as he maneuvered the sedan into the light traffic. When he’d seen Henry on Friday night there had been an effortlessness to the conversation. It would have been easy to blame it on Emma’s engagement, but even Neal wasn’t that naïve.

“Granny’s going to be alright, isn’t she?” Henry asked, hoping that his father offered more hope than his mother’s concerned positivity on the subject.

“I don’t know,” Neal answered honestly. “But I’m sure that the doctor and staff will do everything they can do. Plus you know that Ruby won’t let anything bad happen if she has a say.” Neal slowed the car in front of the diner, craning his neck to look inside the building. The lights were on and most of the parking spots were still filled. “We could get you something to eat? Have you had dinner? I mean not something from a vending machine.”

Henry’s head jerked at the question. “Not there, okay? I don’t want to go in there and see that place without Granny. It’s just too…”

“Yeah,” Neal said slowly. “Maybe Tamara could make us something. It’s about time for bed for you, right? School’s early in the morning.”

That earned a face, Henry scrunching up his nose distastefully. “Do you think Killian will be there tomorrow? Or will he still be at the hospital?” He sort of knew the answer, as while he had packed a few items, Killian had packed an overnight bag for him and Emma. “He said he would be there.”

“Then I’m sure he will be,” Neal offered. “He doesn’t strike me as the kind of guy to not keep his word.”

Henry pressed a few of the buttons on the radio, sighing heavily when he didn’t find what he was wanting. “I feel like I need to do something.”

“For Killian?” Neal asked, distracted by the tricky left turn that took most of his attention. “Why?”

“For Granny.”

“Oh. Yeah. Okay.” Neal turned his car onto the road and made it about 200 feet before he spoke again. “You know that you’re just a kid, right. And I don’t say that to be mean. Granny has a lot of people looking out for her and doing for her, including your mother.”

Slumping more into the passenger seat, Henry frowned deeply. “And shouldn’t I do something if I can? Shouldn’t I be trying to say thank you for all the times she took care of me. Remember when I had the flu. Mom was out of town. You were working. So Granny took care of me for a whole week. She was working and put me in a room on the first floor. Every time I woke up she was
Neal breathed in through his mouth as he swung the car into position to park. “So what are you thinking? Flowers? Candy? A card?”

His 12 year old nose again wrinkled at the pedestrian ideas. “I was thinking something more special.”

“Well, why don’t we think on it over dinner? I’m starving and you’ve got to be too. Let’s see what we can find in the kitchen.” He slammed the car door behind him, grabbing his son’s bag and dodging the overfilled rain puddles in the still drizzling weather as he hurried to the front door. Henry and his backpack were not too far behind, his mind already running through ideas of something that would make Granny feel better.

***AAA***

Killian tried to move the chairs into position so they could rest, the rubber of their feet squeaking on the linoleum floors. He’d slept in quite a few uncomfortable positions in his life, each time vowing that it would be the last. However, he had seen the near panic in Emma’s expression when it was suggested earlier that they return home. While there was still no prognosis on Granny, the woman he loved was refusing to leave until the tests were done and results back.

“You need to get some sleep,” she told him, glancing at the flickering television screen in the corner that showed a four shot of political pundits arguing angrily in front of a digital American flag. “We both need to sleep.”

“Aye, it’ll be a bit tight, but I was thinking we could rest here.” Toeing out of his boots, he situated himself almost sideways in the chair, crossing his legs at the ankles. “Come here, my love.”

“I know you aren’t trying to get romantic in a hospital waiting room,” she teased, sliding into the chair next to him at an angle so that their bodies were facing each other.

His laugh was loud from the quiet confines of the area and she had to place her hand over his quivering lips to attempt to silence him. He turned the laugh into a kiss to her fingers. “While I rather fancy you in a variety of positions and locations, my love, I know when we need our rest.” With her hand removed, his kissed her forehead. “Now sleep. We’ve both got full days tomorrow and the Widow Lucas won’t hesitate to tell us of the bags under our eyes from lack of rest.”

She couldn’t argue with that logic, but she was loathe to not have the final say. “You do realize I told you to sleep first, right.”

“As you wish.”

The armrest between them was a hindrance, but she managed to bury her face into the spot where his neck and shoulder met. Perhaps it was just habit, but that spot had become a favorite of hers. It was where she naturally gravitated towards when she needed a pick me up after a long day or if she was relishing his praise over something. It was the comfortable area where she found herself watching television or listening to him read a story from the newspaper. And most every night that would be where she landed before succumbing to slumber.

“I talked to Henry,” she said, clearly not going to sleep yet. She half expected to be chastised. “He’s facing a lot, you know? Both parents getting married. Not knowing where he fits.”

“Aye, it isn’t the easiest thing in the world when people seem to be making plans around you and not including you in them. Would it help that I have a talk with the lad, reassure him that he is just as
much a part of your life and I…”

“I think we just need to show him,” she said, interrupting. “He’s heard all this before. Now we need to make sure he understands. Maybe it is time that you, Neal, Tamara and I have that talk about expectations though. He’s about to go from one parent to two to four. It’s a big transition.” She ran her hand over his shirt, the buttons rubbing against her palm.

“I’ll follow you lead on this one.”

***AAA***

“You’re going to be a server?” Liam asked, rubbing his hand over his face and unsettling the mess of curls of his hair. “Have you ever done this?”

“Not exactly,” Elsa said, glancing at the menu. “But I want to help and so…Maybe I could run the cash register? That would not require so much practice, right?”

Bleary eyed and yet proud of his girlfriend, he wrapped her in a one armed hug and pointed her in that direction. “Ruby gave me some instructions on how to do it,” he said. They are there next to the menus. Pretty simple. You don’t have to ring the items individually. Just take the total written on each cheque and input that into the machine. Then choose cash or card.”

Her blonde head bobbed in semi-understanding. While her usual pastel and soft appearance beguiled the steely interior of her demeanor, she had opted to fit in with the other employees of the diner. A red skirt hit her legs a few inches above her knees and her white top was stark against it. She folded over the apron she had found in back like Ruby usually did, tying it around her waist to serve more as a pocket for pens and a pad that she might need at a moment’s notice. Smiling warmly at the men at the counter, she was assaulted with requests of refills and to go orders. There were a few complaints about the quality that wasn’t the same. Try as she might, she could not keep the smile on her face and felt the façade of her outward demeanor cracking.

She had just explained to a particularly brash man that the to go cups and mugs were not the same thing. Mugs stayed at the restaurant, she told him at least a dozen times. He angrily chided that Granny allowed exceptions to the rules, ignoring the snide remarks from two servers that he was forever trying to break the rules and Granny never let him. As he huffed and hurried out of the door, he nearly slammed into Zelena’s fashionable form. The bright blue eyes of the woman seemed to size up the appearance of Elsa in a slow glance downwards.

“Darling,” she said as if the two women were old friends. “Look at you. It’s so cute that you are trying to do Granny’s job. Adorable, really.” She shimmied and slithered out of the fitted jacket she was wearing and draped it over the stool next to where she stood. “I know you’re busy, but do you mind grabbing Liam for me? I have a couple of questions about that nasty little issue with the inventory. I just know he can settle it all for us in a snap.”

Elsa’s mouth felt dry as she backed away, not acknowledging the woman and not ignoring her either. To her relief Liam was just inside the kitchen door, expediting as best he could. If she wasn’t thrown by Zelena’s presence, she would not wish for anyone to see it, especially as she could feel Liam’s warmth radiating from him with a simple stare and touch of his hands to her torso. She quickly said that Zelena was there and wanted to see him, trying not to sound too relieved when he rolled his eyes at the information. She even counted to 30 before emerging back into the chaotic normalcy of the morning shift.

“Liam’s a nice guy and he wants his boss to be happy with his work,” Emma had said the afternoon before when she admitted that it worried her. “It is not at all a reflection on how he feels about you.”
The words had soothed Elsa a bit, but jealousy still gnawed at her as Zelena managed to lean over Liam, brushing her bosom across his arm as she gave him an eyeful with the first few buttons of her top undone. To his credit, he yanked back his arm, but she was not to be dissuaded.

“Zelena,” Liam said a tad too firmly as he took an extra step back. “I’ve already shown you that the inventory is not only accurate, but we are ahead on our supplies. We could probably wait another week on an order should that be necessary.”

Still bent forward with one arm under her chest to push it up and forward, she smiled. “You were such the right choice for this, darling,” she practically cooed, leaving Elsa to feel concern for any of the nearby patrons who might lose their appetites. “You’re so good at these matters. It was such a godsend for you to end up working with me.”

“Thank you for your confidence in me,” Liam answered still very tersely. “I was planning to go in about 4 today and finish reconciling the payroll records. However, with all this…” He gestured to the diner. “I think perhaps that I might get a bit more rest before I arrive this evening.”

Zelena’s smile did not crack as she straightened up and closed the gap between them. “You’re so dedicated. It is one of the things I like best about you.”

***AAA***

Emma rarely had a dreamless sleep, but there in the cramped confines of hospital chairs she managed it for a couple of hours at least. Maybe that was why she felt so disoriented as the harsh glare of florescent lights assaulted her eyes juxtaposed with the tender brush of Killian’s lips against her temple. “What time is it?” she asked, nestling herself into his side rather than pulling away to let him up from the uncomfortable position.

“Half past six,” he answered, the stubble on his chin tickling her forehead. “No change as far as I know. She’s sleeping.”

It took just a moment for all the memories to come rushing back to Emma along with the pain of her muscles contorting to create some approximation of a comfortable spot in the chairs. “Ruby?”

One of the nurses took pity on her and showed her where the staff keeps the coffee. I think she’s still back there waiting on Dr. Whale to make morning rounds.” He glanced at his phone to check the time again. “Will you be alright if I head on to work? I would much rather stay here, but it would not do to miss the first day.”

“There’s not much you can do here,” Emma excused, ignoring the pins and needles of her practically numb arm coming back to sensation as she pulled back out of his embrace. “I’m probably going to stay through rounds and then head into the office. Seems Regina’s pissed that the band Mary Margaret and David chose for the reception wasn’t on our list of house bands or signed acts. So I need to go be yelled at for a while.”

He refolded her jacket to make a pillow for her, smiling almost paternally as she laid her cheek on the softly worn leather. “I hate how you reconcile yourself to that, love. It is not your fault.”

“Someone has to take it on. Anyway, you’re the one who has to deal with Mr. Gold.” She wrinkled her nose and rubbed at it with the heel of her left hand. “Sure you don’t want to do this new job thing? It’s sounding better and better.”

“You sound quick to get rid of me, love,” he teased, blindly reaching for his own jacket. “Unless you’re planning to go with me. If that’s the case I suggest a warmer climate. Perhaps me, you, and
the lad could sail away to some place like Tahiti.” His fingers found the jacket’s edge. Instead of placing it on himself, he covered her with it. Once done he grabbed his duffel and limped to the restroom to get ready for work. She giggled at his awkward gait. “No offense to the company, Swan, but the accommodations leave much to be desired.”

Once he had disappeared into the industrial tiled room, she pulled out her own phone and sent a text to Henry. He’d be awake, she estimated, knowing that her son was usually eager on the first day of school and would have plenty to do to get ready. She was right, as he answered back with his own good morning and asked after Granny right away.

***AAA***

Elsa wiped the counter again, though the staff had told her that she needn’t bother with doing their tasks. She had to do something to keep her hands busy. Giving a side eyed glance to the woman speaking to her boyfriend, she felt the knot in her stomach grow.

“I trust him,” she said to herself. “I trust him.”

Leroy, having obviously heard her mantra, scratched at his bearded chin with a sad glint in his eyes. “Coffee?”

“I’ll get you another cup,” she muttered, spinning in place to the rack of coffee. There were so many options, more than should be there by her estimation. She knew there was a pot of regular and one of decaf, but what were the other four.

“White cap,” Leroy said with a gruff clearing of his throat. “It’s uhhh flavored.”

She reached for it and refilled the off white mug in front of him as he spread some of the eggs more on his plate. “Flavored?”

“Ruby got me started on it. It’s a hazelnut blend.” If his face was not mostly obscured by the coarse gray and black hairs of his beard, she might have seen the blush rising to his cheeks. “Damn stuff is addicting.”

Her dealings with some of the miners and other laborers in Storybrooke was pretty slim. However, she knew from what she had experienced and what Ruby would often tell her that Leroy was a soft teddy bear on the inside. There was the hint of it as he pulled the knit hat he was wearing down a bit under her watchful and curious gaze. “I bet it is.” She smiled back at him. “Your secret is safe with me.”

Returning the coffee pot to its home, she faced the counter again with no customers wanting to pay yet. It was hard not to notice that Zelena’s reflexes seemed to anticipate Liam’s every move. She didn’t say her mantra aloud, but she was repeating it in her head when she felt Mr. Clark’s eyes on her. Without asking, she refilled his coffee and then chose to pretend not to hear the cackle that she assumes is supposed to be Zelena’s flirtatious laugh. It is like nails on a chalkboard.

“Hey, Elsa!” Henry called out as he led the way for Neal and Tamera into the diner. His school uniform was a bit creased from travel, but otherwise he’s bright and ready for the first day. Ignoring the signage dictating that he and other customers should not be behind the counter, he gave her a quick side hug. “Any word on Granny?”

“She’s doing better. Sleeping now.” Elsa said, pushing down a bit of cowlick with her hand. “Your mom is there still.”

“Dad?” Henry called out to Neal, who was busily explaining to his fiancé that egg white omelets
were not a standard at a diner. “Did you ask Elsa about the present?”

Neal blinked at his son, jaw still hanging open from his explanation. “You walked in here before us. Did you see me approach Elsa and ask her anything?”

Unfazed, the middle schooler turned back to his mother’s friend and client. “So I was thinking that Granny is pretty picky about food. She probably hates hospital food.” He wrinkled his nose at the fading memory of a lunch he had there following a bout of appendicitis and an emergency surgery. “And she’s always cooking for everyone. So I was thinking that maybe we could send food over for her. I don’t know her favorite things, but maybe you or Liam know.”

“That sounds like a great idea,” Elsa agreed, tapping him on the nose with the tip of her finger. “I will arrange it. But since it is your idea, why don’t you write a note for her and sign it from you.”

***AAA***

It was the first time that she had missed that first day of school send off, the picture outside the front door in the new outfit. She had prided herself on always taking part of the day off – going in late and getting off early so that she could be there and hear the stories about his teachers, friends, and whatever else he wanted to share.

However, Killian had promised to keep her abreast of the school situation and Neal was the one to feed him breakfast. To Neal’s credit, he did remember the picture – outside the car at the school but it was remembered. He had even texted Emma a copy with a quick question about Granny. Killian had texted too, wanting an update and reminding her that things would be fine. She wasn’t sure how he assumed that, but his determination was at least welcome.

“You’re still here,” Ruby said, her cup of coffee empty but still encircled by her fingers. “I thought you had a meeting with Regina.”

“Postponed,” Emma said, shifting her weight. The waiting room had chairs that truly discouraged napping. So she had pulled two of them together and facing. Killian had done the same and attempted to serve as her pillow until he had to leave for work himself. Now her long legs hung over the back of the opposite her and her jacket was under her head. “If you think Regina chewing my butt out about not negotiating a contract properly is more important than Granny…”

“She’ll yell at you,” Ruby said, sounding a bit wistful. “Granny will yell. She’ll tell you that your career comes before her. You can’t raise your son if you get fired. She’ll remind you that and tell me that I should pick smarter friends. Then she’ll sneak off in a corner and wipe away tears that she’ll blame on allergies and dust. But we’ll both know that she was touched that you wanted to stay for her.” Ruby looked into the depths of the paper cup that only held coffee stains. “I can’t lose her, Emma. I can’t do this.”

“She’s going to be fine,” Emma said, hoping she’d believe it herself eventually. “The doctors said that she did well through the night and she’s got that monitor thing on so they know…”

“I’m going to do better,” Ruby declared, the cup cracking along the seams as she squeezed it. “I’m going to be a better granddaughter. I’ll work double shifts. I’ll even learn how to do some of the cooking. And she’s always been after me to do the books. I could take an accounting class or something.”

Emma watched as her friend made a list of resolutions. She knew that half of them would never happen, but Ruby was in pain and not in need of a lecture about how to live her life. “I’ll help too. We’ll all help.”
Ruby’s breathing sounded shaky as she leaned forward, her elbows on the knees. “I sent Graham home. I couldn’t…I can’t do this with him staring at me. He expects me to be so strong and tough. I think you’re the only person I’ve cried in front of about this.”

Emma told her that she shouldn’t worry about that. Everyone knew that she was crying, expected it, and understood it. “It was nice of him to stay. And I won’t mention that you slept while holding his hand.”

“You know I have dirt on you too. You tell. I tell.”

The duo peeked in on Granny for a moment before heading down the hall toward where they were more likely to find him. She was sleeping, her silvery hair no longer in its usual twisted knot. Emma mentioned to Ruby that she had never seen the woman with her hair down and had assumed that it was always resting just above the collar. Her hands were clutching the starched sheet and her skin seemed to fade against it. It made Emma a bit sad to see her in such a state, but there were still signs that all was okay. Only a few machines were hooked up to the woman, normal ones to keep track of vitals. She had not been moved to one of the more specialized wards. So Emma tried to count those as blessings while she watched Ruby fuss with the woman’s blanket and then lead them down the hall.

“She’s…”

“Sleeping,” Ruby finished for her. “I know. She always looks more her age when she sleeps. Awake she’s kicking and fighting, but like this…” She cleared her throat. “Can you stay with her while I go track down Victor. I want a straight answer. If she’s fine, why is she still here?”

“Of course.” Emma moved to take the seat, hoping it would offer some comfort to her tense and hurting muscles. It wasn’t much, but the blonde vowed not to moan louder than a patient with the pain. She was hardly one for prayer, having found herself not open to the idea very often. However, sitting there she found herself praying silently that Granny would be back on her feet. The prayer was not selfish, she told herself. It was for Granny and Ruby, as well as all the others who loved the woman.

Ruby didn’t hear it, nor would she have even guessed that her friend was being a bit pious at the moment. Emma tended to avoid those things, as did Ruby. She made her way past the nurse’s station, ignoring the woman in white who called after her that the doctor wasn’t in yet. It had only been a few dates, but she already knew that Victor Whale was a creature of habit. He typically came in early or slept at the hospital, preferring evenings and nights off for his philandering.

She also knew that he liked to hide in the chemical storage room at the end of the hall. It had a large imposing computerized keypad on it to dissuade nosy visitors, but she knew it didn’t work. Pushing her way into the space, she was not surprised to find him sitting on the floor with his back against one of the cabinets and head thrown back in mid snore.

“Victor,” she said, as if he had just greeted her and she was responding. When he didn’t respond she said his name again a little louder.

He coughed as he woke up, head dropping forward and his chin hitting his lab coat covered chest. “Ruby?”

“Good we remember each other’s names. Now tell me. Why is my grandmother still here? You said last night that you didn’t think it was cardiac related.”

The heels of his hands dug into his eyes as he yawned and threw out his legs in a half-hearted
stretch. “I still don’t think it is,” he confirmed, struggling to his feet. He wiped at a bit of the dust and debris on his white coat. “But her pain is still persisting. So I kept her overnight for observation.”

“This is not news,” Ruby said, her red lips paler without the added lipstick. “Sorry, but I need to understand. You said we didn’t have to worry. But I just looked in on her and she’s hooked to machines and sleeping. Looking…well, she’s looking old.”

“She’s no spring chicken,” Victor said, chuckling at his own joke before clearing his throat again. “Look, I haven’t seen anything on the reports that indicate it is her heart. I would say it was acid reflux or perhaps gastritis, but her pain was quite severe for a while. I’m waiting on more of the bloodwork to come back and then she can probably go.”

“That’s it?” Ruby asked, a bit embarrassed at the display she had in front of Emma earlier. “You think it is just indigestion or an upset stomach? I’m in there mentally going through her wardrobe for a funeral outfit and she just ate too much.”

Victor shrugged his shoulders and leaned in what he hoped was a casual way against a cart that rolled slightly and almost sent him off balance. “Reflux patients often can have esophageal spasms that are painful and mimic heart attack symptoms. And your grandmother is already prone to attacks of bursitis in that arm.”

Ruby’s lips pursed further as she spun to the door and then stopped. “I guess I owe you a thank you.”

“I haven’t diagnosed her yet, Ruby, but I wouldn’t say no to maybe dinner tonight. We could break open that wine I’ve been saving.”

Thankful that her eyes had settled after rolling, she cast him a pitying glance over her shoulder. “I’m seeing someone,” she reminded him. “Graham. You know, tall guy, beard, carries a gun.”

“How could I forget?”

***AAA***

“That doesn’t sound too serious,” Killian said into his phone between classes. Already the first day had resulted in two sets of tears over chair placement, one near fight when some lad’s girlfriend dumped him after first period, and four lost students. He still had a planning period and three more classes to go. “I’m pleased she is on the mend.”

“Me too,” Emma said, her voice almost muffled by the wind as she rolled down her window to swipe her card to gain entry to the parking lot at work. “I’ve got some bad news though.”

“Are we talking ending our engagement or you don’t know where to hide the body?” he teased, knowing that she was not about to drop anything that earth shattering.

“Watch it, buddy. I can take this ring back off, you know. But the bad news is that Regina called to reschedule our meeting. She sort of let it drop that she’s sending me on another scouting mission. My signings have been low the past few weeks and she wants me to bring in new talent.”

“Oh so it is empty bed for me bad news and cheap hotels and take out for you?”

“Exactly,” she confirmed. “I haven’t talked to Neal yet, but I guess I need to check with him about taking Henry for a few days. I normally would get Granny, but after this…Anyway, I thought I’d give you a head’s up before I get home tonight. Damn it. I was thinking after his birthday and Anna’s wedding that we could actually have some quiet time. I don’t want to wake up to scratchy
sheets and pillows that don’t smell like you. And I may have protested at first, but I will miss sharing a shower with you too. Even if one of us usually ends up outside the spray and feels cold.”

He chuckled, not able to say what he wanted with students still wandering in and out of the classroom a few feet away. “Love, I will undoubtedly miss you. Why do you think I stayed at the hospital last night? I adore the Widow Lucas, but I couldn’t bear the thought of not holding you in my arms. We’ll make it work. Perhaps I can come visit on the weekends. You know I would love to see this part of the country and sleep in cheap hotels with you.”

She sighed, the sound more evident as the rattling engine was silenced by her arrival at a spot. “I’m sure we’ll figure out something. I just feel like the world’s worst fiancé right now. Mary Margaret and Anna went into full bridal mode when they got engaged. We haven’t even picked a date. I don’t own a bridal magazine or book. And now I’m leaving you alone for a couple of weeks. This sucks.”

“Aye, it’s not ideal, but I promise you we’ll find a way. And as for Henry, there is no need to uproot him. He can stay at the house with me. And Neal can have his visiting time too. The wedding will happen when it happens. I didn’t propose to Anna or Mary Margaret. I love you.”

She closed her eyes and leaned her head back on the seat. “Water,” she said abruptly, making him chuckle. “I want a wedding by the water. You and I both love the water.”

“Aye, that sounds like a lovely idea. I believe we just made our first wedding plan.”

***AAA***

“Did she appreciate the breakfast?” Liam asked when Elsa re-entered the diner. The crowd was gone, save a few stragglers, and the staff had dispersed either to rest or to perform routine tasks. He was nursing his coffee with the morning newspaper at the counter. “I suppose I know the answer. She didn’t fuss too much did she?”

“She said there was not enough salt on the potatoes and that the egg yolk wasn’t runny enough,” Elsa said with a wry grin as she slid onto the stool next to him. “But she ate it all and made sure to tell Ruby that Henry is supposed to eat free for a year at least for thinking of her.”

She dropped her head to his shoulder and moaned inelegantly as he readjusted their position to wrap his arm around her and drop a kiss to the top of her tousled head. “Tired, darling?”

“Just glad to get off my feet. What about you? You must be exhausted and I know you have to work at the Rabbit Hole tonight.”

“Aye, our replacement will be here momentarily. Kris said he’d cover the lunch shift while that sister of yours finalizes the seating chart again. I’ll catch a short nap between.” He turned the page of the paper and stifled a yawn. “Wouldn’t object to you napping with me.”

“As long as we just sleep,” she said dourly. “I don’t really want to get you all worked up and then send you to Zelena.”

He sighed, folding the paper back into position before kissing her head again. “You don’t care for her much, do you?”

It was on the tip of her tongue to tell him what she really thought. She had pulled her head back to stare into his eyes, analyze his reaction, and let loose the feelings of inadequacy and worry that had been plaguing her. “Not particularly.”

“And you want me to quit?” His blue eyes were a little pained as he watched her struggle not to
break down.

“No, it’s not that. I just don’t like…” Elsa gave the room a quick scan to see if the wrong people were there. It was a quiet group, none of them on her warning list. “I don’t like how she flirts with you and tries to seduce you.”

He laughed loudly. “You think she is trying to seduce me? Darling, if that is her idea of seduction, she is sorely lacking. I’m not even close to being seduced.” His head reared back again in preparation of a big laugh, but he saw that she was not laughing. “I’m sorry. I should have realized that she bothered you so much. I suppose I’ve been so focused on doing a good job for her that I didn’t notice that you were upset.”

Elsa was not prone to snorting, but did so anyway. “You didn’t notice that she finds ways to touch you all the time? You didn’t notice that she laughs a little too much and too long at all your jokes? You haven’t heard the way she coos about your business savvy and intelligence?”

“I’m going to ignore the fact that you might have just insulted my intelligence and tell you that you are the only one I have any interest in participating with in a seduction. Zelena is my boss. However, I can see that her style or behavior has you feeling a tad uncomfortable. So I will make it a point to ward off any of her advances, if you will, if you promise to be honest with me.” His hand lifted up from her shoulder to the nape of her neck where he rubbed slow circles. “This has been bothering you a while?”

She nodded slowly. “I didn’t want you to feel like you had to choose between your job and me.”

“It was never a contest. I love you, Elsa. And nobody and nothing will change that.”
Chapter 40

Thank you all for your support on this fic, following, liking, favoriting, commenting, etc. We're winding down on it, but there is still a little more story to come.

Elsa hummed a few bars of the song, her head tilted to one side and eyes hooded as she tried to find just the right inflection. It was not her usual way of recording, as her partner for the song was not even there, nor was her sister. Anna and her fiancé were doing a series of interviews about their upcoming wedding and plans for the future. Liam was working. And Killian, whose voice would be recorded with her, was at the school teaching. She wasn't sure if she should be upset about that or not, as it might be more than a little uncomfortable to sing of love and undying affection with a man who was her boyfriend's brother and her friend's fiancé.

"I'm thinking we should go softer there," the producer said into his own microphone. "I know you're famous for these big crescendos, but you can't use that on every refrain."

She wet her lips and nodded, looking over his shoulder where Emma was circling things on a clipboard and had a phone plastered to one ear. It was silly, she thought, again humming along as if a warm up to the actual song. She felt strange about this, but even more so doing it alone. Liam had told her that she would be as brilliant as always and teased that Killian might be bad enough that they would decide to call him instead.

She couldn't hear the producer's next words, as his hand covered the mic and he turned to face Emma. She quickly unfolded herself from the chair, grabbed a bottle of water, and headed into the sound booth. "Need a break?"

"I haven't recorded anything yet."

Nonplussed, Emma removed the cap and handed her the water before pulling over a stool and placing herself between Elsa and the view of the control room. "So you want to tell me what's wrong or should I assume and just start giving a pep talk."

"I'm not sure about this refrain," Elsa said, as if it was just a minor thing. "I know they want me softer there, but I can't help thinking that someone singing about love in that way should be shouting it from the mountain tops."

Bobbing her head, Emma smiled. "And that's all it is?"

"Just that and some nerves." She took a long gulp of the water. "You know that it is really creepy when you do that, right?" She crossed her arms over the thin material of her blue and white shirt that was tucked into a new pair of jeans.

"Do what?" Emma played the part of a concerned and naïve ingénue quite well, her eyes wide and hands splayed open as if offering nothing but love and support.

"Look at me like you can read my mind." Elsa tried to laugh, though it sounded forced. "You're okay with me singing a love song with your fiancé? Isn't that a weird kind of situation even for this town?"

Rocking back on the heels of her boots, Emma lifted only one shoulder, as if it wasn't a testament to her abilities to read people. "I can tell you that Killian is completely freaking out too. He's quiet about it, but I caught him singing in the shower this morning. In between the second verse and the chorus
he was critiquing himself." Her tilted head seemed to lean in to interpret Elsa a bit more. Finding something, she turned around quickly and shouted to the producer to take a break that they would start up again later.

"This was probably a bad idea, me trying to fit this in before the wedding. I should be concentrating on that and all these people coming into town, not this song."

"Sounds like quite a crowd. Anna's not upset that I won't be there, right? I wish I could, but Henry's got half of his class coming over to spend the night tonight. I swear even if it is a bunch of your parents' old business associates, it is probably going to be better than 12 and 13 year olds watching violent movies and whispering about girls, weapons, and Pokémon."

"Don't forget food," Elsa teased, her eyes dropping to the ring on Emma's hand. "Don't worry though. Anna's in a world of her own right now. I doubt she'd notice if I wasn't there. Liam's nervous about meeting our aunt though. It's kind of cute."

"I knew there were benefits to being that abandoned orphan thing," Emma agreed sardonically. "Killian hasn't been judged by any relatives of mine. And I think I've passed the test for Liam. At least I hope I have." She gestured her blonde head at the lumpy and uncomfortable sofa against the wall where more than a few musicians had collapsed before or after a session. Both women sank into the leather, curling their legs up under themselves and propping their arms up on the cushioned back. "Sometimes it feels like he is more of a father than big brother to Killian."

"It does, doesn't it?" Elsa picked her fingers through the end of her hair, curling the tips around. "Does Killian ever talk about their father? Liam has only mentioned him a few times."

Emotions clouded over Emma's face, her lips thinning into a frown. "I know he abandoned the family when they were both young. And Killian has said that the man…Brenan, I think…is remarried and has a son now. Named him Liam as well."

"That's so…" She grasped for the word.

"Screwed up," Emma finished. "I know. I wonder about my family sometimes, but I have never had the slightest clue about them. I don't know if I could handle knowing that they have lives and moved on from abandoning me. Who does that?"

Elsa nodded her head in understanding. "I think that Liam might be concerned that Killian would want to invite their father to your wedding. He hasn't said anything much about it, but…"

Emma's eyes widened at the idea. "I hadn't even considered that. Killian doesn't really mention that man very much. Do you think Liam honestly thinks that Killian would do that without consulting him? To be honest we haven't had many discussions about wedding plans like invitations or even a date and time. It would be Killian's decision, but I'm just not thinking either of us want to go with awkward and potentially heated for our theme. I was more in favor of intimate and casual."

"I think it might be weighing on him that he's both brother and father figure to the groom."

"Kind of like you are feeling about Anna, right now?"

***AAA***

In the years that Killian had lived in Storybrooke and taught at the smallish private school, he had always lamented the darkness that surrounded his clapboard house by the water. Many an evening he had returned to it without ever flipping on a light, finding his way to his bed and collapsing there with his clothes still on his body. When Liam had moved in, the house had not seemed any different
only more crowded and less like a sanctuary for him.

However, as his jeep took that final curve and the a-frame of the structure came into view, he could not help but feel a warmth at the sight of it. Emma's car was pulled up close to the porch and behind it sat Robin's truck. Henry's bicycle was propped against the tree that sat closest to the house. Every window glowed with brightness and shadows of the young boy and his friends were evidence of the life inside.

Sitting there in the cooling jeep, he wondered for a moment if this was all something he could actually handle. He loved Emma and adored Henry, but the truth still loomed that his own example of fatherhood was hardly one to write home about. Would he be any good at it? Could he be the husband that Emma needed and deserved or the friend and guide for Henry? Or would he find himself failing miserably. He shook off the idea of failure as he reminded himself to appreciate the fact that she had said yes and Henry did seem to genuinely be fond of him.

As he made his way inside he was struck again by the domesticity of it all. Killian recognized several of his students from school sitting about in the living room of his house watching a very loud movie and talking over each other with trebling voices that seemed to indicate that puberty had a strong hold. His Swan stood with her back to the raucous gang of young men, a bad strategic move, as she drizzled butter over the popcorn and lined sodas up on a tray. She was not decked out in her normal work clothing, forgoing the skirts or tailored pants for a faded pair of jeans and a football jersey with the name Swan across the back. Her hair bounced in a ponytail and her nails were painted to match the color of the jersey.

"It appears we have been invaded, love," he teased, nuzzling into her neck briefly before she shooed him away.

"None of that with the eyes of Storybrooke Academy on us," she warned, a salt shaker wagging in front of his face. "But for the record, welcome home. I missed you."

"Bloody nescience of a faculty meeting," he grumbled, digging a hand into the popcorn for a scoop. "I see you have survived though."

"Robin's been a lifesaver," she admitted, pointing her chin in the direction of Roland and his father. "I'd say he is already ready for the next few years of fatherhood."

The sound of screeching tires rang out on the screen, indicative of a car chase that was clearly enthralling the young viewers. Robin reacted with them, throwing his body about as if he were in the car too and shoving his hand in front of Roland's face before the sound of gun fire erupted in the scene. Emma laughed as the young boy's curly head tried to peek around his father's long digits to catch a glimpse of what had the older boys' screaming and cheering so enthusiastically.

Sensing a need to step in, Emma called out over the crowd that popcorn was served. The group swarmed her each grabbing one of the bags she had just filled and a soda. Their shouts of glee were drowned out by chewing and the popping of soda cans. "Hey," she said as she watched Robin struggle to both shield his son and grab a bite himself. "I need my little helper."

That was all the encouragement that Roland needed as he bounded toward her and set about divvying up the gummy worms and other sugary snacks. His early education of counting was on full display as he counted out five of each item, sometimes with his tongue poking out the side of his mouth. When Killian reached to sample of one of the items, the boy's chocolate eyes warned of impending doom for anyone that stole or made him lose count. A chagrinned Killian took a step back as Emma laughed.
"Can I have one?" she asked sweetly, propping her chin in her hand. "Please, Roland."

The little boy nodded and handed her a long green, red, and brown gummy worm. "These are the best ones."

She thanked him and sat back, dangling it in front of her before biting. "I guess we see who is more popular tonight." An affectionate hand through Roland's curls later, she winked at Killian.

"Uncle Killian?" the boy asked, carefully pronouncing the older man's name. "Is this really Henry's birthday party?"

"Aye," Killian told him, leaning down to better vantage. "He's a teenager now."

That certainly impressed Roland who was looking forward to someday being in double digits himself. He continued his task with strict focus and concentration that would have made most employers proud.

"I'm assuming the pizza went over brilliantly," Killian noted to his fiancé, looking over at the stack of empty pizza boxes that were neatly piled to the side. "You didn't happen to save any for your hard working and starving fiancé, did you?"

The long ponytail bounced as she turned away from him, looking for all the world guilty. "Sort of," she said in the tiniest of voices possible. "The boys sort of attacked when the pizzas arrived. I'm talking full on diving in without question. I was standing back counting fingers and making sure they didn't eat the cardboard. Seriously? What are they feeding kids for lunch at that school?"

"They ate all the pizza."

"Not exactly," she said, squeezing her eyes shut as her nose scrunched. "There are four slices of vegan pizza left."

"Vegan pizza?" he asked, staring at her wildly. "What the devil is that?"

"No meat or cheese."

"So it's a crust with sauce and vegetables." He was trying desperately to picture this concoction she was talking about. Curiosity getting the better of him, he sauntered over to the refrigerator and pulled out the partially empty box. Peering inside, it was his turn to wrinkle his nose. "People eat this? It smells like Asian take out. Not in a good way."

"Oh and it has a gluten free crust made of rice flour." She bit at her lip thoughtfully. "I'll make it up to you."

"I'm keeping a list, Swan," he taunted over his shoulder. "Did you at least save me some popcorn?"

***AAA***

Elsa's mother, Gerda, had always been an expert at entertaining, but Elsa felt pressure to live up to that persona when faced with those who had traveled into town for the wedding. Then there was that Mr. Harringworth who had pinched her four times as he remarked how he had just loved her parents. The senile old man was probably still confused over who exactly was getting married, having congratulated even Liam at the no longer intimate rehearsal dinner that seemed to never end.

"Shoot me now," Elsa hissed at her boyfriend, cursing herself for going with the fashionably high heels rather than something more comfortable. "Someone should get that old man for harassment."
"Just a bit longer, darling," Liam responded, his hand dipping precariously low on her back. He knew almost nobody at the party. Even his brother and Emma had the excuse of Henry's birthday to attend to and Robin had the nerve to join them. Even Ruby had only been there for half an hour before going back to check on Granny, who was well recovered and fighting against the restrictions of her new diet. However, Liam was hardly the shy one when it came to these things. He had a half dozen senior women fawning over him and asking him to say something with his "adorable" accent. Elsa was a fan of it herself, but enough was enough already.

Unlike the more introverted Elsa, Anna was in her element. She glowed with a combination of happiness and excitement that could have sold for a lot of money should someone be able to bottle it. Each and every guest seemed to thrill her. Even Kristof's adopted family, the Stones, who were generally rigid and without much emotion seemed to appreciate the bride's enthusiasm for everything.

Elsa swallowed a groan as her sister bounced toward her in movements that combined the unbridled passion of a colt in the pasture for the first time and a child bounding down the stairs on her birthday. "This man knew father," she enthused, dragging the aged Mr. Harrington by the wrist. "He said they used to play golf together."

To her amazement, Liam bit his lip and did not say that half the old men in the room could claim the same connection. So Elsa followed suit with a warm smile of her own and greeted the man again. "It really is so good of you to come for the wedding. I know father and mother would have been so pleased."

Their parents were certainly missed in all the celebration surrounding the wedding. Despite it not being quite as large scale as Mary Margaret's, the sisters had thrown together a spectacularly grand event in short order. The true missing piece was a father to walk his daughter down the aisle and their mother's elegant taste to guide them in the decisions. Elsa felt woefully unprepared to do double duty as sister and parent figure, but the time was growing near.

She had no qualms about Anna marrying Kristof. He had proven himself to be very much in love with the younger of the sisters and clearly thought the world of her. Though a bit rushed through the circumstances, they were both going to make wonderful parents, Elsa thought with pride. Anna's childish exuberance and Kris with his steadfast practicality were likely to be just the right combination for the boy or girl they would soon be raising.

Liam nudged her back to reality as a late entrant arrived. The woman towered over some of the other ladies and seemed to glide with an ease and poise that Elsa had obtained as well. As she grew closer, it was clear that she had a family resemblance to the sisters' especially Elsa. However, she had Anna's similarly upturned nose and wide set eyes that both girls had earned from their mother.

"Aunt Ingrid," Elsa said, reaching out a welcoming hand to the woman. Dressed in a flowing skirt and blouse with a kimono style jacket billowing about to add to the voluminous effect, Ingrid pulled her sister's older daughter in for a hug and ripping her from Liam's half embrace. The younger blonde's words of welcome were lost in the muffled haze of material.

"It's been too long," the aunt said in a whispery sort of tone that made anyone listening lean nearer to hear. "You girls should have visited me at least once or twice."

Elsa sort of ducked her head and turned toward Liam to introduce the two. Her aunt seemed unimpressed as she shook his hand and questioned him within five minutes on his job, living situation, and intentions. She then made an excuse of wanting to have a bit of fresh air and whisked Elsa out the door toward the patio.
"Aunt Ingrid's here," Anna said less enthusiastically than she usually sounded. "Did she...did she say anything awful?"

Liam looked back toward the closed door with a simple shake of his head. "She's a bit of a whirling dervish, but I don't think there were any insults. She seemed to want to get Elsa alone though." While he empathized with Elsa for having lost her parents and being forced into that hybrid of a role as mother and sister to Anna, he had appreciated the lack of parental approval necessary in their relationship. Suddenly it felt very much like he was being weighed and measured by this aunt he had barely heard about at all.

"That's a switch," she said, wrinkling her face in an uncharacteristically disgusted way. "I'm surprised is all. She's very judgmental."

It was the worst critique he had heard from Anna, who seemed to love everyone. Killian had joked that she probably would like the devil himself if only for the boldness to wear so much red. "I take it you are not a fan of those judgments."

"I've said too much," Anna answered hurriedly. "But Ingrid and Elsa can handle themselves. Elsa always did have a weird sort of affection for that woman." Looking around at the waning crowd, Anna frowned. "You must be bored. Your brother couldn't make it? I know it's just the dinner before the wedding, but I hate for you to be stuck like this. Kris has some of his friends here. I could introduce you..."

"I'm quite content, Anna. Besides this little lull lets us get to know each other better." He had been around the younger of the sisters plenty, but it was rare they had even a moment without her fiancé or his girlfriend. "I don't know that I have congratulated you on the wedding and the lad or lass you are carrying."

Anna's normally restrained rust colored hair was loose around her shoulders and down her back the sides pulled back with a single comb. Her cheeks turned nearly the same color. "I never imagined getting married before my sister," she mused. Then she threw a single hand over her mouth. "Oh I didn't mean...I mean no pressure."

"I assure you that I feel none, Anna," he said, lips shaking out a smile. "I think that might be farther down the road for us than we can possibly plan at the moment. Still it is nice to celebrate such things with our loved ones."

Her hand was still over her mouth as she nodded, reluctantly uncovering her lips after a moment. "I've always just wanted my sister to be happy. And I think she is with you. I know she is. I mean I have seen her unhappy. You wouldn't believe how cold she can be when she is like that...brrr..." Anna giggled. "I guess I'm not very good at this, am I?"

Liam's pale blue eyes blinked a few times as he tried to discern the stream of consciousness that was Anna. "I'm afraid I'm a bit lost."

"I'm not very good at giving the sister to sister's boyfriend warning. Not that you need to be warned. It's more about me telling you not to hurt her. I don't think you will or anything...Oh God. I really suck at this." She tilted her head. "Let me start over. I like you, Liam. And my sister clearly does too. So don't screw it up." Breathing deeply through her nose, her firm facade of an expression melted. "Wow that sounded pretty good, don't you think?"

"Perfect, Anna, perfect."

***AAA***
"It's a bit like a refugee camp in there," Robin declared when Killian joined him on the deck. "I've never seen such a sight in the first world country." The widowed father accepted the mug of hot chocolate from Killian with a twinge of nostalgic regret. Usually the men shared a beer or a shot of something stronger, not a chocolaty drink with swirls of whipped cream and cinnamon. However, it was an appropriate choice in a house of impressionable young minds.

"Roland seems to be enjoying himself. I think that he is currently attempting to emulate Henry in any way that he can." The boy had found his cartoon laden pajamas lacking when he saw the ones the older boys were wearing. Emma had jumped to the rescue and found him a pair of Henry's faded gym shorts and an old t-shirt of Killian's that had shrunk in the wash. Both swallowed his slight frame, but he had never beamed happier than when Henry complimented him on it.

Robin gave a half smile and stared out in the direction of a sliver of a moon over the water. "You never picture this stuff, you know? Single fatherhood. I always thought that Marian and I would have at least three little ones and live in a split level house with a chained link fence. I'd be a part of the union and Marian would be considering going back to work at the bank after the youngest was in school. I thought the drama would be over whether the children needed that new game or toy and not…"

It was a rare flash into the grief that Robin had experienced after the crash. "I think she probably would have been happy with that. She had a competitive side and probably would have attempted to be the best baker in the PTA for fundraisers."

Robin had not retied his work boots when he prepared to go outside, the loose leather gaping as he crossed his ankles on the railing of the deck. "I wonder sometimes if maybe we look for the opposite of what we lost. Probably makes not a lick of sense, but…Emma, she's not like Milah, but yet you love her."

"No, they don't have much in common. Is Regina much like your Marian?" Killian knew the answer, but also knew Robin was groping about for some shared meaning and understanding. He owed it to him to try to understand. Hadn't he wondered before if Milah would even recognize his life now? Had he not looked at Emma's sleeping form and pondered if fate really worked in a way that had set him on a course for her? It had to be harder for Robin, who had Roland as a living reminder of what was lost.

"Not a bit. Marian was softer, kinder, feisty and yet loving. She wanted to change the world. She wanted to make a difference. I remember one of the last conversations we had was about her wanting to do something more with her life and feeling that she had not accomplished much of anything. She thought she had time…we all think we have time to right ourselves and start anew." He gave a sad look over his shoulder toward the house. "Regina's…she's bold. She shows no fear though I'm sure that she has them. Her whole life is about being the best and having power. But…she's different with me and with Roland."

"Do you think that Marian might have liked her?" It was another question that Killian had asked himself about Milah. Would she have liked Emma, understood his feelings for the blonde woman, even been friends with her despite their differences. The quick answer was no. He could imagine them being cordial and maybe even curious. However, he saw no reason for perpetuating the delusion that the two women would have been more than that.

"She would have hated her," Robin answered with a bitter honesty. "Marian was not pretentious. She would have hated the idea of being replaced by someone like Regina. She wouldn't have said anything hurtful to her because that wasn't who Marian was. Yet I know that under the surface she would have despised her." He took another sip of the chocolate. "She wouldn't see what I see when I
look at Regina. She wouldn't see the woman who built herself up into this powerful being because of
the pain and hurt she has experienced. She wouldn't see that sometimes Regina is…”

"You don't have to explain it to me, mate," Killian offered, elbows resting on his knees as he stared
out at the same nearly dark ocean before them. "I don't know that we can ever explain why we love
the women we love. Perhaps it is some greater force directing our steps to the lives we are meant to
live. Or perhaps not. That hardly seems fair to our first loves. And who is to say that we are not
drifting without direction now. We can't get caught up in the shoulds, woulds, and coulds."

"Sage advice over a horribly sweet drink. You've changed, Killian." Robin settled the nearly two-
thirds full mug on the arm of the chair. "And for the record. I think you are on the right path."

***AAA***

Elsa's cheeks hurt from smiling at the handful of out of town guests who were coming to Anna's
wedding. It had seemed rude not to invite them to rehearsal dinner, even though it was originally just
supposed to be burgers and fries for the smallish wedding party. Some of the men and women had
known the sisters since childhood, having been in business with their father or served on charity
boards with their mother. Even their Aunt Ingrid had arrived with her usual way of speaking so
quietly and yet forcefully about everything.

"Your aunt is a piece of work, darling," Liam said, moving out of the way when his girlfriend kicked
off the heels she was wearing with a little too much force. "Did she ever even talk to Anna?"

Ingrid was one of their mother's two sisters. Like their mother, she was tall and regal, and had very
similar coloring to Elsa's pale features. Even when they were young, Elsa and Anna had realized that
the woman rarely associated with the outside world. Their mother had called her a "tender hearted
eccentric," while their father preferred the term, "fruitcake." On the occasions that she did venture in
from Vermont, she tended to spend most of her time associating with Elsa and telling her all the
things they had in common.

"She tends to gravitate toward me," Elsa said, distractedly trying to remove her bracelet from her
wrist. The clasp remained firmly closed and no amount of arm slinging seemed to help. Offering
Liam her best pout was all it took for him to step over to her and try his best to unfasten the silver and
blue braided jewelry.

"I know the feeling." He successfully unlatched the bracelet, tossing it aside and tugging her toward
him. "Though I rather I think my affection for you is a bit less familial."

"I should hope," she said against his lips. "I like the way you gravitate toward me."

His hands skimmed down her back, searching for the zipper. Tugging on it with a bit more force
than needed, she squeaked against him in protest. "No ripping the dress," she reminded him.

"Apologies. I don't know what came over me." Though still insistent, he tugged it down and pulled
the black material away from her. "Perhaps I was just anxious to help you escape."

"Always looking out for my best interest."

***AAA***

Emma blinked up at the ceiling, her eyes adjusted to the dark of the bedroom and ears perked and
ready for the slightest sound of mischief in the living room where all of the boys were currently in the
throes of sleep. Hardly naive, she wondered if they were just waiting on her to surrender to sleep too
before tearing the house apart in some ritual that will make her an outcast of the PTA.
"They're sleeping," the voice next to her mumbled against her shoulder. "We should take advantage of this break and get some sleep too."

"You are a teacher," she reminded him, fingers trailing lightly on the forearm wrapped around her middle. She couldn't forget that not so long ago his handless forearm was not something he used in snuggling up to her. He would pull it back when she attempted to caress or touch it. Maybe it was a testament to his tired state or his comfort level, but he did not flinch when she caressed the scarred flesh with gentle touches. "You honestly think it is safe to turn your back on a sleeping bear?"

"They are children, love, not exactly…oh right, I suppose you have a point." The whiskers of his upper lip and chin brushed her bare shoulder. "What do you recommend? Counter attack? Should we approach from opposite sides?"

"They are children," she repeated. "I don't think we need battle plans." She huffed at his exasperated explanation of naval commands and how cute she would look in the uniform, but it was a cute explanation.

To her luck and amazement, morning finally broke with no major incidents. Killian announced they might have to become short order cooks after they managed to make pancakes, bacon, and eggs for the group of them, utilizing Robin to wrangle them into one location and encourage that the sleeping bags and pillows be picked up before someone fell on them. She only laughed at little when Robin was the first to trip on someone's bedroll. By 10 the other parents had picked up their bleary eyed offspring and Robin had offered to drop Henry off at Neal's on his way to put Roland back to bed. As much as she might want to, Emma knew she had to ready herself for the wedding and try to encourage Killian to get dressed as well. It was only a little distracting when he had suggested a joint shower. But being human she had agreed and became reminded that his blue eyes were even more blue with his hair wet and plastered haphazardly framing his face.

She was shimmying and contorting her body to zip her dress when he emerged from the still steamy bathroom. "You need a hand, my love. I believe I have one to offer."

In the mirror's reflection she could see his raised eyebrows and his fingers wiggling at her suggestively. The more pragmatic and sarcastic side of herself might have rolled her eyes or even shot him the bird in her attempt not to laugh at the silly but still sexy sight of him. They had just had sex, but the man was still flirting with her in that seductively awkward way that he had. "In the interest of time, the zipper needs to go up," she instructed, lifting her freshly dried hair off her back.

It took him only three striding steps to reach her, his hand gliding the zipper up effortlessly. "You weren't so worried about time earlier." Caressing her shoulder with his warm lips, he caught her gaze in the mirror. "Not that I'm complaining."

"And look where that got us," she chided, pressing back against him briefly. "We're running late. What are we going to tell Anna?"

"Soap's slippery?" His arms wrapped around her waist easily, shoulders hunching as he rested his chin at where her shoulder met her neck. "I highly doubt that she will notice. Kris said there was quite the guest list. We'll simply slip in behind the other celebrants."

"You are a horrible influence."

"To the contrary. I do believe that I have brought out your best traits. It is you who tries to distract me with these little dresses and your beauty. When you smile at me or pull me closer, I struggle to even breathe or think." As if to display his lack of control around her, he descended on her lips at the
moment she turned her head in his direction. The movements of his mouth hot and insistent, as she turned in his arms to allow better access. "Bloody siren you are."

***AAA***

Liam chuckled as Emma and Killian slid into the row beside him, his brother muttering an apology and Emma blushing and looking about the nearly filled area. "Glad you could join us, brother," he teased. "I was beginning to think I might have to sit through this one alone."

"Emma and I had a bit of trouble getting ourselves pulled together after the party for Henry last night." The lie was pretty obvious, especially when the younger of the two brother cleared his throat and ran a scratching nail against the skin behind his ear. "And we aren't so late as to have missed anything."

Liam rolled his eyes, tapping his fingers against his knee. "Lovely to see you, Emma. You're looking grand today." He winked at her, earning the frustrated grunt from Killian. "Perhaps we could share a dance at the reception. I'd be happy to show you that not all of the Brothers Jones are wankers when it comes to rhythm."

Placing a soothing hand on Killian's arm as if to say that she had this, she smiled sweetly at Liam's teasing expression. "I don't know. I don't think I've ever danced with…wait, what is it that you and Killian call each other…a prat?" Both men chuckled at her somewhat muddled attempt at their accents. "But I might be game if Elsa doesn't mind."

Liam might have offered a comeback, but the music change stopped him. The soft trickles of a generic song were replaced with the stronger notes that signified the beginning of the ceremony. Kristoff and his best man, a cousin or some sort that he had grown up with, walked purposefully toward the altar. His normally stoic and solid presence fading as he stared toward the back of the sanctuary for a glimpse of Anna.

Killian felt a rush of sympathetic allegiance to the man, knowing that he would be just as nervous in that situation. While they had not discussed the roles of their friends and loved ones yet, he knew that he would wish for his brother to stand up beside him. He might have to choose more groomsmen, as Emma would not want to leave out one of her close friends. He didn't quite care how many of her friends tromped down the aisle so long as he knew she would be walking toward him. Traditional gown of white or some modern and slinky number made by Ruby – he didn't care so long as his Emma stood across from him as they exchanged vows and rings.

"Killian?" Emma whispered to him as the officiant got a bit long winded about how Kristoff and Anna were meant to be together. "I was thinking…"

He smiled, his arm finding a way around her waist to pull her tighter. "Yes, love?" he asked. They had done very little talking about the wedding itself, Emma not wanting to plan anything until things settled back down again. And while he was not inclined to long strategic sessions about seating charts and flowers, he was anxious to get started in this new life they would share together. Wedding or just a quick trip to the justice of the peace, he was already thinking about the rest of their lives. However, her soft nudge made him wonder if she was perhaps being inspired by the recent focus on weddings.

"Maybe we should…" She lowered her voice even more as another guest gave her a look for talking during the ceremony. "Look in on Mary Margaret's plants. She and David are running late. I'd hate for them to come home to brown and dead flowers and plants."

"As you wish, love."
Liam nursed the watered down amber liquid, watching as Elsa hugged her sister for maybe the fourth time in as many minutes. When Granny had told him of the blonde and why they would be perfect together, she had warned that Elsa was not overly affectionate or outwardly loving. "She's the opposite of her sister, but still a wonderful girl," the widow had said. "I think you'll get along great."

There was no lie in Granny's statement, but Liam couldn't help but be somewhat proud of the strides Elsa had made in showing her emotions. The role of sister of the bride, maid of honor, and mother figure had clearly worn her out. Yet she was still so happy for her sister that she beamed brightly in each picture and had wished the couple well no fewer than a dozen times since the start of the reception.

"I think they are happy," a soft voice said from behind him. Not knowing many of the guests at the event, Liam had relegated himself to a table out of the way of the reunions that were occurring. He might be Elsa's date, but she was busy with family duties that he did not feel quite comfortable in joining yet. They shared the occasional look and he was introduced to more people than he could possibly remember, but this day was about Anna and Kristoff and not him. So he had sat making small talk with Ruby until she had to run back to check of the feisty and reluctantly resting Granny. Emma and Killian checked in from time to time, but had been pretty wrapped up in each other on the dance floor for the last half hour. "Elsa too, maybe."

The glass in his hand nearly tilted as he spun in his seat to find the girls' aunt, Ingrid, standing alongside an empty chair. "I…I believe they are…"

She did not wait for an invitation, sliding in with a sigh and brush of her hand to ward off the invisible crumbs she seemed to have spotted. "I didn't get the opportunity to talk to you much last night at the dinner. Liam, isn't it?"

Resisting the urge to click his heels and bow to a woman who had an even more impressive regal air about her, he simply nodded. "Yes, I'm Liam Jones."

She barely smiled in acknowledgement. "And you're the one dating my little Elsa, right?"

Calling the statuesque woman by such a diminutive name seemed wrong, but he did not challenge the reference. According to Anna and Elsa both, the woman viewed the sisters as perpetually childlike. "Yes, we've been together about seven or eight months." He almost mentioned that they lived together and that it was clearly more serious than a few dates as her tone seemed to insinuate, but he didn't bother.

"You know without her father and mother to look after them, Elsa's taken on the role of mother to Anna. I'm not sure the opposite is true though. Everyone should have that protection. Everyone should have someone looking out for their best interests."

"Aye, it is important, but if you are worried about my intentions toward Elsa…well, I assure you that I am not planning anything nefarious. I am in love with her and she with me."

Ingrid held her hand up. "I don't doubt that, as she has told me as much too. I just want you to understand, Liam, that my beautiful girl won't be hurt by a man like you. I'll see to that." She smiled then, a disingenuous sort of expression that did not reach her eyes. "Now I'm going to get back to this lovely event. Have a nice day, Liam."
Chapter 41

Henry’s nightmares began his first weekend at Neal’s apartment while Emma was working. He tried to hide them from everyone, including his mother during their daily conversations. She saw through him.

“You aren’t sleeping well,” she accused, her hand and chin resting on her knees as she held the phone out to study his pixelated face. “Don’t lie to me, kid. I want to know what’s wrong.”

“Just a few bad dreams,” Henry muttered, trying to change the topic back to Killian’s plans for a jazz band and how he wanted to make the cut. “I don’t think he’ll make it easy for me, but it should be doable. I did some sight reading on the piece I have to prepare and it almost sounded right.”

“I’m sure you’ll do a great job with it, but maybe you should hold back on all these activities. You’ve got honor band and school orchestra. Then you’ve got writing workshop, newspaper staff, baseball practice games, and I got an email about you making the yearbook staff. When are you expecting to study?”

“You forgot service league,” Henry said, pulling the sleeve of his sweatshirt over his hand. “I know it’s a lot, but my grades are good.”

“Alright,” Emma conceded with a sigh. “Check with your dad though, okay? And probably Killian too since he’d have to deal with getting you home from that.” She tilted her head to the side. “So about these bad dreams. What are they about?”

Henry did his best turtle impression as he pulled inward and looked very uncomfortable. “Just the standard stuff. Monsters chasing me. You know.”

“And you aren’t hiding anything from me?” She cleared her throat. “No bad test grades? No fights with Violet, your dad, Tamara, Killian? I haven’t done anything to scar you, right?”

“Mom, they’re just dreams.”

Back when Emma and Henry first moved back to Storybrooke and Neal took more of a role in his son’s life, Henry had suffered each night from a string of nightmares that sent him to Emma’s bed. By morning he wanted to pretend they didn’t exist. However, she could still see the streaks and tracks of his tears over their breakfast. Each night became a battle where he didn’t want to go to sleep. Neal blamed Emma for badmouthing him and his father. Emma blamed Neal for letting Henry watch the wrong things on television. But just as suddenly as the dreams came on, they were gone and Henry was back to his cuddling, lovable self.

“You know you can call me anytime, right? I don’t care what time it is or why you would want to talk. You’re my priority, kid.”

“I know,” Henry said thoughtfully. “There is one thing you could do. It’s about Killian though.”

Emma tried not to smile too brightly at the mention of her fiancé. She was so used to hiding her relationships and dates from her son that it still seemed strange to have him know just how happy she was with Killian. However, she still wanted to be careful that Henry understood he was her number one priority. If for any reason he wanted her to call things off with Killian, she would figure out something. “Ok…what is this mystery request?”

“Can you talk to him about breakfast. He said now that you’re away that we should think about
eating healthier. He said no more poptarts for breakfast, mom. I’m dying here. I need my cinnamon
poptarts.”

Emma bit back a laugh at Henry’s dramatics. “I’ll talk to him. Meanwhile, I’ve got a stash hidden
from Mr. Home Cook. Check the third drawer down behind the immersion blender. They are hidden
in an oven mitt.”

***AAA***

Ingrid fingered the silky material of the blouse between her digits, not looking at the product but
rather studying Elsa’s more pensive expression. “We can pretend we’re interested in these all day,
Elsa, but I think you’re just stalling. What is it you want to say to me?”

“Nothing? I mean, nothing. I’m fine.” The younger blonde pulled one of the tops out, holding the blu
material against her and rotating toward her aunt. “What do you think?”

“Do you really need something else blue? You have quite a few blue and purple pieces, dear.” Ingrid
was a fine one to talk, as most of her wardrobe consisted of winter whites and taupe or beige. Anna
used to wonder if Ingrid ever spilled anything, as such colors were hard to keep clean.

“I guess I just like it,” she answered thoughtfully, holding the fabric out to study it more. “I guess it is
comfortable to me.” She giggled that uncomfortable little titter she gave whenever she didn’t want to
say something. “Maybe I should look at the sweaters.”

“Maybe you should tell me what’s going on? I thought we were going to have dinner in tonight? I
want to see this new condo of yours past the living room.” Even at her most confrontational, Elsa’s
aunt was soft spoken and kindly with her nearly whispered tone. It had been annoying to Elsa and
Anna when they were younger, as they had not wanted to quiet down enough to listen to the
woman. However, Elsa could now appreciate the understated elegance of her mother’s sister.

“Liam has some of the guys from the band over to work on a new song they wrote. I didn’t think
you’d want to listen to all that.” She pushed the blouse back into place and turned to a rack of cowl
neck sweaters in the same variety of shades. “I thought we could have dinner at the Italian place and
then head over to the condo. Liam’s working tonight so they won’t be too long.”

Ingrid circled the rack and picked up one of the sweaters. “So that’s it,” she said softly. “He doesn’t
like me around.”

“What? No, that’s not it at all. Liam’s just busy and the band doesn’t have much time these days with
everyone’s jobs. I thought you would prefer…”

“I would prefer you tell me the truth. I realize that he might be a bit uncomfortable around me since I
am your only family besides Anna. However, if he’s serious about a future with you, he needs to be
a man and step up. What’s he hiding, dear? Why won’t he look me in the eye.”

Dropping the sleeve of the sweater she was holding, Elsa sucked in a deep breath through her nose.
“Aunt Ingrid, I know that you mean well, but Liam is not avoiding you. He’s busy with work, his
music, and helping his friends and his brother. He’s a good man. You shouldn’t be so hard on him.”

Ingrid clicked her tongue against the top of her mouth. “I know that you think so, Elsa, but we all get
blind by what we think of as love. Are you sure that you aren’t ignoring some pretty big warning
signs. He’s a grown man and yet he works as a bar tender and dreams of making it big in the music
industry. That doesn’t sound very responsible to me. You didn’t sit around waiting to be discovered.
You’ve had a great career and ample opportunities to make it in other ways. I hate to say it, but
maybe he’s just hanging on to you to keep his eye on the music business.”

Two women in the midst of shopping drew a little too close to the aunt and niece, leaving Elsa to quietly count to ten before she responded. “It isn’t like that.”

Patting Elsa’s arm consolingly, Ingrid gave her a soft smile. “I know it doesn’t feel like it, but you have to pay attention to these things. In addition to your rising career, you and Anna have quite a bit of money from your parents’ estates. It’s not unheard of for a man to seek out a woman such as yourself, thinking he might…”

“Enough,” Elsa said firmly. “I don’t recall you having these conversations with Anna about Kristoff. I’m capable of taking care of myself. Don’t forget that I have done so for a while now. Liam and I are happy and in love. He’s not after me for money or fame.”

“I hope you’re right, dear.”

***AAA***

Ruby swirled her spoon in the murky water that was becoming the warm tea that Granny and Mary Margaret had requested. She was glad to see her friend back from her honeymoon and even happier to know that Granny was returning to normal after her scare and hospital stay. Actually Granny was refusing to admit there had even been a problem, insisting on working the same long hours and not doing much in the way of changing her diet. However, one visit from the newly married teacher and she was reclined on the sofa in the private quarters with a blanket over her legs.

“It sounds lovely,” Granny remarked after Mary Margaret described the mountain cabin where she and David had spent more than a week. The small cabin did sound like a quaint getaway, complete with deer frolicking in the yard and birds chirping hello each morning as they sat on window boxes. “I should think about taking a little vacation one of these days.”

Ruby resisted the urge to roll her eyes at the image of her grandmother doing anything relaxing. She’d probably spend the whole time worrying about the staff and calling in instructions that had woken her in the middle of the night. There was little doubt that she would insist on daily reports of the inventory and draw. There was no concept of sitting under a palm tree with an umbrella drink or curling up with a good book in front of the fire at a mountain cabin.

“I highly recommend it,” Mary Margaret said, reaching a hand out to place on the edge of the blanket near Granny’s knee. “But I am more interested in hearing about you. How are you? Are you still having any pain? You all should have called me the moment there was a concern.”

“You were on your honeymoon,” Ruby muttered, taking a sip of what could only be called the weakest tea ever. “I think that’s a good enough excuse.”

“Granny is family to me,” the pixie haired brunette challenged with a defiant raise of her chin. “I wanted to know.”

“I assure you that I was and am fine,” Granny said just as defiantly. “It was just a bit of tiredness and a touch of indigestion. Now I don’t want that spread all over the place, as it’s bad for business. Imagine if Leroy or one of the guys decided they didn’t want fried food or garlic. I might as well go out of business.”

“You’ll always have me as a customer,” Mary Margaret assured her with a meaningful grin over her cup. “The baby is already making me crave lasagna. I actually wanted it for breakfast this morning.”

Granny laughed at that, her head thrown back and silvery gray curls bouncing. “You can have that
any time of the day. Ruby, make sure the staff knows that this baby gets anything on the menu or off of it. I don’t want to hear that this doll had to fight to feed her baby.”

Ruby considered reminding Granny that nobody was ever turned away from a special request. However, she nodded and pretended to commit the command to memory. “Anything in the kitchen for the baby. Got it.” She shot a pointed look at her pregnant friend. “As much fun as this has been ladies, I need to get back to work for the dinner rush. Leroy hasn’t given up fried foods or fatty ones yet. And I bet since his lunch got cut short it’s going to be a big order tonight.”

Kicking at the blanket, Granny patted Mary Margaret’s arm and lumbered after her granddaughter with instructions about portion size. “Don’t give them more than they paid for, Ruby. I’m not running a charity here.”

“I’ve got it, Granny.”

***AAA***

Killian groaned as he tried to decipher another student’s muddled answer of the differences between treble and bass clef notes. It was his standard test for the first month of classes, one that had been handed down from the previous three music teachers. Yet the students always seemed so shocked and confused by the questions. Stretched out on the sofa with his red pen in one hand and a stack of papers against his bent legs, thumbed through the stack to see if it had somehow miraculously shrunk in the past hour.

He’d relegated himself to that spot after a nearly hour long conversation with Emma, wishing again that she was there. He would still have had a mountain of grading to get through, but it somehow seemed more doable with her curled up on the couch with him. He could hear her humming along with some new track that Regina had sent her. Her blonde hair would be piled on her head messily as her feet tapped playfully against his in her rainbow stripe socks. She’d sneak him smiles over her own stack of paperwork and roll her eyes when he pulled her over for a kiss.

While the thought of such casual intimacy helped to relieve a bit of the headache and heart ache that gnawed at him, he could not help but feel a bit helpless. Emma always buried her feet beneath his thighs, claiming that she was just trying to get warm. Without her socks she was usually chilled, something he teased her most nights in bed. He wondered if she was warm in her hotel room, hoping that she was taking care of herself and not suffering from the chill that seemed to have taken up permanent residence.

In a little while they would start their usual text conversation that would start with whether or not Henry had brushed his teeth and then skirt the lines of appropriate conversation if anyone ever saw it. However, he was tempted to text her right then, knowing she wouldn’t get it until after she came back from her scouting mission in a club in Baltimore. His hand hovered over the phone with words filling his head just as he heard the sound from Henry’s room.

A cross between a grunt and a yelp, Henry’s voice called out for his mother. Killian let the papers fall off his lap as he jumped up from the sofa, nearly tangling with the knitted throw that Granny had given Emma years ago. He hesitated only a moment, unsure how Henry would respond to someone other than his mother. However, the thought left his mind as the boy called out a little more desperately this time.

In seconds Killian was flipping on the bedside lamp and dropping to his knees next to the rumpled sheets and curled up son of his fiancé. “Lad? Henry?” he asked softly, not wanting to further agitate the boy. Henry’s eyes were shut and his hair matted to his forehead as he scrunched his face into a tight and pained expression. “Are you okay?”
In between another of the mournful sounds, Henry’s eyes popped open and his confused gaze landed on Killian. “What…ummm…Killian?”

“Hi there, lad,” Killian offered softly, his accent thicker as pulled the blanket up around Henry. “Sounds like quite the nightmare there.”

The rush of red to Henry’s cheeks was quick and obvious as he tried to turn away from the kind but curious eyes. “It’s not a big deal,” he muttered, yanking the blanket back. “You can go back to…”

Dropping back on his heels, Killian shrugged his shoulders. “I was grading papers, bloody awful ones if you must know the truth. I could use a bit of a break should you allow it. Why not tell me about this dream? Perhaps I could be of some help.”

“I’m not a kid. Only kids have bad dreams and cry for their moms.”

“Well I’d be willing to bet that there a great many adults who would disagree, but let’s say you’re right on that for the moment. Clearly you had a dream that upset you. Now we can discuss it and come up with a possible solution or I can be forced to lie to your mother when I talk to her later and she asks after your well-being.”

“You don’t lie to mom.”

“Aye, it’s not a great thing to do, but I also don’t wish to worry her what with her being a few hours away right now. So you’ve got my attention and help if you want it. Otherwise we can talk about our road trip this weekend. I was thinking that we might take the interstate straight down to Connecticut. There’s a pretty good taco place and this one place that sells chicken that Liam just loves. We could stop for dinner there on the way. Then I was thinking on the trip back…”

“My mom’s drowning,” Henry blurted out, still looking at the wall rather than the man next to him. “In my dream, I mean. She’s drowning. I keep trying to get to her, but she’s going out farther and there’s something pulling me back.”

“That does sound quite frightening,” Killian said thoughtfully. “And then you wake up?”

“She goes under the water and it feels like I can’t breathe either. I can’t…I don’t want to lose her.”

“I’m not exactly favoring that idea myself. Maybe we can figure out if it means something else. I don’t know much about this stuff, but we could try looking up meanings on the internet. What do you say, Henry? Feel like doing some research?”

***AAA***

Liam recorked the bottle and placed it gingerly on the shelf with a quiet thump. The Rabbit Hole had been busy for a weeknight, but that only made the time go faster. After a productive session with Will, Jefferson, and Robin, he was flying high and even a few low tipping patrons did not seem to bother him.

“This is a lovely surprise,” he said when Elsa arrived, her tentative smile giving him a much needed break. She pressed her kiss to his lips lightly before finding her usual spot against his chest and tucked up under his chin. “I thought you were entertaining your aunt this evening.”

“I was,” she said, not offering more explanation than that. “I missed you.” She didn’t pull away even when one of the other employees gave Liam a knowing and annoyed look.

“I was horrible brute to have not considered holding rehearsal some place else, darling. You and
your aunt shouldn’t have had to make yourselves scarce.”

“It’s your condo too.”

“Aye, but it’s hardly a part of my priorities to make things comfortable for Will or Robin. The verdicts still out on Jefferson.” With one arm still around her, he tossed the bottle opener onto the counter. “How much longer is your aunt staying?”

“I don’t want to talk about her. Can we just…”

She didn’t have to finish the request, feeling his grip tighten. “Of course, darling. I was simply making conversation.” He paused long enough to tell his assistant to mind the bar for a moment, leading her to the office that usually doubled as storage. It was a small l-shaped room that housed a desk and computer for him, as well as a bench seat that had once been part of the dining area décor.

She collapsed onto it with a huff. “You know I love you, right?”

His eyes seemed slightly amused by her more obvious statement, but he thought better of laughing. “Aye, as I love you. Is there a reason you would think I wasn’t aware?”

“I know you do. I just wanted to confirm it.” She dipped her forehead against his shoulder. “Where’s Zelena?”

“Likely moved onto her next target,” Liam said with a chuckle escaping. “That Walsh character stopped by earlier. He insisted on taking her away from all this drudgery as he called it.”

She didn’t lift her head or really respond, despite the fact that hearing Walsh’s name reminded her of his slimy ways around Emma that had ended with a slap across the face and a drink thrown at him. Elsa had laughingly told Emma that it was the most soap opera thing she had ever heard of in real life. “I don’t know if she’s coming back but I wanted us to have dinner with Aunt Ingrid. I did until she was so…”

His hand was stroking through the long thick blonde tresses of her hair and the other resting at her hip. “So that’s what this is about,” he acknowledged knowingly. “She doesn’t approve of me, does she?”

“I honestly don’t think she’d approve of anyone I dated. But I don’t really want to find that out. I’m happy with you, Liam. More than happy…”

“I could try harder, perhaps charm her a bit. What do you think?” Still burrowed into his collar, she did not see the mirth in his expression. “It’s been a while since I had to worry about the family of a woman I was wooing, but I suppose I could remember the finer points.”

Elsa finally tilted her head back a bit, revealing the unsprung tears that threatened. “She should already like you. She should be impressed by you. You are smart, kind, loving, talented…”

The hand that had been at her side was suddenly tracing along her cheek. “You are quite good at stroking my ego, darling. And as for your aunt, I suppose she will be hard on any bloke who was attempting to be deserving of your affections. You have said she is all that remains of your mother’s family. She probably has a sense of obligation to protect you.”

“I guess,” Elsa said with a sad sigh. “But I don’t need protecting from you.”

He winked at her. “You don’t find me dark and dangerous, darling?”
For the first time since the door had closed to the bar, she smiled a genuinely happy grin. “I don’t know about dangerous, but you do seem like the type of man who likes to think that he is a risk taker. But in reality you’re a softy who cries at movies I like and pretends like I can’t see…”

“One time,” he said with his gruff denial. “One bloody time I shed a tear over that old couple dying on the same day with their hands entwined. I dare you to find a man who wouldn’t become a bit misty eyed at the sight of it.”

***AAA***

On Friday Henry had fallen asleep a good two hours before Killian even reached the state line, leaving the soon to be stepfather humming along with the soft music on the radio and reading the occasional road sign along the route. Calling Emma a few moments before he exited the interstate had been the least romantic way to let her know of their imminent arrival, but he wasn’t sure that he could prop the sleeping boy up and carry their overnight bags without risking life and limb in the name of a surprise.

She was waiting for them in the parking lot, her hands rubbing her arms in place of a coat that he had told her to wear. The burgundy top she wore sparkled in the combination of moonlight and lights from the parking lot, a part of her business/club attire that she had jokingly said was not normal for any other career that was legal. She had forgone the high heels that she normally wore with the skirt of leather and denim, replacing them with a fuzzy pair of slippers that Killian had slipped in her suitcase against her wishes. He tried not to feel justified seeing her wear them.

Before he had even turned the key in the ignition, she was yanking open the door and stretching to wrap herself around him with a smacking kiss. “Missed you!” she said emphatically, only then realizing that she was that loud. Thankfully Henry didn’t budge.

“And I you,” he assured her, keeping an arm around her as he reached for his seat belt. “Wasn’t going to last another day without you.”

“Sap,” she said, pulling back to standing. “But I feel the same. Come on. Let’s get you two inside before we freeze. I think we skipped autumn and went straight to winter.”

Ignoring his protests, she threw their bags over her shoulder and was already halfway to the door before he had a now partially conscious Henry lumbering behind her. He didn’t miss the affectionate smile she gave her son or the mouthed thank you as Killian righted the boy just in time.

Her suite, such as it was, included two smallish bedrooms and a shared bathroom that would require a bit of fancy scheduling. A multiuse room was between the sleeping areas that included a couch and what could only in loose terms be called a kitchenette with its two burner stove and refrigerator that was the size of a small box.

“Home sweet home,” she said as she disappeared into what would be Henry’s bedroom for the long weekend. “Such as it is.” Like most busy moms, she directed her sleep addled son through the process of getting ready for bed as she dug through his bag for pajamas and pulled back the covers. Killian couldn’t help but appreciate her precision and flexibility, as no steps were wasted and she seemed to have more than two hands to do it. He helped as he could, shoving a toothbrush in Henry’s mouth and helping her find the light switch to reduce the glaring lights that would have prevented sleep.

Once Henry was in the bed, awkwardly sleeping face down with one leg hanging in midair, Emma followed Killian into the other room and laughed as he dropped to the lumpy sofa. “I have a new respect for you,” he said, opening his arms wide to welcome her. “After a week alone with the lad,
I’m not sure how you managed to balance work, your life, and raising him. I must ask though. Do you really allow him a breakfast of nothing but poptarts and juice?"

Her laughter was light, though she gave him a bit of a slap to his shoulder as she settled into his embrace. “There’s nothing wrong with poptarts. I used to survive on them for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. They are like a meal all to themselves. Grain, fruit, dairy… Add some bacon and what more do you need? And you don’t complain when I eat them.”

“They are junk,” Killian said with a sigh. “But I suppose you are right about me not complaining about your affinity for them. Might have to do with how sweet your kiss tastes afterward.” His normally charming smile was masked by a deep yawn and his head falling against the cushions.

“Rough week?”

“Aye, Gold’s got us doing extra observations and evaluations. Henry’s class can’t seem to master this one piece before the upcoming assembly. I managed to delete the alarm app on my bloody phone and spent six hours trying to get it back before I had to get help from Henry. By the way I now owe him a new car on his 16th birthday for that one. I went in to record some of that tune for you and Elsa, only to find out that the mixer broke so I must return later this month. And I was a bloody mess without you, love.”

Using the back of her hand, she rubbed against his stubble covered jaw. “I missed you too.” Her eyes closed slowly, drooping heavily. “How is he, really? Any problems?”

“I can’t say that my lone psychology class qualifies me to analyze dreams, but he seems a bit better now that he speaks about it. Perhaps it is just a bit of a phase?”

The buttons on his shirt were rough against her cheek. “Thank you. I know I say it so much lately that it has probably lost meaning, but I do mean it. You’re being pretty great about all this. I know when you asked me to marry you that you weren’t thinking you’d be on daddy duty quite so soon.”

Chin resting on the crown of her head, he sighed deeply. “I don’t view it as a job. I feel rather honored that you would include me in on this thing you have going. I never gave much thought to becoming a father or father figure. So it’s taking a bit of time and study, but I hope I’m doing well at it.”

She tightened her grip on his forearm. “A great job,” she told him. “Well except for the poptarts.”
Are you still with me? Pneumonia, a crashed computer that deleted this chapter and Illusions (still working on restoring that), mommy responsibilities, and one of the worst weeks I have had at work when I saw the system fail a child have meant little time for writing. However, here is a new chapter. I fast forwarded past Emma’s out of town stuff and toward her birthday. So enjoy! Happy holidays everyone!

Sitting cross legged on curb outside Archie Hopper’s office, Emma tried to respond to one of Regina’s emails on her phone. While it was only mid October, the temperatures spoke more of December and there was a bit to the air that screamed for her to wear gloves over her long fingers. Using only one had made it a slow process, rife with misspellings and typos. But it helped to keep one hand warm by pulling the sleeve of her cream colored sweater down over her palm.

“All you need is a brown paper bag,” Ruby said sweetly, hip jutted out and a coy smile on her red lips. “I thought things were going better. Didn’t you say that Regina was impressed with some of your finds.”

Rolling her eyes dramatically, Emma looked up from her phone and sighed. “Impressed is a bit too much for Regina. She found them adequate.”

“That still doesn’t explain why you are out here begging for money. Wait. Let me finish my coffee and you can have the cup to collect change and other donations. I’ll see if we can get you some cardboard for a sign.”

“Ruby,” Emma said warningly, not wanting to think about her days on the run after leaving foster care one time.

“Seriously, Em, why are you here? Shouldn’t you be curled up with Killian talking about place settings and color schemes? Or at least planning the honeymoon. I’m not even going to bring up that I’m offended you haven’t been by to ask about a dress yet. I mean it’s not like you aren’t besties with a talented designer or anything.”

“Ruby, I just got back into town two days ago. I’ve been working 12-14 hours both of those days. Can I have a moment to breathe before you start draping fabric on me and trying to get me to commit to a dress.” She pressed send and threw the phone into her oversized bag before Regina would have a chance to reply. “I’m here for Henry.”

Eyes following her blonde friend as she rose, Ruby noted the name of the town’s only known therapist on the glass door behind her. “Ah,” she said knowingly. “I guess the nightmares aren’t any better?”

She shrugged as if she wasn’t sure how to described the situation. “Wait? You know about those? Henry said he only told me, Killian, and Neal.”

Ruby sheepishly held out her hand to help wipe a bit of debris off the bottom of Emma’s coat. “He and Killian came to the diner for dinner the other night. He was asking Killian to let him have a coffee so that he could say awake and not have nightmares. P.S. Killian handled it quite well.” She looked at the older two story building on Main Street, staring up at the curtained office of Dr. Hopper who still spent half his time working with the students of Storybrooke Academy and the other half working with patients.
“I hated being out of town for this and leaving it to Killian and to Neal.”

Ruby’s dislike of Neal was evident on her face as she scrunched her nose. “Well, you’re back now and best I can tell, Henry’s fine. You guys will make the right choices for him.”

“Hashtag vote of confidence,” Emma teased, knowing that it would drive her friend batty. A couple of years before Ruby had dated a guy who ended every sentence on their date with a hashtag comment. The friends had wondered if he would do the same in bed. Ruby swore not to find out.

“You’re not going to let that go, are you?” Ruby sneered. “But for the record I would definitely stake my money on your parenting and Killian’s over Neal’s. Speaking of, where is that jerk?”

Emma shifted her weight from one booted foot to the other, knowing exactly what jerk Ruby meant. She’d asked herself the same thing, as Neal had not formally protested the therapy for Henry but not endorsed it either. He had not made time for appointments either, even stating to Henry that he would take him to a movie rather than drop him off at the first session. She had not yet confronted him on it, but she was prepared to do just that.

“Don’t tell me. He thinks it shows weakness…”

“I don’t really know his excuse,” Emma admitted, not wanting to get Ruby too worked up. If she listened to Ruby badmouthing Neal, she’d not be in any condition to speak to him like an adult. “But Henry’s doing this whole therapy thing and seems a little better. He’s slept through the night with no issues the last two since I’ve been home.”

Taking the clue, Ruby offered her friend a hug. “It’s good to have you back. I hope you never have one of these long trips again. You left me with Mary Margaret. She wants me to design baby clothes. Do I look like a baby clothes designer?” Taking a step back, the multi-tasking brunette spun in place. Her own black leather jacket tapered in around her waist and made her look even smaller. She was not wearing one of her signature short skirts, but her high heels and leather leggings showed off the impressive length of her shapely legs. Peeking out from the opening f the jacket was an almost demure for her red sweater that sported a lace overlay that was one of her signature designs these days. Her cascade of dark curls was held back with a headband that was reminiscent of a school girl but also covered in the signature black lace.

“Yeah, I’m thinking the look might be a bit much for an infant,” Emma said as gracefully as she could without picturing a baby in leather leggings too hard. “Maybe we should get together soon about wedding dresses. I wouldn’t want you to think I was trying to find another designer.”

“I have ideas!”

“You know,” Emma said, lowering her voice in a way that someone might use to reveal a secret, “for a woman who is so anti-marriage, you seem to have no problem with wedding dress design.”

She shrugged in response. “Yeah, well it combines two of my favorite things…fashion and wowing everyone with stunning beauty. I try to forget the whole committing to one person for the rest of your life thing.”

“I thought you were getting better about that idea. Weren’t you and Graham talking about a future together?” Emma and Ruby had had a few conversations over Facetime during her absence where she admitted to taking things up a notch with the sheriff. “I mean things looked…”

“Taking things to another level doesn’t always mean marriage and children. I was thinking more along the lines of a set date night or cutting back on others. I wasn’t thinking white dresses and
Placing her free hand to her temple as though willing away a headache, Ruby sighed. “You are a wonderful example of a woman overcoming commitment fears and finding happiness, but seriously…I’m not you. I won’t ever be you.”

***AAA***

Elsa pushed the box of photographs, ticket stubs, and other memories under the bed with her toe. The photo she was searching for was not there, which left only a few possibilities as to its whereabouts. While she had not purposely left little evidence of her parents strewn about her condo, she was not one who dwelled on the past with smiling photographs that seemed to fade with the sun as fast as memories of details of those times.

“Any luck?” Liam asked from the vanity in the bathroom where he was shaving. “I would have thought it would be there.” He was aware of the box where she kept most items of importance to her, though he had not been invited to inspect all its contents. That was something that couples did, but he knew her well enough to realize she thrived on more privacy than most.

“No, maybe it’s in one of the photo albums that Ingrid brought,” she said with a sigh. It wasn’t that she was feeling particularly nostalgic. However, a hormone addled Anna had been thinking more and more about their parents lately. She had asked Elsa on more than a few occasions to share memories from before the younger sister was born. From the best she could remember, Elsa recalled a photograph that had been snapped when her sister was brought home from the hospital. It was fuzzy in her head, but she knew that her parents had posed with the baby and young Elsa with smiles a mile wide. “Thanks for helping me look this morning.”

Liam smiled at her through the reflection in the mirror, knowing that she was stressing herself over something that might not even exist. “My pleasure,” he told her. “I’m rather curious about seeing you as a young lass myself.”

“I was kind of awkward,” she said absently, readjusting the dust ruffle on the bed. “Horse like with all arms, legs, and teeth. And if memory serves from that picture, my hair was a stringy, tangled mess because mother and father were at the hospital and I was left with…well, I don’t remember.”

“When Killian was born I was in the negotiating stage of grief. I wanted to make a deal that I’d be a better son if they sent him back. Papa convinced me to give him a try.”

Elsa knew that Liam quite rarely spoke of his parents, especially his father. She had seen only one photo of him and Killian with their mother, a curly haired spite of woman with blue eyes and the sweetest smiles as she was flanked by the two sons. The childhood memories he shared were usually about Killian only or about time in school. “Aren’t you glad you did?” she queried, breaking him out of what was appearing as a sad memory given his expression.

“Remains to be seen.”

Coming up behind him, she stood on her toes to prop her chin on his shoulder, arms wrapping around his waist. “Killian is a wonderful brother to you.”

“Aye, I’m a lucky bloke. He even managed to impress the woman I love apparently.”

“Well, the real test is impressing the audience. Emma is supposed to listen to the tracks we recorded this week. If all goes well, it could be released next month.” She and Killian had recorded separately
and then tried one session together that she wasn’t sure was all that successful. However, the techs had each complimented them and the band seemed to love it.

“Should I be jealous?” he teased, knowing full well that Regina had hopes the single would out sell everything his band had done so far. “I’m pleased that you and Emma could convince him. He’s far too talented to let opportunities pass him by.”

“So are you,” she said, their eyes meeting in the mirror. “You amaze me every day.”

***AAA***

Killian dropped his messenger bag onto the chair in the dining nook, marveling at the quietness of the seaside house. It had only been months since Emma and Henry had moved in with him, their lives much busier and noisier than he had first imagined. Not that he was complaining. He loved the early morning rush as Emma gulped coffee or hot chocolate, barking orders to Henry who showed no signs of needing to hurry or any sense of deadlines. She was at her highest level of multitasking, reviewing vocabulary with her son, answering emails on her phone, and carving together breakfasts despite his offers to do that task. She always looked adorable in bare or sock covered feet and her work pants paired with the shirt she slept in with her hair damp from the shower. No matter how many irons she had in the fire, she always stopped to kiss him good morning, ignoring the fact that not half an hour before she had groaned at the thought of extricating herself from his warm embrace.

He had learned to even appreciate the sometimes odd sounds of Henry’s video games or his trumpet practice before school that could have woken the dead. While one of his best students, Henry’s almost shy and not completely confident way of asking if Killian would like to watch some movie he had found on Netflix or if they could do something that evening. Despite the still not quite settled trepidation in the now teenager’s voice, Killian always jumped at those opportunities.

The seaside cottage now seemed more homelike with pictures of the three of them spread out in frames on the walls and most table and shelf surfaces. There were Henry’s sneakers next to the door to his room where his mother had left them in reminder that he was to be tidier. Yet her sweatshirt she had been wearing before bed the night before was draped over the arm of the sofa. He wasn’t sure if he or she had left it there in their hurry to get to their room.

The refrigerator was always bursting with all of their favorites, as they had finally settled on the fact they all had different tastes. Even the television was an eclectic mix of shows and movies on the dvr, as they mismatched in several ways. But Emma liked to say that they seemed to match in the ways that mattered. One of those ways was that they all loved his version of his mother’s favorite stew. He gave the slow cooker a glance, breathing in the scent of lamb, beef, and vegetables simmering in a seasoned stock. He ran a knife through another onion and added it, smiling at his creation. With the bitterness of the dropping temperatures, he was already looking forward to a Friday evening with warm bellies and perhaps a fire in the fireplace.

He was just sinking into the overstuffed cushion of his favorite chair when the sound of her car arriving made him smile. As much as the previous version of himself had cherished his loner status, he had found himself loving not only the company but thriving on it. He enjoyed sharing the newspaper with Emma, learning about Pokémon from Henry, listening to both talk about their days, and feeling her nuzzle against him as the three of them watched some movie that one of them just had to see.

Henry was the first through the door, his head down and concentration focused on the handheld video game in his right hand. He broke no train of thought as his left arm shimmied out of his jacket that was probably too thin for the rapidly changing weather. Killian didn’t see Emma immediately, but she called out in a rebuking tone after Henry. Abandoning his attempts to get out of the jacket, he
kept his head down and used his bottom to hold the door open for her and the packages she carried.

Killian jumped to his feet to greet her, relieving her of the bag of work she had brought home and two canvas shopping bags of grocery items. “The heat in your little car is dreadful, love. You are freezing.” His nose brushed against hers, stealing a chaste and sweet kiss before heading off to put her bounty away. “I was going to build a fire later, but let’s get to that now.”

She rubbed her hands together after shutting the door and smiled. “I didn’t think it was possible, but that might just make me love you more.”

“As you wish.”

Emma headed toward the kitchen to finish putting up the few dry items she had bought after Henry’s appointment. Nearing the counter, she slid, her boots practically flying out from under her. “Henry!” she scolded her son who was at that point sitting as a heap on the sofa. “Put away your jacket.”

The normally amiable boy let out a very put upon sigh that echoed, stomping over to do as she bid. Throwing her a frowning face of angst and maybe a little hostility, he seemed to be saying that he hoped she was done with the requests.

Killian readjusted the kindling just so, arching an eyebrow in surprise at Henry’s attitude. Emma matched her son’s sigh, stepping on tip toes to place a box of salt among the shelf items. “It seems that Henry forgot to tell us that we have a date tomorrow night. I ran into Violet and her father who were thanking me for us agreeing to take Henry and Violet to dinner and a movie. Seems that he arranged everything but the chaperones.”

“We don’t need chaperones,” Henry muttered, the game already back in his hand. “I can do this without you.”

“And you were going to pick her up on your bike?” Emma asked sarcastically. “Or were you planning to ask to borrow a car? I’m thinking my car might be easier than the jeep. Oh but wait! You’re just 13, kid.”

Folding his arms over his chest, Henry seemed ready for a stand off with her. “I meant the movie part and dinner. It’s embarrassing to have you watch and judge. And for the record, I was just whispering something to her. I wasn’t trying to…”

“It’s not about embarrassing you. If I’m your chaperone, I need to make sure you both are behaving appropriately. Her father is depending on me to make sure of that.” She frowned even deeper, rubbing her hands again. “And besides, you don’t go around making promises of my time or Killian’s time without consulting us. We have plans already with Liam and Elsa.”

Henry turned to Killian for a bit of support, finding the usually supportive teacher to be silent to the argument. “Fine, I’ll cancel.”

“Perhaps we could speak to Elsa and Liam,” Killian interjected, appearing thoughtful as he reached for the lighter to start the fire. “I am sure that we could work something out and all go together?” He knew that Emma would cave to her son’s plans, as she was not the type to want to disappoint him. However, she was trying to prove a point that he had to be more cognizant of other’s time.

“I suppose could ask.” She let the furrow of her brow melt a bit as she looked at her now hopeful son. “I’m not sure they will say yes though. So you should prepare yourself for that.”

Hiding a smile, Killian called Henry over to help him make sure the fire was going to be roaring and then placing the screen back. “Don’t worry,” he whispered to the slightly nervous glancing boy. “I
think Liam has not seen that particular movie yet. He’s wanted to though.”

“I didn’t mean to not ask. I was nervous about asking her and it just sort of happened. You’re not mad, right?”

“No, but I think your mother is a bit frustrated. You’re growing into a man, which is scary for any mum. Just let her know what’s going on sometimes.”

“I will,” he said, standing up. “You made dinner?”

“Aye, a bit of stew to ward off the cold. Why don’t you got get changed out of your uniform and it should be ready soon. I’ll talk to Emma for you and get her settled.”

“Thanks, Killian.”

He waited until Emma was done on the phone with who he presumed to be Elsa. Using the extra time, he gathered a couple of the throws and fished out three bowls before checking the state of the stew. It still needed a few minutes, but he went ahead and began to preheat the oven for the bread. He was covering the baking sheet with foil when he felt Emma beside him, snuggling up to his left side. “They are willing,” she told him, dropping her head against his shoulder. “So it’s a triple date.”

“You were a bit angry with the lad?”

“I didn’t mean to be. It’s just that he doesn’t want his father to do this so it falls to me. And I feel like he was taking advantage. He even threw out that I hadn’t been around much lately. The guilt kind of got me.” She grinned as he lifted his finger that had a bit of the honey butter he had been spreading to melt on the bread. She licked it off.

“Aye, I suppose that is normal for teenagers though, love. They use whatever tools they can to get their way.” With nothing to do but wait on the oven to heat, he turned wrap his arms around her. “And I suppose he’ll try it next over you having to be in the same theater?”

“Probably.”

“Shall we beat him to the punch. I am certain there is another movie playing at the same time. We four adults could go to it and allow the two a bit of privacy. You could check in from time to time I’m sure.”

“We’re talking about my son in a dark theater with a girl.” She had her face buried in this collar so he could not judge her seriousness. “I can think of plenty…”

“Emma, he’s a good lad with a stellar reputation, save a few quirks and cleaning habits.” It’s meant to be a jab, a joke really. But Emma felt her resolve break at the way that Killian said that, as it signifies a trust and belief that she never had as a child. Foster families never believed in her that way, never saw the best in her or thought that she was not only innocent but well intentioned. So maybe that was why she had a hard time seeing that in herself.

Killian wasn’t sure he understood when she lifted her head, tears shining in her eyes. However, he immediately went into his mode to protect her. Even the dinging that the oven was the right temperature didn’t stop him as he dropped his forehead to hers and his hand rested along her jaw and fingers delved into her hair. “I only meant…”

“I know,” she responded before he could fumble with a reason. She wasn’t sure if she could explain what it meant that someone besides her saw her son as good at heart. Maybe he would understand, though she wasn’t sure how people had viewed him at that age. She and Killian both had
abandonment issues. But unlike her, he had two parents for a while and then at least one. He was older when he was alone. Even then he had Liam. “We’ll try. I’ll try.”

“You know we could always send Liam to look after Henry. He may be a sod when it comes to many things, but he’s a bloody good watchdog. He’d not let them hold hands, let alone snog without permission.”

“Back up plan,” she said softly. “But I will need popcorn, extra butter, and some distraction.”

***AAA***

Elsa admitted that she was more of a watch a movie at home kind of a woman. Still there was something fun in an old fashioned sort of way about standing in line with Liam, Emma, and Killian about 15 people behind Henry and Violet at the local movie theater. While Emma was trying not to stare at her son, the two brothers had decided it was the other’s fault that nobody had considered buying tickets online. If they lived in a bigger town with more than one movie theater, the prospect of a show selling out would not have been a problem. However, the slower the line inched the more real that possibility seemed.

“We’re not going to sit through 120 minutes of subtitles,” Liam groused, eyeing the digital marquee that had only eight movies on display. “I’m not paying that much to read.”

“You wouldn’t be able to keep up,” Killian teased, his affectionate squeeze of Emma meant to ward off the cold. “They don’t leave much time for sounding out the big words.”

The words that Liam used at that point weren’t really appropriate for the ears of the younger patrons around him. So he tempered his rant with the suggestion that Killian and Emma see the new animated flick instead. However, his sarcasm was met with Elsa’s adorable and somewhat embarrassed admission that she would prefer to see that to the sci fi movie they had chosen.

“I don’t think the movie actually matters,” Emma said, narrowing her eyes at her son. His back was to her, making it nearly impossible to read body language from that distance. “I just want to be on the same side of the theater as Henry so I can…”

“Emma, I assure you that I have been on enough covert missions in the Royal Navy that I can keep a watchful eye on the lad. You just need to tell me to what degree do you want this kept. I would assume physical contact should be at a minimum. But are we talking no hand holding? Or should I see the manager about them having separated seats with two or three people between them?” Liam’s expression was masked with his best show of strategic military know how. “Perhaps I could stage…”

“I think Emma plans to be the one to keep an eye out,” Elsa said gently. “But if we need any tactical maneuvers we’ll let you know.”

That made Emma smile at the thought of Liam rolling into the darkened theater with a tank. “I’m trying to trust my son here, guys.”

The line inched forward, the crowd both grateful and anxious as reality and waiting seemed to mingle in the cold. “Did I mention that I will purchase you nachos?” Killian asked good naturedly, hoping that his attempts to distract her were not too soon. “Jalapeños included.”

“Oh great, another line.” Liam pretended to pout as Elsa reminded him that his favorite chocolate candies might also be available.

“Mr. Jones?” a voice from behind them broke through. The foursome turned to find a coltish boy
about Henry’s age looking quite shocked to see his favorite teacher outside of the classroom. It was clearly one of those moments when one of his students seemed to realize that teachers did exist outside of school.

“Matthew,” Killian greeted, smiling brightly, welcoming the boy and his parents with a handshake and quick introduction of the three others. “It’s a surprise to see you.”

After a quick check of whether his teacher was going to same movie as him, Matthew, his friends, and his parents disappeared into the line to wait. However, the exchange was not lost on Liam who muttered about not being able to take his brother anywhere.

“I don’t know,” Emma said, noting that Elsa’s appearance had been somewhat downplayed as part of her disguise for going out and not being recognized. “I kind of like dating a celebrity.”

Liam chuckled as his brother blushed under the attention, pulling Elsa closer to him. “I think, Emma, that is something we can both agree on.”

***AAA***

Regina straightened the eggplant colored blouse she was wearing as she listened to the rough recording on Emma’s phone, her expression giving nothing away. After five weeks on the road Emma had signed two bands and found six more for development deals. Her presence in the club had created some buzz that had groups sending their videos and mp3 recordings to her at all hours.

“And so you saw them perform?” Regina asked over the lackluster applause at the end of recording. “Do they have presence?”

That was a normal question from her boss, who truly must have believed that appearance of the act was more important than any other factor including talent. Skills could be taught, she had said of a trio of talentless but good looking young men who wanted to sing. Emma begged to differ, but it wasn’t her name on the website as the president and CEO. “Honestly? No, I haven’t. But they are pretty persistent. I think they have a good sound.”

Regina pushed the phone back across the glass desk and folded her fingers together under her chin. “Do a little recon and see if you can find some video of them – pictures at least. I want to know what we’re dealing with here before I fly them in for a demo.” She looked at the hastily typed agenda that Emma had provided of new talent, her painted lips turning up when she realized the list was complete. “So let’s move on. Elsa’s ready for her shows? How many did you book?”

“The guys have her performing upstate New York for two shows next week. After that she’s got a 15 city tour as the second opener for that new pop group – the one they are comparing to…”

“Fine,” Regina interrupted with a dismissive roll of her eyes. “I just want her out there more. I know that her sister is not feeling much like traveling, but it’s a waste of time and money not to get that music out there. I haven’t heard anything on the recordings with her and that teacher yet. Are they that horrible?”

“No, it’s just that they recorded separately and the crew is editing it together now. I’ll have something for you soon.” Emma rolled her boots back onto her heels, feeling a bit like she was in a thick blanket of snow with the thick white rug that was under the chairs and Regina’s desk. It was perfect with the black and white motif of the office and its modern vibe. When alone, Regina was the only pop of color in the room.

“Next Tuesday. I want it then. And that just leaves Robin. He’s expressed some concern over the
fact that you haven’t been paying much attention to the group lately.” She never called the band by name or acknowledged that Liam was the actual lead and responsible for negotiations. While Robin was always friendly with Emma, even trusting her and Killian quite a bit with little Roland, he was careful not to divulge much about his relationship with Regina. It had become a thing that when Emma and Killian had dropped off Roland or stopped in at Robin’s with some sort of something or agenda that she had noticed Regina’s unsung presence. There was the night that her shoes were under the coffee table, the scent of perfume still in the air. John, Robin’s neighbor, said that Regina’s car was there quite a bit these days too.

“Well, with Liam taking on that role with Zelena and Jefferson having some responsibilities at the school with his daughter, it’s been a bit tough to…”

“I don’t want them withering on the vine because of excuses. My sister knows that Liam’s first commitment is to this label and not her little project. Get with the guys in booking this week and get them on the road. I want more exposure. And get them into the studio to do a rerecord on that song that Robin hates. I don’t care how much any of the others like it. It’s atrocious.”

Emma didn’t want to think about how Regina knew of the song that honestly wasn’t that bad. “I’ll make it a priority,” she said, a phrase she often used with her boss. “What about…”

“I think those are enough priorities for this week,” Regina said as if offering some sort of reprieve. Emma didn’t doubt that there would be six emails of more tasks by the end of the day. “It is coming up on your birthday week after all.”

That was a surprise. “End of the month,” Emma answered the unspoken question, staring a bit incredulously at her boss. “I didn’t know that you…”

“Relax, I’m not looking through your personnel files. I was merely invited by Robin to a little get together your fiancé is throwing you.”

Trying not to appear too stunned by both the invitation of her boss and the fact that it appeared Killian was throwing her a surprise party, Emma nodded mutely.

“I know that this can all be a little awkward with socializing outside of work. I wouldn’t want you to feel uncomfortable about it. I was just thinking since this party is at the Rabbit Hole that we book the entertainment that night with a few of the local acts you’ve been working with these days. Maybe not a showcase, but it might get a little attention.”

“I’m not sure that’s what Killian had in mind…” She honestly had no idea what he had in mind, as he hadn’t told her a thing about the party. She wasn’t even sure she was happy about it, as birthdays were something that she liked to avoid thinking about in terms of her own. “I mean it will probably just be a little low key.”

“Ms. Swan, I think you need to look at the opportunities here. I’m betting he invited that little blogger friend of yours. You know the one with the month as his name. Imagine the write up he could do if he had exclusive access. It could even get syndicated in the trades. I’m liking this idea. I guess it is a bit gauche for you to plan the acts for your own birthday party. I’ll do that. Just make sure the publicity department leaks the details enough that our media friends want access. When they can’t get it, they’ll show up outside.”

***AAA***

Elsa sipped the warm peppermint tea and watched the emotions run across her sister’s face with an amazing speed. In October there was not much in the way of peppermint available, most of
blends leaning toward pumpkin spice. However, Anna’s morning sickness had only been settled with the strongest of mint flavors. So when Storybrooke’s only store that sold tea bags had produced only one dusty plastic covered box, Liam and Kris had agreed to drive two hours away to find the right combination. It had become somewhat of a joke that they had to drive so far, but Anna had been so grateful that she had launched herself at both men, hugging them tightly and threatening to name the baby after Liam in some way.

“We look happy,” Anna said breathlessly at the photograph that Elsa had finally found among a few of their father’s books that she had kept. “I mean you and mom and dad do. I’m a newborn. Do you think newborns can look happy? I hadn’t really thought about that. Do you think my baby is happy? I don’t want him or her to…”

“I’m sure the baby is happy,” Elsa ensured her, feeling a bit like the boy putting his thumb in the dam to stop the leak. “And I think we were very happy then. Mom was always holding you. She said you were the least fussy baby ever. I cried when other people held me, but not you. You were always cooing and putting on a show for whoever had you at that moment. Even Mr. Wicker. You remember him. He looked like a troll or a warlock or something. Every kid we knew was scared of him, but not you.”

“He wasn’t that bad. He was just misunderstood.” She turned the photo over in her hand, seeing their mother’s curving handwriting on the back. Even though she knew the script by heart now, she read it again anyway. “I miss them. Isn’t that crazy? They’ve been gone for so long and I still miss them. More now. I guess it’s the baby. This is their first grandchild and I wish…”

“I know. I wish they were here to see you and the baby too. You know dad would be excited and overprotective as usual. And mom would put up a good front, but she’d be concerned about what the baby would call her. You know she hated the idea of anyone thinking she was a day older than she was.”

The townhome they had shared was now Anna and Kristoff’s home. Elsa’s former room emptied and becoming ready for transformation into a nursery. Nothing had been decided yet, but the bare walls had a few splotches of paint samples that Anna had changed her mind on daily. “It’s just sad that the baby will only have us and Aunt Ingrid as family.”

Ingrid had finally left a few weeks before, still harboring disapproval of Liam and questioning Elsa’s plans for the future. She had said she would be back again for the holidays, but neither sister had issued an invitation. “I think I’ll take on all the aunt duties. It’s only fair, right?”

“Maybe double duty,” Anna said, her free hand fluttering over the more obvious curve of her lower abdomen. “Kristoff and I were talking about you maybe being godmother. Now don’t answer yet. I still don’t know how all this works. I mean you and I didn’t have that, but he did. And he’s insisting that our baby have godparents and christenings and all that. I don’t want to think about all the planning for that party. But anyway. Let’s think about it, okay? He or she can still call you Aunt Elsa or Auntie Elsa or just Elsa if you prefer. Or we could come up with some other name.”

“I’d be honored, Anna.”

***AAA***

Mary Margaret’s pregnancy was progressing quickly as well, evidenced by the roundness of her face more than her stomach by October. Killian wouldn’t have said anything, knowing that she was quite sensitive about the topic and he was not an idiot.

“If I was orange, my head would look like a pumpkin,” she announced as she entered the office off
his music classroom on the Friday before Emma’s birthday. He had not planned to stay later than the
normal planning time that day, but the files on his desk had beckoned. Usually he was exempt from
such paperwork. However, Gold’s new plan meant that he had to justify the expenses of each child’s
musical education with research driven data that his or her academic studies were enhanced by the
efforts. It meant a two to three page narrative on every student, including those who were simply in
music because it was the only class that fit a rigorous schedule or for purely social reasons.

“I dare say we could all say that about ourselves,” he countered good naturedly, typing the end of the
sentence before looking up and moving a stack of journals out of the chair so she could sit. “I hope
this realization doesn’t mean you’re avoiding the party tomorrow.”

“I’m not thrilled at the idea of being photographed at it, but I’ll be there. Seems like a big deal for
Emma both personally and professionally.”

“Aye, I’m afraid once Ms. Mills became involved that there was no stopping the size. She’s dropping
hints to the trades and planning on leaking photos on social media whatever that means in this case. I
was just planning friends, a cake, and maybe a round of singing happy birthday.”

The pixie haired brunette let him vent a bit about the party getting out of his control, telling him that
Emma would still appreciate his gesture. However, they both knew she would probably dislike the
attention. Besides it was sounding like it might be a little too close to work for her. And as much as
Killian needed the reassurance, he was pretty sure that his colleague was not there to discuss the
birthday party at all. He even wondered if she was about to start her pressure for wedding planning
on him, but relegated that to the back of his mind. He’d been involved in the not quite yet formal
wedding plans that had taken a back seat to real life.

“You’re wondering why I’m here, right?” she asked, interrupting his thoughts on the subject. “Well,
it’s just that I didn’t know if you had noticed lately that a lot of us have…”

She didn’t get to finish the sentence when Henry entered and wanted to know if Killian had nutmeg
in the house. A mental inventory had determined that he didn’t, which was then added to a list that
he promised to pick up on the way home. She either welcomed the interruption so much that she
didn’t fight to continue the conversation or she was overwhelmed by it and offered to take him to
pick up the items for Emma’s birthday breakfast instead.

***AAA***

The wait for takeout took far longer than Killian had planned, the sky dark and most already finished
with the evening meal by the time he took the sharp turn onto the road that ran by the shore. Emma
had arrived home from work famished and exhausted – having been in the studio with Liam and the
guys and hedging off offers for a group they had just signed. She had made some mention of heating
up leftovers that nobody could remember where they came from. However, Killian would not hear
of it and placed an order at the local Asian Fusion place with special instructions from Henry to make
sure the rice was fried with peas and carrots.

It did his heart good to know that Emma was merely a mile away from him at the moment, a distance
he could quickly cover by foot if he had to do so. Most of her time back had been spent at work with
Regina finalizing details on development deals for several artists and bands she had found. While not
one for compliments, Regina had said that the signings were more than adequate. The night before
Emma had barely made it through dinner without her head dropping to her arm and sleep coming to
overtake her. Even though she had been back almost two and a half weeks, Henry was still thrilled to
have his mother back, following her about and telling and retelling tales from school and his social
life. She had done her best to listen, though most of the stories had already been related to her by
phone or in person.
The house was practically dark when he pulled the jeep in beside Emma’s yellow car, a sight that made his heart skip a beat at the knowledge she was inside. Only the light of the fire that he had built before he left and a lamp near the front door provided any visible signs of life in the home. Balancing bags on his handless arm and fumbling with the keys, he tried to enter quietly with the knowledge that Emma and Henry could very well be asleep.

He was half right, as Henry was sacked out on the couch under one of Granny’s knitted throws. His head was resting on a pillow that was anchored by Emma’s lap, her hand softly running along the hair that she had already warned was being cut at the first opportunity.

“He Hello, love,” Killian said in a quiet voice after shutting the door. “Killian’s delivery service has arrived.”

She smiled sleepily, her other hand propping up her head on the arm of the sofa. “Eat in here?” she asked, sounding very much like her son with the husky sound of exhaustion. They had tried hard to make a rule that eating was to be done at the table, but the regulation lasted only a short time. Killian had not put up too much of a fight about it, as he recognized that the intimacy afforded them by curling up together for meals was far greater than formality around a table.

“Of course,” he declared, placing the containers and bags on the coffee table and shooing off her attempts to help. “I’ve got it. I’ll grab some plates and drinks. Do you think the lad wants to join us or should we let him sleep?”

Her eyes studied her son who seemed not quite his age as he lay curled up beside her. “He seems awfully tired, but his stomach is rumbling too. Maybe I should let him know dinner is ready.”

“The two of you are going to catch up on your sleep this weekend,” Killian announced firmly, scurrying about the kitchen to gather a few items. “I insist.”

“No arguments here, but might ought to check with Henry, your brother, Elsa, and Ruby. Oh and Mary Margaret who has been texting me like crazy to get a plan together for wedding planning. I think our calendar might be filling up fast.” She shifted slightly, her fingers twirling in Henry’s hair. “And you’ve been awesome about keeping it a secret, but there’s the whole surprise party thing tomorrow night.”

Carrying a few condiments, plates, cups, and a large bottle of soda all balanced in his hand and under arms, Killian dropped down to one of the floor pillows and began setting up. “Who told you?”

Emma snorted with a slight shake of her head. “You do realize that it is hard to keep a secret in Storybrooke. Nearly impossible.” She widened her eyes in surprise as he stopped dividing up the prawns and pork to give her a quick but hard kiss. “What’s that for?”

“We hadn’t properly greeted each other yet. I thought one of us should take the initiative.”

She rolled her eyes again at his follow up kiss, pushing him back to the pillow before she set about waking Henry. His sleep patterns were still of concern to her, though he claimed the nightmares had subsided. He looked less tired than he had, the circles under his eyes not as dark. Still she was worried. So far he’d had about seven appointments with Dr. Hopper to see about what might be troubling him. While the reports showed nothing so far, she was hopeful they were on their way.

When Henry was in the bathroom washing up, Killian told her of Mary Margaret’s cryptic visit to his classroom. She had not suggestions for the reason, but admitted it was a curious development.

***AAA***
“Killian?” Emma hissed against his ear, breath warm and sweet. “Killian, wake up.”

They muted light was not yet bright enough to illuminate the bedroom they shared

“Hmmm?” Killian asked, his handless arm pulling her from the middle closer to him. “It’s not time to get up yet, love.”

“I hear something,” she said, pushing her hand against his chest to lift up inspect the dim room for any sign of an intruder. “I think someone’s out there.”

Grunting inelegantly, Killian ran his hand over his face. “Love, I assure you that it is fine.”

“I heard someone walking,” Emma insisted. He sighed again in response, leaving her to push away from him and reach to the end of the bed for her robe. “I’m going to go check it out.”

“Emma, please don’t. It is not an intruder.”

“How do you know? There could be 14 people out there robbing us blind and getting ready to murder us. We could…” She threw the belt into a sloppy knot and searched with her toes for slippers or shoes. Finding none, she tiptoed toward the door. The gurgling of pipes echoed through the cool stillness. “See I told you. There is someone out there right now. I’m going to check.”

“Emma,” Killian said, pushing down the blankets and reaching out to her. “Come back to bed. I assure you that there is no malfeasance or mischief about.”

She rolled her eyes that his vocabulary was still that of a teacher even in the predawn hours. “And how do you know? They could be in there washing away finger prints.”

“How do you know? There could be 14 people out there robbing us blind and getting ready to murder us. We could…” She threw the belt into a sloppy knot and searched with her toes for slippers or shoes. Finding none, she tiptoed toward the door. The gurgling of pipes echoed through the cool stillness. “See I told you. There is someone out there right now. I’m going to check.”

“Emma,” Killian said, pushing down the blankets and reaching out to her. “Come back to bed. I assure you that there is no malfeasance or mischief about.”

She rolled her eyes that his vocabulary was still that of a teacher even in the predawn hours. “And how do you know? They could be in there washing away finger prints.”

“Love, it’s your birthday, remember?”

She felt her brow wrinkle with that odd reminder of the date of her birth. “Killian, seriously. I remember when my birthday is. I am not completely idiotic. What does that have to do with people out there planning to kill us.” She looked desperately about the room, her eyes narrowing on certain items before skipping to another. “Do you not have any weapons? A gun? A bat? A sword? Something?”

“Emma, your son is out there.”

“Henry!” She lunged forward to the doorknob, fumbling for it in her attempt to get to her son and whatever intruder was threatening him.

“Making you breakfast,” Killian concluded. “For your birthday.”

Her hand was on the knob, having turned in a quarter of the way before the words sank into her brain. “My son is cooking?”

“Aye, a surprise breakfast for you. I taught him to make pancakes one morning while you were gone. He’s got quite the knack for it, love.”

“My son is making me breakfast,” she said, seeming a bit more emotional than she should be at the idea. “And you taught him.”

“Should I not have? I thought it was a sweet gesture, a bit of mother son bonding once he learned the craft.” His fingers groped for her wrist, pulling her back on the rumpled bed. “He’s excited about doing this for you, said he always thought it would be a lovely gift for you, love.”
“He’s not going to burn the house down, is he?” Emma asked, giving a glance to the door, as if it offered a way to see her son.

“I should hope not, but if you wish, I will go check on the lad and you can curl back up and feign sleep for the purposes of this act of generosity.” His lips touched her forehead and then the tip of her nose before pulling away to appreciate the way her lips turned up despite the fact that she was trying to decide if she was put out by his initiative or upset by Henry’s march toward adulthood.

“He’s a pretty good kid,” she conceded, allowing Killian to let her back into the bed and pull the covers up over her legs. “Thank you for helping him.”

“I would think all the credit belongs to you and to Neal.”

“Group effort.”

Killian ran his hand over her cheek, his fingers warm despite the obvious chill in the air. “I’m going to go check on the lad, but do try to be surprised when he comes in with the feast. It means so much to him.” Wiggling to remove her hastily added robe, Emma rolled her eyes again. “You mean like the party tonight at the Rabbit Hole. I’m going to have to pretend to be surprised a lot tonight, aren’t I?”

He fished out his t-shirt and covered his upper body with it, trying to appear annoyed at being found out for his plans. As it was, he had argued in a good natured way with both Ruby and Elsa about the surprise party plans for Emma, knowing that she was less likely to be apt to wanting a fuss. Last night’s revelation that she knew had come as a surprise to him, but now her rubbing it in was just annoying. “You know the answer to that.” He leaned over to kiss her lightly again as she snuggled under the covers. “If you wish to break your friends’ hearts by telling them that they already knew, far be it from me to argue. By the way, happy birthday.”

“You just had to slide that in there,” she said with an exaggerated pout. “I don’t really like birthdays.”

Winking at her, Killian did not respond and disappeared into the living room with a quiet thud of the door. It was there that he found Henry carefully ladling batter onto the griddle just as he had practiced nearly half a dozen times under Killian’s tutelage. The teenager was concentrating with such focus that he barely heard the soft slap of Killian’s socked feet against the wide planked hardwoods.

“Is she awake?” Henry asked, not bothering with a greeting.

“Aye, I convinced her to stay in bed and keep warm. She was afraid there was an intruder out here.” Killian peered over Henry’s shoulder to look at the batter consistency, complimenting it’s texture as nearly perfect.

“She’s going to hate this, isn’t she?”

“Your mother is likely to appreciate anything that you do or gesture that you make. I’d fear more for myself and her friends who wish to celebrate her tonight. We don’t have the luck of mother and son bonding on our side.” He looked over at the counter where the other ingredients were lined up with some precision and organization. “Would you like some help?”

“Just keep Mom occupied,” Henry said, nodding in the direction of the closed door. “I don’t want her coming in and finding a mess.”

Killian nodded, noting that the orange rinds in the garbage were indication that Henry had been at it
for a while now, including squeezing juice for his mother that would probably not complement the hot cocoa that was a standard for most mornings with Emma. She loved her coffee too, but hot cocoa with cinnamon was something she had frequently at some of her foster homes. It was one of the only young and innocent things about her somedays. “Call out if you need anything,” he instructed. “And Henry?”

“Yeah?” Henry answered, expertly flipping the pancake with his spatula.

“Maybe you could show me some time how you got them to that consistency. That’s bloody amazing.”

Emma was practicing his surprised face when Killian returned to bed, something that made him chuckle at the innocence of the act the fact that her acting skills weren’t that good. She propped herself up against the headboard and ran a hand through her bed tousled hair. “It smells wonderful,” she told Killian with a little awe in her voice. “You did good teaching him.”

“I had some help on the subject. Mary Margaret’s husband gave a few suggestions, including some super secret one that it appears the lad has employed.”

“Nutmeg,” Emma suggested, having been a part of breakfast with the now married Nolan family before. “I didn’t know he was handing out that secret now.”

Killian surmised that Emma and her son were just good at getting such information out of people. He then turned a thoughtful gape upon her as she readjusted the blankets over her lap in anticipation of her son’s not so surprise filled attempt. “Do you really hate birthdays so much?”

“My own,” she admitted. “It’s not a getting older thing. It’s just that growing up in foster homes and group homes, birthdays weren’t a big deal. No deal actually. I would wake up on the morning of my birthday and nobody would acknowledge it. I would build it up in my head that they must be planning something great, but then nothing. And by the time I went to bed that night I would tell myself it didn’t matter.”

“But it did matter,” Killian said softly, his heart feeling heavy at the admission. Each time she opened up about the pain of those years he swore it would be the last time she would have to share it for him to understand. He should have known or guessed. At least that was what he told himself. And if he had to hire a psychic to help him, he planned to never again to anything that would bring back bad memories of those days.

“I survived it,” she reminded him. “And it seems that I have a fiancé and a son who seem hell bent that I feel appreciated on my birthday. So let me get past the idea that nobody cares and enjoy this morning with my boys, ok?”

I apologize again for the delay in this. I hope this supersized chapter made up for a little of that. I promise a new update soon.
Chapter 43

Thank you all for your comments and kudos. I love this story so much. As is the case many times with my writing, real life seems to seep into it. As some of you know, I work at a nonprofit that provides a safe place for abused youth, runaways, and homeless children. This time of year is hard for them and hard to watch as a bystander. So my work has found a way into this story. It’s an AU so I have that liberty, but I couldn’t help myself.

The Rabbit Hole very rarely saw so many acts performing, leaving dressing room space at a premium. While Elsa was not exactly taking the stage in full costumes, hair, and makeup, she was in need of a place that would provide her a chance to freshen up after all the hugs and drinks she was sharing with her friends to celebrate Emma’s birthday. Most of the other acts were men so they took up the larger storage room and backstage unisex restroom. Liam had offered his office to her, allowing her a bit more privacy.

“I’m sure you’re going to be terrific,” Emma said, accepting a quick hug that was totally out of character for her. Maybe it was the sweet cocktails that had softened her a bit or the fact that was overwhelmed by the outpouring of love and friendship that she had received, but she had been more demonstrative with her friends than she had been in the past. “Sure you don’t need anything?”

It was not that the butterflies that she felt taking the stage had disappeared. However, Elsa did not want to rip her friend and manager away from the other celebrants to combat a case of nerves she felt should be over by now. Brushing away the offer with a swipe of her hand, Elsa smiled brightly. “You are the birthday girl. You shouldn’t be doing anything more than snuggling up to that fiancé of yours and enjoying the show. If I can’t perform in front of all of you, I shouldn’t be on stage at all.”

Liam and Killian had been having a friendly discussion about Manchester United, the two brothers’ accents stronger in their argument. Sliding out of the booth where he had been demonstrating his best reenactment skills with condiment bottles and jars, Liam nuzzled Elsa’s thick hair before turning toward Emma. “I got this one,” he told her. “Besides, you need to keep reminding that brother of mine that he owes me 10 for guessing his little secret.”

Wagging her finger at her soon to be brother-in-law, she laughed. “That’s between the two of you. And I’m on to you. I think you want to break me and Killian up so you can move back into the house. Now that’s it’s been renovated you’re thinking it’s more appealing than sleeping on the couch.”

With Emma pulled into his side, Killian agreed. “Aye, my brother never does anything without an ulterior motive. But don’t give him any ideas, love. I am optimistic that this lovely lass may keep him around for a few years at least.”

“At least,” Elsa echoed, placing her palm against Liam’s cheek and turning her toward him so that she might kiss him to distraction. Pulling back away, she patted his cheek. “Now can you boys get along while I go freshen up. I don’t want to hear about any brawls out here.”

Liam threw his hand up in a mock version of a salute. “On my honor, milady.”

She knew that they would be back to teasing each other before she even used the key in her pocket to unlock the office door. That was the way they were, constantly ribbing each other. However, she also knew that the love they shared was deep and real, as was hers with Anna. It made her feel happy and warm that he had someone he cared for as deeply as she did, feeling comforted by the closeness that was likely to last.
One of the only suggestions she had for her sister regarding the growing family was that this baby not be an only child. She couldn’t imagine life without her little sister, even when she was annoying her with constant chatter, questions, and theories. Even now, she removed herself from an in-depth discussion about prenatal yoga with Mary Margaret and followed her sister to help her get ready.

“Are you sure you don’t want to perform?” Elsa asked, blindly reaching out in search of the light switch. “I would feel much more comfortable.”

Anna shook her head. “I don’t think it’s a good idea. I told Regina no performing until after the baby’s here. And I don’t want to look like I’m willing to negotiate on that. I perform with you tonight and next thing you know I’m on a 60 city tour until my 37th week. I don’t want my water to break on stage and that to end up on YouTube or something.”

“Got it,” Elsa said, refraining from saying that a simple no thank you would have sufficed. Finally, her hand came into contact with the switch. The overhead light flickered to life with an unflattering glow and revealed the cramped and slightly disorganized space. There on his desk was a photo of him and Killian. Next to it in a double frame was a photo of she and him at Mary Margaret’s wedding and a solo shot of her from the summer. Usually there were even more photos flashing by on his computer’s screensaver, but the screen was obscured by a giant arrangement of white roses. Elsa gasped at the display, stepping forward to see her own name scrawled on the card.

“Wow!” Anna said, leaning to see around her sister. “Those are beautiful. Liam must have spent a fortune. He does realize today’s not your birthday, right? I mean there was the whole mix up on the pregnancy thing. So he does seem to…what’s the right word?”

“Transfer,” Elsa said, holding the card between two fingers. “Something like that.” The quote on the card was from one of her favorite books, a line from *Pride and Prejudice*. While the scrawl was not familiar, she smiled thinking that only he could have arranged that for her. There were two keys to his office. One was held by him and now in her temporary possession. The other was held by Zelena. She knew that Zelena wouldn’t give them to her. “I should thank him. This was so sweet of him.”

“You don’t have time,” Anna said, suddenly being the voice of reason. Sit down. I need to get your hair back to normal. And you need a bit of color on your face. Those stage lights will wash you out. You’ll look like a ghost. A beautiful ghost, but still a dead person come back from the grave.”

***AAA***

David laughed at Will’s victory dance when he won another round of pool against Jefferson, the lanky British man kicking his legs up high and shimmying. Leaning languidly against the bar where his now wife was drinking a bit of seltzer water after two fruity nonalcoholic drinks, he cast a glance her way with the expectation that she would be laughing too. “What’s wrong?” he asked, suddenly concerned by her pensive expression. “Are you feeling sick? We can get out of here. It’s warm. Maybe we should get you and the baby some fresh air.”

She gripped his wrist as he reached for her drink to carry it out for her. “No, I’m fine,” she said, offering a hesitant smile as reassurance. “Did Emma and Killian leave yet? I didn’t get to say goodbye.”

David returned to his seat, twisting to face her. “No, they are over there still enjoying Liam’s company. Why don’t we join them?” His normally sociable wife seemed distant and almost melancholy with her vacant stare and listless dragging of her finger through some of the spilled salt. “Or we could talk just us?”
“I’m not much of a party guest, am I?” she asked, again feigning a smile. “Sorry about that.” She squared off her shoulders and took a long sip from the glass in her right hand. “I’ll do better.”

A sigh from David said it all, as most everyone had noticed the teacher’s quietness over the past couple of days. Even Killian had asked her if everything was alright at least four times that night. “You know that you can tell me anything, right? I know we’re married and we’re both working some odd schedules lately.”

“I know. That’s really part of this.” She let her left hand floated near her more noticeable bulge, smiling as she always did when she thought of the baby growing there. “I spoke to the administration about my upcoming leave. I know. I know. It’s too soon for me to know exactly when. But I like to be prepared.”

“Like already picking out the paint and furniture for the baby?” he teased, hoping to bring that smile out more naturally. “That’s one of the things I love about you.”

“I thought that you love that I’m an optimist.”

One of the guitar players from a backup band stepped on stage with the grace of a bull, knocking one of the microphones down in the process. Feedback crackled through the air and most people covered their ears. “Among other things,” he said fondly when things quieted. “Your smile, your good heart, your quick wit, your sweet voice when you think nobody can hear you…should I continue?”

“Maybe later. The thing is that Mr. Gold talked to me about my leave. He’s not that thrilled about the idea I had for cutting back my hours. And he’s…well, he’s implementing some changes to keep things up academically. I didn’t realize how many changes he meant until he handed over some schedules. It’s a big change, David. I won’t really have any say so in the curriculum for my classes any more. It’s more about teaching to tests and making sure that our kids have ivy league aspirations even at the youngest levels. It’s against everything I believe about education, David.”

David nodded, knowing how seriously his wife had always taken education, even when they first started dating. She had stood up for her students in every way that she could. “And you don’t think he wants to listen to your ideas?”

“Clearly not. He’s already talking about hiring tutors so that each student is testing at higher than grade level. He’s not talking about education, David. He’s talking about indoctrination. He wants to do away with everything that might actually make our students well rounded. Everything except sports. It’s just insane. I don’t know…I don’t know if I can work in a school that does that. I want to help my students. I don’t want to hurt them.”

“You don’t have to work there or anywhere if you don’t want to,” David offered, hoping that would make her smile. “I mean there are other schools. Or maybe we should look at you concentrating on the baby for a while. But if you want to stay there then we can look at options too. Maybe work with some of the other teachers and lodge a complaint or raise the issue formally. Maybe he doesn’t think anyone will mind the change or that they will cheer for it.”

She looked down at her left hand, the wedding band not seeming out of place at all. “What if…” She trailed off, cheeks flushing without ever saying what she wanted to say.

“What if what?”

“What if I took the money from my family and opened a school. I mean I can’t commit to something as large as Stroybrooke Academy, but maybe just a grade or two to start. We could expand by one level every year.” She scrunched her face. “It’s silly, right? I’m having a baby. I don’t need to take
this on. And I can’t believe I’m discussing this with you at a bar.”

“Well, Graham has been giving you the eye since you’re the designated driver for us and all, but I 
think we’re fine. And as for your idea, I think it’s pretty great. If you want to start something, I’m all 
in.” Her reaction of crying surprised him, making him think he’d somehow offended her. While he 
was likely to blame the pregnancy hormones, he knew that she was sensitive and often cried over it. 
“Is that what you wanted to hear?”

Her lips thinned as she tried to avoid outright bawling. At least she managed to nod furiously.

“Oh come here,” he said, pulling her tight. “I love you. But maybe you should find someone else to 
do the recruiting. The tears might turn off potential coworkers.”

***AAA***

Elsa could feel Liam’s breath on her neck even before he spoke, his strong arms wrapping around 
her from behind. “You’re going to be brilliant, darling. And if you’re not, don’t worry. Most of our 
friends are too drunk to even notice.”

“I’m not sure that’s encouragement.” Her hands closed over where his were around her middle. “But 
you do know how to make me feel loved.”

“Glad to hear it.” He saw the drummer for her band give them a nod that the intro notes were about 
to start, welcoming her on stage. “They’re ready for you.”

She gave a short nod, breathing in as deeply as she could. “You have to tell me where you found 
those by the way. They are beautiful.”

He looked at her quizzically, but the music’s loud crescendo and the lights flashing even in that small 
venue were too much competition for conversation. She twisted her head to share a quick kiss before 
she pulled away and took the two steps up onto the stage. He watched her take the three breaths 
before opening her eyes to audience, a technique Emma had taught her that seemed to work. “That’s 
a good lass,” he murmured to himself. Waiting until she had launched into her first song, he ducked 
back out into the smallish crowd and took his seat next to his brother.

Emma leaned across Killian and grabbed his hand. “She looks great. And she sounds even better.”

His pride in her was evident as he moved along with the steady beat of the pop like song. “Aye, 
brilliant,” Killian agreed, giving his brother a slight slug to the shoulder. “I have to wonder why she’s 
with a sod like you.”

She sang only four songs, each showing a little more confidence than the last. A ballad and then 
three more up tempo songs that couldn’t exactly be called dance tracks had even those in the 
audience who had heard them a million times cheering her on. She met the familiar eyes of those she 
cared about as she performed, including Emma who smiled and gave her a thumbs up when she 
reached her most powerful note.

The ballad provided more options for making connections. She saw Mary Margaret and David 
swaying to the music, a private moment between the two of them at the recognition of the lyrics. 
Anna was holding up her phone and either taking pictures or video. It was probably the latter since 
she kept shooing Kris away from her as she did.

The applause was still ringing in her ears as she left the stage, her breath short and face flushed from 
the rush of performing. Liam was waiting for her there, lifting her off the ground and spinning her 
twice before crashing his mouth against hers. “How’s that for positive reinforcement, darling?”
“You’re on a roll between the kiss and the flowers. I may have to talk to Emma and Regina about taking you on the road with me.” Her arms were still tight around his shoulders and she gazed up at him with the same adoration she had felt from the stage when their eyes had met. However, he was not mirroring the expression back.

“Flowers?”

“Yes,” she said, not catching on that he was unaware and therefore not responsible for the lovely gift. “The white roses in your office that were for me. They are beautiful, Liam. And so many! You are spoiling me when it’s Emma’s birthday!”

He lowered her to the ground slowly, his grip around her waist loosening but not letting her go yet. “Darling, I didn’t buy you roses.”

She let out a short laugh, perplexed by his reaction. “What do you mean? They are roses. Winter whites if I remember correctly. But they are definitely roses. I love them.”

The burgundy sweater he wore was light weight and soft under her fingers, giving him a casual and approachable appearance. While her dress was more subdued than her normal stage outfits, it was a deep purple that draped beautifully over her willowy form. They did not look quite like they matched as they stood in the darkened hallway next to the stage, occasionally knocked or bumped by someone switching out equipment on stage for the next performance.

“Wait, if you didn’t…”

“They are in my office?” he questioned, not willing to let his mind go to where it could be a dark explanation. “Show me?”

She grabbed her coat from the chair where she had left it while performing and dug the key out. “I don’t understand,” she said more to herself as they scooted out of the way of a guy carrying two guitars and an amp. “The office has been locked.”

“Show me.”

She unlocked the door, not bothering to point to the abundant display of flowers that had filled the room with not only their beauty but the heady scent that threatened to make Liam cough. He was close at her heels, reaching around to lift the card. His lips moved in silent reading of the message that he flipped over and back again before replacing it on the plastic holder. “That’s all there was, darling? No other message.”

“No,” she said, worry crossing her face as she stared frightfully at the roses. “Who would have sent them? I thought…”

“I wish I had thought of it, but it wasn’t me. They were sitting here when you and Anna came in, right?”

“Yes, they were just there. How? I mean, I have your key. I don’t think that Zelena would…”

He gripped her wrist tightly, pulling her back to the hallway. “Let’s go talk to her. Perhaps she can shed some light on this mystery.”

***AAA***

“You realize this isn’t the way backstage, right?” Emma asked, her jacket dipping off one shoulder since he had barely given her enough time to grab it before whisking her out of the fray of the crowd.
“Where are we going?”

“Your birthday isn’t the appropriate time to ask questions, love,” he had teased, his grip around her hand tight as they ducked outside and headed for his jeep. After Regina had hijacked his plans for Emma to have a quiet evening surrounded by those she loved and who loved her, he had secretly planned something else to help her understand just what she meant to him. The temperature was still a bit brisk, but thankfully was not the plummeting temperatures they had experienced over the past few days.

“I don’t like surprises.” For a woman known for her investigative skills and ability to track down talent, Emma had not seemed to notice that her stack of gifts had already been confiscated to Mary Margaret’s SUV or that her friends had seemed a bit final in their hugs a few minutes before. “It feels a bit too much like people talking about me behind my back.”

He stopped short, yanking her toward him and making their bodies crash into one another. “It’s a lovely surprise that I hope you will like,” he said before lowering his lips to hers for a kiss cut short by the fact they were standing in the parking lot’s only lane of traffic.

“It doesn’t involve embarrassing hats or wait staff singing to me?”

“Oi! Give me some credit. I’m a bit more original than that.” Despite her protest, he lifted her up to the passenger seat in his jeep and ran to the other side, winking at her through the windshield. Her keen observation skills made a return as she noted their overnight bags in his backseat and a red rose with a matching bow on the dash.

“Compromise,” he said after cranking the vehicle and fiddling with the dials to make sure the heat would warm them soon. “I had first thought of a private celebration with just us in a secluded cabin, some champagne and a few rose petals scattered about…”

“And then you realized that wasn’t a very original plan?” she teased, breathing in the heady scent of the flower she had placed just an inch or two from her nose. “Not that I would complain.”

“Of course not, but I wanted you to see that Henry and I are not the only ones who wish to celebrate the day of your birth.” He had yet to put the jeep into gear, stealing a moment to pull her cold, free hand over and brush his mouth against her knuckles. The engagement ring on her left hand sparkled back at him as if in approval. “But I have no wish to share you for every moment of the day.”

It had been a quiet birthday that after thinking their home was under siege by robbers was just the sort of thing Emma loved. Breakfast in bed had been perfect with her son showing off culinary skills that she didn’t know he had. When she admitted honestly that his pancakes were better than even Killian’s, he had sheepishly admitted to learning David’s secrets for taste and texture during an overnight stay with Mary Margaret a few weeks earlier. Though Killian had acted offended at the idea that he had extra help, Emma had enjoyed the banter between all of them.

Even the party was not too overwhelming. Liam had sectioned off an area just for them and kept things light and friendly. It was Killian who kept Regina at bay, reminding her that Emma was the celebrant and not the worker that night. Whatever he said to her worked, as she sent over a bottle of overpriced champagne so that the birthday toasts could continue. There were plenty of jokes about the two mommy’s to be partying in a bar, but both women took it in stride and sipped their fruit juice with tropical umbrellas proudly.

“You aren’t telling me where we’re going?” Emma asked, her voice sounding on the verge of a pout as he pulled out into the light traffic and took the familiar route home. “No clues?”
“You’re the type to shake the gifts at Christmas, aren’t you?” he asked back, knowing that she would guess when he pulled the jeep back in at home. The luggage was merely a ploy, as he could have run in to get it. “Love, relax. Enjoy the surprise.”

She folded her arms over her chest and let her eyes scan the road ahead. “So we aren’t going far,” she surmised. “The interstate’s in the opposite direction and you don’t have much gas. Please don’t tell me we’re going to the bed and breakfast. It was fun having Granny stop in at the party, but her knowing what we do at night is TMI. And I’m already going to have to face up to Regina Monday knowing we snuck out on her big event.”

He chuckled, slowing as the car in front of them turned. “I assure you that where we are headed is quite private and without check out times. And you don’t want to know what I think of Regina’s plans being ruined because you aren’t there to be at her beck and call.”

“You’re not taking me camping, are you? Because as much as I love you, I don’t want to spend all night in long underwear in a tent.”

“No tents.” The crunch of the gravel was drowned out by the frustrated groan of his fiancé. “And I’m not going to take the bait about long underwear. I assure you that you will be comfortable and warm, even in those moments you find yourself not in my arms.”

She mulled that information over a bit as he cut off the jeep and grabbed their bags before helping her down. It was one of the few gentlemanly behaviors she rarely afforded him, as she hated feeling helpless around him. Lips parted to ask him for another hint, she stopped short as her vision caught a glimpse of one of the sailboats in the nearby slip. Its mast and railings were lit with what seemed like hundreds if not thousands of white lights.

“Killian,” she half said and half breathed. “Did you?”

“Aye, it’s a bit late in the season, but the channels are clear and the tide’s high enough for a nice turn about before we dock her for the winter. I know it’s not that impressive of a getaway, but I thought it a quiet little adventure for us. So what do you say, love? Sail away with me?” Her hand was resting in the crook of his left arm as he held the duffel he had packed and her rolling bag with his right.

“I’d love to,” she answered, keeping her response simple in comparison.

Being at the shore made the breeze a little worse, but Emma felt none of that as he led her on board the vessel that had been barely seaworthy a few months before. Robin and Liam had both helped with repairs, even bringing on specialized help like Marco for some of the wood finishes and custom work. She was far from finished, Killian told her as they stored their bags in the cabin below, but he could honestly describe her as serviceable, safe, and comfortable. Her eyes couldn’t help but note the overwhelming presence of the massive bed in the “captain’s quarters” that took up nearly two thirds of the room. “Happy birthday, my love,” he whispered, letting her take in the view of the improvements.

Reaching for him instinctively, she was soon wrapped in his embrace, lips, tongues, and teeth playing off each other in lazy fashion. More than any of the gifts he and the others had given her that day, the gift of feeling like time was standing still was far and away her favorite. She could almost imagine that they could stay wrapped up in each other forever, never being missed or missing anything. She didn’t want to think otherwise yet.

It wasn’t the type of kissing that left them breathless, the softness of the moment more like melting than combat. When he pulled away, his eyes bright and shining as he stared at her in a way that said he wanted to study and know her rather than possess, he laughed slightly. “As lovely as this is, my
love, I would be remiss if I didn’t prepare us to set sail.”

“Autopilot’s not working?” she teased, hands sliding from his hair and hip to his chest where she rested them ready to push back.

“Aye, but it shouldn’t take too long. Rest here if you like. I’ll call down to you when we are underway.”

She cocked her head to the side, making a thoughtful expression. “And miss the view? No way!”

***AAA***

“Mr. French himself dropped them off about 5 or so,” the ginger haired beauty said from her perch. She was seated at a table with Regina and Robin and some man who Liam didn’t know. “I put them in your office, but hadn’t thought about them. They are lovely.”

“Did Mr. French say who sent them?” Elsa asked, her curiosity over the flowers overshadowing the way that the woman was dressed so provocatively and trailing a hand along the deep v of her dress to draw Liam’s attention to her cleavage.

“No, I didn’t think it was my business to ask. There was a card, wasn’t there? I’m sorry if there was a problem, but I really don’t see any issue here.” She tilted her head and smiled brightly. “I say just enjoy them and thank the sender.” Done with the question and conversation, she turned back to the man that must have been her date. With a sparkling laugh, she asked him some inane question and left Elsa and Liam standing awkwardly. It was Regina who said something about their performances to them and then summarily dismissed them.

“We can call the florist in the morning.” Liam told her as they made their way back to the other people there for Emma. “I’m sure it’s just some clerical error.”

“It’s strange though. That’s a pretty large and expensive arrangement.”

“Aye, but not much we can do other than have a chin wag with Graham on the topic. But that seems a bit much for something like an unknown sender of flowers. I would think it is probably just an overzealous fan of some sort.” He was continuing to walk as she stood still, stopping only when she caught him by the waist of his jeans. “Elsa?”

“Let’s just forget it for right now. I don’t want to ruin Emma’s party with what could be a clerical error as you put it.”

“If that’s what you wish, darling, that’s fine. But we will get to the bottom of it. I don’t like leaving things up in the air.” He wrapped his arm over her shoulder. “And you shouldn’t worry. Killian snuck Emma out after your last song.”

“They are really cute together. I think they are happy.”

“Aye, my brother and I both lucked out when the Widow Lucas decided to interfere with our love lives.”

***AAA***

The morning sun over the water made for soft colors that would rival any artist’s brush, at least that was what Killian told her from the cabin where they were both cuddled up together. Emma had laughed heartily, her hair a tangled mess on the pillow and face clear of the makeup she usually wore. “How would you know? We haven’t been above deck since you anchored us,” she lifted up to
look over his shoulder at the alarm clock. Suddenly the idea of counting backwards to do the math seemed overkill. “Well, anyway for hours. How do you know what it looks like out there?”

His slow smile was of a man with no stress or deadlines at all. “Experience and imagination,” he answered, his eyes never leaving her slightly parted lips.

“Do we really have to go back? I kind of get the whole rocking of the ocean being soothing.” She gave him her best pout, which he promptly kissed and pulled her bottom lip between his teeth.

“I’m afraid so, love. We have responsibilities and I promised Henry that we’d get a bit of piano practice in this afternoon.” While he spoke of their agenda for the day, he made no moves to actually extricate himself from the bed. Even when she pushed him to his back and covered his chest with her upper body, he made no attempt to stop her. The tangled golden waves of hair spilled onto his chest and his hand momentarily lost itself in the mass of it.

“I like it here,” she said firmly. “Thank you for a wonderful birthday.”

“I didn’t do it alone.”

“No, and I’ll thank Henry and our friends too, but you deserve special thanks. I always hated my birthday. When I was a kid I knew that it meant another year closer to having to fend for myself. I never knew if anyone would acknowledge it. And if they did, it was usually just an afterthought. You know some cheap dollar store gift that was collecting dust. But it was also a reminder that my parents didn’t want me. It wasn’t just the anniversary of my birth. It was the day they left me…gave me away. I get the idea of adoption. I really do, but when you’re a kid it’s hard to feel anything but abandoned.”

His hand had trailed to her bare back, tracing circles and lines along the skin there. “I hope you know that despite your beginnings, you are loved and cherished now. It’s not just me who loves you.”

“That’s why I feel so selfish about hating birthdays. You all did so much to make me realize that I’m not that little girl any more.” She sounded nearly tearful, eyes dropping from the intensity of his own stare. “I am grateful, Killian. And I do love everything you did for me.”

“I may not have had the hellish childhood you had, but I do know a bit about feeling abandoned and alone. And I promise it is my goal to make sure you never feel that way again. If it takes the rest of my life, I plan to show you every day just how happy you make me and how you are the answer to every wish and prayer I ever made.”

“Every wish and prayer?” she asked, her tone lighter. “That might be an overstatement.” She pinched his side, trying to tickle him. While he didn’t break into a fit of giggles, he did squirm a little. “This probably isn’t the right time, but I have been thinking…”

“Always dangerous,” he said after he had settled back against the dark sheets. “And when have we ever been slaves to the clock or a calendar?”

She rolled her eyes and stopped herself from making a comment about his dramatic statements. “So we’re getting married…”

“I’ve heard such rumors. Then there is that ring on your finger. Plus I think there’s a wedding planning guide in your loot from the party. No doubt a gift from Mary Margaret.”

“You’re a dork,” she accused, scooting farther up his chest so that her chin was just at his heart. “I was thinking more about after the wedding. And before you chime in with thoughts on the honeymoon, I’m thinking after that too. I know it’s not really in our plans, but I was thinking that
maybe…God, I shouldn’t be thinking this. You probably have your own ideas about things. And we should just enjoy being together and not worrying about adding…” She stopped at that word, letting it hang in the air. It was clear that he thought she was speaking of getting pregnant by the stunned expression washing over his face.

“I wasn’t aware you were thinking that way,” he said somewhat haltingly. “I am not opposed to the idea. Not by a long shot. But if this is something you want, I could be persuaded. Plus we can spend a bit of time practicing.” His fingers trailed down her spine suggestively as she squirmed and pressed her lips together with a disapproving reaction.

“I was not talking about getting pregnant. I’m not…well, I am not sure that is a good idea. I think it is, but you might not. I mean…Ok…I was thinking that maybe we could consider adoption. I know that there are babies out there who will go to good homes. Everyone who considers adoption wants a baby or at least a toddler. I was thinking maybe an older child. I know it’s silly, but I was thinking that maybe we could provide a home for a child who wouldn’t otherwise have one. You think that’s crazy, right?”

His fingers continued their movements on her spine, the pad of each dancing delicately along. He watched as a bit of her hair fell in front of her eyes and she blew it out of the way without lifting a single hand. “You’ve thought about this?”

“I…I always said I would do this,” she admitted, biting at her bottom lip and trying to decide if he was willing to consider this. She knew he would probably agree to anything that made her happy. That was the kind of man he was after all. But this was a big decision and commitment. He had said on a few occasions that he would like to have children with her. And while that had been meant in a conventional sense, she wondered if he would be able to accept a child who was not their own flesh and blood. In a flash she remembered Henry was not his biologically either. Yet he had taken to the duties of fatherhood faster than most. “And I guess I was just thinking that if I do it now that you will…”

“We’re a team, Swan,” he reminded her, his chin down to his chest as he met her eyes. “And I do think it is a brilliant idea. I don’t know much about the process, but I think that we could provide a child a lovely home. So if this is something you wish, I say we take the necessary steps. I would assume it would be easier to be approved once we are married.”

She let out a breath she didn’t realize she had been holding. “It’ll take a while even after that. Some couples have to wait for more than a year before they even finish all the steps in the approval process. The training, psych tests, interviews, etc. are pretty lengthy. I was hoping we could apply to work with a child on a long term placement, hopefully leading to adoption. I don’t know that I could do the shorter term ones where the child would be sent away again soon after he or she arrived.”

“Aye, that does seem best. You have given this a fair amount of thought and research?”

“Yeah,” she admitted shyly. “I really do want to do this. There are so many kids in foster care or group homes who never…who will never have parents or a normal life. They will be shuffled around with their belongings in a bag rather than a suitcase. They’ll never know a home. I want to be that for a child.”

“You don’t have to convince me,” Killian said fondly, knowing that this might just open those final walls she held about abandonment. “And our renovations to the house will make it easier. Perhaps Henry would prefer to move upstairs and the child could have that room. Or the other way around. We have the room and I know we can love this child. We’ll make sure he or she feels safe, wanted, and loved. That’s what matters.”
“I knew I loved you for a reason,” she said, boldly launching herself fully on top of him. “And this doesn’t mean that we can’t…I mean in the future…”

“One step at a time, love. You find out the process and let’s get this started. The sooner we start and get married, the sooner we’ll be bringing the lad or lass home.”

_I hope that you have a merry Christmas, happy Hanukkah, or whatever you choose to celebrate. Whether you are surrounded by loved ones, joined by a few, or alone, I hope that you take time to appreciate the beauty of the season and experience the happiness that can be found._
Happy New Year! Hope you enjoy this chapter. I know that there were some questions about Ruby’s reactions to her friends getting married. I spent a little time exploring that in this chapter.

Killian at the helm of the sailing vessel was something Emma had to admit was a view to appreciate. Maybe it was the way his jeans hugged his hips and legs or the relaxed look of pleasure on his face. She had pulled a knitted cap on him and covered just the tips of his ears, making an adorable sight as he flashed his dimples at her with a wink. She was snacking on a poptart while he was holding a granola bar, but it was still a shared morning meal as they made their way back to the slip the boat called home.

“So you know we do have to make some wedding plans if we’re ever going to actually do this,” Emma said over the sharp snap of the sails in the wind. “More than just a vague idea of location.”

“I’m amiable to anything you wish, but I have a feeling you’d just see that as disinterest. So I can’t be a part of the dress decision. Bad luck and all that. Let’s talk food.”

“That’s easy. Granny would kill us if we go with anyone but her.” Emma cradled her thermos of hot chocolate in between her knees and unscrewed the cap. “I say we give her a budget and tell her to keep it simple but tasting good. I don’t want to feel like I’m eating saw dust at our reception.”

He chuckled, leaning as he corrected the course of the boat. “I can go with that. I don’t have much of an opinion on the menu except that I’d like a good selection of libations to keep us all happy.”

Wiping a crumb from the corner of her mouth with her thumb, Emma looked thoughtful. “You mean you want rum for the wedding toast and not champagne?” She took the last bite of her breakfast pastry and washed it back with the hot chocolate.

“I’m a bit more civilized than that,” he challenged. “Besides I can always keep a bit of rum in a flask.” Cramming the rest of the bar into his mouth, he pulled back his hand and wiggled his fingers at her to beckon her closer while he swallowed. She brought the thermos with her, sharing a bit of the chocolate goodness with him before a heated and sweet kiss that he called distracting.

“You’re the one who called me over here,” she said, snuggling into his left side and sharing the warmth of his jacket with her own. “And you’re the one who kissed me.”

“Can’t blame a man for finding you irresistible, Swan,” he said, using the last name affectionately. “I’m a lucky bloke indeed for having such a delectable and distracting woman agree to marry me.” He gave a cursory glance to the instrument at his right that indicated their position before turning to kiss her again. As she pulled away he growled impatiently at her just out of reach lips.

“You’re the one who is distracting me from planning. I know you and I just want to do this, but we have friends who want details and ideas so they can take it over the top.”

***AAA***

Elsa lounged on the sectional as Liam fished under one of the tables for his running shoes that he knew were there some place. Pretending not to watch him, she swatted at her nose, pretending to scratch it and cover the smile that crept up on her as she watched the funny faces he made with the effort of stretching and the grunts that echoed in the room.

“Amused, darling?” he asked when he returned victorious with the left lace up. He still had to find
She batted her eyes with feigned innocence. “I was reading my book.” She lifted the thick volume as if to prove her point. “Were you trying to get my attention?”

He grunted again before growling and launching himself at her to kiss her lips playfully. Careful of the borrowed book, she moved it out of the way just in time, returning his kiss with as much playful fervor. By the time he pulled back, he looked a little more unkempt than before, his curly hair in disarray and his eyes dilated as he stared back in breathless anticipation. “I was going to go for a run before our appointment with Graham. Unless you have a better idea…”

Using the book as a shield, she opened it back to her page. “I don’t think it’s necessary.”

His hands rested on her calves, watching as she curled back up for the afternoon. “I doubt you’re blowing off my run. Darling, we talked about this. We need to see Graham as soon as possible. Those flowers came from someplace. We need to see to them for peace of mind at least.”

She kept her icy blue eyes trained on the page, focusing on the words of the second line instead of his concerned expression. “I don’t think it’s necessary. I’m sure it was just some silly misunderstanding.”

He rocked backwards, away from her as he watched her thoughtfully run a finger along the page to find her place. “Why are you…?”

“Liam, they are flowers. It’s not like it was a threat or anything that horrible. Let’s just forget it. I’ve only got a few days before my first show of this booking. Let’s enjoy the time before we’re back to Skype and text messages.” She pressed her lips together and touched them with the tips of her fingers. “I’m going to miss you.”

“And I you,” he assured her, pulling a knit cap out of his back pocket and tugging it over his errant curls that were going to need a trim soon. “But I’d feel a lot better knowing you were safe. What if…”

“Don’t, Liam. I don’t want to play games of what if. Look, I know you want to go for a run, but I’m hungry. Why don’t we get some breakfast from Granny’s? You could pick it up on your way back. Then we can have a quiet day here together, curled up and ignoring the rest of the world. I don’t have to read. We could watch a few movies.”

“You drive a hard bargain, darling. But I love a good negotiation. How about I drive over for breakfast and get you one of those pancake stacks you pretend not to love and steal all of mine anyway. That way it stays hot for you.” He winked, standing up and whirling around toward the door. “One day without a run won’t be of detriment to my amazing physique.” He felt a swift kick as her foot came into contact with his denim clad bottom.

“Looks a little flabby already,” she told him with a warm smile. “But I still love it.” He chuckled at the playful mood she seemed to be in, waving off her offer to go with him.

“I’ll be right back,” he promised, donning his jacket and heading out the door after two more quick but firm kisses.

She wasn’t exactly that upset about the cooler temperatures, but the idea of noshing on pancakes, buttery pastries, perfectly cut bacon, and soft scrambled eggs was making her hum with happiness. She loved the diner, but more than that she loved feeling Liam solidly behind her back as they both ate from the same plate and teased each other over the remaining bites. Tossing aside her book, she
was part way to the bedroom to tighten and refasten her braid before his return when she heard the heavy thud of the door again. “Liam?” she asked, confused as to why he had returned. A quick look to the bedside table showed that he had his wallet and keys.

“Aye, it’s me. Seems I’ve got a bit of a problem. My car does anyway. The tires…” He held up a hand as whoever he was calling must have answered. It was a quick conversation, mostly just giving directions to the condo’s parking garage.

She was at his side at an instant, her brow furrowed with confusion at his breathless state. “And you can’t change a flat tire?” she asked. He had changed one for her just a few weeks prior. It made no sense that he could not do the same for his own car.

“They aren’t exactly flat,” he said, his eyes staring back at the door rather than her face. “Three are slashed. Clearly it’s not an accident.”

Stepping back as if slapped by the force of his words, Elsa seemed stunned. “You don’t think…”

His hand dug into the pocket of the lightweight jacket he had been wearing and pulled out a folded piece of paper. “This was on your car,” he said. “Elsa, I think we have more of a problem than either of us were prepared to think last night. The tour is off for both of us. I’m not going to leave you vulnerable and unprotected.”

***AAA***

Henry was dropped off by Neal about 20 minutes after Emma and Killian returned to the house, his footsteps quick and careless as he ran to the door and gave his father a wave goodbye over his shoulder. He knew his mother would ask about his time there with Neal, questioning his sleeping habit and whether he had experienced the nightmare again. The truth was that he had woken up out of a dead sleep with sweat on his brow and his mother’s name on his lips as he called out for her. It wasn’t Neal that came in to check on him though. His soon to be stepmother had stood at the door and told him that it was just a dream. She had tried in her own uncomfortable way to soothe him, but the awkward and meaningless platitudes had just made him miss Emma all the more.

“I’ll talk to your mom about this,” Neal had said over a breakfast of instant oatmeal that Tamara had made before heading to her early morning hot yoga class. “I know she’s been concerned. Probably will send you for more sessions with that doctor guy.”

“I’ll tell her,” Henry promised, not wanting to hear his mother defend her decisions to take him to see Dr. Hopper or the fact that she had gone away for a single night with Killian. There was a tenuous truce between his parents that seemed to hold on by the tiniest of strings. He and Dr. Hopper had already spoken of it many times, the doctor telling him that it was not his responsibility to hold that string together. However, he knew good and well that he was the reason for his parents’ continued contact that was based solely on co-parenting him.

Neal had not argued, only saying that if there was anything wrong, he could always tell him. Henry nodded and hurriedly finished the breakfast so that he could escape to his homework before the ride back to the house. Killian had said they would be back by midafternoon and that they could work on that piano piece that he wanted to learn. Knowing his mother would insist that homework was completed first was just extra incentive. Plus that would mean that his mother might lighten up on her screen time rule about his phone and he could talk to Violet before the evening was done.

While his mother had her qualms about her son having a girlfriend or dating, she at least respected that he liked his classmate quite a bit. She allowed their dates to continue and was supportive of the advice that Killian gave regarding everything from where to go on a date to little gestures at school
that she would appreciate. Killian’s suggestion about bringing lunch for the two of them to share
instead of dining on the disgusting choices of the cafeteria had been awesome. And rather than tease
him about liking Violet, his mother took his opinion and feelings seriously.

He fought the urge to hide his eyes, a habit he had picked up from the displays of affection that his
mother and Killian were not so good at keeping from sight. They never did anything that was
scaring to his young psyche, but they were quite affectionate with each other. Just the other day he
had come home from Avery’s house to find his mother sitting on Killian’s lap and his future
stepfather reading to her from some boring book. Even the morning before when he had given his
mother breakfast in bed, he had rolled his eyes at the way that Killian had wiped the syrup from her
chin with his thumb and the tender look they had shared.

However, he was in luck as Killian was adding clothes to the washing machine and Emma was
sorting through the mail. They weren’t even close enough to touch. His keen observation skills also
saw the way his mother’s smile returned to her face as soon as she looked up to see her son.

“I missed you, kid,” she said, not smothering him with kisses but pulling him to her side for a hug.

“I was just gone overnight,” he protested, running his hand over his brown hair where she had
ruffled it. “You’re used to that.”

“Doesn’t mean I don’t miss you. I think Killian did too. There was nobody to appreciate the
collection of comic book movies he has on the boat now.”

“You guys were on the boat?” Henry asked, reaching around the mail that his mother was sorting
into piles to grab one of the cupcakes that Granny had provided at the party. “Without me?”

“We just took her on a little sail down the coast and back again,” Killian explained as he joined them
at the table. “Once the winter is over we’ll take her out more. She’s a lot more comfortable now and
I’ll add some finishing touches to her when the weather cooperates.”

“Oh, I guess,” Henry said, burying his disappointment in the cupcake. They must have felt
somewhat guilty at excluding him since neither mentioned ruining his appetite with sweets. Instead
they wanted a rundown of what he had done the night before and that morning. Killian was
interested in learning the score of some game and Emma appreciated knowing (just as predicted) that
he had completed his homework. He didn’t mention the nightmare, but swore to himself he would
later. They were already planning dinner and debating a video game tournament rematch or piano
lesson when Killian and Emma’s phones both chirped simultaneously.

He resisted the urge to bite into another cupcake or listen in on their ends of the conversation, picking
up one of the catalogs that had arrived in the mail instead. He was flipping past advertisements for
hover boards and other electronics when Emma returned to her seat. “So change in plans,” she
explained. “Elsa and Liam are on their way over to talk to me about something. I guess it’s about the
tour. Anyway, maybe you and Killian could…”

“I’m afraid I’m not available for any outing,” Killian interrupted, dropping his phone to the table.
“Mary Margaret and David are arriving shortly. Mary Margaret has some plan she wishes to talk to
me about.”

“I guess we better make things presentable for company then,” Emma said with a resigned sort of
shrug after she told Killian that his brother and Elsa would be there too. There wasn’t really time to
talk about it or speculate, as their overnight bags were still in the living room, as were her gifts, a
platter of cupcakes, Henry’s attempts at a racetrack that he swore was part of his science
experiments, and a few dozen books that needed to be returned to the shelves. Henry was running a
duster over the coffee and end tables just as the two couples arrived. While their timing was similar, it seemed that neither had expected to see the other. So amidst the awkward hellos and pleasantries, Henry piled jackets on one of the chairs by the door and offered to check the fish trap that he and Killian had placed a few weeks earlier.

“Mind if I join you?” David asked, giving his wife’s shoulder a squeeze. “Looks like there is a lot to discuss here and I’m not really a part of that.”

So that was how Henry and David ended up checking the trap and then discussing how best to cook the fish that both admitted were gross to clean. David described the wonderful dishes that his mother had cooked so easily, speaking of her with admiration and gratitude. He chuckled that he might not have picked up on his mother’s ease and patience, but he had learned a few culinary secrets from the woman.

“Why is everyone here?” Henry asked when they made their way back up onto the deck that jutted off the side of the house. “I thought you all saw each other last night.”

“Well, my wife wanted to talk to Killian about some idea she has about school. I don’t know about the others.” David looked uncomfortably at the container he had with the fish, lifting it and then lowering it due to the odor. “What do you say we hold our noses and get these cleaned? I’m thinking fish would be good for dinner. We could make it a continued birthday party for your mom if everyone wants to stay. Besides you haven’t told me how my pancake recipe went over yesterday.”

Those were the magic words, as Henry was always excited about pleasing Emma. He didn’t even mind the smell or sight of cleaning the fish as they worked or the fact that David was clearly stalling going back inside. He’d been around the man enough to know that he was honest and hardworking, as he had to be to win Mary Margaret’s heart. He also loved to have fun and told great stories of his days before his family’s farm had been sold off in pieces to developers.

“Are they really that hard to keep up with?” Henry asked, thinking back to what he knew of sheep. They didn’t seem that energetic or troublesome. “Horses I get. But sheep?”

“Trust me, there is nothing worse than trying to get those sheep in a pen when they don’t want to go,” David said authoritatively as he tossed another cleaned fish into the pile. “When I had my first date with Mary Margaret I was nearly late because this one sheep decided that jumping over her friends and keeping away from me was more fun.”

Henry wrinkled his nose and tried to imagine his pretty teacher and her husband as young teenagers. It didn’t work. “She likes people to be on time,” he reasoned, thinking about her classroom rules. “I bet she was that way then too.”

“Oh yeah,” David answered with a chuckle. “I was late for our third date. She refused to answer the door and told me that she would see me in a week if I was on time.”

“Were you late the next time?”

“I was 10 minutes early,” David clarified. “I wasn’t going to miss out on a date with her again.”

***AAA***

Liam seemed for Emma’s eyes to be more of a mother hen in that moment than she had ever seen. He was shuffling about the kitchen of the seaside house with precision as he dug out a tea kettle and began warming the water and brewing what he said would help Elsa’s nerves as the two women sat at the dining table looking at the photocopied note from the flowers and the one found on Elsa’s car.
“And these are the only two?” Emma asked, her fingers touching only the edge of the paper. “Nothing else has happened?”

“Bloody hell, Emma,” Liam exclaimed. “Don’t you think this is enough? This person has…”

“I didn’t mean it like that,” Emma answered exasperated. “I only meant that maybe there had been more contact that had not seemed so threatening, but in retrospect…”

Elsa shook her head, hands still folded on the table before her. “I don’t think so. I have gotten fan letters and even a few little gifts like photos and little items during a concert, but this…”

“This person has infiltrated our home by getting into the parking garage. That Graham bloke is investigating, but what is Elsa supposed to do? Wait until this person is inside our condo? Is she supposed to welcome them and thank them for liking her music so much that…” He slammed the metal container of tea down on the countertop sharply. “I thought that law enforcement would be more concerned. And then I hoped that the label would care…”

“I do care,” Emma answered back just as sharply. She wasn’t trying to antagonize Liam, who was clearly concerned about Elsa’s well being and probably felt helpless at the moment. “I just want to figure out what exactly we’re dealing with here. Most celebrity stalkers don’t start out with the intention of hurting someone. They build up to contacting the celebrity and then become violent when the frustration or rejection hits. So figuring out if this is a new situation or old will tell us a lot.”

Elsa looked over her shoulder at a fuming Liam and then back to Emma again. “Liam thinks that perhaps I should cancel the tour dates.” While her fingers remained laced together, Emma could see the digits tighten as she spoke. “I think that it would be okay. There’s always a lot of security at these shows.”

This was clearly an argument that had grown as the day progressed, Liam feeling helpless and Elsa feeling obligated. They each had a point, Emma reasoned.

“Nothing has to be decided right now,” Emma told them, looking again at the window where her son and David were engaged in conversation. “I think we should consult with Graham though. I’d feel better knowing what he has found and I think you would too?”

“He’s slated to be here after he finishes looking at my car. Wouldn’t even say it was a crime until he looked – like I slashed the bloody tires myself.”

Emma’s foot tapped almost impatiently as she glanced at her phone. “Alright then. We wait on Graham and then we’ll call Regina. The label has a wonderful security team that can make some of the decisions. Plus Graham will have ideas. In the meantime, it looks like my son and David have caught dinner. Why don’t you plan to stay and we’ll take things as they come.”

***AAA***

Ruby had no idea that Graham was headed toward the Swan-Jones home when he brushed her off for their usual afternoon off together. She had slammed won the phone with such energy that she nearly broke the screen, making her long for the days of slamming a rotary dial phone to hear that satisfying clunk and ring reverberating from the intensity of it. Now days you simply pressed a button to disconnect, something that seemed anticlimactic at the end of an argument.

“I know that look,” Granny said, shuffling over to turn the handles on the coffee pots so that they could be easily accessed and identified by the wait staff. No matter what time of day it was the coffee was always brewing and a popular choice. “Which man did what?”
Ruby was not in her uniform, as she did get some time off despite her increase in hours after her grandmother’s health scare. “Graham. I’ve only been seeing Graham lately, Granny. You haven’t noticed.”

“I don’t miss anything, but your monogamy isn’t exactly going to stop others from pissing you off. So what did Graham do to you?” Her tone was short and her eyes were shifting along the counter at the unfinished work that still needed to be done. Ruby didn’t miss that and with a frustrated sigh of feeling neglected and that her grandmother refused to follow Dr. Whale’s directions, she began to load the flatware container and restock napkins. “Well?”

“We usually do something on Sunday afternoons.” Ruby said as she rolled another napkin with a fork, spoon, and knife. “He’s busy, but didn’t say why.”

Granny turned the latest edition to the basin so that all the flatware faced the same direction. “And you are upset that he’s busy or that he didn’t say why.”

“I know he’s not working. He has today off. And I know he doesn’t have any other friends or whatever that he hangs out with that much. So he’s obviously…”

Granny arched an eyebrow over her glasses. “He’s obviously what?”

“He’s obviously afraid to tell me why.”

Opening and closing her mouth as if she was thinking better of what she wanted to say, Granny waited a moment and then slid the plastic basin with wrapped flatware away. “You seem very sure that this is some act of betrayal. I don’t seem to recall you getting so bent out of shape about a broken date before. Is this because you are only seeing him?” The sarcasm dripped from the woman as she said the last part, clearly still reeling from that revelation.

“I thought you wanted me to stop wasting time and find a good man.” Ruby flounced with her dark mane bouncing over her black and red lacy top, shoulders shaking as she placed the basin back in its spot. She reached for the napkins next and began to carefully stack them for the holders at each table. “You have wanted…”

“This isn’t about what I want. You are upset and I’m trying to understand why.”

Skeptical of her grandmother’s concern, Ruby tried to control her breathing as she waited for the next sentence. Surely her grandmother had something new to add, something that would invalidate her feelings of abandonment over an afternoon of plans ruined. “Fine. I don’t do relationships. You know that. But I have been watching Mary Margaret and David and Emma and Killian. Everyone is pairing off for houses with picket fences, babies, weddings, and everything. I’ve never wanted it. I’ve never needed it. And I know that drives you crazy. I have always told everyone that I don’t have a biological clock, I have a grandmother who loves to play matchmaker.”

“I never set you up with anyone,” Granny reminded her in a gentle but firm tone. “You said you didn’t need the help.”

“I thought maybe that I was wrong,” Ruby continued, ignoring her grandmother’s reminder. “I mean they seem happy, right? Mary Margaret practically has blue birds of happiness following her around and Emma is smiling all the time. They both talk about how wonderful it is to be in love and be with someone you want to spend your life with…Even Emma.”

If Ruby had turned around to face her grandmother she might have seen the look of pride at that. She was proud and had every reason to be for setting up the confirmed bachelorette and single mother
with her son’s teacher. It was a feather in her cap to know that Emma was so changed by love as to sing its praises. However, now was not the time for gloating. “And you…”

“I wanted to see if maybe I was the type too.”

“Ahhhh,” the older woman said solemnly. “And you thought that Graham might fit the bill?”

Ruby dropped the stack she was holding and whirled back to her grandmother’s prying but kind eyes. “Emma, Mary Margaret and I used to go to this club in Portland,” she said, ignoring it seemed the question on the table. “Emma and I would drink and dance and have a great time. Mary Margaret would sneak off and call David. But Emma and I would have fun. And there were all these men dancing with us. Tall, short, young, old, rich, broke, it didn’t matter. We were just dancing and enjoying ourselves. And as the night went on the club would be less crowded. People paired off and left. Mary Margaret would go back to the car because she was our designated driver and would fall asleep chatting with David. Emma usually met some hot looking guy but dumped him for some asinine reason and would chat up a bartender about being a single parent. And I was left out there on the dance floor still trying to have a good time.”

The gray haired woman nodded. “I know how clubs work, Ruby. I wasn’t born a grandmother.”

“Then you know that as the night goes on, the options are less. And soon you either settle for some guy who lives with his parents, might not be as divorced as he claims, is addicted to video games, hasn’t worked in 18 months, or just got out of prison. Or you dance alone. And I thought that maybe I was okay dancing alone.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that,” Granny told her.

“No, there’s not, but it’s…I thought that maybe…”

“Maybe there is someone for you. And maybe it is Graham. Or maybe it’s someone else. Or maybe you’re not supposed to…” She picked at the paper on the drinking straw. “The problem with you, Ruby, is that you always want everything on your schedule. You’ve pushed away men, good men, horrible men, everyone, because you weren’t ready. Now you might be ready and you’re standing here with arms open and wondering why they don’t all come back.”

Grumbling, Ruby glared at the woman and then back at the counter. Her legs crossed and uncrossed, a move that she often used to show impatience on a date. “That makes me sound desperate.”

The old woman’s lips twitched up. “A bit lonely perhaps, but not desperate. Ruby dear, there’s nothing wrong with being alone. You don’t have to have the picture perfect life of Mary Margaret and David who will probably have the Christmas cards with them flanked by four children and a tree in front of the fireplace.”

“In matching sweaters,” Ruby added flatly. “Don’t forget the matching sweaters. And pics of them with their oldest holding a sign that says he or she is being promoted when they announce the next pregnancy.”

“Right you are. And you aren’t Emma. I know you sort of hung your star on the idea that the two of you would live that single life for the rest of your days, but Emma’s…she’s been alone too long. She has had to rely on herself since birth. And she wanted a home, a family, and now she has that. But Ruby, you…”

“I am trying to create something where there wasn’t anything before,” she concluded. “I didn’t even ask Graham what he wanted. I just jumped in and pretended it was the same thing.”
Granny lumbered off the red swivel stool where she was sitting and peeked out the window to see if there were any signs of arriving customers. The serving staff for the next shift would arrive soon and the two that were currently counting frozen lasagnas and making out orders would be off in a few minutes. “You’re doing it again. Graham’s never given you any reason to doubt him before this. Maybe something did come up. I know trust is hard for you, but sometimes it is earned.”

“You don’t even like Graham. You said he talked funny and needed his hair cut in a different style. You said he was too scruffy and looked like his beard would tickle when I kissed him.”

“A little superficial,” Granny admitted, smoothing her hands over the cotton apron. “But you know I got to know him better. He’s brought me my celebrity magazines and even showed me how to watch Judge Judy on demand. He’s not a bad guy.”

Ruby bit back a laugh at the idea of Graham watching the screeching woman yell in the mock courtroom. “Wait! When did he do that?”

“Oh since the hospital,” Granny said with a wave of her hand. “He’s been visiting. Said he thought he should get to know me better since the two of you were dating. I thought it was an act at first, but he’s been good company. He absolutely loves that picture of you in the wolf costume when you were three.”

***AAA***

Emma reached around Liam and pulled the cooking spoon out of the organizer. “You know if you’re just going to stand there…”

“Sorry, but I was kicked out the other room so that wanker can ask Elsa questions.” His arms were folded over his tight Henley shirt that was a faded navy blue and obviously one of his favorites. “Something about her being able to speak more freely without an audience.”

Transferring the spoon to David who had taken over the smallish kitchen, she nudged Liam to the side with a sympathetic but firm shift of her hip. “I think that’s just standard procedure. You and I both know she isn’t keeping anything back from you.”

His grunted reply was met with another firmer push from their hostess. “Come on, Liam, sulk someplace else. We’ve got enough cooks in here.” The space was crowded with Killian and David grilling the fish on the stove and Henry stirring up some vegetables and pasta with a sauce that had been classified by Killian as top secret. Mary Margaret was the only one not in the kitchen, as she had retreated to the couch where she was marking pages in a bridal magazine for Emma.

Liam made it as far as to the other side of the bar where he perched on a stool and craned his neck to see the stairs were still empty. “How bloody long does it take to ask her about some flowers and a note?”

It was David who answered that Graham was a decorated law enforcement professional and one who knew his business. “He’s just doing his job,” David concluded, adding a dash of hot sauce to the oil that he was using to marinate the fish before grilling and earning a frown from Killian. “I’m sure he’s trying to get her to make a list of possible suspects.”

“I don’t think she even knows her stalker,” Killian interjected. “It is doubtful she knows each and every fan, especially a deranged one.” He leaned closer to the marinade and breathed in to check it before snatching the hot sauce bottle away from David and putting it away.

“And it’s possible that this person just wants us to think he’s a fan. It could be someone she knows.”
David flipped one of the fillets into the mixture. “I saw on television…”

“Bloody hell, now we’re getting clues from Law and Order.” Liam gripped the counter and kicked his running shoe against the back of the cabinet. “I’m half a mind to go in there and take Elsa off to some deserted island to protect her rather than rely on this shoddy operation.”

“It was NCIS and based on a true story,” David responded defensively. “But what I’m saying is that we shouldn’t make assumptions. That’s how you let your guard down.”

“For once I agree with David,” Killian said, adding quickly that he wasn’t referring to the use of the hot sauce in the marinade.

Emma just shook her head and moved toward the couch and the inevitable discussion of wedding planning with Mary Margaret. She had her own theories about Elsa’s situation, but wanted to wait until Graham had formed at least a theory. Regina wouldn’t like it, but she was sure that the label would foot the bill for more security and even provide a guard or two for both Elsa and Liam, as well as possibly Anna. She wanted to get Regina to provide a list of not only performers from the Rabbit Hole, but their staff, family, and volunteers. Plus she wanted to see if there was a security tape at Game of Thorns. Elsa might not recognize whoever purchased the flowers but Emma thought she might if given the chance to study the footage.

“So I think this style works best,” the newlywed was saying as she pushed the perfume sampled publication under Emma’s nose. “Simple, classic, great lines, and that soft peach is to die for.”

“Peach?” Emma asked, pulling back to better see the page. She was expecting a model in a flowing gown of lace and tulle, smiling as she stood in a garden and coyly looked over her bouquet. Instead it was a plate. Was she really looking at a plate? “Mary Margaret, we own plates. I own plates. Killian owns plates. We could entertain like 36 people with all the freaking plates we’ve got around here.”

“It’s wedding china,” the brunette said with a sigh as she returned the magazine to her lap. “You need good china. You’re going to want to hand it down to your children. It’s an heirloom.”

Glancing at her son who was laughing at something Killian was saying under his breath about David or Liam, Emma rolled her eyes. “Henry’s more a paper plate kind of kid,” she said, not mentioning the idea of adoption yet. “And I think we have enough decisions to make without adding plates and gravy boats to the mix.”

Looking mildly disappointed, Mary Margaret flipped the page. “Okay, so I like these,” she said, shoving the page back at her. At least this time there was a woman in a bridal gown – okay dress since it was short and looked more like a dress for a night club act than a wedding. It was totally not the teacher’s style at all and took Emma aback at the suggestion.

“Seriously? This?”

“Not the dress, the shoes.”

Killian slammed a cookie sheet down on the counter with a bit more gusto than he meant, the sharp clang echoing through the room. He looked sheepish only for a moment before telling David that it would do nicely for roasting a few veggies that Mary Margaret craved at every meal these days. She shook her head as she heard something being said about not having a bloody wok. She was going to have to remember to stroke her fiancé’s ego when it came to cooking, as obviously he was struggling at being compared to David’s more American style.

“They are nice, but if I wear a long dress, I don’t need to worry about how my shoes look. Plus
we’re talking outdoors on the beach. I’m not thinking delicate heels and sand are a good match.”

“You don’t like the shoes,” the pregnant woman muttered, flipping to the next page she marked. “And if you don’t want to talk shoes then I guess we shouldn’t discuss whether to have in season flowers or not.” The woman practically tore the slick pages as she thumbed through the publication furiously.

“Mary Margaret,” Emma said gently, touching her friend’s arm. “I like those flowers on that page. They might work, but let’s hold off talking flowers while Elsa and Liam are here. Why don’t we think about music? I asked Killian to pick out the song for our first dance, but maybe you can help me with the ceremony music.” Okay so that was a bit of white lie. She had said she wasn’t sure she wanted a reception with dancing and all the expense. She was okay with cake and a light meal catered by Granny at their house. But like it or not she would need music for the ceremony and she knew Killian would not mind the suggestions of their friend.

That did brighten the brunette’s face, as she dropped the one magazine and pulled out one three times the size. “There’s an article here on that. It discusses the differences in processions and recessions and how to find one that fits your style.” She thumbed to the right page and was happily engrossed in suggestions and reading quotes aloud as Emma made a show of writing down a few that she liked. There was only one moment of panic when Emma suggested that they could find all the music on MP3 and the teacher informed her that she would have to have at least a quartet.

By the time Elsa and Graham emerged from upstairs and they were all being called to the table, Emma calculated she had enough musical selections picked in case any guests arrived three hours before the wedding began. She settled into a seat between Killian and Henry, looking out at her friends and enjoying the banter when there was a sharp knock at the door. Henry jumped up to answer it with instructions about making sure he knew who it was following him all the way. "Ruby?" Emma asked, confused since her friend strode in and straight toward Graham. "Are you okay?"

She didn’t know if Ruby heard her or not, as Ruby yanked the officer up from his seat, looked at him critically and the laid a kiss on him that had most of the crowd turning their heads. Pulling back finally, she said nothing to him before spinning on her heel and looking at Killian and Emma with an apologetic smirk. "Got another plate?"

"They have plenty," Mary Margaret chimed in. "Go grab one."
Later that morning Emma sat at her desk with her travel cup of coffee balanced precariously in her hand as she flipped through the contract for Elsa’s upcoming appearances. It seemed relatively standard and without some of the caveats that she had thought might cause an issue when she mentally considered options in the shower that morning. While Elsa had yet to say definitively if she was reneging from the obligation of the tour, Emma felt it necessary to arm herself fully in the pending discussion with Regina.

Stretching her boot covered feet under the desk, Emma took another sip from her travel mug and managed to place it next to her phone without spilling it everywhere. The office was relatively quiet, everyone out on assignments or in the studio that morning. A few people were answering calls – mostly unsolicited artists trying to break through into the business by making pests of themselves. She ignored those and stuffed the contract back into the folder.

She was part way through an email to the tour manager about security provision cost estimates when she heard the familiar and foreboding clack of high heels on the hallway floor. Without even looking, Emma knew them to be Regina’s. While Zelena wore such heels too, her steps were usually more gliding compared to the determined march of the younger sister. Sure enough Regina’s dark head poked into the office after a preceding knock.

“You wanted to see me?” she asked, her arms folded and hands tucked as she stared into the much smaller office. “Are you finally going to explain this concern about Elsa? I was at the Rabbit Hole on Saturday. She can’t be that upset that some fan spent a fortune on flowers for her.”

“It’s a bit more complicated than some flowers,” Emma said, motioning for her boss to come in and sit. It would not do to cower to the woman’s sense of propriety and seem weak or wishy washy. No, she had to present herself confidently and as a woman who was not going to cower. It wasn’t that foreign of a concept to Emma, but one she found herself losing ground on with Regina. “Here’s the sheriff’s findings. He’s still investigating, but you’ll see there was an incident yesterday at the condo involving Liam’s car.”

Barely glancing at the neatly typed form from Graham, Regina held it between her finger and thumb as if it might somehow stain her double button blazer and creamy blouse. Her dark red lips pursed out. “And we’re sure this is all legitimate? I know sometimes women can like to garner attention for themselves. It wouldn’t be unheard of for a woman to stage such things to get the renewed affections of a wayward boyfriend.”

“Barely glancing at the neatly typed form from Graham, Regina held it between her finger and thumb as if it might somehow stain her double button blazer and creamy blouse. Her dark red lips pursed out. “And we’re sure this is all legitimate? I know sometimes women can like to garner attention for themselves. It wouldn’t be unheard of for a woman to stage such things to get the renewed affections of a wayward boyfriend.”

“I doubt Graham would have missed that kind of clue,” Emma insisted, not taking the document back as Regina waved it vaguely. She knew the thinly veiled comment to Regina about Graham would sting somewhat. “He’s a pretty good judge of character and whatnot. And Elsa was with Liam the whole time. She couldn’t have slashed his tires without his knowing.”

“Maybe she had help. Her sister maybe?” Regina crossed her legs, the material of her skirt stretching tightly along the split at midthigh. “That’s plausible.”

Pressing a finger to where he nose met her forehead, Emma sighed. “You think that she had her pregnant sister sneak into a garage and slash three tires on a car. The same pregnant sister who has decreased her work load and schedule because of wanting to do everything right for her baby.”

“I’m simply throwing possibilities out there, Ms. Swan. No need to get defensive. So you and the sheriff are sure it isn’t self inflicted. What about an old boyfriend? That’s not unheard of, you know.
Elsa has reached a certain level of celebrity and some would assume independent wealth. I could see some man from her past hoping to benefit from a rekindled relationship.” She shifted in the rounded chair, the silvery heel of her left shoe digging into the carpet enough to create an depression. “Did the sheriff not see anything odd about the fact that Elsa is receiving flowers and notes while her boyfriend gets his tires slashed. I’m not an investigator, but that just screams jealous ex to me.”

Emma gave a placating smile, leaning back in her chair. “I don’t know that it matters at this point. Elsa said she does not know anyone who would do such a thing. And I believe her. Graham agreed that it is most likely an obsessed fan of some kind. So that leads us to discussing security issues. I’m about to ask our IT guys and girls to take a look at the blog, social media, and message boards for anything that stands out. I was also thinking that we need to prepare our front line staff to answer questions without providing personal information that could be dangerous in the wrong hands. I also want to look at our own procedures for divulging information like travel details and dates.”

The dark haired woman’s chin rose slightly. “And this extra security will be coming out of the general budget?”

Expecting such a protest, Emma passed over the spreadsheet she had already printed. “There will probably be extras but this is a good estimate on the start of it. That doesn’t include measures for Elsa’s safety if we continue on course with the tour dates. I was also thinking…”

“Of what? Hiring a cook and housekeeping help for her? Maybe a masseuse to deal with all those pesky issues of stress from all this? A decorator so this stalker has a better looking place to wait?” Regina threw the unread report and spreadsheet on the floor. “I run a music label, Ms. Swan. This isn’t a charity.”

Emma was prepared for that too, knowing that Regina hated to part with money or control. “The final details will be up to you, but I just put together some numbers. I also looked at whether it might make more sense economically to pull out of the upcoming performance dates.” She smiled as she held another estimate in her hands, hoping that her idea of concentrating on the monetary aspects were more likely to sway the fiscally conservative woman than simply asking permission. This would give everyone enough time to book another act if that is how we decide to go.”

“She wants to back out on performances that will bring more attention to her and her music?” the woman asked coldly. “Why not? Let’s not ever record, promote, or otherwise do anything that would make people think we were a label. We could make sand art and sell it at craft fairs or crochet little hats and scarfs. Would that make you happy?”

“Regina, I’m not suggesting anything. I am just presenting the possibilities.” She hoped that her face was not betraying her calm voice that she was trying to keep stoic. “Elsa has a good reason to be concerned. And I’m not saying we’re responsible, but a fan who is bordering on stalking is something we should be prepared to handle. I realize I haven’t yet, but surely you have with your experience.”

Pushing off the arms of the chair, Regina was quickly on her feet and back at the door. “Fine, we’ll do something. I’ll make my decision by the end of the day. I want to see the reports from these security people as soon as they come in. No editing them, Ms. Swan. I want it unfiltered.”

“If you think that’s best,” Emma said, turning back to her computer screen. “You’re the boss.”

***AAA***

Mr. French’s shirt was a crisp white with traces of moss and the floral scent of a man who worked all day with flowers. His calloused hand gripped Liam’s tightly as he eyed the man and frowned just
enough to let everyone know that he was not used to having his business interrupted by people asking questions and buying nothing.

“I don’t know what else I can tell you. The guy came in here and bought the flowers, wrote the card himself. He used your name, but having never met you…”

“I’ve been here before,” Liam groused with his hands shoved in the front pockets of his jeans. “So this guy just claims to be me and you don’t question it?”

“You think he should have asked for identification? He was buying flowers not a hand gun,” Graham said, tilting his head back to check out the two security cameras placed strategically. One was trained on the cash register and the other on the door. It seemed a bit much for the 14’X16’ show room that was crowded with floral displays. “I know you gave us the tape, but is there anything else you remember? Did he have a limp? A tattoo? A scar? Something that would distinguish him in any way?”

Liam grumbled at the questions, his mind immediately thinking of different movies where the bad guy seemed to have such a trait. He certainly hoped that Graham’s training went beyond watching movies and trying to imitate the men in them.

“Nothing really, the grayed man said as he brushed a bit of the cut greenery off the counter from the last sale. “Well, he did have an accent. English I guess. I don’t know much about those things myself. Can’t usually tell the difference, but he sounded like this guy here.”

Graham wrote that down, flipping back through the worn notebook as if he was looking for something. “If you had to guess his age, what would you think?”

“Maybe 20? Maybe a little older or younger? I don’t know really. I appreciate my customers but I don’t typically get to know them that well. I remember his name only because he emphasized the first part and I wrote down Lee at first. He corrected me and then said that she would know who they were from so no need to use his name.” He chuckled to himself, the first sign of humor in the old man. “You wouldn’t believe the number of men who don’t want the woman to know they are sending flowers. It’s a bit like a white flag. See if she shoots or if she accepts. Most of the time women like the attention. I like to think I have a part in that.”

“You’re a regular cupid,” Graham said with a smirk. “And so you or one or you guys dropped off the flowers at the Rabbit Hole? That afternoon?”

“I only have one guy who works for me. He dropped them off about closing time. It was the last delivery of the day.”

Graham talked for a few more minutes, asking questions and even gathering information about everything from the cost of the flowers to the fact that the man had seemed oddly confused about paying cash. “He had to look at each bill two times at least,” the proprietor said. “It was like he’d never seen them before.”

“That was worthless,” Liam muttered, sliding into the passenger seat of the cruiser. He was aware that as a private resident he had no right to tag along on the investigation. However, Graham had afforded him that privilege and seemed to not mind his doubts and concerns. “So we know the price and that he used my name.”

“We know a bit more than that,” Graham said, turning the wheel of the car and pointing it in the direction of the docks. “French said the guy used your name, yes, but where did he learn it? The stories I’ve read on Elsa don’t include your name. Even when you manage to make it in a photo with
her, you’re identified as a companion. That would say that either, a – the guy works with Elsa and knows you, b – the guy has done his research, or c – this is about you or Elsa personally and not just a fan who has stepped over the line.”

Liam could see his face reflected back in the glass as he stared at the passing landscape. His eyes were heavy and his mouth in a firm line. The stubble of his face was more in line with what Killian would wear, but he had not shaved that morning. “And how do we figure that out?”

“We find the guy and that’s when we’ll know.”

***AAA***

“I could get used to this,” Emma said when Killian arrived at her office that afternoon. She had just gotten back herself, having visited with Anna and Kris along with Elsa. Regina had yet to make any announcement of a decision, but she knew that her earlier meeting had gotten under her skin and bored its way into her head. She had just dropped her jacket on the hook at the back of the door when she heard the family lilt of his voice calling her beautiful. She’d called him on her way back to town to tell him that he and Henry were on their own for dinner. Her contract study, meeting with Regina and then the two sisters had kept her from the pending negotiation of another act and a call that she needed to make on travel arrangements for Liam and the guys. It would be late before she got home.

He had wrapped her up in a big hug, his arms around her waist and lifting her up off the ground as she smiled against his lips. Her legs kicked playfully, the leather of her boots heavy.

“If I can’t convince you to leave at a reasonable hour, I can at least prevent you from starving to death,” he said after another peck. “You probably have nothing in that desk other than a stick of gum and maybe a candy bar that isn’t even a brand made any more.”

If he had been wrong she might have pulled open the drawers to show him. Instead she pointed to the single cup maker outside the door to her office. “There’s coffee.”

“Hardly a sustaining meal for my love,” he said, setting her down and lifting bag from Granny’s up high. “This isn’t the most substantial either, but you seem to appreciate the simpler things. Grilled cheese, onion rings, and a slice of pie for dessert.”

She ran her tongue over her pink lips. “You know me well. You know me well.” Relieving him of the bag so he could pull off his coat, she frowned and shook the bag again. “This is pretty heavy. Sure you don’t have a meal for yourself in there?”

“I believe I picked up a burger and cheese fries for me. After all, your boy is currently keeping Granny company and probably being fed every greasy and fattening concoction known to man.” She raised an eyebrow at him before peering into the bag. “Moderation, Swan. I can have some treats. I simply try to keep it in moderation.”

“Right, right, right, you’re a regular health nut.” She placed the items on the small glass table that sat in front of a love seat over in the corner. “I think I’ll just enjoy the treat and ignore the surgeon general warning. Besides I don’t want to spend this chance to be with you on calorie counts and carbs.”

It took them no time to find a comfortable position on the not so comfortable furniture. She stole cheese and bacon covered fries from him while he only managed to threaten to steal onion rings from her. Each time he mentioned it, she pulled them out of his reach defensively. The meal took a bit longer than strictly necessary, as they both managed kisses and caresses between bites.
“This won’t get me out of here any earlier,” she said, her stomach full and her legs stretched over his as she slumped against the cushions. “Right now I need a nap.”

“You would not have accomplished much with a growling stomach either, love. And besides we needed the chance to replenish before the next crisis hits our lives. I gather Liam and Elsa will be back at the house tonight.”

She nodded, her fingers smoothing the soft flannel of his shirt sleeve in an absentminded pattern. “Graham said the contractors made some suggestions for security but it has to go before the board. So I think we have guests for a few more nights at least. As competitive as you and your brother can get, I think he’s more comfortable with us than at Anna’s. And nobody else has the room. So we’re it.” She yawned slightly. “You don’t mind too much, do you?”

“They are both family as far as I’m concerned. And so long as we have a door we can shut, I would estimate that we will have happy moments together.” Reaching out his hand, she assumed he was about to caress the side of her face. She even tilted her head slightly to receive the affectionate gesture. Instead he pushed some of the blonde hair behind her ear. “Perhaps it will do us some good to have a house full. Might be good practice.” His eyebrows raised of seemingly their own volition and her cheeks felt warm under his gaze.

“Slow down, Romeo. You do have one good idea though.”

“Just one, love?”

She tilted her head coyly at him. “Maybe I can get out of here for a few minutes and pick up Henry. You’ve been doing the heavy lifting on his social agenda lately. I owe you more than a few.”

“You know I don’t mind helping you scuttle the lad back and forth. He’s good company and a fine conversationalist if someone steals the batteries to that bloody handheld game of his.” He smiled. “And for the record, I’m not keeping score on that any more than I noticed how many of my French fries you commandeered.”

***AAA***

Emma’s boots crunched the gravel beneath her as she walked from her car to the fenced area where a few other parents were waiting for their children. Appreciating for a moment that this was not currently one of Henry’s more frequent after school activities, she noted the familiar comradery of the parents there and the way they all pointed to each other’s children with a shared pride. When she thought about it, she was grateful that Henry’s interests tended to be more in line with music, writing, and even art. She was not all that sure she wanted or was suited to the sports mom phenomenon where she would sit on bleachers and yell at umpires, referees, and even other children in support of her son. However, the men and women at the horse farm were not all that competitive and seemed much more in tune with being caring toward the growing and maturing of their children.

“You’re Henry’s mom?” a plump woman asked, her with her coat over her shoulders and a steaming disposable cup in her hands. “He’s a cutie. You should bring him here more often.”

Emma smiled her thanks, taking a spot near the wood fence and looking toward the ring where about half a dozen young teens were astride their horses. She’d never considered that as an activity for him, but Violet seemed to be a big influence in it. The young girl sat in her riding habit with perfect posture on a velvety black mare. From what Emma had learned, she was quite the horse woman and had started competing at dressage with promising results. Henry had ridden a few times, mostly at camp or on field trips, but he was nowhere as accomplished as his friend.
Henry’s helmet was falling forward as he turned his head in her direction, noticing her just seconds before it covered his eyes. He pushed back on it clumsily and then seemingly realized both hands were not on the reins. Jolting a bit in the saddle, he gave her a weak smile before turning his attention to the instructor who was giving direction for Henry to lead the horse around the field in a slow walk. She could see his ribcage expand as he breathed out a sigh of relief at not being required to ride the horse in a strong gallop or trot that might have made him feel even more off balance.

She pulled out her phone and readied the camera to snap a couple of pictures as he rounded the corner nearest to her. Flashing her a nervous but toothy grin, she waved at him enthusiastically until he was past.

“They grow up so fast, don’t they?” Tamara asked, startling Emma. “That’s what Neal always says.”

Emma nearly dropped the phone, sourness taking root in her stomach. “Did we get our wires crossed? Is Neal…”

The petite woman smiled brightly, waving her hand before her. “No, I was coming to meet him. He wanted to watch Henry ride. But he got held up at work. I was about to leave when I saw you so I thought I’d say hello.” She adjusted the collar on her caramel colored jacket and squinted into the late afternoon sun. “So hello.”

“Hi. I guess I owe you a thank you for watching Henry the night of my birthday.” She wasn’t sure what to say to the woman, knowing that she was having to share her time with her son was bad enough. “I’m sure you had other plans.”

“No problem. He’s great. I know we didn’t get off to the best start…”

Over Tamara’s shoulder Emma could see a few of the parents pretending not to listen. It was the curse of small towns that everyone knew everyone’s business. “Everyone deserves a second chance. And I think he’s enjoying his time more at Neal’s now that you two have talked. Each time he comes back he’s telling us about your wedding plans. Sounds like those are coming along well.” She gripped the phone tighter, hoping it might ring and give her an excuse to answer.

“Yeah, it’s all a balancing act. I’ve been meaning to ask. I know Neal was concerned that with the reception at the vineyard tasting room that Henry won’t be allowed in because of his age. But I didn’t think he’d want to attend that part. I mean, dancing, eating, and all that. I thought you and your fiancé might could take him back to the hotel or something.” Her bag slipped down her shoulder and she quickly lifted the strap back in place. “I mean if you don’t mind. It would solve a lot of problems.”

“We’d be happy to do that,” Emma said with her own flash of a smile to match the other woman. “I’m happy to spend time with my son.” She knew that the arrangement would probably place doubt in Henry’s head about his father’s love, but she hoped it wouldn’t last long.

Tamara didn’t get the insult and smiled more brightly. “Awesome. I knew you’d handle it. I told Neal that you two have one of the most cooperative custody things ever. So you let us know if we can take Henry off your hands for your wedding. I know Neal wants him there and you probably do too, but you have to admit that fitting a 13 year old into a ceremony is hard work. He’s shorter than the other groomsmen so it will look funny. And boys that age always look so gangly and unkempt. You’re going to take him for a haircut before my wedding right? I don’t want him to look bad in the photos. My parents have already worked out deals with a few newspapers to put the wedding in the style section so those photos matter. And the minister keeps asking if we want to have him as part of the vows.” She groaned. “You know what I mean?”
She could feel her muscles stiffen and then pulse with anger. “You realize that 13 year old is Neal’s son right? He’s my son too. No matter how funny it looks, my son belongs in my wedding. Because that day isn’t going to be about me in a pretty dress. It’s not about Killian becoming my husband. It’s not even about me adding a piece of jewelry or changing my name. It’s about the fact that we are officially becoming a family. And while Neal and I have agreed on precious little over the past few years, I assure you that Neal feels the same about Henry. You’re not just a bride that day. You’re going to become his stepmother. You may not like that. You may want fewer strings and less baggage. But that boy…that 13 year old…he’s going to become your stepson and your responsibility too. Maybe that’s what you should be concentrating on rather than the style section of a newspaper.”
So a week from now I’m going to see A&E, JMo, and Colin talk about the new episode and I get to watch a screening of it. I’m so excited for that. But meanwhile he’s another chapter. Loving the theories of who Elsa’s stalker might be. This chapter looks at two theories. Thanks for all the feedback and comments!

Elsa peered out the window of her former townhome and winced at the sight of the beige car across the street. There was nothing that noticeable about the vehicle or the man. Neighbors probably thought he was simply waiting on someone. However, she knew the truth. He was a last minute add from Regina to her security detail, a former police officer who did freelance work for entertainers. Tall and rather unassuming with his barely moving facial features, he had introduced himself and then asked her if she had any special requests or plans.

“It’s creepy,” Anna said from her spot at the kitchen island, a plate of freshly baked cookies sitting before her. “Not having a bodyguard. I think that’s kind of neat, actually. It’s certainly a sign that you’ve made it big. But you looking out the window at him looking for danger against you? That’s creepy.”

Elsa let the floral curtain drop back into place and spun back to face her sister. “You’re welcome to have your own 24/7 guard. I’m not sure that I understand the theory of having a man sitting outside like a stalker to protect me from another stalker. That’s what’s creepy.”

Anna had unwound her hair from her usual plaited style, the amber tresses flowing in a subtle waving pattern down her back. While some liked to tease her about the sometimes childish fascination with braids, she actually looked younger with the thick mane framing her lightly freckled face. Cookie and a glass of milk in hand didn’t help her maturity.

“He’s here to protect you. I for one am grateful for that. I mean could you imagine if something happened to you? I wouldn’t be okay, Elsa. I can’t be an only child. Who would I talk to? Sing with? Enjoy eating cookies with? You’re not actually eating the cookies, but you understand my point. We’re sisters. We have to look out for each other. Do you not like these cookies? You helped make them. If you wanted something different, you should have said.”

Resisting the natural tendency to roll her eyes, Elsa reached over and grabbed a cookie, taking a dramatic bite of it before swallowing. “See. I like the cookies.”

“He seems nice. Your bodyguard. Maybe we should invite him.” While the sisters had first gathered to talk about the security concerns, go through the playlist for possible songs that Elsa could cover alone during Anna’s self-imposed pregnancy break, and just enjoy some time together, it had turned more domestic. Conversation was about the upcoming Thanksgiving holiday that Mary Margaret and David were hosting. The sisters had been tasked with helping with the menu planning, something they were discussing in earnest.

“To Thanksgiving?”

Anna gave her sister an annoyed glare. “Of course. Even if they have caught your stalker by then. It’s a nice gesture, right? He doesn’t have good taste in car colors, but he’s good otherwise. I have been thinking about colors a lot lately for the baby’s room. I was thinking to go with gender neutral. No pinks or blues, but then what if the baby really likes pinks or blues. Do you know if this bodyguard guy has a family? I could ask him. You know get a guy’s opinion other than Kristoff’s.”
“He’s probably got family. I’m sure he has other plans.”

If Elsa expected an argument to her theory, she didn’t get one as Anna moved on to the next topic of menu etiquette and whether Liam and Killian might be offended by the holiday’s traditions. Elsa provided few suggestions, but was not fully engaged in the conversation. For a while Anna pretended she was getting more than monosyllabic answers.

“Do you want to trash this and try something else?” Anna asked about one of the recipes she was pondering online. “I think I saw a similar one that didn’t include nuts. Maybe that would be better? Is anyone allergic?”

Elsa peeked through the crack in the curtains, straining her long neck to see. “Do you think I know this person? Or is he a fan?”

Anna lowered her pen slowly, thoughtfully running her perfectly white teeth over her bottom lip. “I have a theory about that, but you probably don’t want to hear it.”

“Has that ever stopped you before?” Elsa bit into another cookie, her ice blue eyes studying her sister carefully. They had always been opposites in most regards. Elsa, an introvert and reserved leader, had their mother’s fair skin and hair. Anna’s rambunctiousness was just like their father, as were her wide set eyes and rust colored hair. Both had secretly envied the beauty of the other growing up, wondering how they could be related and yet so different.

“You remember that man I dated before Kristoff?” she asked, her voice sounding timid rather than confident. “Hans?”

“Hard to forget a guy so crazy he tried to kill us,” Elsa said sourly, biting again at the mint chocolate chip creation. “You haven’t heard from him, have you?”

“No, no, no,” Anna insisted, shaking her head violently at the idea. “He’s probably still lying on a psychiatrist’s couch recounting his childhood. But then I thought maybe not. Could he be the one stalking you? He didn’t really like you very much.”

***AAA***

Emma managed to drive Henry home unscathed, her anger simmering below the surface as he chatted over the events of the day and how Violet had kissed his cheek. Try as she might, she was struggling to come up with anything motherly to say about that display of affection. Thankfully he was not too aware of her distraction, his words falling out as fast as anything she had seen or heard.

“You’re not coming in?” He asked, hoisting the backpack over his shoulder and peering back into the car. “Do you have to work?”

“Not exactly. I just need to do something. Tell Killian I’m going to be late,” she said, leaning forward so she could meet his eyes. “And get your homework done before any screen time, okay?”

His lips were parted to argue, give some sort of snide reply to the idea of not being able to at least watch one television show or play one level of his latest video game obsession before tackling the history of Maine. He must have thought better of it, readjusting his bag on his shoulder. “See ya. Love ya.” It was their familiar refrain that she repeated back to him, only adding the word more to the end of it. He echoed it too, changing more to most before waving and darting up the couple of steps into the house.

He was growing up into what she hoped was a fine young man. He still believed in magic and hope, despite having been disappointed by people. It was a wonder, she thought, noting that she was the
most cynical of all. He had a good heart and a friendly personality that won him lots of friends. And he was smarter than she could even imagine, having no problems in school at all. She and Neal were lucky. She hoped Neal realized that.

Making a wide turn with her small car, she drove back the few blocks to the center of town where Gold’s Pawn Broker and Rare Antiquities was still open at the corner just two streets from the library. Neal seemed to think that his time and energy were best served at the dusty old shop where his father’s hoarding obsession turned profitable on the rare occasion someone bought something. Most people treated the shop like some sort of museum, marveling over collections of outdated useless technology as art rather than for purchase.

She was not even sure what Neal did there all day other than dust and sweep an occasional trail through the room. So she was not surprised to find him absentely running a cloth over the smudged glass of a display case full of antique costume jewelry. Finger prints and the ring of a cold drink had marred the surface, but his lazy strokes would not do much good.

“Neal!” she shouted over the guitar strums of an 80s rock tune playing loudly. “I want to talk to you.”

He rose from his stooped position, giving her that lopsided and yet coy smile that seemed to scream that he was ready to give as good as he got. “Ems, nice to see you. Is Henry with you?”

Her eyes narrowed over him, the pressed jacket and pants that while neat seemed too big for his frame. His stubble was more like a shadow on his jaw that an attempt at true facial hair. “No, he’s not. I didn’t want him to know about the conversation I had with Tamara today, Neal. I wanted to give you the opportunity to fix this situation.”

Neal was not known for his reactions or emotions, preferring to remain stoic or as Ruby described him – disinterested to the point of nearly being catatonic. “She said something, right? About the wedding and Henry?”

“You’re not even surprised,” Emma said with a sad shake of her head. “I doubt she’s self aware enough to come over here and tell you herself. I don’t think she even realizes how vapid and cruel she sounds when she says that he won’t look good with the other groomsmen for the pictures. Neal, I know we both agreed to move on from each other a long time ago. And I’m not trying to judge, but seriously? This is the woman you want to be Henry’s stepmother. I’m surprised she even knows his name.”

He exhaled loudly, his hands going up in front of him to ward off the tirade. “Whoa, Ems. Tamara is not like saint Killian, but she’s not the devil either. She’s just not the mothering type. Were you when you first had Henry? I get that. I accept that. Henry’s got a mother – you. At least she respects you enough not to try to compete. It hurts to see me with her. I get that. But Ems, we’re both trying to move on here. So she’s not super-mom. Henry likes her better now. It’s going to be fine.”

She could not even look at him, focusing her green eyes on the old typewriter in the corner. It was missing a few keys, but one could picture great writers pounding out their souls and life’s works onto it. There was something sad and yet proud about the machine that it seemed time had forgotten there on a shelf in the shop. “You know this isn’t about my opinion on her. It’s about her saying the wrong thing to my kid. It’s about her destroying him with some comment about how his suit doesn’t match the rest of you. It’s about her making him feel unwelcome in what should be his second home.” She rocked back, eyes narrow and daring him to challenge her. “He’s a kid. Your son. And while he is loving and sweet now, he won’t always forgive us, Neal. He’s going to remember these days. And when he’s in a relationship or having children of his own, he’s going to remember how it felt to watch his parents navigate through being single parents and dating and now marriage. I don’t’ know
about you, but I want my son to remember that I never for one second made him doubt that he comes first in my life. Can you say the same?"

“Ems…”

“God, I hate that name,” she said, softening a bit as she saw his brown eyes squeeze shut in that way he had about him. For a moment she was 17 again and listening to him explain how they could have the world if she would only just trust him. With that memory came

“Emma,” he enunciated carefully. “Emma, I love Henry. And I love…It’s just hard, you know? Tamara and I both come from money. There’s expectations with that. All this pressure. It’s not easy to fit Henry into that. Her parents are not thrilled that I have a son. These are things you don’t…”

“I don’t understand, right? The little lost girl doesn’t know what it’s like to have family breathing down your neck. You know what, I don’t want to hear how her family and your father are taking over your wedding plans. I don’t care. What I do care about is how you’re going to explain to your son that you chose a wedding over him. Not a wife but a wedding.” She waited a beat for him to stop her, explain why she was wrong. “Fine. You have Henry for dinner on Wednesday. You can explain to him then why he’s not welcome at your wedding. Make it a good excuse, Neal. He’s growing up and can spot a lie just like I can these days.”

***AAA***

With Henry tucked under a blanket on the couch and surrounded by three textbooks about American History, Killian gave a nod to his soon to be stepson and stepped out through the side door onto the deck where his brother was waiting. The two brothers had spent very little time together lately, as both busily planned tours, weddings, and weekend getaways between hurried texts and dropped phone calls.

“I’ve always admired the view here, brother,” Liam said, leaning on his elbows over the railing toward the muted gray sky and water. “You did quite well for yourself to find this lovely house.”

Killian took the spot beside him, staring toward the shore lights that blinked back at him. “You know, Emma has been talking of finishing that space above the garage. She was thinking a music space. However, we could convert it to a small flat for you should Elsa ever kick your arse out.”

“I suppose if Elsa wasn’t with me that’s where you would have shoved me, right?” The older of the two accepted the extra bottle of beer from his brother and held it firmly without taking a single sip. “I don’t mean that. You and Emma have been gracious. I knew that she is a lovely lass both inside and out, but you are a lucky bloke, brother. You have a nice little family here with her and with Henry. I hope you know that.”

Lips still pressed together, Killian grinned out toward the lights. “That I do, but I wouldn’t say you were down on your luck either. Elsa is brilliant and seems to adore you for whatever reason.” His grin widened. “She is coming back tonight, right?”

Liam’s laugh was tight as he finally turned up the bottle briefly. “Aye, she seemed so happy to see Anna that I suggested they spend some more time together while Kris is off working or some such. She promised to call so I can escort her back. I don’t feel that comfortable with the idea of her out alone.”

“Perhaps we should consider similar precautions for you?” Killian turned his back to the expansive view and settled onto the built-in bench with his head cocked to look directly at his brother’s profile. “So tell me about this trip to the flower shop. Any clue as to who could be causing all this?”
“That Graham chap has theories, but no solid leads. I can’t quit thinking about it. Why would someone do this? What would they have to gain by attempting to woo her and hurt me?”

“I’m afraid I don’t have a good answer, mate. While I frequently imagined pummeling you as a child, I can’t quite fathom that much hate in your regard now. Didn’t Graham ask you to come up with some possible suspects of your own? Some people you may have pissed off over the years? Even some of those sailors who may have been passed up for promotion in turn for you? As much as I love you, I’m sure there are no shortage of possibilities.” He noted the sour look on Liam’s face with his own chuckle. “You know what I mean.”

“I do,” Liam said, softer than either expected. “Killian, I have been thinking and wondering. I don’t want to bring this to the attention of our local sheriff, but…”

“Sounds as though you have a conspiracy theory.”

“Of sorts. I was thinking about father.”

Killian had been about to take a sip of his own beer when he sputtered at his brother’s revelation. Still holding the bottle, he frowned. “What the bloody hell for? I assure you that he’s not thinking of us.”

“Perhaps not,” Liam agreed, still staring into the distance and not at Killian. His sweater rode up a bit as he stooped more against the rails. “That son he has now. He’s what 16? 17?!”

“I think it’s more like 19. He met that lass about 20 years ago and married her about 19. I think she was expecting at the time.” Realization hit Killian boldly. “You don’t think?”

“Aye, I was just considering the possibility. That flower bloke did say the man said his name was Liam and spoke with an accent. Mighty big coincidence, don’t you think? Perhaps it wasn’t one though.”

“And what reason would this half-brother of ours have in causing you harm? We’ve never so much as laid eyes on the lad except in that bloody prep school graduation announcement that was sent to us. Looks more like his mum if I recall correctly. I’d be more likely to believe old Brennan himself was behind it before his son.” It was somewhat of an understanding that both Liam and Killian avoided their younger brother’s name, as it seemed too much like their father was replacing them. Killian had little doubt that had the new Mrs. Jones had another child his name would have been Killian.

“Father doesn’t match the description of the flower store. But our younger brother just might.”

“But what would be the reason? If any of us have an issue with the whole family it should be us. That man abandoned us when we were vulnerable. He married another woman and attempted to paint himself as a family man after that. His son is the golden child, gifted and probably spoiled.”

Liam said nothing as he drank from the bottle again, turning his gaze back to the house and through the glass doors toward Henry. The 13-year-old was settled on the couch with one leg sticking out from the knitted throw. His sock covered foot was on the stack of bridal magazines that Mary Margaret had left and Emma had yet to read. “Did you know I heard from father about two years ago? I was still in the navy.”

“Did you answer him?” Killian asked, sounding accusatory with his angry eyes narrowing at his brother. Liam had always been so against contact with their father, even after the man had made a half hearted attempt years before to reconcile. “Did you?”
“He was ill,” Liam said vaguely, his pale blue eyes closing. “I think the booze and hard living finally was too much for the gaffer. Seems his liver was shot. Needed part of mine.”

“And you…”

“I ignored the email. Who the bloody hell asks for such a thing over email? He barely even asked after me, never even mentioned you at all. Then he asks for a part of my body. I deleted it. I couldn’t…I couldn’t face it.” Turning back toward Killian, his features were turned down in a sad state of confused agony. “He should have died, but I suppose they found the git a donor because he’s still alive.”

“And our brother…”

“Wasn’t a match,” Liam concluded, looking for all the world like the 15-year-old explaining life to his younger brother. “He wrote not long after, called me all sorts of names for not wanting to help. Said I was not his brother and never would be.”

“And you never told me this before?”

Liam seemed to snort as he buried his chin against his own chest. “I don’t know, Killian. I suppose I thought it best to ignore it. I didn’t want to think about how we should have done more to save our brother from Brennan Jones. We ignored the warning signs and left the lad to be raised by a man who abandoned us. Or perhaps I was jealous. Wondered what it was that made the second Liam so special as to keep our father around. But we weren’t. Were we honestly that flawed?”

***AAA***

When Emma was first promoted at work, friends had encouraged her to find a new car. Something more reliable, safer, fuel efficient, and more luxurious would be better suited for the single mother and music industry executive. However, she had resisted, citing her car’s long history and her love of the little yellow compact that had seen her through every rough moment in her life. After an unfortunate stay in jail as a juvenile it was her sole possession, along with a newborn son and freshly printed GED. She didn’t like to admit to having slept in the seats, eaten more meals than she could count, and even falling in love with Neal as they drove aimlessly and determinedly away from what both had deemed crappy childhoods.

It had driven her from a barely there existence back toward Neal and the promise that he could and would be a father for Henry. And just as she was doing now, she had sat in it and stared at the weather worn façade of Gold’s shop and waited on divine intervention years before. Smoothing down an errant cowlick on her son’s head, she had trooped him into the shop under the guise of building bridges toward family. The man had taken it as a sign of weakness, of her crawling back in search of money for her son. She had fought that assumption as best she could.

“Okay so this is creepy,” Ruby said, sliding into the seat next to her. “Are you stalking Neal or are we just having a good pout?”

“Neither,” Emma said, accepting the throw away cup of hot chocolate from her friend. “Just thinking.”

“Do I want to know? I mean I am here for you and love you as a sister, Emma, but Neal is not my favorite person or topic of conversation. I have such respect for you, but seriously. That was an odd combination.” Ruby flipped down the visor on the passenger side and ran her pinky around her lips to check her lipstick. “It was the sex, right? It had to be the sex because the guy’s not exactly the most intellectual, a good conversationalist, and he was running away from his daddy’s money at that
point. So it was good sex. That’s why you hooked up with him.”

“I think 14 years is a bit too long ago to kiss and tell.”

“Fine, so the guy’s a dud. So why are you looking like this. You didn’t kill him did you? I mean I would totally go help you hide the body, but I need details.”

“He’s still around, but I basically just told him that he sucks as a father,” Emma said, her eyes falling to the steering wheel. “I mean who am I to do that?”

“You’re Henry’s mother, that’s who,” Ruby exclaimed boldly. “You have been with that boy since day one. And you have seen Henry with his so called father.”

“I’m not perfect. I make mistakes too. I’m pretty much the model for absentee mothering lately with my fiancé helping to raise my child. That’s not good parenting or even normal. My kid is in therapy fears and anxieties about me being around and what do I do? I go on weeks long road trips to book semi-talented musical groups. They should lock me up for that.”

Ruby twisted in the cramped seat, facing her friend the best she could and crossing her bare arms over her tightly covered chest. “Is that what that jerk said to you? Emma, you are a single mother. You have a job that requires a lot, but you manage to do it and raise your son. Do you honestly think anyone could do better?” One hand flew out and hovered a few inches from Emma’s parted lips to stop her. “Wait! Before you answer that, tell me something. Is Henry having nightmares about losing Neal? No, he’s having them about you. Because you are his mother. You are his one true parent here in this situation. And who is the one dealing with those nightmares?”

Despite the close quarters Emma flopped back against the seat covering. “Me. And Killian’s been pretty great about it too. Neal’s not been bad exactly…”

“Just distracted, right? Isn’t that the excuse you used for him before? He’s distracted by his wedding. He’s distracted by the pressure his father puts on him. He’s distracted by running a shop that barely has enough business to stay open in a normal town. When is he going to be distracted by being a father?”

“Fair questions,” Emma admitted. “I guess I don’t have the answers.”

Ruby nodded, shifting her gaze out the windshield at the darkened shop. “So we’re watching what exactly? Is he in there?”

“Yeah, I guess I was trying to make myself feel better that I confronted him tonight. Maybe if I saw him upset or looking at a picture of Henry or something. But that’s what you see in the movies, not in real life.”

“I agree that’s a tall order, but Emma, you can’t put that on yourself. Henry’s fine. He’s a good kid with a mother who loves him and would fight dragons to protect him. And if I have any of my grandmother’s sense people then I will say that he’s got a future stepfather who is almost equally as devoted to your son. Maybe your confrontation will kick some sense into Neal or maybe it won’t. But what matters is that you are trying to make things better for that kid. You and I both know what it’s like to grow up without parents. Henry’s got so many of us pulling for him that he’s never going to want for love.”

Leaves scattered on the pavement, a sign that fall was in full swing with the brisk air blustering in from the west. Emma and Ruby both watched silently for a moment. “You’re a good friend, Ruby. Especially for bringing me hot chocolate.”
Rolling her eyes upward and flipping her thick dark hair over her shoulder, Ruby sighed. “I know. I know. I’m a freaking saint. So let me offer one more piece of advice. Go home. Get in bed with that fiancé of yours after hugging your son goodnight. Forget about Neal. He’ll be a good father or he won’t. You can’t force people to do the right thing.”

Emma handed her friend back the empty cup with a wry smile and a mocking salute. “Got it, boss,” she said. “You really do sound like your grandmother sometimes.”

***AAA***

Henry skimmed the paragraph again, hoping the words would find their way into his brain with minimal effort. While he loved most all his classes, he was not in the mood to read about the advancing British army during the Revolutionary War. Killian often called him perceptive, noting that he picked up on things around him way too easily and tended to internalize them. The drive home was a prime example, his mother’s tense and yet concerned tone giving credence to his worries. And now Killian and Liam whispering on the deck seemed to indicate more secrets in the household.

“Anything the matter?” Liam asked, the first to enter back into the expansive living space. He rubbed his hands together swiftly after dropping the empty beer bottle into the recycling. “You look as though you ate something that disagreed with you, mate.”

“I’m fine,” he lied, ignoring the vibration of his phone on the table. Violet had a tendency to text when she was done with her homework. And while it shouldn’t, the notice that she was done ahead of him seemed to bring out a competitive nature. “Just doing homework. Where’s Killian?”

There was a flash of something in the older brother’s eyes, guilt maybe. “He’s finishing his beer out there. Should be in soon. He tells me that you went horseback riding today with that young lass. The one with the flower name. Must have been a fun time. I took a lass I was courting out for a ride once. She was quite impressed with my skills.”

Henry’s face flushed. “She’s better at riding than I am. It was kind of scary to be honest. They are pretty tall animals. And they go really fast.”

“Aye, but you need to appreciate the freedom of them. And I’m sure she appreciated the gesture nonetheless.” Liam dropped into the chair next to the sofa, his long limbs sinking into the stuffed cushions. “So if it is not woman trouble that has you so anxious, what is it? Your mum’s back in town. I haven’t heard a word about any academic difficulties.”


“Aye, she’s having a bit of sisterly bonding right now. She’s planning to come back with that new bodyguard of hers in tow. Is that the problem, mate? Are you feeling a bit crowded here?”

“No, that’s not it. I guess I’m just in a mood.”

“Ahhhh,” Liam said, sneaking a peek out the door where his brother was clearly brooding over news of their father and younger sibling. “That does happen from time to time. If you care to wag your chin at it, I’m all ears.” He crossed his right leg over his left, ankle resting on the opposite knee.

“Wag my chin?”

Liam chuckled and mumbled something about language barriers with Americans. “I think you probably refer to it as chatting. Or something of that sort. Fine, I’ll clarify. If you wish to talk about it, I’m willing to listen.”
“Just never heard that expression before,” Henry said, trying it out for himself. “I like it.” He gave a sort of half smile. “What else have you got?”

It might not have been the conversation Liam anticipated, but he enjoyed himself as they both threw out colloquialisms and slang the other was completely unfamiliar with. When Killian joined them a few minutes later, they were both laughing hysterically and trying to string as many together as possible. Even Emma joined in on the fun when she came inside, her eyes still puffy from the tears she had shed but laughing as she sat between her son and future husband on the couch.

“I don’t think it sounds the same with our American accents,” she said after Henry tried to say something about dinner options. He could barely get through the phrase without laughing so hard that his breath came in short spurts and he was reflexively hitting the arm of the sofa.

“It does sound rather flat, but lovely nonetheless.” Killian bopped her nose playfully, which combined groans, guffaws, and giggles in the group.

Eventually Emma called a halt to the shenanigans, sending Henry to ready himself for bed and eyeing Liam’s ability to drive himself to the Rabbit Hole. Deeming him safe, she sent him off on his way too, rolling her eyes when he kissed her cheek and called her mom.

“Call us when you get there, mate,” Killian called out, winking back at the man’s scowl. “Have fun and be careful.”

Emma placed her hand on Killian’s bicep, her face a bit more gentle and understanding. “The label arranged for someone to monitor the parking lot at the Rabbit Hole. Similar to the guy watching out for Elsa. I can arrange for him to…”

“No,” Liam said firmly, offering no more argument before disappearing into the night. Killian looked both mildly amused and a bit annoyed by his brother’s lack of concern on his own safety. It was not unexpected at all, but still stung a bit in the faces of those who cared about him.

“You didn’t really think he was going to take me up on that, right?” Emma asked, dropped her head to Killian’s shoulder as they both stared at the closed door. “You’re the one who often refers to him as a stubborn arse.”

“Such an American accent, love,” he chuckled. “No, I expected his reaction. I hoped for better, but often expect obstinacy in my brother’s foul-mouthed wake.” He drew in a breath. “You are quite like him in that way. Both hard headed and stubborn.”

Turning in his loose embrace, she craned her neck back as if inspecting him for signs of regret in his statement. Finding none, she pursed her lips into a frown. “I’m not sure I enjoy being compared to your brother. Don’t want you confusing us or picturing him when we…”

He crushed his mouth against hers quickly to silence her, harsh and bruising against him. When he did pull away, he smoothed down a bit of her hair that had escaped from behind her ear. “I assure you that I’ve never confused the two of you.”
Chapter 47

Liam entered the seaside cottage a few hours before dawn, his eyes bleary from trying to balance the till and complete the inventory reports for Zelena. Yet there was a satisfied smirk to his features as he shucked his coat and shoes at the door and padded toward the refrigerator for a bottle of water. Only a dim light from above the sink lit up the dark wooded space, but he moved expertly about to avoid Henry’s game controller on the ground and someone’s book that had toppled off the chair arm where it had been left.

“You don’t have to be so quiet,” a voice said from the doorway to the master bedroom. “Killian can sleep like the dead and Henry’s not a light sleeper either.”

“It would seem I have already woken you,” he answered, blinking into the shadows to confirm that she was actually awake. “I do apologize.”

“Already awake,” she excused, stepping into the room after pulling the bedroom door shut behind her. “So I’m going to guess that you aren’t exactly thrilled at the idea of going up there alone tonight?”

He shrugged, not sure that he could put into words the battle in his brain at that moment. Yes, Elsa was safe and snuggly tucked away in her sister’s home with Kristoff and some bodyguard to watch her. He didn’t begrudge her that or even feel neglected by her need for a little sisterly time. However, he did miss her and want her in his arms where he could feel both close to her and needed. “Just planning to unwind a bit from work.”

She nodded in return, passing him to dig in the cupboard for a bottle and two tumblers. “This usually helps.” She deposited the items on the counter, raising an eyebrow at him in challenge. “You’re the one with experience. I was just suggesting.”

“I’m sure I didn’t anticipate sharing a drink with my brother’s betrothed, but if the lady insists.” He poured the amber liquid into the glasses, quirking up a smile when she pushed her glass closer to signal she wanted more. “What are we drinking to?”

Scrunching her nose, she lifted her glass in anticipation. “To late night insomnia?”

“Hardly a thing to celebrate, lass. What about to…odd family relationships?”

“I don’t think that’s much to celebrate either?”

He chuckled, lowering his own tumbler a quarter of an inch. “To cheap booze and late nights. May they always coincide.” She must have agreed, as she moved her own glass toward his, repeating his words as they clinked and then downed the fiery first gulp.

“I put some fresh towels upstairs for you and for Elsa when she gets back. I hope…I know this isn’t where you want to be…”

“Emma, I think we both know that I’d rather be with Elsa right now. Happily tucked away in our condo with her complaining about schedules and me about her cold feet that she never seems to notice. I know why we’re or I’m here. But it isn’t about not wanting to be, Emma. I’m happy here. It’s home. Killian’s my brother and you are practically my sister now.”

She took another sip, closing her eyes as the liquid burned her throat. “So then why do you constantly look like you’re ready to throw your arms up and surrender to this stalker? Because I need
“to figure out if you’re planning some suicidal protection move before I finalize these security plans.”

Half breathing and half laughing, he shook his head. “I should be able to protect her myself. I feel every bit a fool to be sitting here in your home, putting you, your son, and my brother in danger because…”

Emma’s hair fell over her shoulders in tangles as she reached out to grasp Liam’s free hand. “You do realize that your loving Elsa doesn’t mean that you are Superman, right? You can’t protect her from everything.”

“I can bloody well try.” He tried to pull away, but her grip was as strong as his. “It’s my job. My responsibility.”

Emma’s eyes studied him carefully, seeing the faintest resemblance between the two brothers. They both had their mother’s blue eyes, Killian’s a deeper shade and Liam’s lighter. Their jawlines were both solid and striking. Killian’s nose and ears were more pronounced, though Liam’s mouth was fuller. Even Liam’s hair was a softer shade of brown and curly by comparison. But Emma knew that their mother must have seen them both so similarly, a mother finding commonalities where there aren’t always any. “I know that’s important to you. You’ve always done that for Killian. You protected him from your father. You protected him from himself after the accident and Milah died. That’s what big brothers do, isn’t it? It’s kind of like being a parent only without the age and label.”

“She hates needing my protection,” Liam mused softly. “You know how she is about those things. She wants to be loved and respected. Like the two are mutually exclusive. My loving her and wanting to protect her are not an insult to her independence. But I fear she will see it that way.”

“She’s more afraid for you right now. You’re the one this guy seems to be gunning for. You’re the one who had his tires slashed. It’s not even about her in her head.” She felt his hand go slack for a moment, seemingly responding to her comforting gesture.

“Doesn’t make it any easier. She’s stubborn.” He looked down at her hand covering his. “A bit like you I would think. Killian says you are anyway. I think it does him good to have you around challenging him. He’s a bit hard on himself sometimes. And I don’t think you stand for any wallowing.”

She felt her cheeks burn with the embarrassment of his compliment. “I don’t know if I have a big brother or even a sibling at all. But if I did, I would want him to be like you. From what Killian tells me, you were as good as any father could be. And I don’t see any reason to doubt him. He shows that same love and kindness to Henry. He had to learn it somewhere.”

“You’re a kind lass to give me such credit, but I would disagree. We all have strength in us to do what we have to do when we have to do it. I don’t know all the details of your hellish childhood, but from what I have heard you would understand that as I do.” He rocked forward toward her. “For what it is worth, you have taken up the cause quite well.”

“We’ll call it a draw,” she said, releasing his hand and reaching for the bottle again. “So one protective person to another, can I ask a favor?”

“I doubt that my saying no would stop you,” he replied brusquely. “And I think I already know what you were going to say. You wish for me to have some security bloke following me about this town too.”

“Well, yeah,” she admitted, topping off his tumbler too. “I know you seem to think you know who is doing this, but what if you’re wrong? The security men we hire are not obtrusive. Yes, it feels a little
“I should give in because Elsa did so easily?”

“She agreed to it partially because of you. She’s still sure this is a rabid fan who just wants attention. She’s feeling guilty, Liam.” Emma flinched as she recalled the quiet admission from her friend and client, the shattered façade as she admitted her worry that she had done something to cause the disarray in her life.

“She’s wrong. I remain certain this is my half-brother’s doing, retaliation for my ignoring our father’s pleas and essentially turning my back on the rest of my family. Killian has probably informed you of how hurtful our father’s betrayal of our mother and even us has been. I have no regrets of ignoring my father’s request for medical assistance. The bastard has no place in my life. But if my decision to tow the hard line on that has in fact brought danger to Elsa…well, that is something I regret. She is innocent of my actions and shouldn’t suffer for them.”

“I don’t think she sees it that way,” Emma said calmly, her glass now untouched. “I know that I wouldn’t see it that way if Killian was in your shoes. I’d want him to be protected. Hell, if you’re right that it is your half-brother, I’m going to encourage Killian to be protected too.”

“Might not be such a terrible idea,” Liam mused. “But Emma, we can guard ourselves and create security all we want, but it’s a false hope. We can’t remain vigilant forever. It’s against human nature.”

***AAA***

Elsa had insisted that the sofa was a comfortable enough bed for her that night, not wanting to displace Kristoff from the larger bed and knowing her former room was now the sight of still unassembled baby furniture and various good buys for the little one’s arrival. Anna had volunteered to sleep in the chair so they could continue their sisterly bonding; but that had seemed cruel for a pregnant woman so Elsa refused.

Turning onto her side, Elsa stared into the darkness of the room that had once seemed so familiar to her. The furniture was the same, the muted tones of greens, blues, and mauves that did not distract from the beautiful forest views from the windows. Some things differed slightly. There were photos of Anna with Kristoff, with Elsa, and various friends all around. Table surfaces were littered with the memories of a clearly happy life. On the fireplace mantle were two framed photos that were prominently displayed, including the girls’ parents in a formal setting and Kristoff’s parents in the second frame.

Staring at the hazy shot of her parents, barely illuminated by a light from the kitchen, she wondered for the millionth time what life would be like if they were still there. She was sure they would have loved Kristoff for all his rough edges. He did truly love Anna, and would make a wonderful father for their child. Perhaps they would have loved Liam too, knowing that he was responsible for the happiness that their older daughter felt. No, he wasn’t the businessman her father had envisioned for her, but he was good and decent, truly loving her.

“I hope you’d be proud of us,” Elsa whispered, her arms folding under the pillow. It had been months since she had last visited their graves or spoken to them in a whispered hush. It seemed odd, especially after years of feeling like a disappointment to them for so long. She had never felt at home with her mother’s socialite status or her father’s drive for domination. And while Anna did not seem to either, Anna’s easy nature was more palatable to almost everyone. Elsa’s own quiet nature seemed overshadowed by her sister at times, something that left her craving some sort of note of approval that had never come.
Not wanting to have her sister and brother-in-law hear her speak to dead people, Elsa let sleep come and overtake her. It was not a comfortable slumber, as she woke several times that could not be explained away by sounds of traffic or neighbors. She missed her bed, the comfort and softness of the sheets that seemed like silk on her skin. But most of all she missed Liam, his lazy kisses across her skin, the way he would hold her to him as if he was frightened she might disappear on the spot.

Blinking at the clock on her phone, she hesitated. He was working that night, but was surely back at Killian and Emma’s. She hoped he was sleeping better than she was, enjoying the airy guest room at his brother’s. But something in her told her that he was probably as sleepless as she was, the stubborn man refusing to disturb her. Pounding out a text message, she did not have to wait long for his reply.

**Liam:** You have turned a captain into a cuddler, darling. You should be ashamed.

**Elsa:** Proud actually. I miss you.

**Liam:** We are only six kilometers apart at most. Five is more likely.

**Elsa:** Too far. I’m thinking of sneaking out.

**Liam:** You’re far from quiet, lass. You’ll wake your sister and shock your brother-in-law when you trip over something and shatter a vase.

**Elsa:** Are you calling me clumsy?

**Liam:** I wouldn’t dare. But think of your poor guard. He is probably settled in for a quiet night. And your sneaking out would require him to follow.

**Elsa:** I hate him.

**Liam:** No, you don’t. You hate this situation. As do I, darling.

She cradled the phone in her hands, holding it above herself as she closed her eyes to the incessant glow.

**Elsa:** I do. I hate not feeling safe. I don’t even know who it is who is trying to hurt you. But I hate him for making me feel this way. If something happens to you, I’ll never forgive him or myself.

**Liam:** Stop thinking that. I love you. I don’t want you to ever think that this is your fault. If it is anyone’s it’s mine. I can’t text this. I’m going to call you.

Within seconds he was on the phone with her, his voice loving and kind in her ear, but with a tinge of regret and fear. He told her of his younger brother and his fear that this was somehow at his hands. She assured him they would overcome, but it was not until he said goodnight that he truly wondered if it would ever be the same again.

***AAA***

Liam considered grabbing one of the books on the low shelf near the window. The thought of losing himself in someone else’s words and story was tempting to say the least. However, he was a practical man and knew that whittling away the hours with a good book would be a temporary fix to a larger problem. He needed sleep for all the things he had to do. Decisions were going to have to be made
and tasks completed, things that would require a clear mind. Yet even in the dark room with the soft pillows cradling his head, he found no respite from his mind. Flashes of his father were mixed with those of Elsa suffering at his own hand. His younger brother, a lad he had not seen other than in photographs, seemed angry and accusatory as he pushed at Liam’s insecurities about being a brother and good man. That barrage of images and words would have been considered a nightmare by sane people, but his eyes were wide open and his mind aware of their inaccuracy.

“Liam?”

He sat up in the bed, his head almost scraping the sloped ceiling and the blankets pooling around his waist. His mind’s scenes playing had seemed normal, but hearing that familiar voice was enough to make him consider a Thorazine drip. He waited for the sound to repeat, almost not noticing the soft patter on the stairs. Then he heard it again.

“Liam?”

“Elsa?” he asked, glancing toward where his phone was charging by the bed. Its screen was dark and silent, indicating he had not accidentally called her. He hoped his voice was welcoming enough if that was indeed her, though he didn’t want to sound too crazy.

Her tall form appeared in the doorway, backlit by the light from the stairwell. “Are you asleep?”

“Perhaps dreaming if that’s really you, darling.” He blinked furiously as he flipped on the bedside lamp. “I know I just saw you hours ago, but it feels like longer.”

She shimmied out of the coat, revealing that she was still wearing the borrowed pajamas from her sister. His smirk reminded her as much and she snickered in response. “Okay so my clothes were still in Anna and Kristoff’s room so I wore pajamas. I didn’t want to wake them up. I left a note to tell them where I went. This way the only ones disturbed were you and my guard.”

“Your guard must not be very happy with you for sneaking away.” His smile widened as she joined him under the covers. Despite her ability to ignore the cold, her nose was freezing, as were her hands as she clung to him for a full 30 seconds before kissing him gently.

“Anna and I baked cookies. I gave him some before I told him I was leaving.”

“And that seemed to pacify him?” Liam goaded, blindly reaching for the light to bathe them back in the darkness.

“More or less. He didn’t lecture me. He just followed me here and is currently parked on the street, probably reading a magazine and looking for all things that go bump in the night.” Yawning behind her hand, she settled in beside him, tucking her feet in between his legs. “Can we please quit discussing this guy? I would rather not think that much about him. I missed you and didn’t think I could get a good night’s sleep without you. Is that so horrible?”

“You always get your way, darling. It’s impossible to deny you. Especially a bloke like me.” He let the fresh scent of her blonde tresses tickle his nose as she relaxed.

“You say that like it’s a bad thing,” she said, challenging back. “I like being right. I like getting my own way.”

“Aye, and I you have a willing participant in that with me, darling. I love you.”
“Love you too,” she muttered, falling asleep before he could say much more.

***AAA***

About an hour later Emma scanned over the screen of her tablet, noting the changes to the document that she needed to make but careful not to wake Killian beside her. When she had come home with tears still stinging her eyes, she had expected to distract herself in the latest drama in his life or Henry’s, allowing her to ignore the bitter words with Neal. Despite the laughter and levity with Liam, the mood grew more somber as she found herself staring into his troubled eyes over a shared drink.

“I suppose I don’t own the title to troubled childhoods,” she had told him as he mused over his father’s apparent illness and his younger brother’s possible involvement in the dangerous situation. “I’m sorry I have been blind to yours.”

He had waved off the apology and insisted that he was fine, snuggling in with her to watch some late night television as they spoke in quiet moments about anything but his family and her ex. It was a temporary reprieve, but still needed as they teetered on the emotional edge. When she had admitted to loving his accent despite the earlier teasing, he had snatched a wedding magazine from the pile and read to her about the year’s trends in engagement photos and announcements. She had fallen asleep cradled in his arms and hearing the lilting voice dance over words about natural fibers and sustainability.

However, work was still calling. Despite her impromptu and hasty decision to leave work early, the responsibilities were still there and the tasks knocking at her consciousness when she woke that morning. Sitting with her back against the headboard and Killian’s sleeping form half over her legs and head using her lap as a pillow, she updated herself on the contracts for Elsa and for Liam’s band. She’d added a few dates to her own schedule and was reading an overview of what the team had found on social media when she heard her phone vibrate on the nightstand.

“You’re awake, good. I was thinking that we should probably have a statement prepared in case the press gets wind of this stalker situation,” Regina said, not bothering to apologize about calling before dawn or admit she was far from transparent in her actions. “See if you can work with our publicist. Reactionary is fine, but let’s be prepared.”

“I already have her drafting something,” Emma whispered, frowning as Killian stirred and then hugged her legs closer to him like a body pillow. His unshaven cheek tickled her thighs, but she managed not to laugh. “I’m meeting with her at 9:30 to discuss, right after a briefing from Graham about the report from the security team at the condo.”

“You didn’t think to tell me this before you let me rattle on about getting on top of this?” Regina asked, barely waiting for an answer before the sound of water came through the phone. “Just take care of it. And do it cheaply. That publicist charges by the hour. And so does that lawyer who usually goes over our contracts. Safety is important but so is staying on budget.”

Emma was hardly in the mood or position for an argument about going cheap on bodyguards. So she quickly ended the call, not surprised that Killian’s blue eyes were staring back up at her when she returned the device to the table.

“Any chance that was Granny saying she prepared too much food and wants to deliver some to us?” His accent was thicker with sleep still clinging to him, but there was a softness to his early morning expression that made him seem even younger. Like a fish out of water, he flipped to his back, flailing his hand upward to grab the tablet away from her. “You’re working? A lesser man could be insulted that your first thought upon waking was email and not the devilishly handsome man in your bed.”
Letting him fling the tablet onto the mattress, she couldn’t resist running her now empty hand through his disheveled and inky black hair. “Good thing I’m marrying and sharing a bed with a man who is confident.” If he had been any more cat like, he might have purred at her soft ministrations. Instead he pulled her hand down by her wrist and kissed her palm.

“Sleep well?” he asked, letting his eyes lock with hers in what seemed a silent conversation. Her slight upturn of her lips into a sad acknowledgement was all she needed to say. “I suppose I can’t ask you to play hooky with me today?”

“You’re honestly going to skip work?” she asked, knowing that his dedication was not so flimsy as to allow that. “Should I alert the media?”

“I would if a certain beautiful woman agreed to hide away with me. I have plans for her.” His thick eyebrows flew up and down at the teasing words that she had to smooth them over before dissolving into giggles. “I would certainly make it worth your while.”

“Sorry, babe, but I’m going to have to face that desk sooner rather than later. Maybe we can find some time together this weekend.” She smiled sweetly at his disappointed pout. “But we do have a little time left before the alarm should be going off.”

“So we indeed?”

***AAA***

Mary Margaret kicked at the metal base to the hospital exam table, her eyes already tired of the three posters she had already read at least a dozen times and the tattered magazine that had to date back a few years. Her bare legs felt cold, the paper gown and sheet offering very little warmth. She swung her legs again, hoping that perhaps the doctor would hear her banging and enter the room even sooner.

However, the move didn’t have the desired effect, merely bruising the tender flesh of her heel in the process. She frowned sternly at the door and then her phone, neither of which seemed to come to life for her. Even David, her stalwart and dedicated husband, was missing in action. Well, not exactly missing. In their hurry to get to her prenatal appointment after oversleeping, Mary Margaret could not remember turning off the stove. She was signing in at the registration desk when she had the flash of the burner burning unattended. With a large leather tote over her shoulder, she had hurried back to her husband and begged him to go check.

Nothing seemed to be going right that morning, as David and his truck were caught in a traffic mishap from a utility truck accidentally knocking out power and taking out two poles on the route. He had called twice already to update her on his progress. But at the last call he was on his way back – the burner having not been left on. She wasn’t sure that he would make it back in time, but that was not mattering much with the doctor running late as well.

Shaking the phone, she willed it to ring or ding with a message that he had returned. It was not responding though. It’s just a check up, she thought hastily. He’ll have the opportunity to be at dozens. Yes, she was hoping to hear the baby’s heartbeat that morning, something they had looked forward to since that stick had announced her pregnancy. Maybe they could record it for him, she thought, trying to remember if she had ever heard of such a thing.

Her friends Ashley and Aurora both had newborns or toddlers, but she hated to disturb them. Ashley usually worked late and slept until almost noon. Aurora could be prickly about somethings, including questions about childbirth. So after only a few seconds of hesitation, she pressed the familiar contact and listened to her friend announce herself with a single name.
“Swan,” she said into the phone, the sound of a shutting door the only other noise.

“Hi, Emma, it’s Mary Margaret.” She paused. “Nolan, used to be Blanchard.”

“I know who you are,” Emma said a bit breathlessly. “Hold on just a second. Let me grab this.” There was a muffled discussion on the other end and the sound of retreating footsteps before Emma returned. “Sorry about that. I’m a little burnt out on paperwork today so I’m at the studio with one of the newly signed groups. Not to worry I finished all my other paperwork, attended three meetings, and managed to make it over here in time. Somehow my assistant and Regina’s assistant don’t seem to understand the concept of me hiding out for a day.”

“Is this a bad time? I kind of need to talk to you as a mom.” She ran her fingertips through the short hair on the back of her neck. “I could call back.”

“No, no, I’m sorry. I was distracted. You’ve got my attention. Is it Henry? Did he not do an assignment?”

Mary Margaret laughed, realizing it was true that she rarely called for social reasons during school hours. In fact, the last time had been about cake samples for the wedding. “Sorry for the worry. No, I’m at the doctor actually. Just wanted to chat with my friend.”

Sighing, Emma laughed. “I am relieved. You don’t know how much pressure I’m under with that kid with one of my best friends and my fiancé teaching him. I feel like he has to be perfect. So he should thank you too. I don’t want to have to murder him.”

“No worries. I would tell you if there was a problem. I was hoping you might give me a little advice on this whole baby heartbeat thing.” Even though the conversation was not face to face, Mary Margaret scrunched up her face with embarrassment. “See I’m here and David might be late…”

“You’re there alone and that freaks you out?” Emma asked before hissing at someone else that she would be a few minutes. “You should have called earlier. I’d be there.”

“David will be back soon.” She filled in her friend on the morning’s adventures thus far. “Anyway…I kind of needed a voice of reason. You know. Someone who has been through this before. You’ve got Henry. And I know he’s 13 and all, but maybe you could offer a few suggestions…”

Emma’s laugh showed that she was not taking the slight about age personally even though she was clearly getting ready to quip back sarcastically. “I’ll have you know that you are older than me by an entire year. So no making me feel old, Mommy. While I’ll be enjoying peace and quiet with Killian once Henry goes off to college, you’re still going to be chasing around a little one. Though knowing you’re going to have four or five.”

“I’m hardly old enough to be your mom, but wait…you don’t want more? I know Henry’s a teenager now, but that’s it? Does Killian want children? Have you guys even talked about it?”

“Of course we’ve talked about it. But…” Emma stopped short, clearly holding something back from her friend. Mary Margaret, while an optimist, did tend to have a vivid imagination.

“Oh my God! Can you not have more children? I didn’t think. I’m so sorry. And here I am just wanting to know if they can record the baby’s heart beat so that David can hear it if he doesn’t get back in time. This sucks. What about adoption? Or a surrogate. I would totally be a surrogate for you!”

“You’re sounding like Anna,” Emma accused, letting out a short but tense laugh. “And for the
record I never said any of that. Calm down.”

“I do not sound like Anna,” Mary Margaret said defensively. “Okay, maybe a little. I just think that Killian and you are such awesome people. You would be great parents together. And Henry would be wonderful as a big brother.”

“As Killian would say, duly noted. Now let’s get back to the bun in your oven. Something about the heartbeat?”

The two women talked for another three or four minutes until David arrived, nullifying the conversation’s premise. Both mom and dad heard their new baby’s heartbeat, marveling over the quick and steady cadence. Mary Margaret was thrilled when she was presented a thumb drive that included the new ultrasound photos and a recording of both the video and audio of the exam.

***AAA***

“I’d like to hear it a little more up tempo,” Emma announced from the sofa in the control room. While one of the industry’s best producers was working on the group from Pennsylvania’s attempt at a full catalog, she was not above putting her own opinion in where she thought she should. Without formal schooling in music or marketing, she had learned what she knew from observation and experience. She never tried to step on toes, usually relegating herself to that back couch where she watched and listened.

The producer simply nodded and gave a few curt instructions to the band, including picking up the pace. His ears were covered by large earphones and his fingers flew across the soundboard, priming and picking up sounds that he wanted. He was so busy that he did not even notice the door open and Killian slip inside.

“I thought I might find you here,” he said, slipping beside Emma. “Henry was trying to reach you earlier.”

She frowned at the phone on the table. “I put it on silent when they were recording. Sorry. I can call him back.”

“No matter, love. He was simply calling to ask if he might go camping with Neal the weekend before Thanksgiving. Seems that Neal would like a little father and son bonding time prior to the nuptials. Perhaps your little chat did some good after all.” His tone was cautious as he pulled out his own phone and scrolled to the message. “When he couldn’t reach you, I told him I thought it would be okay with you. I hope you don’t mind.” His forehead creased with concern as he studiously watched her look at the note from her son, first on her phone and then his.

“I guess…Oh Killian, it’s fine that you gave permission. I know we haven’t worked out all these details, but you have that right. You have gotten to know me well enough to know whether I would or wouldn’t want him to go.” She reached out to cup his cheek. “I don’t say it enough, Killian. Thank you for taking on all this with Henry. You’re pretty terrific for doing it.”

His cheeks were pink, not just from the chill in the air and he cleared his throat nervously. “Well, Swan, it would appear we’ll have a nice weekend to ourselves. Perhaps we can live it up a bit. A date that doesn’t include two teenagers and you acting as chaperone?”

“Dinner some place without paper napkins or plastic straws?” she tested, ignoring the producer’s pointed look over his shoulder at them. “I want to go some place that doesn’t advertise during cartoons.”
I’m thinking, quiet, out of the way, dress code…No plastic trays that we carry or trash receptacles in view of the dining area. Perhaps even a movie afterward?”

Her eyes flashed excitedly. “Something without teenagers? Something with adult situations and suggestive themes?”

“Perhaps even a curse or two.”

“I can’t wait,” she sighed happily, collapsing onto his chest. “You are my favorite guy to date.”

***AAA***

Liam felt like a visitor in his own home as he paced behind Robin and wandered aimlessly. He’d asked all the questions he could about locks and alarms. While Robin was not on the security team hired, his carpentry skill and general knowledge of construction came in handy. So he was there as a favor to Liam, making note of things he noticed and suggesting fixes to make them more secure.

“It should only take a few days, mate,” Robin told him, climbing down from the step ladder. “I don’t see anything that should slow us down.”

“Glad to hear it. Living at my brother’s is not the best situation what with Elsa, Emma, and Henry being there too. It’s all a bit crowded.”

“I can only imagine,” Robin said, wiping a bit of dust from the window onto his pants. “I’m going to agree with the suggestion of a video monitor outside the door being a good investment. Once this is over it will help you keep those buggering salesmen away.”

“Whatever you think,” Liam noted, thumbing through the book that Elsa had left beside the bed they shared. Their bed. With their sheets. Their art on the walls. He was lucky to have a generous brother. He knew that. He was grateful. There was just something about being home that could not compare.

“Why don’t I have a talk with that Graham bloke and we’ll put together a plan for this. I’m taking it that you are not all that concerned.”

“Make the place a bloody fortress,” Liam complained, throwing himself down on the bed like a petulant teenager and then standing up again in frustration. “I haven’t been able to protect us so far. I might as well make our home into a prison. Perhaps that will deter him.”

Robin looked consolingly. “It’s not going to hurt to ask for help. We all care about you. We care about Elsa. It’s the least we can do to make sure you’re both safe.”

“He hasn’t even done anything else after slashing my tires. I think this may be a bit much.”

“Let’s get ourselves a pint down at that joint you’re running. It’ll do us some good.” Robin led the way out of the bedroom and into the sunny great room with the floor to ceiling windows. It was a bright and yet cold day. Liam was grabbing his coat off the back of one of the chairs when Robin stopped. “I can’t be certain, Liam, but that envelope was not there before.”

Liam’s blue eyes scanned the direction where Robin was pointing. Sure enough there was a crisp white envelope in the center of the kitchen’s peninsula. His name was printed plainly and boldly across it. “Bloody hell.”
The work room on the back hallway of Storybrooke Academy was relatively quiet as Killian crunched into his apple and waited for the copy machine to whir its way through the stack of musical theory sheets he was trying to disseminate before next week’s test. Letting his mind wander, he did thought of Emma and the future they were planning together. While he certainly could not wait to marry her, he had very few qualms about any sort of wedding she might enjoy. Instead his focus was on the life afterward, appreciating her honesty about wanting to adopt.

He had thought she was brave before, but the moment she had admitted that made his eyes shine brightly with pride for her honesty and bluntness. Yes, he wanted children with her, the thought making him feel happy just to consider the idea. If she preferred adoption as a way of accepting what she had been through, then he would go through the process with her. In the not yet a year since they had been dating, he was sure of two things more in his life. First he was sure that he was meant to be at her side and love her for the rest of his life. Second he had found himself feeling immense pride and love for a boy who would at most call him his stepfather. The fact that he and Henry had not biological connection did not seem to limit his ability or desire to be a part of the child’s life.

Setting the apple aside, Killian was refilling the paper tray to finish the job when Mary Margaret entered the room, followed by Belle. The petite teacher looked physically pained at the presence of their boss’s wife. She gave Killian a half smile and told him that she was very thankful for his suggestion of a substitute for her class that morning.

“I trust she did a fine job?” he asked, leaning against the machine.

“Oh yes, and it was wonderful not to have to worry about anything while I was at my appointment. David and I got to see the baby!” Her eyes lit up as she spoke about the baby, describing him or her in terms of the size of a fruit and giving a general run down of what she had read that week. Killian nodded patiently, hoping that whatever she was there to tell him was not time sensitive.

“That’s so exciting!” Belle gushed, hugging the other woman tightly. “I’m so happy for you. I know my husband can be a bit of a stickler for rules, but be sure to get with him about your leave. It’ll be here before you know it.”

All talk of babies and ultrasounds done, Belle turned on her precariously high heels to rummage through a supply cabinet. Like many teachers, the sight of new office supplies delighted the woman to no end. She was practically singing with joy to show Mary Margaret and Killian the brand new pair of scissors she procured, as well as a roll of tape with cat paw prints on it.

“Smashing,” Killian said with a practiced grin. His copies now complete, he had no reason to stay in the work room and looked toward the exit. However, Mary Margaret was already a few steps ahead of him. She stepped toward the machine and started her own job coallating before letting out a little gasp. The picture of innocence with her pink cheeks and peter pan collar on a black and white dress, she smiled sweetly. “I think you forgot this one,” she said, tucking a magazine into his stack of papers that were in his folded arm. “I read it a few weeks ago. Good stuff on classroom management in there. I think you’ll really like the article on creative mind mapping. Page 33 I think.”

He smiled back, dipping his head in the direction of both women. “Good day to you both,” he said, backing his way out of the room. Once back in his classroom he thumbed to the page and found a post it note from the other teacher. On it she explained she had found a place that would be ideal for their campus. A former school had been abandoned three years ago when a newer school was built. It was currently sitting empty and had enough room for their first year and potential growth from...
there.

He didn’t have time to check out the link she mentioned in the note, as his phone chirped loudly. He halfway expected it to be Emma checking in with him, but found that Robin’s smiling face was staring back from his contacts.

“Do me a favor, mate?” Robin asked, sounding desperate. “Pick up Roland and keep him until a bit later. Something’s come up and I need to deal with a job.”

***AAA***

Graham stared at the copied sheets of paper, occasionally shifting his eyes to the notepad at his side and scribbling down a word or phrase of observation. He seemed unaware of the anxious pair across from him or at least unaffected. Tapping the cap of his pen against his lips, he squinted at the page he was currently reading.

“The guy is wordy enough to be a Jones,” Elsa grumbled, looping her arm through Liam’s. “You and Killian can both expand a sentence like no others.”

Even the jest that Elsa was poking at him made no difference as the elder of the brothers chewed at his bottom lip and occasionally lifted a now empty cup of tea. The third time he made that gesture, she reached out to stop him, smiling reassuringly.

Finally Graham dropped the pages on the counter, running a hand over his face. “Before we get into logistics and my thoughts, I want to know what you both think. Do you feel this was something sent as a threat?”

Appalled, Liam wrenched his arm away from Elsa and pointed incredulously at the letter. “Bloody hell, mate. It says right there that this man child is looking to do me harm. It says point blank that no matter what we do to guard Elsa that we are not safe and should expect the worse. How the bugger am I supposed to take it?”

Graham nodded and made another note on the page. “And you still believe this to be your brother’s doing? Your younger brother, also named…Liam?”

“Aye, it makes sense and would explain why my own name is being used.”

“Elsa, you’ve never met this man, is that correct?”

“Elsa, you’ve never met this man, is that correct?”

She shook her head, her face pale and drawn from both the stress of the situation and the lack of makeup. She had been enjoying a quiet bath and listening to some potential new tracks when Liam had called in frantic mode. She had thrown on the first set of clothes she could find, a pair of jeans and his own tshirt that she had covered with a flannel shirt that she usually only wore on lazy Sunday afternoons. “I haven’t met any of Liam’s family but Killian.”

“And when was the last time you saw your brother?” Graham asked, flipping through the pad while he waited to hear the answer.

“I heard from him a few months ago, but I haven’t seen him in...well, I’ve seen pictures. I haven’t ever really met him since he was a lad.” Liam reached back for Elsa, tucking her hand into the crook of his arm. “My father...well, he started life again with his new wife. Killian and I stayed away.”

“Family can be complicated,” Graham mused, his eyes scanning the spiral pad as though looking for something. “And how did you acquire these pictures you’ve seen? Your father?”
Liam shifted uncomfortably, his eyes darting over to the overfull bulletin board that contained memos and alerts from at least the last five years. “Online, okay? I was curious. I wanted to see what he looked like. I wanted to see…he’s my half-brother. I was curious.”

The soft squeeze of Elsa’s hand was comforting as Graham wrote down another note but said nothing. “I think that’s pretty natural,” she offered in defense. “I know I have always been curious about family I barely know.”

***AAA***

“I don’t know anything yet,” Emma said without looking up from the text that Elsa had sent about still waiting on Graham to get a location on the younger Liam. She knew that Regina was anxious, as the statement to the media about the previous incidents were creating a stir. One national news magazine show was even calling about doing an interview with Elsa.

“We do have other things going on besides some kid stalking his big brother,” Regina said from the doorway. “Though it does have to do with Elsa and your boyfriend, apparently.”

“What?” Emma asked, raising her head for the first time in hours. “What about Killian?”

“Roark Stevens, the DJ who has launched almost every hit song in the last decade, wants to have Elsa and Killian on to talk about the recording of Intertwined. I know there has not been much made of them going beyond just recording it for radio and internet release, but the buzz is out there. Roark heard the track at a recent industry event. He’s very excited.”

Emma’s jaw dropped, her eyes blinking at her boss. “Have you forgotten that we’re trying to keep Elsa out of the spotlight for a week or two. And Killian is a teacher, not one of our artists. You can’t require him to do this.”

“You’re so dramatic about things. It’s a radio interview about the song they recorded. Unless you finally want to admit that it was just a vanity project to make your boyfriend feel included?”

“I’m just not understanding your plan here. They recorded the song. If we still did records, it would be a b-side, never performed and just a footnote in her career. So let’s say they did the interview. Then what? Are you thinking to release this thing? Would you try to get them booked on talk shows and stuff? Because that’s impossible. Killian is a teacher. He can’t jet off for a six minute performance and interview. No, if he wants a new song from her, she’s got plenty of solo stuff or that duet with Liam. Either of those options is better.” Emma was aware of how much time and energy had gone into convincing Killian to record. He had said while he loved making music, he was uncomfortable with the process of recording. She was pretty sure that some of the awkwardness was singing with someone who was his brother’s girlfriend.

“Run it by him and her. I want their answers, not yours. But I am on the record as saying I want this, Ms. Swan. This is important to this label and our careers. Opportunities like this don’t come around every day.”

***AAA***

Reaching toward the sun visor on the passenger side of the car, Liam jabbed his finger at the garage door opener several times. “Bloody useless thing,” he muttered as it didn’t work for him.

“It’s probably just the batteries,” Elsa told him, glancing in the mirror to see the guard slip his car into a spot across the street. It was a different man that the night before and different even from that morning. She didn’t know his name, though he had introduced himself. Like the others he
brandished metallic sunglasses and a humorless disposition.

“Knowing the cause doesn’t make it work any better.” He frowned sourly at the door. “I don’t mean to snap at you, darling. I’m simply frustrated by our situation. I brought this hellish situation upon us. And I can’t understand why you would ever forgive me for that.”

“Liam, you’re not to blame,” she said softly, hoping that her quiet tone would subdue him. “I love you. I loved you before this and will after. You said yourself that your brother doesn’t know you or Killian, not really. He’s only got your father’s words about you to go on. He’s lashing out. Maybe if…” She swallowed, moving her hand over to lace their fingers together. “Maybe if you talk to him. Or your father?”

“I swore I would never see that bastard again. I swore that he would die alone and crying for the sons he gave up. Then he…he replaced us with this son and a wife. He never…he must never have cared for us at all.” Liam wasn’t crying, not letting tears flow over his cheeks. But it was close. His voice broke and eyes glistened as Elsa squeezed his hand turned in her seat.

“Liam, it’s okay. It’s going to be okay. I’ll go with you. Or Killian will go. We could all go. We’ll see him. We’ll talk to him.”

“I don’t want that bastard to meet you, to touch you, or see the real you, darling. I have done a horrid job caring for you and protecting you, but by God I won’t take you directly to the devil himself.”

***AAA***

Roland gripped Killian’s hand as the trio, including Henry crossed the street in the direction of Granny’s diner. With road work and the busy nature of the dinner rush, parking was at a premium. That left Killian parking a few blocks away and attempting to funnel the attention of the kindergartner toward the diner and not the various shops and window displays between here and there.

“You know what I want?” he chirped, pushing his hair off his forehead. “I want a pony.”

“For dinner?” Killian asked, knowing it would get a rise out of the child. “You are hungry enough to eat a horse?”

Henry’s hands were buried in his pockets, undoubtedly because he had neglected to wear his gloves even after Emma’s reminders. He snickered, kicking a rock out of their path.


“I rode a horse, not a pony,” the teenager patiently explained, hoping to dissuade the discussion before he was roped into another riding lesson. “It was huge and smelled kind of funny.”

“I bet it smelled like hay,” the kindergartner mused thoughtfully, using his considerable knowledge of farm animals. “They eat hay. Hay, and carrots, and apples, and horse food.”

Killian did not want to know why the boy’s hand was so sticky, but kept his grip to make sure that there were no stragglers. “And what precisely is horse food?” he asked, hoping that taking the route across the street meant that they would not walk past the candy shop that would be too hard for Roland to resist.

The child’s answer droned on and on, his voice carrying over the sounds of cars and other small city sounds. Thankfully they passed by the candy shop with its rich scents of chocolate and sugar that wafted through the air. Henry audibly groaned, but kept himself focused on getting Roland to where
they were headed.

The babysitting adventure was a bit rushed, as Robin had asked at the last minute when things with Liam and Elsa had run long. He wasn’t even sure what the timeline was at this point, as Robin had not elaborated and Emma had called to say she would be late too. He was trying not to be too concerned, but even Henry had noticed Liam’s car at the sheriff’s station.

“Hey,” Henry said, his feet shuffling along the sidewalk. “Is that dad?”

Looking ahead, Killian could see the man Henry was referring to, standing at a window to the shop his father owned. There was not much sense in crossing the street to avoid him, as things had been civil between the two despite tension over the wedding and parenting. So swallowing a bit of doubt and a desire to stay loyal to Emma’s desires to co-parent responsibly, he gave a wave with his prosthetic hand and a noncommittal smile as Henry rushed ahead.

“What happened to the window?” Henry asked, stopping short. The window next to the door was shattered, spider web like cracks creating a lacey pattern. “Did you do that?”

Clapping his son on the back, Neal shook his head. “No, someone tried to break in while I had the place shut down for lunch today. Can’t leave it like this tonight so I was going to board it up before I head home. Flipping the hammer in his hand, he looked down at Roland. “Looks like you have one more joining you. This is Locksley’s kid, right? Roland?”

“Aye, the lad is joining us for dinner at Granny’s while his papa finishes a few things.” Roland smiled up at Neal, showing off his missing tooth and dissolving any bit of tension. Pointing proudly at the hammer in Neal’s hand, he smiled.

“My papa has a hammer like that. He uses it for work when he’s not making music.”

“Your papa’s a talented guy.” Squinting back at the street, Neal flipped his hammer again. “Emma’s not with you?”

“Work,” Henry interjected. “She said okay about the camping trip. It’ll be too cold for actual camping. Won’t it?”

“Not to worry, kiddo, we’re staying in my dad’s cabin. We’ll have indoor plumbing, a fireplace, all the creature comforts of home. But it’s a good chance for us to spend a little father son time together. We can cook over the fire pit outside if you want. Or we can order food in, if you’d rather.”

“Pizza, definitely pizza.”

Roland’s already alert ears picked up on Henry’s suggestion, the boy yanking away from Killian to join his friend and mentor. “I like pizza. No, I love pizza.”

“I would have never guessed,” Henry said, shaking his head. “I guess that’s our cue to leave, right Killian?”

Grabbing the smaller child around the waist and throwing him over his shoulder to the sounds of maniacal laughter and the slap of flailing limbs, Killian nodded. “The lad’s not eaten in nearly 20 minutes. He might turn into some sort of creature if his stomach growls. But if you want to…”

“Do you need my help, Dad?” Henry asked, reaching out to tweak Roland’s food as the child continued his wiggling attempts to break free. “I could hammer in some nails or something.”

Neal smiled at his son, shifting his glance to Killian and back again. “Go on. You’re probably
starving and I’m sure Killian needs the help with Roland there.”

***AAA***

“Liam, slamming my door is not going to help,” Emma said sternly as her future brother-in-law stormed into the house. “Look, Graham is just trying to do his job. Yes, it looks like your younger brother is doing this, but he’s being thorough.”

Whatever the man muttered was probably not exactly polite or friendly, leaving Emma to ignore him and continue pulling out the ingredients for sandwiches. Perhaps not as dramatic as Liam, Emma threw the meats, cheeses and condiments onto the counter with resounding thuds as Elsa dispensed ice and Anna began to pour soda and juice for the four of them. It seemed an odd assembly, but when Elsa had called and asked Emma to come talk some sense into Liam, Anna had been there in the blonde’s office. She and Kristoff tagged along.

Liam yanked open a drawer to fish out a knife for the mayonnaise, slamming it back shut with such force that Elsa jumped at the crack of it. “Liam,” she said softly but firmly. “Can we just take a moment…”

“He was in our home, Elsa. I didn’t even know it. How the bugger am I supposed to protect you when I can’t manage to keep that man out of our home? He didn’t even break into it. He just sauntered in and dropped of that blasted note.”

Elsa flinched as he stomped around the island and threw back a stool with such force that it rocked precariously. “That’s why we are looking at security options. And why Graham is being so thorough.”

“The man made me feel like the bloody stalker for wanting to know about my own brother. How else should I take that conversation? He’s probably scouring my internet history now rather than out searching for the actual culprit.” He let out a few more four letter curses before Emma slapped a plate in front of him.

“Liam, you’ve got to calm down,” she said, looking him dead in the eyes. “I know you’re upset. I’m upset too. But right now the priority is keeping you and Elsa safe.” She wiped a few crumbs into her cupped hand. “Plus we’ve got Elsa’s guard out there who is probably going to call 911 if you keep stomping around here screaming.”

He scowled angrily as he reached for the sandwich, taking a large bite and wiping the crumbs off with the back of his hand. As he chewed forcefully his eyes softened. “You made me a sandwich?”

“You’re acting like a five year old,” she challenged back. “So yes, I made you a sandwich. You’re lucky I didn’t pour you milk and give you a cookie.”

She turned to the ingredients again after throwing the crumbs away. It was all she could do not to demand more information, to pull from him the reasons that he was so distraught even at the thought of a brother she had assumed they barely knew. Liam was not a man who ran or hid from danger. He was strong and had received medals in the Royal Navy for his service and valor. So she knew it was not fear that had him stalking the room like a caged animal.

Robin and Kristoff clamored through the door with a ladder in their hands. Sharing the task, they began the task of installing the security censors above the windows.

“Go join them,” Elsa said, kissing his cheek. “It’ll do you good.”

His growled response was tempered by her close proximity. “Darling, I never thought that my selfish
pride would put you in danger. You must hate me, but I’m going to make things right. I swear it.”

“Liam, you’re not…”

Elsa’s words were cut off by the boundless energy of a young Roland. He scampered into the house with a more subdued Killian and Henry not far behind. His chocolate colored eyes scanned the room happily, finding himself with an audience. However, his first step was to his father, scrambling up the bottom step of the ladder as his father climbed down and throwing his arms around a leg joyfully.

“Papa!”

***AAA***

Henry threw the heavy backpack on his bed, shucking his school jacket and letting it join the lumpy pile there as he pulled out his phone. His message to Violet was quick, just a note to say hello and that he was thinking about her. His mother would probably be in his room soon so homework needed to be started. Yet he still typed out the message.

**Violet: Bored. Are you reading that chapter for Mrs. Nolan?**

**Henry: Not yet. Hiding in my room. Too many people here and mom sent me in here.**

Violet sent a question mark and a perplexed emoji in response. He knew that he had not made any sense. So he tried to fill her in the best he could.

**Henry: Something’s up. Lots of people here looking worried. Guess I have to read that chapter.**

The voices on the other side of the wall were distorted and muted, but he could tell that there was something going on from the intensity. Then he heard a door slam followed by the same sound much softer. He didn’t know what to think, staring back at his phone and the lack of three dots telling him that she was responding. In fact, Violet didn’t type anything back but called instead. Her voice was soft and quiet, obviously trying to avoid detection by her own father who limited her time on the phone and computer.

“Are you and your mom and Mr. Jones okay?” she asked worriedly. “Your text sounded weird.”

“I don’t know. My mom and everyone looked worried. I didn’t get to ask though. She said I had to do my homework.” As if his mother could see him, he dug into the straining bag and pulled out his science text. “Killian said he’d come help me later if I needed it.”

“I like Mr. Jones,” Violet said in response, earning a sigh.

“You and everyone else at school,” Henry said distractedly. He knew that some of the girls in class did whisper about his cute accent and his looks, but he tried to ignore it the best he could. Killian brushed those things aside easily, only getting embarrassed on occasion. Emma found it all to be hilarious with the exception of some of the single mothers who flirted with him.

“I don’t mean like that. I just meant that he’s a nice guy. And he’s always good with your mom when they take us to movies or concerts and stuff.”

“Yeah. I guess.”

“Look I know you can’t or don’t want to talk about whatever this is but I wanted to make sure you were okay. Message me later if you want. I’ll be up for a while.”
Henry smiled though she couldn’t see it. “Yeah, me too. And Violet?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks for checking, okay? I…well…I…”

“I know. Henry, it’s going to be okay.”

***AAA***

Emma stared at the precisely folded note that Liam had thrust into her hands before storming off with Killian following in short order. Blowing off steam, Killian had texted her. It was certainly needed. The typed note was single spaced and three pages, a rambling diatribe that seemed to confirm the brothers’ fears that somehow their father’s youngest son was at the helm of it.

“I don’t understand,” Anna said, sipping her banana and strawberry smoothie through a thick paper straw. “Why would Liam do this to himself?”

Elsa’s head whipped ferociously to stare slack jawed at her sister. “Himself?”

The rust haired woman’s cheeks hollowed as she drank down her smoothie. “You said Liam wrote the note, right? And Liam received the note?” She pursed her lips and shook the foam cup. “So why would he write himself the note?”

“Liam…Elsa’s Liam…didn’t write the note,” Emma explained patiently, the pages of it ruffling. “Killian and Liam have a younger brother – a half-brother. His name is also Liam.”

Anna chewed at the straw, her eyes thoughtful. “So there are three boys in the family? No girls.”

“Right,” Emma and Elsa said in unison. Emma passed the note back to Elsa, who had already read it a few times. She simply folded it again, curling it in her hands and then smoothing it back out again.

“And two of them are named Liam?” Anna asked. “Is Killian’s middle name Liam too? I mean did some guy named Liam save their father’s life? Why would he name two of his son’s Liam and not the middle one? That doesn’t make sense.”

“I don’t know,” Elsa bit out a bit more tersely than she meant. “He’s upset about this. Blaming himself.”

Anna was still asking why as Emma sent her on an errand to find something. It wouldn’t take forever, but it would give Emma and Elsa a chance to talk without the incessant questions. Perhaps they could count on Roland, who was trying hard to be an assistant to a busy Kristoff and Robin. Sure enough, the child seemed to sense when he was needed, matching Anna question for question and enjoying the conversation.

“Do you know what Liam is planning to do about this? I know Graham said for you guys not to do anything, but…”

“But Liam has it in his head that he’s the only one capable of solving this mess. I get it. I don’t know. He’s been angry and sullen. I haven’t quite gotten it out of him yet.” Elsa looked toward the oversized windows and the darkness that seemed to envelop the house. “Their father must have been horrible to them. He never said much about him until this.”

“I guess,” Emma agreed, again tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “Killian always seems unwilling to say much about the man. I assumed it was because he remembered less or maybe he
was trying to protect me and my own lack of family memories.”

“They seem bound and determined to do that, don’t they? Protect us?”

Emma stirred her drink in her mug, watching the whipped cream dissolve amongst the dark chocolate and create a muddy hue that would still taste sweet on her tongue. “We do too. I think that’s part of it, isn’t it? Part of being in love? We want to protect the ones we love? You want to protect Liam and Anna. I want to protect Killian and Henry.”

Elsa looked far away again, running a knuckle over her lower lip. “You know I’m not scared, right? I don’t think he really wants to hurt me. But Liam. I’m scared for Liam. Even if his younger brother is stopped, Liam’s not going to come out of this unhurt.”

“They don’t make our jobs easy, but we’ll handle it. Let’s get you situated first. I know you had a few days clothes with you. Do we need to pick up more? Do laundry? Go shopping? What about Liam’s stuff?”

“We’re fine,” Elsa assured her, stabbing at the crusts on her plate. “Let’s just…”

Emma knew instantly what her friend meant, wanting to ignore the danger for a moment and pretend that everything was normal and mundane. “Got it. So Regina stopped by this afternoon. She had some questions about future interviews and stuff.”

The singer’s well plucked eyebrows knitted together. “I’ve been thinking about the tour dates. I’m sorry, Emma. I know that I said I would try, but I don’t think…”

“I don’t blame you,” Emma agreed before telling her about the opportunity to launch the new single. By the time they were done she was already setting up a plan to ask Killian.

***AAA***

“You brought me to Granny’s?” Liam asked, staring crookedly at the neon sign that glowed from the window. “I said I wanted to forget my troubles and you brought me to the family diner.”

“Oi, the Rabbit Hole was out because you know everyone there and they work for you. I didn’t think they needed to see you wrecked and wasted. There’s that new Italian place but neither of us are dressed for it. So you have a choice. We go to Granny’s and gorge on junk food, to the ice cream place, or we head over to the pharmacy and stock up on warm beer to drink in the jeep. I vote for Granny’s.”

“This town needs some economic development,” Liam grumbled as he jumped down from the passenger seat.

“Take it up with the mayor. Go get us a booth. I need to check in with Emma.”

“You, brother, are whipped,” Liam chuckled tightly as he scooted past three of the tables to a booth he usually shared with Elsa. His brother was already on the phone, clearly talking to Emma by the look on his face. Rubbing his hand over his face, Liam wondered again what had brought him to this spot. Not Granny’s, but the United States even. He had a life in London and then in the Navy. He’d spent years perfecting it. That was until he had made a bad call and let his anger rule over him. He was just starting to feel grounded again, having a family with his brother, friends, a job, music on the side, and of course – Elsa. Now it was as though he was teetering on the edge again, perhaps losing everything because of a rash decision to ignore his father’s needs in favor of his own pride.

“She’s worried about you,” Killian said, sliding into the booth and waving off the attempts to hand
him a menu. He’d already eaten there once that evening. Requesting a beer, he waited for his brother to respond.

“I didn’t know Emma cared that much,” Liam answered sullenly. His shoulders drooped and the blue Henley he wore seemed faded in the artificial light of the diner. He shook his head as Killian opened his mouth to correct him. “I know Elsa’s worried. She thinks that perhaps I should see our father.”

“Do you want to?” Killian asked, a single eyebrow arching automatically with the question. The older of them sagged at the question, opening his hands palms up to say he doesn’t know. “I can’t imagine that conversation.”

“Neither can I, brother. She suggested coming along or maybe you.” He shook his head the heels of his hands coming to rest at his eyes. “I can’t let her. I can’t let her see how that man looks at me like I’m nothing. I can’t let her know what it was like for us.”

Killian’s tongue darted out over his lips. “You know, he might have changed. He is older now. He raised our brother. Perhaps…”

“You’re forgetting what he was like. He hurt us physically. He left us abandoned. I don’t know about you but I’ve never had an urge to celebrate the man as a father.” He paused long enough to accept the two ice cold bottles from the server, tilting his toward his brother in mock salute. “I don’t know that it would do any good to see him. I would likely say something to make it worse.”

“And I’m the one with the temper and control issues,” Killian mused before a sip. “You always told me as much. Said I never thought things through and acted on impulse.”

“Aye, it appears to be a family trait, along with stubbornness and determination.” He followed that observation with a sigh. “And of course dashing good looks.”

“Of course. You know what Emma said when I mentioned perhaps finding our father after all this time? She said she thought I should. Said she never knew her own parents and always wondered about them. Perhaps we should listen to the lasses and get ourselves a pair of airline tickets. It might be time to face him.” He shrugged. “I would say I’m quite curious if my memories and the truth are even close to similar at this point.”

“She’s a smart one, that Emma. I’ve always thought so.” He swallowed again, his knee bouncing as he considered it. “I know you, Emma, and Elsa all have a point, but no. I can’t do this. I can’t go face him.”

“And if I said I was going to do it alone then?”

“I’d say you were a proper git.”
Chapter 49

The moon reflected off the ocean, waves only breaking occasionally to shatter the ethereal path along the surface. Killian pulled his jeep in behind his brother’s, knowing that he would be the first to leave in the morning with Henry in tow for another day at school. Cutting the engine, he rolled his head back on the seat and sighed. “Home sweet home.”

“You’re not going to try anything else to convince me?” Liam asked, planting his booted feet firmly on the car mats. “You don’t usually give up so easily, little brother.”

“Younger and I don’t think there is much point,” he argued, reaching his right hand around to turn off the lights. “You have made up your mind. It’s not my business if you are content to live this oddly situated relationship with our younger brother.”

“That’s the Killian I know.” Liam wagged his finger at his brother. “You’re using that teacher psychology on me, reversing the situation.”

“I just don’t wish to argue with you when you are so adamant that you want nothing to do with our father or the younger Liam. It’s that simple. I’m not interested in arguing with your pompous arse about this. One of us will have to go see our father. That someone is obviously going to be me.” Killian turned the key and the engine’s rumble died into silence. “Now let’s go inside and try to act like we haven’t been sitting around discussing nothing for the past two or three hours while Robin did all the work here.”

Both men lumbered out of the jeep, Liam offering a curt wave to the guard in the unmarked car in the empty lot across the street. He had argued earlier that the guard was too obvious sitting there, but Emma and Elsa had said that was the point. “Emma was a bit put off by my behavior?”

“She has a 13 year old son. You think she hasn’t seen a temper tantrum before?” His hand full with the keys and a bag from Granny’s, Killian nudged his brother with his elbow. “Believe me, Henry can out pout you any day of the week.”

“Yes, he truly can,” Emma agreed, stepping out onto the stoop and squinting into the low light. She was still wearing a skirt and sweater from her work day, but a thick blanket was over her shoulders and her boots were replaced by a pair of socks that Killian was not sure weren’t his. “Robin got the security system installed and working. But he is going to have to come back about some outdoor lighting.” She readjusted the throw blanket over her shoulders. “I love how secluded we are out here, but he’s right that we need to light it up a little more.”

Killian passed his brother and brought his left arm around Emma, holding her to him and kissing her with a resounding smack. “Apologies, love. I didn’t greet you properly before. I brought your favorites from Granny’s to make up for my errors. Forgive me?”

Emma raised a curious eyebrow, peeling open the folded bag and peeking inside. “Grilled cheese, good. And fries?”

“Onion rings,” he corrected. “Have I passed your test?”

“For now, Mr. Jones,” she laughed, giving him a peck to his cheek. She then turned her eyes to Liam, noticing the similarly shaped bag in his hand. “Elsa’s upstairs supposed to be sleeping but probably fiddling with her guitar. I sent her upstairs about an hour ago when Anna and Kris left. Hopefully whatever that is will heat up nicely for tomorrow.”
The older brother scuffed his boots in the rocky path, looking down at the bag as if it had just appeared. “Actually, lass, it’s not for her. I thought…well…”

“Seems my brother is set to make amends with the guard. Something about calling him a few names earlier when he became a belligerent git over being told it was not safe for him to leave alone.”

Liam’s cheeks pinked even in the low light as he turned to the darkened car where the man sat. “It’s a nice gesture, brother. Nothing more.”

“Whatever helps you sleep at night,” Emma teased, tugging Killian’s arm from around her waist and leading him into the house. “My waist and thighs are going to hate you, but my appetite is very happy with you right now, babe.” She had a hold of his left elbow and she pulled him through the door into the house before he could properly tease his brother himself.

She rooted around the refrigerator for a bottle of water, claiming that it would offset some of the sinfulness of the buttery sandwich and greasy fried onions. Once she found one, she squeezed in next to him in the oversized chair, sinking into his embrace. “It’s been a long day,” she muttered against his shoulder. “Do I want to know if you have had any luck with Liam?”

“He’s stubborn,” Killian admitted, knowing that was a bit like admitting the sky was blue. “I’m not sure I made any headway at all. He seems quite determined not to seek out our father. And since our brother is not making his presence known except through these notes and such, I am sure we are now at an impasse.” Her stomach rumbled, vibrating against his folded arm. “Let’s get you fed, love. You probably fed everyone else and haven’t eaten a bit yourself.”

“I was playing hostess,” she reminded him, letting him then guide her over to the chair where he sat and then pulled her into his lap. Thankfully she remembered to bring the bag from Granny’s and her drink from earlier was still on the coffee table only slightly warm. “So do we have a plan?”

“How would you feel about a trip to London?” he asked, biting off a bit of the proffered onion ring she held out to him. “If my brother doesn’t wish to see our father, perhaps I should go in his stead. I haven’t formulated an actual plan, but…”

“But you’re considering it?” she asked, ignoring for a moment that he asked her to join him. “Do you think that’s safe?”

His head lolled back on the leather, blue eyes staring up at the ceiling. “Our father is not a danger,” he said slowly, measuring his words. “And if we wish this to end in some sort of peaceful resolution…”

“Then you and Liam need to talk to him?” She bit down on the sandwich, chewing as she considered what he was saying. Swallowing, she pursed her lips together. “And you want me to go with you?”

“I suppose I was thinking I might share a bit of my own beginnings with you. If you’re up for it? It is a silly idea. Henry’s schooling will certainly not allow such a trip. And we shouldn’t leave him alone for that long.” Killian frowned. “Perhaps a phone call would be best. I can…”

“Let’s go,” she said, staring at her sandwich as if it had given her the answer.

“What?”

“I said, let’s go. You and Henry both have next week off for Thanksgiving. It won’t be a long trip, but we can do it – together. Henry gets back from this camping thing on Sunday. We can fly out then. You make the travel plans and I’ll pack. I’d say it would be fun, but…”
“I don’t think that fun is the term most appropriate for confronting your father who abandoned you.” His smile was restrained, arm tightening around her waist. “But I would be a proud man to show you and Henry about.”

“I can’t wait to see it,” she said, offering him another of the fried onion rings.

“You’ve been to London before I would assume, what with your job and Regina’s tour schedules for her acts. Henry said you and he spent a whole summer in Europe while you worked.”

“This is different,” she assured him. “I am going to get to see London through your eyes. I want to see your home.”

His smile grew as she chewed down more of her meal. “My former home,” he corrected. “You and Henry are my home now.”

“You know,” she said, her finger making nonsensical patterns on his chest through the thick shirt he wore. “The feeling is pretty mutual. You’re my home too.”

***AAA***

He expected to find her slumbering in the bed, her white gold hair cascading around her and the gentle rise and fall of her chest indicative of her state. However, there she sat, her legs folded under her and a spiral notebook in front of her. Her fingers were strumming the old acoustic guitar, lips moving silently. Occasionally she would pull a pencil out from behind her ear and scribble something down.

“I know that look,” he said, collapsing on the foot of the bed and folding his hands over his forehead. “The ‘there’s a song in me that I have to write now’ look. Going to be a long night, darling?”

Her thin fingers gingerly strummed the acoustic guitar, lips moving silently with the words she had scribbled on the page. The light was dim in the guest bedroom, but Elsa’s eyes could still make out the blue pen marks of lyrics that were still troubling her as she let them cascade into what could become a new song. Pausing briefly, she removed the ink pen from behind her ear and crossed out one of the stanzas that seemed the most problematic, humming to herself as she tried to replace it.

“Sounds lovely,” Liam said, his large frame filling the doorway where he was leaning. “Though I might be a bit biased.”

Her indifferent lips turned up into a smile as she saw him standing there watching her. “I don’t have it right yet.”

“And yet you’ve already mesmerized me, lass. I rather think you’re a natural.” Arms folded loosely, he dipped his head in gesture for her to continue. “May I hear more?”

Her normally porcelain cheeks pinked under his gaze. “I was just fooling around with it. It’s nothing, really.”

Striding toward her, he leaned to kiss her cheek before sitting behind her, forming his body to hers so that she was against his chest. “Perhaps a collaborator?”

She let her head fall back against him as his hands came around to cradle hers over the guitar. Eyes closed, she listened to him mimic the soft sounds she had been making earlier with the instrument. The very fact that he was able to make himself seem unobtrusive when his usual musical style was much more bold and ostentatious only spoke to his versatility. “It sounds better when you play it,” she said turning her head toward him.
“I would thank you for the compliment, but you’re the one playing darling. I’m simply enjoying the closeness.” His mouth dropped to where the collar of her blue flannel shirt met her long neck, kissing the skin softly.

“Do you want to talk about it?” she asked, her lower lip trembling. “Your father?” His body tensed against hers but relaxed slightly when she said they didn’t have to have that conversation.

“I’d much rather make music with you, darling, but I suppose the conversation is due.” Instead of letting her go, he held a little tighter. “Could we maybe…”

“I could use some help with the second verse.” Her forehead leaned into his cheek. “It’s about feeling like you’re on solid ground after a long time of feeling unstable. I had a few lines about feeling safe, but that doesn’t seem right. Safe seems arbitrary and as if there is a war going on outside. I don’t feel that way. I just feel like the world makes more sense and is a kinder place with you.”

Licking his lips, he nodded slightly, humming the tune she had already created. “Perhaps that is the key, darling? Stability? Not physically mind you. But perhaps when you’re in my arms I don’t feel like the world will slip out from under me.”

Her hum joined his as she played with the words a little. As the words started to flow, his grip on her hands decreased. “You like?”

“I love,” she clarified. “I think that’s enough for tonight though. Unless you have some real energy going on there, buddy.”

“Killian wants to see him…our father. He is making plans to do so. I assume he’s taking Emma with him.” His face his still buried in the soft flannel of her pajama top, the occasional scratching sounding out from his stubble against the fabric.

“You don’t want to go?” she asked, trying to understand. Her situation was different than Liam and Killian, even Emma’s. She had lost her parents. They were gone and the possibility of reuniting was not ever going to happen. Her gut instinct was to say that he was throwing away the relationship with his father over an old hurt. Yet she knew that his father was far from innocent in all this. “Maybe he could offer…”

He swayed backwards and then steadied himself. “Darling, I must seem so weak to you. He abandoned me years and years ago. And yet I’m still feeling the effects of that rejection.”

“I don’t think you are weak at all, Liam. In fact, I think you are the strongest man I know. You want to know how I know that? Your youngest brother is attempting to terrorize you. You haven’t once threatened to do anything violent or immoral. You want to fix this without hurting him or letting him hurt us. That’s a real man, Liam. That’s the man I love.” Her hand lifted from the neck of the guitar to cradle in cheek. “And I do, Liam. I love you so very much. If you want to see your father, I’ll be there for you. If you don’t, that’s okay too. He’s the one who has lost out. He doesn’t know the amazing man you’ve become.”

“You’re quite brilliant yourself, Elsa,” he said with a sad chuckle. “It’s not every day a man is rejected by everyone in life only to find a woman who accepts him – flaws and all.”

She shifted around to face him as he placed the guitar against the edge of the bed, rising up on her knees in front of him. “I’m pretty fond of a lot of those flaws you have.”

“Are you now?”
“Yes,” she teased. “I mean your nose is a little large and your hair’s kind of curly. And there is that annoying way you breathe through your mouth when you’re sleeping. Plus you talk in your sleep. It’s like you’re really trying to have a conversation but oblivious to everyone else in the world. It’s all kinds of adorable and creepy at the same time.” She looped her arms over his shoulders. “So it’s pretty easy to love you.”

“Loving you is the easiest thing I have ever done.” He gave her a rakish gaze, holding her just a few inches from himself and drinking in the comfort of her nearness. Reclaiming her lips, he crushed her to him.

AAA

It wasn’t their first argument, but it had weighed on her most of the day. With more people in the house Emma had taken to making a full pot of coffee each morning rather than the single serve pods that were more convenient when it was just her and him. She’d stumbled into the kitchen before her shower to start the water, something she was used to doing and could have done blindfolded. The scent of the freshly brewed pot assailed her from the moment she rinsed the shampoo from her hair. Images of the dark brew along with bacon and eggs seemed to be flashing in her head after she heard Killian stirring about.

So when she entered the kitchen to find the crumbs and rinds of what had been the breakfast she had imagined she was upset. The fact that there were only three drops of coffee in the pot and no more coffee in the canister had made her furious. It was probably Liam’s fault or even Elsa’s, though as guests she couldn’t really fault them too much. Maybe that was why she snapped at Killian and told him that it was his fault she was going to be late. He had not saved her any food, despite her efforts to make it fresh. He’d stared at her like a wounded animal as she huffed about to gather her coat and hurry Henry on his way. She felt bad about the time that she backed the little yellow car out of the driveway, Henry’s voice ringing out over the radio asking why she had not wanted to wait on Killian.

“Hey,” she said when she called during his planning period. “I wasn’t sure you’d pick up.”

“I’d be remiss if I didn’t offer myself up for rebuke,” he said a bit gruffly, his voice quiet probably since the door to his office and classroom were open. “You were rather angry with me this morning. I suppose I want to know if there is anything I can do.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” she said quickly, trying not to imagine him as he had looked that morning. “I just…I guess I got frustrated and took it out on you. That’s not fair. I’m sorry.”

“I should have paid more attention, love, for which I am sorry too. You deserve a lovely breakfast. It’s the least I can offer after all you have been doing for my brother and his love. You even made the coffee this morning and we drank it all.”

“I picked up some at Granny’s. It wasn’t that much of an inconvenience. She makes it better than I do anyway.” The now empty travel cup from the diner was atop her trash bin, glaring at her.

“Still, I behaved horribly. I promised you when I proposed that I would always be your advocate and always in your corner. And here I let you fend for yourself.”

“I’m used to fending for myself.” Slipping out of the painfully tight shoes, she padded through her office to the door and closed it. The administrative staff didn’t need to hear her private business. “But I do like your attempts to take care of me sometimes. Even if I don’t deserve it.”

“Oi, just sometimes? I will have you know that I make an effort to spoil you, Swan. Should I double
my efforts? Should I take to carrying you around so that your lovely toes never have to touch the cold floor in the mornings? Or perhaps I should make you breakfast in bed? My love, you are worthy of every bit of my spoiling and coddling.”

“There you go again,” she sighed, falling into her executive chair with a grunt.

“Have I done something to offend?”

“Not exactly. You’re just being perfect again. I hate that. You can get mad at me, you know. You don’t always have to be perfect. But I love you so I forgive you. Forgive me?”

“Always, love, always.”

Emma found it easier to work after that, making headway on choosing the songs for one artist’s album and managing to select from a few tracks to send to Regina for final approval. Elsa came in for a meeting with Regina and she was able to convince her boss that cancellation was the best solution. She even scheduled three phone interviews for Elsa and lined up a few selections for video directors. Without a tour to promote the new album they would need other means to get the music out there. Interviews and media were great, but a real grass roots effort was needed too, including social media and viral videos.

She was in the midst listening to a mixed version of Elsa’s solo efforts and mentally packing items for the pending trip to London when a text from Mary Margaret came in to request a parent teacher conference after classes dismissed for the day.

Emma’s shoes slid on the freshly waxed floors of Storybrooke Academy, practically sending her flying in the process. Hand still clutching her keys, she rounded the corner to the hallway where most of the middle grades classrooms sat between the high school and lower school. She still had a hard time picturing her son with so many teens and tweens. His escalating height aside, she still pictured the gap toothed kid smiling up at her whenever his name arrived in conversation.

Mary Margaret’s classroom was the second from the end, a colorful exhibition of student work and motivational quotes lining the walls. Usually she stopped to see which of Henry’s assignments were on display, but time would not allow it that day. Pushing into the classroom, she exclaimed her apologies for her tardiness – feeling at the moment like a student rather than a parent.

“Emma, I told you it wasn’t an emergency,” the teacher said with a soft smile as she came around her desk to hug her breathless friend. In the weeks since the wedding, the teacher’s abdomen had rounded out, as had her cheeks. She looked to be happier than Emma had ever seen her. “I just said I wanted to show you something.”

“You gave me exactly zero details,” Emma said, draping her jacket over the student desk next to her. “Forgive me, but that totally sucks for a mother. You wouldn’t believe what I’ve imagined on the drive here. Is he planning a terrorist attack? Did he make honor roll? Is his essay so good it’s making you cry? The possibilities are endless.”

Tilting her head, Mary Margaret reached behind her to grab a file folder. “Emma, I can see where Henry gets his imagination. I didn’t mean to scare you.” She motioned for the table where she usually did small group assignments and conferences. “Let’s have a seat?”

Mutely, Emma nodded. She stared at the pencil drawing that the teacher slid out from the file. Lines and squiggles marked the page.

“I caught Henry drawing this during our science lesson today,” she said, pushing it across the table.
with two fingers. “He said it was a plan to keep your house safe.”

Now closer to her, she could make out the outline of the house’s floor plan. He’d even placed the furniture in familiar spots and labeled the rooms accordingly. It was a relatively accurate layout of the rooms and space with one exception. The walk in closet that she and Killian shared was shaded darker than the rest and bore labels of weapons. “Safe?”

“I take it that you and Killian had a new security system installed? I don’t mean to pry, Emma, but I think Henry’s concerned. Have you talked to him about what’s going on? I’m guessing it is the whole Elsa and the stalker thing. Right? With the nightmares and all…maybe you should…”

Holding the page at the corners with her fingers, Emma groaned. “Yeah, it’s kind of complicated. We aren’t meaning to keep you out of the loop.”

“I tried to question him on it, ask him about the whole thing. He just said he thinks that you guys need to prepare.” Mary Margaret held her hands out, palms facing the ceiling. “He’s a sensitive kid, Emma. I think that whatever is going on has him worried. He told me that he just wants to make sure you’re safe. He said that maybe you need a guard.”

Emma dropped the page and grasped her head with her hands, palms at her temples. “It never occurred to me. We’ve been so careful about only discussing the details when he’s gone or in bed. I haven’t even really told Neal that…well, it seems…” She filled in the teacher on the basics, pausing to answer questions that her friend obviously had. To her credit, the brunette only asked for clarification on a few points.

“But so far it’s just been against Liam and Elsa, right?” she asked, folding her hands in front of her. “This other Liam hasn’t done anything to threaten you, Killian, or Henry?”

“No, I don’t even know…I suppose it is possible if…”

“I’m not accusing, Emma. I think it’s great that you and Killian are opening your home up to Elsa and Liam. I would just suggest opening up to Henry about it. He’s obviously worried.”

“Of course,” Emma said gratefully. “I’m going to go track him down now. Any clue…”

“Killian’s classroom. Emma, don’t worry. Things are going to be fine.”

That’s what Emma told herself as she crossed through the halls that were usually full of students. Everything was going to be fine. She and Killian would confront the brothers’ father. Things would go back to normal. Though she wasn’t sure where normal fit on the spectrum at this point. When she got to the music room she pulled the door open a few inches and peered inside. Watching from doorway as her son ran through his scales at lightning fast speed, Killian laughing loudly at the antics, she felt a warmness at the scene. They were quite a pair as her fiancé liked to say, both playing off each other in goofy and yet loving ways. Folding the drawing that Mary Margaret had given her and placing it in her pocket, she stepped into the room and caught Killian’s eye.

“This is a grand surprise, love,” he said motioning for her to come over through the mismatch of chairs and music stands. “You rarely visit these days.”

She gave into the quick peck, keeping her eyes locked on his before turning to Henry. “I actually came to see this guy here. We haven’t had a mother son dinner in a while. What do you say we get some pizza and check out the action over in the park? I’ll even let you eat in the car.” It was a long standing rule that food items were limited to tables not moving vehicles.

“Am I in trouble?” Henry’s shoulders dropped as he sank back in the chair. His limbs appeared
overly long as he lethargically waited for the answer. “Or sick? Is someone dying?”

“Nope, I’m just hungry and miss my kid. Come on. Get your coat.” She placed her hand on Killian’s chest, giving him a hopeful stare for understanding. “See you at home?”

“No. I’ll even pack up the lad’s trumpet. Be off with you both before the lines are too unbearable.” He did not even look disappointed as she hurried the teenager out of the room, already discussing the possible toppings for their pizza.

Clearing away some of the debris from the teaching day, he felt his phone vibrate with a message from Emma.

**Emma: Just in case I forgot to tell you. I love you.**

***AAA***

Liam rested the box on his elevated thigh, bracing it between him and the wall as he tried to open the door with just one hand. He was too impatient to actually set the crate aside to do the task. Nearly dropping it, he cursed under his breath at the thought of explaining to Zelena how he had managed to lose a box of top shelf liquor.

“You are multi-talented,” the auburn haired beauty said from her perch at the bar. He wasn’t sure exactly what she did all day other than sip Pellegrino (or something stronger) and shop for new shoes on her phone. It wasn’t that she didn’t play a good game. He’d had enough phone calls and meetings with her to know that she could bluster like most business women. However, he seriously doubted her acumen was more than a few learned phrases and haughty looks. “Juggling, managing, and bartending. Not to mention your musical talents.”

“Just a bit too lazy to put the box down and pick it up again,” he explained, shifting past her toward the storage room.

“Come back after you’re done. I want to have a little chat.” Her smile was fake, but he pretended not to notice as he carried the box into the cave like room that could have doubled as a bomb shelter. Emma had expressed some happiness that Zelena seemed more interested in the bar than in the music business lately. It made things quieter in the office to have the two sisters separated. He understood that.

Unsealing the box, the lifted the bottles from the excelsior and placed them in the line for rotation onto the shelves. There were three more that he still needed to fetch when she called him back, her voice that sickening sweet tone. He swallowed back his flippant reply on the tip of his tongue and obeyed.

“I’ve been looking at the sales,” she said as he wiped the dust from his hands onto the bar rag that was looped over his belt. “Food numbers are good and liquor is quite substantial as well. However, we’re not doing so well with our booking fees and cover charges. I realize that we are in Storybrooke and not New York or Boston, but people here are searching for entertainment too.”

“Aye, that they are,” he said, waiting on her inevitable idea that would make him question his decision to work there. “Some of the larger and more well-known acts aren’t easily booked here.”

“I was curious, Liam, if you were using the right technique. See, I know you and your own band have limited exposure right now, but you’ll learn that most acts are more than willing with the right incentive. Perhaps we should look into that. I’d like to see this place flourish, darling. I’d like to see you flourish.” She leaned forward not by utility but clearly to showcase the deep v of her blouse and
the oversized emerald pendant that hung between her breasts. He did not let his eyes venture there, disappointing her with her lack of reaction. She sat back up and adjusted the top to more modestly cover her.

“I can certainly try to get some more notable artists.” It wasn’t what he wanted to say. He wanted to question her sanity and grip on reality at thinking some a-list groups were going to perform in a sleepy little town that boasted an outdated bed and breakfast over some of the higher priced luxury hotels in bigger cities. He didn’t imagine Bon Jovi or Sting would be enticed by the idea of lumpy beds and Granny’s frozen lasagna. “Is there a possibility that we could use some of your sister’s connections?”

He regretted asking as soon as Zelena’s face curled into a penetrating scowl. “My sister is not a part of this enterprise, Liam. And I’m not done with this conversation. I was noticing that we seem to be improving on food sales. So perhaps we should consider some celebrity chefs.”

“And you have some ideas there? I don’t think Bobby Flay is going to do a pop up here at the bar, Zelena.” He wiped at an invisible spot on the bar. “Perhaps though we could look at some ways to step things up. Some drink pairings with the food rather than just the typical happy hour fare?”

She smiled, her teeth dazzling as she flipped her long hair over her shoulder. “Brilliant idea!”

***AAA***

Emma cupped her hand under the triangle of pizza, hoping to catch the toppings that threatened to fall into her lap and the crevices of the car. She’d only recently stopped finding Cheerios and other cereal snacks from her son’s car seat days. She wasn’t thrilled at the idea of dried remnants of peppers, sausage, and salami taking up residence there.

“If I apologize will you let it drop?” Henry asked, taking a swig from the bottled soda. His brown eyes were scanning the park that was empty in the cold and dimming light. Though she had assured him several times already, he still believed himself to be in trouble.

“You’re not in trouble. I just thought we should talk. You know we haven’t had much time lately. And now with Liam and Elsa staying with us temporarily, it’s been crazier than normal.” She chewed her way through the thick crust. “And I haven’t probably let you in on some things like this whole alarm system thing.”

Henry whipped his head so fast that his hair took a moment to catch up. “Are we in danger? Is that guy that sent Elsa the flowers going to come to the house?”

Emma knew that her son had been in the room when Elsa and Liam’s situation was first discussed. Like any child, he had selective hearing that always seemed to pick and choose only the worst things to hear. “We’re making sure that he can’t hurt us,” she explained, not wanting to lie to him. She couldn’t guarantee that the younger Liam wouldn’t appear at their doorstep. However, she also didn’t want to own that fear and pass it on to her son. “That’s why we’re being careful, adding the security system, and Elsa has someone watching her and the house all the time. I’m sorry, Henry. I should have talked with you about this earlier. I guess I just thought that you didn’t need to worry.”

“If we’re in danger, I should worry.” His brow furrowed as he shoved more of the pizza into his mouth. “If this guy could hurt us, why are Elsa and Liam staying with us? Shouldn’t they go someplace else?”

“Henry, you need to realize that Killian and I would do anything to protect you. If we thought that there was a real danger because of their presence, we would have found other arrangements. But it’s
not like that.” She reached out and smoothed over his hair. “You believe me, right? Kid, you are the most important person to me. I wouldn’t risk your safety.”

“Is the alarm a good one? I mean will it keep him out?” He popped the last bit of pizza in his mouth and did not reach for the box that now rested precariously on the dash over the radio.

“Robin says it is the best,” she said, her hand still on the top of his head, thumb smoothing in circles. “And we can do other stuff to feel safer if you want. We can add more lights outside. We can make sure Elsa’s guard is more visible. Remember when you were little and thought there was a monster under your bed? I used to do monster checks every night.”

“You don’t have to do that,” he said, cracking a smile. “But maybe…”

“Yeah?”

“Maybe we could get a dog? Do you think Killian would be okay with that? Not like a mean dog or even that big of one, but a dog could be nice. And when you were gone for work the dog could stay in my room with me so I don’t get lonely.” He shifted his eyes to look at her hopefully, balling his now empty fists in anticipation.

She didn’t take the bait. “Do you get lonely when I’m at work?”

“Sometimes. I mean it’s nice to see Dad and it’s been fun with Killian. I just miss having you around. And when you get home you’re usually tired and too busy to do anything fun for a while. So…”

“I don’t like going on those trips either, you know?” She dropped her hand to his shoulder, feeling the not so soft fabric of his school blazer. “So a dog?”

“We couldn’t have one at the apartment, but now…”

“We’ll have to check with Killian,” she said, not committing with her answer. “And it’ll have to wait until after Thanksgiving. We’re going to London. I can’t see us getting a dog and then abandoning it at a kennel for a week. You’ll have to take some responsibility on this. If you want a dog to share your room, you have to make sure that dog knows you are going to take care of him or her.”

“Sooooo…you’re cool with a dog?”

“You’re good at this, you know.” She fell back against her seat, smirking out the window as she thought out she had been played. “I feel like a bad mom for not making you feel safe and you ask me for something I’ve said no to in the past.”

“You’re not a bad mom.”

“Nice save, kid. Look, dog or not, we have to know we can talk to each other. If you’re feeling abandoned, scared, alone, or whatever, I want you to tell me. My most important job is to take care of you. If I miss something, you’ve got to tell me. Remember we’re a team.”

***AAA***

With Liam working and Anna trying out some sort of prenatal yoga class, Elsa threw her purse in the passenger seat of Liam’s sedan and sighed into the silence. She’d pushed back against his agitation of her picking up his car after getting new tires and a few other maintenance type things done to it. His odd hours meant less time for such tasks, but she didn’t mind at all.

Another week and a half and they could talk to the condo board about some of the renovations they
needed to have done to their home. It was annoying to think they couldn’t make these necessary changes without permission, but such was life in a home owners association. Staying with Emma, Killian, and Henry wasn’t bad at all, but she knew that Liam would get stir crazy soon enough. And with the trio headed to England next week, Elsa worried that he might struggle even more.

She was very much used to getting her own way. Maybe it was a byproduct of being the oldest or just her determined grit. So the fact that Liam was stubbornly refusing to go to his father was something that was gnawing at her. She loved Liam, cared for him beyond anything she had ever known outside of Anna. Not being able to fix this for him hurt.

Turning the car along the curving road she hit the gas a little too heavily. She quickly corrected, sending the shoulder bag sliding off the seat into the floorboard. She cringed both at the squeal of the tires and the clatter of her belongings falling out on the floor mats and under the seat.

“Dumb,” she said, realizing she had not bothered to zip her bag after Michael had given her the final receipt. She had blindly shoved it in among the wallet, her phone, cosmetics, and other essentials, never considering the mess she could make. It was too late to correct it now, she thought with the fleeting hope that nothing was damaged or lost for good. She pressed her hand to the stereo’s on button, letting the car fill with the familiar sounds of the local pop station. While she wasn’t exactly a fan of today’s auto-tuned charade of talent, she had to admit it was fun to have in the background as she drove.

She belted out the catchy dance tune about finding love in unexpected places as she glanced in her rearview mirror. The guard, who today she thought was named Elliot or Eli, was to follow her home. So what if she was taking the long way to clear her head a little in the wake of another difficult day. She had signed off on cancelling her tour dates earlier, something she was already dreading telling anyone. Yes, it would be easier to not be on the road and forced to perform every night, but she was not sure she wanted to give in that easily. Regina had been negative on the whole decision, but Emma had smiled reassuringly and already started talking of other promotional plans. Despite the loss of tour revenue, Regina had joined in the discussion over lunch and even promised to have Elsa and Anna’s website redesigned and social media upcharged.

The lights in her rearview mirror blinked twice, odd since she wasn’t sure what it meant. She let her foot off the gas and eased down the speed of the sedan. The car behind her didn’t though, its lights so close now that she could not even make out the make, model or color of it in her mirrors. She was practically blinded by light as it closed in, filling the side and rearview mirrors with insufferable brightness. She squinted, trying to make out the fatherly man who she had entrusted to carry her to the mechanics. She couldn’t see him.

With her phone out of reach and her flailing attempts to reach it fruitless, she pressed her foot harder on the gas and created more distance between her and the car behind her. It kept pace, but she was able to view on one of the curves that it was not the four door green car that she remembered from earlier. It was a compact burgundy car that looked to have a young man behind the wheel rather than the fatherly figure of her guard.

“Damn it,” she said, gripping the steering wheel as she skidded through another curve. She was just three miles from the street that would take her back toward town and to the sheriff’s station. If she had been in her own car then her bluetooth would work to contact someone, but Liam’s was a stripped down model.

The car behind her swerved into the next lane as if wanting to come along side her. She pressed harder on the gas and urged the sedan to perform. Her efforts were thwarted as she felt the thud of his car hitting hers, sending her off the road in a cloud of dust and debris from the shoulder. When
her eyes opened and her breathing became less erratic, she saw no second car.
So I didn’t ever imagine this story would go on this long. When I started it, it was an experiment to see if I could write something that was a different style and more of a romance than my usual stuff. And so here we are at Chapter 50. There will be just a few more chapters in this story. I am still overwhelmed at the reception this has received and the messages supporting and encouraging me. Thank you all for that love and support!

Killian was more excited about the idea of a dog for the family than Emma anticipated. He and Henry rushed through their school assignments – math problems and a vocabulary review for Henry and grading tests for Killian – with a fervor that she had not seen in either of them lately. Once responsibilities were done for the evening, they had barricaded themselves on the couch to view the photo galleries from the animal shelter and were placing calls to David about the different possibilities for the new family pet.

“Killian and I like this lab,” Henry told his mother when she carried in a tray of hot chocolate and strawberries for their evening snack. He shoved the smart phone in front of her and shook it until she commented.

“Nice,” she said, holding her head back to better view the image. “I thought we were going to look at the shelter after we get back from London.”

Dropping his hand, Henry let out an exasperated sigh. “But this one is perfect. He’s just two years old, already house broken, and has a sweet temperament. It says it right here.”

“After London,” she reminded him, placing one foot and then the other on the coffee table and crossing them at the ankles. “We aren’t adopting a dog and then disappearing for a week. That’s just cruel.”

“We could take him with us,” Henry quipped, quickly silenced by his mother’s put upon groan.

“If he’s available when we get back then we’ll talk about it, but for now…no.”

Killian shot an amused smirk at Emma, his hand reaching up to scratch behind his ear as he watched the exchange. He’d considered adding a dog to his life for the past few years, but had not felt comfortable with the idea given the state of his life. He wanted a dog to fit seamlessly into things, not add burdens or distract him. However, Henry had been so excited by the idea that he had jumped aboard immediately. “He’s a fine one. But perhaps we should keep our minds open until we see the animal. Perhaps there is another that might be more suitable for our family.”

“He’s perfect. He even likes the water.” He shoved the phone under Killian’s nose this time. “See! Water! He’s perfect for us.” There was as self-satisfied grin on the teenager’s face as he re-read the description off of Killian’s phone, declaring again that the dog would be a welcome addition to the family.

Killian abandoned the talk to show Emma the website where he’d been tracking prices for their airline tickets. He was trying to find the perfect price and time that would avoid jet lag and not cost a fortune. She should have known he’d be that organized about it, ranking the different flights from 1-10 with notes about the suitability of each. She was a little surprised he was letting her do the packing.

“So Henry will be back on Sunday around 2, right? I was thinking we could fly out that evening
about 7 or so. That would put us…”

“Before you book that, maybe I should ask you something first,” Emma said, chewing at her lip as both Killian and Henry peered over at her. “It’s not bad or anything. I mean I guess…well, see…” She went ahead telling him about the offer to do the interview with the radio program. This was not going to go well.

“Wait, you want me to do an interview on a radio program?” Killian asked, his voice cracking. “What the bloody hell would I even talk about?”

Emma scrolled to the second picture of the dog Henry was back to excitedly studying on Killian’s phone. “Well, you wrote the song and penned the lyrics. I suppose you could talk about your thoughts on the final product, inspiration, process, and stuff like that. You don’t have to do this, but I know it would mean a lot to Elsa.”

“Would there be cameras there?” Henry asked, his interest in the dog waning momentarily with the thought of his future step father getting 15 minutes of fame. “Will you be on television?”

“It’s a radio interview,” Killian said, then shook his head. “And I haven’t agreed to do it.”

“Well, Henry’s not totally wrong. They sometimes record them for social media.” She flinched at the sight of Killian’s reluctance. “But we could totally ask them not to do that. And you wouldn’t be alone. The whole thing would really feature Elsa. It’s just that the duet is getting some attention. It could mean better sales for her, which frankly is a concern what with her not touring and Anna taking time off.” She tried to relax her own expression, indicate to him that this was no big deal. “And if you’re not comfortable, I totally understand. I just thought that what with Henry out of town on a camping trip, you and I could have a fun weekend in New York.”

“If I skip camping, can I come to New York? I like New York,” Henry jabbed his elbow at his mother and looked the picture of innocence. “You would just have to buy me food. I wouldn’t be a problem at all. I’d stay out of your way. Or I could help!”

“You and your dad have a camping trip,” Emma reminded him, nudging him back. “Besides I don’t think Killian is going to want to do this.”

Killian stared at the screen with flight information, studying it carefully. His hand moved on its own accord, each finger brushing the pad of his thumb in turn just inches in front of his mouth. “I gather this was Regina’s idea.”

Emma nodded slowly. “Yeah, but that doesn’t mean you have to do it. I mean Elsa’s under contract, not you.”

***AAA***

Liam flipped the page in the outdated magazine with so much force that the slick paper almost ripped from his effort. Growling his discontent at it for daring to be so flimsy, he threw it back on the stack of equally useless periodicals that seemed to be the norm in every waiting room.

“I’m sure she’s fine,” Emma ventured, clapping her own cup of coffee with a vice like grip. It had been more than an hour since she and Killian had received the frantic call from Liam about the accident. And while they had sat there with him for the entirety of the time, none of them had been allowed past the double doors, as they weren’t family.
“You bloody well got to see Granny,” Liam pointed out when she said the nurse who had informed them of that rule was just following protocol. And while that was true, Emma was sure that the difference was the area of the hospital since Elsa was in the trauma unit and not simply under observation. She didn’t bother building up her case for Liam though, simply nodding and sipping on the stale distraction of the coffee.

“Perhaps Anna has heard more,” Killian offered, standing up and brushing his hand against his jacket and pants before taking a few steps toward the reception desk. In his haste to get to his brother and Elsa, he had left the prosthetic at home so his left arm was significantly shorter and drawn under the long flannel sleeve of his shirt. “It’s worth a try.”

Liam gave no indication of his approval or disapproval of his brother’s actions, leaning his head onto his hands and staring down at his knees. It wasn’t until Emma stood and changed to the seat next to him that he even breathed out a sign that he was aware of the others in the room.

“Have you heard from Graham?”

“You useless wanker,” Liam groused, rubbing his forehead with a finger. “Said car accidents happen all the time and that we shouldn’t automatically assume…” He snorted, pushing his hands down on his knees. “I know about car accidents, almost lost my brother in one. Don’t think I don’t know what it’s like to sit here and wait on word…any word about someone you love.”

She had not even thought about how similar the situation must have been, the connection between sitting there waiting for news and not knowing all the details. There were differences though, including the fact that he wasn’t also learning of the deaths of two friends at the same time. But that wasn’t what she pointed out to him. “Maybe it’s time to figure out what we can do to protect you and Elsa from your brother? I know that Graham had suggested before that a protective order might be a possibility.”

“You think that a bloody piece of paper will do anything to protect us?”

Emma shrugged. “I don’t know. It was a thought. Look, I know this sucks. I know that you’re feeling a lot of things right now. Scared that Elsa is hurt. Frustrated that despite Graham’s efforts this hasn’t stopped. Guilty that maybe your brother thought it was you in the car…”

“I hadn’t gotten to that last one,” he said, smirking sardonically before grimacing. “So I guess I can add that to my list. If I’d picked up my own car from the shop this wouldn’t be happening. If I hadn’t asked her to do that so I could avoid the hassle, she’d be fine right now. Is that what you’re saying?”

“Liam!” Killian’s voice was sharp as he rejoined them, looking harshly at his brother. “I know you’re worried, but taking it out on Emma is not the answer.” He crossed his arms over his chest, ignoring the look Emma gave him that said to just blow it off. “And just so you know, Anna is back there now with the doctor. They are x-raying Elsa’s shoulder to see if there is any damage, but it appears she made it through without a scratch.”

Liam let out a sigh of relief, mumbling maybe a thanks or an apology before stalking off in the direction of the bank of vending machines against the far wall. Killian didn’t follow, taking root in his brother’s now abandoned seat. “He didn’t need to snap at you that way, love.”

“He’s worried about Elsa and remembering the last time he was waiting on word from an accident,” she said, dropping her head down on Killian’s shoulder. “I get it. I said the wrong thing and he snapped. It’s understandable.”

“We’re all under a lot of pressure, but there is no reason to turn on each other. I doubt he’s going to
appreciate it very much when I ask him for our father’s contact information. But we must do what we must.” He rested his cheek on her head and tugged her into his side even tighter. “We didn’t get a chance to talk about it, but is Henry okay? I didn’t wish to pry.”

Even though he couldn’t see her face from that vantage point, he knew that she had closed her eyes, breathing in deeply through her nose as she did when she was preparing to say something. “I guess I just needed reminding that my son isn’t oblivious. He’s worried about all this and thought maybe we were hiding the danger from him.”

“Poor lad. Perhaps we should keep him updated on Elsa. I doubt our rushing him off to Mary Margaret and David’s made him feel much more secure tonight.” He jostled her a bit with his shoulder. “Why don’t you go take care of him. I can handle my time bomb of a brother and get him and Elsa situated. You go give the lad a hug and see that he’s thinking of nothing more taxing than asking Violet to the basketball game and what to pack for his camping adventure.”

She shot up, the golden blonde hair that was no longer in the intricate braid flying wildly in odd directions. “Basketball game? Who gave permission for that? He doesn’t even like basketball.”

“It’s a school function, love. It’s not the same as a date with dinner and movies and such.”

Her eyes closed again and her chest rose with the deep breath she drew. “Seriously? I have to learn about my son’s social life from his music teacher?”

“Who is also your fiancé,” he said, his finger touching the tip of her nose. “I thought your rule was that they were free to spend time together at school functions?”

Her mouth screwed into a thoughtful pose. “Just a basketball game, right? You didn’t offer to take them out for dinner afterwards or something?”

“Just a game, love. It’s over by 5:30.” He smiled brightly, waggling his eyebrows at her obvious discomfort. He knew he was overdoing it. “I suspect that the most that will happen will be them holding hands or sharing a box of popcorn.”

“You are not cute,” she said, tapping her foot wildly. “You’re not cute at all.” She rolled her eyes, leaning over and kissing his cheek, muttering still that he was not that funny either.

“And yet you still love me. I can see it in the way you roll those lovely green eyes. Go see your son; it’s fine. I’ve got this.”

***AAA***

“I want you to follow my light with your eyes not your head,” Dr. Whale said, his normal bedside demeanor on display for the two sisters. “Good, very good.”

“She’s fine, right?” Anna asked, holding her sister’s coat like a life preserver in the ocean. “You’d tell me if she was really sick or hurt. She’s awake so that’s a good sign. And she’s talking…”

Leaning forward, she yanked her sister’s chin toward her. “You’re talking, right? Talk to me!”

“I’m fine,” Elsa said in a low tone. “I know Liam is out there worried. Go see to him, okay? Please.”

“I don’t want to leave you,” Anna protested, her bottom lip protruding as she backed away from her sister. “The doctor’s here. I should hear what he says. What if he says something important but you don’t remember? What if you have amnesia and can’t remember anything?”

“I don’t have amnesia.” She grimaced as the doctor pressed delicately on her shoulder. “I promise. I
Victor chuckled, dropping his pin light back into the pocket of his lab coat. Feeling the eyes of the younger sister on him, he smiled patiently. “She doesn’t have amnesia. I am a bit concerned about this pain in her shoulder though. I think I’ll order an x-ray and get you a little something for the pain. If there is no damage to the bone, I’d say we can get you out of here in an hour or so.”

“You could have damaged a bone?” Anna wailed. “Which bone? I know it’s your shoulder, but there’s more than one bone there. It’s a joint. Ball and glove. No, ball and socket. Did she hurt the ball or the socket? Or is it wrench?”

Grabbing the clipboard off the end of the tray beside the exam table, Victor made a few notes. “We’ll know more after the x-ray. In your condition you can’t be around for that so why don’t we see about an update for the patient’s boyfriend. Think we can trust you with that?”

Anna stood up quickly, the coats she held falling to the ground. Chin held high, she turned to the door. “Got it. Update Liam. Shoulder hurts but no amnesia.”

***AAA***

Stairs creaking beneath her feet, Emma lumbered up to the door of Mary Margaret and David’s loft in the dim light of the hallway. She knocked twice, softly so as not to wake everyone with the pronouncement of her arrival. It must have been just loud enough as the bleary-eyed David who answered and swung the door open to welcome her.

“He’s upstairs on the daybed in the nursery,” David explained, stepping over a video game controller that Henry had probably left out before bed. “I thought you were going to let him stay here? You said that, right?” He bent to pick up the game device, looked around, and then threw it on the coffee table next to a display of pink and white peonies.

“I did. I am. I just…well, I needed a break.” She wiggled her shoulders as she attempted to rid herself of the too thin jacket, standing in the center of wicker and pastels that were her friend’s trademark. Even David’s addition of a mountain bike hung from the wall and a leather hassock next to a mint green armless chair had not done much to affect the overall look of the space. “I didn’t mean to wake you guys…”

“You didn’t.” Mary Margaret said, coming out from behind the Chinese screens they were using in lieu of the French doors to separate the bedroom from the rest of the first floor until David had time for the installation. “Well, you did but I get up about 20 times a night anyway. So it’s fine.”

Her yellow and white robe hung open to reveal an oversized shirt that was probably something David had brought her back from a conference or event. Short black hair sticking up in wild directions and her green eyes squinting at her husband, she kissed his cheek as he laid a gentle hand on her more obvious belly. “Go back to bed, sweetheart.”

He blinked back at her, gave the baby a final caress and nodded. “Yeah, I should. Don’t stay up too late. Good night, Emma. I didn’t even ask…Elsa’s alright?”

“Banged up her shoulder a little, but fine. They are releasing her soon.” Emma sank into the armless chair, picking a throw pillow from behind her back and tossing it aside. “Sorry for waking you.”

He waved his hand as he lumbered toward the alcove where they had their bed. “No big deal. I’m a heavy sleeper. Won’t even remember in the morning.”

“Tea?” Mary Margaret asked, her eyes a bit more awake now. “I could scramble an egg? Juice? I’ve
got grape, orange…maybe some…no I don’t have any pomegranate. I think David finished that yesterday. I’ve got milk. And…”

“I am fine,” Emma interrupted. “Honestly I just needed a moment away from the hospital. The guard that was supposed to be watching Elsa drove me over here.”

Mary Margaret crossed over the u-shaped living room and plopped down across from her friend. “That bad? I know you said she’s okay physically, but…” She sighed. “Is it the brother?”

“Possibly? Probably? I don’t really know. She never got a look at the guy or that good of a look at the car. Graham and Liam think it is him. Graham’s talking about calling in the state police to look into things. I’m looking at adding more security because this guy was able to get past the one guard we’ve got.” She sighed, throwing her head back dramatically. “I’m sorry. It’s late and I thought…Killian suggested and I guess I just wanted to see Henry.”

“He’s upstairs. Want to go up there?” The pregnant woman moved toward the edge of her seat again. “If it will make you feel better, let’s go.”

“You’re not mad?” Emma asked, cringing. “I am not usually like this.”

“No, you’re not like this. So clearly something is wrong and we’re going to talk about it when you come back downstairs. Now go look in on your son and pull it all together. I’ll make us some tea and we’ll chat when you get back.” Giving one of those patented teacher looks, she pointed at the metal stairs. “Go! Oh and bring back a pillow and blanket from the linen closet. You’re staying here tonight. I’m not having you drive back given what’s going on with this guy.”

***AAA***

She would have fought him had they not given her a strong pain killer for her shoulder. Instead, she felt herself going limp in his arms as he carried her from Killian’s jeep up the couple of steps and through the front door of the house. He must have said he had her safe and sound at least a dozen times on the 100 foot journey from the garage, his breath warm at her temple and hands gripping her denim clad legs and her lower back.

“Take her on upstairs,” Killian said, turning on lights as he waded through the room toward the kitchen. “I’ll fix up an ice pack for her to keep the swelling down.”

“Nothing’s broken,” she informed them, not realizing she had said that over and over since her release. It was true that the x-rays showed nothing to be concerned about, the impact having simply bruised her rather than broken or dislocated her shoulder. “We’re here?”

“Aye, darling, we’re at Killian’s…”

Her nod was more like bobbing, her eyes wide and studious. “I like it here. Emma lives here too.”

Ignoring his brother’s chuckle, Liam readjusted his hold on his girlfriend. “Aye, that she does. She’s a good friend.”

“Yup,” Elsa agreed, kicking her foot a bit too wildly and sending her shoe in an arc toward the couch. “I think Killian really likes her.”

That earned a loud guffaw from the younger Jones, his shoulders shaking as he paused from making an ice pack to laugh at the blonde’s drug addled observation. He laughed even harder when Liam responded with, “I think you might be right about that, lass.”
There were only a few protests as he carried her up the stairs and to the guest room, promising that she could make dinner for everyone soon. She could be heard calling out menu ideas even from the landing above.

“You like garlic, right? Killian? You like garlic? And chocolate! Everyone loves chocolate. I’ll make something with chocolate!”

“Sounds magnificent, Elsa!” he shouted back, tossing up the newly frozen ice pack when his brother reappeared on the stairs. “I will look forward to it.”

In the haste of getting to the hospital there were more than a few items placed haphazardly throughout the living room. While he should have been considering sleep or even texting to make sure that Emma was snug at the Nolans’ loft, he found himself cleaning up a bit. That was where Liam found him a few minutes later, throwing a few of the forgotten cushions back in place on the couch.

“She was passed out before her head hit the pillow,” Liam announced, sinking down onto the newly restored sitting space. “Thanks for the ride back.”

Shrugging off the compliment, Killian folded the throw that Emma was so partial to over his left arm a little awkwardly. He frowned at it and tried again, this time making the ends meet. “Sounds as though Elsa will be paying us back with quite a feast of garlic and chocolate, mate.”

“Yum…” Liam said, rolling his head on his shoulder from one side to the other. “I owe Emma an apology. She was concerned about how I was feeling and I jumped on her a bit too harshly.”

“I doubt she’ll hold it against you.” Killian draped the newly folded blanket over the back of the chair. “She has a thing for a hot cocoa with cinnamon though. And since she’s staying the night at the loft, you could have one waiting for her when she comes back in the morning to get ready for work.”

“The least I can do.” Liam folded his hands over his chest and kicked his feet up onto the coffee table. One look from his brother and he removed his shoes before reassuming his relaxed position. “So let’s hear it? I’m a stubborn arse for letting it get this far. If only I’d called father and told him what I thought instead of ignoring his pleas. I know the drill. I also know that we should pursue this protective order and look at where that brother of ours is before anyone gets truly hurt.”

“If you already know what I plan to say, there is very little need for me to say it,” Killian teased. “But yes, I do think it is time that we take some action. Let the authorities deal with Liam, but our father…”

“I’m not going to London.” If Liam were a child, one might understand the petulant tone better. He might have even stamped his feet and stuck out his tongue. But Liam was a grown man who should be above such things.

“Aye, I can respect that, brother. But you should understand that I wish to go. I have every intention of seeing this through. So I would appreciate your telling me what you know about where he is living now. London is no small place.”

“I won’t be a part of this.” Lowering one of his hands, Liam reached for the remote control for the television only to have it snatched away by his brother. “You can’t possibly think I’m going to change my mind.”

“After your first refusal, I never invited you again. I was simply hoping you might share with me
what you know about father’s whereabouts. It would make my task infinitely easier to at least know where I was going and what I might face.”

“This isn’t your fight, brother. Nobody’s after you or your fiancé. I have to deal with this the best way I know how.”

Clenching his hand, he tried to find the words that would convince his brother. It would be a tall order that would require skill and care. Or perhaps he should just stick his middle finger in the air and call it a night. “He is my father as well as yours,” he said, settling on reason rather than emotional appeal. “And this brother of ours could have easily enough targeted me. Still might.”

“It doesn’t involve you. I don’t want you putting yourself at risk to simply be disappointed with that lout won’t give you the time of day or seems to forget that you even ever existed. You’ve got this week planned. Take Emma to Paris or Rome. Go have a bit of romance in Vermont or on a cruise. Don’t waste your time trying to mediate between me and a man you and I always said was no longer our father. Don’t subject Emma to him and his lies. It’s a mistake.”

He briefly closed his eyes, remembering the panic and pain that his brother had displayed at the hospital. While he had heard Liam’s expression had been similar after his own accident, he had never actually seen his brother so distressed. He couldn’t blame him. If something happened to Emma, he’d be likely to lose what he had left of his sanity. “You’re in danger, brother. You of all people can’t expect me to sit back and watch this come to a head. Let me try to help.”

***AAA***

Liam did eventually pass on the information he had on Brennan Jones, swearing that he couldn’t confirm it was accurate. However, Killian went with it and made hotel arrangements and rented a car that would carry him to the small house that was their father’s last known residence. It took most of his time during those last few days of the week, especially combined with Elsa’s demand that she would do the interview and her impassioned plea for his inclusion. He’d finally given in on that detail. So when school let out on Friday he carried his and Emma’s bags to the jeep while Henry and his father prepared to leave on their own weekend adventure.

Neal’s car disappeared down the road with Henry and a few bags inside it, the trip to the cabin still a viable option even after the rough week. While Emma did not want to come straight out and ask if Tamara would be joining them, she had noted that there was no room in the sedan for her with the equipment, games, and whatnot littering the backseat.

“Good thing we won’t be here this weekend,” Killian said, dropping a weekend bag next to the door where she stood looking out at the now empty road. “Maybe you won’t miss him so much.”

“It’s crazy, right? Henry’s 13. I’ve shared custody for years now and he’s always headed off for this camp or that friend’s house. I should be used to him traipsing off for weekends away, but I’m not right now. I miss him.” Letting the curtain on the window next to the door fall back into place, she spun to face him. “You probably think I’m a co-dependent mess of a mother who is the laziest helicopter parent ever.”

“I’ve been around my share of such mothers and fathers, love. You are nowhere near that level of insanity. And to be honest, I hope to distract you as much as possible this weekend.”

“You’re not angry that this weekend is turning into a work thing?”

“It seems to mean a lot to you and to Elsa,” he shrugged. “It’s not as though you are dragging me on some awful adventure to a foreign land to look for your wayward father.”
Giving him a quick peck to his lips, she smiled. “I think you have a different idea of torture, but if it makes you happy to think that I am somehow making the supreme sacrifice by going with you to London, I’m all for it. I could use the guilt points.”

It would be a busy weekend for them with the two nights planned in New York, a quick flight back to Maine and another flight to London Sunday evening. Neal had promised to have Henry back to Mary Margaret and David’s who would then transport him to the airport to meet them, as well as their luggage for the week in tow. There were a million little things that could go wrong, but Emma had promised both Killian and herself that she would try not to worry about them too much.

“Perhaps I’m just concerned that all this time together will have you rethinking your decision to marry me.”

She lifted her left hand and waved it between them, the engagement ring on clear display. “I think that ship’s already sailed there, buddy. I even managed to let Ruby nail me down about a possible dress design and have quotes on the flowers. And last I checked we’ve got invitations being printed. Can’t let all that go to waste. I’m not planning this for nothing, you know?”

“You’ve been busy. Perhaps you’d like to write our vows too?” He was well aware of the plans so far, having been privy to most of the decisions, including taking on the task of Ruby and Granny’s ideas for the reception. Keeping it simple had proven to be more of a challenge than either of them realized, as Mary Margaret and Ruby had both gone into overdrive with ideas that would be better for a wedding with a guest list of 200. His fiancée was stubborn though and fought back when necessary, giving in on a few details that she was not that concerned about anyway.

“I thought we could just wing it,” she teased with a shrug. “Just say whatever came to mind?” She gestured toward the stack of luggage. “I promise to do all our travel packing in the future and you promise to…”

“Ravish you every chance I get?” He pulled her to him, earning a little gasp of surprise at the quick but welcome gesture. “I certainly plan to do that.”

She twisted her mouth to one side, pursing her lips for the effect of appearing to think hard about his suggestion. “I was going to go with you promising to always empty the dishwasher, but I could be convinced to go with the ravishing thing.” She threw her arms over his shoulders, laughing as he dipped her back dramatically to kiss her.

“Oi, if you two keep that up, you’ll be horrible travel companions for Elsa,” Liam announced, the woman in question’s rolling bag in his hand and a carry on in the other. “Just remember this isn’t the honeymoon yet, brother.”

“Aye, we will be on our best behavior,” Killian said, keeping his eyes on Emma as she shimmied her way out of his embrace and smoothed down the black shirt she was wearing. “It is a work trip after all.”

***AAA***

Elsa pulled back the curtain and held her phone up to snap a photo of the incredible view for Liam, texting it to him immediately. With the quickness of his reply he must have been holding the phone, the ring of hers mixing with the sound of the text being delivered.

“You’re all snug and safe, darling?” he asked after a few pleasantries. “Killian made sure your room was up to par?”
“Killian and Emma have both been wonderful,” Elsa assured him, dropping to one of the chairs in the sitting area and sighing. “They invited me to join them for dinner tonight, but I told them to go without me.”

“Elsa,” he said warningly. “You shouldn’t go out alone. We had a deal…”

“I won’t be totally alone. I have that burly guard to watch me and I thought I’d just explore a little. I was going to see if I could possibly score a ticket to a show. I don’t want to impose on them.” Her manicured finger tapped on the back of the phone. “Quit worrying. There are millions of people in this city. I doubt your brother would fly all this way to follow me.”

***AAA***

As much as she complained about Regina’s overbearing ways and micromanagement, Emma had to admit that the artists both on and pursued by the label were treated extremely well. Never had that been so evident to her as the rooms that had been booked for Elsa and Killian to do their interview in New York that weekend. Travel on the weekend before Thanksgiving was hellish, combined with the fact that she and Killian were due to fly out with Henry on Sunday. But there they stood in the room, throwing a tip to the bell hop and pretending not to gawk at the floor to ceiling views of the vibrant lights of Time Square.

“I may abhor the idea of these insipid interviews, love,” he said before crashing his lips against hers and making quick movements toward the king sized bed, “but this room makes up for any discomfort.”

She smiled against his mouth, batting away his hand that had already pulled the black blouse from her jeans and was fussing with the buttons blindly. “We’re having dinner out tonight,” she reminded him. “You promised. Reservations? With Elsa. I even got us all tickets to a show that is supposedly impossible to get tickets to see.”

“Love, I have no reservations about staying locked in this room with you for the entirety of this weekend. I shall never complain again about staying in with you. I was a stupid, stupid, man.”

She craned her neck back to both display her desire to move on from the interlude and head out as planned, as well as to give him better access as he assaulted the skin there. She could admit desiring both. “You promised me a date,” she said, her fingers gripping his head to pull him closer, getting lost in the thick tufts of dark hair. “Food, wine, dancing, no children’s movies or teenage angst.”

“I thought we were bringing Elsa with us?” he queried, paying closer attention to the dip in her neck and shoulder. His tongue traced over the sensitive area, relishing her shudder with his teeth flashing against her skin.

“Tonight dinner and a show. Tomorrow is date night.” She pushed back on his shoulders twice before he stepped back with a frustrated groan. “Easy there, tiger. We have all weekend. You go shower and get ready. I’ll get Elsa.”

***AAA***

“I wish you were here,” Elsa said, pulling her knees up to her chest. “I know you’d hate going to see a musical, but…”

“I would do it for you,” he interrupted. “I would do anything you requested. But we both know that I am needed here this weekend. Apparently this American holiday brings out long lost family and encourages drinking in excess leading up to the day.”
“It’s about being thankful,” she giggled. “You are so British sometimes.”

“I’m simply making an observation. After your interview, have that security guard of yours take you to the airport and we’ll be in each other’s embrace by tomorrow night.” He was still whispering some pretty dirty things to her when her reverie was interrupted by a sharp knock at the door. Insisting that he stay connected while she answered it – what exactly was he going to do from Storybrooke if it was trouble – he heard Emma’s familiar voice and realized what was going on about the same time as Elsa.

“Hi Liam,” Emma said into the phone. “I’m kidnapping your girlfriend. Seems Killian’s glutton enough for punishment as to take two blondes out to dinner.”

“Lucky bastard,” Liam chuckled, signing off after getting Elsa to promise to call him when she returned.

“Emma, I don’t want to be a third wheel,” she said, dropping the phone on the bed and sighing. “I’m just going to find a quiet place, people watch, and maybe go see a show or something. You and Killian should enjoy a night without your son. Get him to wine and dine you.”

Clicking her tongue on the top of her mouth, Emma shook her head. “Nope, you’re not backing out on me now. If you won’t go with me for social reasons, fine. But think about my taxes.”

“Your taxes?” Emma asked, not quite sure what to make of that argument. “What does my going to dinner with you have to do with your taxes?”

Emma smiled, happy to have at least gotten her friend off balance with the argument. “If Killian and I go out alone it’s a date,” she said, explaining the obvious. “But if you join us then I’m a recording company rep taking out two clients or a client and a potential client. Total right off on my taxes.”

Elsa looked at her suitcase, trying to picture the outfit she had packed in case she did decide to go out. It was a simple black dress that would highlight her creamy complexion and blonde white hair. If she unfurled her braided lochs, she would sport thick waves that would frame her face and with a little touch up of her make up would be stunning. “Taxes,” she repeated. “Fine, you win. I’ll be your tax deduction.”

“Great,” Emma said, lifting her shoulders with a mix of pride and celebration. “Be ready in 25 minutes.”

***AAA***

While Elsa was still worried about being a third wheel with Emma and Killian, the two lovebirds did all that they could to make her feel included. Emma continually referred to it as a business dinner, even making a show of keeping a copy of the receipt and toasting to the upcoming release of the song. Killian was much more casual about it, offering an arm to both women and riding in the front seat of the cab so that both ladies could have more room in the back.

When they arrived at the theater just a few minutes before time for the curtain, Killian was engrossed in a chat with Elsa about the show they were going to see. He seemed to be appreciating her knowledge of musical theater as much as she was entertained with his theories about composition. Emma groaned loudly that maybe they should switch seats so they didn’t have to talk over her.

Killian even wore his moniker of being a lucky bastard proudly, texting his brother a photo of him flanked by his fiancé and Elsa at dinner and following it up with one that included both women kissing his cheeks. Liam had a few choice words for them after that one.
Arriving back at the hotel, the trio stopped at Elsa’s door first to drop her off with the promise to meet for breakfast at the diner across the street. As he had promised Liam, Killian scanned the room with the guard who had followed them at a distance all night. Declaring it safe, he wished her a good night and rushed Emma along to the room next door, sliding the do not disturb sign on the doorknob in a swift and seamless motion.

“Tonight was fun,” Emma said, kicking off the heels she had been wearing before heading to her suitcase to dig out something more comfortable to sleep in. “Thank you.”

“You and Uncle Sam paid for dinner and the show, love. I’m not sure why you would thank me.”

She was twisting off the back of her earring, her favorite flannel pajamas over her arm. Most women would have brought some sort of sexy lingerie for a romantic weekend with their fiancé, but Emma preferred comfort and familiarity to showy tactics that felt fake. “You were a good sport with Elsa and a gentleman throughout. I’m impressed.”

“I’m always a gentleman,” he countered, yanking down on his tie to loosen it. They had almost added to their delayed departure with the act of her tying it for him earlier. “And I was promised that I would have you all to myself tomorrow night.”

“A deal’s a deal,” she said, rising onto the balls of her feet to place a chaste kiss to his lips. “And I hear that married couples do seem to get a few date nights now and then.”

“Something else to look forward to,” he smiled against her. “Perhaps we should practice that. We could go back out in the hall and I could carry you over the threshold?”

She rocked against him, appreciating the earnest yet gentle kiss he gave her in return. At first his lips touched hers like a whisper, his grin still evident. It made his lifting her into his arms bridal style all the more shocking, her squeal bouncing off the walls. “That damn guard is going to come in here and beat you down,” she chastised, dropping the flannel pajamas in a puddle on the floor. “Killian!”

“You won’t need them,” he teased, spinning them toward the bed with dramatic movements until he dropped her gently onto the plush covers. “Isn’t that better? Much more comfortable than those dreadful theater seats.”

“Those dreadful seats are going for at least a thousand dollars a piece,” she said, raising her chin defiantly to look him in the eye. He wasn’t looking all that formidable with his blue eyes sparkling and his cheeks pink as he seemed to drink her in. “But you’re right. They were like sitting on concrete.”

“I do love being right.”

She exclaimed in irritation, rolling away from him as he dropped to the mattress himself. “Great, my fiancé has a debate club fetish.” Her lips trembled in an attempt to keep the smirk at bay. She failed.

“I assure you that my fetishes are all quite mature and involve only you, my love.”

As much as she appreciated the playful banter with him, she was not ashamed to admit that she melted when he smiled at her that way or enjoyed the attention he bestowed. And without a teenager in the next room or guests nearby, she was enjoying it all the more. She snuggled against him as their legs entwined. The languid kisses and caresses hardly matching the passion they both felt but somehow stymied for a more methodical pace. Her hands busily pushed and pulled at his clothes, freeing him with the same impatience that beguiled their more measured machinations.

Soon enough bare skin came into contact with bare skin, leaving her feeling as if she was consumed
half by flame and half by ice with the burn and surge of passion she felt for him. And while her impatience with the slower tempo grew, their inevitable coming together was ripe with the downpour of fiery sensations.

It wasn’t until after, contentment and peace overriding the emotions of a hectic week and even month, that she noticed the red blinking light on the phone beside the bed. Killian sauntered back into the room from the bathroom, not having bothered to dress or cover up and carrying a wash cloth for her use and smiling broadly at his beautiful fiancé.

“Something the matter?” he asked, three small lines forming as he regarded her. “You seemed happier a moment ago.”

“We’ve got a message,” she said, pointing at the phone. “Who even knows what hotel we’re at besides Liam?”

“That’s quickly remedied,” he reminded her, reaching for the phone and kissing her bare shoulder as he waited through the menu of options. He said nothing else, the flicker of anxiety bold on his face as he cradled the old fashioned phone against his ear.

“Killian?”

He shook his head slightly, his jaw clenching as his back straightening at whatever it was that he heard. Closing his eyes, he let the phone slip slightly and then replaced it back on its base.

“Killian, what is it?” Emma asked.

“My father,” he said, the title for the man sounding cold and distant. “He’s not in London. That was him. He’s in New York. Upstate a bit. He heard I was here and would like to talk.”
Killian couldn’t remember a time when he’d seen his mother sipping on tea or coffee, lazily perusing through the newspaper or quietly contemplating the rest of the day. She was always so busy, rushing from one job to the next to support her sons and their life in the crowded flat they shared in London. It was not that he felt neglected when he was under her care, as she always managed to show up to school functions and often read him to sleep before a few more hours of work at a second or third job. Perhaps that was something he admired about Emma was her own fierce determination to make Henry’s life the best it could be, always making time for him and putting him first.

And yet he never felt that Emma was just fitting anyone in her life. One of his favorite images of Emma was not dolled up and ready for a night on the town. Instead he preferred her blonde hair piled high on her head and her normal business attire replaced with leggings and an oversized sweater with sleeves so long that they cupped around her palms. Yet that wasn’t the image he had that morning as he finished brushing his teeth and made sure that his facial hair was even.

Her hair was still damp from her shower and her clothing more business casual as she lifted the heavy drapery of the hotel room and looked at the street below. She was frowning into her cup of room brewed coffee, a pseudo-delicacy that he planned to skip and remedy with the closest chain coffee place for a latte and some buttery pastry.

Stepping into the room, he greeted her with his own sort of half smile and sought out his socks and shoes. His phone, abandoned on in the center of the rumpled bed, was silent and dark. “No word?”

She shook her head, wrinkling her nose either at the coffee she had just ingested or the question itself. “He’ll come around, Killian. I know he will.”

The he in question was Liam, who had not been at all happy to hear about their father’s call the night before. Somehow he had turned it around that their father and called Killian a few names for considering getting in contact. The angry and tense call had ended abruptly with the older brother refusing to answer subsequent calls and texts. Killian hoped that his brother might calm down after talking to Elsa, but the lack of reply indicated otherwise.

“The Emma I fell in love with wasn’t an optimist,” Killian joked, jamming his feet into his boots. “She would probably tell me to lose my father’s phone number as well.”

“You’ve rubbed off on me.” Reaching for the phone, she held it for a moment and then handed it to him. “And I’ve always thought family was important. The choice of whether you call your father back is up to you.”

“You’d think this would be an easier decision since I had us booked to track down the man in London,” Killian groused, pulling her over to him so that she stood between his legs. She placed a hand under his chin to bring their eyes in connection. “I feel like a bloody coward for not being able to punch in those numbers.”

“You’re being cautious,” she said, still not letting go. “That’s not a bad thing. The ball’s in your court and all that. Call him if you think you need to do it or we can throw that phone number in the first sewer grate we pass.”

“My mother always said he was too much of everything. Too angry, too bold, too charming when he wanted to be…She said Liam was his copy.”
“And you’re more like her?”

“Apparently,” he laughed. “Liam got her curly hair and coloring, but I suppose I have more of her temperament. She had the voice of an angel. Loved to sing all the time, but only in private.”

“So I wouldn’t have been able to convince her to sign with the label?” Emma asked, smiling wryly at him at an attempt to add some levity to his wistful remembrance. “Sounds like I might have a good combo. You, her, Liam. Like the Sound of Music but English.”

“She was scared of the stage. I remember a lad at some pub where she worked for a time asking to hire her for a show. It was quite a bit more money than she was making at the pub, but she said she couldn’t do it. Said it was her greatest fear.”

“So she didn’t do it?”

“No, she came home with a second job picking up laundry for some of the more prosperous families around us. Said she had a responsibility to her boys to keep us in shoes, food, and clothes. Our father gave her nothing, so it wasn’t as though she had any help.”

“She sounds like a strong woman. I wish I could have met her. But mostly I wish she could have been there to see you grow up and be proud of the man you are now.” She placed the now empty paper cup of coffee aside and looped her arms over his shoulder, leaning her head down to his. “I know you miss her.”

His eyes closed, relishing the closeness of her. “I do miss her greatly. And I wish she was here now to see me so happy with you. She’d be rough on you at first, questioning your intentions with me. But in the end she would love you as much as I do. She’d love Henry too.”

Resting his hand on her hip, he squeezed a little as she swayed. “I know I’d be so nervous meeting her. You’d have to hold my hand and tell me I was going to be okay.”

“Always,” he agreed. “And my father? Will you be nervous meeting him?”

She was quiet, the scent of their shared hotel brand body wash mingling between them. “Am I going to meet him?”

“Aye,” he said after a pause. “That was the plan for us. Go to London, confront him, and put an end to all this mess. Now that I know he’s close at hand, it feels…”

“Too real?”

“Aye.”

She hadn’t moved from the spot, their foreheads touching, her body molding against his. “I’ll call the radio program,” she said softly. “I don’t think you should put yourself through that whole interview with all this going on. Regina will understand.”

“Love, I promised you that I would do it. I keep my word.”

“And I love that about you. But you don’t really want to do it. And I don’t want you to have to do it. Elsa’s capable of doing this on her own. Maybe we can even have Anna call in and answer some questions.”

He arched back, taking one of her arms down from his shoulders and kissing her hand softly. “You weren’t forcing me to do it. And we’re already here. I see no reason to back out now.”
“You’re really going for that title of saint,” she teased, squeezing his hand. “Just so we’re clear though. I don’t want you to feel like you have to do it.”

“I don’t feel that you have coerced or blackmailed me, love. I am doing it for a variety of reasons, but none should amplify your guilt.” He looked up at her pensive expression. “But I might feel better about the whole bloody mess if you were to say kiss me.”

“Is that all it takes?” she asked playfully. “So if I kiss you and tell you I sent your father’s phone number to Kathryn and Frederick to research, you’d be fine with it?”

He closed his eyes again, breathing in deeply through his nose. “You did that?”

“Maybe?” She sighed, looking sheepish as her face scrunched adorably. “I shouldn’t have overstepped, but I know that the two of them are really good about tracking down information on numbers. And since you didn’t want to bring Graham in on this…I can tell them to stop.”

“Love, you didn’t overstep at all. I can recognize that actually tracing my father’s number goes a lot farther than me staring at it or listening to his voicemail for the 100th time.” He cocked one eyebrow at her still awkward expression and gave her a frown in response. “But you did so behind my back and we may have to consider a bit of punishment.” She let her jaw drop a little as if considering if he was serious or not. “I think I am now owed two kisses.”

She shimmied her shoulders and rolled her eyes. “If you insist.” She lowered her mouth toward his eagerly, but stopped just before they touched. “Just remember that this is not about love. It’s simply me paying a debt.”

He smiled. “I can live with that.”

***AAA***

The assistant producer on the radio program carried over a few of the proposed social media posts on a sheet of paper. Handing it to Emma, the woman, who looked to be barely old enough to vote, pushed her glasses on top of her head. “I have to tell you that I love that song. It’s gorgeous. And your boyfriend is going to be huge with the tweens and teens out there. I hope you’re already looking at some exposure for him. Does he have Twitter? Instagram?”

“He’s not really in the industry,” Emma said, skimming through the list of teases for the interview that would be broadcast in syndication around the country. “He wrote the song for our friends’ wedding.”

“Well,” she huffed, glancing over her shoulder as though Killian and Elsa might hear her through the glass partition of the waiting area and studio. “He’s got a lot of potential. It’s a crime to let that go unchecked.”

“He’s happy being a teacher and concentrating his efforts there,” Emma said, passing the paper back. “But thanks for the compliment. He’s certainly talented.”

Evie, the assistant, ripped the page back out of Emma’s hands. “The production value is great too. I really liked some of the choices. Did he produce it?”

Emma smiled back, tentative and unsure. “That’s actually me.”

“Amazing. I knew you were a scout for the label, but producing too. I hope that Ms. Mills pays enough. I’ve heard she can be a little stingy, but so are most execs. You should branch out. There are lots of independent artists looking for a good producer. You could set your own hours, work with
“Thanks for the advice,” Emma said, shifting her weight from one foot to the other. “So the interview starts soon?”

“Oh yeah,” the woman enthused. “We’ve already gotten some calls, you know? Calls about Killian and Elsa. Fans I guess. They were asking about them and when and where the interview was. Well mostly about Elsa, but Killian got one too. Some guy. British accent. He was nice. I took that one myself.”


“Yeah, he was really nice. I told him we record in New York, but couldn’t tell him more specifically. He was gracious and all. I liked talking to him. Men with accents are just so cute, you know? Of course you know, Killian has an accent too.”

“Did he? Did he want any other information?” Emma asked, hoping her face was a mask of what she was actually feeling – panic. This was how Brennan Jones had figured out that Killian was in New York. It was a scenario that had never occurred to her. “Like the hotel or whatever?”

“No, not really,” the woman tapped her head at the temple. “Oh wait. He asked if the label was taking care of arrangements. Said he wanted to send flowers as a congratulations to the hotel. I told him I couldn’t tell him the hotel but that yes Storybrooke Recording was in charge of it all.”

Emma thanked her, hoping the woman would get out of her hair and allow her to make the phone calls and confirm her thoughts. Regina’s assistant had been the one to tell which hotel. It would have been easy from there, as they traveled under their own names. Most of the other staff would have been more vigilant, but the head of the label’s assistant was not as careful with information.

Sitting tensely through what turned out to be a light and fun interview were the longest minutes of Emma’s life. She smiled at the right time and places, shooting Elsa and Killian thumbs up when either made a particularly pithy or insightful statement. To the host’s credit, he did not ask them anything too tough. Most of the interview focused on the song, Killian’s inspiration in writing it, as well as Elsa’s musical interpretation. When it was over both of them were smiling and seemed proud of their work.

“You were really wonderful,” Emma told Killian in his ear as she hugged him and waited for Elsa to finish signing an autograph that would be a contest giveaway on the show. Killian had balked at the idea of signing anything himself, stating he was a teacher not a celebrity.

Once all three were deposited safely back at the front of the building, Elsa squinted up at the tall building across the street. “So I’ve got about an hour before I need to leave for the airport. What do you say we go grab something sinful like a soft pretzel or even pizza from a street vendor? It’s not New York without that experience.”

Emma decided it would be easier to explain to Killian about his father if they were comfortable and seated, so she held off until they each ordered a slice of pizza. Elsa offered to pay, joking that Killian held tight to Emma’s hand so he would have the excuse of not having a free hand to pull out his wallet. But Emma joked she could take care of it and then proceeded to pull out Killian’s wallet and the money necessary. All three laughed at her solution.

“So you must have some harsh critique to share, love,” Killian said as they sat on the steps to one of the museums that Elsa had mentioned she wished she had enough time to see. “You’ve looked quite vexed throughout the interview and since we left.”
“You know me too well there, buddy,” Emma said, resting a napkin on her knee and hoping that the wind wouldn’t blow it off. Of course it did and she frowned. “So I know how your father found you.” She proceeded to tell them of the assistant producer’s conversation and the phone call. She even told them she had confirmed with Regina’s assistant via text that it was she who had divulged the details, not realizing that Elsa’s was not the only privacy in need of protection. “I kind of feel like this is my fault.”

“Love, you didn’t make the call for that bastard.” Killian furrowed his brow, taking another bite of the pizza and looking for all the world like the taste confounded him. She knew better. Even Elsa looked concerned.

“But if I hadn’t made you do the interview then this…”

“Well, if you’re to blame then so am I,” Elsa chimed in, somehow managing to balance the pizza slice, soda, and napkin in elegant style. “I helped convince you to do it. I even played up my injury as reason for wanting to do it.” She looked guiltily at the couple. “I should be past the whole solo issue now.”

“I probably wouldn’t have chosen to do it, but it did make sense,” Killian said with a slight shrug. “The song was written by me and was recorded by the two of us. It would have appeared weird for you to do this alone. And despite my misgivings, the actual experience was far from a bad thing. I enjoyed working with you, Elsa. And I didn’t even mind the mindless prattle of the interview. So the two of you can stop with your pouting and guilt. I am not upset about the bloody interview.”

“So…” Emma said, trying to respect his wishes about not feeling guilty. “What are we going to do about your father?”

“I’m not sure there is a clear cut answer for that. But I do think that we need to get Elsa and the guard on the plane, calm my brother down so that we can talk to him reasonably, rent a car, and drive to wherever this is my father is hiding. I don’t wish to do it this way, but enough is enough.”

***AAA***

Liam glowered in the background as Graham and David discussed some sort of match that he was neither aware or interested in at all. It was unusual to have them both there, but David and Graham had been together on the golf course when the call came in from Liam about damage to Killian’s garage. Nothing appeared to be taken but there was a mess in there, as if someone had been searching hard for something.

Pacing the distance from the dining table to the fireplace, he split his focus between the inane chatter and the clock on the mantle that was ticking closer to having to pick up Elsa at the airport. He welcomed the short amount of time that was left before he could have her safely in his arms.

“So you say this was not the state of the garage when you left last night?” the sheriff asked with a casual air about him. He had his notepad out and a pen hovering above the lined pages. However, his expression was that of all business. The cold winds that seemed even worse on the water had relegated them inside.

“I wouldn’t have called you over to see it if it was always that way. I’m sure you’re a fine officer, but we aren’t exactly mates there, Graham.” Liam felt the phone in his pocket vibrate, but he knew it wasn’t Elsa. She was midflight and under rules not to use her phone. Since she was the type not to break or even bend the rules, he was left to believe that it was one of the guys in the band or most likely his brother.
“Point taken,” he said stoically. “And you’re sure nothing’s missing. We’ve had a rash of break ins lately. The pawn shop, two residents on the east side of town, the ice cream store.”

“Someone broke into the ice cream shop the week before Thanksgiving when the temperatures are freezing?” David asked incredulously. “Wouldn’t it make more sense to hit that during the summer when the register had more money?”

Graham shrugged. “Could be kids or someone stupid. Doesn’t take much intelligence to be a thief like that. The good ones aren’t getting caught.”

“Can we focus on the fact that my brother appears to be getting bolder and hitting even closer. Between causing Elsa’s car accident and now this? Don’t we have enough for more than a protective order? It’s just a bloody piece of paper that offers nothing other than a finger wag.” He shoved his hands in his pockets before his fists clenched out of frustration. “Are you even looking for Liam?”

“Of course we’re looking for him. The state police were called and have been scouring the area. They’ve even brought in some of the cyber guys to determine if he can be traced that way. We’ll find him.” Despite the fact that the page on his notepad was only half full, he flipped to the next page. “How certain are you that Liam is the one that broke into Killian’s garage?”

“Who else could it be? This man is clearly trying to hurt me. He almost killed Elsa thinking it was me in the car. What am I supposed to think?”

David leaned back in the chair, throwing one leg onto the other so that his ankle rested on the opposite knee. “Could be those teenagers that Graham was talking about. Or maybe someone down on his luck and looking for something to pawn? Could be some of Killian’s students who think they are owed a better grade. The possibilities are endless, but you’re right. It might be your brother. Doesn’t seem like it though. He usually leaves a note or makes sure you know it is him.”

Liam’s light blue eyes darted to the husband of Elsa and Emma’s friend, narrowing at the man’s nonchalance over discussing the issue. He remembered Emma saying something about David’s own dysfunctional family and something about a twin brother. So he bit his tongue and looked almost pleadingly at Graham.

“I’ll look into it,” Graham promised, standing abruptly. “Get Killian to file a report the minute he’s back, but I’ll give this one a head start. And see if Robin can come over and help you get the structure secure. No sense in leaving it open for the more petty among us. Don’t worry, Liam, we’ll find this guy.”

***AAA***

Emma’s hand ran over the soft sweaters displayed at the store where she and Killian had ducked into to avoid a cold rain that only lasted a few minutes. She’d already picked two for Henry, rolling her eyes when Killian suggested that they purchase one for each of them and use them in upcoming Christmas card photos. It wasn’t such a bad idea, but she had no intentions of embarrassing her son that badly.

“I bet Mary Margaret, Anna, and even Elsa are already done with their shopping,” she said as she tried to see which of the shirts he was browsing seemed to catch is attention. “I’m more last minute.”

He nodded, moving a few steps to the left to look at another display. “I haven’t bought for more than Liam lately. Though I did purchase a large quantity of Irish whiskey for Granny last year. It seemed appropriate.”
She smiled, remembering how Granny pulled that bottle out and showed it to anyone who happened by the private residence long after Christmas. The thoughtful and slightly inappropriate gift had melted a layer or two off her gruff exterior. Though she was back to barking orders shortly after, Emma knew her appreciation had been deep. “We don’t have to do anything big this year. I just usually try to get a few things for Henry.”

A few things was an understatement, as she had a bad habit of hiding her working mother’s guilt behind more stuff – buying presents for any conceivable holiday. She might not make every concert, but dang if he didn’t have an extensive video game collection. To her relief Killian looked appalled at the idea.

“It would be dishonest if I said I hadn’t had quite a few thoughts of you, me, and the lad celebrating the holidays together. I even took to finding a prime location for a tree in the living room. And before all this mess with our brother started, Liam promised that we could find just the right lights for the outside of the house.” He ducked his head. “Mum was always so busy working that we never really had a true holiday like that. I’ve even begun to research some eggnog recipes and whatnot. Mary Margaret and David may be hosting everyone for Thanksgiving, but I was thinking we might for Christmas. Henry would love it.” Both eyebrows went high with the request, his cheeks pink with the excitement boiling under the surface.

She held out a single arm and twisted it dramatically. “You win,” she said, pretending to consider the victory carefully. “But no inflatable snowmen or Santa. I hate those things.”

“Animatronics?” he asked playfully, abandoning his clothing search and stepping closer. “I was thinking an elf workshop theme.”

“Dork,” she teased, shaking her head before kissing him chastely. “And you’re right. Henry will love it. He’ll probably draw up a diagram and plan the whole thing out for you. Then it will take all of January and February to clean it back up again.”

“Gladly. Perhaps we could even do matching pajamas? I hear they are quite the fashion this time of year.”

If he had looked less earnest and her phone had not buzzed, she might have dismissed that wish too. She had never found the joy in dressing alike. But given his excitement, she might have to reconsider the idea. It was a nice thought to have some of her traditions, Henry’s traditions, and Killian’s all melding together, creating new ones along the way.

She frowned at her phone, and he knew right away that it was about his father. Raking his hand over his face he waited for her to respond. “Any word?”

“I’m not sure I was expecting this. Your father’s number is not a cell phone at all. It’s a landline. A recovery center upstate that focuses on spiritual and overall health in terms of alcohol and drug recovery. A rehab basically.” She tapped the link and stared at the stock images of people in loose flowing outfits sitting on grassy banks as they stared upward at white fluffy clouds in perfect blue skies. “I suppose it makes sense. He’s got that liver issue.”

“Which was taken care of?” Killian shook his head. “Wouldn’t they require him to be sober before he underwent such treatment?”

“I honestly don’t know,” Emma said, shoving the phone back down. “Why don’t we pay for this stuff and head over for a drink and look into this information. I’m thinking I could use one. And if I can, you certainly can.”
Liam frowned at the lone suitcase circling the carousel at the airport. Everyone had picked up their luggage from that flight more than an hour before and left the battered purple bag to circle endlessly until some sky cap or porter picked it up and took it out of its misery. For as little as he knew of its owner, Liam felt very much like that bag, aimlessly wandering through a scenario that couldn’t possibly be his life.

His phone vibrated in his hand and with a cursory glance he dismissed the message from his brother in hopes that the next would be from Elsa saying she had safely landed. Killian wanted to talk. He was talked out on the subject of their father. He had nothing left to say or do on the subject.

Elsa had asked him the same questions as Killian when she had called that morning. She wanted to know if he would prefer to meet them in New York and travel upstate to see his father. He’d said no. She said he might regret the decision. He said he didn’t care. She asked if he would talk to Killian again, as his brother was concerned and worried. He said he couldn’t. She had told him she loved him as she hung up the phone, but he’d heard it. He’d heard the disappointment.

He wasn’t a stranger to that sound of disappointment in a person’s voice. His mother had sounded that way when he had gotten into trouble at school. His father had sounded that way in his younger years. Even Killian had worn a mask of it when he’d shown up on his younger brother’s doorstep with the ink of his discharge papers still wet. To hear it from Elsa was even more troubling though.

“Hello there, sailor,” Elsa said, throwing her arms around him and giggling a little at the oomph sound he made in surprise at her affectionate greeting.

“I thought you were to call me when you arrived,” he said, suddenly confused. “Did you not have a signal?”

“The crowd kept surging forward. Travel on the weekend before a holiday is brutal.” She grinned, arching back to take a better look at him. “Besides you told me where you’d be.”

She was not the type for public displays of affection and there was a crowd gathering to pick up their luggage. Two people had already run into them and a man in dark jeans and non-descript cable knit sweater was watching from the sidelines, an overstuffed backpack on one shoulder. “Your guard?” he asked, nodding in the man’s direction.

“Frank,” Elsa confirmed, letting go with one arm to secure her grip on her own carry-on bag. “We talked at the airport and on the plane. He’s got a wife and two kids. Another one on the way in a few weeks.”

“And your wife was okay about you traveling to another state so close to the holidays?” Liam asked incredulously. “And you were okay with it?”

Frank, who had to be at least 6’3” and 280 pounds of muscle grinned beneath a heavy mustache and shifted the backpack to the other shoulder. “Yeah, my wife is a big fan of Elsa and Anna. I kind of promised to ask for an autograph.”

Elsa beamed at Liam, clearly proud of her ability to make conversation with the man despite the awkwardness of the situation. “I am never going to be used to that.”

“Well, seeing as you probably already signed it and Frank here probably wants to get home to that family, let’s run along now. My rental’s in a good spot.” He relieved Elsa of her bag and placed a hand at the small of her back to guide her through the crowded baggage claim area. With only the
barest pressure on her back, he realized she wasn’t moving. “Darling? You didn’t plan to stay here at the airport, did you?”

“I think you should fly to New York,” she said resolutely. Reaching up, she cupped his jaw and cheek with a slender hand. “Go to Killian. Stand with him and face your father. I know you don’t want to see him. I get that. But you and I both know that it is going to eat at you. Look at you now. You’ve got bags under your eyes. You’re testy and moody. And frankly you’re probably going to say something to your brother or to me that you regret. So let’s pretend that you’ve said all your protests. And I’ve said mine. Go. I’ll be here when you get back.”

Liam looked helplessly at Frank who was craning his neck to either look away from them not so discreetly or trying to spot any danger. Either way wasn’t helping Liam. “You have got to be kidding. You just got home. Last night without you was torture.”

“For me too,” she said with a smile. “I know for a fact that there is one seat next on the next flight. You have just enough time to make it.”

“I’m not going,” he said just as stubbornly. “I won’t leave…”

If he thought that digging his feet in would sway her, it didn’t. She stared back at him with the same resolve and determination, her eyes icy as she regarded him though there was a softness in her expression. He recognized that and loved it. “You’re being unfair to Killian,” she noted softly. “I’ve never known you to be intentionally cruel, Liam. And yet you’re hurting him. He didn’t understand. Not really. And you won’t even return his calls.”

“An airport isn’t the place for this.” He scrubbed a hand over his face. “Bloody hell, Elsa. Let’s just go home. I’m not going to New York. I’m not playing into this here in front of God and everyone. Elsa, let’s drop it. My brother has a fantasy that needs to stop now.”

She let her jaw go slack. “Really? A fantasy? Liam, why is it such a bad thing…”

“Because Brennan Jones uses people. And despite the fact that I drilled it into my brother’s head. Despite his fiancé’s reassurances. Despite all of it, Killian could walk in there and forgive him, opening himself up to all manners of pain. And I don’t know if I can stop it.”

That she could understand, as an older sister who wanted to protect and defend her little sister. But still she knew what it was like to lose the chance to speak to a parent, to never have the final words or emotions conveyed and assume that they understood before they were gone. “He wants you there. Killian. He wants you there.”

“Elsa,” he shook his head sadly. “I am not sure I’m strong enough for this.” He glanced over her shoulder and the crowded area of people greeting each other, tired, hungry, elated, sad. Every emotion was on display in that one spot. “I just can’t. Forgive me?”

“I’ll always forgive you, Liam. I just hope that Killian can.”

Giving a tilt of his head in Frank’s direction, they headed toward the exit, Elsa quiet and contemplative, Liam unsure and sulking. She had tried. Later that night when she texted Emma that would be what she said. She had tried.

***AAA***

Emma’s cheeks were nearly as red as the thick woolen scarf around her neck, the lone spots of color with her black coat and dark gray beanie that she had worn with the prediction of snow flurries that afternoon. Allowing Killian to keep his hand free, she looped her arm through his for both warmth
and closeness as they made their way through some of the more tourisy sights of the city. While she tried to keep the conversation light, she could feel the tension radiating off him. He checked his phone for missed calls when he thought she wasn’t looking and seemed to have a faraway glaze to his eyes.

“We don’t have to do this,” she said after they snapped a selfie in front of one of the theater marquees that boasted a show they both wanted to see but couldn’t manage tickets.

“I thought you at least wanted to see the sign. Perhaps there is a scalper though? Might cost a bit, but it would be worth it…” he let his gaze drop. “Oh. You mean…”

“You haven’t said anything about it. Your father. Do you want to go see him? I can still call about a car.”

The sky was starting to spit snow, tiny flakes that were neither beautiful nor a nuisance yet. They melted the second that they touched their skin or coats. Still he brushed at her to rid her of anything that cold and bothersome. “You know, love, as much as I love your strategic mind and preparedness, this is less a case of logistical questions and more of emotional.”

“I suppose I’m just not sure what to say,” she admitted. “Killian, I want to be here for you. Whatever you need. You just have to ask me.”

“I wish I knew what I needed. It would make it easier.” Her hand were rubbing up and down his arms, not any particular pattern or purpose. He was grateful for the familiar motion that usually preceded or coincided with their lips touching passionately. “I need my brother to stop being such a wanker and talk to me. I need my father to be honest.”

“I wish I could make those things happen.”

“And perhaps that is all either of us can do.” He sighed. “Elsa was going to talk to him. Tell him that his place was here confronting our father. I doubt it will help.”

“You should have hope,” she said, her black leather covered hand stopping at his neck, fingers curling into the hair on the back of his head. “I’m not your brother, but I’ll be there.”

He tilted his head, eyes half closed. “Your being there is the only thing keeping me in control of myself right now, love. I don’t know that I could face him without you.”

She yanked on his arm, throwing him off balance and catching him at the same time. Her lips fused to his, the kiss hard and needy there on the sidewalk and half under the awning for some shop. She parted her mouth, inviting him inside as her hands resumed their slow massage of him. His grunt of surprise disappeared into more of a sigh. Her lips were soft and supple against his, the flesh pushing against his, tugging at his bottom lip incessantly.

“I thought you did not appreciate a good public make out session, love?”

“Some rules are meant to be broken,” Emma declared. She bunched the softly worn leather of his jacket in her hands and ignored the startling sound of car horns close by as someone must have committed some heinous act of bad driving. “So we are…”

“We’ll drive up in the morning. With or without my blasted brother.” He gave her an awkward wink. “In the meantime, may we please go about our evening of adult entertainment without a second thought about my family? I would prefer to enjoy this time alone with you as much as I possibly can. After all, I only have a limited time to properly woo my fiancé before she becomes my lovely wife.”
She pretended to consider his proposal, tilting her head and twisting her mouth in faux contemplation. “Deal, but we have to deal with the car first. And someone has to call Mary Margaret and David about not taking Henry to the airport. And we have to do something about the airline tickets. Maybe we could drive home rather than fly. It might be a nice escape for us?”

“I rather like that idea, love,” he smiled wider. “Have I told you that I love you for your brilliant mind?”

“Among other things.”

“I am a fan of every part of you, Emma Swan.”

“Soon to be Emma Jones,” she countered. “And I know you’re going to agree when I suggest you call Mary Margaret.” She pretended to wince. “I love my friend dearly. But if I call, she’s going to tell me all the bridal shops and whatnot I need to visit in New York. And she won’t lay off until I somehow agree to do it. She won’t do that to you.”

He chuckled, digging into his pocket for his phone. “Very well, my love. You deal with the car and I will take on the wedding planner and teacher extraordinaire, Mrs. Nolan. We’ll take on the airlines later.”

The duo ducked into a yogurt shop that seemed only slightly less busy than anything else, ordering a shared treat and then beginning Killian’s call and Emma’s attempts to rent a vehicle on her phone. She could only catch his end of the conversation, but she considered herself lucky to not be the recipient of her excited friend’s questions. He could barely get in the request about Henry before he was promising to check out some restaurant she had read about and offering to find her a t-shirt that she had seen another teacher wearing.

“Aye, I will certainly pass that information along,” he said, cradling his phone between his ear and shoulder as he scribbled something on a napkin. “No, Emma’s been a bit preoccupied to do any wedding shopping, but I’m sure it will be priority soon enough.”

That must have sent the woman into a long soliloquy of details and information, as he nodded and chimed in with appropriate responses. All the while he waggled his eyebrows at Emma over her phone. The entire scene was amusing and she was tuning out his robotic reactions until she heard him ask her to repeat herself. In quick succession he asked a few questions and then thanked her again for agreeing to look after Henry until their return. Emma lowered the phone and looked at him questioningly.

“It would appear that someone smashed the lock to our garage and did a bit of snooping around. According to David, Liam could find nothing missing but was not completely sure. It seems David was unaware that Liam had not notified me at all about it.” He shook his head, digging his spoon into the dish of peanut butter and chocolate flavored yogurt. He never lifted it to his mouth, placing it back in the plastic dish with a sigh. “I understand that he is angry about our father, but this is a time to put that aside and tell me of the development and the fact he had to call out the sheriff.”

She clicked the confirm button before the six minute limit ran out, electing to ignore the fact she had completed her task in favor of being supportive. “Graham is thinking it’s your younger brother?”

“Not sure. I’m hearing this from the wife of the man who was there for my brother to tell the sheriff. It’s not exactly first hand knowledge.” He balled his hand up into a fist and tapped it against his forehead. “It’s truly maddening to think my brother is so unwilling to talk to me that he would think this information better left unsaid. What if that wanker broke into the house? What if you or Henry had been there?”
“He didn’t,” Emma said, ignoring that twinge that told her she was worried about the same thing. “He hasn’t. We’re fine. And all we store in the garage is junk that neither of us can bring ourselves to part with. Maybe it’s a sign we should.”

“A fact I’m grateful for.”

She felt as if she had spent most of the weekend asking him what he wanted to do. It was his choice. She knew he had to be the one to choose when and where to see his father. He had to be the one to confront both of his brothers. Or he could decide to ignore it all. So she asked him one more time what he wanted to do.

He pulled the phone from her hand, setting it aside on the table. “The plan has not changed. First we’ve got this frozen dessert to finish. After that I will make a call to Graham to find out what I can. You check into out flight situation? Then we’re off.”

He made good on that promise, hurrying through the conversation and waving them down a cab while she explained the situation to some ticket agent over the phone. As they slid into the car she gave him a thumbs up at her success in negotiating their ticket transfers. She even managed to read and respond to a text from Elsa about Liam’s refusal before following his lead and placing the phone in her coat pocket. By the time they made it back to the hotel to change for dinner, she was quite a bit calmer and he certainly was as well.

Stepping out of the dressing area, barefoot in her red and black dress, she laughs and twirls in place to his appreciative reaction. “You know I sort of thought you might like this. Even if you did first try to woo me with a boardwalk arcade.”

“You were reluctant,” he said, clearly enjoying the view as she bent to retrieve her shoes. “I had to surprise you.”

“You’ve surprised me and even made me surprise myself with how easily I fell for you.” She swept her hair over one shoulder. “Not that I’m complaining.”

He stood from his seat, his own dark colored pants and shirt with its waistcoat conforming nicely to his body. “I’m not sure I wish to share you with this city tonight. Perhaps we should stay in? Entertain ourselves?”

She walked easily in her heels, something he could never understand how she did, slowly sauntering toward him. “I was promised a date,” she reminded him. “No paper placemats. No playgrounds. No Granny’s.”

“And I shall do my best, my love.”

“That’s all either of us can do, Killian.”
He shook awake just before dawn, the warmth of the body next to him more than a little comforting as his eyes blinked into the unfamiliar darkness of the hotel room. Their romantic and sweet date of dinner, dancing, and a carriage ride through Central Park that she had called touristy, had been a wonderful reprieve from the anticipated conversations with his father and the feeling that his brother was not at his side in all this. Still the doubts and fears returned full force as soon as his eyes had closed.

Emma mumbled something against his chest, her sleepy eyes locking with his as she smiled almost shyly and tugged at the sheet that covered them haphazardly. “We have to be up soon,” she told him, propping herself up on one arm. “But if you want we can talk.”

His right arm was around her, holding her as she studied his face and mimicked his own sadness. He lifted the battered and scarred arm at his left, holding high the wound that was usually covered with a prosthetic. “I’m not sure he even knows about this,” he said, dropping his arm back at his side. She instinctively reached for it, her thumb caressing over the scars. “Foolish, I know, but I hate for him to find out. I would rather not appear weak to him.”

“You won’t,” she said, her grip on his arm tightening. “You aren’t weak. The man I know and love is strong, brave, and probably a better man than Brennan Jones ever imagined when he left. This…” She squeezed his arm again. “This doesn’t matter. Not in showing who you are, not really.”

Rolling his neck on the pillow, he glanced toward that wrist and grimaced. “My father gave up any chance at a relationship with me or with Liam so many years ago. I can’t let myself believe that he’s changed or that the outcome will be any different now.”

She smiled sadly at him, placing a soft kiss at his shoulder, as it was the closest area of skin she could reach to do so. “Killian, I don’t know why your father did that. And I certainly don’t know why he’s reached out now. But I know something about being abandoned. If you let him, he can hurt you. Only if you let him. Go there tomorrow or today or whatever and see what he wants. See if he can explain. But don’t forget what he did. Don’t let yourself be hurt by him.”

“You have more confidence in my abilities than I, love.”

“Maybe I just know that when we walk out of that place tomorrow, we’re not losing or gaining anything other than closure. No matter what your father says or does, we’re still going to be happy
together. We’re still getting married. We’re still going to see Henry and hear all about camping. You’re still going to start this new venture with Mary Margaret. You’re still Killian. I’m still Emma. Those are the things that matter.”

“I suppose I want him to be honest with me. I would hate for him to see my lack of a hand as a reason to pity me.”

“He’d be a stupid man if that’s all he could do,” Emma said firmly. “You don’t think I pity you, do you? Because I admire you for what you can do that others take for granted. And I don’t find you lacking at all.”

“I suppose we will see what stuff my father is made of soon enough.”

“And then maybe we’ll have an explanation for your younger brother and a way to stop him from all this stalker stuff. We can go back to planning our wedding. Elsa and Liam can move back to the condo.”

“Despite the mundane nature of all that, I quite hope you’re right, Emma. I can’t wait to have you as my wife. Should we consider moving that little plan along faster? A trip to city hall, perhaps?” While there was mirth in his question, she was not sure that it was completely heartfelt. His eyes did not dance like the usually did when he teased her. She knew that his heart was still heavy with worry about his father. She might have even said something about that if her phone had not vibrated another warning of a text message.

“Your interview yesterday was broadcast in about 300 markets overnight. Regina’s a little excited.” She scrunched up her face. “I have already told her no more. You’re hanging up your writing and performing hat. I’m not ever asking you to do that crap again.”

“Never?” he asked. “Because I was thinking that perhaps I might write a song for our wedding. You are the one who inspires me most, love.”

“As wonderful as that sounds,” Emma said waringly. “That’s totally how we ended up in this mess. No, if you want to serenade me, you do it in private and do a cover.” She gave him her most serious and slightly motherly look. “Do whatever you want. You know that I’m not that hard to please.”

Yelping, she felt him roll her over onto her back as he hovered over her. “I daresay you are nearly impossible to please, love. I had to work at it to convince you that dating would not damage you in
some way.”

She twisted her mouth to one side. “So I’m a little picky. That should make you feel good. You broke through that.”

“I am quite proud that I broke through your walls.” His breath was warm against her, his eyes softer and less pained than before. “I hope you are truly happy with me. As I am with you.”

“Killian,” she said, taking his face between her hands. “I promise that I have never been happier than when I’m with you. I love you.”

“And I you.”

***AAA***

Elsa stared at the screen and blinking cursor, wracking her brain to find the right words for a social media post that would speak to her fans and yet not draw undue attention to herself. Graham had said a bit of publicity was fine, warning her to keep more intimate details private. She was grateful to her fans, though she did sometimes feel odd in having them at all.

“Almost done, darling?” Liam asked from the doorway. He’d already been down to the garage and put some things back in order so as to not leave it all for Killian. “Robin texted that he would be by in a bit to look at some security features for the garage. I think he’s bringing Regina and Roland with him.”

Her violet blue eyes widened at the news. “We’re inviting people over to your brother’s home when he’s not here?”

“It’s more like they invited themselves. Besides, you like them.”

She flexed her fingers over the computer’s keyboard. “Yeah, I like Robin and Roland.”

“Regina is a bit of a bother, I know, but it appears a package deal. I thought I’d put on some water for tea and perhaps order something in? Pizza? Chinese?”
“She doesn’t strike me as the take out carton kind of woman,” Elsa mused. “Let me finish this and I’ll be down in a minute. I’m sure there’s something in the kitchen I can whip up that even Regina will find palatable.”

“I’ll be there to assist,” he told her, kissing the crown of her head. “I can be your sous chef today.”

“A captain assisting a woman without a rank? I’m not sure that will win you any points.”

Bending at the waist, he playfully nuzzled the side of her neck. “I rather think you have an even more impressive title. You’ve always struck me more as a princess or some other type of lovely royal.”

She leaned backwards into his embrace, nudging his face to lock eyes with him. “I prefer queen. She’s the one in charge. So I’d rather be the queen.”

“Then so you shall, darling.” He looked toward the blank spot on the screen where she had been concentrating her efforts with no results. “Aren’t there people to do that for you? A social media coordinator? An intern?”

She ran the tip of her nose against his jawline. “I said I would make a few suggestions. I guess something about how the interview went. We have a picture of me with the host and Killian. I guess that would work, but what is there to say about it? Had a good time? Lots of questions? Hope you enjoyed?”

“You’re thinking about it too hard. Your fans just want to hear from you. Say something about your favorite moment or a little behind the scenes tidbit. It doesn’t have to be much.” Pushing the down arrow, he pointed with his index finger to the screen. “Look here, darling. Your fans are asking about everything from your shoes to your favorite movies. I’d say the field is wide open.”

“Well, once I get this done, I’m sure Regina will have plenty of suggestions. I’m glad she’ll be here and not driving me insane with texts and emails that she copies Emma on and tells her to ignore. Those are followed by Emma basically translating for me, helping me see that she’s not so evil and horrible.”

“You don’t have to be here when she arrives,” Liam suggested, pulling her hand from over the keyboard and kissing her palm gently. “I can make your excuses. You could go see Anna or
perhaps…”

“I’m not afraid of Regina. I just don’t particularly like her. Maybe seeing her outside of work will help. Besides I like spending time with you. And Roland is absolutely adorable. You do realize that once Anna and Kris have their baby that we’re going to spend quite a few weekends playing the fun aunt and uncle.”

“Sounds delightful, so long as I am not expected to do much more than make funny faces and noises for the wee one. I’m not quite the parental figure that my brother has managed to be over the years.”

***AAA***

The rented sedan carried the couple easily along the back roads of upstate New York. They probably could have made better time on the interstate, but had decided to opt for a more scenic view and slower pace. Perhaps it was avoidance, but Emma and Killian did not seem to mind the label as they had lingered over coffee at a quaint restaurant an hour outside the city and taken a few photos to share with Henry once they got back home.

“It’s comfortable,” Killian announced as Emma perused her emails and typed out a few of her own with her thumbs. The break in silence startled the blonde passenger.

“What? Oh. The car. Yeah, it’s pretty nice.” Her eyes lifted from the phone to the road. “We’re farther than I thought.”

“You’ve been a bit preoccupied with the phone. I didn’t think it was right to disturb you about it.” He made a quick glance to the rearview mirror and then back to the road again. “I think it’s roomier than my jeep or your car.”

“Yeah,” she said, lowering the phone to her denim clad lap. “You are looking for another car? Seriously? Is there something wrong with the jeep? I like the jeep.”

“The jeep’s fine. It’s just got a rather small backseat. So does your car. What with Henry being a growing lad and our discussion about perhaps adopting a child or children…we might need more room. I was just thinking that it might make sense for one of us to have a more family friendly vehicle.”
She glanced over her shoulder to the tan leather seats and wrinkled her nose. “Like a minivan or an SUV?”

He chuckled, his thumb rubbing against the steering wheel nervously. “I take it you don’t like those ideas.”

“I didn’t say that. I just have a hard time picturing you without your jeep. And a harder time picturing me without my car. It makes sense. But the idea is kind of hard to imagine for us.” She reached over to touch his arm. “It makes me feel old. I know I have a 13 year old son. And that technically makes me old. But the idea of minivans, carpools, soccer, band practice, teacher conferences. Oh God, I already do those things.”

“Do I need to pull to the side, Emma?” he asked, feigning concern behind a brightly growing smile. “Do you need a moment?” Gesturing with his prosthetic hand, he chuckled. “I wasn’t suggesting it was time for you to retire or consider joining a bridge club. I was only thinking about the inconvenience of trying to transport a child or children.”

“It makes total sense,” she admitted, her cheeks pink from the slight embarrassment of overreacting. “I guess I wasn’t thinking about it when… I want to do this. I really do. I just realized that things will change. And I mean, how are we going to afford it? We kind of stretched the budget with the work we did renovating the attic? And Henry’s growing so fast that I’m practically going broke with clothes and school uniforms. And while we haven’t talked about it, I kind of get the feeling you’re thinking about this offer from Mary Margaret.”

His sigh was labored as he followed the GPS directions and turned left on a stretch of road that seemed even less busy. “I haven’t really made a decision. I wouldn’t without you, you know?”

“What are you wanting to do?” she asked, shoving the phone into her purse by her feet and twisting in her seat to face him better. “It might be good. You wouldn’t have Gold to contend with as much. You seem excited about Mary Margaret’s ideas for curriculum. It could be a good change for you.”

“Aye, but it could also flop and leave me penniless and destitute. I am hardly a wealthy man, my love, but this is a bit more than just a simple wager on the future. It could be quite damning to my career should it not work out and I have to find a new position.”

She smoothed his hair at the spot over his ear, smiling softly as he instinctively moved his head toward her. “There’s always music,” she said hesitantly. “I know you said you don’t like the spotlight and all that, but what about song writing. With my role at the label, I could probably sell dozens of your songs. It’s not as lucrative as performing, but still…” She stopped herself. “You don’t
“Love, if you wish for me to explore that as an option, I doubt I would disagree with you. But no, it’s not high on my priority list. If I am struck by inspiration to write another song, I would much prefer to share it only with those I love.”

***AAA***

“Things seem cozy,” Liam said, hoping that the teasing of Robin would take the place of the rock in the pit of his stomach. It didn’t, but it was at least a little distracting. “You and Regina.”

“We’re taking things a step at a time.” Robin jotted down a measurement and then stared at the pad before making another note. “And unlike you and Elsa, I have a son to consider. Plus she’s a bit out of my league.”

“If you’re looking at it from the perspective of money and power, then yes. But I’d say you surpass her in other areas. Besides weren’t you and Marian always talking about love not being a contest? Nobody’s keeping score, mate.” Bending at the waist, Liam picked up a spilled box of tools and began to replace the items in the wooden crate.

“Using my own words against me is hardly fair.” Robin chuckled. “When I met Marian, I knew. I knew I wanted to be with her. I knew she was the one. I never thought I deserved her, but it never stopped me from wanting that life with her. Even before Roland entered our lives, I was happily oblivious to the idea that there was any other path in life for me. And once he was born, well…I have to tell you that it does something to a man to watch the love of his life become the mother of his son. And then it was over. She was gone.”

The last of the scattered tools went into the box and Liam returned it to one of the shelves. “I didn’t mean to dredge all that up. I was simply trying to distract us from the silence with gossip about Regina.”

“No offense meant, mate. I was simply trying to find something to talk about. I had not meant to hit a nerve.” He frowned as he reached for an overturned canister. “I suppose I could ask about the weather, your business, if you have any plans for this holiday, or any thoughts on those new songs Emma sent last week for our live shows.”

Robin craned his neck back to inspect the higher windows, taking the tape measure from the sill to
the floor and deciding it was probably not worth the efforts to alarm each one. “It’s a bit cold but
that’s normal for this time of year, business is going well especially with the Joneses needing my
services, just a quiet sort of dinner at Regina’s, and I haven’t had much of a chance to listen yet.” He
smirked back at his friend. “Should I ask you the same questions or should we admit that I suck at
the small talk stuff?”

“Perhaps I should go check on the lasses and leave you to it?”

***AAA***

Emma and Killian both admitted they were expecting the rehab center to appear more clinical than
spa like as they were led through a lobby that included stone floors and water feature that was
supposed to be calming. Floor to ceiling windows revealed a leafy oasis outside, framed by wood
and stone accents. The woman behind the desk had smiled so brightly when Killian signed in that
she nearly split her face in two, enthusing that Brennan had spoken of his sons with such pride.

“I didn’t picture this,” he admitted as they were directed to sit in a waiting area that could have been
someone’s living room with cloud soft leather sofas and lemony yellow walls. “I thought…”

She was sitting at his left, something they had previously discussed, as he wanted to be able to
extend his right hand to his father easily. Rubbing her cheek against his shoulder, she tried to spread
some of the confidence she knew he was lacking. “It’s going to be fine.”

“Aye, it is. Or it isn’t. Can’t do much to change that now.”

He wasn’t usually so fatalistic, but this trip seemed to bring it out of him. “I won’t say anything,” she
told him, covering his wrist and prosthetic with both her hands. “I don’t want to…”

“I don’t expect you to sit there mutely. Surely you can think of something to say.”

“I don’t want to be too friendly. I don’t want to be too mean either. A happy balance. That’s what I
want to be.”

“Sounds lovely.” Killian leaned forward and stared out the French doors to the hallway in search of
the receptionist or his father. There were two false starts, as there were others wandering the halls.
Killian was not completely sure he would even recognize his father who had taken on a bit of
legendary status in his own head. When a thin and long limbed man walked into the room, Killian was taken aback and surprised. His face and features were much more angular and his dark eyes sunk back farther into his head. A mop of thick and unruly hair indicated that he had that same habit of running his hand through it still. Killian could see that repetitive motion as his mother spoke of unpaid bills and obligations.

“Killian,” the man said, taking a step forward with his arms partially extended. When his son did not stand, he took a step back and eventually lowered his arms. “I wasn’t sure…I hoped…”

“I thought it was time we spoke,” Killian said, his voice shaking slightly. While he hoped no one noticed the tremor, Emma must have since her hand rubbed his covered wrist with a bit more pressure. “I have questions.”

“I’m sure you do,” Brennan said, motioning to a seat diagonal from the loveseat as if asking permission. When Killian nodded, the older man sat down, folding his hands over his chest as he did. For the first time he looked toward Emma. “And you are…”

She turned to look at Killian, not sure if he would introduce her or if she should explain her presence. He glanced downward and then out at his father. “This is my fiancé, Emma. Emma, this is…”

“Brennan Jones,” the man interrupted, tipping his head toward her. “Your fiancé? That’s brilliant, Killian. Such a lovely bride for you. When is the happy day?”

“We are still working on that,” Emma answered when Killian did not respond. “It’s hard to plan with everything going on.”

“I’m sure it will be soon though,” Killian supplied. “Not that…”

“I wasn’t fishing for an invitation, son. I was simply making conversation with your lovely girlfriend. I suppose I still think of you as that wee lad at your mother’s side. Hard to imagine you with a wife and family. But you are grown now, and quite well it would seem. You’re happy, healthy?”

“I’m well,” Killian answered curtly. “And we are happy.”

Emma didn’t respond, smiling at Killian in a way she probably intended as reassuring, as she could feel his muscles still tense at her side. If she looked at Brennan carefully she would see the
similarities between him and his sons. Killian had his nose and jaw, even similar cheekbones. And though the older man’s hair was lighter at the temples now, the coloring of both men was on point too. It took Emma a moment to realize and remember her high school genetics lesson that Brennan’s chocolate eyes did not preclude him from being father to his blue eyed sons. Something about recessive genes or something.

When she had figured that out, Killian was answering vaguely that his career was going well and that Emma’s son lived with them. She again gave her most reassuring smile. It was then that Killian asked about the initial contact with Liam and whether or not he had made it.

“I did,” Brennan said, holding up his arm to display a hospital bracelet. He was wearing clothing rather than hospital garb, a rust colored sweater and dark jeans hanging loosely on his thin frame. “My doctors insisted I contact family to see about a donor. I was not eligible for the official recipient list, as I have not been sober all that long. When Liam refused, I gave up hope in…Killian, I didn’t do right by you. It’s not even a matter of confession to admit that. It’s…I regret it. I regret that gave up my sons.”

His jaw clenched and eyes narrowed to nearly slits. “You gave us up? You say that as though you left us in the care of someone else. Our mother died. You are our father and you ignored your responsibility. Not only that, but you left us behind while you started a new life. You replaced us with that new life…”

“I know it looks that way, son.”

Killian pulled his arm out of Emma’s grip. “Looks that way? It was that way. You named your new son after your first son. Who would do that but a man trying to replace the old parts of his life. You had no intentions of ever having us as a part of your life. You only contacted my older brother out of this need. There is no way else to see it. Don’t you realize that we can count? Your son Liam was conceived and born before our mother ever died. You cheated on her, left her penniless and ill.” Killian stood abruptly, his breathing measured and his one hand clenched into a fist.

“My doctors insisted I contact family to see about a donor. I was not eligible for the official recipient list, as I have not been sober all that long. When Liam refused, I gave up hope in…Killian, I didn’t do right by you. It’s not even a matter of confession to admit that. It’s…I regret it. I regret that gave up my sons.”

His jaw clenched and eyes narrowed to nearly slits. “You gave us up? You say that as though you left us in the care of someone else. Our mother died. You are our father and you ignored your responsibility. Not only that, but you left us behind while you started a new life. You replaced us with that new life…”

“I know it looks that way, son.”

Killian pulled his arm out of Emma’s grip. “Looks that way? It was that way. You named your new son after your first son. Who would do that but a man trying to replace the old parts of his life. You had no intentions of ever having us as a part of your life. You only contacted my older brother out of this need. There is no way else to see it. Don’t you realize that we can count? Your son Liam was conceived and born before our mother ever died. You cheated on her, left her penniless and ill.”

“I know it looks that way, son.”

Killian stood abruptly, his breathing measured and his one hand clenched into a fist.

“Killian,” Emma said, partially standing to join him. “You wanted…”

His eyes flashed toward hers, the anger evident along with regret for having seemed to heartless. “I don’t wish to relive old times. I’m here to talk about you. About Liam.”

Brennan looked as though he had assumed that to be true. “I knew your brother would be angry. I deserve that anger.”
“Expect no argument from me on that.”

“It was unfair of me to expect his support or his help. I learned that lesson and followed his instructions not to contact you, Killian. Not until I knew you were so close.” Brennan touched the plastic hospital bracelet with his fingers, the lone symbol that he was not a free man to come and go. “I’ve been here a few weeks now. Two to be exact. And I’m trying to understand myself better. I regret how I treated you and your brother. I hoped that you would be ready to hear my apology.”

“Which would apology would that be? What are you sorry for now? Leaving us? Not answering the cries for help that Liam sent when we were in danger of being on the streets? What do you regret? Naming your sons the same thing? Raising your youngest with so much anger that he’s now threatening to harm my older brother? Tell me! What is it that is your biggest regret? Apologize for it so I can move on with my life and leave you here.”

Brennan turned briefly to Emma upon hearing the accusation against the younger Liam. When she showed no emotion at all other than her radiant concern over her fiancé, he faced his son again. “I… Liam? He’s done something? I… I thought he was back in London. He didn’t stay around here for very long after I arrived. He said he had things to tend to back home.” The heel of his left hand rested at his eye. “He was angry at him. Thought he should have… well…”

“I’m not here about the reasons why.” He lowered himself back to the seat, perching on the end of it like he might run any moment. “I want to know if you are involved. Did you put him up to it?”

“No, I wouldn’t do that. I love each of you. I know it doesn’t seem that way. And as for the name… well, that was a bit of a tricky situation. You see, Liam is also the name of my wife’s father. When she found out we were having a boy, she was quite insistent. I couldn’t tell her that I didn’t want to give that name to another of my sons.”

***AAA***

Roland was a good ice breaker between Regina and Elsa, as he kept both of them entertained with his constant dialogue. He was confused at first where his beloved Uncle Killian and Aunt Emma were when he arrived and found Elsa and Liam in their place. There was almost no consoling him when he realized that his best friend Henry was not there either. Yet he soon calmed down and was showing Elsa and Regina how Killian and Henry had shown him the best view of the docked boats from the second story of the house.
“I think your father and Uncle Liam might need some help,” Regina urged gently. “They look confused.”

Elsa stifled a giggle at the sight of Roland pumping his legs and arms as he ran for his father.

“I’m coming, Papa. I can help. Just wait for me!”

Regina stood at the door and watched until the boy was in his father’s embrace and then turned on her heeled shoes toward Elsa. “I’m hearing good things about the interview. You apparently impressed quite a few people. And sales via download are really taking off. I don’t usually suggest doing this, but we need to strike now. So I want you and Killian in my office a week from Monday to record something new. That’s enough time, right? For Killian to write something?”

“Killian’s a teacher, Regina. He’s not a songwriter or singer.”

Chocolate brown eyes blinked back at Elsa incredulously. “You’re assuming I don’t know that. Just have him come back in after his classes or whatever. We can make some progress in a few hours each day after his schedule. That will work, right?”

***AAA***

Emma could see Killian through the narrow glass pane beside the door as she paced and waited on Mary Margaret to finish her detailed analysis of the state of her son. She was worried about Henry, as that went with the territory of being a mother. But the fact that his newest coat had a slight tear in it was really such a minor issue that she was nearly ready to scream at her friend to get to the point.

“Is everything okay?” Mary Margaret asked, clearly taking a break from her careful reporting. “I mean with you and Killian?”

“We’re visiting his father right now,” Emma explained. “I guess I’m anxious to get back in there. I’ve never really seen Killian this on edge.” It wasn’t a lie as she spied through the glass again and watched as Killian’s hand clenched into an angry fist that she hoped would not land anywhere.

“Oh God, he’s…” Mary Margaret paused. “Look, take as much time as you need. Henry is fine here. David’s got him down at the shelter taking a look at that dog. I know that you haven’t decided yet, but it doesn’t hurt to look, not really.”
“Thanks, Mary Margaret,” Emma said with choked back sigh. “I know he needs to hear from me. I’ll call back a little later. Maybe things will be more settled then.”

“No problem. And for what it’s worth, I’m glad you, Henry, and Killian will be in town for Thanksgiving. It wouldn’t have been the same without you. I love you, Em.”

“I love you too.”

She crammed the phone back into her pocket and walked toward the door again, her hand already extended to open it. She knew she had very little to say to the man who had seemed so kind on the surface. Her own experience was probably clouding her judgement, but she could feel the insecurity radiating off of Killian as he faced the man who should have loved him beyond everything and didn’t. His stern expression softened as she snuck back into the room. It wasn’t exactly covert, as both men stopped talking as she entered and took her place next to Killian.

“Your son is okay?” Brennan asked her, one of the few questions directed toward her.

“Fine,” she answered, keeping it succinct. “I told Mary Margaret we’d be home soon.”

Killian lowered his head. “How serious is it?” he asked his father, not letting his gaze reach. “The prognosis.”

“I wasn’t exaggerating when I told your brother I need a transplant. It’s not out of the question that I might find a donor at some point. I suppose it is a fitting situation after years of drinking.”

“And you’re here to stop?” Killian reiterated, his shoulder brushing Emma’s. “Because Liam said no to you.”

“Killian, I never expected your brother to say yes. It is quite an invasion of all we hold dear to think that I can just reinsert myself into your lives. He made that clear and was clear that you felt the same.” The man’s half smile was similar to that of his sons. “I agreed only out of…well, to be honest I couldn’t imagine a situation where you might forgive me.”

“And what changed? What makes you think I am less angry and hurt than Liam?”
"I suppose a bit of hope. It sounds quite mad actually, but here in our therapy there are all these sessions. Individual ones. Group ones. And in one of the group ones we each selected a song we had heard that meant something to us. And one of the women in the group selected a son by the woman you shared the duet with…Elsa. It was a lovely tune and I could see why it would inspire her so. In her efforts to explain the song’s meaning we were looking up information and found the song that you had written. I realized that it was you.”

Emma felt her jaw go a bit slack at that revelation. “You found his song?” she asked. “That’s…”

“I didn’t know what to do with that information. I had promised not to contact you, agreeing with your brother that it was too much to ask that you might forgive me. But the words of devotion, love, forgiveness, and acceptance were strong. And I continued to hope, Killian. I continued to hope that maybe there was a chance.”

It was clear that Killian wasn’t sure what to make of his father’s claims, keeping his face neutral as Emma seemed more worried over the revelation. He crossed his right arm over his body and smoothed his palm down her arm. “And so you decided…”

“I suppose it is daft, but I decided to view your visit to New York and interview as a sign. I asked my program sponsor to get the number of the studio and soon found where you were staying. I left the rest up to you.” He glanced at the clock on the wall. “I see now that you have other reasons for being here. You mentioned your younger brother.”

Killian gave a brief and vague description of the events as of late, noting that the younger man had been seen only on video. “You are saying you know nothing about it?”

“Of course I didn’t. I wouldn’t condone that as a way for my sons to behave, especially with each other. I said before that he had told me he was going back to London. I…I can contact him. See if I might…”

Killian scoffed, his grip on Emma’s arm stronger as his father flailed a bit under the pressure of the question. “You’re going to what? Ground him? Make him do some menial penance?”

It was Brennan’s turn to look annoyed as he again studied the clicking wall clock. “I’m not sure what you were expecting me to do. My sons are all grown men. I can’t really…” He placed his hands in a prayer like sign on either side of his nose and breathed in deeply. “In this place they teach a lot of things, especially about human nature. And one of those lessons is that we can’t always or ever
change people’s behavior, only our own reaction to it. I will do my best, Killian, but I can’t perform miracles.
Chapter 53

David lurched with the effort to control the game’s racecar, nearly falling off the small sofa in the loft’s living room and making his wife laugh at his antics. “I seem to be going backwards,” he shouted, turning the plastic wheel holding the controller. He shot Mary Margaret a pained expression and then looked back to the screen. “It’s not easy!”

“Henry seems to be having no problem at all,” she shot back, folding her hands over her more than ever noticeable baby bump. “I think it might be that you’re too old.”

The teenager laughed, expertly weaving his vehicle through the crowded course on his half of the screen. “You just need practice.”

“Maybe by the time the baby arrives I’ll be an expert.”

There was a short laugh from Henry. “More likely the games will have changed and improved by then. This one will be outdated and not played any longer.”

David groaned loudly as the news of his defeat flashed on screen and Henry gave a little fist pump of victory. “Maybe you can come over and play games with the baby. I don’t think I’m cut out for this. I’ll stick to driving my truck through the streets of Storybrooke.”

Mimicking David’s relaxed pose with his legs crossed at his ankles, Henry smiled brightly. “It took Killian a while to catch on too,” he said consolingly. “But he’s good now. Not as good as mom at it, but he doesn’t end up in last place.”

Mary Margaret stood and moved toward the kitchen. “I’m sure he gets lost of practice with you around. You have been playing a while yourself. Now on to more important things. Who wants a snack? I was thinking some popcorn or maybe cupcakes? What do you think, Henry?”

The teenager glanced at the screen where his victory was still being displayed and smiled. “Can we have popcorn like my mom makes it? With Milk Duds melted inside it?”

Mary Margaret made a noise like she might protest, but David interrupted with his own opinion. “You know, that doesn’t sound bad. I’m not sure we’ve got the candy though. I can run get some. What do you say, Henry? Want to ride along?”

“Can I drive?”

“Not a chance, but you can ride shot gun,” he said, grabbing both their jackets and throwing Henry’s to him. “Come on. Your mom will be calling soon. We better be back for that or Mary Margaret will have our heads. Then neither one of us will be playing or winning at video games any time soon.”

***AAA***

Emma unintentionally laced her hands together in front of her as the doctor spoke to Killian. It was all very clinical and from what Emma could hear and understand, not at all hopeful. Brennan would need a liver transplant soon, the years of drinking had taken their toll on his body. The younger Liam had not been a good enough match and the older Liam had refused to even consider being tested.

While she paid attention to the conversation, her eyes scanned over Brennan Jones for the first time without distraction. She could tell that he had once been a very handsome man, rugged and almost dangerous looking with his steely gaze that both Killian and Liam had inherited. His long fingers
seemed to tap out an unknown rhythm while he waited to speak, not out of nervousness but some other need that stirred within him. And while he was clearly not the world’s greatest father or even close, he did look at Killian with a measure of pride that was evident even to her. His lanky and willowy frame was unlike his two sons who both kept up a muscular tone. Its lack of strength was probably due more to his drinking and liver condition than any diet or regiment.

“There are lists though?” Killian asked, not yet looking at his father or Emma there in the room that felt all of a sudden too small. “Surely there is someone…”

“Mr. Jones would have to be sober for at least 12 months before he could be considered for one of those lists. He may not have that long.” The doctor looked at him over the rims of his glasses that seemed to forever slide down his face. “A family match would probably be the best bet at this point. There would be less chance at rejection and not system to process this through.” He pushed the glasses up again. “I do understand that there are some family dynamics that mean it could be a bit tricky. That is always a consideration too.”

Killian swallowed hard, placing his thumb and forefinger on opposite sides of his forehead. “Is that why you called?” he asked his father. “You decided to contact me because the other two can’t or won’t do this.”

“No,” Brennan said vehemently. “I swore I would not put you in that position. I simply wanted to talk to you, tell you how sorry I am. I wanted to know that you are okay. I needed that.”

Emma reached out and touched his sleeve, tugging him back to his seated position. “Maybe I should step out,” she said softly, giving his forearm a squeeze. “This really is a family thing.”

“No,” Killian said, finally looking toward his father. “He’s said his apologies. I have heard them. I’m not sure there is more to say.”

The doctor shifted uncomfortably in his chair, his silver clipboard waving a bit as he did. “Mr. Jones, Killian, I know this is difficult. Family situations often are, especially in cases where there has been alcoholism and whatnot. I do understand that.”

“If he doesn’t get the transplant, what will happen? How much longer…” Killian seemed not able to say his father’s name or even refer to him in anything other than pronouns. It wasn’t that hard for Emma to pick up on and her heart ached for him.

“Killian, I didn’t ask you to come here for any reason other than to let me apologize and see if we might be able to talk and come to some sort of understanding. It would not be right for me to ask you to go against your brother’s wishes and consent to a transplant.” Brennan’s voice had the same melodic quality of the older two Jones brothers, soft and firm with a hint of music in it. “I wanted to see you again, wanted to say how very sorry I am for not being the father you deserved and needed.”

The doctor again shifted, looking quite uncomfortable. However, Killian would not let up on the question he asked. “We’re talking a few months at most. Probably two. He’s a good candidate for a transplant from a related donor. I see no complications such as rejection, but there are no guarantees.”

“And the person donating? Would there be any dangers in that?” Emma’s eyes shifted from her stealthy study of his father straight to Killian, wondering if he was truly considering such a thing.

“There are dangers with any surgery,” the doctor said humorlessly, “but the donation of a portion of the liver is one of the easiest and least complicated transplants today. Recovery would take a few weeks, but there are few issues for donors when you look at other options.”
Brennan leaned forward, his elbows resting on the arms of the chair. “Killian, do you possibly mean…”

“I was simply questioning the doctor on what we need to know. For all I know you made up all this transplant nonsense simply to lure me here. You’ve claimed you don’t wish to ask me to be a donor, but you showed no qualms about asking Liam. That seems a bit odd to me.”

“I assure you that I mean nothing more than to apologize and see if we might repair our relationship.” Brennan’s voice shook with emotion as he observed at his son’s tense shoulders and cold stare at absolutely nothing. “I can see you don’t believe that.”

“Why should I?” Killian asked, as the doctor stood and began to make an excuse about needing to leave. It didn’t escape Emma’s attention that the man had come in on a Sunday to have this conversation, stressing the dire nature of the situation. “You talk about this relationship that needs repair, but I don’t remember such a relationship. You were absent as a father before you ever walked out. You made our lives miserable.”

To his credit Brennan had endured every question and accusation without anger or emotional displays. He was not stoic, but he’d remained in control. “I didn’t realize you remember it that way.”

“There is nothing else or any other way to remember it,” Killian said, rocking backwards. “Let’s see about this blood test. Not because I owe you anything, but because I don’t want to be left with the guilt of what could have been.”

“Killian,” Emma said not waringly but with concern. “It’s a big step. Maybe we should look at alternative treatments or…I mean surgery…”

Licking his lips, he gave her a nod and then turned his attention to the slowly retreating doctor. “If I have this blood test, that’s not a promise, correct? I am just seeing if I might be a suitable match?”

Clearing his throat, the older man followed up those questions with an affirmation. “It is quite minor of a test, simply a blood draw. We would then analyze it. Given that it’s Sunday and the start of a holiday week, I’m assuming the results would be back in a day or two if the labs aren’t backed up.”

“Very well. Let’s do this.”

***AAA***

Liam had walked Robin, Regina, and Roland to their car and waved them off with a forced smile. He had to admit that while his brother’s home was comfortable, it felt odd to stay there without him and odder still to know where Killian was at that moment.

“We survived?” he asked teasingly as he took the spot next to Elsa to clean up the few dishes from their lunch and late afternoon snack. As much as he had hoped that Regina being there in a social setting might provide Elsa a calmer view of her boss, the woman did not seem to have a casual mode. Every question she asked seemed to be a probing attempt at gathering intel rather than idle curiosity. Even her demeanor was rather formal with the others in jeans, flannel shirts, or sweaters and Regina in a tight skirt and blouse with uncomfortably high heels.

“Robin seems to think he is getting somewhere with the condo board,” she said, ignoring the question and stepping to the side to load the dishwasher. “It would be good to get back there, especially before the holidays.”

“Aye, I’m rather anxious myself.” He tightened his grip on the plate that almost slipped from his hands under the water. For a few minutes they worked in silence, both concentrating on the task at
hand. “You’re disappointed in me, aren’t you?”

Standing up straight and wiping her hands on the nearby towel, she shrugged nonchalantly. “I don’t know that disappointed is the right word. I guess I don’t understand. You’re rightfully angry with your father. The man abandoned you and your brother. I get that.”

“But?”

“Liam, I know what it’s like to lose your parents when there are things left unsaid.” She brushed her hands again on the towel. “Are you sure that you want to face that?”

He rocked backwards, seeing both the hurt in her eyes and his own concern reflected back. He hated that she had such thoughts of her parents, as he could not imagine anyone not adoring her. Surely her parents had been proud of the beautiful, headstrong, talented daughter they had raised. He could only hope that one day she would see that. “Darling, I’ve been facing that. There are many imagined conversations and fights that I know will never come to pass. Perhaps one day I will stop thinking in those terms.”

“Not today?”

“No, Elsa, not today.” He threw his arms out, nearly displacing the spice display that sat between the sink and stove. “Come here.”

She flew into his embrace, burying her nose in the softness of the shirt he wore. “I’m sorry, Liam.”

“Whatever for?”

“I shouldn’t have pushed you. I shouldn’t have made you or tried to make you feel guilty. I guess I didn’t understand. I would give anything to have a conversation with my parents. And I kept thinking about that. As much as our relationship was strained, it was never an issue of abandonment. And I suppose I projected.”

Both of his hands, still damp and smelling of the apple scented dish soap, framed her face as he pulled her up from his chest. Meeting her eyes, he smiled. Not one of his mischievous or roguish sorts of grins, but a genuine smile that curled up. “I love that you want the best for me. I only want that for you too.”

***AAA***

Emma pressed her foot on the gas of the rental car and threw the turn signal on moments before passing the slower moving car in front of them. While the drive to the facility had been more relaxed and lazy with side stops at diners and country stores, she and Killian both felt the urgent need to get home to Henry and their little house by the ocean.

“It looks as though the lad had a fine time,” he remarked, running his thumb over her phone screen. “Either that or he was so insanely bored that he took a selfie with every tree in the woods,” she laughed, settling back into a normal speed. “But you’re right. His smile shows he had fun.”

“Perhaps we should look at maybe going to that rock climbing wall. It might be a good little excursion.” He slipped the phone into the cup holder on the console between them, sinking back into the seat. The miles that she was putting between them and his father had already seemed to relax him a little, though he was still noticeably tense. “Or in the spring we could see about renting a canoe.”

“He’d love that.” Even in the dimming light she could see his fingers go to the crook of his elbow,
touching through the soft gray sweater gingerly. “You know that it might not work out, right? I mean there are a thousand and one reasons you might not be a good donor.”

“Are you telling me that I don’t need to prepare my excuses just yet,” he said, a tight laugh bubbling out. “I suppose you are right about that, love. But the fact they opened the lab up on a Sunday is quite telling. They are assuming I will be the donor for him.”

“Still doesn’t mean you have to do it.” She reached her hand over and placed it atop of his. “Remember what we said. We’ll gather all the facts and make a decision when necessary.”

“I know,” he said, closing his eyes momentarily. “I just fear that if no one else will do this, it is left to me. How do I make the decision of whether or not to save my father’s life? Despite what he and his decisions have done and how horrific a situation he created, he’s still a human being. If I have it in my power to save someone’s life, including a detestable man such as Brennan Jones, can I truly say no?”

The curve in the road ahead meant she had to put her hands both on the wheel. “I don’t know the answer to that either. I think you have to do what feels right for you. And you don’t worry about what everyone wants or thinks. You’re already the most generous and loving man I know. Whatever you decide here isn’t going to change that.”

“Perhaps I should hope not to be a match,” he said with a chuckle. “It would things much easier.” Clearing his throat, he lifted his hand and shifted in his seat, indicating a change of subject. “So with our plans for a London holiday off the table and Henry’s new pup needing attention for a few weeks, what do you say we start working on our honeymoon plans?”

She scrunched her nose, pressing her foot down on the gas a bit harder. “I’m not anti-honeymoon, but I hate all the planning. Can’t we just get in your boat and sail away for a few weeks. You know, go wherever the wind and the waves take us?”

“That’s a brilliant idea, love,” he said cheerily. “I wouldn’t mind that a bit. Perhaps hit a few of the smaller ports that we’ve neither one ever seen? Anything else for the itinerary? Any special events you wish to see? Any tourist traps?”

Her face relaxed and she smiled through the glass windshield. “Nope. I plan on lots of time alone with you. I wouldn’t mind if we didn’t see another soul for as long as we’re away. Think we can handle all that togetherness?”

He hummed as he pretended to think. “It might be a bit much, but I’m game if you are, Swan. Perhaps we could set some ground rules. No clothes strewn about the cabin? No talking with our mouths full?”

“Those are good. Maybe we should just outlaw clothes all together? I mean I know you hate finding various articles of clothing just piled on the floor.”

“Might make things more interesting. We’d have to add a few stipulations to that. Perhaps a requirement of time in bed? It is our honeymoon after all.”

They made up a couple of dozen or so other rules each more ridiculous than the last. She requested pop tarts on board and he was more about activities. While some were risqué, others were sweet and loving, earning a kiss to the hand or cheek of the promise of picking the next song on the rental car’s stereo. They were both laughing at the absurdity of it all when Emma’s phone blooped with a call.

“Answer it, will you?” Emma asked as the squinted at the road signs ahead warning of another
interstate merge she had to figure out in the waning light. “Or just let it go to voicemail.”

He chose to answer it upon recognizing Elsa’s number and picture on the screen. “Hello there,” he answered, hoping he sounded normal enough. He didn’t want the woman, or anyone really, to think that his visit with Brennan had caused any strife or damage to his psyche. There was enough drama with the situation with the younger Liam to suffice without bringing up old hurts that might derail any of them from moving forward.

“Wow, just the man I wanted to talk to today,” Elsa said, sounding forced. “Regina came by with Robin and Roland. She’s sort of digging in about us recording together again. I told her you weren’t interested, but she’s…well, she’s Regina. I don’t mind witnessing her dramatic tirades, but this is harder. She said she’d call you personally. I wanted to give you a head’s up.

“I appreciate that. The woman is a bit stubborn.”

“A bit?” Elsa cackled at the comparison in her head. “I have met brick walls with more flexibility. So anyway. Consider yourself warned and continue to screen.”

“Hey, I answered your call, didn’t I?”

He could imagine the icy blonde pursing her lips and tapping a delicate finger distractedly on the table. “Yes, but I called Emma’s number. Your phone’s off. I knew she’d keep hers charged up for Henry to be able to reach her.”

“I didn’t realize…” He reached into the pocket of his jacket, placing the phone in the palm of his prosthetic. “Oh. I had it off because we were at that facility. I didn’t turn it back on. Liam wasn’t trying…”

“No, he’s been dealing with some things around here. He’s in a good place though. Or at least getting there.”

He thanked her and ended the call, dropping both phones into the cup holder. Staring down at the fake hand, he sighed. “My father didn’t seem to notice did he?”

“Notice what?” Emma asked, again making a move to pass a slower moving car. She missed his pained expression as she checked for other cars in the side mirror. “I think he was pretty much aware that you weren’t really there to thank him or kiss his feet.”

“My hand. He didn’t even notice I lost my hand.” The fingers of the prosthetic hand were perfectly shaped, but he could not feel or use them like a natural hand. It was just ornamental and without true value other than to make others more comfortable with his disability.

Emma slowed the car back to the speed limit again, casting a quick glance over at him. “He didn’t say anything about it, but maybe…”

“It doesn’t truly matter. I gave him no opening for such a moment. And it is not as though I told him that I didn’t have but one. I just…I would have assumed that he would have noticed. Wouldn’t you have noticed if something about Henry was different than it should be? Of course you would. You love your son and want only good for him.”

“Maybe he didn’t notice, but…well, I think that’s just another strike against him. I may not always think of you as only having one hand, but that’s for good reasons. You’re amazing. You do things that I think you shouldn’t be able to do. I’m always in awe of that, but at the same time…I sort of take that for granted. He should be proud of you and how you’ve rebuilt your life after the accident. That’s what a parent would do.” She reached over and touched where the nylon and spandex of the
hand’s braced wrapped around his blunted wrist. “Killian, I know it’s not the same as a parent loving you, but you are loved. I love you. Liam loves you. Henry is crazy about you. You have friends, family, and so many people in your life. If you want to help your father, then we’ll stand by you. If you don’t, I doubt that anyone who truly loves you will blame you.”

He shot her a sort of half smile. “I preferred when we were discussing plans for the honeymoon. Perhaps that is more appropriate until we know if I’m a good match.”

She placed her right hand back on the wheel. “You know. I’m looking forward to that. No matter where we go, I’m going to get to relax and wake up to you every day. No responsibilities, no worries. Other than Henry, I don’t plan to talk to another soul besides my husband.”

“I quite like that idea myself.” Even in the cramped space of the passenger side of the car, he stretched out like a cat. “We haven’t discussed it much, but what about after the wedding. Where do you see us?”

Her jaw went slack for a moment. “You already sprung on me that we need a minivan or SUV, which I still haven’t forgiven you for by the way. And now you’re mentioning moving?”

“No,” he answered hastily. “I meant more figuratively than literally. I suppose we’ve chatted enough about my future plans what with Mary Margaret wanting to open our own sort of school. And we’ve decided to look at adopting or fostering children, which I must say is one of your more brilliant ideas, love. And we know that we are more likely than not going to have a new canine join our little family. Plus relatively soon we’ll get Elsa and Liam back to their condo. Henry’s going to continue being busy with all his activities and high school soon enough. So I’m thinking we’re all set with future plans except for you. What is it that you plan for the future?”

She snuck a look at both the side and rearview mirrors, her shoulders raising tensely as she continued on with the drive. “I guess I just assumed I’d keep doing what I’m doing now.”

He made a low humming as he considered that. “I noticed that you seem to enjoy the recording process quite a bit. Perhaps that is something you should consider. You were helpful to Elsa and her sister. And several of the crew said you had fantastic timing and suggestions. It would mean less time on the road and more in the studio, but I think you might prefer that.” He didn’t meet her eyes, not sure if she would take the suggestion well.

“I don’t know,” she finally admitted. “I don’t know that Regina would like that idea too much. She’s pretty much convinced that my skills are better used finding talent and managing their time. I’m not so sure she’d want me on the creative end.” She breathed out heavily. “But you’re right. That does sound nice after all these years of bars and clubs where the acts are very rarely what they portray online. And I have all these ideas for cutting new songs.”

“You’d be magnificent,” he said, pulling her right hand from the wheel back to his mouth and kissing the back of it softly. “You know, if my brother or whoever broke into the garage hasn’t destroyed it, there is an upstairs to that building. With a bit of renovation we could turn it into a proper studio. You wouldn’t have to work for Regina.”

Her jaw once again fell and her eyes grew wide. “I’m not sure which I’m more surprised about,” she said with a terse laugh. “Are you actually suggesting we both quit our jobs and venture out on our own? Isn’t that a little risky?”

“It isn’t that much of a risk for you. Elsa and Anna would surely sign with you, as would my brother and his gang of miscreants. And there are bound to be others. I’m not saying start a label and compete with Regina. I’m just suggesting that you start a production venture. You could still work
with many of the same clients and artists.”

“And you?”

“I’ll be busy at whatever we name this bloody school of Mary Margaret’s, teaching music and recruiting students apparently. Who knows? I may have to woo you a bit more to get Henry enrolled.” He chuckled at the idea of having to persuade his own fiancé for such a favor. “Though I might out to concentrate on ones we would actually charge tuition.”

“You know he’d kill me if he couldn’t go there. But I was thinking more along the lines of your music. I know. I know. You don’t want to do it as profession, but maybe you could write some stuff that we could sell to other artists. So many don’t write their own songs these days. You’d make a fortune doing it.”

“Emma,” he said, breathing in through his nose. “I don’t wish to have a career like that. It is one thing to write for our friends’ wedding. Perhaps I might pen something for our own. I don’t even truly mind helping Elsa as it is. But I truly don’t wish to make it a habit or a career.” He frowned. “I just hope that I have not disappointed you.”

“You aren’t disappointing me. I’m really proud of what you’ve done. And if you don’t want to do it, I won’t push. I just…” She curled her fingers tighter around the steering wheel. “Have you been doing this because of me? Just because of me?”

“Emma,” he said, breathing in through his nose. “I don’t wish to have a career like that. It is one thing to write for our friends’ wedding. Perhaps I might pen something for our own. I don’t even truly mind helping Elsa as it is. But I truly don’t wish to make it a habit or a career.” He frowned. “I just hope that I have not disappointed you.”

“You aren’t disappointing me. I’m really proud of what you’ve done. And if you don’t want to do it, I won’t push. I just…” She curled her fingers tighter around the steering wheel. “Have you been doing this because of me? Just because of me?”

“Emma, I…”

“Damn it, Killian. You did all this crap that you didn’t even want to do because I asked you to do it?”

“Emma, that’s not such a bad thing. And it isn’t as though you forced me to do it.”

“But you wouldn’t have done it if I hadn’t asked. Is that what you are saying?”

His eyes were locked on the road ahead, but from the corner of her eyes she could see him clench his jaw and his nostrils flare slightly. “I gave up my designs on becoming a musician many years ago, Emma. And I hardly think that your inspiring me to do more with it is a bad thing. You didn’t force me or even manipulate me. It was simply…”

“You are a horrible liar, Killian. I guess I was so caught up in my job and wanting to please the investors, the producers, Regina, Elsa, and everyone that I didn’t realize. You must be pissed at me every time I asked you to do just one more thing. Why didn’t you say something? Why would you do this stuff if it was making you miserable?” She could feel her stomach tighten with the threat of shedding tears, feeling both guilty and frustrated for her role in all this. “And your father. Your father found you and contacted you because of this. Damn it, Killian. I am sorry. I’m so sorry. I should never have made you do any of it.”

“Love, you have done nothing so unforgivable. My father tracking me down simply because of this interview yesterday is a bit of a fluke. While, I feel vindicated that I was right to lead a more private life, it is highly likely he would have tracked me down anyway. I am not sure anything would have prevented it. So if by doing the song and the interview, well, I conquered some fears and in some way helped you in your career, then I am happy to have done so.”

“You know you’re one of the bravest guys I know, right?” Emma asked, blinking against the headlights of cars on the other side of the interstate and her unshed tears. “But we’re in this together. It isn’t selfish to say no to me. I won’t break. So here’s the deal, Killian. You speak up and tell me
that you don’t want something or like something. And I will stop trying to convince you of things when you do say no. Anna and Elsa are talented enough to do this without you. I don’t want you to resent me or feel trapped.”

“Never, my love, never. And I’m not saying I’m putting away the writing pen forever. Perhaps there is a song in me about you. Something we could share together on our wedding day?”

***AAA***

“I think they’re here,” Elsa said from her spot on the couch where she was reading one of her favorite classics that Killian just happened to keep on the shelf. Wrapped up in the story, she had not even noticed Liam’s dozing until he had let his head drop to her lap. He had just come in from a few tasks at the Rabbit Hole himself, smelling faintly of the old leather and wood stain. Holding the book in one hand and letting the other comb through his thick curling hair, she had been comfortable and content there in front of the silent television and dark fire place.

Liam blinked drowsily at her. “What?”

“Emma and Killian. A car just pulled in. The jeep I think.” She gave his shoulder a little slap. “Come on. Let’s go help them get their stuff inside.”

He stretched his arms over his head and reached for her clumsily, pulling her down for a kiss and then again. “Very well. I’ll carry the heavy stuff and you fawn over their little adventure like you didn’t just see them yesterday.”

She rolled her eyes. “You do realize you’re going to have to explain the condition of the garage to your brother?”

“You sure you don’t want to do that, darling? He likes you better than he likes me.” To prove his sincerity, he protruded out his lip dramatically. “Please?”

She pretended to mull it over before slipping out from under him and sending his head to bounce on the couch cushions. “Nope. We’ll do it together. Come on.” She carefully placed the book on the end table and then offered him a hand with a warning look not to pull her back down.

“A man should not be frightened of his younger brother.”

“You’re scared of Killian?” she asked tossing him his jacket and then heading to the door without hers. “Seriously?”

“I’m not frightened, darling. You just don’t realize how anal he can be about things. And the fact that I didn’t know where the electrical tape should go when I went to clean up the mess will probably bite me in the arse.”

The cool fall air swooped in as she held the door open with her hip. “That’s a shame. I like you ass. I’d hate for a chunk to get bitten out of it.” She did not wait for an answer, darting out and helping Emma guide the sleepy yet walking Henry back to the house.

“Thanks,” Emma said, nudging her son. “According to Mary Margaret he’s been gorging on junk food and sort of crashed about an hour ago.” She grabbed hold of his shoulder again as he appeared to head toward the cellar doors rather than where Liam and Killian would bring the luggage. “I think he’s had quite a weekend.”

Elsa laughed, placing her hand on the center of his back and guiding him. “Up one step,” she coaxed. “And another.”
Both women were out of earshot when Liam threw one of the duffle bags that Henry had packed over his shoulder. “So you saw him?” he asked, squinting into the darkness at Killian. “I mean…”

“Aye, he’s in a rehab facility.” Killian offered no more than that, peering around the disorganized contents of the garage. “Want to tell me what happened here?”

Liam made a face and dragged his toe on the concrete floor. “So someone broke in. I didn’t see anything missing, but filed a report. Robin came over and installed some automatic lights and a buzzer if someone enters without the opener.” He shifted his weight with the bags. “Did he look sick?”

“Older, thinner, sort of pale…Any idea who did it or are we assuming our younger brother?”

“Graham said we should probably assume our brother,” Liam said with a frown. “Brennan give you any…”

“He’s dying, Liam. He wasn’t there asking how we were or what we were about all these years. He is still a selfish bastard who simply can’t be bothered to anything but ask us to support him once again. I can’t say you were wrong to refuse before.” He took two steps in the direction of the house. “He said he hadn’t seen him in a while. Said he would try and reach him. I wouldn’t count on it.”

Killian took a few more steps before turning around and facing his brother. “I gave some blood to be tested. I don’t know if I will agree but thought I should know my options.”

Liam gave a curt nod. “You’ll do the right thing. You always do these days.”

“What the bloody hell is that supposed to mean? You are acting as though I did something wrong here. If I did, I’d appreciate an answer as to what. Either that or you can sod off.”

“It was an observation,” Liam said, taking a few steps of his own and then stopping before he reached his brother. “You didn’t always do the right thing, you know. I worried about you, thought you would end up in prison or at least sued by the time you were 25. That night I got the call about your accident. I thought I had underestimated you. I thought you were going to die.” He shook his head as if to dislodge that thought. “I thought that I had done a poor job in raising you. But I guess…you changed. You weren’t looking for the easy way out. You went to school, started teaching, bought a house, and…well…sometimes I forget that you’re supposed to be my little brother.”

“So you’re saying that I’m an incredible bore and that’s why…what? I don’t understand.”

“You weren’t always so unselfish, brother. After mum died and we were alone, I wondered how I was going to get you to be man. I didn’t know how to deal with you. I barely knew how I was going to get by myself.” The strap of the larger bag slid on his broad shoulder. “I prayed that I might know what to say to you. You were finishing high school and I wished for you to join me in the navy. You didn’t want that. You wanted university, parties, and fun. I couldn’t afford those things and our father was not willing to even return our calls.”

Impatiently, Killian shifted from one foot to the other. “I know what a bastard he was, brother. I don’t have any designs on him being anything but one.”

“No, but without my help or guidance, you somehow became a man who gives. I didn’t understand it at first. I do now. You give and give because you don’t think someone will love you unless you do. You don’t trust that you’re enough. Even with Emma. God knows she fancies you more than any woman ever has. She has agreed to marry your sorry arse, but you somehow doubt her love. So you twist yourself and turn yourself into everything she could ever want so she won’t leave.” Liam swallowed hard, sensing his brother’s surprise would not last long. “I do the same with Elsa. We
both do this. We don’t trust that anyone can love us and not leave.”

Killian scoffed, turning on the heel of his boot. “I don’t think you earned a degree in psychology, brother.”

“Perhaps not,” Liam called after him. “But you know I’m right. Brennan Jones won’t love you more if you donate a portion of your liver to him. He’ll say he does. He’ll make promises and paint rosy pictures of sitting in the front row at your wedding. But he won’t be there. Killian, he’s not a father in the real sense. He won’t ever be won over by anything you or I do. So you can put yourself through all sorts of torture proving that you’re a better man, but it was never a contest. And it won’t win you a bloody thing other than a scar from surgery and a bitterness that he still won’t ever see what he did as wrong.”

Killian didn’t turn back to face his brother, but he made no move toward the house either. In the dim light from the house he could see Elsa’s guard sitting in a parked car and probably wondering why they were still out there. In a few minutes Elsa and Emma would come looking for them. They would want to know where they were and what was taking so long. “He couldn’t give me an answer,” he said softly. “I waited to hear it. I wanted to hear why. He said he was sorry. Said he was wrong.”

Not missing a beat, Liam nodded into the darkness. “I know, brother. Every child wants a mother and father who love them. We didn’t get that. We had a lovely and brilliant mother, but our father… he wasn’t there. And no amount of wishing will change that. But our lives aren’t so bad. We did okay without him.”

“Aye, we did.” Killian turned back slowly. “If I am so lucky as to become a father, I don’t want to be like him Liam. I want to be a better man.”

Closing the few steps between them, Liam embraced his brother. “You are a better man. And maybe I haven’t said it because I don’t always say the right thing. I’m proud of you.”
Chapter 54

Henry’s fever was at its highest on Monday after their trip to New York and his own camping trip in an unheated cabin with his father. While it was on the tip of her tongue to chastise Neal for not making him wear a hat or gloves in their little adventure, she simply informed him that Henry was not available for that last minute suit fitting that Tamara was insisting on for him. There was no further question about it as she checked on her on an hour or so later and found him sleeping with a rattle of congestion when he breathed and his face flushed from the fever.

If anything good happened from the virus he had caught, it was that Elsa and Liam elected to go stay at Anna and Kristoff’s for the duration. They had beat a hasty retreat upon finding out from Emma just as everyone was headed to bed that Henry was indeed sick. Liam had a performance after Thanksgiving that couldn’t be missed and Elsa feared for her own singing voice. So rather than quarantine themselves with hand sanitizer and masks, they slept on matching couches with her sister.

Killian did not seem all that upset at the development, cooking breakfast that morning sans shirt and humming along with the radio without fear of being watched. That was except for Emma who was parked on the couch with a blanket thrown over her and Mary Margaret’s organized trove of wedding suggestions in her lap. Occasionally she would throw an idea out to Killian, who mustered some enthusiasm over flowers and trinkets.

Delivering a freshly brewed cup of coffee to her, he held it aloft until she raised her head and accepted his kiss as payment for the caffeine. He pulled away after the first kiss, licked his tongue over his bottom lip, and then dove in for a second kiss before placing the steaming mug within reach.

“You do know I don’t care about any of this stuff,” she said, blowing into the too hot to drink mug. “We could just go to city hall.”

“I would go anywhere with you, love, but I don’t think we’d survive the wrath of Mary Margaret or Ruby. Mary Margaret has become the pseudo mother of the bride and Ruby’s apparently designing you quite the frock. I dare say both would be disappointed beyond reason if we were to elope.”

She flipped a page in the notebook that was innocently titled bouquets and boutonnieres, barely glancing at the rose and tulip heavy cascade of flowers. “How do you know what kind of dress Ruby’s designing for me? She’s barely shown me other than to make sure her measurements are right. She may be a hot mess, but she’s very superstitious and wouldn’t want you to see it before it’s time.”
He grinned as he returned from the kitchen with his own mug, settling in next to her and resting his left arm on the back of the sofa. The breakfast frittata he was making was in the oven and already filled the air with so many flavorful scents. “She’s had some questions about my abilities.” Her raised eyebrow made him chuckle. “Nothing too offensive, mind you. She simply asked about my hand and if a zipper was preferable to buttons.”

“And your answer?”

“That it was your dress and your comfort and desire should come before my preferences.” He grimaced at the heat of the coffee as it hit his tongue. “Though I should have told her that my thoughts on the subject included you, a strip tease, and a quite enjoyable evening to start our lives out was husband and wife.”

“She would be the only one of our friends to appreciate that.” Emma tried to sound annoyed as she blew one last stream of air at the coffee. “But just so you know, she’s not designing what I wear under my wedding dress. That will be for your eyes only. Well, your eyes and I guess the cashier who sells them to me.”

The kitchen timer and a sharp knock at the front door interrupted any further discussion of what to wear or not wear for their still nebulous wedding plans. Killian darted to the kitchen, snagging a sweater from the laundry while Emma peered out the window to see who was stopping in so early. “Speak of the devil,” she announced when the whirlwind that was Ruby draped her arms around Emma to hug her. Keeping one hand holding a large paper sack, she waved it toward Killian.

“Granny heard that Henry was sick. She sent her miracle soup to help.” The dark haired beauty laughed as Killian peeked in the bag he sat next to the fresh from the oven breakfast. “You don’t want to know what’s in it. I don’t even know. I just know there is a lot of hot sauce because she thinks it makes you sweat out a cold or something.”

“That’s very kind of you and Granny,” Killian said, “But perhaps it would be better for lunch than breakfast?”

Ruby ignored the question, shimmying out of her slim cut coat and collapsing dramatically onto the couch just next to where Emma had been huddled. She lifted one of the photos of wedding flowers and promptly ripped it. “If you go with something like that, you might as well have carnations and baby’s breath. Seriously, Emma, if you insist on leaving me alone in the spinsterhood, you can at least show some fashion sense and class at your wedding.”

Emma let out an amused sigh as she squeezed Killian’s shoulder on her way back to the couch. He’d
already plated up some breakfast for Henry, adding a slice of toast and brimming glass of orange juice that he placed on a tray. He made a show of balancing it perfectly and was delivering it when Ruby made a face at another photo.

“Don’t,” Emma warned. “They aren’t even mine. This is Mary Margaret’s doing.”

“I should have known. She’s called you forward to the pastel side. Shoes ready to dye? Am I right?”

“Even Mary Margaret has better taste than that,” Emma protested, hoping that the advertisements for such things were well tucked away. “I thought you promised to be supportive. You’re supposed to be on my side.”

While nobody had mentioned Ruby staying for breakfast, she made no protests when Killian returned with a plate for her and a report that Henry woke up long enough to take a bite or two along with another round of medicine. “Try the soup later. It’s bound to work.” Her lips curled around the fork and she moaned loudly in appreciation.

Killian blushed slightly over Ruby’s reaction, but Emma was more amused. “That sounded indecent. Seriously, Ruby, it is just eggs, cheese…” She turned to Killian for help.

“Zucchini, a bit of spinach, a dash of cream, and some honey cured ham.” The fork he was holding sliced though his triangular piece and dropped a modest amount into his mouth. He closed his eyes as he chewed and swallowed, something Emma found endearing. He was the same way in so many things he was passionate about, including kissing and touching her. It was as though he wanted to savor each and every moment. The blue of his eyes popped against his dark lashes as his eyes opened suddenly. “It is quite good.”

It was Ruby’s turn to be amused, wagging her fork at him. “You two need to spice things up around here. You’re turning everyone orgasmic over breakfast.” Her ability to eat bellied the thin frame that was covered in a red and black outfit that hugged each curve with definition. Her long legs disappeared under a short black skirt that was buttery soft. A zig zag of red leather crossed in both front and back.

“We have plenty of drama, Ruby,” Emma said warningly, winking at Killian as she adjusted the blanket over her lap and enjoyed her own plate. “What are you doing up anyway? I thought that you were spending the weekend with Graham? Shouldn’t you be… recovering from doing things that I don’t want to know about and you’ll end up telling me anyway?” Emma knew her friend well, having spent more than a few nights listening to rants about failed one night stands or the time when Ruby forgot the name of a date and had Emma scouring the internet to find his identity while she hid
in the restroom.

Throwing her head back dramatically, Ruby threw her legs up on the solid coffee table. “Okay so I am not just here to deliver soup and mooch breakfast. I need advice.” She lifted a single eye to open and spied Emma pleadingly. “You know I don’t do this. Not really.”

“What don’t you do exactly?” Emma asked warily after she gave Killian a silent look that said it was okay for him to stay. “Or should I ask what did you do?”

“Saturday night,” she said cryptically with an arm thrown over her eyes. “I went to the Rabbit Hole.” Emma wondered how her friend was able to sigh properly with the tight outfit. On someone else it would look like they were trying too hard, but Ruby was a beautiful sight in the leather and bold colors.

Swallowing, Emma drew in a breath and waited for the worst. “Without Graham?”

“He was working.” Ruby threw herself back to sitting on the edge of the couch, her back ramrod straight. “Okay so this whole monogamy thing. It's got rules, right? You can’t just go around sleeping with guys you don’t know if you’re in a monogamous relationship.”

When Emma didn’t answer, her mouth full of the egg dish, Killian gave each woman an amused smile. “It’s generally frowned upon, as is sleeping with men you do know.” His smirk wasn’t returned by either, forcing him to turn the laugh that was bubbling up into a cough.

“Who exactly are we talking about?” Emma asked, prodding her friend gently. She’d been through and subject to many of Ruby’s freak outs. This one seemed no different except for Ruby’s reluctance to divulge.

“Me!”

Emma reached a hand out and gently stroked through her friend’s now tousled and tangled mane of hair. “I meant the guy. Who was the guy? What happened?” She waited while Ruby’s breath returned to normal, Emma took another bite of her breakfast and chewed thoughtfully.

“He was just a guy,” Ruby said through a dry sob where no tears fell. “I don’t even know his name.”
“And you slept with him?” Emma asked, cringing at the drama this was going to cause. Confessions, tearful questions, regrets, decisions to move on, and the list would go on and on. There would be awkward moments in the future when Graham and Ruby were in the same room.

“No,” Ruby nearly wailed. “I didn’t. He said hello. I said hello and then…”

Killian and Emma both waited for Ruby to continue, but she didn’t notice them staring expectantly. She flung herself backwards again, her ankle boots clattering against the aged wood table. Hugging a throw pillow to her tight red sweater, she moaned in a painful huff.

“Ruby, whatever you did, I’m sure that Graham can forgive you. I mean this is still very new for you. If you’re honest with him, I’m sure…” She glanced at Killian with a hopeful eyebrow raised that he might have the right words now. While she wanted to be supportive of her friend, she couldn’t imagine facing such a thing herself. She would never consider cheating on Killian and had no indication he would ever cheat on her. “I’m sure it was just sex. I mean no emotions, right?”

“I didn’t sleep with him,” Ruby said, lolling her head to the right and looking pointedly toward the blonde. “I wanted to. God, did I want to sleep with him. He was hot. And from the looks of his outfit, which wasn’t bought here in Storybrooke, he was rich. And when he talked to me, he was funny, smart, and everything else you could want in a guy.”

Confused, Killian placed his mug back down and then removed the plate from his knee as if the shock of this conversation might unbalance it. “Wait? You didn’t sleep with this guy?”

“No,” she wailed, still beseechingly focused on Emma. “I freaking wanted to and was going to. You know that area in the restroom where…”

“Details aren’t necessary,” Emma interrupted, not wanting to think about the nights (yes, more than one) when she and Mary Margaret had seen her disappear into that restroom and come out some time later disheveled and sated. “So you had a plan and he wasn’t interested.”

Ruby’s chin dropped and her eyebrows raised in challenge. “When have you known a guy not to be interested in sex?”

That question made Killian laugh and Emma conceded that her friend had a point. Men were never lacking with Ruby, though their quality and worth was lacking. “Point taken. So I’m trying to figure
out what’s wrong here. You said you didn’t sleep with this guy. Does he even have a name because guy is a bit generic?”

“Yeah so I don’t know,” Ruby complained, rubbing one ankle on the other. “It’s freaking insane. I talked to him. I flirted. I mean not overly so. I don’t ever do that. And he’s all ready to give me his number and suggesting some not so proper things. And do you know what happened?”

Emma said nothing, knowing exactly where this was going. It was Killian who seemed the more enthralled with Ruby’s story and her rhetorical question. “Do tell, Ruby.”

She squeezed her eyes shut, wrapping her arms around her middle. “I couldn’t do it. I felt sick to my stomach. I saw Graham’s face in my head and knew that I couldn’t face him if I did this.” Her hands lifted to her face where she covered her features with her palms. “I never turn down a guy I’m interested in. Never. What is wrong with me?”

Emma shared a look with Killian, scooting closer to her friend on the sofa. “You realize that you’re not a bad person for this, right? I’m proud of you, Ruby.”

She lowered her hands and stared incredulously at her friend. “Seriously? I tell you I practically cheated and you’re proud of me?” She blinked a few times. “Why?”

“Ruby, it’s okay to love him. It’s okay to be vulnerable and a little scared. The reward is worth it. I promise.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Ruby said harshly. “Nobody is talking about love here. And I do vulnerable. What do you think I am when I wear my stilettos out on a rainy night? That’s vulnerable. Anything could get me? A serial killer, a mugger, a pot hole. I know vulnerable.”

“You know what I mean,” Emma responded. “I’m just saying that there is nothing wrong with wanting it to work out with Graham.”

Emitting the large sigh of resignation, Ruby grabbed for one of the files of wedding ideas. “So Granny wants to know if you want to go with just chicken as the main dish or something else and give people a choice. I was thinking seafood, but that doesn’t have to work if you don’t want it.”

Killian shook his head as if the change in topic had given him whiplash. “I like seafood,” he said
almost meekly before repeating it a bit stronger. “That sounds lovely.”

***AAA***

Elsa folded the blankets and placed them at the table at the foot of the stairs. She knew her sister was planning for them to stay another night, but Elsa dreaded the idea. The townhome was spacious and comfortable, but it was no longer home. She missed her own condo too much, the sight of Liam’s shoes sticking out from under the bed, her cereal and his both in the pantry.

He came down those stairs a few minutes later with his hair even curlier in the dampness from his shower. “Your sister scares me, darling,” he said, swooping in to kiss her with his minty fresh mouth. “I made the dreadful mistake of asking after a bar of soap for my shower. She proceeded to begin naming every bath oil and wash that she has in her possession. I swear to you, darling, I could hear her voice through the door.”

Reaching out to smooth some of his damp hair, she smiled uneasily. “She didn’t walk in on you, did she? I know she wouldn’t mean to, but with Anna…She thinks before she acts.”

“Thank God for locks. No, she was waxing nostalgic over something called lavender meets juniper breeze in the hallway. I now know what not to buy her for Christmas.”

“You don’t have to buy my sister anything,” Elsa teased. Or maybe it wasn’t much of a jest because that would mean she had to buy something for Killian. And the whole thing could just snowball.

“We’ll worry with that later. So…” He darted his eyes about the living room and back toward the stairs. “Your sister is wanting to make us breakfast. But I was thinking…”

“Granny’s?” She knew he was not in the mood for his sister’s steam of consciousness. To be honest she wasn’t either. The two sisters were already scheduled to do a little cooking experimentation in anticipation of Thursday and some baby furniture shopping over the next few days. Plus they were meeting with the web team at the label about some promotion for their site.

“Sounds like a brilliant plan. I’ll grab our coats and you tell that guard of yours that we are venturing out.” He half turned to leave toward the closet when he spun back and kissed her even more solidly than before. “Sorry about that. I just needed a little motivation this morning.”
“Liam!” Anna called from upstairs. “Next time you shower you totally need to try this new all natural loofa sponge that I got. It makes your skin glow. Well not like in the dark or anything, but it makes you look good. I think it would be good for you. Not that I…”

Elsa hid her face against Liam’s broad shoulder and soft sweater. “Tell her to stop,” she said in the muffled tone against him.

“Thanks, Anna,” he called out. “Perhaps another time.” His voice was strained with hidden laughter.

“Go,” Elsa told him. “I’ll distract her and get your coat. You tell Frank or Ollie or whoever the guard is right now. Don’t look back. She can totally sense hesitation. She’ll pounce.”

***AAA***

Fresh out of the shower, Killian stared at his reflection in the mirror. His eyes were still a bit red from lack of sleep and his skin a more pallid shade than normal. While Emma had been comforting and even distracting, his father’s words played on loop in his head. Even the purplish bruise from the nurse’s needle seemed to be reminding him of the weekend.

With his phone eerily silent on the counter, Killian concentrated on his reflection again and whether or not he should shave. Deciding that he should, he was part way done artfully trimming his stubble when the phone bleated a generic ringtone that he feared was the news from the doctor in New York. No news meant that he did not have to make any decisions, something he didn’t mind postponing for as long as possible. His brother may have placed the truth out there for him to see, but it didn’t make the idea of refusing someone a lifesaving operation any easier to face.

The phone number on the screen was not a New York area code though, but Killian answered it with a measured trepidation. The conversation was rather short and he wasn’t sure that the woman on the other end fully appreciated what he had to say. However, it needed to be said. He wasn’t interested in recording let alone traveling about on tour. His brother might dream of such things, but he did not.

Killian came back into the kitchen from their shared bedroom, pushing his phone into his pocket. “Sorry about that, love.” Emma had knocked and looked at him questioningly while he was on the phone. In his haste to finish the call, he had waved her off.

“Was it the doctor?” Emma had tied her hair up in a messy knot atop her head, her emerald green
sweater and faded dark jeans covered with an apron that she usually teased Killian for owning. Two bowls were in front of her with flour and other ingredients mostly in the bowls. Directly in front of her was the stained recipe for a chocolate lava cake.

“No, it was Regina’s assistant asking for me to attend a meeting with your boss.” He eyed the mess carefully as he rounded the peninsula and smiled. “I told her I wasn’t available for it. What on earth is all this, love? Are you attempting to bake?”

She leaned in to kiss his cheek, furiously wiping off some of the flour that she transferred to him. “Don’t laugh, but I wanted to give this a shot. See I always just buy the stuff Henry has to take to school for bake sales and stuff. I never really have time to bake. I can cook. I can make anything that includes meat and vegetables and is prepared on a stove. But baking…”

Ignoring the flour that clung to her, he slid in behind her, his hand skimming down her torso and coming to rest on her hip. “I’ve been known to bake a few things. Perhaps I could be of some assistance.”

Her back was nestled against his chest and his breathing seemed to coincide with hers. “Of course you know how,” she muttered, reaching for the recipe. “I feel a little bit like a bum. Isn’t this something moms should know how to do?”

“Perhaps moms in 1950s sitcoms, love, but not actual mothers. At least not any that I know.” Peeking over her shoulder, he kissed a spot just below her ear and then again at the juncture of her neck and shoulder. “You have many other fine skills and qualities.”

She grimaced, flushing possibly from his compliment but also frustration. “So…no word from your dad’s doctor?”

“No news is good news, but I don’t know what good news would be at this point. I thought we decided not to make any decisions until we know there is a decision to make.”

“Sorry. I’m just worried about you. Not even mentioning the emotional impact this is clearly going to have on you, your relationship with your father, and your relationship with your brother, there’s the physical thing. Surgery like that isn’t a joke. What if…”

“I promise, love, if the doctor’s office calls and says I am a match, you and I will make a decision together. I won’t be doing anything rash or headstrong.” His fingers dug into the flesh near her hip.
“Now do we want to do this together or shall I heat up some of that soup for the lad? I’m rather anxious to see if Granny’s claims of healing properties can be trusted.”

She laughed tightly, turning her head toward him. “I checked on him earlier. He’s sound asleep again thankfully. Seems he had another of the nightmares about me drowning.” She frowned. “I thought we were past those.”

“Aye, I did too. Do you suppose our being away this weekend caused any anxiety? He seems to have them when separated from you.” The dreams had not completely stopped, but Emma knew they had lessened. Either that or he was not telling her of them as frequently. She’d hoped that he would move past them as he realized that she was not planning anything so dangerous to take her away permanently. “I would guess the fever he has doesn’t help.”

She closed her green eyes, breathing in slowly. “I didn’t ask Neal if…”

“It’s alright, love. Go look in on the lad. I’ll tidy up a bit and we’ll try again on your sponge.”

She wrinkled her nose at the unfamiliar use of a familiar word. “Oh you mean cake.” She grinned a little. “I watch those British baking shows sometimes.”

“You have quite a few eclectic little habits like that,” he teased, his voice deep and breath warm on her ear. “I’ve caught you watching a few of those cop shows as well.”

“Believe it or not, I considered that line of work in a previous life, Killian.” She lifted her spatula like a gun. “I am good at finding people. I thought I might make a career of it.”

“You are good at finding talent. Brilliant in fact. So any more thoughts about this whole idea of producing?” He was talking and asking about something serious, but yet his tone was light and playful. His hand skimmed along her hip and up then down her torso again.

She dropped the spatula and stepped out of his embrace to busy herself in another area of the kitchen. “I thought we were going to concentrate on your father, the wedding, and making sure your younger brother stays put. Not to mention there’s Henry’s grades, Neal’s wedding, two friends having babies, and whatever drama Ruby brings in next.” Rolling her shoulders back, she kept facing forward as she searched in the cabinet for some unseen item. “What about you? Any more thought on the school thing with Mary Margaret?”
His eyes narrowed at her obvious escape and avoidance. “I planned to talk to her at this party thing Thursday. She’s taken the lead on it.” Though she wasn’t looking at him, he frowned. “Did I say something wrong?”

“No,” she answered, turning 90 degrees and walking over to the refrigerator where she pulled out the soup from Granny. “I just thought we were going to hold off on my career decisions until things were more stable. But it’s not a big deal.”

He watched her for a moment and then joined her next to the stove. “I told you that we could make this work if you…I only mean that we can go at whatever speed you like.”

“Let’s get this done for Henry, okay? We’ll talk about life altering decisions later. You decipher that recipe over there and I’ll heat this up. That’s about my speed right now.”

***AAA***

“So I was thinking that it might be a little crowded at that loft,” Granny told Elsa as Liam tried to pick something new and different from the menu. There was nothing new on it and very little that could be called exciting. Yet he still tried and usually settled for waffles. “What if we took the burden off the poor girl and hosted it here.”

“Here?” Elsa considered thoughtfully as she dragged her straw through the ice water. “I’m not sure that the diner is the family feel Mary Margaret was really reaching for on this.”

The older woman huffed at being shot down, yanking the menu out of Liam’s hands. “You do realize that we are planning to fit me, Marco, August and his date, Ruby, Graham, You and Liam, Emma, Killian, Henry, Anna and her husband, David, Mary Margaret, Ashley, Sean, and whichever other strays end up at this thing, all around a table with four chairs. I’m just saying there has to be a better place.”

Liam, who had said nothing, reached out to retrieve the menu only to have her hold it out of reach. “I wasn’t done with that, Granny.” He chuckled playfully and reached again. She slapped his hand with the laminated menu.

“You’re just going to order the waffles,” she sniffed. “Just think about what I said, Elsa. Nothing is worse than eating turkey in shifts because there is no room.”
Elsa dropped her head to her hand and rubbed at her temple. “She has a point.”

“Aye, but she’s also a tad violent with that menu. And I wasn’t planning on getting waffles. I was considering that wester omelet thing until she snatched it away from me.” He rubbed at his hand as though he still felt the sting. Elsa looked at him incredulously. “Very well. I was planning to get the waffle, but she didn’t know that for sure.”

“Mary Margaret really wants to host this party for Thanksgiving. It would break her heart if we have it at the diner instead.”

“Perhaps we should cut the guest list? Henry’s feeling poorly so he may be out, which would mean Emma and even Killian…”

“You can’t go around disinviting people. Besides, it’s Monday. Henry will be fine by Thursday. What if we had it at the condo? We have that giant great room area, open concept and all that.”

Liam swallowed the coffee in front of him and grimaced. “We don’t even have a dining table. Plus the place has been shut up since this whole thing with my brother. Anna’s?”

“My sister is a hormonal mess right now. She was following me around this morning with a vacuum. Her hosting Thanksgiving would probably send her over the edge. Plus there is no parking there.” She pursed her lips and stared off toward the menu. “What about Emma and Killian’s? They’ve got a larger table and we could do something outside with heaters and stuff. It would work, wouldn’t it?”

“We do always seem to congregate there. I don’t see a problem.” He reached for the raw sugar packet, shaking it for good measure. “But if you suggest I ask my brother, you’re likely to be disappointed. I think we’ve both run out of favors owed in that case.”

Remaining thoughtful, Elsa again stirred through the water. “No, you’re right there. Besides we need to make it seem like it’s Mary Margaret’s idea. I don’t want to hurt her feelings.” There wasn’t much of an explanation needed, as the woman who was normally even keeled and protective was overboard with every emotion.

“Good idea, I suppose,” Liam lamented as his waffle, sans whipped cream, was dropped off in front of him and Elsa’s healthier dish in front of her. “We are quite different, you and I?”
Spearing a piece of melon with her fork, she hummed her response wondering what he was getting at. “That’s a bad thing?”

“No, I only meant that sometimes it seems strange that the lovely proprietor here would see us as such a good match. I am not complaining, as I’m more than grateful. I just wonder what it is she saw.”

Elsa chewed slowly, giving herself time to digest the words and consider her own. Finally, she took a sip of her water and swallowed that too. “Well, we are both the oldest children in our families. We both have a love of music and writing. Both of us are stubborn and loyal. We can both be fiercely determined and not all that easy to please.”

“I feel that way too,” he said softly, looking toward the counter where it was business as usual in the diner. As it was Monday most people were at work, but there were a few extras given the holiday. The usual décor of forest wall paper and red vinyl with formica was enhanced with autumn leaves and honeycombed turkey decorations. Liam had made fun of the ornamentation when they first arrived, but he was beginning to like its simplicity. “What brought this on, darling? Are you creating some pro con list that I am unaware of right now?”

“No, it’s more about just considering what I’m thankful for this year. I suppose it’s the idea of Thanksgiving, but I’m trying to not be so focused on the negative. My career’s going quite well. My sister is happy and in love. I’m about to be an aunt. I’ve got friends who support and love me. And I have a loving and wonderful boyfriend.” She smiled, spearing another piece of fruit. “If I just focus on those things, I have to admit I’m happy.”

“I like the sound of that. You being happy.” He reached across the table to clasp her left hand. “And one of these days we’ll be back at our lovely condo and things will be back to normal.”

Her icy eyes watched their entwined fingers for a moment. “So what if we move back now? Your brother is still out there, but if we’re careful…”

“Elsa, he tried to run you off the road. He may have broken into Killian’s garage. It’s just not safe…”

“Those things happened since we left. I’m tired of living our lives based on where he’s going to strike next. I want to go home, Liam. I want to have a home again and not be a burden or a guest. I want spend rainy or snowy days with you on the couch, curled up in pajamas while I read a book and you strum your guitar looking for just the right way to express yourself. I want to raid the refrigerator at 2 a.m. and only worry that you’re going to catch me. Only it won’t be you catching me because you’ll join me and we’ll snack on good things until we fall asleep without even bothering to
clean the kitchen. I want us to make love in our bed and not have to worry about your brother or my sister hearing. We have a guard. Robin’s already made some improvements. We’ll be careful and vigilant. Let’s go home.”

***AAA***

To Elsa’s relief Mary Margaret was not at all upset in the change in plans. She even volunteered to call Emma herself, saying she didn’t want to impose on her without knowing for sure with her own ears.

“Are you sure?” Emma asked Mary Margaret with the phone tucked against her ear. “I feel horrible that he might have passed his germs on to you.”

“I teach for a living. Past the first year I built up an immunity that you wouldn’t believe. Trust me. You could drop me in a room with patients of a bubonic plague and I’d be healthy. It’s not a big deal.”

“But David isn’t immune and you’re pregnant. I feel awful.” Henry was on the mend and even his pediatrician’s office had seemed rather blasé about the whole thing earlier.

“Trust me, it’s fine. Now tell me what’s going on. You sounded stressed when I called earlier.” Leave it to Mary Margaret to already be concerned about someone other than herself. Her voice lost that harsh teacher edge in these moments and became what Emma had always imagined her own mother would sound like.

“Just trying to take care of Henry, deal with this whole thing with Killian’s father, learn to bake, and somehow convince my boss that my fiancé is not interested in becoming the next big thing in music. By the way that is in random order. Plus someone keeps dropping off wedding planning stuff over here. Do I really have to pick what kind of runner I want to walk down the aisle on? How is that even a choice?”

If Mary Margaret was offended at her friend’s overwhelmed rant, she didn’t show it. “Yeah, you’re a little busy. So I guess it won’t help if I say I have one more thing to ask you to do.”

Emma flopped back on the bed, as she had closed herself off in hers and Killian’s bedroom to have the conversation. She had seen the look in his eyes that said he was concerned about her and heard his voice sounding worried he had done something wrong. While he hadn’t, she was teetering on the
It felt selfish to her to think of him waiting on life or death news about his father and she was the one breaking down. “If you want me to kill someone, I’ll try to work it into my schedule. If you want me to consider another wedding plan you saw online and just have to see in person, count me out.”

“You can’t see me right now, but I have my fingers in the Girl Scout salute. Seriously, I won’t even mention the wedding if that takes something off your shoulders. Actually it’s about Thanksgiving.”

“Oh right,” Emma said, staring at the ceiling above. She knew her friend was going for that traditional New England holiday feel. Next year their meal might include a few others, including the new babies who would be there by then. “How set were you on having lava cake? Because I was thinking that your pumpkin pie is dessert enough. Plus you know Granny will bring that stuff she makes. And since you invited Regina, Robin, and Roland you’re bound to get apple tarts from Regina.”

Mary Margaret’s laugh sounded relaxed and easy. “No big deal, Emma. I am sure whatever you want to make will be fine. See. I am not the control freak everyone assumes I am.” She paused when Emma didn’t confirm her assessment. “No, really. I’m not. But we do have a location issue. Granny and Elsa called. Our guest list is kind of getting out of hand.”

“So you want me to disinvite people,” Emma said knowingly. “I get it. Okay there are a few easy cuts.”

“No, I’m not asking that. See, Elsa and Granny were thinking the loft might be too small for everyone to be comfortable. And except for the diner, you’re the one with the biggest place. We could even get some of those heater things and place them around. What do you think?”

Within 20 minutes they had a plan that she promised to run by Killian. Then they could go about notifying everyone of the venue change. Emma was already feeling relieved that Mary Margaret’s favor seemed to be manageable.

“So you’re sure you’re okay with everything?” the brunette asked again. “Because if you need to talk…”

“I’m fine,” Emma assured her. “I’m just feeling a lot of things at the moment. I thought I was okay with everything earlier but now…”
“You’re worried about Killian, aren’t you? I would be too if it was David. That’s kind of a jerk move to abandon your son and then show up years later wanting a liver.” Mary Margaret clicked her tongue on the top of her mouth. “You do realize that most people would have told him to go to hell.”

“Yeah, most people,” Emma said ruefully. She rolled to her right and came face to face with a photo of her and Killian from their summer vacation. Henry had taken it, the sun shimmering her in blonde hair perfectly and pinkness of her skin and Killian’s well on display. The ginger coloring of Killian’s stubble was on full display with the brightness of the light. “I’m worried about him, Mary Margaret. What if…”

“Emma, it’s okay to worry. But maybe if you talked to him about this. It is him we’re talking about.”

She closed her eyes. “Yeah, I know. I don’t want him to know how worried I am. It’s his decision not mine and I don’t want him to think I’m interfering.” She left out the guilt that she was feeling over his reluctant acceptance of things in her career just because he had wanted her to be happy. And the fact that Regina was apparently trying to reach him did not help.

“It’s not good to let things boil inside you. Just talk to him, Emma. You’ll feel better.”

So that is what she meant to do. She pulled herself up off the bed after disconnecting the call and ran her hand through her hair that now was falling out of the knot atop her head. She walked slowly into the great room, waiting to see if he would notice her. He did. But it was not as she had pictured the moment just seconds before. He was on the phone too, the three lines between his eyebrows bunching together dramatically. When he disconnected, he shrugged at her hopelessly.

“I’m a match.”
Chapter 55

Killian stamped his boots vigorously on the mat just inside the door of the cold and nearly empty building. It had been, according to Mary Margaret, the administrative offices and classrooms of a church that had long since moved to a larger facility. While the fixtures and whatnot were a bit dated, she was right that it might make for a great space for their school. The concrete floors were polished and painted, the walls a bit scuffed from years of people walking by over and over again.

“I think it might work wonderfully,” Mary Margaret said, clasping her hands in front of her chest. The newly married teacher’s light blue coat barely concealed the growing evidence of her pregnancy and her face was nearly always flushed with excitement lately. “We could put our offices over there. And the whole second floor plus the rest of this one can be classrooms.”

He hummed a hesitant approval as he peered down the long hallway. “It’s compliant?” he asked, remembering the thick stack of forms that she had found on the state’s website about accessibility. “Elevator, door width, and all that?” His hand reached up and loosened the warm and overly large woolen scarf around his neck. Granny had knitted it and given to him as a gift just a few weeks ago, her gruff demeanor not letting on at all. “If not, that would be expensive.”

She didn’t seem annoyed that he would question her judgement, flipping through the flyers that the realtor had given her in their morning meeting. It had been a feat to find an out of town realtor willing to show them properties in Storybrooke. When Mary Margaret had seen the place the day before, she had known it was what she wanted and arranged to borrow the key to show Killian herself. They had even parked two blocks away and walked in the misty rain so they wouldn’t be spotted. But the secrecy was necessary given Mr. Gold’s ownership of almost all commercial properties. “It is. There’s nothing really wrong with it other than price.”

He opened one of the doors to a classroom, finding a smattering of child size tables and chairs stacked in two corners. Empty bulletin boards and dry erase boards lined two walls. “And all this stuff?”

“ Comes with it,” she assured him, passing him to stand in the center of the room. She spread her arms out wide. “Perfect for kindergarten, don’t you think?”

He tilted his head back and forth without answering. “No desk for the teacher,” he pointed out. “And they’d have to travel quite far to get to the playground for recess. Might be a bit difficult for such young lads and lasses not to disturb the rest of the school.”

Her perma-smile seemed to fade momentarily but was back almost instantly. “Then we’ll do kindergarten at the end of the hall. It’s not a big deal, Killian.”
“You really think this is the place?”

“Killian, it’s perfect. I’ve already told you the reasons, but if you want to hear them again…” She smiled, reaching out and touching his arm. “It’s scary. I know that. But it’s what we need to do. This town needs us to do this. Think about the children who are not reaching their full potential because Gold is just about the money. He wants their tuition and doesn’t care about anything else other than test scores. We would be that more.

We would make a difference in their lives.”

He chuckled at her enthusiastic speech of hope. “And the money? I don’t know about you, but teaching has hardly left me with a windfall. What if we take this place and can’t make the payments? What if parents don’t want to give us a chance? We could be sitting here come next year with bills piled high and a bunch of empty classrooms.”

“I’m glad you asked that,” she said, digging into the leather bag on her shoulder. She pulled out a single red file and smiled. “I worked up the numbers. The number of students we would need. The staff we need. The figures for the mortgage, utilities, supplies, insurance, and all that. Potterfield’s school is closing in June. We are nearly a lock for gaining their students since it’s not that far away. And surely some of Gold’s enrollment will follow us.” She pursed her lips as if trying to make up her mind. “And as for the money, I sort of have a plan for that. See I have some funds in trust from when my parents passed away. I was supposed to find a good cause…”

He looked incredulous as she passed him the folder. He groped at it, unseeing anything but her hopeful expression. “You would use your own money to finance this? You believe in it that much?”

“I do,” she said, touching his arm.

“Mary Margaret, this is amazing, but I can’t…I can’t match you here. I just paid for renovations on my house. I don’t know that I can even…”

“I’m not asking you to contribute more,” Mary Margaret said, patting his arm. “I’m going to go check out the space that might make for a good cafeteria. You look at those numbers and see if you’re willing to take this leap with me.”
Her numbers were strong, he admitted to himself, perching on a window sill and running his finger down the page. She had thought of everything from dry erase markers to health insurance premiums. There were even line items for all weather mats and travel expenses related to conferences. He didn’t want to be the person to tell her no, as that seemed unusually cruel. But he felt a bit useless if she was going to front so much of the money. Pulling out his phone, he called Emma. He knew that she would hesitate in telling him what to do, but he wanted to hear her reasonable voice.

“Hey,” she said softly when she realized it was him. “How is it? Mary Margaret seemed excited.”

“It’s quite a lovely spot,” he agreed, keeping his own voice low in the echoing room.

“She’s a determined sort of lass.”

He could hear her shifting, probably moving away from a sleeping Henry to continue the conversation without hesitation of waking him. “That’s better,” she said, her voice a little stronger. “All it took was suggesting Henry do some reading for class and he was out like a light. I should remember that next time he wants to stay up all night for absolutely no reason at all.”

“He’s feeling better then?” Killian asked, already feeling warmer in the drafty building with her voice in his ear.

“He’s still acting puny, but he’s better. No fever and definitely less congestion. I think he’s trying to prove he’s better and ready to take on the responsibilities of adopting this dog. We need to make a decision by the way. Are we keeping him or not?”

“Henry? I thought that was a given, love. He’s your son and my student. I can’t imagine sending him off now.” His smile grew with her exasperated sigh.

“You know I meant the dog, wise guy.” She paused, the echo of her foot steps on the stairs stopping with her. “So what’s wrong? You sound worried.”

“Perplexed, perhaps a bit stressed, but not worried,” he teased. It only took a moment before he confessed his misgivings to her. He did not want Mary Margaret to shoulder all the burden and risk on the venture, which he explained to Emma. She seemed to understand.

“So what do you want to do?” she asked softly. “We could dip into savings to see if you could help more. Or you could…”
“Hardly ideal, love. We don’t have huge amounts about. Perhaps I could secure a loan with the house as collateral. Still that is a huge risk and puts you and Henry in danger as well. I don’t relish the thought of that.” He looked out at the watery landscape of the rainy fall day. “Perhaps there might be another way, but I don’t know what it could be.”

“What did Mary Margaret say?”

“She’s so excited about this, and hardly seems to recognize the risk of it. I wonder if we are being too rash. It is a small town with a public school, the Storybrooke Academy, and now this. It seems that there are not enough students for us all.” He sighed, leaning his forehead on the cool glass. “I feel like I’m a bit of a pessimist to bring that up now.”

Emma was quiet for a moment and he wondered if they had become disconnected. It was the day before Thanksgiving, a busy day that meant so many people out on the roads. While the rain put a damper on that, he was seeing cars splashing water from the gutters and wipers on at a steady pace. The gray day seemed like an unending saga of near twilight despite it still being just about time for lunch.

“You know that I wouldn’t stop you if this is what you want to do,” she answered. “You love teaching. You’ve said that a million times. And this plan of yours and Mary Margaret’s sounds amazing. If you want to get a loan, then I say let’s go to the bank on Friday and get a freakin’ loan.”

“That easy?” he teased, knowing that it would take lots of paperwork at the very least.

“Not everything has to be hard. You want this. I have a good job. So let’s make this happen.” She sounded very matter of fact. He could picture her in her asymmetrical sweater and leggings. She was probably sitting in the window seat in their office, much as he was sitting at the window too. Her blonde hair had been pulled up in a messy bun that morning when he left, but was probably down now in waves.

“I could use the boat as collateral,” he said thoughtfully. She’s worth a good bit even if I haven’t finished restoring her yet.

“I love that boat,” Emma protested.

“And you don’t love the house? I hardly think a bank will give me money based on my jeep and
“Yeah, a mom van,” she said sullenly, still bitter at the idea she was old enough for such transportation. “Go tell her that you’re going to do it. You don’t want someone to snatch up that place without you.”

“Emma, are you sure about this? It’s risky…”

“It’s what you want. I’m in. Now go talk to her or she’ll spend all Thanksgiving trying to convince you.”

***AAA***

Liam stared at the invoice and compared it to the list of provisions that he had ordered, finding the discrepancies to be more than Zelena’s claim of just a paperwork error. He ran a finger over the numbers again, quick math only confirming his suspicions. The numbers were just not adding up, which meant that either Zelena was completely incompetent or her scheming had found another way to make money. He felt the heat of his anger simmering at his boss for putting him in such a position.

“You’re cute when you’re working like that,” Elsa said, leaning over the back of the sectional to kiss his cheek, her legs momentarily going up in the air. With his quick reflexes, he caught her and held her in place as he planted a firmer kiss to her lips. She squealed dramatically and kicked her legs midair.

“I prefer more masculine adjectives, darling,” he teased, appreciating her flustered look as she righted herself back to standing.

“You have to earn those,” she challenged back. “And right now, cute is just what you are, Liam.”

Wearing a flannel shirt dress in green and purple, leggings and ballet flats, Elsa came round the sofa to sit next to him. Her long hair was clipped back and flowed loosely down in waves that resembled cascading snow in the winter sun. She mimicked his kicked back position, crossing her legs at the ankles and leaning her head toward his. “I thought you weren’t working until later.”

“Robin couldn’t make the practice so I thought I’d get a head start on the ordering. It’ll help my mind rest easy if I have that done before the music festival this weekend.” Tossing the invoice on the pile
next to him, he threw his left arm around her shoulders and pulled her into his side. “What about you? I thought this was some sort of marathon cooking day for you and your sister? Weren’t you complaining about all the chopping and sautéing left to be done?”

“Yeah,” she said, nosing at his soft flannel collar. “So Regina called while we were shopping. Seems that the headliner that the city of Portland had lined up for the tree lighting tomorrow night cancelled. Something about a sore throat. Anyway, they’d like me to sing a few songs, plus Oh Holy Night for the lighting of the tree.”

He watched her shift, her expression mildly hopeful. “Sounds as if that might be a bit of a step down for you? I mean you cancelled your tour dates and you end up singing in a mall parking lot?”

“It’s on a stage in the city park,” she said defensively yet kindly. “My parents used to take us to it every year. It’s kind of a nostalgic big deal. So I was thinking that we do the parade, football, and lunch with your brother and Emma and then we head to Portland. Anna said she wants to come too so she can start the tradition with her own family. What do you say?”

“Sounds quite festive, darling. I’m sure that Emma and Killian will understand our absence at dinner.”

“Good,” she said, snuggling deeper into his side. “So that means I don’t have to cook at my sisters. We have some time before you have to go into work.”

He hummed under his breath, placing his fingers under her chin to lift. She thought he might assault her lips with kisses then, but instead his mouth was on her neck, creating a trail up to her ear with licks and pecks. Ghosting his lips over her soft round cheeks, he again skipped over her mouth and trailed down the other side of her neck, nuzzling against her playfully.

“You…” she began, tilting her head back to allow him better access.

He was sure she was about to protest his teasing and smiled against her warm skin. “I what, darling?” Her arms circled lazily around his shoulders, holding him in place without any pressure at all.

It was then that the doorbell chimed sharply and she pushed back from his embrace. “You better answer the door.”
His eyebrows lifted upward. “I don’t think that’s what you were going to say, but I’ll take the hint.” Nipping at the tip of her nose, he sighed. “It’s good to be back home with you, Elsa.”

She hugged herself as he rose and walked toward the small foyer of their condo. It was good to be home. There was a simple and comfortable feeling about not being a houseguest. And with the guard ever vigilant and security measures in place, she felt safe enough in the confines of the condo. And she hoped that he did too.

“What the bloody hell are you doing here?”

Elsa stood from the couch and ran the few steps to see what the trouble was in their foyer. From her vantage point she could see her broad shouldered boyfriend standing with a large hand firmly on the door about to push it shut. There was clearly another person on the other side of him, but she could not make out even a shadow. “Liam?” she asked, not getting an answer. “What’s wrong?”

“You’ve got it wrong, brother. I’m not here to do anything but apologize.”

Elsa stopped in her tracks, her right foot skidding a bit on the floor. That wasn’t Killian’s voice and that was not the way that Liam would react to the middle of the three brothers. It had to be the younger, the one also named Liam. Her Liam was still standing there as a shield between them, but as she leaned to the right she could make out a tall yet lanky man who was considerably less mature looking than his brothers. His hair was a bit too long in comparison and uneven as he ran a hand nervously through it.

“You should go,” the oldest brother said, pushing slightly on the door only to have it catch in the visitor’s hands. “I could call the authorities, you know?”

“I only wish to apologize to you and to Elsa,” the younger man repeated. “Please. Just hear me out.”

***AAA***

Dodging raindrops on his trip from Mary Margaret’s SUV to the front door, Killian gave his co-worker a sturdy wave and shifted the two canvas shopping totes on his left arm. “See you tomorrow,” he called out to her before unlocking the door. The still new alarm system seemed to beguile the comfortable nature of the seaside house, but it was a necessary evil. Even with the sturdy locks, he preferred the sense of security that he knew was important in keeping Emma and Henry safe.
“Hello,” he called out, kicking the door shut behind him. There was no immediate answer and the room, though filled with the warm scents of a casserole baking and bread in the bread machine, was silent and empty from other people. He dropped the last minute Thanksgiving shopping on the counter and leaned to peer into the bedrooms only to find them empty too. “Emma?”

The only response was the patter of the newly adopted dog’s feet on the hardwoods upstairs. Since the security gate was down, he reasoned that Emma and Henry must have taken refuge upstairs for the afternoon. Grabbing Emma’s favorite knitted blanket, he bounded up the stairs and breathed a relieved sigh as he spied them in the office.

Henry’s mouth was open in a slight snore with his still stuffy nose, his history text splayed on his chest and open to a page about the Oregon Trail. Eyes closed and legs wrapped in a thick afghan, his iPod and headphones dangled at his side. Killian secured each of the items and untangled the afghan to cover his soon to be stepson against the chill in the fall air. He gave the boy a final caress to his forehead, checking to ensure the fever he had been running on Monday was still at bay.

Though he had endeavored to be quiet, Killian heard Emma’s groggy voice greet him. “Hey there,” she said from the window seat that offered a view of the inlet and the choppy water there. “He said he was going to study. I don’t think he got through a whole chapter.” She was propped against the built in shelving, pillows piled high behind and beside her. Instead of a book she was holding her tablet.

“It appears you have fallen to a similar fate, my love,” he said, kissing her forehead gently. “Wedding planning exhausting you?” His eyes scanned the screen and widened at the recognition of a site about pregnancy and maternal health.

She recognized the look. “Whoa, buddy,” she said, snatching back the tablet. “I was trying to come up with some ideas for baby showers for Mary Margaret and Anna.”

“Ahhhh,” he said, frowning at the lack of room for him on the built in seat. The newly acquired black lab was resting comfortably at the end of Emma’s bent legs, his head using one of her thighs as a pillow. Though he wasn’t asleep, his rhythmic breathing was slow and eyes sad as he stared at Killian.

“Don’t worry,” she continued, pulling him down by the material of his sweater for a kiss. “I don’t intend on being a pregnant bride. Mary Margaret and Anna pulled that off just fine, but I’m thinking Ruby’s wedding dress design is a little more form fitting.”
His lips slid against hers easily, hand diving into her hair. When she pulled back, he did not immediately release his grip, leaning his forehead against hers and marveling at the softness of her against him. “Beautiful view,” he whispered.

She laughed softly, cradling his face in her hand and giving him a quick peck before turning her eyes toward the window. “The clouds are pretty incredible. I know you had this room built so we could do work from home, grading papers, going over contracts and all that, but it is so peaceful to watch the clouds build over the water. It’s cold in here, but it looks like summer thunderstorms are building.”

“I brought your blanket for you,” he said, pointing to where he had placed hers near where Henry was still slumbering. “But it appears Sparrow’s got that job covered.”

“Jealous?” she asked with a smirk.

“Hardly. I just thought we might cuddle up here and watch those clouds you seem so fond of these days. We’ve got a while left on the timer before we are back to kitchen duty.”

Pursing her lips in the pretense of considering his offer, she finally broke out a smile and nudged the lab with her knee. “Make some room,” she told the sweetly dispositioned dog. While Henry had not been up for much playtime with his new pet, the dog’s appearance in their home was welcome. They had named him Captain Jack Sparrow after a movie marathon gave Henry the idea. It was quickly reduced to Sparrow for practical purposes. The dog lifted his head, looked questioningly at Emma and then lumbered in retreat to situate himself near Henry. Emma patted the warm and now vacant spot. “All yours.”

Bringing the blanket with him, Killian eagerly sat with her, pulling the blanket around both of them and depositing a series of kisses on her cheeks, nose, chin and then mouth. “Much better,” he declared. “That old building and then the grocery store were both quite drafty. Left me chilled to the bone.”

“You did like the building though?”

“It was lovely, but expensive. I’m not sure we’re fully prepared to finance such a space what with all the other costs. Mary Margaret has often mentioned that she wants us to build a school that is quality driven, student focused, and accessible. I fear this might not be the right option for that. Mary Margaret is convinced though that her budget can stretch that far. We shall see.”
Emma nodded, her expression compassionate as she rubbed his arm gently. “There’s bound to be a space. You just have to find it. And as for money, we’ll figure it out.”

“Aye, it’s not dire yet. I did get a call from my father’s doctor while I was out. He said he’ll be happy to go over any concerns about the surgery, if we would wish.” He let his head drop against the bookcase on his left. “He seemed quite surprised that I would even consider it.”

“Are you?” she asked, her fingers digging into the woven sweater a little deeper. “I mean do you have questions?”

“I’m not so sure I do. His doctor has been quite forthcoming about what the surgery and recovery would entail. He’s given us a list of possible complications and a few suggestions for second opinions. He even gave me the name of a therapist who might be of some use. I’m not sure my lack of enthusiasm for doing this is for any practical reason.” His knee bounced. “I just don’t relish the idea of giving any more of myself to that man. Even if that does make me selfish.”

“Nobody can blame you for that.” She squeezed his arm a little tighter and then drifted her hand down to his. “If you’re selfish, then I am so much worse. I don’t want to lose you because of that man. And the thought of you going under the knife simply because he wouldn’t put down the bottle until it was too late.” She frowned, her fingers gliding between his. “That’s not very fair of me, is it? He’s your father. And if you want to do this, then you should. It’s your decision, not mine.”

“I want to know what you think, Emma. It does affect you too.” Head still resting on the coolness of the wood, his eyes slowly closed. “I don’t want to…disappoint you.”

“You aren’t,” she assured him, tugging his hand in her own. “I swear. I think you’re pretty awesome in case you didn’t realize that. If you want to save the world, I’m not going to stop you from being a hero. I’m just worried…And I guess I don’t know what I’d do in your situation.”

“I know you pretty well, love. You’d give a limb to save Mary Margaret, Ruby, Elsa, or Henry. I’d like to think you might do the same for me. You’re one of the most unselfish people I know.” His eyes reopened and he pulled their entwined hands toward his mouth, dropping a kiss there just below her thumb.

“Have you even met me?” she asked incredulously. “I am a horrible patient and would probably end up in prison for murdering everyone who annoy me. That’s a long list, really long.” She grew serious as his expression softened and mouth parted to argue against her self-assessment. “Either way. It’s still your decision. And like we said, you don’t have to make it today. Think about it. Consider it. And then decide. Nobody will blame you or fault you either way. If you do it, if you
don’t, I’m still going to love you and see the best in you.”

His fingers tensed in her grip. “I love you too, Emma. So much.” It might have been the perfect moment to kiss her and show her just how much. But he didn’t. He couldn’t. The doorbell ringing was a deafening chime through the newly completed space. Even Henry stirred from his deep sleep at the intrusion. “Hold that thought, love. I’ll be back in a shake.”

She smiled, reaching for her tablet again and tucking her feet under the warm blanket. Forehead on the cold glass window pane, the fog of her breath was evident. Had she been a more immature person she might have traced out a heart or their initials in the whitish color. She didn’t get the chance as Killian’s voice carried up the stairs. It was Graham at the door and there was something wrong with Liam.

Graham pulled the patrol car into the semicircular drive in front of the hospital and let Killian out. He promised he would be back in a few minutes after he finished the reports that would be needed. Killian didn’t even ask what he meant by that or what could be the issue. He was too busy throwing himself into a caretaker mode and running toward where his brother was located. He pushed through the double doors to the hospital, not waiting on the automatic opener to work and jog walked the last few steps until he spotted Elsa sitting there with her eyes glued to her phone. “Is he awake? What’s going on?”

He immediately felt bad for questioning her, as her red rimmed eyes said enough. She was barely holding it together and her normally measured response was one of fear as she cut her eyes from him to the doors to admitting and back again. “He’s back there. I can’t get any information because I’m not family.” She pursed her lips tightly. “I don’t know who this HIPPA person is, but I’d like to wring his neck.”

Licking his tongue between his lips, Killian scanned the crowded waiting area for someone in a uniform. He didn’t really care what their position was so long as they provided him with answers. “Be right back,” he announced, marching over toward a gray haired woman with a frown that seemed to be permanently set in her face. “Excuse me, I’m here about Liam Jones.”

She was looking at her screen with a bored sort of movement to pick up the clipboard on the counter. “Are you family?”

“I’m his brother,” Killian said, leaning his elbows on the counter. “Is he…”

“The doctor will talk to you shortly,” she said in a monotone. “I don’t have any information here.”
He quickly assessed his unlikely chances at getting her to say more and chose to find someone else to interrogate on his older brother’s condition. However, he had barely made a squeak with the turning of his shoes on the tile floor when she called him back.

“Which patient was it again?”

“Liam Jones,” he repeated, unsure why she was so forgetful as to not remember a four letter first name and common last name. He widened his eyes and shook his head almost imperceptibly.

“Which one?” Her tone was still rough, but she seemed genuinely confused.

“You have more than one here?” he asked in return, turning to look at Elsa who was now walking toward him. “He’s here too?”

“Yeah, I should have mentioned. I thought Graham must have when he went to pick you up today, but I’m guessing not. So Liam and I were at the condo and your younger brother showed up. Said he wanted…”

Killian threw up a hand to stop her explanation and spun back to the woman behind the counter. “I’m the brother of both of them,” he clarified for her. “Can I get an update as soon as possible?” He placed his hand under Elsa’s elbow and led her back to the supremely uncomfortable seats where she had been. “Talk.”

She did, explaining that the younger Liam had shown up and said he was there to apologize. The older brother had not believed him, becoming agitated and angry over the entire situation. When she tried to intervene, her boyfriend had not reacted well at all and pushed his younger brother out into the hallway. She had been unsure what to do and stood motionless until she heard the sound of something hitting the wall. “It made the pictures that we just hung shake,” she told him, exhaling sharply. “I opened the door and they were both…so much blood.”

“Did he say anything to you?” Killian asked. “Liam…I mean…bloody hell. Did my older brother try to say anything to you? Was he conscious? How bad was this whole bit?”

“He said just his hand was hurt,” Elsa said, shrugging her shoulders lightly. “Killian, I’ve never seen him like this. To be honest it was scary. He was just so angry.”
“You know he’s not normally like that. I know few who are as level headed as my brother. I would think that our younger brother must have said something to

Not sure what he could say to assuage the situation or her perception, he patted her arm and stood again. “I’m going to see if there’s someone else I can…” He stopped, watching as the fair haired Dr. Whale sauntered out, shoving a pen into his white coat pocket. “Victor?”

The doctor threw his hands up in a mock surrender. “Not me,” he said, feeling his nametag with his right hand. “I just saw them though and they both look fine.” He smirked. “So a younger brother? Are you sure there aren’t more of the Joneses around? Seems like an awful lot for a small town.”

“If you’re not their doctor, then who is?” Killian was clearly in no mood to mess about with trifle details. He wanted information on his brothers, particularly the older Liam.

“I’ll see that he comes out here for you,” Victor said, sliding past Killian. “But do you mind if I get a coffee first?” He took about two steps under Killian’s watchful eye and turned around again. “Or I could go get him now.”

“You do that,” Killian said, rolling his eyes. He was somewhat glad that Ruby had found herself in a relationship with someone other than the doctor. He wasn’t sure if he wanted Victor as a permanent fixture in their lives of the family they had created with friends.

***AAA****

“So I think the way to go is stripes,” Mary Margaret announced, holding up three varying fabric samples to her husband. “I think the polka dots are too busy and the solid just isn’t flashy enough. So stripes?”

“If it makes you happy, then stripes it is,” he said, twirling the screwdriver through his fingers. “But we aren’t going to need to worry about fabric samples if we can’t get this thing built.”

The rocking chair had been high on the expectant mom’s wish list, a must have accessory for the room. She’d even asked that David start on it earlier than her due date, as she thought it might be nice to rock and talk to the baby while she was still expecting. So they had spent the last few weeks visiting every store in and out of town to find the perfect one. She’d been particular, measuring seats and seeing if her feet met the floor with her back against the cushion. She wanted high arms to aid her in keeping the baby in the right position. And it had to be just the right shade of whitewashed wood to go with the crib that Marco had designed for them. In the end they had found just the right thing. The only problem? It was an assembly project that was currently scattered across their living
“Good thing we aren’t hosting dinner for Thanksgiving this year,” she said brightly, her toes pointing toward an unseemly amount of wood and screws. “As talented as you are, I’m not sure you’ll have this done before Christmas.”

“If my wife had found any of the other choices acceptable, we would be sitting in the chair and not building it right now.” David smiled as she looked slightly sheepish. “But I know, everything is going to be perfect for our baby.”

She bit her lip, dropping the fabric samples back to her rapidly disappearing lap. The doctors had told her that once her second trimester hit that she’d find the changes to her body coming much quicker. They were right. “So don’t kill me, but…”

“You do realize that nothing good has ever come of starting a sentence that way?”

“I know, I know. It’s just that my site visit with Killian got me thinking.” She pressed her hand to the spot where the baby was kicking and smiled at the sensation. “Maybe we could consider a second nursery. At the new school?”

He didn’t immediately freak out at the thought of extra work or chastise her for again changing her mind on something. Instead he muttered something about bracket b and joint d needing to be joined. “I thought that you were thinking less of an administrative role and more of a teaching one?”

“I think I’d miss the kids for sure, but this is my vision of a school I’m creating. Shouldn’t I be the one making the decisions and whatnot?”

Sitting back on his heels, David watched as she softly ran her hands over the same spot where the baby had been kicking. He knew that she was nervous and even concerned about being a good mother, as they had these conversations often and came to realize neither were fully prepared for the challenge. Still, they wanted to be as ready as they could be and set about educating themselves. Lately, his wife had taken to reading to the baby each night, actually having conversations with the growing child within her.

“Have you asked Killian what he thinks? Maybe he’s planning something?”

She shrugged, rocking backward to propel herself up to standing. “He’s been great about picking out the best curriculum and seeing that we at least have all the documents and forms we need for the
state. He made a few contacts for furniture from a charter school that’s closing after merging with a larger one. So there’s that. But I think his heart is set on teaching. I mean he’s said that before when Regina’s been after him about more singing and writing gigs. He’s feeling a bit weird about the money, but I told him I’m not expecting a huge investment from him.”

“I say talk to him. And before we look at adding nurseries all around town, remember that Ashley agreed to make us a deal about daycare.”

She bent at her waist the best she could, kissing the top of his head. “You’re always so sensible.” Pressing her cheek to the spot she had just kissed, she smiled. “Want something to eat? I’ve got about two hours of baking to do for tomorrow.”

“I’ll fix a sandwich later,” he assured her, turning his attention back to building the chair. He had started twisting another bolt when he felt her eyes on him. “I know that look. What’s wrong?”

“Do you think this is a horrible idea?” she asked, looking for all the world about 10 years younger than her late 20s. “The money. I know that my parents set it aside for me to do something great with it.”

“And you don’t think this is it?” David looked perplexed, but she wasn’t sure if it was the assembly project or the question. “You’ve dreamed about this.”

“I know,” she said, circling the narrow island in the kitchen. “I love teaching. I really do. I just don’t know if I should sink every penny into a school. What if…what if it doesn’t work out?”

David lowered the small tool he was holding and watched her nervously pace. Finally, he pushed himself up to his feet with a groan at the tight muscles. “Well, let’s think about this for a minute. First we don’t know that it will fail. It could be a success. I think it will be actually. Then there is the money. We have been doing well enough on my salary and yours. Even before you considered this private school idea, we had talked about simply living on my salary so that you could take some time off with the baby.”

***AAA***

“Is Liam okay?” Emma asked, hurrying down the stairs and pulling her ponytail tighter as she went. “What the hell happened?”
“Both are physically well,” he said, shaking his hand through his hair that was damp from the rain. “Both are now also out on signature bonds.”

“Both,” Emma repeated. “I never got the full story out of Elsa. So they both pressed charges?”

“Aye, it seems that stubborn pig headedness is a family trait, love. Sure you wish to marry into such a family?” Smiling sheepishly, he turned his cheek closer to her as she brushed her lips against it.

“I’ll take my chances,” Emma agreed. “I’m known to be pretty stubborn too. God help our children coming from the two of us.”

His breath caught in his chest as he looked at her curiously. She was self-consciously pushing an errant curl behind her ear and shifting her weight from one sock covered foot to the other. “You’ve changed, Emma,” he said softly in a tone not meant to scare her. “There was a time you would not have said a word of us someday having children, even in jest.”

She pursed her lips and tilted her head to the side, the tip of her ponytail brushing his arm that was about her waist. “Well, it seems pretty safe to do so. And so far it hasn’t scared you off.”

“Aye, it’s a lovely thought.” He dropped his forehead to hers and simply breathed in and out for a few moments. “Liam has injured his hand from hitting our younger brother. A few bruised knuckles is all and a few stitches on his cheek. Minor scuffle really.”

“Elsa’s taking him home, I would imagine.”

“She’s in quite a pickle though what with her singing out of town. Graham won’t let either of my brother’s out of town until they see the judge on Monday. Her aunt has plans to come see her sing. So I suppose we’ll get Robin or perhaps Will to go sit guard over him so that he does nothing stupid in her absence. I don’t know. He was looking rather ashamed of his behavior as she was loading him up.”

“He could come stay here while she’s gone,” Emma said, running her hand over the still damp hair at the back of his neck. “I know he’d rather be at the condo, but we’ve got the bed here.”

He pressed his eyes shut and scrunched his nose as if trying to ward off the punch she might throw. “I’m afraid that my brother might not be allowed within 500 feet of here.”
“What?” she asked, pulling back from his embrace. “You didn’t?”

“He had no place to go,” Killian answered, speaking quickly. “Graham would have had no choice but jail for the lad if I hadn’t…It’s only for tonight. It seems he has a friend who may…it’s only for tonight.”

“Your younger brother, who has been stalking your older brother and his girlfriend. Your younger brother, who nearly killed Elsa in that stunt on the road…Your younger brother who…” She stepped back and gripped the back of the couch in her hands as if ready to fall over from surprise. “You want him staying under our roof? Are you kidding me?”

“I set him up on the boat.”

“Why not Granny’s? Or a shelter? Or why not jail? He could probably use the fear of God being put into him in jail. Killian, this is such a bad idea.” She pushed her oversized sleeves up her arms and then pulled them back down.

“He won’t be a hassle, love. I told him that he’s to stay there. I will keep an eye on him.”

“You do realize this is insane, right?” She gripped his sweater sleeve tighter in her hand. “Of course you do. That’s why you look like you’re ready for me to go nuts yelling at you about it.”

“Emma, I couldn’t leave him alone in a jail cell over a bloody holiday.”

She frowned, shaking her head. “You can’t save the world, Killian, but I guess you’re going to try. Okay, so you’ll let him stay on the boat. It’s fine. It’ll be fine. Did you invite him up to the house for dinner? Should I plan an extra spot for tomorrow?”

“I didn’t think that far in advance,” he admitted sheepishly. “I was more concerned over just trying to keep both my brothers out of jail and the hospital. Bloody hell, “Neal’s wedding is this weekend I suppose I’ll have to find a sitter of sorts if he’s still here. I doubt Neal and his fiancé wish to have another Jones on hand for their nuptials.”

“We won’t go,” she said stubbornly. “I’ve been looking for an excuse. I don’t know that I can make
He ran his hand up her back, fingertips dancing along her spine. “We can’t skip out on the wedding. Henry’s a part of the festivities. We have to be adults.”

“Can I at least hit them?” she asked, sounding serious about the idea of violence. “I just need one good punch to the face for him and I’ll be fine.”

His laugh wasn’t loud, but she felt it vibrate against her chest before he pulled back to look at her. “If it comes to that, I won’t stop you. I’ll even find the funds to bail you out of jail.”

“Don’t worry,” she said, rolling her eyes dramatically. “I’m totally not going to ruin the wedding by decking them. We’ll let Neal and his bride have their day. But if I find a voodoo doll between now and then…watch out!” She made a stabbing motion with her fingers clutching an imaginary pin. “So back to the subject. You don’t have any questions about the surgery, but have you made a decision?”

He sighed, cocking his head far to the right so as to almost touch his ear to his shoulder. “I suppose not, but I am leaning that way. I don’t know what the timeframe is regarding that. I suppose I will have to see and make a decision.” He frowned, the lines between his eyes and farther up his forehead deepening. “Are you thinking differently, love?”

She wrinkled her own nose, tightening her arms around him. “It’s going to sound crazy.”

“Last night when Henry couldn’t sleep, he and I had a long conversation about aliens and if they relieve themselves the same way as we do. I assure you that nothing you say right now could sound crazy after that.”

She laughed silently, vibrating with the effort to hold it back. “I’m glad I missed that one. But I was thinking about this surgery thing. What if something goes wrong?”

“I’ve told you, love, I’m a survivor and have no intention of leaving you to grieve. I’ll be here for the long haul and you’ll not be rid of me.” He ducked his head to catch her glance, smiling hopefully at her.

“That’s good to know, but still…What I’m asking or saying or whatever is what if something happens. I was on the phone with Elsa and know that she couldn’t make a single decision about your
older brother. Your brothers would have more rights to make decisions about you than I do. And before you freak out thinking I’m talking about inheriting money or something. I was just thinking that girlfriend or fiancé means I’m out in the waiting room and not by your side. And I think you know that would kill me too.”

“That is a good point, love. Perhaps we should do something about that. Not that I’m saying I will have the surgery, but it’s best to be prepared.”

“Killian, it’s fine. We’ll figure something out. I’m sorry. We need to be worrying about your job and not my concern over who gives me updates at the hospital.” She trailed her right hand down his neck and to his chest, resting it over his beating heart. “So how soon do you think Mary Margaret and you can get this school up and running?”

The corners of his mouth lifted and his hand returned to her face, thumb caressing her cheek and jaw before his index finger touched her lips to silence her. “Marry me?”

She tilted her head back and lifted her left hand to show off the ring again. “I thought we established that I would. Fiancé, remember?”

“As soon as possible,” he clarified, nonplussed. “We can still have our lovely wedding by the water with your frock designed by Ruby and our every moment planned by Mary Margaret. But perhaps we should do this now…settle all this so there is no question as to our status.”

“Killian,” she breathed, her shoulders falling slack. “I…”

“Marry me?”

“You don’t have to…” She looked away again, turning her eyes toward the stairs would be clamoring down soon. She saw the mixture of their photos on the walls, some from his life and some from hers. But most were from their days together. “We have time.”

“Marry me?” His eyes barely blinked as he looked at her, the bright blue darker than usual and his lips still threatening to spill into a smile. “Emma Swan, will you marry me?”

She ran her teeth over her bottom lip. “When?” she asked, shaking her head. “I don’t have a dress. You don’t have…”

“I’d say tomorrow, but as it’s a holiday, how about Friday. Should be relatively quiet at the
courthouse. Everyone else will be shopping. And you don’t need a dress. We only need each other, right?” He lifted her chin with his fingers, locking gazes with her again. “Marry me?”

“This is crazy”

“Aye, you warned me that it would be, love. So? What do you say? Marry me?”

Her head began to nod before she managed the one word answer. “Yes.”
Chapter 56

So I am guessing many thought I was giving up on this, but here is almost the final chapter. It’s a long one, as it was originally going to be two but I got carried away. I could make my excuses of another job change, a move, and three weeks without internet, but I won’t. If and when I finish my paper for my class I am taking this fall, I’ll update my other two stories too. Enjoy!

Portland, Maine was not the largest town in the world and its entertainment scene was somewhat lacking. Still the annual Christmas Tree lighting brought in a huge crowd on Thanksgiving night with a few very special musical guests headlining the event. Elsa knew that it was a special moment for her and her career, though she was sad her sister didn’t want to take the stage with her and that Liam had to stay behind in Storybrooke after the altercation with his youngest brother. Thankfully Anna and Kristoff had traveled with her and she would be home in bed in just a few hours.

“I think she’s up to something,” Anna said, sitting in the canvas chair that someone had placed in the backstage area. “I can just sense it you know. I think it’s the hormones.”

Elsa stared at her sister’s reflection in the mirror and then back at herself as she dabbed on a bit more of the pink lip gloss. “You think Ingrid’s plotting?”

“No Aunt Ingrid,” the younger sister said in exasperation. “Emma. Didn’t you notice during lunch today? She was kind of there but not there. I think she is planning something. When’s Killian’s birthday? Maybe it’s a party. You know like a surprise. I love surprise parties.”

Elsa closed her eyes. “I don’t think it’s that. She’s not acting that weird.” Elsa appreciated the friendship she had with her manager and friend, but she hated the idea of gossiping.

“You just aren’t observant. I am.” Her sister’s sweater stretched across her quite noticeable baby bump, hands on either side of it. “Number one. She was making a list. I couldn’t quite see it to read it, but it was definitely a list.”

“She’s hosting a huge thanksgiving dinner tonight. You think that might have something to do with it?”

“She was doodling hearts on it.” Anna laced her fingers together in front of her. “And then there were the looks.”

“I know I’m going to regret this,” Elsa said, running her brush through her long blonde hair. “But what looks?”

Cocking her head to the side with a satisfied smile, Anna wrinkled her nose. “The ones they kept exchanging. Killian and Emma. When someone mentioned what their plans were for Friday they touched hands and smiled at each other. Then Emma asked Mary Margaret if she and David would mind watching Henry Friday night. And then someone asked about their wedding plans and Killian actually coughed. And Emma said something about other priorities right now.”

“Well,” Anna interrupted triumphantly. “Why was Killian asking Regina what time the courthouse opened? You want to know what I think? I think they are eloping.” She scrunched up her nose.
“Wait. Is it eloping if they go to city hall? Don’t you have to go somewhere to elope? Vegas? So maybe it’s not an elopement. Maybe it’s a…I don’t know what you would call it.”

“I don’t care what we call it. Why would they do that?” The brush clattered to the counter without so much as a flinch from either sister.

Anna looked defensive, squaring off her shoulders. “I think it’s romantic.” She gave a quick wave to her husband standing near the security team lead for the event. “I think I need to go take my seat. Don’t worry. We’ll be watching you.” The rust haired woman laughed then. “That sounded creepier than I meant it to sound. I don’t mean we’ll be watching you like we’re keeping track or something. No, I just meant that we’ll be watching you like we want to see you shine up there.”

Elsa smiled sweetly and braved the idea of smeared lip gloss to kiss her sister’s cheek. “I understand, Anna. And thank you.”

***AAA***

Gingerly tugging back the curtain over the sink, Emma looked across the dark dock toward the boat where Killian’s younger brother was staying the night again. She had not exactly met him yet, having spent most of the day playing hostess to their little holiday gathering. The house was nearly empty now with everyone heading off in various directions except their core group of friends besides Elsa and Anna.

“So I was thinking I might sleep at Elsa and Liam’s condo tonight,” Killian said, wrapping his arms around her waist and pulling her back to collide with him. “Bad luck to see the bride before the wedding and all that. But then it occurred to me that it was unfair to leave you here with my younger brother on the boat. Perhaps I should stay out there with him.”

She rubbed her cheek against his and covered his arm with her own, the other snaking back to let her fingers dive into his thick, dark, hair. “Superstitious?”

“Well, if you must know…” His nose skimmed the shell of her ear, breath and voice warm and low. “I just don’t wish anything to spoil our day, my love.”

She wanted to close her eyes and sink into his embrace, forget all their troubles for a moment and simply get lost in his soft touches and naughty little suggestions in her ear. For the life of her, she wasn’t sure she could stand a night away from him even if he was being adorable about it all. The practical side of her looked over where Ruby seemed to be holding court, sipping on wine and talking to Mary Margaret about hot yoga and losing pregnancy weight. When had Ruby become such an expert on postnatal care? Granny was complaining rather loudly that all this new way of doing things was not at all better than the classics. Everyone seemed relaxed though, eyes hooded with the warmth of the fire in the fireplace and full stomachs from what had been a massive dinner.

“You look like you’re up to something,” Henry announced, carrying a glass that had not been picked up during the initial sweep earlier. “Just so you know, Ruby noticed and has been asking me.”

Emma flushed, grabbing the glass out of her son’s hand and turning back to the sink. From the corner of her eye she could see Killian clear his throat and place a guiding hand on Henry’s shoulder. “That lass is obsessed with conspiracy theories. Don’t tell me that she has convinced you that we are mutant space aliens.”

“No,” Henry hedged, allowing his future stepfather to turn him back toward the living room. “But you guys did say you wanted to talk to me tonight. And you keep sneaking off and whispering to each other.”
Killian raised his eyebrows high at the list of observations. “You’re quite an astute young man, but why don’t you go see if the pup is still appreciating his temporary spot?”

“Are you getting rid of me?”

“No at all,” Killian said with all seriousness. “I just wished to protect the office upstairs from the hijinks of that pup.”

Offering no new protests, Henry ran up the stairs, his sneakers clomping loudly as he went. Emma, who had finished handwashing the glass, turned to watch him. “He’ll be excited, or happy, or I don’t know,” she noted, more to herself than to Killian. “I hate keeping secrets.”

“Aye, so do I, love, but it is necessary. If we tell all our lovely family and friends of our little plan, they will surely want to have a say in it. And our private ceremony will take on a new color with the courthouse full of celebrants. Let them keep planning the big event. Tomorrow is our day.”

She cupped a hand on his cheek and kissed him lightly. “I love you, but our friends will kill us if they find out.”

“Then we should quit talking about it with them only feet away.” Leaning forward to kiss her again, he pulled back and then in again to add a third kiss. She laughed against him.

“You know if Mary Margaret and Ruby find out, I’m totally blaming you. This was not my idea. I am being forced.” She pulled the dish towel off of his shoulder and tossed it toward the counter. “You should be glad that I love you so much that I’m willing to do this.”

“Every day,” he grinned, capturing the hand still on his cheek and jaw and drawing it forward. He placed his lips against her palm and then lowered their hands down between them. “I am grateful every day for your love.”

They tried to hide their grins as they joined the others, Killian topping off glasses of wine and laughing at Ruby’s latest antics being retold. Emma nudged in next to Mary Margaret, handing her pregnant friend a hot cocoa instead of the wine. By the time Killian joined Emma on the sofa, everyone seemed relaxed and paired off with arms and legs entwined and drowsy heads resting on shoulders. Even Granny was settled in the largest of the chairs and sipping happily as she chimed in with an opinion every now and then. She went to check on Henry only to find him texting with Violet to which she informed Emma that it was far too soon for the boy to be that serious about a girl.

“I knew this was horrible mistake,” the older Liam said, looking appropriately disgusted as he entered the room from upstairs. “You fill us with all that food and then turn our stomachs with all that love and affection.”

“You are just jealous that you can’t canoodle with Elsa being halfway across the state,” Ruby stated insightfully, her own legs thrown over Graham’s lap and her eyes heavy. “I’d invite you over here, but I’m not interested in a threesome right now. Why don’t you go sit with Granny? She’s had enough wine now that she won’t bite.”

Liam made a big show of perching himself on the arm of the chair where Granny had taken up residence and throwing and arm around her as he placed a loud but sweet kiss against her cheek. “Lovely company is so hard to come by,” he said flirtatiously as Granny half shoved him backwards.

“Ooops,” Ruby announced, recrossing her legs. “I might have been wrong. Watch out, Liam. Granny does have fangs.”
Graham’s low warning to his date sent them all laughing as Liam collapsed dramatically into the chair closest to the fire and pulled his guitar into his lap. “I suppose I could manage to play a little.”

“If you practice, I’m quite sure you’ll get better,” Killian teased good naturedly, forgoing a drink to link his hand with Emma’s. He hoped his caressing of her ring finger was not too big of a sign that something was planned for the next day. She would look at him and smile sweetly, dropping her head to his shoulder and sometimes even burying herself into his side.

“My brother is both a teacher and a comedian,” Liam groused, adjusting the strap over himself. “I thought that Anastasia and Will were planning to come over too?”

“Perhaps they wanted some privacy,” Graham suggested, his bottle of water standing out among the drinkers. “Will is not too happy to share a meal with a man in law enforcement.”

“He’s not too terrible of a bloke and I don’t think he has any outstanding warrants,” Killian said, surprising even his brother in defense of a guy who had been in jail twice for petty theft. “And I daresay that many of us in this very room have had one or two run ins with the sheriff, even if just a traffic offense.”

“I haven’t,” David announced proudly, ducking as Ruby threw a pillow in his direction. “Well, I haven’t.”

“And that’s why I love you,” Mary Margaret laughed, grabbing the now discarded pillow and putting it behind her back. “You don’t make me feel like such a goody two shoes.” It had been a longstanding joke between the three friends that Mary Margaret was far more innocent than the others. Ruby often put sister in front of her strongly Catholic sounding name to refer to her as a nun. So to hear her call someone out on being more innocent than she was made them all giggle and chortle at the irony.

Liam played a bit more, letting the songs linger in the air and each of the guests sang along despite some off key voices and questions about lyrics. By the time Henry joined them, everyone was trying to outperform the others. Emma squeezed her son in between herself and Killian, mussing his hair and pinching his cheek when he warbled out part of a song that he totally shouldn’t have known.

As the last bit of daylight lingered into a cloudy and drizzly twilight, Killian carried a bit of dinner down to their other brother and the guests tuned the television into the event in Portland to catch a glimpse of Elsa. Emma dug back out the desserts and offered up slices of pies and cakes to fill already full stomachs as they watched a group of dancers perform on a smallish stage that was made smaller by oversized presents and elves that were supposed to glow with lights.

“You do realize the purpose of setting these items out was so people could serve themselves,” Granny said to Emma. “And you’re fooling no one by the way.”

Emma sliced through the still warm pie. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Granny inspected the slice that Emma gave her and must have found it satisfactory. “You and Killian were angels to host everyone here. The loft where the newlyweds live is much too small, and while my dinner is larger it’s a tad impersonal.” Emma let out a sigh of relief that the woman’s questioning seemed to be distracted. She should have known better. “But you two are positively giddy like newlyweds. So do you want to tell me why? I am the one who introduced you and tried to get you to date. I think I deserve to know if perhaps we’ve moved up the wedding.”

If the blush on Emma’s face wasn’t enough to tell everyone that she was indeed guilty of hiding something, the way her hand shook as she sliced another piece of pie was clearly evidence. “I don’t
“You are a horrible liar, which is a good thing, but nonetheless. So when is the big day?” Granny leaned her soft green covered torso over the counter and lowered her voice. “Don’t tell me you’re knocked up too?”

Emma shook her head and lowered the knife. “We wanted to get married to make sure everything was…you know with the surgery and all…I mean it’s not guaranteed or a done deal, but I just…and he…”

Granny must have translated Emma’s ramble that wasn’t like her normally blunt self. “I was hoping to cater your reception and sit front and center to watch you say your vows. But I understand. At least tell me you’re going to have a new dress. Ruby will throw one of her fits if you walk down the aisle in something you’ve worn a million times.”

“We haven’t really had time,” Emma protested. “And the dress doesn’t matter.”

There was a gentleness to Granny’s annoyed scoff that thankfully didn’t arouse any attention from the others. “Tomorrow morning. First thing. You and I are going to the store and buying you a damn dress. I won’t have you looking like you’re headed to work on your wedding day.”

Emma knew better than to protest and gave a short nod. “I guess that would…”

“And you’re going to have a honeymoon, right?” The woman was clearly already going through a check list. “I mean you can’t get married and then just come back here to help Henry with his homework and take that dog for a walk.”

“With Killian’s little brother here at the boat and Neal’s wedding this weekend, we can’t really do that now. But we will. We’re still…”

“Henry’ll come stay with me and Ruby. And we’ll take him to that Neal’s wedding. Nope, it’s just tacky for your honeymoon to be nothing more than coming back here as wonderful as this house is and all. And as for that brother of his, I’ll see what I can do. What do you say that we find that boy a room at the bed and breakfast? Surely someone will be checking out by then. If not, I’ll open up that room that Ruby’s been trying to refashion. It’ll be fine. Now I know you don’t want anyone to know so a reception is out. What about a cake though? You have to cut a wedding cake.”

“Granny, I…”

The older woman snapped her fingers and dug her phone out of her pocket. “I’ll call my head cook. He’ll be baking early in the morning. I’ll get him to concoct some little sheet cake or something for you two.”

“You don’t have to…”

“Hush,” the woman said, pulling the phone up to her ear. “I insist. And you know me. I’m too old and set in my ways to change my mind. You’re essentially like family and I’m not half the control freak planner that Mary Margaret can be in these situations. You get these pies and cakes cut and I’ll get back to you about flowers and everything else.” She ambled toward the door to the deck, clearly seeking a bit of privacy from being overheard. “Oh and Emma,” she said, rotating the phone so she wasn’t speaking directly into it. “Congratulations.”

***AAA***

The party finally seemed to disperse after the television performance and Granny’s insistence that
they had all intruded long enough. Nobody even noticed the wink she threw to Emma and the hug she gave Killian before reminding him that he needed to be out of the house by midnight if he was going to keep with that tradition. The man had smiled widely at her muted suggestion and told her he would go just as soon as they had their chat with Henry. Granny had appreciated that and even thought to herself that it was quite sweet that Emma and Henry would spend Emma’s last night as a single woman together.

“You’re up to something,” Ruby said, shrugging out of her coat after a long and private goodbye with Graham. Granny was mildly surprised that her granddaughter had not gone back to his place. But the question was clearly plaguing her. “Are you going to tell me or do I have to…”

“Threats are not necessary and completely useless.”

“It’s something about Emma, right?” Ruby continued, kicking off her heels next to the door and padding her way into the shared living space in the diner and bed and breakfast’s private quarters. “Is something wrong? Killian’s going to have that surgery, isn’t he? He’s probably feeling like he’s got to be the hero for his father.” She made a sour look. “I am not surprised. Emma’s probably freaking out.”

“You jump to conclusions,” Granny muttered, flipping the slick pages of her cookbook. “Did you taste that pie that Killian made? It practically melted in my mouth. Do you think he would share the recipe with me? I think Leroy would particularly like it. I’ll ask Henry when he spends the weekend with us.”

There was a moment of silence before Ruby ducked under the counter of the kitchen bar and pulled out a bottle of aged whiskey that Granny kept there for medicinal purposes. “So what’s going on then?” she asked, more to herself. “They were acting strange. Not bad strange, mind you. But just really affectionate.” She hummed under her breath as she poured some amber liquid into a glass. Looking at it critically she poured a bit more. “Emma was drinking tonight so she’s not pregnant. And then…wait. Did you say that Henry’s spending the weekend with us? Why?”

“I thought it might be easier if we took Henry to his father’s wedding. It’ll give Emma and Killian some time alone without having to plaster on smiles and pretend to like Neal, Gold, and the whole bunch.”

“You do realize you’re making yourself sound more and more guilty, right? So let’s see here. We have you, Emma, and Killian whispering. I saw Emma looking like she could burst into song like a Disney movie. Mary Margaret suggested something about their wedding and Emma didn’t freak out about it. Killian…You…What are you looking at…” Ruby lunged toward the older woman and swiped the book off of her lap. “You’re looking at wedding cake recipes?”

“There is a wedding this weekend,” the woman said defensively. “I’m just getting prepared.”

“You’re not catering it,” Ruby reminded her not so gently. “So…wait, you were talking to Emma. She hugged you. She never hugs you. I mean she loves you and all, but she never hugs you. Did she…She’s freaking eloping, isn’t she?”

“Ruby, dear, I don’t think it is right for me to spill secrets.” The woman snatched the cookbook back from her granddaughter. But that hardly stopped the younger woman’s mind from racing. “Ruby, please.”

Waving her hands as if trying to stop the older woman from instructing her on what to think, Ruby considered her information again. “That’s it, isn’t it? But why? Okay, I don’t need to know why. Why won’t they tell me? I’m half a mind to call her up and give her…”
The older woman removed her wire rimmed glasses with a sad sort of expression. “Ruby, don’t ruin this for them. They made the decision to do it this way. Don’t ruin that for them. Let them do this. Let them get married. From what she said, they are planning the larger wedding this spring. It’ll be beautiful and include everyone.”

Looking slightly defeated, Ruby’s shoulders rolled forward as she sank down on the floral couch her grandmother refused to part with and stared into her glass. “Does she even have a dress? Please tell me she’s not getting married in a pair of old jeans or a business suit. Please?”

“I’m taking her shopping in the morning.”

Ruby’s eyes rolled backwards as she bopped her head from side to side, clearly thinking about possibilities. “You know, I have that dress that Zelena had commissioned and then chose something else. It’s shorter than a typical wedding gown, but it’s cream colored and a-line which she seems to love. And I know her measurements from working on the dress she wanted. I could alter it to fit her.”

“You can’t let her know that you know,” Granny admonished, placing her glasses back on her nose and smoothing down the page of her book. “She’s not wanting…”

“I won’t. You give her the dress. Make up some story about how you swiped it. It can be her something borrowed. That way you can skip the shopping for it. Make an appointment for her at the spa or something. They won’t be busy the day after Thanksgiving. I assume by your cookbook that they want a wedding cake.”

The antique clock on the mantle chimed the late hour and both women frowned at it. “She said no, but you can’t have a wedding and no cake.”

Humming around the rim of her glass Ruby took that information in and processed it with what she knew of her friend. “What if that’s when we surprised her? It doesn’t have to be formal. We can shut the diner down after lunch and throw a small reception here. It won’t be meal time so just finger foods and cake, champagne for a toast.”

“She won’t be happy that you know…”

“She’ll get over it. They have to tell us eventually. So this just makes it easier. I’m not talking about inviting the town. But if we call Mary Margaret in the morning, I’m sure she’ll gather the troops. Elsa, Liam, Anna, Kristoff, me, you, her, David, Henry. I’ll check on Graham’s schedule. Do you think that Killian would want us to see if his dad…Okay, bad idea. We’ll just keep it simple.”

Granny turned another page and smoothed it into place. “She’s going to kill you. I’m not sure even with my crossbow that I could protect you.”

The dark haired woman lumbered up from the too soft couch and groaned before kissing her grandmother’s cheek. “If I worried every time that Emma threatened to kill me, I’d be on anxiety meds. Now you pick a cake. I’ll get the dress.”

***AAA***

Elsa’s face was illuminated by the screen of her phone as she slipped into bed next to Liam who she thought was still asleep. Smiling at the latest message, she let out a little sigh, and drew her knees up like a table and rested her back on the tufted headboard.

“Should I be worried that you’re more interested in that bloody phone than me?” he grumbled, tugging at the edge of his pillow. “Welcome home, by the way.”
"I was only gone a few hours," she said, delivering a peck to his lips and giggling when he seemed upset at her pulling away so quickly. "And you have been busy with your brother and friends, haven’t you? Not sitting around here pining away for me."

"You did beautifully, darling," he said, the warm affection and pride seeping through his put upon pout. "Radiant."

She blushed, finally lowering her phone. "I wish you could have been there."

That seemed to break the sweet moment between them as he ran a hand through his hair and rolled onto his back. "I never meant to leave you alone on that stage. If I hadn’t…"

She reached over, a long elegant finger placing itself over his lips. "I’m not mad, Liam. Save the apologies for something else. But I do have something I probably need to tell you."

The sheets and blanket were around his waist as he turned back to face her. "I’m all ears. It is good news, is it not?"

She lifted one shoulder and tilted her head as she pulled back her hand. "So I don’t know how you’re going to react. Anna thought that your brother and Emma were acting weird. She actually suggested that maybe they were planning to elope.” His eyebrows shot up and once again she silenced him with her finger on his lips. “I told her she was crazy, but you know…they have been acting strangely. And well, Ruby and her grandmother noticed too. So I have been texting with Ruby.” She held the phone up as evidence of this conversation. “They are getting married at noon tomorrow at city hall.”

“My own brother isn’t…” His lips moved against her finger before the single digit pressed harder.

“It’s about them,” Elsa reminded him, knowing he was twisting it into a slight against him. “They want to get married. We aren’t going to judge.”

“This is complete bollocks.” He pushed off from the firm mattress and stood in the darkened room. “I am about to go kick my brother’s sorry arse.”

She laughed, lowering her legs and crossing them at her ankles. “Can I suggest you get dressed first? You’re just wearing a pair of boxers.”

He huffed, heading in the direction of their shared walk in closet before whirling around to face her. “They are sneaking off as if they are doing something to be ashamed about.”

“They are in love and want to be together,” Elsa reminded him gently. “It’s about them, not you or the rest of our friends. Now Ruby’s planning to throw them a smallish reception at Granny’s tomorrow afternoon. Are you going to be okay by then? Or should I make our excuses?”

He folded his arms over his bare chest. “He’s my brother. I should be there. I should…”

“She knows you love him. He knows you’re happy for him.” She held out an arm to beckon him. “You can joke about this in your speech over champagne.” The mattress dipped as he sat again,
finally reclining next to her. “You want to do more, don’t you?”

“A courthouse wedding just seems so impersonal. Don’t you think that should want more than that?”

She seemed to think about it for a moment, holding a splayed hand on his chest. “Such as?”

“I don’t know exactly, but it feels like we should do something more.”

***AAA***

Emma folded her robe and placed it over the softly worn chair next to the bed. The bed itself seemed overly large without Killian there reading from some creased paged book or thoughtfully making notes in that notebook of his. Even the house was quieter than normal, despite Henry and Sparrow’s presence that should have more than made up for his absence.

“Only one night apart, love, and then I’ll be at your side for all eternity,” Killian had said in that annoyingly poetic way he had about him. She was not sure why she was agreeing to his silliness about not seeing her before the wedding. Her only real excuse was that he had been so sincere about it that she couldn’t help but give in to him.

Having puttered about the bedroom long enough, she sank into the bed and tried to ignore the empty spot beside her. Everything felt off and odd without him there, her cheek missing the wiry hair on his chest where she would rest her head, her shoulders missing his blunted arm around them. She curled her arms around his pillow and thought about all the nights as a teenager in group homes when she would do something similar and imagine a night when she wouldn’t feel so alone.

It wasn’t that she felt alone now. She knew that Killian was not all that far away on his boat, probably awkwardly talking to his younger brother. Her son was excitedly sleeping next door, having been nearly impossible to get to bed after news that his mother would be getting married the next day. Henry had begged for details she couldn’t provide, but had been more than satisfied when Killian suddenly asked him to serve as best man since Liam was in the dark about the nuptials. Henry had been in awe of the responsibility and promised to keep the rings safe with the most earnest of vows.

Staring at the alarm clock, she groaned. There weren’t that many hours to sleep and the thought of her son solemnly swearing made her wonder if she too needed to consider writing vows for their ceremony. Killian had said nothing of it, but would that stop him. He would probably be able to deliver a speech that made her tear up without giving it much time at all. She was not that kind of writer. She loved him. That would have to be mentioned. He made her feel like the broken pieces of her heart and life were beautiful and not as tragic as they had once felt. He made her feel important, loved, cherished. All of it seemed too cliché. It was a time like this she wished she could call Mary Margaret and ask for some advice about what to say.

She could do this, she told herself, flipping onto her back so that her head rested between her pillow and his and created an almost cave like feeling. She would just think of everything that he had done, said, or even tried to do to make her understand that he wasn’t like the rest of the guys she had dated. There was that sweet way he always tried to make her feel special, the way he held her hand. It wasn’t about protecting her or guiding her as much as it was a show of his support and wanting to be by her side. The way he danced with her was similar, their bodies moving together and the smile on happiness that couldn’t help but escape from both of them despite the desire to keep it cool. It reminded her of the way they made love, passionate and deliberate, lazy and affectionate. There were more sides to their relationship than any coin or set of dice.

The beeping of her phone pulled her from her thoughts, smiling she held it above her and giggled
(yes, she was capable of that sometimes) at the picture of him he had sent. He was in a dark bunk on
the sailboat, his hair somewhat a mess from having changed into a shirt and sleep pants. One eye was
shut tightly and the other peeking at her through his phone. The text read, “can’t sleep, can you?”

She texted back just as quickly, “no, I can’t. Someone woke me by texting me.”

**Killian: Bloody bastard. You should sic your fiancé on him.**

**Emma: I don’t know. He’s kind of cute. Might want to keep him around.**

***AAA***

Liam paced outside the diner with one hand in his pocket and the other digging through the curls of
his hair that were damp from the slight drizzle of the morning. He’d known that things would be
crazy on the roads. But two cars almost hitting him, three pedestrians wandering out in front of him,
and a plastic Santa being swept in front of him by the wind was a bit much. Elsa had discerned from
a few very early phone calls with Ruby and Mary Margaret that Emma was due at the diner
momentarily to join Granny for a quick dress shopping experience. While he had not even told Elsa
of his early morning errand, she had been too preoccupied with some idea that Mary Margaret and
David were concocting.

“You can wait inside, you know,” Ruby said, hefting up a bag of trash that she was taking to one of
the canisters. “Granny won’t bite. Well, today anyway. She’s already had her breakfast.”

“I was waiting on Emma,” he admitted, brushing his hand across his forehead. “I know that you
don’t want me telling her that we all know about the wedding. I just wanted her to have
something…”

Ruby peered over his hand to look at the shining object in his other hand. “That is…”

“It was my mum’s necklace. It’s just a cheap little bobble that probably turned her neck green. But I
thought…well, what with her becoming my sister today that it was appropriate for her something old.
That is the tradition, is it not?”

Ruby pressed her lips together in an effort not to laugh. “You do realize she’s marrying your brother
to have him as a husband not to gain a brother in you?” Her stiff white and red uniform was a bit
wrinkled that morning after hours of sleepless toil over Emma’s dress. Still she was a stunning
woman with a thick mane of chestnut hair and long legs that seemed to defy reason under a short
skirt. “Though I know Emma. And she’s probably excited to be getting more family.”

“Aye, I’m just a part of the package,” he laughed. “I know it would mean a great deal to my brother
as well. Our mother…well, she would have been so proud of us both for having fallen in love with
such strong, beautiful, and kind hearted women. I wish she could be here for it.”

“I miss my mother a lot too. But they are with us even though we’re not able to see them. I think
she’s probably very excited knowing her baby boy is getting married today.” She made a show of
dabbing at her eyes as if she had been crying. “Just so you know, Jones, I’m not sentimental. Not at
all.”

“Of course not,” Liam smiled. “So Emma is…”

“She got here about an hour ago. I think she’s back with Granny trying on the dress she’s going to
wear and working on a style for her hair.” Placing a long fingered hand across her chest, Ruby
smiled brightly. “And I’m pretending that I totally don’t know what’s going on in there.”
“So I’m out here waiting for…”

“No good reason at all,” Ruby finished. “You can find your brother down at the flower place though. I overheard that he and Henry were determined to buy Emma a bouquet to carry, which I admit is kind of romantic.”

Liam jogged off in the direction of Game of Thorns, ignoring Ruby’s declaration that she was just being helpful. If his brother wanted a private ceremony without anyone about, he could understand that. Still he felt the need to at least offer a family support that his brother would probably miss without him. And he’d be lying if he considered saying he wasn’t hurt by the exclusion.

And while he understood Elsa’s insistence that this was simply something for Killian and Emma, he knew that his brother would regret not embracing the day as something for their small family. He wouldn’t push himself onto the celebration, but at the least he could offer to help. If Emma would accept it, he would offer her the necklace as well.

His brother had always been a horrible liar, no less so when confronted with something that he was excited about. To his satisfaction his brother turned beet red at being found in a flower shop with his hand pointing to various blooms. “Brother, you’re…”

“Here to lend a hand,” Liam offered, not worrying over the fact that he was losing an opportunity to out his brother’s secrets. “I understand we have some nuptials to plan?”

His brother shifted his weight and glanced apologetically at the store owner. “We didn’t mean to…”

“I don’t think we have time for the excuses, brother. Let’s be getting on with all this. I have a suggestion, if you don’t mind.” The oldest of the brothers clamped his hand down on Henry’s shoulder. “You have a capable best man right here. I am happy to relinquish that title if you allow me a bit of a moment myself.”

Killian raised an eyebrow high, his dark hair in stark contrast to his white shirt that was clearly meant to be below a suit jacket. “A bit of a moment?”

“Aye, I was thinking that perhaps you would want something more family oriented than a courthouse. So what do you say if I perform the ceremony? I know the two of you well enough to do a load better than any barrister or magistrate. So what do you say, brother?”

Henry’s eyes grew wide at the suggestion and he was already bobbing his head at the same time that Killian was coming up with reasons why that would not work. “You aren’t a commissioned naval officer any longer. I am not sure it would be legal.”

“Perhaps not, but I could become ordained online. It’s a rather simple process they tell me. Perhaps the good man here would be so kind as to…”

Belle’s father, who had owned the shop for as long as anyone could remember, took a step backwards and held up his hands in surrender. “Far be it from me to stand in the way of true love. I happen to know just the site you need, sir.” He left Killian standing there with a half bundle of flowers resting on the counter. “Right this way.”

Liam did not go alone, dragging Henry back with him to fill in the appropriate blanks. By the time Killian was back to picking some more of the flowers, he only heard one gripe from his brother at having to pay the $50 expedited charge to print the ordainment on demand. As he went to pay for the flowers, chuckling that Henry was trying out names on his soon to be uncle that included titles of pastor and reverend, he thanked Moe French for offering to supply a few loaner arrangements if they
found a place on short notice.

“I think we should stick with the courthouse,” Killian offered, ducking into his jeep after depositing the flowers into the back of it next to Henry. “It is far too complicated to get the license and all that plus plan an event.”

“Very well,” Liam said, scanning his phone to find the proper words to deliver his now required speech for the ceremony. “I should have printed this out. It’s going to look a bit awkward with me trying to read off a phone.”

The trio did a few other odds and ends that needed taken care of with Liam offering to run interference between anyone who balked at the short notice. It wasn’t until they stopped for two coffees and a hot chocolate that he voiced his concern over keeping it all a secret. “I don’t know the particulars, but it would seem that Emma’s friends have picked up on the fact there is a wedding today. I know you don’t wish to make it too big of a deal, but perhaps…”

“I doubted you kept it from Elsa and she most likely didn’t keep it from the rest of our mates. Who else might I expect to see there today?”

Liam’s lips moved with the words on his screen, ignoring his brother’s direct question. The truth was he didn’t exactly know. Elsa had been rather quiet other than saying she wouldn’t interrupt the ceremony just to show that she knew what was going on that day. Ruby was probably up to something more than supplying a dress and hosting the reception. It was Mary Margaret he wondered most about since the woman loved a wedding and was dreadfully inept at keeping secrets.

***AAA***

Mary Margaret’s mint green dress was more appropriate for summer than fall, but maternity clothing was hard to come by at the last minute in a small town. Her low heeled shoes didn’t exactly add to her height, but they were serviceable and comfortable. It was David who pointed out that they would be better for running in case Emma threw a fit at their presence.

“You do realize we could be wrong about all this,” David mused, pulling on his suit jacket as his wife paced in the rounded corridor of city hall. “Maybe they aren’t…”

“They are,” the teacher corrected, peering down the hall way again with her green eyes searching out anyone familiar. She had promised Ruby and Elsa that she would not do this, but the pull had been too great. Emma was like a sister to her so the thought of her having a wedding with no celebrants or witnesses other than her own son and a stuffy judge was not just sad but horrifying. Like the teacher she was, Mary Margaret had packed a bag that was now at David’s feet, including her new camera that would take the best pictures of the ceremony.

“She’s going to be angry,” David observed, clearly trying to warn her off from getting too excited. The night before had been a sleepless one after they returned home from Killian and Emma’s house. Mary Margaret had been vocally going through every possible scenario and secret that Emma could have been hiding from them. However, phone calls from Elsa, Anna, and Ruby had meant that Mary Margaret was not only right but on a mission.

“She’ll thank me once she realizes that we are just trying to give her a special day that she won’t regret later.”

While it wasn’t the bride that overheard that comment, it was Anna who appeared at the top of the stairs sans husband or sister. “You think Emma will regret marrying Killian?” she asked, her jewel toned purple dress a good combination with her rust colored hair. “I thought they were in love.”
The two women hugged fiercely and left David shaking his head. “No, I just meant that she might regret getting married here without her friends.” She scrunched her nose as she looked down the corridor again. “Shouldn’t one of them or both of them be here by now?”

“Killian’s jeep is out front,” Anna informed them, “as is Ruby’s car. I think Granny must have driven that since it is parked a little crooked and Granny tends to do that.” She lifted a hand to check her earring, rolling her eyes at the inquisitive looks from the couple. “What? I’m observant, okay?”

“Wait, so they could both be here and we’re up here waiting for…”

Anna’s eyes grew bright as she caught on to Mary Margaret’s meaning and the two expectant mothers ran or more like speed walked down the stairs and down the hall where they found Henry pacing in front of the bank of restrooms tossing the velvety ring box up and then catching it. David was just a few steps behind with Mary Margaret’s bag of tricks slung over his arm and shoulder.

Henry realized immediately that his mother’s friends were not there for purely social reasons. “She’s going to kill you,” he said against his teacher’s shoulder as she pulled him into a hug. “I don’t know why she is hiding this, but she is.”

“I brought David and Anna to protect me,” she responded, hugging him tighter. “David’s pretty good in a fight and Anna’s scrappy.” She pulled back and inspected him. “So before we have this brawl, what is the plan? How do we make this day more special?”

***AAA***

Ruby pressed her lips together tightly and tilted her head in the cramped space of the women’s restroom. “It’s kind of simple.”

Emma’s eyes met hers in the mirror and narrowed at the gigantic can of hairspray in her friend’s hands. “I’m getting married at the courthouse on the day after Thanksgiving when most people are out shopping. I think I’m okay with simple.”

“There’s nothing wrong with simple, but your hair is so beautiful. Maybe you’d like…” Ruby took a step forward, tilting her head and already going through possibilities in her head.

Emma’s hair hung in loose curls down her back and was framed by a fat braid over the top of her head that was fastened behind her right ear. Tiny glittering pins were placed within the folds of the braid, creating a shining halo when the light struck just so. “Are we really doing this right now? In the middle of a public bathroom?”

“You’re the one who wanted to elope,” Ruby said, digging into her bag after shoving the hairspray into her grandmother’s hands. “Romantic and all, but still it’s a pretty special occasion. I say we should bling you up a bit.”

“You’re the one who wanted to elope,” Ruby said, digging into her bag after shoving the hairspray into her grandmother’s hands. “Romantic and all, but still it’s a pretty special occasion. I say we should bling you up a bit.”

“I say no,” Emma announced, her green eyes sparkling. “I promise that when we have the big ceremony.” Her fingers made air quotes that she hated most of the time. “When we have that, I promise that I’ll do my hair differently and even wear more makeup.”

“I say no,” Emma announced, her green eyes sparkling. “I promise that when we have the big ceremony.” Her fingers made air quotes that she hated most of the time. “When we have that, I promise that I’ll do my hair differently and even wear more makeup.”

“Wait, you’re not putting on more makeup?” The appalled tone of her dark haired friend made Emma glance toward Granny for support. The older woman grabbed Ruby’s arm in warning. “Got it. It’s your day. You do you.”

Emma’s phone, which was being held by Granny, rang loudly, startling all three women. Peering out of the bottom of her glasses, Granny smiled at the name and picture on the screen. “It’s Killian,” she said, handing the bride the phone. “Ruby and I’ll be outside.” Before Ruby had the chance to protest,
she was shoved out of the cramped space with her hairspray in one hand and a brush in the other.

“Is calling me not bad luck?” Emma asked as the door clanked shut. “I thought you were all into the superstition thing.”

His chuckle, even through the electronic connection, was warm and welcome in her ear, reminding her of nights by the fire or the way his lips would brush against her shoulder blade in the morning. “Just so you know last night away from you was torture, love. I don’t plan to repeat that any time soon.”

“Me either,” she agreed, leaning toward the mirror to inspect the mascara she was wearing that had a tendency to clump if she wasn’t careful. It looked fine. “So what’s up? Are we not doing this thing? Did you get cold feet? Or did something come up?”

“Perish the thought. I am anxious to marry you. I simply wanted to warn you of something.” His voice caught and she knew he was probably scratching behind his ear with that nervous twitch that was such a tell to his state of mind. “My brother knows of our plans. He showed up this morning and even did a thing to make it legal for him to marry us.”

“Your brother,” she said slowly, as if repeating the words, “went from naval officer, to unemployed musician, to bar manager, to minister? Or are you telling me he joined the priesthood. Am I going to have to call him Father Jones now?” Her laugh was light and she hoped somewhat soothing to her nervous sounding groom. “It’s okay, Killian. People are going to have to find out. So he found out sooner? It’ll be nice having him there. He’s your brother.”

“He’s not the only one who knows.”

Her sharp intake of breath cut off her easy laugh. “Elsa? Anna? Ruby knows because Granny told her.”

“Mary Margaret and David as well,” he managed to say. “I’m afraid they are all here. I haven’t spoken to them yet, but I went to track down Henry and saw them all in the hallway outside the restroom I think you must be in right now.”

Taking three steps toward the door, Emma groaned as she head the muffled yet familiar voices. “We suck at this,” she told him emphatically. “So I guess we have an audience.”

“I suppose we do. Do you wish to welcome them or should I? And just so you are aware, Liam said Elsa was the only one steadfast enough in her resolve to respect our wishes. She isn’t here. But he will call her if you should like.”

“Call her,” Emma agreed, smoothing her hand down the front of the cream colored dress. “Call her. I’ll talk to our friends and then meet you at the mayor’s office in 15 minutes?” They were going to have to get a special license for the ceremony, as they were marrying in fewer than 24 hours after application. It should not be a problem, but Emma’s less than optimistic nature had her worried. Since the mayor was her boss’s mother, she was sure that maybe some red tape could be avoided. She squared off her shoulders after telling her soon to be husband that she loved him and headed into the crowded hallway corridor to face her friends.

Mary Margaret and Anna did not kill her, instead they were misty eyed and supportive as they both hugged her in tandem and then separately. “I know you wanted to…I’m just so happy for you. This is your day!” Mary Margaret squealed and squeezed her friend tighter. “He’s your very own prince….”
“I’m glad you’re here,” Emma told Mary Margaret, holding her a bit longer than necessary as she looked toward David with a slight nod that said she wasn’t in fact mad or angry over the added company. “The only thing wrong with our plans to do this today was that we couldn’t share it with all of you.”

Anna was less schmaltzy than the teacher and reached out tentatively to touch one of the curls that had had wound its way onto Emma’s arm. “You’re a beautiful bride, Emma. I love the dress.”

Ruby might not have intended to make it a wedding dress, but it was fitting the bill quite nicely. The rounded neck showed off Emma’s shoulders well and the wide cream colored straps left her defined arms bare. Its precise stitching was highlighted with pearl luster buttons on the back and a full skirt that swished about Emma’s legs and ended just above her knees. Emma had thought it was perfect for the occasion, especially when Ruby and Granny had agreed that she didn’t need a veil or other trappings of a more traditional bride. They even managed a quick trip to the store to buy some shoes that were far more expensive than she had intended but matched the color perfectly and added height to her already long legs. Even with the heels she was still sure to be a few inches shorter than her groom, which Granny had slyly told her was perfect for their first kiss as husband and wife.

Anna wasn’t done with her commentary though, complimenting Emma’s hair and her light touches of makeup before lunging for Mary Margaret’s bag to remind the other woman of their accessories. “So we know this totally isn’t a wedding type of wedding, but you have to do the traditional things too. You know something, old, new, borrowed, blue.”

Emma laughed nervously as Mary Margaret and Anna pulled various items out of the teacher’s bag of tricks. There were gaudy sapphire earrings that neither woman would admit to being a contribution and were summarily dismissed. The next was a blue garter that Mary Margaret had said was her own second choice and a fine addition to the thrown together plans. Emma accepted the gift, laughing that she did need one after all. Anna pulled out a familiar box and pulled out a thin silver bracelet.

“Okay, I was planning to give this to Elsa for Christmas and then I started thinking you’d need something new so I am giving it to you. It’s pretty new. See, it’s got the price tag and everything. Wait! Don’t look at that. You don’t need to actually see the price.” The rust haired woman leaned forward and clipped the bracelet around her friend’s wrist. “Okay so that is blue and new. What’s next?”

“Old,” announced an added voice to the group. Wearing a sheath dress of rich purple, Elsa rushed up to them quite breathlessly. “We’re going to talk about the fact that we all said we were going to meet at Granny’s and I was left there without anyone. But first, I have this.” She dug into the clutch she was holding and pulled out a velvety box with a pair of pearl earrings. “You’ve borrowed them before. Your first date with Killian, I think. They were our mother’s and her mother’s before that. They will certainly work as the old here.”

“Much better,” Mary Margaret announced as a newly earringed Emma hugged Elsa too. “So that’s it right. I mean you’re borrowing the earrings that are old. The bracelet is new. My garter is blue…”

“I guess I’m all set,” Emma said, laughing as Ruby rushed forward saying she forgot something.

“It’s a tradition, according to Granny,” Ruby announced, holding up a penny. “See, it’s your birth year and everything. Put it in your shoe and you’ll have good luck. Or lots of kids. Or great sex. I don’t know. It’s good luck.” Granny covered Henry’s ears as the adults laughed toward Ruby’s blubbering and gibberish. “I mean I guess the great sex could lead to kids. It’s got some sort of meaning. Just put in your shoe and hope for the best.”
“You can Google that silly tradition later,” Elsa interrupted, pointed down the long hallway toward where her boyfriend was reading the words of the ceremony again. “I think you need to go deal with the paperwork aspect of all this. Liam’s looking nervous so I can just imagine that Killian is too.”

Emma nodded, gathering the skirt in her hand and then releasing it when Ruby shouted out in panic about wrinkling the material. So with a roll of her eyes instead of a hug, Emma marched toward her fiancé and his brother in hopes that this would not take too much longer. To her surprise, Liam looked paler than his brother as he greeted her nervously and cut off Killian’s comment about how beautiful she looked in her newly fashioned wedding dress. “I have a bit of business to take care of with sister in law here,” he noted, shooing his brother with one hand and shoving his phone back into his pocket.

“I know the lasses have already given you your good luck baubles or whatever, but I was thinking…” He looked down toward his feet, his eyes closing for a moment. “I have this necklace that belonged to mine and Killian’s mum. She wore it on special occasions.”

Killian must have swallowed hard, as she heard a slight noise from him as Liam presented her with the silver chain and knot like charm that was set off by deep blue sapphires. “It’s beautiful,” she said, her voice barely a whisper and her hands not daring to touch the necklace yet. “I would be…I would be honored.”

That seemed to relax the oldest of the brothers as he loosened his grip on the jewelry. “She would have been wearing this today if she had lived to see this occasion,” he commented, stepping behind her and clasping it, giving his brother a satisfied smile. “I thought perhaps this would be a bit like having her here.”

“I’m truly sorry I never got to meet her,” Emma said to them both. “She must have been an amazing woman to raise the two of you.”

“Aye, she deserved more than her lot in this life.” Killian clapped his brother on the shoulder and extended his left arm toward Emma. “Raising two hell raising sons was probably not the life she dreamed of for herself.”

“No, it wasn’t, but it wasn’t always so dreary. Passersby and even some family used to think Killian here was a girl. He had the longest eyelashes and thickest hair you’d ever seen on a wee babe. He was quite a sight with it. Mum dispelled that rumor quickly, but still everyone we knew made that mistake once or twice at least.”

Emma grinned as Killian’s face turned pink. “You know I kind of like those lashes of yours. They make your eyes even more blue.” She leaned over and kissed him softly, earning a groan from Liam.

“Let’s get this done now. I have been studying like mad to perform this ceremony and poor Henry’s hands may never completely unfurl after carrying those rings of yours so carefully. It’s likely he’s going to have arthritis from that vice grip of his.”
So I had not planned on the wedding taking up this much space. Since it did (sorry, not sorry), it got its own chapter. I don’t think you will complain. Thanks for reading and keeping with me while my writing has been more academic lately.

Killian could remember the first girl he had kissed. Her name was Shannon, and she was a slight little thing who had been in his primary class. Adorable with her red hair and freckles, he had not thought that he was in love with her. She, on the other hand, had proclaimed their betrothal to the entire class during recess one day. From then on she was at his side, including making him play house and care for the dolls she had decided were their children. His brother had teased him mercilessly about it. As the rest of the young boys in his grade were playing football or racing each other around a dirt path through some nearby woods, Killian was pretending to burp a baby doll and pushing a plastic pram about while his faux wife baked invisible pies. His reward had been a quick kiss behind a mulberry that ended rather abruptly when she hauled back and smacked him. The next day he joined a few of the other lads in pretending they were on a pirate ship rather than a rusty old jungle gym.

It was Liam who reminded him of his first foray into the idea of marriage as they stood together on the damp sand of the beach and waited for the bride to walk toward them. “I think Emma is a better choice of a wife, brother,” he teased, nudging the middle brother in the ribs. “She’s more amiable about you having interests of your own.”

“Prat,” Killian groused, tugging at his collar. The wind was still sharp despite the slightly clearing skies and lack of rain. He’d already noticed that Mary Margaret was now wearing her own coat and had the sheriff’s parka over her shoulders when Graham had felt sorry for her. Anna was probably cold too, but her chattering about how romantic it all was kept her from expressing too much discomfort.

“I am happy for you, you know?”

“You’re amused,” Killian countered, still not making eye contact. “You’re planning to use this against me. You thought I would be a bachelor for the rest of my days.”

“No, I haven’t had that thought in a while. Emma’s a good woman and you are a lucky…”

“Aye, I’m aware of my run of luck,” Killian said rather proudly. He was glad at the moment they weren’t having the huge ceremony with tons of people and all the tradition. He could see his Emma standing a few yards away with her newly acquired bouquet in her hands and her arm looped through her son who was doubling at giving her away and serving as Killian’s best man. She did not seem as nervous as he feared, but there were some twinges that indicated her excitement. Her teeth ran over her bottom lip and she would dig one heel into the sand and then the other.

“Mum would have been happy too.” Liam respected that his brother had fewer memories of the woman who had raised them. Most of the stories he told were repeats of things that Liam had informed him about over the years. Still he knew that her acceptance would have been important to Killian. “She would have enjoyed seeing us both settle down with women who know how to stand up to us and make us test our worth every way we can.”

Killian huffed, his breath not quite condensing in the almost too cold air. “Knowing her, she would
have been sitting with Henry and soaking up her chance at being a grandmother.” He imagined it
sometimes, the vision of her included in their daily lives something that comforted him most of the
time.

“Aye, and most likely encouraging you and Emma to get to work on increasing that responsibility.”
Liam’s warm hand clung to his brother’s shoulder. Where Liam had some of their mother’s features
with his curly hair and lighter eyes, Killian looked more like Brennan. Perhaps that was why his
mother had looked so lovingly at her baby boy, remembering a time when Brennan had been
innocent and untouched by bad choices and decisions. “Not a bad idea if you’re up to the challenge.”

Killian laughed, shaking his head. “Not any time soon, brother. Not any time soon.” He knew that
Emma wanted to seek out more information about adoption, but they had stalled after reading a few
websites and downloading an information packet. Perhaps, if he went through with the surgery, he’d
have time to read more on the subject during his convalescence.

“I can’t find it,” Ruby interrupted, shoving her phone toward the two brothers. “Unless you want
your bride to walk down the aisle to Taylor Swift or Lady Gaga, I’m thinking we have to download
a wedding march. But I don’t seem to be able to connect to wifi out here.”

Out here was a sandy little cove that Elsa suggested when they had somehow procured a wedding
license from a grouchy yet eventually willing Cora. There had been a brief panic when Emma had to
call Regina to ask for the favor. Not really a fan of love stories, Regina had balked at first and then
agreed, even suggesting that Emma take a few extra days off for a honeymoon. They hadn’t
explained that such a trip was going to be short and sweet based on the hospital schedule for
Killian’s surgery. Emma’s boss even threw her work aside and joined with Robin at Roland to make
it to the ceremony just in time. The cove was quiet except for the crash of waves on some rocks
nearby. The rain had prevented even the most ardent of sea gulls. Low hanging clouds left very little
in the way of crystalline skies and reflections on the water though it was better than before.
However, Elsa, who was doubling as their photographer with her new camera had said it would all
come out well in Photoshop.

“Can’t be having that,” Liam said, grabbing the phone from the leggy brunette and punching in a
few numbers and letters. “Just use my account. It’s faster and I’m not about to feel like bait out here
in the mist waiting on the right song.”

“You could just play the guitar,” Ruby teased, grabbing the phone back and nodding approvingly at
what he had selected. “Elsa and Anna could sing…”

“We’re not having a musical wedding, lass,” Killian said with a smirk at the woman he knew would
find a way to make her mark on the nuptials. “I don’t intend to sing my vows.”

***AAA***

Emma raised her eyebrows in Ruby’s direction, hoping that her friend would start the music soon or
at least start humming something so they could hurry up. The brisk breeze was cutting through the
not so thick material of the dress and chilling the bride to the bone. If it would have gone over well
with Mary Margaret and Anna, the two most recent brides, she might have plucked Killian’s soft
leather jacket from the pile and worn it over her dress to simply keep her teeth from chattering. Elsa
pulled her from her thoughts and snapped a posed photo of mother and son before dashing off like a
not so stealth member of the paparazzi.

“Nervous?” Henry asked, smiling at the way Will seemed to have had his clothes thrown at him as
he arrived with Anastasia. Clearly a bit hung over or even still intoxicated, Will stumbled in the sand
to jump up behind David and Mary Margaret to photobomb the picture that Elsa was taking. Later
they would find him nearly horizontal in the picture, as he had nearly fallen in his attempt.

“No, I’m just excited,” Emma told him, catching Killian’s eye and smiling at the man she was about to marry. She managed to realize that and not throw up, which was a feat into itself.

“You’re shaking,” Henry accused, cringing as Roland caught sight of him and began to chant his name.

“That’s cold wind not nerves,” Emma responded. “And what about you? First wedding of the weekend.”

Turning his head to miss a blast of wind and some of the sand it kicked up, Henry scrunched his face and squinted his eyes. “At least I’m not the one getting married. And what happened to simple and uncomplicated?”

“Our friends happened,” Emma laughed, shaking her head to force some of her loose hair into place. “And it’s okay. It’s kind of nice to know this many people care about us.”

“Yeah,” Henry agreed. “We kind of do have a big family, even if they aren’t related to us.”

She tilted her head until her cheek was on her son’s head, something she would not be able to do much longer at the rate he was growing. It was easier in her heels. “Who would have thought it?”

The music from Ruby’s phone blared loudly and without warning, making the guests jump and laugh as they turned their attention to the bride. Without seats, they stood in sort of a semi-circle and left room in the middle for Emma and Henry to walk. David and Kristoff were already handing tissues to their wives and Granny ripped her glasses off to wipe them from what she said was a bit of dust. Drawing in a deep breath, Emma gave a smile toward her son. “Ready?”

Henry nodded and walked alongside her toward Killian. She had scoffed at the idea of someone giving her away, but then changed her mind when David made the suggestion. It was more about she and Henry walking together toward a future they both would share. They were walking toward the man who was joining their little family. Nobody was giving anyone to anyone. They weren’t like that.

When she finally arrived at Killian, she laughed slightly and joined hands with him after he and Henry shared a sort of side hug. Her heart was thumping a bit heavier than normal and her eyes misted over as he not only held her hand but caressed it as if to assure her that this was still their moment and not just a spectacle for all their friends.

Whatever nerves she had left disappeared as she watched Liam struggle to form the words for a traditional ceremony. He could have said anything at all, but he had said it would be easier to go with tradition. She giggled when he closed his eyes tightly to remember the word matrimony. And Killian shook with unheard laughter as his brother fist pumped a recovered line. However, soon enough Liam sounded professional and proud. Then it was time for their vows.

“I wasn’t sure that I could ever be the man you would want to marry,” Killian told her, swallowing thickly and pressing his lips together before continuing. “I was scared you would reject me for being less than you wanted, a bad choice, someone who could never live up to your expectations. But you didn’t. And you haven’t. So I take that as a sign that I must continue to fight to be the man who deserves to be loved by you. Because no matter what, that’s a man I want to be.” His eyes briefly left hers for Henry and he gave the boy a smile. “I have been lucky to have a brother and know what it is to have family. But I am blessed beyond measure to be invited to be a part of yours. I won’t take that for granted, my love. Henry’s approval and care mean more to me than you both could know. Vows
are supposed to be sacred and so I will make these to you with the utmost sincerity and promise that I will always be true and faithful, always love and respect, forever cherish and honor you. And while it is perhaps old fashioned to say that I will protect you, I vow to protect our family and our love, fighting each day to be with you and for the honor of being loved by you.”

Though Killian’s voice had been strong, his accent thicker than it normally was, it was Emma’s voice shook as she took a series of breaths and began to speak. “I didn’t want to love you and I’m not sure I’ve forgiven you for making it impossible not to love you.” That earned a few titters from the gathered group. “But I suppose it is too late to place the blame now. See I didn’t know love or understand it. In books and movies, the story usually ends with the couple declaring their love or getting married. I guess I didn’t know what comes next. But now I’m going to find out with you.” She expelled air through her nose and rolled her lip under her teeth before locking eyes with him again. While she hated the process of speaking to him in front of others, she saw the love in his eyes and knew that they shared that. “Like you, I wasn’t sure if I was or am enough for you or deserve this happy beginning for our lives. So like you I vow to love you, be faithful, respect you, cherish, and honor you. And with everything in me, I will fight for our love and future.”

She might have said more or even let a tear loose from her green eyes. However, Anna’s loud sob made the couple laugh, adding levity to the pictures that Elsa was surreptitiously taking with her camera. In the years to come people would notice a large print of one of the pictures of the couple with both their heads thrown back in laughter and their hands clasped together between them.

Liam hurried through the rest of the formalities, including allowing them both to place rings on each other’s fingers. Killian was to wear his on his right, something that made everyone smile as Emma kissed his palm before sliding the ring into place. It wasn’t much longer until Liam was declaring them husband and wife and they were nearly blinded by the flash of the camera and deafened by cheers from their friends.

His kiss was firm and passionate, but not overly so in the conditions and with the audience. He dipped her back slightly just to make her squeal and arouse awwws from Anna and Mary Margaret. Standing her up right again, he motioned toward Elsa. “Take the bloody picture of the lot of us before we freeze.”

That was why the group photo, which was recreated with Elsa standing in when Kristoff volunteered to snap another, was filled with laughter and silliness. Granny broke into line to congratulate them before anyone else, instructing everyone to, “Haul it back to the diner for the reception.”

***AAA***

“You make a beautiful bride,” Killian said when they had a moment alone – or as alone as they could manage in the diner that was closed to customers for a short time only. He pushed back a bit of her hair and leaned in to softly touch his lips to hers. “I’m sorry that we didn’t have your dream wedding.”

Her head tilted to the right slightly, studying the way his eyes looked downward like he was truly regretting not offering her something. Her left hand cupped his face and she waited for his eyes to meet hers again. “None of that. I wanted to marry you. And I don’t regret the way we did it at all.”

“Even the damp sand that is surely in your shoes as it is in mine?” he teased, inwardly cringing as the approaching footsteps of some of the celebrants got closer. It had felt like they were in a fish bowl earlier as everyone watched and commented on their first dance as a married couple, and laughed as they fed each other cake. “I was thinking after today that a warm bath might be just what we need.”

“And just where might that bath take place? You haven’t given me any clues about our
honeymoon.” She leaned in to kiss him quickly; obviously aware of the limited time they had before another toast or heartfelt congratulations. Mary Margaret had already hugged her numerous times as though each moment of the reception and ceremony were some monumental feat. “Not that I’m complaining. You’re quite good at surprises.”

“My brother always was at that,” Liam announced after clearing his throat. “Though I don’t believe I need the details you might provide on the subject.” He had left his suit jacket and overcoat on the one the tables, leaving his shirt sleeves pushed up and his tie dangling. After years in the navy, he had a hard time with uniforms and starched wardrobes now.

“Please don’t tell me that Elsa wants to take more pictures. We’ve don’t every traditional pose that there can possibly be out there. For God’s sake, my arm still hurts from posing with the cake for more than 10 minutes while she fiddled with the lighting.” Emma’s left hand dropped to Killian’s chest, the wedding band and engagement ring both sparkling against his black shirt. “I will never again use the phrase, ‘take a picture it will last longer.’”

Liam chuckled, taking in a gulp of the cider that Granny was serving since it was far too early for her to serve people to excess with alcohol. “I haven’t asked, but I believe you’re safe for the moment. Though I do think she may have a few ideas for your departure.” He glanced over his shoulder toward Graham, who was pretending to listen to Anna. “The good sheriff asked that I…well, here’s the deal. I am not allowed within so many feet of our younger brother. And I understand you may have use of the boat this weekend…”

“And our younger brother will be housed here,” Killian said, catching onto the dilemma. “So you may need to make yourself scarce.”

“Aye,” Liam agreed rather sheepishly. “I was hoping to hurl a bit of bird seed at you both, but I have used too many favors with law enforcement already.”

“We understand,” Killian assured him, beckoning over Elsa. “One more picture of us with my beautiful bride.”

“It would be a pleasure,” he agreed, sliding next to Emma so that the bride was in the center of the frame. Elsa snapped four shots before Mary Margaret tapped her shoulder and invited her to join in the next shot. Liam happily threw his arm around his girlfriend and grinned widely for the camera. As Elsa had been the photographer, the shot was one of the few with her in it. Just a few days after the wedding it was framed and on display at the condo.

Liam ended up staying a little while longer, but discretely exited when the younger brother arrived. While he had no intentions of starting another altercation, the protective orders against each other were still in place and there was no recourse otherwise. Anna took her sister’s camera and followed up on duties while the two slipped away from the waning festivities. Everyone was still in good spirits, even Henry who audibly groaned in protest at the number of times someone insisted that the couple kiss or affectionately pose for another picture. Ruby joined in a few of those protests just to make her friend’s son smile.

“Welcome to the family,” Henry said to his stepfather after David had insisted on a dance with Emma – declaring himself her father for the day at least in spirit. She had protested the idea at first, but agreed after Mary Margaret reminded her that David needed the practice. He was twirling her in an embarrassingly flamboyant move as Mary Margaret, Kristoff, Ruby, and Granny all cheered. Roland was trying to get his father to imitate the same move with Regina.

“I appreciate that welcome,” Killian confided, leaning his elbows on the counter. “You know it won’t be all that much different than the past few months?”
“I guess not,” Henry said, spinning on his stool a little. “But it feels a little more permanent. I think Mom will like that.” He threw out his foot, kicking the metal strip around the bar and then started again. “She’s always…”

“Your mother is very important to me. I would not wish to ever hurt her or you.” He swallowed hard and then looked in the direction of Emma’s laugh. She was wobbling from the latest spin as David threw in a few disco poses. For a second his heart hurt that she wasn’t actually getting the opportunity of a father daughter dance, a traditional rite of passage that was being glossed over. But he knew she was happy, as happy as he was at the small but significant way they had pledged their love to each other.

“I know,” Henry said, looking away from the dancing. “I know.”

“And she still needs you too,” Killian said, making the assumption that he was perhaps feeling left out with both parents getting married.

“That’s nice of you to say, but it’s not true. I mean, she’s my mom. I love her and need her. She doesn’t need me.”

Killian shook his head as one of Granny’s staff began to approach to refill drinks. “No, lad, you’re wrong there. Your mother needs you and loves you. I don’t know for certain, but even if you weren’t her son, she’d love and adore you just the same. You’re a good kid. And I’d say you’ve done a fine job being there for her and her there for you all these years. You’re the first to notice when she’s working so hard that she’s not eating or sleeping properly. You’re the one who runs in after we’ve all been out all day and turns on the heat and gets her that blanket she loves. You even let her pick the movie when she’s had a rough day. And don’t pretend you haven’t let her win a few rounds on that blasted video game of yours.”

The crooked little smile that split Henry’s face was one that reminded Killian of Emma. The two guys touched shoulders in their brief sway. “She’s got you now too,” Henry said thoughtfully. “You do stuff for her too.”

“Aye, but I’ll never tire of seeing her smile so brightly when you’re on stage performing or when you win one of your awards. You may not notice it, but she is proud of you. And so am I, even if I’ve had very little responsibility with it.”

There was probably something that Henry could have said, but he didn’t quite have the words he was looking for right then. Instead, he launched himself into Killian’s arms and held on tight until his mother tapped his shoulder. “So here’s the thing,” she announced to both her boys, her face flushed and breathing a little uneven. “We are getting out of here soon and you’re staying the night with Mary Margaret and David. Unless you’d rather stay here with Granny and Ruby.”

“My choice?” Henry asked, cocking his head to the side.

“You’re a popular kid,” Emma announced. “Anyway, dancing or whatever that was with David made me realize I haven’t had a dance with my son. So I want that. Now I should warn you that Anna’s going to go crazy with that stupid camera.”

She wasn’t wrong about Anna, who must have taken 60 shots before they even got the first chorus of the song. Emma and Henry did a good job of ignoring the glare as they swayed and joked about who should lead. She did roll her eyes when Killian pulled out his phone to snap a few photos of his own, hissing about the “damn paparazzi.”

As the last stanzas of the song faded and Emma hugged her son and then husband who joined them,
she wiped at what she swore were not tears. “Where did Granny go?” she asked, looking around as everyone was lazily smiling over smaller conversations.

“She went to make a few adjustments on the boat,” Ruby said, gathering the fabric of the impromptu wedding dress and relaying it in the right direction. “It may not be a suite at the fanciest hotel in town, but she wanted you to have something nice. And it probably needed a touch up after a bachelor’s been spending all this time on it.”

“She was a bachelor’s boat for a while,” Killian noted, pulling Emma into his side. “She’s still afloat.”

“Not a bachelor’s boat now,” Emma reminded him, keeping one hand linked with Henry as she rested her head on Killian’s shoulder. She had noted earlier that if they didn’t leave soon she might just slumber through their wedding night.

“No, she’s not. She is yours just as much…”

Emma laughed softly. “I meant you’re not a bachelor anymore,” she interrupted. “Someone went and married you.”

“And who could that lucky lass be?”

Ruby threw her hand over Henry’s eyes and groaned loudly. “I don’t usually tell people this at parties I throw, but seriously…you need to leave.”
There was only one small window in the bedroom area of the boat where Killian and Emma were spending their honeymoon. A thin film had been placed over it by some previous owner to distort the light from being so intrusive and give a better illusion of privacy. With Emma curled against his side her long, bare leg thrown over him possessively, Killian stared at the porthole like window for a while and wondered how on earth he had managed to marry the one woman who was a perfect complement to him. Tilting his head just inches, he rubbed his stubble covered jaw against the silky tresses of her tangled hair and, letting his eyes fall shut to the sounds of her breathing melding with the choppy waves against the wooden planks of the boat and dock.

They had sailed south of Storybrooke, enjoying the small coastal town they had found on Saturday. While the amorous activities of their honeymoon had been exhaustingly plentiful, they had found time to stroll about the fishing town and peek in the shops before sipping wine and eating pasta at the quaint bistro that served as a perfect backdrop with checked table clothes and dripping candles. Emma had seemed so light and carefree as she scooted closer to him and twice admired her wedding and engagement ring in the low light as if she couldn’t believe they were really on her long elegant fingers.

His one regret was that she had requested something Asian for dinner. The line at the town’s one and only Thai restaurant was out the door with an estimated wait of nearly two hours. She had joked that she wasn’t that hungry for it and kissed him sweetly when he had suggested the alternative of Italian. Still, he felt as if he had failed by not providing her sincerest wish.

Carefully pulling his right arm out from under her, he grabbed his phone off the side table that was built into the wall. It was only 10:30 and not too late for wishes, he reasoned as he typed in the memorized name of the establishment and with his voice barely a whisper ordered a few of her favorite dishes. It would be way too much, and would garner protests. But he could see it in his mind’s eye that her protests would be matched with a smile as she dug into the treat. The biggest struggle was detangling himself from her without waking her before the food arrived. For a moment he feared he had failed as she fluttered her eyes and made a soft noise before burying her nose into his pillow. With the blankets piled on her, he searched in the dark for the thick cable sweater and jeans he had been wearing earlier. Finding a few of her garments strewn about as well, he placed them at the foot of the bed before climbing up to meet the delivery driver.

Knowing his wife, Killian waited patiently as the scent of the prawns, noodles, and veggies tickled his nose. He gulped at the ginger beer that he knew she loved and had been sure to order as well. When he had finished it and she had not appeared, he descended the ladder clumsily, the bag of food under his arm and making his descent even trickier. He managed to set the table before he heard her moan and the bed creak as she must have realized his absence.

“You better have a good excuse,” she said, emerging from the small room into the galley. She had ignored the clothes he had set out and wrapped herself in the soft green blanket that had been washed so many times that its still thick material felt of summer cotton rather than stiff wool. She tied it off at her chest and let the fabric flow as if she were wearing a gown for a ball, though her thick socks were not exactly matching the elegance. “You’re the one who talks about good form and all that. I don’t think it’s good form to leave your wife alone in bed on your honeymoon.”

Lifting the dish of pad thai, he lifted a single eyebrow as if he had just given a full explanation. Not surprisingly she grinned widely at the addition and dove for him. He had to juggle to place the dish down before she dislodged it with her embrace. “I wasn’t sure if you…”

“I never turn down Thai,” she said, rising up on her toes. “Or you for that matter. Best of both right here.” The tip of her nose traced along his jaw. “Have I told you I love you today?”

Pulling his head back, he smiled at her sweetly and tightened his arm around her waist. “A few times, my love, but I’m always apt to hearing it more often. Should we dine in here or…”

“Bed?” she asked with a grin. “Might be a little messy, but it’s comfy.”
“And you certainly are dressed for it,” he teased, kissing her soundly before handing her a plate. “Go before you freeze.”

She snagged a few of the ginger beer bottles and winked as she glided back to bed. By the time he arrived with the rest of the food, she was already settled among the blankets and sheets, balancing her plate on bent knees. Her long hair was pushed back over her shoulders and he was eyeing the largest prawn with a look of hunger and delight. “You are a wonderful husband for this, by the way. How did you know I still wanted this?”

Her mouth was full as she reached over to help him with the rest of the food so he could more easily get back in bed after shedding the sweater. “Your stomach may have growled a time or two, but I also know you.”

“I didn’t know you heard my stomach,” she said, pretending to hide behind her free hand with feigned embarrassment. It was an unnecessary gesture given her state of undress. “I tried to cover it up with a well-placed moan or two.”

He chuckled, inspecting his own food before answering. “You wound me. I may have to be insulted by that. I thought those moans were the direct result of my attention to you.” He lifted a particularly fat prawn and moved it toward his mouth before switching course and offering to her. She eagerly bit into it and let out a loud moan as her eyes rolled back.

“Definitely all your doing.”

***AAA***

David’s wife also had requested a late evening snack of sorts, but her request was for salt and vinegar potato chips that the hotel did not carry for room service. Donning a warm outfit he had thought would be in the suitcase until the next day, he headed out to the parking lot to warm his truck and scour the mountain town for a store that would still be open and carrying the item that she swore she didn’t need but couldn’t quit talking about either.

He had only been gone for a few minutes when she heard the soft and then loud knock at the door. Assuming it was him having forgotten his keys, Mary Margaret opened the door with a bemused expression and waited for his sheepish reply. Instead she got Ruby looking flushed and agitated with a bottle of wine cradled in her arms like a small child. “So I was at the bar,” she announced, waltzing in and ignoring the pregnant friend. “And guess who was there.” The tall beauty stooped toward the room’s mini bar and plundered for a moment. “Where the hell is your cork screw?”

Mary Margaret cradled her growing belly in her hands and stared incredulously at her friend. “I know you’re not asking me that. I’m pregnant. I can’t drink.” She paused waiting for Ruby to catch on. “Why would I need a cork screw?”

Ruby flung her chestnut curls over her shoulder indignantly. “I don’t know. Maybe David needed it.” She scrunched up her nose. “I’m a terrible friend who isn’t thinking.”

“You’re a great friend. And as for David, he’s more of a beer guy than wine. Why don’t you just tell me why you’re here?” Mary Margaret gestured toward the two chairs near the window. While Ruby and her grandmother had reserved a suite for the weekend, something where Henry could have his own room and Ruby didn’t have to be quite so careful about coming in late, Mary Margaret and David were in a standard room that boasted none of the finer luxuries. The teacher reminded them that she was planning on starting her own school, preparing for a baby, and saving for a house – none of which afforded them much room in the budget.

“Oh right, so I went to the bar because you remember that guy who was fighting with one of Tamara’s friends…well, so they broke up and I thought maybe he’d be interesting to talk to.” She rolled her eyes and placed the wine bottle she was carrying on the table between them. “I’m not planning to cheat on Graham. It was just going to be conversation. Except he was kind of gross. He had all this product in his hair and his sense of humor was bordering on harassment…anyway…”

“Ruby? Do I need to be here for this?”

“Tamara came in the bar with some guy.” Ruby waited for full realization to hit her friend as she tapped her tongue on the roof of her mouth impatiently “Seriously…as in Tamara. The bride…”

“Is she still the bride? Because they called off the wedding.” Mary Margaret considered this for a moment as her friend grew more agitated. “So wait…she’s got her boy toy here?”
Nodding with exaggerated slowness, Ruby smiled brightly. “Yup. His name is Greg. They’ve been dating for a while. Neal was the rebound and then she got back together with Greg. It’s all very 90210.”

It wasn’t the most polite thing to do to talk about a failed wedding attempt and relationship, but that’s what David found the two doing. He had to laugh at the childish way they sat in the oversized chairs, Ruby drinking wine thanks to the corkscrew he found and his wife noshing on chips and drinking sparkling water. He stayed for a bit and then excused himself to go and check on Henry. He and Granny took the boy to the hotel’s arcade (a small room with about four games), reassuring him that the failed wedding was not his fault at all.

***AAA***

Liam pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes and squinted toward the muted television that was broadcasting some infomercial about a vacuum that would pick up a bowling ball apparently. They had been watching a cooking competition earlier, something where the contestants were challenged with baskets of unrecognizable ingredients that made Elsa shudder in his arms and wrinkle her nose adorably. He wasn’t even sure who had won the last battle since he’d felt his eyes growing heavy about the second round of judging, promising only to shut them for a few moments during the commercial break.

“What are you doing?” he muttered. His hands flailed against the blanket she had placed over him. Not looking a bit tired, Elsa was curled up at the opposite end of the l-shaped sofa with her laptop perched on her bent legs and her long, white blonde hair, wrapped in a thick braid over her left shoulder. She was still wearing an oversized shirt boasting the name of a rock band he had seen a few years ago and knee high socks that on most would look decidedly unsexy.

“Going through the pictures,” she answered, turning the computer to face him. “I was thinking we could frame a few and place them around the house for Killian and Emma. Sort of a welcome home gift.”

“Not much of a honeymoon. That bastard father of mine seems to ruin everything, including his son’s own…” He stopped, noting the three lines that appeared between Elsa’s eyes as she stared at the computer again. “Sorry, darling. I know you don’t like my flying off the handle like that.”

“I’ve seen worse,” she answered, flipping to the next photo and tilting her head to study it. “I know you want to blame your father for everything, but did you realize that your brother is really very happy?” She turned the computer again and showed him the photo she’d just pulled up. It was a quiet moment before they were taking the “official” photos. Killian’s arms were wrapped around his bride’s waist, his chin tucked near her shoulder. He was clearly whispering something in Emma’s ear, her own expression filled with glee and humor as she tilted her head back and her mouth open in a laugh. A smile played at his lips and unlike Emma his eyes were wide and watching her with love and admiration that was unchecked.

“They deserve more than a few days on a leaky boat in late autumn. They should be in the Caribbean or Hawaii, a secluded place where they might get a real honeymoon without this blasted surgery looming over them.”

“And if they want that, they will get it. I think it’s romantic what they did. And to be honest, it is their style.” She closed the lid on the laptop to set it aside. “I know you like to be in charge. It’s that older sibling thing. I’m the same way. I am constantly telling Anna what to do and how to do it. But the truth is that she can take care of herself. And so can Killian.”

“Sometimes I have my doubts that he can do so properly.”

With the laptop set aside, Elsa scooted closer to her boyfriend. “You think it’s a bad idea for him to have the surgery.” It wasn’t a question. She knew he was struggling with it. While Killian had not announced his final decision, the writing was on the wall. The rushed wedding, shortened honeymoon, and a few other details screamed that he was putting his life in order for surgery and convalescence.

“Should anything happen to Killian in this, I won’t forgive Brennan. Ever.”

“I don’t know the man, but I doubt he would forgive himself.”

***AAA***
Emma climbed the ladder with an oversized mug of coffee in her left hand, a feat that she had nearly perfected on their occasional trips on the boat. Her favorite sweater, the one she wore when she wanted to feel warm and comfortable, was somewhere down below, the victim of an overly amorous husband who had very little use for keeping her clothing intact, she had learned. After half an hour of straightening up, she wasn’t quite sure where it had landed.

“We’re almost home, love,” he announced, not turning to face her as he adjusted the sail that he had said was always giving him trouble. Once he had tightened the knot and inspected his work, he felt her arms go around his waist and her chin dig into his shoulder. “You didn’t have to come up yet. I would have called to you when we were about to dock.”

“Do we have to go back?” she asked, sighing as he snagged the coffee from her and took a long sip before securely placing it back in her hand. “Because I’m not really feeling the whole going back to work tomorrow thing at all.”

“It was a rather short honeymoon,” he mused, his eyes drooping as if he might not be able to stay awake much longer. She loved that sight, him relaxing and their breathing matching in short little puffs. “Perhaps we should take another. Me, you, a beach somewhere warm, rum, you in a skimpy little bikini…”

“ Drinks with little umbrellas, coconuts, you in swim trunks, I’m kind of digging the sound of this.” She hummed out what she thought was a tropical tune in his ear. It sounded more like the theme to Gilligan’s Island, which he would probably tease her about later. “But I do miss Henry.”

“Aye, the lad’s probably got quite the tale to share with us once we dock.” He turned to face her, pausing to let her warm herself with a healthy gulp of the hot coffee. “And there’s no rule that we must stop our private celebrations of our wedding.”

She grinned over the rim of the cup and took another long sip. “Good thing I’m drinking in the caffeinated stuff. I think you’re planning to keep me awake.”

“Honeymoons aren’t supposed to be relaxing.” He waggled his eyebrows for effect. “Besides, I can’t help that our accommodations were small and you are always irresistible, my love.” His eyes roamed over her, studying and committing to memory the way she swayed and the way she kept having to tuck back that same bit of hair behind her ear.

She bounced up onto the balls of her feet and kissed him soundly before digging one arm under his jacket. “Do you think it will be different? Being married I mean.”

“I rather think it will be similar but just about perfect. I can’t quite believe that you are my wife now.”

“Then I guess I’ll just have to keep reminding you.” She punctuated that thought with another brief but solid kiss. “I love you, Killian.”

“And I you.” Craning his neck back to better look at her, he frowned. “Where is your jacket, love? You’ll freeze out here in that.” That was one of his soft blue shirts, a pair of her own jeans, and a wool blanket over her shoulders from his supply closet.

“I missed you,” she said with a grin, tucking herself in closer to him as he made tsk noises and made room for her within his own jacket. “Do you think it will be different? Being married I mean.”

“I rather think it will be similar but just about perfect. I can’t quite believe that you are my wife now.”

“Then I guess I’ll just have to keep reminding you.” She punctuated that thought with another brief but solid kiss. “I love you, Killian.”

“And I you.” Craning his neck back to better look at her, he frowned. “Where is your jacket, love? You’ll freeze out here in that.” That was one of his soft blue shirts, a pair of her own jeans, and a wool blanket over her shoulders from his supply closet.

“I missed you,” she said with a grin, tucking herself in closer to him as he made tsk noises and made room for her within his own jacket. “And I know you. You always try to take care of me.”

“I seem to recall you arguing with that idea and wanting to take care of yourself,” he reminded her. “Is that now negotiable?”

“Case by case basis.” She dug her fingers into the flannel of his shirt, softly worn and washed to the point that it almost felt like velvet. “If I’m going to rely on someone to take care of me sometimes, it’s definitely you. So I know we said no practical talk on our honeymoon, but have you…”

“Emma…” His voice came out as a warning, a note that he was not ready to discuss more than frivolous little things over glasses of wine and between long, lazy kisses. He knew what she was asking though, as the unpenned deadline of his decision loomed boldly in front of him. She wanted to know if he would be going ahead with the surgery, risking his own life for that of his father. She had a right to know. “I…”

“You don’t have to actually say the words,” Emma said, trying a technique that had worked on Henry before when she wanted him to admit something. “You can just answer if you are keeping your appointment with the doctor?”
He huffed, his eyes studying her upturned face. “I know you are worried, Emma. I am too. But I feel that I must do this. I must offer him this chance.”
She nodded almost imperceptibly. “You’re a good man. You know that, right?”
“I’ll remind you that you said that when you complain about my cold feet in bed or my grumpiness over some football friendly that didn’t end as I thought it would.” His smile was a bit weak, but he looked almost as if he was confident in his decision.
“I’ll let all those things go without me complaining too much if you promise me you’ll be careful. I want my husband back as soon as possible. Got to admit I’m not a big fan of the idea of you in the hospital.” She shimmied her shoulders a bit as she snuggled even closer. “Just so you’re aware, I plan to spoil you while I nurse you back to health. You’re getting the best food that Granny’s has to offer and then some. I’ll tuck you in bed. I can even manage a few massages when you’re getting stir crazy.”
“I don’t think I’ll object to any of that, love. I enjoy our time together even if we are doing nothing more than this.” His head came to rest atop hers before he slid his lips to her temple, cheek, tip of her nose, chin, and then mouth. The sound of the brisk breeze snapping the sails and water lapping against the sides of the boat echoed within her soft sigh as she returned the kiss.

***AAA***

The next morning Elsa stirred her tea and flipped her white blonde hair back over her shoulder so that it fell down her back. It was still early yet, the faint traces of light barely breaking through the clouds that hung low over the trees near their condo. Taking one sip and then adding a bit of honey to her mixture, Elsa watched as Liam seemed to pace as he fumbled with the rust colored tie that hung limply around the white collar of his shirt.
“You’re nervous,” she surmised, barely recognizing the reaction from the man she loved. She waved him over with her left hand, the right still holding her mug. “Come here, let me do it.”
He yanked on the silky material and wadded it in his hand. “I bloody don’t want to do this.”
Clicking her tongue atop her mouth, she raised off the stool she had been perched on and rescued his tie from wrinkling. “Liam, this is important. You know that. Your brother…”
“Killian, that’s who my brother is, not that sniveling little…” He stopped as she placed a finger over his mouth. His pursed lips brushed the pad of it as he waited for her to correct him as he knew she would.
“He’s your half-brother and we have to deal with this. We can’t pretend he doesn’t exist. It’s not fair to you, to me, to him, or to Emma and Killian who are basically stuck in the middle of all this.”
He was still grousing as she looped the tie around his neck and expertly completed the knot before smoothing her hand over it. In a single move he caught her hand and brought it back to his lips where he placed a series of kisses. “I’m doing this for you, darling, so that you might feel safe again.”
She frowned, which seemed to confuse him. “Do it for you,” she said softly. “I don’t want to be the reason you cut someone out of your life or walk away from family you have said yourself you wish you had more of on more than one occasion. He’s barely an adult. He could lose his father. And as wrong as it is, as much as it isn’t anyone’s fault, he blames you for not wanting to help. You can understand that.”
“He tried to kill you,” Liam reminded her, the color darkening on his face. “And would have succeeded…”
“He didn’t succeed.”
“Thank all that is holy,” Liam muttered, turning about 45 degrees and then back again to quickly kiss her, stealing away the gasp of surprise at his speed. “If that little prat so much as looks at you wrong today, I’ll be buggered if I let him receive only a slap on the wrist.”
She accepted his somewhat of a compromise and admired his backside view as he walked away to find his suit jacket that she had laid out for him. He was being as brave as he could be, she supposed, recognizing the anger as part of that. Returning to her stool and testing to see if the temperature of the tea was still right, she took a long draw of it before calling out to him. “I didn’t want to disturb Emma last night, but are they coming to the hearing today? I can’t believe they only got a weekend
honeymoon.”
“No,” Liam answered, popping his neck and then waving his arms about as if trying to decide if the jacket he had just worn on Friday still fit. “Killian’s going to be doing his tests at the hospital today. Emma was planning to work unless you need her there?”
Elsa shook her head and touched her fingers to the pearl earring dotting her lobe. “I was just curious. So your brother is definitely…”
“Aye, the wanker is going to actually give part of his body over to that father of ours. Can’t say I’m surprised or happy, but I understand. Or at least I’m trying.”

***AAA***
The honeymoon was sweet, romantic, and way too short, or so Emma said to the eighth person who asked her about it when she returned to work that Monday and awaited Killian’s call from the hospital. They had sailed down the coast a bit and anchored in a quaint little town where they feasted on seafood, took quiet walks while bundled up in coats, and drank wine as they talked about nothing and everything all at once. She left out some of the more intimate details, not wanting to taint her own memories of them with enthusiastic questions, whistles, and knowing looks. Killian actually helped with that, having breakfast from Granny’s delivered, an overabundant array that she shared with a few of her co-workers. It reminded her distinctly of their early dating days.
The one discussion she was still keeping to herself was Killian’s decision to go ahead with the surgery. He’d looked at her with a sadness and resignation that seemed to ask if she would try to talk him out of it. She hadn’t. It was his decision, which she intended to support despite her own fears about the outcome. And if things didn’t go well, she didn’t want her memories to be infected with selfish pleas for him to reconsider. She was proud of him, knowing that he was doing this with no guarantees or promises that he would have a relationship with his father. He was doing it because he was a good man who knew that he would hate himself if he hadn’t at least tried.
“Is Henry doing well?” Regina asked before sending her off to find out about the latest request for Elsa to perform. While the question might have been out of place by most bosses, Regina had been at Neal and Tamara’s mess of a wedding attempt that had ended with a screaming match over the revelation that Tamara had been seeing another man not all that discreetly. “He seemed fine with your friends dragging him out of the ceremony.”
“He is fine,” Emma offered, cradling a few files in her arms against her chest. Knowing that Killian was facing surgery this week, she was in a hurry to get as much done as possible before taking another stretch of time off. “Mary Margaret said he was more concerned over his father having to return all the gifts and how they would ship some of them back.”
“Practical child,” Regina said. “He’s very good with Roland and seems to be a wonderful... I just wanted to make sure…”
“Thanks. But like I said, he’s fine and anxious to be back at school with all his friends,” Emma said, ducking out into the hallway and back to her office before it got even more awkward. Regina was her boss, not a friend. And it was strange to try to be chatty with a woman who was known to have outbursts of anger about things that Emma felt were a professional courtesy. Yes, she’d been at Emma’s wedding but other than a quick congratulations they had hardly talked.
Besides Henry was doing well. He had taken the broken engagement of his father in stride and even expressed condolences to the man before Mary Margaret and David hurried him back to Storybrooke with promises of a movie marathon and binging on all his favorites. Granny and Ruby said they both bit their tongues over the entire scandal, but Henry had not seemed any worse for it. They hadn’t even called Emma until she and Killian returned late Sunday evening. So she had not had the opportunity yet to have called Neal herself, but knew that his father, stepmother, and others were rallying around him after the betrayal. Her sympathies might come off a bit false given her own recent wedding and current state of bliss, but she would eventually say something.
“Ms. Swan...I mean Mrs. Jones, you have a call on line three,” the receptionist’s voice came through the intercom. Emma had not even thought about the whole name thing very much. Most people called her by her first name anyway. Keeping her eyes on the screen where her notes about a contract proposal were sitting, Emma fumbled for the phone and lifted it to her ear.
“Are you having as frightful of a time concentrating today as I am?” Killian asked after she said hello. “It’s bloody torture because all I can think of is my lovely wife and how much I would rather be with her.”

She fell back against her seat and smiled widely picturing him talking low into his phone in some quiet corridor. He’d been wearing a blue sweater that morning, the richness almost as alluring as his eyes. “I’m lucky I don’t have that problem,” she said saucily. “Maybe you should call your wife on her cell instead. Don’t you know it’s a bad idea to breathe heavy on a work line.”

He chuckled, even the through the phone filling her with warmth. “Would that I could, my love. But my lovely wife was so distracted giving me another one last kiss this morning that she left the phone on the counter in the kitchen. So I am holding it close to my heart right now.”

She stared at her coat that she had slung across the guest chair in her office earlier that morning. The tell-tale sign of her phone was absent from its pocket. “Damn it,” she muttered. “I need that phone.”

“Aye, I’ll bring it by for you in a bit. Perhaps we could share a little lunch while we were at it.”

She knew that would be a bad idea for her motivation and her self-control, yet the idea was tempting. She told him as much. “Maybe some place public so that I don’t do anything too distracting.”

“Sounds like a plan, as I’m not sure I’m a strong enough man to resist your charms for too long anyway.” The sounds of the intercom and people talking could be heard around him, as well as dinging elevator.

“How’s your father?” Emma asked, knowing that he was not going to be as carefree and soft with his answer. “Did he get transferred…”

“He’s in a private room here at the hospital,” Killian explained. Once he had agreed to have the surgery everything seemed to be moving rather quickly. So far the teacher had been poked and prodded within an inch of his life as his father went through similar tests in another room. They had only seen each other for a few moments, which Killian preferred. The younger Liam was expected that afternoon.

“Any word on…”

“Should know more this afternoon. They wanted to test my blood again, see about my records from how fast or slow I healed after losing my hand, and even had me hooked up to a heart rate machine. Thankfully it did not shock or electrocute me.” He didn’t tell her that he was still wearing a hospital gown with his jeans underneath it because they wanted to do another scan. He didn’t tell her how the paperwork had seemed scarier than before and his hand shook as he signed it.

“Well, swipe a pair of scrubs. Those could come in handy later. And get your cute butt over here.”

She laughed at the idea of making him blush.

“Bored with our sex life already, love?” She could hear the struggle for levity in his voice, but chose to pretend the tension wasn’t there.

“Never, but we could always have a little fun. And…” She grimaced as Regina appeared in her office doorway. “I have to go.” Her hasty goodbye included a not so graceful return of the phone to its base that almost knocked over her coffee.

“Our sex life already, love?” She could hear the struggle for levity in his voice, but chose to pretend the tension wasn’t there.

“Never, but we could always have a little fun. And…” She grimaced as Regina appeared in her office doorway. “I have to go.” Her hasty goodbye included a not so graceful return of the phone to its base that almost knocked over her coffee.

“Didn’t mean to disturb,” Regina said, sauntering in and dropping to the chair that didn’t contain Emma’s jacket. “I wanted to see if you had considered the offer for Elsa to resume the tour in the new year? If she’s up for it, I think we need to get as much play out of that now. So if you could…”

Regina paused, crossing her legs. “I suppose you won’t have time to talk to our communications staff about a campaign that might entice Grammy voters.”

“Regina, I may not plan to be in the office, but I’ll be in contact. I can…”

The dark haired woman held up a hand. “I’m not asking about that. I simply think that perhaps we need to think about what’s best for the company, the artists. If you’re not 100%, then there are too many problems that could happen. Have you even spoken to Anna about her return? Elsa is talented, but the two of them together are the act that I signed.”

“Are you saying I’m not focused and dedicated? Elsa’s career has been a huge focus in my life. I have done everything to make her successful and comfortable while Anna focuses on her pregnancy. She’s getting good reviews and press. Those download cards we distributed recently have been successful. Her album sales are phenomenal. I know you don’t pay much attention to the trades, but
there’s already buzz about award nominations. All of this while she was being stalked and we had to double and triple efforts to keep her safe.”

“You do represent other clients, you know,” Regina reminded her, as if she needed the prodding. “I was simply thinking that you might consider transferring responsibility to some of the other associates…ones who didn’t just get married or have pending obligations.” Standing abruptly, Regina walked toward the door. “Just something to consider.”

Emma frowned, looking at the sheet of paper that her boss had left behind. It was a one page plan to relieve Emma of many of the clients she was currently representing. She had found or discovered most of them, bringing them up from bar acts to sometimes international sensations and artistic giants with great reputations in the industry. It had taken years to build this portfolio of talent. Giving them up would be career suicide. Yet it made sense too. She was about to have a husband recuperating from surgery. They were talking about adoption to expand their family. And while she should be offended that only a woman would be asked to make such a sacrifice, she knew it was not out of the realm of reason to question her right now.

She stuffed the paper in her bag and tried not to think about Killian’s recent suggestion that she consider going out on her own as a producer. She did love that part of her job and wanted to see herself doing more of it. But now did not seem the time to put forth that effort. She didn’t want Killian to worry about her while he faced surgery and a new venture of his own.

Not wanting to consider it any longer, she shot Killian an email to his phone telling him she loved him and wishing him luck on the tests. She also suggested meeting him at the coffee shop near the hospital for lunch, as it would be quicker than Granny’s and less intrusive.

***AAA***

Killian stared at the ceiling tiles, counting them and then considering how the school facility he and Mary Margaret had found had similar colors on its ceiling. They were probably uniform and typical for the age of the building, he assumed, squinting his eyes and pretending that the sounds of the heart monitor and other machines were perfectly normal.

“You’re looking far too relaxed to be a patient, brother,” Liam announced, pulling back the curtain without even pretending to worry about the need for privacy. “I’d say you look like a bloke just back from his honeymoon.”

“And you look as though you’re a wanker who escaped from the court hearing unscathed,” Killian said, lifting up on his elbows to acknowledge the appearance of the elder Jones sibling. He’d already been told about the outcome earlier by phone. “Lost your tie did you?”

Liam rolled his eyes and dropped into the chair at the side of the hospital bed. “Tore that bloody thing off the moment I escaped. I believe it may be somewhere on Lakeshore Drive. Twice in a few days is far too often for me.” He leaned forward and took a look at the rolling cart of equipment, part of which was attached to Killian. “This all looks quite serious.”

Grinning, Killian leaned back against the nearly flat pillow. “I haven’t a clue what they are looking for, but they are determined to put me on every bloody machine in this place. And they don’t tell me anything about results. The nurse keeps making noises and saying things are interesting.”

Crossing his legs so that one ankle rested on the opposite knee, Liam inspected his fingernails for a moment. “You’re sure about doing this? You know you don’t own that man anything even remotely this important?”

“Liam, I have already explained why…”

“Aye, and it still sounds like bollocks to me. He abandoned us. Left us as though we were barely more than strangers. He moved on with that wife of his and had another son…”

“It still doesn’t change the fact that he was and is the only father we have ever known. Our mum loved him for better or for worse.” Killian swallowed, his head lolling back as he stared again at the water stained tiles that were blurry with his eyes tearing up. He blinked rapidly to stave them off.

“He may not have been the best husband to her or father to us, but there must be something about him that won her heart. And perhaps she would… I think she would want me to offer this if there was even a chance of him recovering. We both were hurt by him, but he cannot fix what he did or even properly apologize if he isn’t given this chance.”
For a moment Killian wondered if his older brother planned to simply stand up and leave. He dropped his foot back to the floor and surged forward in the chair as if he was about to stand. But then he leaned backward and folded then unfolded his arms from his chest. “So how is married life treating you, brother? Has she sent you to sleep on the sofa yet?”

***AAA***

Emma wasn’t exactly a fan of hospitals, but as Ruby had told her during Granny’s stay – nobody really was. Since Killian had missed their lunch because tests were running longer than he had anticipated, she had hurried through her afternoon and driven over to see him as soon as she could see the surface of her desk through all the paperwork. When she walked briskly through the first floor waiting room toward the nurses’ desk, she was surprised to see Elsa sitting there thumbing through an old magazine that looked like it might have been there since the building was first constructed.

“Did Killian kick you out?” Emma asked, stopping in front of her friend. “Is he being that bad of a patient already?”

The blonde smiled up at her, eagerly tossing aside the outdated periodical. “I was giving him some time with Liam. I thought they could both use it.”

“Court go okay?” Emma asked, taking a seat across the narrow aisle. “I’m sorry we couldn’t…”

“The judge didn’t really take much time on it. Liam – my Liam – has to do a six week anger management course and 16 hours of community service for the fight. The other Liam has more community service and some other legal stuff…They both pleaded guilty and Graham said they both showed remorse for their actions. So I guess we’re good…”

Emma nodded, frowning as her friend shrugged. She wasn’t sure what she could say. There was so much to process and so many ways to approach it. “Are you okay with that? What he did was pretty scary with the stalking and the driving you off the road.”

“You sound like Liam. He wanted me to ask for more punishment. I wasn’t really prepared for this today. I thought it would just be a quick arraignment like on television. I didn’t expect things to be settled today.” She let her hands skim over the soft material of her pencil skirt. “I hate this. All of this. Why couldn’t he have just confronted his brothers? Why did he have to…Why did he have to try and hurt us?”

Emma braced her hands on her knees. “I wish I could answer that. Killian, Liam, and Liam seem to have the absolute worst timing with this stuff. I mean who the hell goes from wedding to honeymoon to organ donor? And I love him. I wouldn’t expect anything else from him but to be the kind, generous, and giving man that he is. And as for your Liam, you know he’s got that big brother complex thing. He wants to protect everyone, Killian, but most especially you. I think he probably looks at this as his fault for not having dealt with his brother from the start, letting it get to the point that you were in danger.”

The vibration of Elsa’s phone called her back from the nearly tearful memory of how scared she had been and frustrated. “It’s Anna. She had another ultrasound today. I’m sure she wants to share the pics and the news.”

“Yeah,” Emma answered thoughtfully. “I should get back there to my husband.” She scrunched up her nose and squinted. “That’s going to take some getting used to, you know.”

“I can’t even imagine. For what it’s worth, I think Killian’s being really selfless about this. It’s really impressive.”

“You’re impressive too,” Emma said, covering one of Elsa’s hands with her own and squeezing. “And just a quick question about work. You don’t feel like I’ve been neglecting you, do you? I know I’ve been busy with Henry, the wedding, and everything, but…”

“No, you’ve been awesome. That gig on Thanksgiving worked out great. I’ve already heard from your publicity department that there are some more interviews that they want me to do before the ballots go out for award season. They seem to think I have a shot at something.”

“And Liam? It’s been kind of slow go for the band. I probably could have concentrated on getting them more exposure.” She bit her lip, trying not to think about Regina’s statements. “I still could. I know this one booking guy in New Jersey who might be interested.”
Tilting her head to one side, Elsa studied her friend for a moment. “You are asking some odd questions, Emma. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Great,” Emma said, squeezing Elsa’s hand again. “I promise. Now I’m going to go see my husband. And I’ll send that boyfriend of yours out to you.”

***AAA***

Henry slid his shoe covered feet off the coffee table seconds before Emma and Killian walked through the door. Dropping his math book onto the floor next to where Sparrow was happily noshing on a new chew toy that Killian had found in a small shop, Henry smiled brightly at his mother and stepfather, opening his arms for a quick embrace and then collapsing back down onto the cushions. Killian escaped back toward the bedroom, declaring that he wanted to wash the stench of the hospital off of him and giving mother and son a moment alone.

“Didn’t your dad feed you?” Emma asked when his first question was about what was for dinner. “I thought you were meeting him after school.” She didn’t mention that she was a bit upset that her ex dropped their son off rather than waited with him for someone to be home. That’s a touchy subject and not at all Henry’s fault for being at that age where she is not sure about the lines or privilege and responsibility. She would have to talk to Neal later about that whole thing.

“We ended up going to the library and talking to Belle for a while. Dad’s not eating much so I guess he didn’t think I might be hungry.” Henry shrugged, quickly removing his feet from their position again when they hit the table quite by habit. “So can we order in?”

Emma ducked her head into the refrigerator and lifted a few items for closer inspection. She placed a thumb and index finger on her nose and pursed her lips. “I think so, kid,” she agreed, pointing toward the basket atop the refrigerator. “You pick. I’m going to go check on Killian.”

The water from the shower was running as he had said it would be when Emma yanked off her boots and peeled out of a layer of clothing to replace it with an oversized sweatshirt and leggings. Padding into the steam filled bath, she used her sleeve to wipe at the mirror before turning on the exhaust fan. She called out over the water to her husband that she thought Henry would choose Chinese as their dinner. It would likely not be as good as the Asian meal they had already shared on the boat, but she wasn’t going to argue.

“Any special requests?”

His answer was to surprise her, which she could have taken as passive aggression, but she didn’t. She knew he was thinking more about what was ahead and less about what meal they would have.

“Ways thinking to meet with the loan officer in the morning,” he said over the sound of the shower. “I need to settle a few things about the school loan before the surgery.”

“Should I come with?” Emma asked, reaching into the pocket of the sweatshirt for her now returned phone to check her schedule. “I have a 9 a.m., but if we do 8 then...”

Sliding open the glass door of the shower, he poked his head out. The water logged black hair was sticking to his scalp and forehead and his skin was pinkish red from the heat of the water. “You are still thinking this is a good idea?”

She surged forward to kiss him before she answered, smiling against his mouth in her most hopeful way. “I really hate that I need to ask which idea we’re talking about here. If it is the surgery, yes, I think it is a good idea. The loan to get the school going with Mary Margaret? Yes, also a good idea. You’re a great teacher and the plan is solid, right? So I say go for it. Any other ideas we’re batting around? Because I’m feeling very supportive tonight.”

He grinned and ducked back into the shower. “It just seems to me that we are rushing things along a little fast.”

“Says the man who helped me plan a wedding that got re-planned in 48 hours,” Emma teased, leaning her hip against the counter. “Seriously though. Enough with the lack of decisions.”

He was silent for a moment and with a flick of his good wrist turned off the shower. Stepping out of the shower, he grabbed the towel off the rack and smiled wickedly at her as he patted himself dry. “I was negligent upon our return today. I didn’t carry you over the threshold.”

She shook her head in disbelief at the way he was staring up at her with the most mischievous look ever as he hunched over in his task of drying off. “You did that last night, remember. And you
carried me onto the boat twice. I’m thinking we have gotten that tradition out of our system.”

“Are you saying you don’t enjoy it? Me holding you close in my arms? Carrying you toward our bed?” His voice dropped about two octaves and his eyes were dark as she tried to playfully kick her leg out at him only for him to catch her foot. “I think you might just like it too much.”

“I think marriage has made you cockier than usual,” she said, pulling her leg back and hopping down from the counter. “I’m going to go help Henry before he orders more than dinner with my credit card. Tell me when you figure out when we need to go to the bank?” She stopped still inside the doorway and spun back toward him. “I love you. I know, awkward moment, but it kind of needs to be said.”

His skin was still warm from the shower and he smelled of the body wash she was always telling him was hers from years before. Moving his lips softly over hers and holding the towel just barely knotted on his waist, he smiled against her mouth. “I love you too.”

***AAA***

Elsa leaned over and looked again at the screen where her sister was pointing out another item for the baby registry. All of the names, colors, and decorations seemed silly beyond measure. It was a high chair. Why did it need to be called Mr. Bumble Bee’s Nutrition Station for Babies? It was a freaking high chair.

“I think it’s cute,” the younger sister said, jotting it down on her affirmative list. So far she had three pads of paper and her tablet in front of her. One list was for yes. One was for no. And one was for maybe. Nothing was on the no list yet. “And the color is cute.”

Elsa tilted her head as she studied the extra full padding, the matching dish set, and the adjustable back rest. “Aren’t they supposed to be more functional than cute?” she asked. “I’m all for fashion, but this…”

“Is about what I want,” her sister reminded her. Anna patted her protruding belly. “Growing a human here, remember?”

Throwing up both hands, Elsa leaned back against the sofa. “Mr. Bumble Bee it is then.”

Anna gave a triumphant nod and scrolled to the next item. “So I like the idea of going neutral on the nursery, but I don’t want it to be too bland. What do you think of orange?”

Diplomatically, Elsa avoided making a face. “What does Kristoff think of orange?” she asked, plucking one of the cookies from the package. She nibbled on it daintily, as if the smaller bites would somehow reduce the number of calories.

“He said it looks like how he imagines a pumpkin latte factory would look. But I don’t think they make pumpkin spice lattes in a factory, do they? They are like fresh or something? I mean, not fresh exactly since they are made with spices that are jarred and stuff, but still not a factory…”

“Maybe we should look for something like green or yellow, something soothing and that you and Kristoff can both agree on.”

Anna scrolled past a few more items before turning her head to the side and studying her sister nibbling on the rest of the cookie. “Does this bother you?” she asked suddenly. When Elsa didn’t answer right away, Anna gestured toward her stomach again. “This. The baby, marriage, basically domestic bliss. Does it bother you?”

Elsa dabbed at the corner of her mouth for nonexistent crumbs with her finger. “Why would it?” she asked, her eyes wide and curious. “I’m happy for you. I’m happy to be an auntie.”

“And you’re happy living with Liam when all your friends are married and more settled?” Anna queried softly. “I know you love Liam, but you two…You’ve been dating as long as Emma and Killian.”

Elsa dropped her hand to her lap, frowning. “It’s not a contest or even fair to start comparing. And I don’t know that I’ve ever really equated happiness with being married. It’s nice and all, but it doesn’t really have to mean that the only measure for a successful relationship is a ring and a cake.”

Turning her attention seemingly back to the screen, Anna scrolled past two carriers and wrote one down on the maybe list before she asked again. “Do you not want to get married and have children?” Elsa shrugged her shoulders. “I didn’t say no to the idea. I just don’t see the need to push for more when I’m happy with Liam and our life together now. Is there a rule that says we all have to be
married and having babies? Can you honestly say that you see that for me?”

***AAA***

The house was quiet as Emma slid out from the bed she shared with Killian and padded into the living room with her laptop and phone cradled in her arms. Not bothering with a light, Emma studied the websites for a few of the bands she was representing, making notes about needs for improvements and about potential angles for promotion. She was on her seventh one when Killian appeared in the doorway.

“Not sure how I feel about my wife of only a few days sneaking out of bed. Isn’t it proper for us to not want to leave it for a few weeks at least?” He’d put on a pair of sleep pants and a Henley that was misshapen from years of washing. Still he looked adorable as he leaned over her to give her a kiss and then fell dramatically against the couch next to her. “Something wrong?”

“Just work stuff,” she said, the glow of the screen illuminating her face and the messy top knot of her hair. “Regina’s sort of on my case.”

With his hand extended, he lifted her computer off of her knees and balanced it on the table before opening his arms up to indicate she should find comfort there. It only took a moment before she was laid out half on top of him as he reclined in the corner of the couch. “Want to talk about it?”

“Nope,” she said with some finality. “I don’t.”

“Then we shan’t. Perhaps we should talk about other things.” She was rubbing her cheek against his chest and her hand was playing with the frayed edge of his shirt near his waist. “Any suggestions?”

“Nope,” she repeated, earning a chuckle that vibrated against her ear. “I think we talk too much for this to still be our honeymoon.”
Laden down with bags and a notebook of paperwork for the hospital admitting staff, Emma felt her husband squeeze her hand. For that moment it outweighed the sharp pangs of the leather strap digging into her shoulder and the way the tote bag of magazines, books, and her work stuff was cutting off the circulation to her fingers on her other hand.

“I should be carrying all that,” Killian groused as the sliding doors at the front of the hospital. It was still dark out and a cold fog had nearly encased the building in a shroud where only a few of the glowing letters on the top level could be seen. “I’m not an invalid.”

“I thought we agreed that you were going to let me take care of you,” she answered back, tilting her neck back to ease a little of tension. “You’re the patient.”

“Not for another few minutes.” Walking into the building, he blinked against the overabundance of light that hurt his eyes after the darkness outside. “David’s going to watch Sparrow, right? I mean I don’t want you to have to…”

“David and Henry have it under control. He’ll be the most spoiled and well cared for dog in all of Maine.” She carefully swerved past the easels with an artist’s rendering of planned renovations to the facility. “And I have it under control too. I swear.”

“I have no doubt,” he told her, pausing to kiss her gently before they made their way to the surgical admitting area. It was busy with nervous looking patients and family members trying to distract them. He scanned it quickly to find the desk where he was supposed to go, but made no move in that direction. “And you’re not going to stay tonight, right? You’ll go home to Henry and I’ll be fine here. I don’t even think I’ll be awake really so I won’t really know.”

“Then you won’t know if I followed that ridiculous request or not,” she murmured. “You know I heard that tickets to Tahiti are half price. We could forget this and head to the airport. Two weeks in Tahiti and I don’t think I’d miss this place one bit. That’s sounding better and better.”

Dropping her hand, he awkwardly fidgeted with the thick leather of his watch band, pulling it off after a bit of a struggle. “They won’t let me wear it during the surgery,” he explained, placing against the palm of her hand. “You can keep it with you. Make sure you don’t stay too late or get here too early. I don’t want you neglecting your life because I’m here.”

He closed her fingers over the cold metal of the watch. “I’m going to pretend that you didn’t just give me instructions to ignore you while you recover. You do realize that I am not going to want to leave you? Hell, I might even crawl in the bed with you in recovery because the idea of sleeping in our bed alone is horrible. You’ve turned me into a cuddler, Killian and I might not forgive you for that.” She gave him a kiss on his cheek. “So this is totally your own doing. But go be a big boy and check in. I’ll grab a seat.”

“Stubborn lass,” he said as he waded through the four other people milling about the desk with clipboards in hand and yelling out questions about when did they have their appendix out or what did Grandma Clare die from. He at least had already done that bit of work.

By the time he made it back to her and where she had dropped all of the stuff, he had to smile. Even in the uncomfortable room with people nervously watching silent television monitors of local and national news, she was looking quite comfortable in her oversized sweater, jeans, and boots. He could catch a glimpse of the silver on his watch when she waved at him almost shyly.
“So your brother is here,” she said as he sat.

Raising a thick eyebrow at her he wondered briefly why Liam and Elsa weren’t sitting there with her if they were in fact there. He’d told them both that he didn’t want that dramatic hospital goodbye and hoped they would simply check in via text with Emma who was of course going to stay through the surgery. “Where?”

She gestured toward a seat near the door with her chin. And he realized why she had been so cryptic. The younger Liam was sitting there staring at a People magazine as though he had not flipped a page in hours. His hair the color of wet sand was messily hanging about his head and cheeks red and almost splotchy. For a moment Killian wondered if the younger Liam had been crying.

“I should…”

Emma pulled her phone out and began to scroll. “I don’t know if that’s the best of ideas. He may want to be alone.”

The decision wasn’t Killian’s to make, as Liam stood up abruptly, dropped the magazine, and made his way over to them. “I wasn’t sure if you wanted to see me or not,” he said, shoving his two hands into his pockets. “I mean…well, I owe you a thank you for saving my father’s life. Our father’s life I would have done this if I was a match, but you…you are. And well, thank you.”

“I’m not sure that I deserve that credit,” Killian admitted. “I’m sorry that you’re having to go through this at all with losing your mother and all.”

Liam wet his lips. “You did too. You’re going through this too.” His hair was unruly and that stage of long that looked more unkempt that stylish. He was wearing a faded pair of jeans and a hoodie that included the peeling image of some sort of cyborg or something that Emma didn’t recognize.

Killian didn’t respond right away, sinking into the uncomfortable seat next to Emma and fumbling for her hand now that she had put away the phone. It was her turn to squeeze back in reassurance.

“You’re planning to stay during the surgery?” she asked her new brother-in-law. They would be starting on Killian first and then begin with Brennan about half way through. Both men would be in separate rooms adjacent to each other for the procedure. “It’s going to be a long wait.”

“Yeah,” Liam said, shifting his weight from foot to foot. He gave a brief cut of his eyes toward an empty chair and decided against sitting there. “My father doesn’t really have anyone else…”

Feeling Killian tense next to her, Emma squeezed his hand tighter. “I understand,” she told Liam. “You know once they take Killian back, I’m going to go to the cafeteria. Hospital food sucks, but I was here for a friend a few months ago and they had these frittata muffin things. Those were so good. I’m hoping they have them again today.” She squeezed even harder. “Maybe you could join me. I mean we’ve got to eat, right?”

“Yeah,” Liam said, digging his hands into his pockets deeper. “That sounds lovely.” He shifted his eyes again toward the chair. “I uh well I got here early to see father, but they said he’s been sleeping. I was careful not to wake him up when they let me in for a few minutes.” He gave a sort of half smile and looked back toward the door. “I should go back. I just wanted. I wanted to make sure you heard a thank you. I know I didn’t handle all this properly.”

“He’s lucky,” Killian said, his voice sounding hoarse. “He’s lucky to have you. It’s important to have someone who wants to see you get well.”

A few minutes later they were alone or at least as much as they could be in a small curtained off area
where Killian reclined on a gurney and Emma was sitting on a chair that was wedged between the wall and a cart of machines. “So anything you need to know or want to ask before I go under the knife, love?”

She sighed. “I hate that you’re making light of all this. Yes, we need to be positive, but it’s surgery, Killian. It’s not…”

“Emma, I’m fit and well. I won’t leave you for some light in the sky. I promise.” His blue eyes looked tired as they studied her and she wondered if he had slept at all the night before. He’d been asleep when she woke up and fixed Henry a quick breakfast to send him off to school. Her son had of course protested and wanted to stay with her, claiming worry over Killian and wanting to be a part of the waiting. She had not wanted to wake her sleeping husband and had let Henry record him a video message despite the fact the boys had said their good lucks the night before. She fumbled for the phone to show that to him.

“I know you’re coming back to me,” she said, feigning a smile to match the cool demeanor she wanted to portray. “I would be really mad at you if you did leave me. And you don’t want to deal with me being mad.”

“The thought frightens me to my core, love.” The curtain that didn’t fully close around him opened and a nurse in salmon colored scrubs poked her frizzy haired head into the space.

“Mr. Jones, there is another Mr. Jones here to see you. He said to tell you that he’s content to wait in the waiting room. He also said to tell you that he doesn’t care what you say he’s going to be here for you.” She blushed to the shade of her hair. “So that’s the message.”

Emma patted her husband’s arm. “Don’t be mad or surprised. He loves you. You’re his brother.”

“Aye, I’ll talk to him if you could lead him back here.” Rolling his head on the stark white pillow, he looked at Emma thoughtfully as the woman walked away. “I suppose we should say what we need to say before he comes in?”

She nodded, her teeth sinking into the flesh of her bottom lip. “I don’t want to say goodbye so I’m going to wish you luck and pleasant dreams while you’re sleeping, okay?” Her eyes were brimming with tears and from what he could see love. “I’m not exactly a tearful goodbye person.”

He could have cracked a joke, tried to make her smile or better yet laugh. But he didn’t do that. Instead, he lifted his head off the pillow and strained to get closer to her. She met him more than halfway for a sound kiss, her hand stroking his cheek and then trailing down his neck. “I love you.”

She kept her eyes closed, running the tip of her tongue over her lips. “I know. I love you too. And even if I hate that you’re doing this, I’m really very proud of you.”

“He’s going to be fine. I’m going to be fine.”

She lifted her head a bit. “I know. I really do know that. I’m just not good at this. You kind of mean a lot to me what with being my husband and all.”

***AAA***

Liam didn’t immediately return to the waiting room, having learned that Emma planned to take the youngest brother for breakfast. He wanted to think, wanted to ponder how Killian could be so strong minded and brave, not to mention selfless. Wandering, he passed by a few of the quieter units and learned to tune out the incessant calling of staff across the intercom. A fruitless visit to the cramped gift shop later, he found Elsa sitting with her back against the window and her eyes closed. The cord
of her earbuds was a stark white against the navy of her sweater. Her lips moved slightly as she mentally sang along with the recording.

Reaching a hand out, he ran his knuckles across the apple of her cheek and grinned as she jumped from being startled. “Any word?” she asked, removing one of the buds and using her finger to stop the music from playing. “Emma’s not back yet.”

“Not a bloody word,” he sighed, the back of his head hitting the cold glass window. The fog was beginning to break and there were moments of clear views of the water a few blocks away and the cannery in the distance. “And don’t give me that tired line of no news being good news.”

She nodded, putting the phone and earbuds away in her own bag. “They’ll come out soon and talk to us. I am sure that they just want to have something to report.”

He exhaled through his mouth, the force of the air blowing a few of the curls against his forehead. “I’m not a patient man, darling. I thought that was already established.”

“Anything I can do?” she asked. “Remember I do give a pretty mean neck massage.” She motioned for him to turn and kneaded the flesh of his shoulders as they both talked about anything other than Killian’s surgery. The conversation quieted to talk of Anna’s pregnancy and whether they should purchase something expensive or do something more heartfelt.

“It seems to me that with all the people here in Storybrooke that their closets will be overflowing with outfits, furniture, and toys for the wee one. Perhaps we should think of something else rather than that high chair.”

Her fingers dug into the sensitive area where his shoulders met his neck and he groaned in appreciation. Both of them stifled laughs as an older woman shot them a disapproving look. “What if we recorded something?”

“Like a movie?”

She slapped the back of his neck playfully. “No, I mean like a song. A lullaby?”

He turned his head, leaving the rest of his body at the mercy of her ministrations. “A brilliant idea, darling. Something classic, perhaps? A proper lullaby? Or should we…”

“Maybe we could do a real one and then write one? I bet Emma could help us get some recording time. This probably isn’t a good time to ask her, but I’ll do it soon.”

He rolled his head from side to side as she continued to knead the tenseness out of him. “If she’s at all like me, she’d welcome the distraction. Though I’m not sure that would be all that helpful. I’m quite sure this is a difficult time for her.”

***AAA***

Emma once thought that sitting in waiting rooms and pacing down corridors that smelled of astringent were limited to bad television. At her age she had seen far too much of the inside of the hospital, finding herself knowing which vending machines were more prone to giving away free or extra food and which tended to keep her money with no reward.

As she sat, her legs folded under her awkwardly in a chair that did not lend itself to such contortions, she watched the double swinging doors for a nurse or doctor who would tell her that everything was going to be just fine. There was no reason that it shouldn’t be anything but fine. Yet with each swipe of the hands of the clock, she wondered if that was just her mind coping with the possibility that she
might have one of the shortest marriages on record.

“So I was thinking to go with blue,” Mary Margaret said from a few chairs down. “Soothing and yet trendy. But not too overpowering.”

Not actually involved in the conversation, Emma ran a finger over the engagement ring and wedding band on her left hand. Both still felt oddly foreign there despite the happiness she had felt about the addition of them. She studied them for a moment, considering the platinum bands and soft shimmer even under the harsh florescent light. She was married, not just dating, not just hanging out. She was Killian’s wife and he was her husband.

“Do you think Killian likes blue?” she heard the teacher ask. Emma lifted her eyes to meet the nearly same green colored ones staring back at her.

“For your baby’s nursery?” Emma asked, contorting her face in confusion. “Killian is…I’m not sure that he’d care that much.”

Mary Margaret accepted the swatch back from Elsa who sat across from her and smiled patiently. “Actually I was talking about the chairs and accent walls in each classroom. I was thinking this shade of blue.” She rolled her head from side to side. “It’s still too early to be worried. They just took him back there,” she looked at the time on her phone, “an hour ago.”

“I know,” Emma said, leaning forward to look at the swatch. “It looks good. I know he has a shirt that color. He wore it…” She broke off and cupped her hand around the watch again. “He wears it a lot.”

Looking sympathetic, Mary Margaret placed her balled hands at her chin. “I’m about to have to head back to the school since my planning period is almost over, but David’s on his way. Maybe he could bring you something? Lunch? Snack food? You have to eat.”

“I did,” Emma told her gently. “I am fine. I promise.”

“And so is he,” Elsa chimed in. “You know he’s stubborn as hell. You both are. Don’t worry.”

“Easier said that done,” Emma chided, her eyes heavy as she studied the clock on the wall over the nurse’s station. “So does anyone think it’s too soon for me to check?”

“When was the last time?” Elsa asked her, passing the paint samples back to Mary Margaret with a gentle shove. “I’m sure you have…right?”

“About 22 minutes and 45 seconds,” Emma admitted glumly. “They said they would let me know.” She pulled her tablet back into her lap. “I’ve read this damn email six times already. Yet I can’t even tell you what it says.” She threw her head back in exasperation. “Regina might be right about my ability to juggle all this.”

“Regina can be a witch,” Elsa said, yanking the tablet and perusing the email. “So this is about the rights to the song of Killian’s that we sang. Someone is asking if it might be for sale or if they can get a use permit for a movie.”

“Oh,” Emma said, rubbing her temples. “I guess we could ask him…”

Elsa tapped the screen and quickly typed out a response. “I told them that it is negotiable, but that you are currently out of the office and the songwriter is not available for discussion until next week at the earliest.” She paused with her finger hovered over the return. “Works for you?”
“You know if this singing and performing thing doesn’t work out, I could use you in the office.”

“It’s good to have options,” Elsa said, tapping send and then scrolling through the other emails. “You were scheduling Liam and the guys some dates?”

“Yeah,” Emma said, not bothering to demand back the device. “After the surgery and all. I mean Liam’s not restricted from travel by the court now so…”

“You’ve got a few responses back. Want me to line them up for you? I’m seeing one or two that might conflict, but…”

Pretending to surrender, Emma held up her hands. “Go ahead. You seem to have this under control.”

Elsa did have it under control. She managed to schedule a few dates, work out a conflict about studio time, and solicit a few demo offers before handing the phone and tablet back to her friend. “I’m going to go check on Liam. He and Robin have been gone way too long. It is crazy, but I keep getting the image of him finding a pair of scrubs and sneaking into Killian’s surgery.”

Smiling faintly, Emma nodded. “I wouldn’t put it past him. He’d probably grab the scalpel too.”

Blinking at the standing singer, Emma sighed. “Thank you. For all that and for being here. It does mean a lot.”

“Family and all that,” Elsa said with a shrug. Given that Anna’s a crazy pregnant lady right now, you’re my sane sister. I can’t have you going crazy too.”

***AAA***

It had been four hours. Four hours since she had kissed her husband and wished him sweet dreams during the surgery. Four hours since he had called her his love and reminded her that Sparrow would need a new set of shots before he was to be released from the hospital. Four hours since his fingertips had traced over her cheek and beseeched her not to cry. Four hours since he teased her with thoughts of a trip they didn’t know when they were going to take and the idea of frolicking on a beach with not a care in the world. Not that Emma was counting.

“Does it normally take this long?” Anna asked, crossing her legs at her ankles and brushing off Elsa’s attempts to get her to eat something other than cheese puffs dipped in chocolate. The woman’s cravings were not exactly appetizing to the others who had gathered in the not so big surgical waiting area for word on Killian.

“I’m sure we will hear something soon,” Mary Margaret consoled, looking with a mixture of pity and concern at Emma who had about an hour before moved to a seat closer to the window out of need to just be alone for a little bit with her thoughts.

Killian had told them all that he was going to be fine, going to make it through the surgery, and did not need them to sit vigil while he lay open on the operating table. They ignored that part, gathering around in what Ruby told him with playful slap to his arm was a show of support of his wife and not necessarily him. “You get to go to dreamland and recover in peace while your wife will be worried sick and probably chewing on her nails to avoid thoughts of you leaving her.”

The elder Liam had paced the length of the hospital to the point that his fitbit was registering more steps than he normally took in a month. Nobody fought it though and a few of them even joined him on a few rounds just to offer supportive conversation. When Robin arrived he took over that responsibility with Elsa, who was fielding a few interview opportunities about the latest single release. Normally such things would go through Emma, but Elsa was trying to do things a bit more
independently.

“He seems strong,” the younger Liam said, approaching her shyly. His coloring and accent were different than Killian’s style, but there were similarities. The way he stood and looked almost nervous as he ran his teeth over his lips and ran a finger behind his ear when he spoke.

“He is,” Emma agreed, dimming the screen of her tablet as she looked the young man in the eye. She’d had very little contact with him, as Killian had done much of that. “I’m sure your father is too. I only met him the one time, but he’s…”

“He likes you, said you’re good for Killian.” The young man let his brown eyes, so different from both his brothers’ blue ones, stare wildly at the waiting room. “He told me that like 10 times or something.”

Emma swallowed as she tipped back the foam coffee cup and found it empty. “I could use some coffee and maybe something to eat.”

Apologetically the young Liam stepped backward. “I didn’t mean to… I can go get you something. I know there’s a cart around here someplace.”

She shook her head and removed Killian’s jacket from her lap that she was using as a blanket and put her tablet back in her messenger bag. “I could use the walk. Come with me?”

***AAA***

Robin leaned on his elbows along the railing, staring down at the hospital’s lobby. “It’s a bit odd to look down at a Christmas tree,” he said with a soft nudge to Liam’s shoulder. “Any plans for the holidays yet?”

“I think Elsa would like to spend it with her sister and aunt, but I’m not so sure I’m invited to that.”

“The aunt doesn’t like you so much?”

“No,” Liam said between yawns into his cupped hands. “She would rather see Elsa with someone more sensible and…” He let his mind drift and his eyes squinted out the window at the clock tower in the distance. “Are they ever going to let us know how he’s doing? It’s been a bloody eternity.”

Robin lifted his shoulders in a silent sort of admission that he had no idea what was happening. With Marian it had been fast, the word that she was gone had come before he had even time to process the possibility. It seemed that waiting in hospitals was a thing that other people did, not him. “Perhaps we should see what the others are about? They probably have a better idea.”

Liam didn’t move except to stare down at the first floor again and the top of the Christmas tree. “I am not going to lie. It’s hard to see Emma like this. I see her worrying and yet staying silent and think that she is quite a bit stronger than I am. I feel like shaking every prat in scrubs or a uniform. She is…”

“No doubt she’s beside herself on the inside.” Robin turned toward the bank of elevators. “It’s like watching people be sick to their stomachs. You think you’re fine. You tell yourself you’re fine. Then you see it, smell it, and hear the retching. Suddenly you’re just as sick as the rest of them. But until the moment you know it is coming up, you’re telling yourself that you’re fine.”

Liam scrubbed his hand over his face again. “Did you just compare my brother and his bride’s love for one another to retching up their lunch?” Appalled, he looked at the man who was about two inches shorter and still bundled in his jacket as though he had just arrived. Maybe he had. People had
been coming and going for hours. Robin had been there that morning, left to see Regina and speak with Roland’s teacher about some issue, and returned with word that he had saved them all from a visit from Will.

“I didn’t mean that,” Robin argued, his cheeks reddening with what Liam could only hope was humiliation over the gaffe. “I only meant people say they are strong even when they are falling apart inside. It was a bad analogy, mate.”

“I hope you’re better at giving talks to your son. Otherwise the poor lad might have a twisted view of the world.”

***AAA***

The teachers and staff of Storybrooke Academy came by in small clumps to check on Killian, offering thoughts, prayers, and stories of when their own loved ones had been in the hospital. Their stays were short as they simply used their planning periods and lunch to make the couple of blocks trek in the worsening weather. Even Ruby slipped in after Granny had called her useless for texting with Mary Margaret about Killian’s condition so much that she missed taking five different orders. The older woman wasn’t that upset though and packed her and Graham down with enough hot food to feed an army. Even sporting a folding table, she set up a sort of buffet in the waiting area and fed all who were there for the teacher.

“So I had a thought,” Ruby said, sitting in one of the uncomfortable chairs with her uniform from the diner still on. “That wedding dress I was making you.”

“I’m going to pay for that still,” Emma said, her eyes too tired and bleary to read the book that she had packed in her bag. She’d brought it for Killian anyway, as he was the reader between them. She had pictured herself tucked in beside him on the narrow hospital bed trying to read from one of his favorite novels while he rested his eyes. He would make fun of her attempts at an English accent, calling her own flat yet beautiful. “I thought you understood the whole move it ahead thing…”

“Oh yeah,” Ruby said flashing her hand through the air as if she hadn’t given that a second thought. “No, I was thinking that if I died the fabric and shortened it some that it would make a good date dress. Maybe a welcome home from the hospital now I am totally going to seduce my husband dress.” She smiled brightly as Graham to her left who had an arm over the back of her chair was biting back a laugh.

“Whatever you do,” he said with a shake of his head, “don’t go into marketing, Ruby.”

She huffed indignantly, dropping his hand that she had been holding. “I’m not kidding. You guys barely had a honeymoon. You need a date night. I mean we have to do girls night again soon, but date night is important too.”

“Got it,” Emma said, crumpling the napkin in her hand and gesturing toward the bank of vending machines. “I think there is a trash can over there. I’m going to go look.”

It wasn’t that she didn’t want date night. She did. She wanted to dance with her husband, make love after a glass of wine and conversation that she couldn’t have with anyone else. She wanted to play games on the boardwalk again, try to beat him at competitions, and taste cotton candy on his lips. She wanted to sit by their Christmas tree and sip cocoa while snuggling and stealing kisses. She wanted to watch the school’s holiday concert, cheer for her son’s solo, and beam proudly as her husband acted as director and conductor. But it all seemed so far away while sitting in the hospital waiting room with no word about him.
She tossed the napkin away, brushed a crumb off her sweater, and turned to head back to her well meaning friends. They were at least taking turns, Anna having bought a stuffed reindeer for her to snuggle with and Elsa acting as her assistant, even warding off a call from Regina about a missing file. She had acted as go between for the two Liams, making sure that neither were in the same area at the same time. Mary Margaret was a distraction, making decorating and curriculum choices, even surveying people about names for the baby. Emma loved them all. But the one she wanted right now was Killian.

Suddenly a force of navy and khaki practically knocked her down. Her son, who should have been in school, was clinging on to her with a force so heavy that she felt like he had been propelled there by a magical force.

Emma cradled her son against her chest, not bothering to question how he was there when he should still be at school or who had driven him to the hospital. There were some things better left unsaid when it came to parenting. “I’m glad you’re here, kid,” she said, her arms tightening and her body rocking back and forth. “You know that, right?”

“I belong here,” he told her, his voice muffled against her sweater. “He’s my dad too.”

Still holding him to her tightly, she opened her eyes to see Neal standing there next to the vending machines with a sort of lopsided grin. “Hey, Em,” he said, shoving his hands in his pockets and rocking back on the heels of his dress shoe loafers. “So I know you probably…”

She shook her head slightly to tell him that explanations weren’t necessary. But he didn’t pay attention. “Henry called and said Killian was in the hospital. Said he’d take a cab if he had to do it. I didn’t trust him not to do just that. Probably steal my father’s credit card to pay for it.”

“Thanks,” Emma said, resting her chin awkwardly on Henry’s head. She had to raise up on to the balls of her feet and strain her neck with his added height. “I appreciate it.”

Loosening her grip, she grabbed the lapels of her son’s school uniform jacket and cleared her throat. “So Liam, Elsa, and Anna went upstairs to look through the nursery window to see all the new babies. Want to go join them?”

Smile broadening, Henry nodded quickly. “Yeah, is Killian okay? You never said.”

“I haven’t heard yet, but don’t worry. I’m sure everything is fine. And don’t try to convince Liam you need food. We’ll eat dinner in the cafeteria later or you can have some of this stuff that Ruby brought, okay?”

Mary Margaret lumbered upward and linked her arm with her former student’s elbow. “I’ll walk you up. I kind of want to see them too.” She smoothed her hand down Emma’s sleeve and gripped her hand solidly. “I’m sure your mom could use a moment.”
The two of them disappeared down one of the corridors and Kristoff excused himself to make a phone call. From her spot there by the vending machines, she regarded her ex warily, his eyes shifting across the floor and his hands going deeper into his pockets. Emma folded her arms across her chest. “I am surprised to see you out…”

“Being jilted isn’t exactly the worst thing to ever happen to me, Em. I’m tougher than that.” He rocked back again. “So is he really okay? Killian?”

“I haven’t heard anything,” Emma told him, her tone even and hollow. “They took him back hours ago.”

“I’m sure he’s…”

She held a hand up, her left one. The engagement ring and wedding band glimmered in the light as she waved off his platitudes that meant very little to her. “I know. So I’ll get him home. Don’t worry. Thanks again for bringing him.”

“Sure, I mean he’s like Henry’s dad too, right?”

Emma felt the forced smile she had been holding slide off her face. “Seriously, Neal. What do you want him to say? Killian is his teacher and his stepfather. They are pretty close for being what they are. And you’re not always...This doesn’t have anything to do with you. Henry caring about my husband like a father isn’t a reflection on you. It’s a reflection on the fact that Henry cares about someone who is very important to me.”

Neal gave a little bit of a shrug, his parka falling open to reveal a suit that could have used another swipe of the iron. “I said it is fine. It’s not like we were ever getting back together.”

“No, we weren’t. That has nothing to do with Killian or Tamara or the next woman you date. We are Henry’s parents. And we need to be able to deal with things without automatically seeing each other as the enemy.”

Pulling his coat closed and rocking on his feet, Neal nodded after a moment of what Emma hoped was reflection. “For what it’s worth, Ems, I never thought of you as the enemy. You’re more...well, I hope things go okay with Killian. I mean I’m sure he’s going to be fine. And if you need me to do anything…”

She hesitated, wetting her lips as she let the words that would hurt and the ones that would have come so easily fall into the atmosphere without being uttered. “Maybe you could do something with Henry this weekend? I know he’d like that. And if Killian’s back home, I’ll be on nurse duty…”
“Sure, that’s not a problem. Anything you need. Just let me know what time and where to pick him up.”

“I’ll call,” Emma said, frowning as he spun around to head toward the door. “Neal, just so you know. I am sorry about the whole thing with Tamara. Nobody deserves that kind of treatment. And I hope that you...well, I hope that you do find someone someday.”

“Yeah,” he said his head rolling on his shoulders as if he had just woken up and needed to stretch. “Who knew it was so hard to find Tallahassee?”

She pushed her hair back over her shoulder and considered that for a minute. In their brief life together as a couple, Tallahassee had been their dream spot, close to the ocean for her and with plenty of opportunities for him. They talked about it like it was some mythical place where all their dreams would come true. It was funny in a way, the accidental way they chose that goal off a children’s placemat. She had not considered it in years. “Keep looking. It’s out there.”

***AAA***

It was almost six hours after they took him back for surgery that Dr. Whale entered the room, his scrubs sweaty and his face concerned. Holding his scrub cap fisted in his hands, he nodded in Ruby’s direction. “Emma?” he asked, interrupting a quiet conversation she was having with the older Liam and Elsa.

She glanced up, the conversation seemed to stop in the little clumps of people who were seated around the room. “Killian is…”

Dr. Whale exhaled and gave her a half sort of smile. “The surgery is complete,” he said somewhat vaguely. “The surgeon has successfully completed the transplant. Brennan Jones will be in ICU for a day or two, as there were a few complications that we need to…”

“And Killian…” Liam interrupted, his hands clenching into fists. “You know the one we’re all here…”

Swallowing hard, the doctor motioned toward another door that had not been used at all during their wait. “It’s probably easier if I speak to Killian’s wife privately.”

The bile in her stomach began to rise as she stood up and followed the doctor into the small room. It was sparsely decorated with three chairs, a floor lamp, and tissues on an otherwise bare table. She knew that it was never supposed to be good news if the doctor wished to speak to the family privately, as they normally did so to soften a blow. While she supposed the Liam could have joined her, he had seemed frozen in place as she marched behind the glass and wood door.

“Something’s wrong, isn’t it?” she asked as the doctor, a man she knew quite well outside the hospital too took the seat across from her.

“The surgery went a bit long because…well, Mr. Jones had some issues with the anesthesia. To be honest a mistake was made and a small hole was punctured in his right lung. I wasn’t aware of the issue until after I had already removed a portion of his liver. As we were finishing up with his part of the surgery…” He pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes. “As we were finishing up, I
realized that there was a problem.”

Her chest was tight and breathing was becoming a problem as she tried to read the man’s eyes that wouldn’t meet her own hardened gaze. “Victor, please just tell me what happened. Is he okay?”

“His lung collapsed just as I was closing up. It caused his heart to work too hard and while we were confirming via x-ray, he went into arrest. We have him stable now and he’s breathing on a ventilator. I’m not sure it’s necessary, but I wanted to give him some assistance recovering. I’ve taken him up to ICU where they are getting him set up.”

“Can I see him?” she asked, arms folded across herself as she clutched to the fabric of her sleeves. “I want to see him.”

“There are special visiting hours for the ICU, but yes, of course. Give me a few minutes to get everything updated and I’ll have someone take you up.” He gave her a wary smile and stood up, heading to the door. “Just to update you, his father will be in the cube across the hall. I’m going to talk to his son…”

“He’s waiting in the main waiting area,” Emma explained, shivering despite the warmth in the room. “His name is also Liam.”

***AAA***

The ICU was a dark place, the sounds of alarms, bells, and machines echoed in the long hallway of beds partitioned off by glass walls. Killian’s older brother walked with Emma back to see him, his hand on her shoulder as a busy looking nurse greeted them and pointed toward the bed where he was sleeping sort of catty corner in the bed with a tube taped to the side of his mouth.

Liam stayed back as Emma approached the bed, her fingers brushing the hair across his forehead before dropping a kiss there softly. She swallowed a few times before glancing back at Liam. “He’s strong. He’s going to be fine.”

“He’s a stubborn arse,” Liam agreed, taking a step closer. “Just couldn’t do this the easy way, could he?”

“That’s not his style.” Her fingers drifted down to where his hand should be, finding an inflated boxing like glove to cover it instead. She frowned, but assumed that was to prevent him from pulling out the tube.

“You’re going to be fine,” she whispered to him, stooping down so that she was next to his head. “Remember our deal. I’m not saying goodbye to you.” Her forehead touched his temple as she closed her eyes and tried not to dwell on the surroundings. The smell of antiseptic, the whir of the ventilator, and the sallowness of his skin were all things she would rather forget.

They stayed a while longer, until the nurse said they had to leave. While Emma considered protesting, it was Liam who pointed out that there were not even chairs in the room for them to sit on and visit with him. “He wants you to go home,” Liam reminded her when the nurse firmly told them that it was time to go.

“No, I’m not going,” Emma said sternly. The nurse must have heard her, returning to the ICU waiting area with a thin blanket and pillow that seemed nearly as flat. Pointing to a wall with three recliners, she said it was first come first serve. Emma noted that two were already taken.

Sighing, Liam twisted his mouth and pulled his phone out of his pocket. “Fine, stay the night. I’ll be here in the morning for first visit. Then you’re going home. I’ll stay tomorrow.” He gave her a sort of
one armed hug. “We’ll take turns. That way he can’t kill us both and we can make sure someone is here.”

Emma nodded, made a few texts, and waited to hear back from David and Mary Margaret who were to take Henry home with them. She pushed off anyone who wanted to stay or visit, explaining the hours and insisting she was fine. Settling into the chair closest to the wall so that she could charge her phone and tablet, she tried to relax a little in the crowded room where people in all sorts of emotional states huddled in corners to talk about next steps and plans.

She only meant to close her eyes for a moment, but sleep overcame her and she dozed while waiting for any word about the change in his condition. Dr. Whale had insisted he was going to be fine, but she wanted proof. She wanted to see his eyes open and hear him call her love again.

The chair next to her creaked as someone sat down, and Emma pried open one eye to see who had saved that seat. The short dark hair was all the clue she needed. “Mary Margaret,” she said warningly.

“And Ruby,” the teacher was quick to say. “Elsa went home with Liam. And we didn’t think you needed 100 question Anna. So here we are.” She was thumbing through a magazine and looked all too comfortable.

She tugged on the hospital blanket that was much too small even for her petite frame. “You guys didn’t have to do this.”

Ruby leaned forward in her chair and smiled almost wickedly. “I wasn’t going home and neither was Mary Margaret. Now you can sleep. We brought DVDs. I have snacks. And I even brought Monopoly. But just so you know, I’m not going easy on you just because your husband is sick. Boardwalk and the railroads are mine.”

A/N: When I was writing this story almost a year ago, my mother was diagnosed with lung cancer. It was a freak thing that I never thought would happen. Emma’s experience at the hospital was much like mine. I was surrounded by family and friends, but felt very much alone. A surgery that was supposed to take 90 minutes took six hours before we knew what had happened. They had punctured her good lung during the surgery. The doctor didn’t realize it and finished up only to have her lung collapse and her heart stop. Thankfully they were able to reinflate her lung and brought her back. But I sat there thinking as he told me this, “Is she okay? He hasn’t said she’s okay. He keeps talking about what happened, but what about now?”

This May she will have been cancer free for a year. And like Emma in this story, I couldn’t leave her in ICU alone. So I did sleep in a recliner while my friends came and stayed with me. They kept me entertained and supported. Since I wanted Emma’s friendships to be an important part of this story, I thought I would end this chapter with them there to support her – girls’ night in the hospital.
Chapter 60

Sorry for the delay, my health issues have kept me from having a clear enough head to write much. I’m trying to tie up these stories I have left. Here is one more chapter of this one.

Ruby’s long legs were thrown over the side of the chair and her hair dangled over the other arm, her mouth thrown open as she slept in what Emma could only call the most uncomfortable position ever. By contrast, Mary Margaret was curled up under a thin white blanket that one of the nurse’s supplied, the picture of serenity in the not so quiet waiting area of the ICU. Emma had promised them that she would sleep, closing her eyes and trying to even out her breathing as she waited on them to believe her claim. Eventually they did, leaving the blonde to sit quietly in the semi dark and think. That could be dangerous.

One wall of the rectangular shaped waiting area was windows down to the parking lot with the occasional rays of headlights breaking through even at the late hour. The opposite wall was also glass that looked out into the hallway between the waiting area and ICU. Emma had started to count the number of people who walked down that hall, not bothering to pause or take note of the rooms on the other side of the doors where people were fighting for their very existence.

“Mrs. Jones?” the frizzy haired nurse asked, only sticking her head through the partially open door. “We’re about to administer another dose of his sedation. Perhaps you would like to see him. He’s not awake, but I would bet he can hear you.”

Emma had bolted from her chair and nearly tripped on a bag of snacks that Granny had sent over earlier. Apparently, when one’s loved one is in the hospital, eating was the thing to do. She followed the swift moving medical worker past double doors that remained locked except during the specially posted visiting hours.

Killian’s room was rather small, as all of these glass enclosures were with a single bed, more machines than people, and a sink in the corner. No chairs existed to encourage visitors. Emma stood near the head of his bed, holding his hand through the inflatable mitt that was there to prevent his pulling out his breathing tube. His left arm was curled across his chest, the prosthetic hand safely in her tote bag for when he was moved to a regular room.

She pressed a kiss first to his forehead and then cheek, looking toward the nurse for guidance. “I’m not sure what I’m supposed to…”

“There aren’t really any rules with this. I mean you can talk to him about how you feel. Wish him well. Talk about your favorite show or song. It’s really wide open. It’s your voice that matters. Be soothing. It will help. Maybe you could sing to him even?”

She almost laughed at the suggestion. “He’s the musician in the family.” That made her scoff again. “I really just said that, didn’t I? Family. It’s just been my son and I against the world for so long. Now he’s…”

“Sneaks up on you, doesn’t it?” the woman said, adjusting the settings on one of the machines. “Love, I mean. My husband and I were friends for years. The best of friends. He nursed me through broken hearts. I was judgmental about his girlfriends and dates. And then one day I saw him. Really saw him.” She wrinkled her nose. “Haven’t looked back and it’s been 20 years now. That sneaks up on you too. I am guessing you’re a newlywed.”

“Yeah,” Emma admitted, noting the growing stubble on his jaw that was several shades lighter than
his dark hair. She had noticed it during the summer as he chased after her on the beach and threatened to throw her in the water, the sun making it look a soft shade of auburn. It made him look a bit less roguish as he was fond of saying. “Less than a month.”

“Wonderful time. I enjoyed it even though there was a learning curve. My husband has the coldest feet ever. And he cannot see fit to eat anything but greasy, processed, fast food. Minor things, right? But when it was all so new it seemed so dramatic and almost insurmountable. But it wasn’t. And this isn’t either. Your husband, Mrs. Jones, is recovering. And in a while you’ll not look back on this time with fear.”

Emma nodded, touching his cheek. “He can really hear me?”

“I would think so,” the nurse said, jutting her chin out. “Now, I need to get a new IV ready, but he won’t need it for about 20 minutes or so. I don’t see any reason that you can’t stay in here for that little while. It’ll give you a little time with him.”

“Thank you,” Emma said, not taking her eyes off of him. She heard the woman mutter something at one of the machines and then the squeak of rubber soled shoes on the linoleum floor. That left her with his closed eyes and the hiss of the breathing machine. Exhaling, she ran her fingers down his cheek. “I should try to remember this as the time you couldn’t argue with me, maybe even tell you what I want that I know you won’t agree with and then later tell you we already discussed it. But all I can think that I want is for you to wake up and be fine. I have no reason to think that you won’t be. You did promise me that. And you never go back on your promises.”

He didn’t move or acknowledge her, but she could see that his brow furrowed a bit so maybe the nurse was right. “You have to get better,” Emma continued. “There is so much more we need to do. You owe me a trip to Europe, remember? I don’t want to go without you. And I still haven’t managed to see all those James Bond movies you like. Maybe while you are recovering we can have a few movie nights at home? Curled up on the sofa, eating my famous popcorn with melted Milk Duds, sneaking kisses while Henry’s engrossed in the story? I’ll even let you keep the remote?”

She stopped to drop a kiss on his forehead. “And breakfast. I will make you something healthy like fruit and eggs with oatmeal instead of poptarts. I promise I will try to make everything the way you like it if you just wake up.” There was still nearly silence as she rambled a bit in hopes that her concessions would somehow miraculously wake him up. As she listed them, she realized that she wasn’t saying the reason that she wanted him and needed him to recover. It was coming out as a want list, frivolous and mundane. Normally she would have collapsed into a chair and had a good cry, ugly expressions and fat tears rolling. There was no chair though and the thought of falling onto his hospital bed seemed even less appealing. So with a sniffle, she squared her shoulders and squeezed his hand again.

“I could try and guilt you into waking up. Because I sure as hell need you right now. I’m not even sure how I would begin to…Well, I am not sure I even want to know and…that used to scare me. It used to make me freak out that I could love you that much. I want to think that you love me that much too. I want to think that you wouldn’t know what to do with yourself either. Please, Killian, wake up and be well again. I don’t want to figure this all out alone.”

***AAA***

Zelena flitted around the now empty bar, squashing out the dim flames on candles and lifting the chairs onto the tables so that her cleaning crew could finish the floors. “I didn’t really expect you here tonight,” she said to Liam, taking a moment to readjust the shoulder of her green sweater. “I know if Regina had just had surgery, I’d be there with her. I may want to kill her half the time, but that’s just part of being sisters.”
“Emma’s staying with him tonight,” Liam muttered. He’d been home before, sitting on the couch and trying to do anything but think of his brother. There was no reason for him to go back to the hospital, as Emma was there and if anything changed she would call. They would have to divide their resources to care for him, Elsa had reminded him when she encouraged him to get a good night’s sleep. But sleep hadn’t come so he had dragged his butt to the bar at nearly 11 p.m. to work a few hours before he made his way to the waiting room to relieve Emma.

“And you decided the drunks of Storybrooke were more inclined to need your services?” she asked pointedly. “I don’t mind your dedication to your job. I rather like it, actually. But I don’t need you to have a break down here. This is a bar. The only people who should be hiding away from their emotions are the customers.”

He was about to answer when he saw something flash behind her, the whiff of sweet perfume overpowering the stale beer and fried concoctions. Elsa walked in carefully, her features looking delicate in the oversized sweater she was wearing that made her complexion and hair seem even more pale by comparison. Giving her a sort of half-hearted smile, he watched as she approached the bar and sat on the stool closest to the employee door.

“Lock up like usual when you go,” Zelena said, nodding toward Elsa. “And make sure you leave one light on for the cleaners?”

“Aye,” he responded, not taking his eyes off of Elsa. “I’ll text you about my schedule for tomorrow.”

It wasn’t until the door shut and Zelena had retreated that Elsa finally spoke. “I woke up and you were gone. I got worried that maybe I’d missed a call about Killian and you went to the hospital alone. But I texted Ruby and she said you weren’t there. So I assumed you must have come here.”

He could have tried to explain that he couldn’t sleep or that his mind had raced with thoughts of what his life would be like without his brother. Then there was the guilt that he felt about his own father who was lying in a room in that very hospital. Liam had made it as far as that floor earlier in the evening but then realized he had nothing he could think of to say and should probably at least prepare something before walking in there. No, nothing would explain why he was standing there in tight, faded jeans, a t-shirt, and a flannel shirt over it. Nothing would explain why his hands needed to be busy and his mind focused on something other than his brother in that moment.

Elsa nodded as though she had heard his thoughts. “Ruby said that Killian’s holding his own and the nurse said it is reasonable to presume that he’s going to get the breathing tube out in the morning.”

Letting go of the breath he had been holding, Liam nearly dropped the glass in his left hand. “And they don’t think…”

“No permanent damage. He’s strong enough…” She smiled. “Killian’s going to be fine. And your father…”

She stopped when she saw the flinch on Liam’s face. “I don’t really care to discuss him at the moment. While I know it was not intentional, there is a part of me that will never forgive him for putting Killian in this position. Had he not been a lousy drunk, he might not have destroyed his liver.”

“Nobody would blame you for thinking that way. I mean it was a pretty horrible set of circumstances and Brennan seems to have come through unscathed. Would you feel better if it was him who had the complications?” She leaned her elbows on the bar and clasped her hands in front of her.

Liam rubbed his chin thoughtfully after he placed the last of the glasses on the sideboard. “I wouldn’t
wish anything like that on anyone. Perhaps it was because my mother was quite a superstitious woman or all that time I spent at sea with old sailors and their beliefs in fortune and luck. Either way, I don’t wish ill on people.

She nodded. “You ready to get some sleep? Or should we head over to the hospital? I don’t think Emma’s going to mind or be surprised with either.”

***AAA***

As it turned out none of them were allowed back in the ICU when Killian did finally wake up. Weaned off the medicine keeping him asleep, he was surrounded by Dr. Whale and the surgeon, as well as several nurses for the uncomfortable task of removing the tube. It came with quite a bit of coughing that he finally finished in time for Emma and Liam to come see him before he was finally transferred to a regular room for a bit more recovery.

Liam held the plastic cup and directed the straw at his brother’s mouth, smiling sympathetically at the way Killian’s eyes glazed over with the hangover of sedation. “Be a good lad and have just a sip,” he coaxed, ignoring the flail of a hand trying to brush it aside. “It’s not the tastiest beverage, but can’t be having you weave down the hallway of this hospital after a pint.”

Clasping the once flailing hand in her own, Emma squeezed tightly. “Come on, Killian. He’s not going to leave you alone until you do it. And that nurse seemed like a real hard ass too. I would suggest drinking your water like they ask.”

Cutting his eyes to his wife’s most relaxed expression since the whole ordeal began, Killian parted his cracked lips slightly to allow his brother to insert the bendy straw and took a deep but short sip of the still cool water. He pushed the plastic out with his tongue. “One sip. I did it. Now will you bloody well leave?”

Liam chuckled and wiggled the straw in his direction again. “So maybe I lied, little brother. I think we need to finish this bit and then we’ll see about some food for you.”

Emma stifled a laugh as her husband muttered about meddling brothers and no appetite for anything other than going home with her. It had been a long 24 hours with Killian’s surgery, the emergency, his ventilator, and a 12 hour say in the ICU before they even considered sending him to a regular room. But there he sat, surrounded by pillows and socks with paw prints on his feet as his brother force fed him water and his wife teared up each time he winced or coughed. She was willing to put up with anything he would dish out after seeing him looking so pale and lifeless as she had in the ICU. The sight of his eyes, even as he looked frightened to learn of the events, had given her more comfort than she could have imagined possible. And the warmth of his hand clutching hers was a magical connection that she swore she wasn’t going to forget. “I think the patient’s getting a bit fed up with you,” she told her brother-in-law. “Want me to try?”

With an exasperated sigh, Liam thrust the cup at her and sat back down on the room’s only chair. Emma had sworn she was going to sleep in it that night, but as of yet had not left the edge of his bed. “I don’t want to know why you’ll be more compliant with her than your own flesh and blood.”

“Probably because she has better legs,” Elsa said from the doorway, peeking in with a grin. “It’s good to see you awake, Killian. You’ve had us all worried. Liam hasn’t slept a wink. He paced around so much last night that I was worried our downstairs neighbors might call the board on us for making too much noise.”

“A man’s not allowed to be concerned about his brother while he’s in the ICU? That’s pure bollocks.”
Killian gave Elsa a soft hello between sips of water that he did in fact take better from Emma than his well-meaning brother. After hours with a tube down his throat to help him breathe, he had a wicked sore throat and a hoarseness that made him sound far weaker than he actually felt. He’d not yet asked about anything other than Emma’s comfort and Henry’s whereabouts.

Holding Liam’s shoulder under her hand, Elsa propped her hip against the radiator on the wall. “So I thought you both might like to know that I’ve been by the house. David’s got Sparrow and all is well there. I even managed to take a quick glance around your boat to make sure everything was as it should be. If you want, Anna’s dying to do something. I thought we might go by the store and pick you up a few odds and ends. Maybe that would save you a few steps upon your release.”

The mere mention of the word release had Killian’s eyes lighting up and a hopeful sort of expression aimed at Emma. She kissed his forehead and whispered something about soon and doctor’s orders. Her hair was hanging messily from a twisted bun atop her head and the oversized cardigan she wore over a thin white shirt seemed to swallow her. While she knew she looked rather ragged in those clothes, Killian’s warm smiles to her and the way his eyes raked over her form seemed to indicate that he merely saw her as beautiful even when she was sleep deprived. “That’s so nice of you,” she said to Elsa. “You’ve been a big help. Even with work stuff…”

Elsa flushed as she listened to Emma’s compliments. “I know this isn’t probably the time, but well, there is something I wanted to show you two.”

Liam peered over his girlfriend’s shoulder with curiosity. “Those two and not me?”

Ignoring his petulant question, Elsa passed Emma her phone and shrugged. “So one of the calls you got from work was about that new singer Regina wanted signed. He went with another label, but the thing is that he’s looking for a few more songs to record for his first album. He’s mostly wanting original stuff, no covers. And without you there…one of the lower staff found a really obscure song on your computer. I told them that the stuff there wasn’t part of the catalog, but it was too late. He heard it and his label wants to buy it.” She bit her lip as Emma scanned the screen and its contract notes that Elsa had put together. “I think it’s a good deal. And there’s no obligation afterward. It’s just a song contract.”

“You are bothering her with work?” Liam chastised, pursing his lips together with a certain amount of disappointment. “I thought we agreed that we’re here for Killian. Work can wait. Isn’t that the lecture you gave me in the bloody elevator when I wanted to check on the schedule at work?”

Emma scrolled a bit more on the phone. “This is about Killian,” she said softly, reading the notes. “I mean if he wants it to be.” Flashing her eyes to confirm with Elsa, she looked back at Killian and lifted one shoulder slowly. “It seems that Elsa may have sold one of your old songs. And she may have just negotiated enough of a payment to match Mary Margaret’s on the new school.”

***AAA***

Killian refused to consider the offer until he had a chance to view the contract on something other than a smart phone and that didn’t come for two more days until he was home from the hospital. Released was another matter since he was forbidden from strenuous activity and was under the watchful eyes of his wife, brother, and stepson. It was a rare moment for him to wake up without one of them checking on him, tucking in covers or replacing lukewarm water with fresh. On the fourth day of his recovery, Henry and Liam had helped him into the living room where they watched Star Wars and discussed the upcoming Christmas holidays, including Henry’s growing wish list.

“I think you might be barking up the wrong tree, lad,” Killian said with a smirk, the small pillow clutched at his stomach to brace for the next cough that the doctor said was both natural and helpful.
“Your lovely mother has declared herself the chief merry maker in this home and is doing all the shopping. I haven’t even been allowed to wrap a present, though I’m not very adept at that sort of thing with only one hand.”

Liam, who was drinking water out of solidarity for Killian’s recovery regimen, sputtered at the statement. “Don’t let the bloke fool you. He’s never been good at it. Once we bought our mother this gaudy necklace that was sure to turn her neck green. Killian used all the paper, two premade bows, and gobs of tape on it. She threw it out with the rubbish thinking it was just that. I had to go out there before the collectors came and dig it out of the bin. Went to school smelling of the past three night’s dinner after that. It wasn’t pleasant at all. And what do you know, my little brother ended up with all the accolades for that gift. He’s always been a charmer.”

Killian posed the best he could from the seated position, giving an impression of doe eyes and cute smile to his brother before collapsing in laughter. That was how Emma found them as she entered and stamped the snow from her boots. She smiled brightly through tired eyes as she dropped three packages on the counter and hurried around the sofa to kiss her husband before wedging herself into the seat beside him.

“What are we doing?” she asked, squinting at the paused screen on the television that showed very little in terms of clues. “Movie watching?”

“Liam was telling me about how Killian was a charmer growing up.” Henry slid off the adjoining sofa to sit on the floor and reach for the remote.

“I can definitely see that,” Emma agreed. “And a cute one at that.” Liam and Henry matched ahhhs as the couple made a show of another kiss, smacking loudly to earn the teenager’s groan of disgust. “I brought some stuff for sandwiches. I didn’t know what you might want for lunch. If you want something hot, I could heat up some…” She broke off, sniffing the air. “Is that?”

Liam puffed his chest out proudly. “Aye, I’m adept in the kitchen, lass. It’s an old recipe of mum’s that I will not be sharing with the lot of you. But you can have a bowl.”

“I believe there is an apron in there of Emma’s,” Killian called out, his voice decidedly stronger since that first day he woke up. “A pink frilly one would look rather dashing on you, perhaps.”

“You git,” Liam called out, rummaging through a lower cabinet for a lid.

With Liam’s attention on the cooking and Henry scrolling through messages on his phone, Emma lowered her voice to Killian. “I got a paper copy of the offer and proposal for that song,” she nearly whispered. “We don’t have to do it now, but whenever you’re ready…”

“Is it a good deal?”

“Very generous. The company is legit and wants to buy it for this guy. He’s seriously talented and will probably take it to the top of the charts. And other than your signature, they aren’t requiring another thing from you. Speaking as a professional and not your wife…you’d be crazy not to take it. And speaking as your wife…”

“You already know me to be a bit mad,” he answered cheekily. Stifling a yawn, he nodded. “It would take the pinch off with this whole school opening thing. And it isn’t like I was planning to do much with the music anyway. It was simply gathering dust.” He lifted his left arm to throw over her shoulders, a move that made him wince with the pain the stretch brought on. “Perhaps I should go ahead and agree before they find another song from another source?”
Emma brushed her nose on his cheek. “I don’t want to pressure you on this. It’s all your decision.”

“I feel no pressure from you, love. But I am not naïve enough to believe that I have all the time in the world on this.” He pointed his chin toward the packages and bag she left on the counter. “Grab your pen, love. I’m ready to sign.”

***AAA***

The documents were signed and officially sealed by all the parties three days later, just an hour before Killian was due at the doctor to follow up on his recovery. Emma promised him dinner at Granny’s if he was a good patient, which he was all during the appointment. He coughed when asked and took deep breaths as directed. The nurse smiled when he displayed his arm for bloodwork without complaint. Everything seemed on track.

As the couple met with Liam and Elsa for a celebratory dinner at the popular diner, most of them had no way of knowing that just upstairs Brennan was recovering too. The younger Liam had ordered food for the evening meal and was checking the tray when Killian spotted him. The half-brothers’ eyes met briefly and for one awkward moment, Killian considered calling out to him.

“I wasn’t aware he was still in town,” Elsa said, dabbing a paper napkin at a sticky spot on the table. “I would have thought…”

“There is one thing you should know when it comes to my father and apparently his youngest son,” Liam said, his eyes focused on the card with different desserts featured on it. “Logic will not help you to understand.”

Emma looked a bit uncomfortable as she shifted in her seat. “I didn’t realize he would be in the diner tonight, but apparently Brennan is recovering here at the bed and breakfast before heading back home. He’s not been cleared to travel yet.” Her mouth formed a tight line. “So…anyone want to change the subject?”

Killian sipped from his drink and exhaled slowly. “I would presume that you’ve been speaking to him.”

“No? Yes, sort of. I ran into your brother out front the other day when I was picking up hot chocolates. I didn’t know what to do or say so I asked how Brennan was doing. I wasn’t trying to interfere. I just thought I should be polite, you know? He asked about you. Seemed kind of worried.” Emma fidgeted again. “And because I know you won’t ask. Your father is doing better. He’s getting his strength back. And should be able to travel sometime in January probably.”

“That will be good,” Killian said as Liam muttered something unintelligible. I take it that they will be here for the holidays then? You didn’t invite them over to the house, did you?”

“No,” Emma said defensively. “I wouldn’t do that.”

Having sat quietly through the exchange, Elsa gathered her jacket and kissed Liam’s cheek. “I need to go check on Anna and it’s too loud in here for a conversation. Be back in a minute.” She caught Emma’s eye and tilted her head ever so slightly toward the door. Emma understood the gesture. Whatever the brothers chose to do, it should be on them to decide. Making her own excuse about Henry, Emma joined Elsa on the cold patio where only the heartiest would brave the temperatures and wind.

“You think they’ll go up there?” Elsa asked softly as Emma dug her gloveless hands into her pockets.
“Yes, maybe, I don’t know. Killian once asked me if I would face my parents if I ever met them. I
don’t know the answer to that either. I do know it would gnaw at me until I did something. So
maybe they just need to do something. They can talk to him or walk away and never come back.
Either way it is their decision.”
He assumed Elsa would be asleep when he got back to the condo after dropping Killian off at the cottage. She wasn’t. Sitting on the couch with a stack of papers balanced on her knees, she looked younger than usual sans makeup. Her mouth lifted into a gentle smile. “I was wondering if you were coming back.”

“Always,” he said, shedding his coat and looking at the counter where an empty bag from Granny’s sat. “‘Leftovers?’

“Granny wouldn’t let us leave without them,” she said, flipping her hair over her shoulder. “‘You guys didn’t seem like you were going to come down to finish them, so Emma and I divided them up and brought them home.” She pursed her lips thoughtfully. “Sorry we didn’t wait. She was exhausted and we were thinking you guys probably wanted to talk without us butting in on you. I made her call me as soon as she arrived, just to make sure she got back okay.”

He nodded, scrubbing his face with his hands. “You aren’t asking what happened?”

She lifted the papers off her knees and lowered her bare feet to the floor. Then she motioned for him to recline next to her and use her lap as his pillow. Not hesitating, he did just that. “I assumed you would tell me what you wanted me to know. Emma and I talked and both felt that this was yours and Killian’s decision.”

“We didn’t mean to be gone as long as we were,” he admitted, closing his eyes as she smoothed back his hair. “Most of it was spent just outside the door, if I’m being honest. I was hesitant to knock and Killian wasn’t making a move until I did.”

“Understandable.”

“Aye, I suppose it was. Neither of us ended up knocking or even speaking of it. Our younger brother opened the door and invited us in. Surprised me that he was so willing and encouraging.” He let out a soft sigh as she continued her efforts. “I still find him a proper arse about the way he treated you, but he’s…”

Using the break in his words, Elsa leaned forward to kiss his forehead. “I don’t know that I would want to be as friendly with him as I am with Killian, but if…you…”

“I wouldn’t put you in that position,” he interrupted. “I was simply saying that I suppose my father is lucky to have at least one doting son. Two if you count that Killian gave a piece of himself to save his miserable life.”

Her thumb brushed over where she had kissed him. “Then you spoke to your father?”

“I thought he might be sleeping. Recovering. He was awake though, sitting up in that bed and eating a bit. Kept trying to share his meal with us.” Opening his eyes, he looked up at Elsa. “It struck me as quite funny at the time and I nearly laughed. There were so many nights that Brennan Jones did not even bother to provide us a meal before heading out to the pub for his drink. And yet here was this prat trying to get us to share a bit of that lasagna the Widow Lucas seems to think everyone loves.”

“I’m guessing he was probably pretty nervous to see you both there and wondering if he was about to be yelled at again,” Elsa offered.
Liam continued, explaining that Killian had been much nicer and even asked the man in the bed how he was feeling. There was a softness in Killian’s words that had been comforting to Liam, but at the same time he felt horrible for his own lack of empathy. “He invited us to come visit on Christmas,” Liam ended by saying. “I can’t quite picture us all sitting about the tree and reminiscing about years past.”

“What did you say?” Elsa asked, pulling down the throw blanked to cover him. While she was normally warm blooded, he felt the chill more than she did.

“I told him we were planning to visit your sister and aunt.”

Elsa paused in her movements as she considered this. “You don’t want to visit Aunt Ingrid. And you see my sister several times a week. I think we could make the effort if you wanted. We are spending Christmas Eve with Killian, Emma, and Henry. Why not stop in for a few minutes with…”

“Your aunt is much more tolerable than Brennan Jones,” Liam protested.

“Neither are the best company,” Elsa conceded. “We don’t have to decide now. And you need your sleep. I know that you’re planning to be over at Killian’s first thing in the morning. You’ve been averaging about three hours of sleep a night. It’s going to catch up with you.”

He stuck his bottom lip out a bit exaggerated. “Are you saying you missed me?”

She cupped his cheek. “I’m saying that you’re probably driving your brother crazy.”

“Aye, but that is the prerogative of the older sibling. You should know that.” He swatted her hand playfully away from tweaking his nose. “Are you telling me that you won’t be paying extra visits to Anna once the wee little one arrives?”

“You don’t play fair, Liam Jones.”

~~~AAA~~~

Unlike Elsa, Emma was sleeping when Killian entered the house and peeled himself out of his clothes. There was no doubt she hadn’t meant to, he thought when he stopped in the doorway of their shared bedroom to peer in at her sleeping atop the still made bed. She was curled into a ball, still dressed, and limply holding her tablet where she had been reading emails. The throw blanket she’d been using for warmth was knotted about her waist to the point it provided no actual warmth for her. Walking softly on the rug next to the bed, he pulled it off of her without waking her and attempted to do the same with the comforter and top sheet on the bed.

“Hello, love,” he said as she stirred with a slightly confused expression. “Let’s get you into bed, shall we? Sleeping in your clothes cannot be too comfortable.”

She covered her eyes with one hand and frowned as she rolled toward the edge of the bed to stand. “I was trying to stay awake. I don’t think I did a good job of it though.”

“There’s no blame for you needing your sleep, Emma. You’ve been running yourself ragged lately. Perhaps we should…”

She helped him pull down the covers and then did the same with her jeans to his pleased smile at her impromptu strip show. “You’re the patient, not me. I’m fine.” She kicked her leg that was still partially inserted in the pants leg a few times before heading toward the bathroom to wash off her make up. “Speaking of…how’s your father doing?”
“A bit weak and tired, but better than I expected,” he answered, shedding his own outerwear as he gave an update about both the youngest of the brothers and their father. “Wants us all to visit on Christmas.”

The running water of the sink stopped and Emma appeared in the doorway, her long legs on display under the sweater she had been wearing. Her face was pink from the hot water and she was patting it dry. “We could do that if you want,” she said. “Other than a tradition of a huge breakfast and orgy of presents, Henry and I don’t really have any major traditions for Christmas.” She leaned back in the bathroom and held up the fresh bandages for his surgical marks and lifted her eyes to ask silently if it was time for the change of them. He shook his head in return.

“I think I’m going to leave that decision ultimately to my brother,” Killian said, smiling brightly at her and patting the spot next to him. “I seem to be still recovering from the last request that Brennan Jones made. So you’re okay if we decide yes?”

Emma replaced her sweater with her flannel sleep shirt that she knew was far from sexy but still warm and comfy. “Yours and Liam’s choice,” she said, diving in next to him and kissing him soundly before reaching over to turn out the light. “I’m cool with your decision, okay? I’m not opposed. And again, not trying to butt in here, but if you’d rather they came here since we’re not living in a single room at the moment…”

Killian didn’t answer, pulling her in tight next to him so that her head was nestled into his shoulder and neck and her breath was warm on his skin. “Perhaps we might make those plans tomorrow, love. I think I would much prefer a quiet moment with you rather than speaking of all this right now.”

“Sure,” she said, her lips brushing against him as she spoke. “But I’m going to warn you that I probably won’t last long. You make a really good pillow.”

He didn’t stay awake much longer than she did, keeping her gathered in his arms and saying another silent thanks for having the opportunity to be with her. While he appreciated her strength and independence, there was a beauty to the vulnerability she displayed when the day’s stresses wore off in their embrace. Her face seemed to relax instantaneously and her hands no longer fisted on his chest. Instead she let her jaw go a bit slack and her right hand was splayed just above where the incisions were healing. The last thought he had before he fell asleep was of her and how he would do whatever he could to let that same look continue for as long he could.

They slept so soundly that they barely moved in the night until the unmistakable sound of heavy footsteps woke him up. Blinking in the still dark room, he first saw Emma’s shadowy form sitting at the edge of the bed. Her head was cocked to the side and her hair flowed over one shoulder with a messy tumble. With her hand still on his chest, she locked gazes with him before lifting a finger to her lips to indicate he should be quiet.

“I’ll go see, love,” he said, brushing off her attempt to join him. Instead, he tossed over her phone from where it was charging. “Just in case.”

He stumbled as he crossed to the door, his foot tingling from their position in the bed just moments before. Groping for something to steady himself, he almost fell over her discarded sweater, earning a mouthed apology from her for leaving a mess.

He was at the doorway when he heard the steps again, the living area dimly lit with a single light that Emma normally left on so that they could move a bit freely in the night. There was no sight of the intruder, but Killian stepped forward in the direction of the shadow he saw moving near the stairs. Spreading his hand out behind him to search for the baseball bat he knew was in the hallway where Henry had left it a few days ago, he came up with something soft rather than wooden.
“It’s my house too,” Emma argued in a whisper. “Two are better than one.”

“How do we know there is only one?” he whispered back, gripping and then squeezing her hand reassuringly before again seeking out the bat. This time he found it. “There could be…”

“Then you should be glad I’m here so we can take them both on,” Emma hissed. She grabbed his elbow and pulled him back as she realized the footsteps had stopped but there was a breathing sound coming from the other room now that was followed but something that almost sounded like talking. “There are two of them.”

Killian craned his neck and leaned forward, as if he might be able to see around the alcove wall into the living area. Giving up on that idea, he cleared his throat and called out, “Who is there?”

“Bloody hell, little brother. I was just going to put a load of laundry on for you, but I didn’t mean to wake you.” Killian rounded the corner to the sound of his brother’s booming voice with Emma following. There he stood, his winter coat hanging open and his hair in disarray under a knitted hat. He was holding the hamper from the hall bathroom and frowning at his brother and sister-in-law.

“Since when did you learn to do laundry, mate?” Killian asked, passing the bat back to Emma before he had to explain that one. Thankfully, Emma understood and stealthily slipped it in the basket of wood by the fireplace. “And you still have a key?”

“Thank God he does,” the female voice said from the kitchen. “Otherwise, I would have been making your eggs on the grill outside. Not exactly what I want to do with the threat of snow.” Killian whirled to face her, expecting to see Elsa standing there since it was his brother’s intrusion. Instead, it was Ruby who was wearing her Granny’s uniform and whisking something in a bowl at his counter. “You two sleep like the dead by the way. I tried to wake you when we got here, but you were dead to the world. Graham suggested putting a mirror under your noses, but then one of you snored and I decided it was fine.”

“Graham’s here?” Emma asked, still linked to Killian’s arm and shivering in the cool morning air. “You do realize that we weren’t planning a party this morning, right?”

“Graham came over with us to check on that light in your office upstairs,” Ruby explained. “He said the bulb was loose so he fixed that. And then he and David took the dog for a walk. Mary Margaret dropped off some flooring samples for your project, Killian. And Anna said she’d be by later to see about having Kris move the furniture in the living room for our Christmas Eve party here. Elsa’s going to stop in later after she finishes something she’s working on for Regina.” Ruby continued to list friends as Liam returned, looking proud of himself for starting the laundry. “Oh and Roland is making you a picture or something and Robin promised him he’d drop that off today. He was here earlier too, dropping off some dog food.”

Killian’s jaw fell open as he stared at the woman behind the counter. “All these people…”

Emma bumped her hip against his. “We may need to move,” she said softly. “It might be easier than getting all the keys back.”

***AAA***

She was sure the document was some place on her desk or the credenza behind it. It had to be, as she had not taken it out of her office at the recording studio. Between the holidays, getting married, and her husband’s surgery, Emma wasn’t sure where many things were anymore. Her office was supposed to be her own, but the evidence was there that her coworkers had each taken a turn sitting at her desk and using her computer, as it was faster than most of the machines. Now she was certain
one of them had misplaced the set list that Liam and the guys would need for the show they were performing for a pre-taped New Year’s Eve show.

The phone on her desk, the one with more buttons than seemed even remotely necessary, crackled and hissed as Regina’s voice could be heard. “Ms. Swan,” she said in that highly effected voice. “Could you please see me before you sneak out of here again today? I do need some updating on your status with several projects.”

Emma resisted the urge to stick her tongue out at the phone and kept digging through the disorganized stacks that were balanced precariously on the edge of her desk. Of course Regina wanted to see her and of course she used her maiden name to address her. But that wasn’t that big of deal since she had decided to keep Swan professionally and use Jones otherwise. No, it was the cold indifference in the woman’s voice that rattled her.

“There you are,” she said, sliding the printed sheet out from under a few invoices that she needed to approve as soon as possible. Six songs were printed on the list and another four were handwritten. When she had asked Robin and Liam to narrow down the list, she had not meant for them to add more. She’ll have to give Liam a call to pry a decision out of him. Collapsing into her chair, she frowned. Calling Liam would probably mean another 20 minute discussion about Killian’s progress and what they were doing for dinner. The older of the Joneses seemed to have declared himself a permanent nurse maids for her husband. She was appreciative of the help, but it was wearing a bit on her nerves to have Liam and usually Elsa there every single afternoon and evening. Throw in Mary Margaret, Granny, and Ruby, and the house felt very full sometimes. She loved the company and knew Killian did too, but there were times when she just wanted a bit of quiet with her husband.

“Emma?” the receptionist’s voice crackled. “You have a call from a Neal?”

“Put him through,” Emma said with a sigh. Work would have to wait. Henry had offered to spend a few nights with his father at her suggestion. Killian’s sleep schedule was off and she had felt that a quiet house might give him a better opportunity to sleep. Since Neal was still nursing his broken heart, the set up was perfect.

“Hey,” she said, reaching for the invoices to at least put them in order while he asked her whatever parenting question had come up recently. Yesterday he wanted to know if Henry was allowed chocolate milk. Then last night he wanted to confirm that their son did have a regular bed time.

“What’s up?”

“So Henry’s dating?” her ex asked, sounding a bit stressed at the very idea. “And he has a girlfriend?”

“Well, sort of dating,” Emma explained. “He’s been allowed to see her with a group of friend or on occasion Killian and I have taken them someplace. But he’s not allowed to date her alone or something. Why? Is he wanting to take Violet to a movie or something?”

“He wanted advice about a gift for her. I put him off and said I’d have to think about it.” Neal chuckled nervously. “Is it wrong that I don’t really like thinking of our son being old enough to need this kind of advice? And is it wrong that I think you or your husband might be better at providing it?”

Emma clicked her tongue at the top of her mouth softly. Her thin pencil skirt made her sit more primly in the chair rather than curl up like she normally liked to do with her legs under her. “You’re pretty hard on yourself. I do seem to remember that you could be sort of romantic when you wanted. Not exactly Prince Charming, but you had your moments.”

She could hear the hesitation in his voice when he addressed her again. “Neal, out with it. What’s the
He sighed noisily. “Christmas,” he said, as if the one word was enough to explain his hesitation. In some ways it did. I wanted to see if I might take Henry to the Gold family dinner. I mean, if he wants to go and all. You and Killian are welcome to join us. I mean, it might be a little awkward with Killian and my papa, but it could…”

Emma leaned her chin on her fist and closed her eyes to imagine Killian sitting next to Mr. Gold and making small talk over a roasted goose. “Why don’t you take Henry to your dad’s for Christmas Eve dinner? Then drop him off afterward at our place. I wouldn’t want to interfere with your time with him and I know he’d like to spend some of the holiday with you.”

“You don’t mind?” Neal asked. “You don’t already have plans?”

“A few friends are coming over,” Emma admitted, “but it’s fine. He sees my friends all the time anyway. Henry will probably have fun getting some one on one time with you and your family. Let’s let him decide though.”

“Thanks, Em,” he said, sounding genuinely grateful. “I meant to ask earlier. Is Killian doing okay? Healing and all that?”

“Much better. And thanks for keeping Henry a few extra nights. I know he’s been enjoying his time there.”

As soon as she disconnected the call, Emma hurried to Regina’s office, knowing that the head of the label was not quite so flexible in her time frame as she had indicated. Knocking politely, she entered at the dark haired woman’s gesture. “I sent those approved invoices to payables with my signature and an explanation of that one charge. The contracts for that brother and sister duo and the Lost Boys area down in legal for one final vetting. And I spoke to Elsa this morning about getting some publicity for her with that charity work she’s doing with Liam at the food bank. She’s up for having a crew get some stills and b-roll of them stuffing bags and organizing pantries.” Emma sat perched on the seat hoping that her boss’s list of tasks did not include anything she had forgotten.

“That was quite concise, but not exactly what I was looking to ask you about. I spoke with Elsa just a few days ago. Now that this stalker mess is over with and all is good, I was hoping to persuade her to reconsider the tour.”

Emma shifted in the uncomfortable seat. “I suppose that’s up to her. I know she wants to be near her sister when the baby comes…”

“Yes, yes,” Regina said, grimacing. She recrossed her legs under the glass desk that Emma was sure was simply to show them off to the male clientele. “I spoke with her about that and came up with a new solution. I don’t normally involve myself in the arts of New York so much, but I got a call from an old friend of mine who is producing a show on Broadway. She thinks that Elsa might be just the woman for the role. You were a little busy so I approached her and gave her a copy of the script and some of the tracks they want her to sing. She said she’d think it over, but…”

“She hasn’t gotten back to you?” Emma said, fighting back the urge to remind Regina that Elsa was her friend and client. She should have at least been briefed on the offer.

“No, and she seemed reluctant to do so without you giving your blessing. So see that she makes a decision on that within 48 hours, okay? Speaking of which, you haven’t mentioned the status on that sale of your husband’s song? He did sign didn’t he?”
Emma frowned, the feeling of being boxed into her job rearing its head. “I’ll speak to Elsa, but as far as the song goes, that’s not really something that falls under this label. The song is Killian’s work and he’s under no obligation to anyone.”

“The staff found the song on your computer? Your work computer?” Regina raised her hand to point at her own monitor. “They would not have allowed it to have been heard outside this label otherwise.”

Emma lifted her chin. “They found it on my iPod. It was there with a few other tracks I listen to when I work out, including a little 80s rock, some Kelly Clarkson, some Beyonce, some Michael Jackson…Are you going to claim those songs too?”

Extending her hands out in a palms up gesture, Regina gave her best impression of contrition. “I’m simply saying that the song appeared to me to be in the company’s library and therefore part of our collection. If I’m wrong, I will of course reconsider my position. But you should also know that I don’t find it appropriate that you would spend your work time peddling songs to other labels and artists from other labels. There is brand loyalty expected in your job.”

“I’ll think about that.”

***AAA***

Elsa sat in the booth absently stirring her drink as people came in and out from the bitter cold to order food and occasionally talk amongst themselves. With the exception of the occasional refill or question about food for her, she was left alone to flip through the pages that Regina had supplied her just a few days before. It wasn’t in her nature to keep secrets from Liam or even Emma, but so far she had told no one of the offer. Maybe there was nothing to tell, she said to herself as she watched the words on the page swim in front of her. It was just an audition and there was no real reason she had to believe she would get the part.

It might have been quieter to read in the comfort of the condo, but Liam was there trying to get a bit of sleep before his evening shift and any visits he planned with Killian. She did not want to play the what if game with him, as she wasn’t even sure how she felt about the prospect yet.

She attempted to read the first scene of the second act again when she felt the cool wind of an open door hit her. While that had been happening all morning, she knew somehow it was different this time and looked up to see a tense face looking back at her. Emma was standing there with people darting past her to get back to work. Without saying a word, the blonde woman grabbed a menu off the counter, pointed out her order to the server near the register and then walked calmly over to Elsa’s booth.

Sliding onto the opposite bench, Emma used one hand to slide the script away and looked at it somewhat suspiciously. “Broadway?”

Elsa crossed her arms in front of her and rested them on the table. “Eventually? Maybe? It’s a long shot, I guess. Out of town start in Boston and then we’ll see. It wasn’t my…”

“Regina told me this morning. Said you haven’t given her an answer. Not trying to pry, but I would kind of like to know what’s going on in that head of yours. So care to explain?”

Elsa pushed at her soft lavender sleeves on the light sweater she was wearing. Her cheeks were pink from the intermittent bouts of cold air rushing inside and her long tapered fingers were curled like fists. “Emma, I’m not trying to keep anything from people. It’s just a strange opportunity and I’d rather know how I feel about it before I put it out there.”
Nodding, Emma pushed the script back in her direction. “Well, that was fine until Regina decided I needed to pry your decision out of you.”

Elsa closed pages together and placed her hands on top of them. “Did I ever tell you about the first time I sang with my sister? I don’t mean at home. I’m talking about on stage with people watching?”

Emma shook her head.

“Anna was barely in elementary school. She was more interested in playing princess than singing a song. Anyway, it was an awards banquet at a client of my father. The entertainment got stuck on the highway and were running late. So they basically called up anyone with even one bit of talent. My mom pushed us to do it because dad’s friends thought it would be cute. We did it a lot over the years, but always together.”

“And now Anna is wanting to take time to be a mom and not a singer?” Emma asked as her order was slid in front of her. “So you want to try something new?”

“I’ve been trying, Emma. I really have. I get on that stage though and it feels weird to sing when she’s not beside me. And I hate that I’m getting compliments and awards when she’s not there too. It feels unfair to her. And I feel…exposed. I don’t really like it.” Elsa gave her drink one more stir and then sipped. It had gone from steaming hot to luke warm, but she stirred it anyway. “Regina gave me this script and I refused at first. But then she made me think about it. And there is something about it. I would be on stage, but I wouldn’t be alone. And I wouldn’t be me. I’d be a character. I would have something between me and the rest of the world.”

Emma broke off a little bit of her grilled cheese and dipped it in the soup. “Maybe that’s a good thing.”

Shrugging, Elsa looked down at the script. “Maybe. And it wouldn’t be like touring. I’d perform in Boston and then maybe New York. I could drive back here more often. I could see Liam, Anna, and the baby. I wouldn’t be away so much.”

“It sounds like you do know what you want to do,” Emma noted. “There are enough people out there who are going to tell you who you are. I won’t stand in your way as one of them.”

Elsa smiled tentatively. “You wouldn’t hate me? If I do this? You wouldn’t hate me because you spent so much time and energy on my career?”

“No, but I will totally be angry if we don’t get front row seats for opening night.”

***AAA***

Killian’s head fell back against the back of the sofa, his eyes heavy as he listened to the wind outside the crackle of the fire in the fireplace. While he was well on the mend and growing stronger each day, his patience was paper thin after all the nursing and mollycoddling that his brother and wife were insistent upon as part of his recovery. They practically spoon fed him each meal. If he had not protested so vehemently, they might have even given him a sponge bath rather than allowed him to shower after he stood up too quickly and had to check his balance.

“You should go to bed,” Emma said softly in response to his grunted attempt at repositioning himself. “I’ll clean up.”

With just a few days before Christmas, the house was never empty. That evening had been no exception when Liam and Elsa stopped by for dinner. Thankfully the conversation topic was not Killian’s health, the guys’ father, or even the upcoming holiday. Instead, Elsa dropped the news on
Liam about the audition. He had been more than supportive of the idea, calling her a star and promising that he was going to be proud no matter how it turned out. Killian had his own pride in watching his brother’s reaction.

“I feel as though I have already slept most of the day away,” Killian complained, flexing his sock covered feet to return the circulation. “It’s no wonder after that meal the Widow Lucas sent over. She does realize that I am but one man, correct?”

“We’ve been having a lot of company lately,” Emma remarked, taking a swipe at the counter. She had made it through a whole day of work, kicking off her heels and the constricting business suit in exchange for an oversized sweater and jeans. Thick socks that matched absolutely nothing were on her feet and her hair was pinned haphazardly in a twist atop her head. “People are worried about you.”

“Something I’m grateful for, love, but I’d be more grateful for a bit of alone time with my wife. Do you think she might come sit here with me?” His smile was playful as she dropped the sponge in the sink and pretended to think about his invitation. “I promise only good things.”

“Well, if you promise,” she said, swaying her hips a bit as she walked. “You know we probably won’t be alone long. Your brother’s only working until 1. I forgot to wrestle that key off him.”

“And I’ve already told him that I expect him to return home rather than here. I appreciate all the help, but I am not in the mood or frame of mind to entertain much more.”

“Are we wearing you out? I can go change the sheets on the bed and then you can get some sleep. Maybe Neal can keep Henry for a few more days? He’s already staying there tomorrow night, so I’m sure he wouldn’t mind. And I’ll get Ruby to limit the drop offs to…”

He lifted her hand that she was using to count off all the things she could change and kissed first the wrist and then her palm. “No, love, I’m declaring myself well. The doctor should clear me to drive soon and we’ve got Christmas coming up in just a few days. I’m tired of being the patient. I want to spend this time with you and Henry, not a bunch of well-wishers who mean well but are…”

“Annoying?” Emma supplied, smiling as he clasped her hand tighter in his.

“I was thinking of stronger words, but we shall go with that. In the meantime, you are to go to work tomorrow and not call to check on me at all. You may call as often as you like to tell me you miss me. And you may text me dirty little thoughts you have. But no asking if I have eaten, slept, or anything else of the nursing sort. And you will not visit Granny’s to pick up dinner, nor will you have it delivered. Instead, you will come home tomorrow evening to a grand meal, prepared by your loving husband. You will do nothing more strenuous that dress yourself in some sexy little frock and make frivolous conversation with me over the meal. And when you declare it is time for bed…”

“You haven’t been cleared for that,” Emma said sternly, pressing her lips together. “But as for a romantic dinner with my husband? I can definitely go for that. And maybe kissing in front of the fireplace? Or if we get really daring, we might go outside and enjoy the stars?”

“Sounds divine.” He brushed his lips against her temple. “And as for the cleaning, I will take care of it in the morning. For now, I just want to enjoy some time with you.” She must have agreed, as he threw her legs over his and burrowed into his side. “I feel as though we haven’t had a proper reunion.”

Their lips were just about to meet when the song of their doorbell interrupted them cheerfully. With a single eyebrow arched, he kept his arm around Emma and protested, “Ignore it.”
“If it’s your brother, he’ll use his key. That was probably just a warning.” Emma said, craning her neck back to see if she could make out the shadow on the other side of the glass.

“We should ask for that back,” Killian grumbled. “Besides, he’d already be in here if it was him. I’m guessing Mary Margaret with more samples for the classrooms and suggestions for movie night with you, love.”

“Nope,” Emma said, swinging her legs off of her husband. “I’m going with Liam. And if not him, Anna. She was craving chocolate today. I bet she’s stopping by to see if we have any.”

Rubbing his hand under his jaw, Killian scowled. “When we met, love, you told me you were a loner. I believe you lied. You have far too many friends to be the loner you represented yourself to be.”

Emma stuck her tongue out at him and scurried over to the door as the tune rang out again. Her socks skidded on the slick floor. “Coming!”

Opening the door without heeding Killian’s warning to ask who it was first, Emma stifled a laugh that they were both wrong in their assessment. Standing bundled on the front porch was Granny, her form made rounder with the thick coat, scarf, sweater, and other layers she wore as she juggled to large bags in either hand.

“Ruby’s off on a date with that Graham and I wanted to get these to you before they grew stale,” the woman said, peering over the rims of her glasses she normally wore for reading only. “I hope I didn’t wake you.”

“Not at all,” Emma said, relieving her of the load in her right hand and ushering her inside. “We were talking about going to bed, but hadn’t made it off the couch yet.” Emma dropped the bags onto the granite counter and began to paw through the containers of homemade soup, meatloaf, lasagna, vegetables, and bread that was still warm through the wrappings. In the other bags Granny held were cakes and pies that could have filled a display counter. It was way too much, which Emma immediately expressed, along with a hug to the woman who was standing there between the kitchen and living area still bundled up.

“You are too kind to us, Mrs. Lucas,” Killian chimed in, pulling himself up to standing. Despite his pajama pants and long sleeve soft shirt, he stood so solidly and formally in the woman’s presence that Emma thought he might actually salute her. “And with all the visitors we have had since my release, I’d say the food will not go to waste. They are friendly but hungry crowd.”

Looking rather pleased, the widow smiled brightly and adjusted her scarf. “I know it is too much, but I can’t help myself sometimes. And I can’t have you getting sick because you didn’t have the right sort of stuff. That chicken tortilla soup is my own special recipe. It’s spicy enough to knock any of the bad stuff right out of you. Not like that bland stuff you English make.”

The comment left Killian appearing completely affronted and Emma covering her mouth to avoid laughing. “Thank you,” Killian finally managed to say. “Emma did complain that my brother’s cooking was like an old sock left out in the rain.”

Emma began to sort the containers and move them to the almost full refrigerator. “That’s because it was. I don’t know how the man could make something with bacon and cheese bland, but he did. Even if Killian is still too English to know the difference, Henry and I will appreciate this food, Granny.”

The woman beamed at the compliment and began to walk toward the door, ignoring Killian’s
suggestion that she remove her coat and sit a while. “No, no, no,” she said when Emma repeated the plea. “I’ve got breakfast shift coming up and that means I’ve got a lot of eggs to crack and bacon to fry. You two need some time alone and not entertaining an old woman like me. But you call me if you need anything else…anything at all."

They managed to wait until her car was rumbling away before they both burst into laughter and Emma told him that she guessed he didn’t have to cook that romantic dinner after all.

A/N: Thank you all for reading. There’s one more chapter left to go.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!