Summary

When the *Daily Star* prints a false story about wealthy heiress Emma Swan, accusing her of stealing another woman’s girlfriend, the *Star*’s managing editor Helena Wells drops everything, including a Valentine’s Day date with her girlfriend Myka. When Emma sues the paper for libel and demands an ungodly amount of money, Helena brings in Regina Mills, a former *Star* reporter and libel suit specialist. Together, they hatch a plan to get Emma to drop the libel suit: Regina acquires a fake wife and goes after Emma to make her look like the homewrecker the *Star* called her. What could possibly go wrong?

Notes

**Author's note:**
This is completely AU: my Swan Queen / Bering & Wells take on my favorite movie, *Libeled Lady* (1936). I’m going to stay pretty close to the movie plot but of course there will be changes as I adapt it to my OTPs and our world (but I’ll admit it’ll still be an old-fashioned modern world). There’s no magic, no artifacts, just four women in a screwball comedy that might or might not translate to the written word. I just felt the need for something lighthearted after all the angst and pain that both fandoms have to endure through the shows. Plus, this was mainly an exercise to get over my writer’s block. It worked.

**Disclaimer:** I don’t own any recognizable characters, and this time I don’t even own most of
the plot. This is a writing exercise – a variation on a theme, if you will. The original movie was written by Maurine Dallas Watkins, Howard Emmett Rogers, and George Oppenheimer, based on a story by Wallace Sullivan. I bow to those four.
Chapter 1: The Big Mistake

Helena Wells was smiling at her reflection in the mirror as she was getting ready for her date with Myka Bering. *Dapper. Well, she does love me in suits.* It was Valentine’s Day, and she had something special planned for her girlfriend.

She scowled when her phone rang. “Wells.”

“You gotta come in straight away, boss,” her second-in-command yelled.

“Calm down, Pete,” she said as she touched up her lipstick. *Myka’s going to like that color,* she thought. And she was hopefully going to enjoy seeing it all over Myka’s body later. “What’s going on?”

“We ran a story,” he began. “A scoop about Emma Swan … that turned out to be wrong.”

At the name, dread spread like tendrils through Helena’s stomach. “What did the story say?”

Pete hesitated for a moment. “Well, somebody called it in from London and it sounded interesting enough, so Steve put it up. He must have been distracted or something …”

Helena growled. “What did we say about Swan?”

“We basically called her a lesbian homewrecker, boss,” Pete admitted. “The story is about how she was seen in a London gay club, dancing intimately with somebody else’s girlfriend and kissing her outside. Then it say she got into a fight with the woman’s girlfriend.”

“Were there pictures to corroborate the story at least?”

“Yes, there are pictures, but …”

“What’s the problem then? If she can’t keep her own secrets, it’s not our fault—”

“Boss,” Pete interrupted. “The photos were not taken at a gay club. They were taken at a fancy restaurant …”

“Okay, that’s not ideal, but maybe we can work around—”

“… and the person she was kissing turned out to be a dude with a ponytail. Plus, the kiss looks more like a friendly peck than anything else. And there was no fight.”

“Why the hell would Steve even touch that story?” Helena closed her eyes with a sigh. “Please tell me you already took it off the website.”

“As soon as I saw the photos, yes,” Pete said, “but unfortunately the print edition was running a bit empty tonight, so it ended up in there as well.”

“Of course,” Helena muttered sarcastically. “Buried somewhere in the middle, in a tiny column towards the end, I hope?”

“Front page header, with a huge photo of Swan.” Pete sounded like he was speaking at a funeral, and he might as well have been.
“I’m coming in,” Helena said. “Stop the press, stop all deliveries, call any trucks that have already gone out, call the shops on that delivery route and tell them not to sell any papers. Tell them we have a more important lead story! We need to get every single one of the papers back! And you better start praying none of her people have seen it yet! I’ll be there in twenty.”

Seventeen minutes and thirty-three seconds later Helena Wells stormed into the bullpen at the Daily Star. "What the hell is wrong with you all? I take one afternoon off and you try to kill the paper?"

Steve looked at her like a kicked puppy. "Let me explain--"

Helena continued as if he hadn't spoken. "I know you're still new in this business, but I thought your nose was better than that. Where was your nose, Jinks?"

"My n-nose?"

"Your nose, Steve," Helena repeated, pacing around the desks scattered in the bullpen. "This story reeks of alcohol, and quite a lot of it, too."

Steve looked at Pete, his face slightly confused.

"Whoever called it in was drunk or high ..." Pete muttered to Steve, but Helena heard him.

"Or called us with a fake story on purpose," Helena continued, still pacing. "Why didn't you double-check that story before putting it up and printing it on the front page of the evening edition?" Her voice got progressively louder as she stopped in front of Steve and stared at him.

Steve blushed. "Time was running out and we didn't have anything exciting for the front page," he explained. "And I thought it would be nice since the boss hates Swan’s father so much."

"Yes, and her father hates us!" Helena exploded. "If he could, he'd blow us up, and you hand him dynamite." Helena ran her hands through her hair, messing it up and leaving her looking gorgeously rumpled. "The one woman that we should handle with kid gloves," she muttered, "and you spread her name all over the front page!"

A young woman with red hair, liberally streaked with blue strands, stormed into the bullpen, interrupting Helena mid-rant. Helena whirled around "What?"

The girl jumped back at the tone. "Eek!"

"Sorry, Claudia," Helena said through gritted teeth, not having the patience or the inclination to be overly friendly at this point. She was missing dinner with Myka for this clusterfuck. Oh God, Myka! I didn't even call her to tell her that something had come up! Oh, hell! She took a deep breath and focused on Claudia. "What's up?"

Claudia swallowed. "What do we use for a headline?"

"Headline?"

"Yeah, to replace the one that just got kicked. We need to print something."

"I don't care," Helena replied distractedly, her focus already pulled back to the much bigger problem at hand. "War threatens the Middle East!"

Claudia nodded. "Which country?"
"I repeat: I don’t care," Helena glared at Claudia, but then smiled slightly to make the young woman feel better. She did like the smart redhead a lot. "Flip a coin," she added in a softer tone. "In that part of the world, you won't be wrong."

Claudia nodded again. "Okay, boss." She turned to go, but stopped and turned around. "Oh, and the big kahuna is here. She wants you right away."

"Does she want me or my job?" Helena sighed, and Pete slapped her on the shoulder in silent commiseration as Claudia shrugged and left. "I need a drink."

"There's a fresh bottle in your bottom drawer," Pete said as he gently pushed her towards her small office. "Figured you might need it today."

Helena sent him a grateful smile as she settled behind her desk and pulled out the bottle of whisky from the drawer. She poured herself a generous helping and took a sip, shaking her head at the mess her people had made. "Jesus Fucking Christ," she muttered. Well, time to call Myka and grovel.

She had just started dialing her lover's number when her door was opened forcefully. "Why am I not surprised to find you here at your desk, drink in hand?" the newcomer asked acerbically.

Helena looked up in shock. "What are you doing here, Myka?" She stood and walked around her desk. "It’s good to see you.” She cringed knowing full well that Myka was pissed at her, and that she deserved it.

“What am I doing here?” Myka asked incredulously. “What are you doing here?”

“We’re having a crisis and I needed--”

“You _needed_ to be at Fontanello’s 30 minutes ago, Helena Wells,” Myka interrupted angrily. “You invited me, remember? You insisted on a fancy date, remember? So why am I standing here in your office looking--”

“Looking like a million dollars, darling.” And Myka did, Helena thought and sent another curse in the direction of her incompetent staff. “You look absolutely ravishing, darling, and believe me I’d much rather be having dinner with you than take care of other people’s mess.” She said the last bit loud enough for Pete and Steve to cringe visibly. “I’m so sorry I didn’t even have time to call you,” she continued much more quietly. “Wait, how did you know where I was anyway?”

Myka snorted. “How long have we known each other? You practically live here. There was ever only one place I’d find you.” She paused. “Besides, Pete called me.”

_of course._ Helena glared at Pete who had the decency to shrug apologetically.

Myka’s face got serious. “You can’t keep doing this to me.”

“What are you saying, darling?”

“Don’t darling me, H.G.,” Myka growled. “We’ve been dating for two years and the paper always comes first. We plan a trip to Colorado so you can meet my parents, there’s a fire somewhere. We plan a weekend away, there’s a kidnapping that absolutely can’t take place without you manning your desk. So, what’s it this time? A cat caught in a tree? A runaway dog? Some celeb getting a nose job?"

Helena raised her hands in surrender, surprised by the resignation in Myka’s voice. “It’s really serious this time, Myka,” she tried to explain. “The paper made a terrible mistake while I was gone to
get ready for our date.” She pointed towards her own body, drawing attention to the fine dark suit she was wearing especially for Myka. “I wanted tonight to be special, but Pete and Steve had to call me in.”

“Helena, I don’t need special,” Myka said quietly. “We could have a sandwich in the cafeteria downstairs, for all I care.” She sighed. “I just need to know I rank somewhere on your list of priorities.”

Helena tried to hug Myka but was pushed away. “I’m sorry, Myka. I assure you that you rank very highly on my list of priorities.”

“Okay then. Come have dinner with me. Now.”

“I’d love to, darling, but I don’t have the ti—”

“It’s not a trip to Paris, H.G., it’s a 15-minute dinner in the cafeteria.”

“Myka … please understand. I can’t,” Helena pleaded. “The paper is facing a libel suit and that’s some serious trouble. It could cost us the paper.”

“Well, you’re facing some serious trouble in your personal life, too,” Myka said dejectedly. “ Seriously, H.G., if you don’t want to be with me, just say so, okay?”

Helena winced at the repeated use of her initials. Myka only called her that when she was particularly mad. “I love you, Myka, and I want to be with you,” Helena promised, trying to placate her irate lover, as her hand unconsciously wandered into her pants pocket and curled around the box in there. Now was so not the time or place for this, but she also didn’t want to lose Myka over a missed dinner. She took one more look at Myka’s thunderous expression and made up her mind.

She pulled out the box, which was still mostly hidden in her hand. “In fact, the reason why I made reservations at Fontanello’s tonight was because I wanted to ask you something … something very important.” She dropped to one knee in front of Myka and held out the box, ignoring the stares she could feel through her office windows from everyone in the bullpen. “I wanted to ask you for your hand in marriage, Myka.” She swallowed. “Will you marry me?”

Myka stared at the little blue velvet box. “Are you serious right now?” she asked. Then she snorted. “Of course you are. You blow me off time and time again, then you stand me up on Valentine’s Day, and now you’re telling me you want to marry me?”

Helena had a sinking feeling in her stomach. This was not going well, but then again she had no right to expect it would. “I am.” She tried to keep her voice steady. “Myka, I know you think I’m already married to my work and I know I don’t deserve you, but I love you and you make me happy, and I’d like the chance to make you happy, too.”

“You’re not off to a promising start, H.G.” Myka watched her lover squirm in front of her for a few more moments before she relented somewhat. “Are you willing to rethink your priorities?”

Helena nodded eagerly, trying to ignore the ache that was starting to settle into her knee. “As soon as this crisis is averted, I’ll take you on a long vacation. Just the two of us, somewhere warm and tropical where clothing is optional.”

“Are you going to come downstairs with me now and eat something?”

Helena sneaked a look at the big wall clock in the bullpen. Maybe she could spare a few minutes. “Yes.”
Myka thought for a few moments, but the fact was that she loved Helena and probably always would. At least the Helena that she could be when she wasn’t entirely focused on working. And admittedly, her own career sometimes got in the way as well when a case kept her at work far longer than planned. She probably had canceled dinner plans just as often as Helena had, if she had to be honest. She sighed. “In that case, I guess I’ll m--”

She was interrupted by an imposing woman who suddenly showed up behind her in the doorway. “Didn’t they tell you I wanted to see you?” the older woman asked imperiously, completely ignoring Myka.

Helena jumped up, wincing slightly at her aching knee. “Mrs. Frederic,” she greeted the newcomer.

“What is this, Ms. Wells?” Mrs. Frederic asked. “Do I own a paper or a dating service?”

“Mrs. Frederic,” Helena introduced. “My future wife, Myka Bering.”

Myka managed to simultaneously snort at her girlfriend and nod politely at Mrs. Frederic. Well, that explains some things, she thought, looking at the older woman. I’d probably do her bidding, too, if she looked at me like that. She shivered a little and wondered if somebody had suddenly cranked up the air-condition in the building.

Mrs. Frederic looked between Helena and Myka in their evening finery. “Nonsense,” she dismissed them. “I’ll be in my office. You have two minutes to get rid of her.”

Myka whirled on her heels, fury written all over her, but Mrs. Frederic was already gone. Helena wrapped an arm around her girlfriend from behind. “Easy, Myka,” she tried to placate her. “That’s the owner of the paper.”

“I don’t care who she is,” Myka replied, fuming. “Nobody just dismisses me like that.”

“Mrs. Frederic is ... unique,” Helena whispered. “She lives and breathes this paper, it’s all she cares about. Ignore her, please.”

“This explains so much,” Myka muttered.

“What do you mean?”

Myka shook her head. “Never mind.”

Helena turned Myka around so they faced each other. “I really need to go talk to her now,” she said. Myka could hear in her tone that she really didn’t want to, which was why she was almost ready to forgive her. “Will you wear my ring?” Helena asked, looking up at Myka with a small smile. She opened the box and took out the platinum band.


Helena breathed a slow sigh of relief. “It’s not even a tenth as gorgeous as you are, darling,” she muttered around the lump in her throat. “I love you.” She pulled Myka closer and pressed her lips softly against Myka’s. “So much.” She rested her forehead against her lover’s.

“I love you, too,” Myka sighed. “But things need to change, okay? From both of us.”

Helena nodded against Myka’s forehead. “I promise.”
“I believe you,” Myka said and kissed Helena again. “Now go see that dragon. Call me when you can.”
Mrs. Frederic was speaking into the intercom on her desk when Helena entered her office without knocking. She looked around the room as she waited for her boss to be ready for her, only half listening to what was being said. Helena had always liked the office with its old-fashioned decor, largely unchanged from the early days of the newspaper that had been founded by Mrs. Frederic’s grandfather in the 1920s. Dark wood panels and tall bookcases lined three walls, while the fourth wall had huge windows that looked out onto Midtown and towards the Empire State Building.

Mrs. Frederic was leaning over the front of her desk, her pink and beige tweed costume looking a little more rumpled than normal. Helena was surprised to see that there was even an unruly strand of hair that had dared to escape the intricate knot at the back of the imposing woman’s head. “Listen, I just want to talk to David Nolan,” she demanded into the intercom. “It can’t be that difficult to reach the man.” With a sigh she straightened and turned to face Helena.

“This is terrible, Ms. Wells,” she said. “A mistake like that can ruin us.”

“What do the lawyers say?” Helena asked.

Mrs. Frederic shrugged. “An open-and-shut case. Pure libel and slander,” she replied. “We don’t have a leg to stand on if they saw the paper or the website.”

“Let’s hope they didn’t then.”

The look on Mrs. Frederic’s face shut Helena up. Yeah, it was unlikely. The Nolans had connections everywhere in the city and were probably already preparing the lawsuit.

“And now I have to get on my knees to David Nolan,” Mrs. Frederic continued. “A man I’ve been fighting for ten years, never giving an inch.”

The intercom buzzed. “There’s a phone call for you on line one, Mrs. Frederic,” her secretary’s voice announced. “From London.”

Mrs. Frederic reached for the receiver, but Helena stopped her with a hand on her arm. “Wait a minute,” she said urgently. “Let me talk to them. You know how they hate you.” She shrugged. “I’ll take all the blame ... you know nothing, you’re utterly surprised by it all. And if I fail ...”

“You can’t,” Mrs. Frederic insisted.

“You tell him it was all a just a giant mistake and you’re going to fire the person responsible straight away.” She pointed at herself. “Lattimer said only 50 of the papers even got out, so chances are they don’t have one.”

Mrs. Frederic nodded and Helena picked up the receiver. “Hello? Hello, Mr. Nolan? This is Helena Wells of the Daily Star in New York. You know the Star, Mr. Nolan? –Oh, I’m sorry you feel that way about us, Mr. Nolan. – Yes, I realize that we’ve fought in the past but it’s always been a good, clean fight. – Why we tried to reach you? Nothing serious, but the evening edition of the paper carried a little item about your daughter. It wasn’t serious at all, nothing really, but I just thought I’d call you ... Yes, exactly ... The spirit of fair play.” She gave Mrs. Frederic an encouraging look.

“I appreciate that spirit of fair play, Ms. Wells,” David Nolan said silkily, “but you see, my New York office faxed me a copy of your little item.”
Helena closed her eyes in dismay. “What?” she managed to ask weakly, just having to make sure she heard right.

“Yes, indeed,” David Nolan confirmed her fears. “It’s hardly what I’d call innocent but it’s certainly typical of Irene Frederic and everything her paper stands for.”

“Mr. Nolan, I’m...”

“I’m not interested, Ms. Wells. You can discuss further matters with my attorney. Hold on.” With that he was gone and Helena was left waiting for the attorney to come on.

Helena slumped her shoulders and covered the mouthpiece. “They’ve seen it,” she whispered.

Mrs. Frederic closed her eyes and shook her head sadly, but before she could say anything, she saw Helena straighten her posture again.

“Yes, hello?”

“Hello,” an older female voice said in a distant, even tone. “This is Eugenia Lucas, of Lucas, Lucas, and Wolf. We’re filing suit immediately through our New York office. You’ll receive the papers tomorrow.”

Suddenly another woman’s voice could be heard in the background, albeit a little muffled. Helena assumed it was Emma Swan herself. “Just a minute, Granny,” the woman said. “Don’t forget to mention the amount we’re suing for. That should interest them.”

Helena could hear the smirk in the voice and knew things were going to get very, very bad. “I’m listening,” she said quietly. There was nothing else to say.

“You might inform your Mrs. Frederic,” the attorney took over, “that Ms. Swan is asking damages for 80 million dollars. Goodbye.”

Helena dropped the receiver, jaw slack from disbelief.

“80 million dollars,” Mrs. Frederic breathed out as she slumped into her chair, looking as shocked as Helena had ever seen her.

“She’s insane,” Helena muttered. “Certifiable. There never has been a libel suit for 80 million.” She started pacing around the office. “There isn’t that much money in the world. She already has all the money in the world.”

“It’s not money they’re after,” Mrs. Frederic reminded Helena. “It’s the paper. It’s me.” She looked at the evening edition on her desk and Helena finally saw the headline for the first time. *Dyke drama: Emma Swan steals other woman’s girl*, it read in big, bold letters. *Cat fight with girl’s SO ensues*, was the teaser in smaller print. Helena winced, horrified, and wondered who had come up with that header. Nolan hadn’t been entirely wrong about the paper. They did print stuff like this a lot. It was what sold a lot of copies, after all.

“For ten years, I’ve fought Nolan.” Mrs. Frederic’s voice pulled Helena from her thoughts. “Kept him out of the senate and when they wanted to make him ambassador, I stopped that, too.”

“80 million dollars,” Helena muttered again, still unable to believe it.

“It’s their chance to strike back,” Mrs. Frederic said resignedly, “and they’re taking it with both hands. The paper won’t survive this, not with that kind of money at stake.”
“That’s not going to happen,” Helena protested. “We haven’t even started to fight yet. We’ve been sued before, even big suits.”

“Yes, but they were after money,” Mrs. Frederic pointed out. “They were all glad to settle. The Nolans don’t need or even want our money. They want the paper gone.”

“Swan will settle, too, when we get through with her,” Helena exclaimed. “Remember the Farrell girl? That was open-and-shut, too, until we started digging.”

“You can’t do that here,” Mrs. Frederic said quietly. “There’s never been a word of scandal about Emma Swan.”

“Not yet, but she’s no saint ... she’s human,” Helena said with a small grin. “And I’m gonna throw a woman at her.”

“You're not suggesting a frame?”

“Nah ... but we have to get to Ms. Swan,” Helena explained, “and I'm going to bring in the best woman we ever had for that kind of job.”

“Who's that?”

“A lady that will beat anybody in the world from Mandela to Mirren,” Helena replied. “Regina Mills.”

“Regina Mills? Of course!” Mrs. Frederic nodded as enthusiastically as someone like her could. “But you fired her, the best woman we ever had on libel. You admit she was the best, and you fired her.”

“Yes,” Helena admitted. “And I'd do it again. Insufferable know-it-all, that woman. She tried to run the paper ... thought she knew more about it than I did.”

Mrs. Frederic gave Helena a shrewd look over her glasses. “And she was right.”

Helena stared at her boss for a moment, but then she simply shrugged. It was probably true. “She's the only woman who can swing this case,” she begrudgingly admitted. Emma Swan won't know what hit her.

“Get her back!” Mrs. Frederic’s voice was pure steel as her fighting spirit was reawakened.

“I'll have her here in an hour,” Helena promised.

★★★★

Some promises, Helena realized after a few unsuccessful hours, were hard to keep. Chasing down Regina Mills was much more difficult than anticipated as the woman seemingly had turned into a phantom since she had left the Daily Star. So far, Helena had chased her to various other papers from Chicago to San Francisco to Los Angeles and now to Washington, DC.

“This is Adams of The Washington Chronicle.”


“Mills left here over a year ago, headed for Denver. Try the Denver Courier.”

Two minutes later, she heard. “Sure I remember Mills. She left Denver about six months ago, and the
boss’s wife almost followed her to Seattle.”

Seattle garnered no better result. “She worked here, yes, but only for a couple of weeks. A girl here got a Christmas card from Sydney, though.”

But there was no trace of Regina Mills in Sydney either. Helena slumped over, letting her head fall on her arms on the desk. She looked up as Pete came in. “I traced her to Sydney but that’s where the trail ends.”

“Maybe we should try Europe,” Pete said. “I could try London and Berlin.”

“Try anything,” Helena replied tiredly. “Just find her.”

“Maybe some jealous husband or girlfriend finally caught up to her,” Pete remarked casually. “Maybe she’s dead.”

Helena grimaced. “It would be just like her to die at a time like this.” The phone rang, and she shook her head vigorously, trying to wake up. “Hello?” she barked into the phone.

“Just making sure you’re still where I thought you’d be at 2 in the morning,” Myka said with a smirk.

“Hello, Myka.” Helena’s voice softened instantly. “Yeah, I’m still here. This crisis has now turned into a major catastrophe, and I can’t find the one person who could help us. We’ve been trying all night.”

“Anything I can do?”

Helena smiled. “Go back to sleep, darling. At least one of us should get a decent night’s rest.”

“So I’m guessing I should put away this lovely, almost see-through, black lace negligee I’m currently wearing, and not wait up for you?”

Helena felt all the moisture in her mouth head to body parts further south at the image. “You’re cruel, you know that?” she croaked.

“Revenge, sweetie, is a dish best served cold,” Myka replied with a laugh. “Or in the middle of the night.”

“God, I wish I could be with you right now.” Helena groaned at the thought of having to stay here while Myka was lying in her bed dressed like sex on long, long legs. “I love you, you know that, right?”

Pete smirked at her tortured face, but refrained from commenting.

“Try to take a nap, okay?” Myka said. “Nothing can be this important.”

“Unfortunately, this is,” Helena replied with a sigh, “but I’ll see what I can do. Thank you for calling, darling.”

“I do love you,” Myka said simply as if that explained everything, and maybe it did ... her forgiveness, her willingness to deal with Helena’s obsession with work, the lack of free time they both had to endure all the time. “I’ll be thinking of you while I’m lying here helping myself relax enough to fall asleep.”

With that, she hung up, leaving Helena to stare at the receiver in her hand for a good minute, her mind playing vibrant images of Myka and how exactly she might be helping herself to relax. She
moaned before she could stop herself, which got her a curious look from Pete.

“You okay?” he asked with a cheeky grin. “You look a little ... flustered.”

Helena finally managed to put the receiver on the cradle and shake herself out of her thoughts. “I’m fine,” she said huskily. “Just need more coffee.”

She was still saying the same thing a few hours later. Coffee had helped her through many nights, and it was doing its job now. She yawned when Pete came into her office once more, Claudia in tow.

“I had Claudia pick up something to change into from your apartment. You can’t keep wearing that,” Pete commented, pointing at Helena’s rumpled suit.

“Thanks,” Helena mumbled as she shrugged out of her shirt and pulled a fresh one from the pile of clothes Claudia had put on her desk. “Much better already,” she said. “Thank you, Claude.”

“No problem,” Claudia said, hastily turning away from the sight of Helena still buttoning her new shirt. She decided to focus on opening the blinds instead ... the streets outside were a much safer view. When she turned back around, Helena had vanished into the small locker-sized en-suite bathroom, and she breathed a sigh of relief.

“So, where’re we at, boss?” Pete asked loudly enough for Helena to hear him next door.

“Well, one trail leads to Berlin, the other one to Beijing of all places,” Helena replied. “Both report the whereabouts of Regina Mills unknown.” A moment later her head poked into the office. “Pete, call that detective agency we use sometimes, see if they can find her.”

Claudia had perked up at the name. “You’re looking for Regina Mills?” she asked. “The one who used to work here?”

Now Helena’s whole body reappeared from the en suite, dressed in fresh clothes. “Yeah. Why?” She looked up from buttoning her vest.

“I know where she is,” Claudia replied quickly.

“What?!” Pete and Helena yelled simultaneously.

“Sure,” Claudia confirmed. “We’re sort of friends. Just last week, she gave me 200 bucks for my brother. He--”

“What’s her address?” Helena interrupted urgently, suddenly more awake than she had felt in days.

“She’s staying at the Grand Plaza.”

“The Grand Pl- ... the one on 5th Avenue?” Helena asked with a frown. “Never mind, that can’t be the Mills we want.”

“Don’t you mean the Regina Mills who always beat you at poker?”

Helena grumbled. “That’s her all right.” She perked up. “Pete, tell everyone to stop searching. She was hiding right under our noses the whole time.”

“Except she wasn’t hiding,” Claudia remarked, a little more confident now that she had helped solve the mystery ... and Helena was dressed.
“Details, details,” Helena replied with a chuckle.

“Want me to go get her?” Pete asked.

Helena shook her head. “No, I want to talk to her personally, feel her out. If she’s living at the Grand Plaza, she must have come into money, which doesn’t bode well for us.” She sighed. “Wish me luck.”
Regina Mills entered the lobby of the Grand Plaza in search of her morning coffee. She picked up her mail at the reception desk, dodging the desk clerk’s flirting with practiced ease. She turned away from the desk and opened the letter with the hotel logo first, knowing what she would likely find.

Ms. Mills,
Room 1164

Dear Madam, Your overdue account totals $12,461.72. Please arrange to settle this matter at your earliest convenience.

Yours very truly,
Frank Anderson
General Manager

Damn. That much already? Regina fanned herself with the letter before folding it up and shoving it into the pocket of her blazer. It was a good thing she was expecting a nice windfall soon, she thought as she made her way over to the restaurant. She smiled secretly to herself when she caught sight of Helena Wells entering the lobby from the corner of her eye, but continued on her way, counting to herself while she walked. Very soon indeed.

She’d counted to four when she felt someone poke her in the lower back. “Helena George Wells,” she said without turning around. “Still in the backstabbing business, I see.” Her voice was even, with just a hint of snark, which Helena tried to take as a good sign.

“I never stabbed you in the back, Regina,” she defended herself, trying to sound convincing. “And I want to ...” She paused. “After all, that was a long time ago, and we should--”

“Bury the hatchet? Or was it a knife?” Regina continued on her way through the lobby, exuding an air of indifference.

Helena stopped her with a hand on her arm. “Now listen, Mills, I didn't knife you.”

“No, you only tried to,” Regina agreed. “And I was quick enough to escape. before you could.”

“That was two years ago,” Helena conceded. “We should ...”

“Let bygones be bygones?” The tone was only mildly sarcastic.

“Yes, sure, that would be great. Whatever happened--”

“Is all over now,” Regina interrupted mildly. “Goodbye, H.G. It was nice to see you again.” She turned to the young man behind the newspaper stand in the lobby and gave him a brilliant smile. “Good morning, Henry. My usual, please.” Then she turned back to Helena, still an expression of polite indifference on her face. “Give my regards to everyone at the office.”

The young man handed her the New York Times with a beaming smile of his own. “Here you go, Ms. Mills.”
Regina smiled back at him, but continued talking to Helena. “Are you still at the Daily Star? Mrs. Frederic still not figured you out? Well, you'll get fired soon enough and then the Star could be a first-class paper.”

Helena was finding it very difficult to hold on to her composure, especially since Regina kept smiling at the paper boy while insulting her. She had enough of this. “Listen here, Regina. If you're ...” She saw Regina smirking just in time and stopped her tirade with a deep breath. Then she forced a conciliatory smile onto her face and changed the subject. “By the way, what are you doing for yourself these days, Regina?”

“I wrote a book not too long ago,” Regina replied dryly. “All about my early hardships, the newspaper business ... and the rats I met there.”

Helena felt the smile slide off her face. “If you mention me in that book--”

“How is the libel business these days, by the way?” Regina asked suddenly, sounding only vaguely interested, and Helena’s weird feeling intensified. “Do you have someone good on the hush stuff?”

Helena decided to play along. “Yeah, we get along okay.” When Regina didn’t say anything else on the subject, she continued. “Where did you go when you left us?”


Helena caught up to her easily. “What's your hurry?”

“Breakfast. I need coffee.”

“It can wait,” Helena demanded. “I want to share an idea with you.”

“I'd rather have coffee, thanks.”

“Regina, I really need to talk to you,” Helena pleaded.

“Well, well, H.G.,” Regina said, her eyebrow raised again. “You weren't that ... needy when I left.”

“Could you please stop walking?” Helena’s voice held more than a hint of frustration. Regina had always had the ability to drive her insane. “This is a proposition.”

Regina snorted. “Not before breakfast, dear.”

“I don’t have time for breakfast.” Helena threw her hands in the air.

“Then you obviously don’t have time to ... proposition me,” Regina remarked wryly. “That's too bad. Goodbye. Again.”

“Good morning, Ms. Mills,” the head waiter greeted Regina.

“Good morning, Marco. Table for one, please.”

“Table for two,” Helena interjected.

Marco looked at Regina for confirmation and received a curt nod. “Very well, ma’am,” he said to Helena before smiling at Regina. “This way, please, Ms. Mills.”
Once they were sitting at the table, Helena was trying to come up with a way to get Regina to come back to the *Star* and do the job. She waited until the other woman had her first sip of desperately needed coffee, then opened her mouth but Regina held up a hand to stop her before she could get the first word out. “One rule,” Regina said. “You let me have breakfast in peace, then you can talk.”

Helena nodded begrudgingly. As she waited for Regina to eat her way through an omelet and a plate of fruit, she wondered how Regina had managed to get everyone at the hotel to like her as much as they seemed to. The paper boy, the head waiter, and even now their waitress sent Regina warm smiles every so often. *They must know she has money,* Helena thought. *That’s the only feasible reason. She can’t have changed that much from the arrogant woman I knew.*

As if on cue, the waitress appeared by Regina’s side again, bright smile firmly in place. “More coffee, ma’am?”

Regina graced her with a smile. “No, thank you, Jen.” The young woman nearly swooned and even Helena was reminded again just how beautiful and damn near irresistible Regina Mills was when she was letting her charming side come out to play. Which was exactly why the paper needed her so desperately.

Finally, Regina focused on Helena. “Now, H.G., what’s on your mind?”

Helena took a deep breath. “I’ve been thinking, Regina,” she started, trying to project charm and cordiality. “After all, you’re really good at what you do and maybe I was a little hasty when I—”

Regina tried hard to hide her smile but the corner of her mouth still twitched. “Are you offering me back my old job? Is that what this is?”

Helena nodded, relieved that she didn’t have to spell it out. “Yes, that’s it. What do you say?”

In the blink of an eye, Regina’s face lost all traces of mirth. “All right,” she said, her tone completely professional. “You want to talk business, Helena? Okay, let’s talk business.” She sat down her coffee cup. “You're in trouble over Emma Swan,” she continued, enjoying the moment when Helena’s jaw dropped. “You printed a hot story and she's suing you.”

“Who told you that?” Helena asked, unable to hide her surprise.

“Elementary, my dear Watson,” Regina explained, tapping the side of her nose. “I read the story in the evening edition, carried by no other paper. *That,* I said to myself, is the fine work of Wells or one of her boys. Bulls in a china shop, the lot of you.” She paused for another sip of coffee. “What is she asking?” she asked casually.

“80 million dollars.”

Both of Regina’s eyebrows shot up almost to her hairline, and she quickly swallowed her coffee. “Who does she think she is?”

Helena snorted. “Just one of the richest girls in America.”

Regina nodded. “Yes, I read a little bit about her. Daddy’s girl, with a father who buys her everything she wants. All-American beauty, the closest thing we have to a fairytale princess … that’s her rep, and she thinks *that’s* worth 80 million?” She snorted. “When I’m done with her, she’ll take 80 cents.”

Helena’s eyes twinkled in triumph. “Done. You’re back on the payroll.” She held out her hand for Regina to shake on the deal.
Regina shook her head, having expected that reaction. “No, sorry, Helena. No philanthropy.” She pulled out a folded piece of paper from the pocket of her black dress pants. “During the six months that I worked for the *Star*, I saved the paper about five million dollars in libel payouts. And what did I get? Not even a 100k per year before taxes.”

Regina unfolded the piece of paper and handed it to Helena. “This is my contract, drawn up last night.” She smiled. “I had some time on my hands,” she explained at Helena’s incredulous look, “and I’ve been expecting you for about twelve hours. You took your time.”

Helena read the short contract. “$100,000 down payment today and $900,000 more when you ... you’re completely out of your mind,” she whispered loudly, enraged. “That’s a *million* dollars for one job. No other reporter gets that much money. That’s robbery.” Helena just kept shaking her head. And she had been so close.

Regina calmly took back the contract and folded it up again. “All right, forget it,” she said with a smile and caught Jen’s eyes to ask for more coffee. “Have you read any good books lately?”

Helena wasn’t above begging, she was that desperate, and she knew that Mrs. Frederic would kick her out without question if she came back with anything but a *Mission Accomplished* to report. She hated that Regina was so damn good at what she did, and that she had decided to prove it by playing hardball right now. “Regina, please be reasonable,” she tried again. “Take it or leave it.” Regina smiled at Jen as the young woman gave her a refill. When she focused on Helena again, she seemed to reconsider. “On second thought,” she said with a smile, “I don’t want the job at any price. I got all the money I need right now, so why would I want the trouble you will undoubtedly get me into?”

She pulled out another piece of paper. “Look here. My publisher just offered me an advance of $100,000 for my next book, so let’s just forget about this whole thing.” Regina put the piece of paper in her pocket and began to get up. She didn’t notice when the letter dropped to the floor instead.

“Wait a minute.” Helena stopped her and grabbed the contract from her hands. Getting out her pen, she muttered, “You ought to be arrested for extortion.”

Regina sat back down. “It’s not my problem you need me quite so desperately, H.G.,” she said with a smile as she checked the signed contract.

Jen showed up next to their table again. Helena saw her bend down and come up with a piece of paper in her hand. “One of you must have dropped this,” she said, holding out the folded letter with a smile.

Helena grabbed it on instinct and opened it. Her jaw dropped the second time that morning. “What is this?”

Regina rolled her eyes, recognizing the paper instantly. “That is a letter,” she replied slowly and calmly.

“Oh, I get it,” Helena muttered. “So your publisher’s going to send you a 100k advance, huh?” she said conversationally. “More like 12k behind with the hotel, you mean.” She dropped the letter on the table with a look of mild disgust at having been played so easily.

Regina chuckled. “Not now, I’m not.” She grinned as she took the letter and folded it almost lovingly.

Helena growled. “I knew I was a sap to believe--”
“That’s right, you were, given our history,” Regina interrupted her mildly. “I don’t let go of grudges easily ... but you’ll get your money’s worth, don’t worry.” Helena snarled at her but bit back a retort.

Regina leaned in closer. “Now, here’s the plan: Emma Swan and her father are in London, so I’m going to fly over there tonight,” she explained.

“But they’re coming back soon,” Helena protested.

“That’s why I’m flying tonight, so I can come back with them,” Regina replied. “Ms. Swan seems to not like flying all that much, so they’re taking the Queen Mary.” She gave Helena a pointed look. “Five days on a boat, H.G. Anything can happen on a boat. I meet her, perhaps at dinner, and maybe she comes to my cabin—”

“Oh, no.” Helena shook her head. “No, not this woman.”

“Only for a drink,” Regina said with a half-shrug. “Perfectly innocent to her, to me, and everyone else on the boat. Except to our private detective, who calls my loving wife.”

Helena stared at her. “You have a wife?”

“No,” Regina replied curtly, rolling her expressive eyes, and Helena could almost hear the you idiot that Regina thankfully swallowed. “This is a setup, not a confession.”

Helena raised her hand in apology. “Sorry.”

Regina waved it off. “We hire some attractive woman to marry me or at least play my long-time girlfriend and when the time comes, she stages a pretty little scene and Emma Swan looks exactly like the woman you made her out to be.”

“That could work,” Helena admitted, her face lighting up. “The Star called Emma a lesbian home wrecker, she denies it. We duplicate the situation and this time, she does steal the girl. This time, we’re right.”

“Let her go to court with a libel suit with that and see what she collects.”

“But how about a woman to marry you?” Helena asked. “Or play your girlfriend? Do you know anybody?”

Regina shook her head. “Now, that is the tricky part,” she said. “We have to find someone we can trust implicitly. I have a ... friend who can perform some sort of ceremony for us, but we have to find the right woman first, and quickly.”

Helena thought for a moment and then swallowed as the only viable solution came to her. “I know the perfect woman.”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: In case anyone was wondering about the kind of money that's being talked about in the fic: I took the sums from the 1936 movie and ran them through an inflation calculator to get today's equivalents (at least roughly - I did round up or down in some cases).
Myka was enjoying a late breakfast when her phone rang. She checked the caller ID, then answered with a brilliant smile. “Good morning, Helena. Still at work?”

“Yeah,” Helena mumbled in response. She was feeling nervous and tongue-tied all of a sudden. “How would you like to get married today?” She cringed, knowing this was not the right way to go about getting her girlfriend to agree to help.

“Get married?” Myka laughed. “Helena, you only asked me last night and I don’t think we can get the papers this quickly. But if you insist ...”

Helena grimaced at the note of hopeful enthusiasm in Myka’s voice. “Myka, darling ... it’s not quite what you think,” she started to explain, ignoring Regina who was watching her with a smirk on her face. “Could you just come to the Grand Plaza? I’ll explain everything once you’re here.”

Helena could practically see the worried frown on Myka’s face. “Are you in trouble, Helena?” she asked softly. “What’s going on?”

“Just the same trouble as last night,” Helena replied. “We’ve come up with a solution but we need your help.”

“I’m not sure how us getting married is going to solve your problem,” Myka said, her tone holding more than a tinge of doubt, “but if it helps you, I’ll at least come up to the Grand Plaza.” She paused. “You better have a good explanation though,” she said with a sigh. “My patience only goes so far.”

“Thank you,” Helena said. “See you soon.” She ended the call and let out the breath she hadn’t known she was holding. “She’ll be here in a little while,” she told Regina without looking at her, missing the soft, understanding smile on the other woman’s face.

“She’s your girlfriend?” Regina asked almost gently.

Helena looked up, surprised. “Yeah. She’s the only one I can trust in all of this.” It was clear that she didn’t completely trust the woman sitting across from her, but Regina shrugged it off. She wasn’t sure how far she trusted Helena either. It had been a long time since they were friends.

“Do you think that’s wise?” she asked instead.

“Why?” Helena was suspicious. “Are you going to steal her?”

“Oh, please,” Regina snorted. “But you’re asking quite a lot of her, aren’t you? You must be very secure in your relationship. Good for you.”

“I don’t need your approval,” Helena said testily, her doubt over what they were planning making her anxious. Regina raised her hands apologetically, and Helena decided to be gracious. “But thank you. We have a good thing going but work--”
“Gets in the way,” Regina finished for her. “Given that, do you really think we should use her?” she repeated her earlier concerns.

“Myka will understand.” I hope. “Why don’t you call your friend, so we can get this show on the road?” And with that the conversation was over.

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“Seriously, H.G.?” Myka asked again, and Helena shrank a little more into herself.

Regina settled back into the armchair in her suite, watching, not sure if she should be exasperated or amused by the couple’s interaction. Right now she was tending towards being bored on top of everything else. Myka and Helena had been going at it since Myka had arrived ten minutes earlier. They had met her in the lobby, introductions were made, and as soon as things had become heated and a little too loud, Regina had suggested taking things up to her suite.

“Myka, please—”

But Myka wasn’t listening. “I mean, really?” She was rambling now, pacing back and forth. “For two years I’ve been playing second fiddle to your damn newspaper, but this? This takes the cake.” She threw up her hands. “When you asked me to get married, I didn’t expect it to be to her.” She pointed at Regina, who merely raised an amused eyebrow.

“But, darling,” Helena tried again. “It’s only for a month or so, maybe even less, and it’s only for show.” She looked at Regina for help.

“But, darling,” Helena tried again. “It’s only for a month or so, maybe even less, and it’s only for show.” She looked at Regina for help.

“Really, Ms. Bering,” Regina confirmed with a smile. “We wouldn’t do this if we didn’t have to, but I assure you I’m actually quite fun to be around.”

Helena glared at her. “The moment the libel suit is gone, we’ll get married for real, darling.” She took a step closer to Myka.

“Stop,” Myka exclaimed. “Don’t you dare come any closer, H.G.! Don’t you see? I don’t want to get pretend-married to some woman I don’t even know ... I want to get married and stay married. To you. Like I said last night: if you don’t want me, just say so!”

“Of course I want to marry you, Myka,” Helena said earnestly. “With all my heart. I didn’t buy that ring on a whim, and I didn’t ask you just because I had nothing better to do. I love you and I want to spend the rest of my life with you, but you need to understand. If we don’t avert this crisis, my life as I know it is over.” She sighed. “This is our only chance. There isn’t a newspaper in the world that would hire me as an office girl. Would they, Regina?”

“Not if they know you like I do,” Regina replied dryly.

Helena bristled at the comment, but decided to ignore it. “Darling, please,” she begged. “Would I ask you to do this for me, if I didn’t consider you practically my wife?”

Myka snorted, not exactly flattered. “Would you ask your wife to hook up with that ... that lady over there?” She somehow managed to make it sound like an insult.

“The lady objects,” Regina commented mildly.

“Darling,” Helena tried again. “This is not a big deal, really. A short ceremony, a few hours in this suite, during which I’ll never leave you,” she explained, “and then Regina is off to Europe.”
Myka had enough. “I’m out of here.”

Regina had been watching all of this shrewdly and had come to a decision. “No, wait a minute,” she stopped Myka, and stood. “I’m leaving. The deal is off, Helena. Here’s your contract back.” She turned away from Myka and handed Helena the folded contract. She gave the confused reporter a wink and a grin. “There’s not enough money in the world to go through this with her.”

Helena caught up quickly. Ladies and gentlemen: Regina Mills, master manipulator. “No, Regina,” she pleaded. “You know the trouble I’m in.”

“I fail to see how that’s my problem,” Regina said coldly. “Find somebody else to take care of your mess.” She walked to the door, counting in her head, hoping she hadn’t miscalculated. Three, two, one ...

“Wait a second,” Myka cried, stopping Regina just as her hand touched the doorknob. “You’re walking out on her?”

“That’s the plan,” Regina replied without looking back at Myka.

“You can’t just do that,” Myka protested, protective instincts rising instantly at this perceived slight. “You know what that paper means to her. You’re a reporter, you know this will ruin her career, her life.” She growled. “A fine friend you are.”

Regina grinned, but pushed it back down before she turned around to face Myka, thoughtful look firmly in place. “Well, if you put it this way,” she said hesitantly, as if she was reconsidering.

“I’m putting it that way.” Myka snarled. “We need to help Helena.”

“Does that mean ...?” Helena asked.

“I swear, the things I do for that damn newspaper,” Myka replied with a sigh.


“Oh, shut up,” Myka sighed.

Regina deftly plucked the contract from Helena’s hand that was resting against Myka’s back. “I’ll go get my friend and round up a couple of witnesses, okay?”

She left, not expecting a reply. She doubted people could actually talk with their tongues that close anyway.

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"And I pronounce you married."

Regina’s dark-haired friend made a grand gesture that went wonderfully with his guyliner and general appearance. Helena stared at him, wondering how he and Regina knew each other. She didn’t seem the type to have a flamboyant gay best friend, but the reporter in her felt there was a story there. She shook off the thought, knowing she would probably never find out. For a moment she felt a twinge of regret about the loss of a friendship she had once thrown away and that she might never get back.

Regina and Myka were awkwardly standing next to each other. When nobody said anything for a few moments, Myka shrugged and turned towards Helena.
“Aren’t you going to kiss the bride?” Jen, the waitress from that morning, suddenly asked with a huge smile. As promised, Regina had brought two witnesses when she had come back. The second witness, Henry, the paper boy, nodded eagerly at the suggestion of a kiss.

“Sure,” Regina said easily and turned Myka back towards her. She made sure that Myka’s back was to Jen and Henry, so they couldn’t see that the kiss was a harmless peck just to the corner of Myka’s mouth.

*That was unexpectedly thoughtful*, Myka mused. Helena had told her a little about Regina’s reputation as a womanizer while the other woman was gone, and from that alone, Myka had expected her to make use of this opportunity. She smiled softly at Regina for the first time and was reassured by small nod she received in return.

“May I?” Suddenly guyliner-guy was in Myka’s face, but he looked so utterly harmless and cheeky that she just grinned. “Why not? Everybody else seems to be doing it.”

Before he could lean in, Regina muttered a soft “Killian, be nice”, and he dutifully only pressed the lightest of kisses to her cheek, then sent Regina a wink and kissed *her* full on the mouth. Regina just grinned, having expected something like that, and wiped her mouth.

Jen and the paper boy looked on with smiles on their faces. He looked like he wanted to go for a kiss himself, especially one aimed at Regina, but Jen kicked his foot and he stepped back with a grimace.

“Aren’t you going to kiss me?” Myka finally turned to Helena.

Helena just nodded, not really feeling up to talking. Seeing the love of her life getting married to another woman had not been an easy sight to bear, no matter how fake the whole thing was. She growled at the way Regina smirked at her, knowing that the other woman enjoyed her discomfort at least to a certain degree.

Myka took Helena in her arms and leaned in for a kiss. Seeing where this was likely going to go, Regina turned to their two witnesses. “Why don’t we sign the paperwork?” *No need to mention that it wasn’t worth the paper it was written on*, she thought, *and Killian had made a nice effort to make it look kind of official.*

Jen nodded but couldn’t seem to tear her eyes away from the on-going hug between Myka and Helena. When Helena kissed Myka, her eyes grew wide.

Regina gently pushed the waitress towards the small desk next to the door. “She’s an old friend of the family,” she said casually.

“I’d say so,” Killian said with a small whistle under his breath, drawing attention back to the kiss.

“A very old friend,” Regina said, pushing Jen and Henry a little more forcefully towards the paper now.

Finally, the papers were signed and Regina tipped Jen and Henry generously as she let them leave to get back to their duties. She breathed a sigh of relief once they were gone.

A moan from Myka tore Regina’s gaze away from the door and back to the couple. She cleared her throat loudly, and that finally seemed to be enough to get them to let go of each other.

“Well, I hope you’ll be very happy,” Killian remarked dryly to Regina. “And don’t forget to invite me to your silver anniversary.”
Myka snorted. “It'll have to be within the next month or so.”

Killian laughed out loud and shook his head before he pulled Regina into a firm hug. Helena was surprised he didn’t lose both his arms. “Goodbye, and good luck,” he said to the room in general, a hand still on Regina’s arm.

“Thank you, Killian,” Regina said warmly. “See you soon.”

Once they were alone, Regina turned to Helena and Myka. “Well, phase one is a go.”

Regina poured three glasses from the bottle of champagne she had received as an impromptu wedding gift from the staff at the Grand Plaza. She was just putting the bottle back in the cooler when the phone rang.

“Yes,” she answered calmly, having expected the call. Her eyes met Helena’s, who raised her eyebrow in question. “Yes ... oh, really? – Could you send it up, please? Oh, and could you please send a waiter, too? – Right away? Thank you.”

She hung up and picked up her glass. “That's the fax you had Pete send me,” she confirmed Helena’s assumption. “There will be a bellboy and a waiter to witness the very tender scene when we learn that I'm called to Europe.” She toasted Helena and took a sip from her glass. No need to waste some damn good champagne. Over the rim of her glass she could see Myka taking a huge gulp as well.

Helena snuggled up to Myka on the small sofa. “I know it’s a lot to ask, but you’re going to have to act all broken up,” she said. Pointing at Regina, she continued. “She’s torn from your arms, just after an hour of marriage,” she added dryly.

“That’s already too long for me,” Myka growled.

Regina fought back a grin. The more she saw of Myka, the more she liked the feisty woman with the wild curls. She was interesting and had a sharp tongue, and she wondered what a woman like that was doing with a workaholic like Helena. She raised her glass to Myka. “To my lovely bride.”

Myka emptied her glass. “I’m not,” she replied after swallowing. “I’m her fiancée.” She pointed to Helena, who smiled widely.

“Yes, dear.”

“Don’t call me that,” Myka said instantly. “You know my name.”

“Of course.” Regina nodded. “Mrs. Myka Mills.” She barely suppressed another grin at the outraged look on Myka’s face. Sometimes it was just too easy.

“I’d rather have a number.” And then Myka actually stuck her tongue out at Regina, who simply shrugged and took another sip of champagne.

Helena wasn’t quite sure she understood the undercurrents in the room. “Come on, now,” she cautioned softly. “No fighting, please.”

Regina raised an eyebrow. “Why not? We're married.”

“You're supposed to be happily married.” Helena threw up her arms. “You're supposed to be madly
in love with each other.”

“In case you didn’t realize, H.G.,” Myka said with a completely fake sweet smile. “There’s nobody here to see us.”

Helena shrugged. “True,” she said. “It’s just the three of us, but you should get used to being nice to each other.”

“Why?” Myka asked. “As soon as Regina is gone, you and I are going to get out of here and you’re going to take me to the most romantic dinner you can possibly manage at such short notice.”

“But ... Myka,” Helena protested. “I can’t take you anywhere, you need to stay here or at your apartment when you’re not at work.”

“You're not going to take me out?”

“Darling, I can't take you out,” Helena said gently. “As much as I want to ... and I really do ... but you can’t be seen running around with another woman.” She pointed to Regina. “You're supposed to be happily married, so you have to look married.”

Regina raised an eyebrow. “Maybe we should have rented twins for the occasion,” she stated dryly.

Myka looked like she wanted to throw her glass at Regina, but before she could even raise it, there was a knock on the door.

Regina opened it quickly and let the waiter in. Just as he had pushed his cart through the door, the bellboy came up to them as well. “Yes?” Regina asked him as she directed the waiter to the table with her hand.

“Ms. Mills?” the bellboy replied.

Regina gave him a curt nod, stalling him, wanting to keep both of them in the room. “Just wait a moment,” she told him, then turned to the waiter. “Could you clear the table, please?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Helena nudged Myka into action. She went to the bellboy and took the envelope from his hand. “Regina, there's a fax for you,” she said in an overly sweet voice.

“Thank you, dear,” Regina replied with a smile. “Would you open it for me, my love?”

Myka did and as soon as she deemed enough time had passed for her to scan the message, she reacted dramatically. “Oh, Regina,” she cried, clutching one hand to her chest. I should have become a freakin’ actress instead of going to grad school.

The waiter and the bellboy looked on in fascination, sensing some terrible news had befallen the newlyweds.

Regina took a step towards Myka. ”What is it, dearest?” she asked, equally as dramatic, hoping she wouldn’t get cavities from all the sweetness she tried to exude.

“It's a fax from your office,” Myka explained, her voice appropriately shaky. “They say you need to fly to London today for a meeting tomorrow. It’s important.” She saw the captivated audience of two and decided to turn her performance up a notch. “You can't leave me,” she cried and threw her arms around Regina who took a step backwards in surprise.
“Baby, this is terrible,” Regina acted along once she had regained her footing. “Breaking into our honeymoon like this ... But what can I do, honey? I'll have to go.”

Helena decided to jump in and move things along. She took the fax from Myka’s hand. “It’s only for a couple of weeks at the most, Myka,” she said soothingly. She looked at their audience and told them, “They just got married.”

“But I’ll miss you, snookums,” Myka said.

Regina couldn’t stop the cringe at the pet name. She pulled back to glare at Myka, glad that her back was to the waiter and bellboy. “And I’ll miss you,” she cooed in a cloyingly sweet voice. “Pookie.”

Helena had about all of the scene that she could stomach. She pulled Myka out of Regina’s arms, trying hard to make it look gentle. “Regina,” she said. “I’m afraid you’ll have to hurry if you want to catch that flight.”

Regina nodded. “Oh, yes, you’re right.” Can’t wait till this scene is over, she thought. She called over the bellboy. “Could you take my bags down, please? It’s the two leather ones,” she pointed out her bags. “It’s a good thing they were already packed.” Not mentioning that it had been a rush action between acquiring a fake wife and setting up this little scene.

Regina turned to the waiter and handed him a very large tip, making sure he wouldn’t forget any of this any time soon. “Thank you very much,” she said in as friendly a tone as she could muster.

He nodded and let himself be guided out the door, still somewhat spellbound by the heartbreaking scene between these beautiful women. He couldn’t wait to tell his wife about all of this.

“My going to miss you so much,” Myka cooed.

Helena growled. “Can you please stop? They’re gone, and I’ve had just about enough of this.”

At once, Myka took a huge step backwards from Regina and glared at Helena. “Good,” she snarled. “Now you know how I feel.”

Regina wisely refrained from saying anything, despite feeling like she could use a shower to get the sticky sweetness off her skin. She grabbed her phone and her light coat and walked to the door.

“One more show in front of the elevator and we’re done, Ms. Bering,” she said as evenly as she could. “It’s been a ... pleasure.”

Myka sighed and followed Regina to the elevator, Helena hot on her heels. Almost immediately, the elevator doors opened, revealing a small group of people. Perfect, Helena thought.

Regina was sick of playing nice and decided to let her mischievous side come out to play for a bit. She pulled Myka into a tight hug while Helena held back the elevator doors. “Just got married,” Helena explained in the general direction of the people in the car. As expected, everyone’s expression softened immediately and went from annoyed at being held up to awwwing internally.

“I’ll miss you every minute, love,” Regina said loudly enough for everyone to hear.

“Every second.” Myka replied, then almost squeaked in surprise when Regina pulled her into a passionate liplock. Helena’s jaw dropped and she let go of the elevator doors. Two men immediately shot their hands out to stop them from impeding their view. I swear I’m going to get you for this, Regina, Helena swore.

All Myka could think was, damn, that woman can kiss.
Then, as suddenly as it started, Regina ended the kiss and got on the elevator before Myka could hurt her, covering a delighted smirk behind her hand and by looking at the ground. She could only hope that her chuckles would somehow be interpreted as heartbroken sobbing. She would cherish the looks on Myka’s and Helena’s faces – dazed and angry, respectively – for a good long while.

The chambermaid who’d come up to the scene at the tail end of it all took one look at Myka’s stunned face and felt compelled to offer comfort to the obviously distressed woman. “She’ll be back, Miss,” she said and moved on down the hallway.

Which is how she missed Myka’s growl, Helena’s curses, and the crash as a half-empty bottle of champagne ended up against the wall.

Regina grinned all the way to JFK.
The Setup

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: see Chapter 1

A/N: ... and finally Emma Swan shows up. :D

Regina took in the imposing view of the Queen Mary waiting for her passengers at the pier in Southampton. *Taking a ship to New York? Well, that'll be a first,* Regina thought. She wasn’t a big fan of ships or large bodies of water. *Let's just hope it's worth it.*

She handed her luggage and a generous tip to a steward, then leaned against a pillar waiting for her mark to show up. Finally, the car she had been waiting for slowed to a stop and three people emerged. Regina recognized David Nolan and his daughter, but not the man with them. *I sure hope he’s not her boyfriend.* She watched the small group walk closer, her eyes staying on Emma Swan the whole time, trying to get a feel for the woman she was supposed to ensnare over the course of the following five days.

The blonde carried herself well, she supposed, but she did so with an air of indifference to her surrounding. A pair of aviators rested at the top of her head, and Regina was surprised she wasn’t actually wearing them. She glanced around and saw that most eyes were upon Emma Swan and her father – with the men more or less obviously ogling her, and the women staring daggers in her direction – but it didn’t seem that the blonde even noticed. *She must get that a lot,* Regina thought, but for some reason it bothered her. She closed her eyes a moment, realizing she was guilty of doing the exact same thing.

When she opened her eyes again, she called over the private investigator the *Star* had hired. “Everything is set,” he said with a grin. “Palmer's the one who's gonna take the hit.” He pointed out the man he was talking about.

Regina nodded. “Fine. Tell the guys to lay it on heavy.” She saw her mark coming closer. *Let's see how she deals with this.* “Here they come. Leave. I'll see you on the ship.”

He nodded and walked over to the gathered paparazzi. “Here they come now. Lay it on heavy.” He clapped the first guy on the back and quickly walked away.

Regina nodded towards a steward she had bribed earlier and he moved to intercept David Nolan and Emma Swan. “Mr. Nolan, excuse me, sir,” he said, sounding politely apologetic. “There's been a bit of a mix-up with your baggage. Would you come with me, Sir?”

“Do you want me to take care of it?” the bearded man asked.

Nolan shook his head. “I'd better go with you, Graham.” He turned to his daughter. “Wait here, Emma, okay?”

Emma nodded and focused on her phone. *She's actually quite stunning,* Regina thought. Her dark boots, skinny jeans, and bright red leather jacket might have looked common to the untrained eye, but even from a distance Regina could see that nothing Emma Swan wore had come off any kind of
rack anywhere.

“Will you make a statement for the press?” The first of the press pack had reached Emma and he shoved a recording device in her face. Emma’s head reared back in surprise, but she didn’t say anything.

“Are you really suing for libel?” Another chimed in. “What are your chances of winning?”

“I have nothing to say,” Emma replied, a fleeting look of distaste on her face. She put away her phone and hid her eyes behind her aviators. Regina smiled in appreciation of the sight. \textit{Focus}, she told herself.

“Oh, come on, Swan,” one of the guys pushed.

“You have to tell us something!”

“Come on, Emma, make a statement!”

“You can’t just ignore the press.”

“Watch me,” Emma stated calmly and turned to walk away.

“Turn her around, Palmer, I need a good shot,” one of the guys yelled and Palmer grabbed Emma’s arm from behind and whirled her around.

Regina recognized her cue and quickly walked towards them.

“Take your hands off of me!” Emma growled low in her throat, trying to wrest her arm from the man’s grasp, but he held on.

“Smile for the camera, Swan,” a guy yelled and started snapping pictures.

“Just a minute,” Regina said loudly, and as coldly as she could, as she walked up to the circle surrounding Emma and started shoving men out of the way. When she had everyone’s attention, including Emma Swan’s, she continued, “Obviously the lady doesn’t want her picture taken.”

“That’s none of your business.” Palmer shoved Regina away a little with his free hand, the other tightening his grip around Emma’s arm.

Regina saw Emma wince and pulled her arm back and slapped him right across the face once, then one more time for good measure. Palmer was acting the way she had planned, but she still found the sight of him manhandling the blonde a little disturbing. Which was disturbing in and of itself. Palmer let go of Emma with a small push and faced Regina. “Now clear out,” Regina shouted. “All of you.”

The men moved a few yards away and left Regina and Emma standing next to each other. Regina turned to the blonde who stared at her with an unreadable expression on her face before turning away. “You’re welcome,” Regina said with a small smile and a hint of sarcasm at that, but Emma completely ignored her.

\textit{Arrogant, are we?} Regina thought. \textit{We’ll see what we can do about that}. With a short nod to Emma she turned and slowly walked away to board the ship.

“Emma, are you all right?” David Nolan came up to them.

Emma smiled tightly, her eyes surreptitiously following the brunette who had helped her. “Yes, dad. \textit{I’m fine},” she said, tearing her eyes away from Regina and glaring at Palmer who was holding his
cheek. No, she was not impressed with the beautiful woman who had come to her rescue. Not even a tiny bit. Nope.

David turned towards Palmer and the others. “This is an outrage. You scum ought to be arrested.” With that he took Emma’s arm and pulled her towards the ship, Graham following a step behind.

“That woman shouldn’t have gotten involved,” one of the paparazzi shouted loudly.

“We’ll get her for that,” another added. “I know her ... that was Regina Mills, the author.”

David turned to Graham. “Remember that name.”

“Yes, Mr. Nolan,” the bearded man replied, making a note on a pad. “Regina Mills.”

Emma made a mental note as well.

When they were out of sight, Palmer turned to one of the others, his cheek still a little red. “I should have charged that Mills woman more than a hundred quid. Ouch.”

● ● ●

Regina sat in her cabin, flicking through the file folder Helena had given her. There wasn’t much on Emma Swan, but Regina didn’t mind that so much for the moment. She knew that focusing all her attention on Ms. Swan would probably make the other woman suspicious sooner rather than later, so Regina needed to be a little more ... indirect in her approach. Get to know the father to charm the daughter, so she focused her research accordingly.

She pulled out a stack of newspaper clippings.

*Financier Predicts Better Business for Coming Year,* one read, followed by many of a similar vein. Regina winced, hoping she wouldn’t have to talk investments with the man. Ever. Not that she couldn’t ... the topic just bored her to tears.

Regina kept flipping through the articles. What she needed was something the man was passionate about, an in he would go for straight away. Her eyes fell on a second stack of articles labeled “hobby” and she took it with a little spring of excitement coiling in her belly.

*Here we go,* she thought with a smile that dropped the instant she read the first headline.

*Fishing.*

Really?

She had hoped for something a little less ... outdoorsy. She winced and focused on the articles.

*Nolan Hauls in Record Swordfish with Rod and Reel,* with a huge photo of a smiling David Nolan with a monster of a fish hanging from a hook next to him.

*David Nolan wins Anglers’ Cup.* This time the photo showed the man with a whole string of fish.

*King of Rod and Reel.* Regina wrinkled her nose, suddenly wishing Nolan’s only focus was on his work. She'd rather spend a year talking about money. *How was she supposed to talk about fishing with the man? She had no clue what to say.*

There was a knock on the door and Regina stuffed the articles back in the file folder and shut it. “Come in,” she called out as she got up from the desk, expecting to see a steward. The door opened,
however, and revealed the bearded man she had seen with Emma Swan and her father earlier. Graham, she thought his name was.

“How do you do?” he greeted formally, and Regina wondered how a scruffy-looking man like that, bespoke suit or not, could sound so stilted and formal.

“What can I do for you?” she asked, trying to show just the right amount of polite interest. It wouldn’t do to give away her satisfaction that her plan had apparently worked.

“Mr. Nolan sends his compliments,” Graham replied. “And would Ms. Mills join him for cocktails before dinner tonight?”

For a fleeting moment Regina wondered if he talked that formally in bed as well. “Mr. Nolan?” she repeated, playing dumb.

“David Nolan, ma’am,” Graham explained patiently. “The lady you rescued from those reporters earlier today is Mr. Nolan’s daughter.”

“Oh. Oh, yes.” Regina nodded as if she just now remembered the incident. “Yes, I’d be delighted to have cocktails with Mr. Nolan.”

Graham looked pleased. “7:30, the Grill Room bar then.” He walked backwards out the door.

“7:30,” Regina confirmed, slowly closing the door. “Thank you.”

As soon as the door was closed, she smiled to herself. Phase two was on. Her smile slipped as she looked at her watch. She had exactly three hours and twelve minutes to learn everything she could about fishing.

She pressed the button for the steward and poured herself a drink as she waited for him to arrive. Prompt service, she thought when there was a knock on her door not even a minute later and a young steward came in. Traveling first class does have its advantages.

“You rang, ma’am?”

“Yes, steward,” Regina said after a sip of her drink. “Do you know if they have any books in the ship's library on fishing?”

“Fishing, ma’am?”

“Yes. You know, trout fishing?”

The steward looked her up and down. “We have several,” he said after a moment. “Shall I fetch you one, ma’am?”

Regina nodded. “Just bring me all of them.”

Regina spent the rest of the afternoon reading about trout fishing, trying hard to find some enthusiasm for the subject matter somewhere. Well, at least Emma Swan would be there to provide a very nice distraction. Her mind wandered to her mark ... again. She's beautiful. The pictures really didn't do the woman justice. Regina shook her head to clear it of those thoughts. Don't, she admonished herself. You have a job to do. Don't get distracted, no matter how ... attractive that woman might be. She remembered the woman's arrogance. Probably a good thing, she figured.
Otherwise she would be really dangerous.

Regina forced herself to focus on the books again, only stopping to take a quick shower, and even now as she was applying her make-up, a book was sitting in front of the mirror, so she could look down and memorize things she might let drop in conversation later.

“The best rainbow trout fishing is found in Lake ...,” she muttered as she put on some eyeshadow. When she couldn’t remember where, she looked back at the book. “Taupo.” She sighed. “Lake Taupo, New Zealand.” She wondered if she got the pronunciation right.

“The best rainbow fishing is found in Lake Taupo, New Zealand,” she told her reflection. Rainbow fishing?, she repeated in her mind as she applied her lipstick. She checked the book again. Well, given why we’re here that would actually be funny. Alas, it’s just rainbow trout we’re fishing for in ... Lake Ta-upo? Lake Tau-po? Who cares, fake it till you make it.

She smacked her lips and checked her appearance in the mirror. Not too bad, she thought, then sighed almost immediately. She realized she had taken extra care to look great, and it definitely hadn’t been for David Nolan.

Regina stood and pretended the vase next to the vanity was a living, breathing person. “Now, the best rainbow-trout fishing is found in Lake Taupo, New Zealand, you know,” she said conversationally, satisfied when it rolled off her tongue as smoothly as if she’d talked about fishing all her life.

She nodded once and deemed herself ready. As she walked to the Grill Room bar, two thoughts kept repeating in her head: Whatever you do, don’t call it rainbow fishing. And don’t get caught staring at her.

Emma sat in her cabin, planning to spend the evening with a good book and a drink or two. She loved the sense of life slowing down that ship journeys gave her. They usually allowed her time to sit back and reflect, something most people didn’t expect her to be capable of. Urgh, she hated her image sometimes.

She stared out over the vast ocean and, unbidden, her thoughts wandered back to that morning’s incident. Normally, she wouldn’t give a second thought to a pack of paparazzi hounding her, but this incident had been made different by the woman who had stopped them. The beautiful woman who had interfered on her behalf, she amended. Her presence had been very ... convenient. Almost too convenient actually, especially the way the pests had just ... disbanded.

Emma bit her lower lip, lost in thought. Something about the whole thing felt off to her and she tried to forget about the whole incident, but time and again her thoughts went back to the dark-haired woman. If she had to take a guess, she’d say that she was after something, and it was most probably money, either from her or her father. She had a feeling that she hadn’t seen the last of her. Her heart rate picked up a little at the thought. Curious, very curious.

Her musings were interrupted by a knock on her door. “Come in,” she said.

Her father poked his head through the door. “Hello, baby girl,” he said with a grin. “Just wanted to let you know that I’m going to be having drinks with that woman from this morning later.” He smiled. “I owe her thanks for saving you, after all, and what’s one drink? Would you like to join us?”

Emma had no inclination to do that, but found herself nodding nonetheless. Her father smiled,
looking pleasantly surprised, and left again, leaving his daughter to ponder why she’d just agreed to
drinks with that woman. *It’s a good opportunity to sniff her out*, she told herself. That was *definitely*
the only reason.

Then why did she jump up to get ready with a small tingling in her fingers and a flutter in her
stomach? And why did she chose the sexiest dress she had brought just for cocktails with someone
she found highly suspect?
Helena sat in her office, wondering if Regina was getting anywhere with her mission. She was fending off hourly phone calls from Mrs. Frederic, and so far she hadn’t had anything to tell her worried boss.

The last call she’d had from Regina had come from Southampton while the *Queen Mary* was still docked. Apparently, she had come up with a plan and had set it in motion, but had nothing concrete to tell yet.

Helena grabbed more coffee from the tar sludge receptacle in the bull pen and took a sip with a grimace. She took her cup back to her office and sat down, not wasting a moment to take out the bottle in her bottom drawer to add some much needed taste to her coffee and make it vaguely drinkable.

“Everything okay, boss?” Claudia stopped in her office door. “Have you heard from--”

H.G. sighed. “No, Claud,” she said. “I haven’t heard from Regina in about seven hours.”

“Oh.”

H.G. leaned back in her chair and put her feet up on her desk. “How do you know her anyway?”

Claudia walked fully into the office and pointed at the lone, rickety visitor chair. When Helena nodded, she sat down and got comfortable. “Well, we *did* work here together,” Claudia explained the obvious.

“But Regina left a good two years ago,” H.G. mused aloud. “You’ve been here *that* long?”

Claudia nodded. “I’ve been here four years, Ms. Wells,” she said evenly, holding back on rolling her eyes at her boss, “but the only one up here who ever talked to me was Ms. Mills.”

“What else?”

“Yeah, I started out in the in-house mail department downstairs, so I only came through here two or three times a day,” she explained. “Ms. Mills always talked to me and gave me tips on how to learn more things and get ahead, you know ... what to read and stuff.”

“Really?” That didn’t mesh with H.G.’s memory of Regina at all.

“And she sort of helped me get into some good evening classes at her old school,” Claudia continued. “She talked to a friend of hers, a professor there.” She paused, deciding not to mention that Regina had also somehow managed to let Claudia enjoy those classes for free. “She knew I didn’t want to be a mail runner for the rest of my days here.”

“So what did you learn at those classes?”
Claudia blushed a little. “I’m pretty good with computers,” she said. “I dabbled a little in programming and such.” She hesitated.

Helena leaned forward. “And?”

Claudia sighed. “And I helped Regina Mills with some jobs ... doing research and stuff.” And hacking but we won’t mention that. “She paid well, and I sort of don’t really make enough here.”

With that, she got up and left the office. H.G. took another sip of her whisky-infused coffee. Had she misjudged Regina all those years?

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Regina was met at the door to the Grill Room by Graham, the Nolans’ stiff and formal companion. “Mr. Nolan has been delayed by a phone call from America,” he explained as he led Regina to a table, “but he sends his regards and asked that you order. Do sit down, please.” He pulled out a chair for her.

Regina raised her eyebrow at that, and sat down with a small smile. “Thank you.”

“We appreciate what you did this morning,” Graham continued, keeping a hand on the back of her chair. “Most unfortunate incident.” Then he looked over to the door and pulled out another chair at the table. “And here’s Mr. Nolan,” he said, nodding his head at his employer.

Regina turned slightly in her seat, frowning a little at the slight pang of disappointment when she realized that Emma Swan was not with her father. She wondered for a moment if she should get up, but before she could make up her mind either way, David Nolan was standing in front of her, holding out his hand.

“Sorry to be late, Ms. ...” he said, shaking Regina’s hand in a firm grip.

“Mills,” Regina filled in.

“Mills,” Nolan repeated with a curt nod. “Have you ordered?” He pointed at the waiter hovering just to the side of their table.

“A dry martini, please.” Regina smiled at the waiter who ignored her and looked at her host.

“The same,” Nolan said curtly and sat down. “Now, if you'll excuse me.” He turned to Graham without waiting for Regina’s reply. “Did we hear from the bank?”

Rude, Regina thought. Must run in the family. It's probably enough that he invited me over for a drink as thanks. This was going to be much harder than expected. She decided to just watch Nolan and his lackey while waiting for her drink. Not like I have anything better to do anyway ...

“Complete accounting,” Graham told his employer with a nod. “And Jennings, shall he meet you in Washington?”

Nolan seemed to think about that for a second. “No,” he finally said. “He’d better come to New York and fly down with me. That's the only time that I'll have. Be sure that the plane is ready.”

“It's ordered for noon.”

“Good.”

Graham apparently knew a dismissal when he heard one as he nodded and left straight away. David
Nolan turned back towards Regina. “Now, young lady, I want to thank you for what you did this morning, both for my daughter and myself.”

Regina dismissed the thanks with a smile and a chuckle.

“Quick thinking on your part,” Nolan continued.

“I rather enjoyed it,” Regina said, still smiling. *Let’s see if I can hook him like that.* “As a matter of fact, newspapers and I aren’t very good friends.”

David Nolan made a non-committal sound that told Regina that he wasn’t really listening. She decided to continue talking anyway. “One time in Chicago, I sent a reporter to a hospital.”

She trailed off as Nolan pulled out a few sheets of paper and started to read, still making noises that she supposed were just there to keep her talking. *Rude,* she repeated in her head, wishing her drink would arrive quickly. She thought about tossing the drink in his face when it arrived, but figured that would pose a slight problem for her plans. *Grin and bear it, Regina.* “My publishers never forgave me,” she said as casually as she could given that she wanted to slap the man.

“Publishers?” The question was directed at the letter Nolan was reading, but Regina decided to answer it anyway.

“Yes,” she said, a slight edge creeping into her tone. “I’m a writer.”

“Indeed?”

Regina hoped the letter was a good conversationalist since Nolan kept talking at it. “Yeah,” she drawled and decided to throw in the trump card. “Just now, I’m working on a book with some fishing stories.” She put some emphasis on the last two words.

“Really?” He still didn’t look up.

Regina rolled her eyes and mentally threw her arms up in frustration. “Yes, *really.*” She could feel the vein in her forehead beginning to pulse angrily. *Calm down, Regina, before you slap the guy. Or ...* Her slightly murderous fantasies were interrupted by someone stopping at their table. “Hello, Dad.”

David Nolan turned around at that and smiled brightly at his daughter. “Emma, my dear, I wasn’t ...” He stopped as Regina stood as well.

Regina tried hard not to react to the sight of Emma Swan in a dark green dress that hugged her body in all the right places. Her blond curls fell over her shoulders and she was wearing subtle make-up that accentuated her eyes. *Damn, she’s gorgeous.*

She had no idea that her thoughts mirrored Emma’s as she took in Regina’s slim form in a black cocktail dress. *Whatever she’s selling, Emma thought, might be worth listening to if she looks like that doing it.*

David Nolan missed the looks the two women exchanged. “I want you to meet Ms. ...,” he paused again.

_Yep, he wasn’t paying any attention whatsoever.* “Mills,” Regina said again. *Or maybe he’s the most forgetful man on the planet.*
At least this time David Nolan had the decency to look slightly uncomfortable. “Ms. Mills,” he said, pointing at Regina. “The woman who saved your life.”

Emma’s eyes roamed up and down Regina’s body once, and Regina could feel those eyes burning a trail. *Judgment?* she wondered. *Interest?* She hoped it was the latter.

“Yes, indeed,” Emma finally said politely. “Thank you so much.” She sat down in the chair that had been Regina’s and turned to her father, who sat down again as well.

*Effectively dismissed,* Regina thought. Now she knew how Graham had known when to leave. Good thing she was far more stubborn than that. *I can't figure that girl out,* she thought as she took a seat on Emma’s right and across from David Nolan. *Definitely a challenge.*

“I thought you were with those people from Plymouth,” Nolan remarked.

Emma shrugged one shoulder. “I ran out on them. I simply can't be bothered with people you meet on boats.”

*Ouch.* Regina gave Emma a look the other woman missed. “Well, I'm glad that we met on the dock then,” she drawled with a smirk. *Make her interested in you ... don't be too nice.*

The waiter finally delivered their drinks and Regina took hers gratefully. *God, I need that.*

Emma turned to the waiter. “Dry martini.” The waiter nodded.

“I should apologize for the scene I caused,” Regina said casually, smiling at Emma and sounding vaguely apologetic.

Emma gave her an unreadable look, then focused back on the waiter. “Waiter, never mind. I won't have anything.”

David Nolan sipped at his drink. “Ms. Miller here--”

“Mills,” Regina corrected mildly. “But you can call me Regina.”

“Ms. Mills,” he continued as if she hadn’t said a word, “is a writer.”

Regina was surprised he had retained that much from their earlier conversation.

Emma turned to her, eyebrows raised. “How ... interesting. What do you write?” Before Regina could reply, Emma had turned to her father again. “Dad, guess who's with us ... Mrs. Burns-Norvell and that dreadful daughter of hers.” She huffed and rolled her eyes. “We elude them in Europe, and now we meet them on the same boat.”

“Oh, God,” Nolan sighed. “Now we're in for it. They'll be asking us to dinner.” He shuddered visibly.

Regina watched the interaction with interest. Maybe that was something she could use to her advantage because right now she really wasn’t getting anywhere.

Emma snorted. “Not if we see them first. I've been ducking them all day.” Her gaze went over to Regina. *Let's see how much she's willing to take, shall we?* she thought, hoping the other woman couldn’t see the slightly evil glint in her eyes.

She smiled brightly at Regina. “Are you having fun, Ms. ... er?” She pretended not to know her name and saw Regina’s eyes narrow just a little before the other woman controlled herself. *So she’s*
Regina swallowed a growl and prepared to say her name for the nth time that night. “Mi--”

Emma ignored her completely and turned to her father. “My bike,” she said suddenly. “Dad, did you fax about my bike?”

David Nolan sighed. “Leave it in storage and take one of the town cars. It’s safer.”

“But I want my bike,” Emma protested. “I’m dying to feel that power between my legs again,” she continued with a side glance at Regina.

Holy ... Regina’s brain swam with images of Emma Swan on a big motorcyle, with herself wrapped around her from behind. She resisted the urge to close her eyes, which is how she caught the glint in the green eyes close to her. Playtime, is it?

“Do you ride, Ms. Miller?” Emma asked sweetly.

“Mills,” Regina corrected – again – even though she suspected that Emma was most probably getting her name wrong on purpose. “Oh, yes, I do ride,” she said. “I ride horses, though. Bareback, mostly.”

Bingo. Regina could see the slight widening of Emma’s eyes at that and wondered if she was finally having some sort of effect on the other woman.

Holy smoking hell. Emma swallowed and saw her father smiling tightly. She could just see Regina Mills in skin-tight riding pants and leather boots, clinging to a horse's mane, laughing at the exhilaration of it all. And she could see arms wrapped tightly around the woman's middle ... she could see herself glued to a strong back. No, no. Stop this right now. She's after something and it's probably your money, not you.

Regina watched as Emma shook her head as if to clear it and just barely managed to hide her grin. Despite the fun she was – finally – having, she decided to bring the conversation back to safer ground. “My favorite sport is fishing, though,” she said, looking from Emma to Nolan.

Emma raised her eyebrow and gave Regina a look. Fishing? Fishing for what? That's the question, isn't it? Such a coincidence that she shares dad's well-known favorite sport. Please don't let him fall for it ... Just then the waiter reappeared. “Sorry, Mr. Nolan, it's 7:45. Your dinner table is ready.”

Regina was vaguely insulted when David and Emma got up as if their chairs had caught fire. She stood as well. “Thank you for joining us,” David said to Regina, smiling politely. “If ever we need your help again,” he continued, while folding his papers, “I hope you'll be on hand.”

Emma gave Regina a perfunctory smile. “It's been so nice to see you,” she said, managing to sound as insincere as only a socialite could.

With that, the two turned and left Regina standing at their table with the waiter, who turned to her and said, “Good evening.”

Dismissed by a waiter, Regina thought, shaking her head. Well, that was a bust. For a moment, she didn't move except to watch Emma Swan leave, and enjoy the view. Which was how she managed to see the fleeting look of horror on the blonde's face when she caught sight of two woman walking towards her and her father with purpose.
Seeing a possible opening, Regina surreptitiously moved a little closer, hovering just within hearing range.

"Here they are, Mother," a mousy-looking girl said loudly, her voice shrill and bordering on painful. She dragged her mother over to where Emma and her father were still standing, kept in place by shock and the laws of polite social interaction, Regina assumed.

"Emma!" the older of the two yelled, her voice just as shrill and high-pitched as her daughter's. Regina found her incredibly annoying, even at first glance. "Emma, my dear!"

Her daughter chimed in. "We've been looking all over the boat for you!"

Regina watched in growing amusement as Emma tried to hide her irritated eye-rolling while her father let go of a deeply aggravated sigh. "Serves you right. I should just go to my cabin and leave you to fend off those harpies by yourselves. Unfortunately, she knew she shouldn't let an opportunity go by, should one arise out of this situation, so she remained where she was to observe and listen.

The two women had finally closed the distance to Emma and her father, who both tensed as if for a confrontation. This is better than TV, Regina thought.

"My dears! It's so nice to see you both again." The older of the two said loudly. "Bert will be so pleased that we're crossing together."

David Nolan finally seemed to find some manners somewhere. "How are you, Mrs. Burns-Norvell?"

"... and you're joining us for dinner," Mrs. Burns-Norvell continued as if he hadn't spoken. "I won't take no as an answer."

Regina watched as Emma and her father paled considerably.

"It's my birthday," the younger Burns-Norvell added. "I'll be 21 at midnight."

Emma fixed an apologetic smile upon her face. "I'm very sorry--"

“No,” Mrs. Burns-Norvell interrupted. “No excuses.”

“We'd love to,” David Nolan jumped in, “but you see, Emma and--”

Regina saw her opening and jumped right in. She approached the small group with a wide smile. "I'm so sorry if I'm late, David, but I had to send a very important fax," she said, ignoring the Burns-Norvells.

David turned to her, a huge question mark written all over his face. "Huh? What?"

Don't be so damn obvious, Nolan. Regina gave him a long look. “Shall we go in to dinner now?” she asked, looking between David and Emma expectantly.

Emma and David still looked dumbfounded, but caught on after a moment. “Yes, of course,” David said, sounding relieved.

“We're dining with Ms. Miller,” Emma added with a fake smile, and Regina bit back the automatic correction of her name with a small growl. Emma ignored her and pointed at the two women with her hand. “Mrs. Burns-Norvell and her daughter, Barbara.”

“Pleasure,” Regina said and she could see from the fleeting smile on Emma’s face that her voice had conveyed the exact lack of pleasure she had wanted to express.
“Can’t we all have dinner together?” Barbara Burns-Norvell asked, and her mother nodded enthusiastically.

Emma shook her head, desperate to get away from the women, whose voices were giving her a headache. “They’re going to talk business.”

“Yes,” Regina quickly added. “You see, I’m a writer and David and I are working on a book together.”

Mrs. Burns-Norvell clapped twice in excitement. “That is too wonderful! You must tell me all about it tomorrow,” she told Regina as she turned to go, pulling her daughter with her. “I’m always up for lunch,” she added over her shoulder and vanished into the dining room.

“Yeah, sure,” Regina said weakly to the Burns-Norvells’ backs. She could practically feel Emma smirking evilly next to her. Ah well, she’d find a way to get out of that one by lunch tomorrow.

“Well, we’re indebted to you again, thanks,” David said neutrally.

“Yeah,” Emma drawled. “That was fast thinking.” She wasn’t sure what to think. For now she remained wary, but also a little impressed. No matter what she’s planning, at least she got rid of the Burns-Norvells quickly enough.

“I suppose we’ll have to have dinner together now,” Regina stated with a small smile. “Shall we?”

David nodded and simply started walking towards the dining room. Regina thought she heard Emma give a small sigh, and cheekily held out her arm to the other woman. Emma ignored it and followed her father.
Myka yawned for what felt like the tenth time in as many minutes. Her day off had not been quite how she had envisioned it. No leisurely breakfast in bed cuddled up with Helena, no soft, slow love-making to while away the morning, no crossword puzzles over coffee, no nice walk through Central Park. In short, no Helena. At all. Because Helena was at work, as usual, while she was sitting here in Regina Mills’ hotel suite, playing the sad little wifey who’s been left behind.

*I am so not that person.* “What the hell am I even doing here?”

She paced the room, starting to feel like a caged animal. She had already rifled through the remainder of Regina’s things and clothes – twice – out of sheer boredom and more than a little curiosity. All she’d learned was that the woman had fantastic taste in clothes. If she had any secrets, they were hidden in the room’s safe, which Myka so far had been unable to crack. Maybe she could ask one of the hotel staff to open it for her. *They surely had a master code or something like it. Right?*

Well, if her “wife” wasn’t here, the she could at least make use of her wardrobe. At least some of the shirts should fit her. And maybe that sinfully short skirt. And she really liked that soft, black leather jacket. She made some choices and began her own personal fashion show.

●

An hour later, Helena looked up from her desk at a knock on her door. “Myka, what are you doing here?” she asked as she stood and walked around her desk. “It’s late.”

Myka snorted. “That’s all you have to say? It’s late?”

Helena cringed. She had obviously caught foot-in-mouth disease from someone in her office when this whole thing started. *Pete probably.* “Hello, darling,” she amended. “You look beautiful.” She looked Myka up and down. “Did you go shopping?”

Myka laughed lightly. “In a way,” she replied with a smile. “I took some of Regina’s clothes because whatever else, that woman knows how to dress. And since I’m her wife, I figured I’m entitled to wardrobe sharing.”

“Those are Regina’s clothes?” H.G. asked. “Damn, she’s really changed.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, this is ... I don’t know ...” She hesitated. “Don’t get me wrong, she always knew how to wear clothes well, but she used to go more for the sexy tight dress style than the sexy business power style, you know.”

“Oh, believe me, she still has a few of those dresses lying around.” Myka studied Helena for a moment. “Were you ever interested in her?”
“Me? Interested in Regina?” Helena scoffed. “She would have maimed and killed me, then eaten me for breakfast.”

“That doesn’t quite answer my question,” Myka commented mildly as she pushed a lock of hair behind Helena’s ear. “I won’t be mad, you know. She is a very beautiful woman, after all.”

Helena looked into Myka’s eyes. “I found her attractive at first,” she admitted. “I mean who wouldn’t? Pete almost fell all over himself whenever she was around. But that was before I got to know her and realized that she wasn’t a very nice person.”

“Wasn’t?” Myka asked. “Or isn’t?”

Helena thought about that. She wasn’t sure any longer, now that she’d seen Regina around a few other people, heard Claudia’s story. Maybe it had only been her, maybe it had just been their personalities that had clashed vehemently. “I don’t know,” she finally said.

Suddenly a thought hit Helena that made her nauseous. “Why? Are you ...” She swallowed. She couldn’t even bring herself to voice the suspicion. It would be just like Regina to--

“Yes, I want you.” Myka asked archly, interrupting her dark thoughts. “Really, H.G.”

Oh, shit. Initials again. Helena’s shoulders slumped.

“I came here to bring you a late dinner.” Myka sounded exasperated. “Since you won’t be seen with me outside because of your stupid lawsuit.” She pulled Helena’s head up with a finger under her chin. “And if you don’t kiss me within the next ten seconds, I’m going to--”

Helena didn’t let her finish. She closed the distance between them and pressed her lips against Myka’s. She shut her office door with her foot and fumbled with the lock for a second until she heard it snap into place. She lowered the blinds with a clumsy hand before pulling Myka over to her desk.

Their late dinner would have to be just a little later.

● ● ●

"Looks like you're in luck, dad," Emma said after glancing over the short but exquisite menu once the waiter had left with their drink order. "Your favorite fish, brook trout."

And here's another opening. Regina made an appreciative sound.

David Nolan looked up from his menu. "Do you care for trout, Ms. Miller?"

“Please call me Regina.” It’s so much easier than having to correct you every damn time you try to remember my name. "Do I care for trout?" Regina lowered her menu. Gotcha. "Mr. Nolan, the one thing in the world that I care for is trout in any shape or form." She leaned over the table a little more. "Especially on the end of a line."

David Nolan's face brightened instantly. "You're an angler, Regina? And please call me David."

Regina nodded and missed Emma's massive eye-roll. She was too busy trying to come up with something from the books she'd read that afternoon. Let's go with ... "I'm on my way now to Glen Arden all set to prove they'll rise to a Parmachene Belle.” Regina was proud that she didn't stumble on the words that didn't mean anything to her. She felt like she was navigating a minefield in stilettos walking backwards and blindfolded, and she hoped with all her might that nobody would ever ask
her to explain what a *Parmachene Belle* was. *Sounds like cheese to me.*

David thankfully seemed to understand her just fine as he scoffed good-naturedly. "No, not this early, Regina. A Royal Coachman, perhaps," he said, warming up the subject. "Or maybe a Pink Lady, but not a Parmachene Belle."

"I've caught them," Regina said with a small shrug, covering up the fact that she had close to no idea what he had been talking about. "Even earli--"

"Not at Glen Arden." David shook his head. "I know. I've fished Glen Arden. I've tried it."

Emma rolled her eyes again and let out a long sigh. "Dad," she said, trying to get his attention. "Shall we say trout?"

Dinner – brook trout for all of them – was a tedious affair for Emma, and by the time the waiter served their coffee, she was wishing fervently she had stayed in her cabin and ordered a sandwich. It’s not that she didn’t love fishing, but as the only topic for hours? *No, thank you.* Although she had to admit that she admired Regina’s staying power. *She must be after something really big.* Her glance wandered over to the brunette who was talking animatedly with her father. Well, staying in would have had a downside ... no staring at a beautiful woman, who was too focused on reeling in her father to notice Emma’s long looks.

She watched the woman some more while busying herself with adding sugar to her coffee. To her relief she couldn't detect anything sexual in the way Regina talked to her father, so she apparently wasn’t after him. The look she was receiving from those expressive dark eyes right now, however, could definitely be considered ... *oh crap, she caught me staring.* Again.

Emma realized that she had been staring at Regina so long that the other woman had noticed and had been staring back for a while if the grin was an indication. It had happened several times during dinner, and every time, Regina's eyes had twinkled and her mouth had curled up into a half-smile that was beginning to drive Emma a little wild.

Thankfully, Emma could count on her father to break up the moment. "What a sport," he said with a happy sigh. "To feel the trout on your line, to play him, to reel him in. There’s no thrill in the world like it."

*You have no idea,* Regina thought as she tore her eyes from Emma’s. *Not even close. This, the hunt, the excitement, that is the greatest thrill.* She cleared her throat. “There’s just one that beats it,” she replied.

“Oh?” David sounded unconvinced.

“When you first see him,” Regina explained, delving deep into her recently acquired fishing knowledge. It was a good thing she had a vivid imagination. “Not yet on your hook, but rising to the bait.” She smiled and unbidden, her eyes wandered over to Emma again. The blonde studied her for a moment before looking at her father.

“I stand corrected,” David said good-naturedly, and jumped straight into another story. “I remember once, in the high Sierras, I was using a Wickham's Fancy. No, a grizzly wing--”

“Dad,” Emma interrupted with another eye-roll. “We've had nothing but fish for two hours.”

David looked surprised at the interruption. “My dear, I was only telling Regina about my trip to the Sierras.”
Regina smiled at Emma, more than glad about the interruption. She decided to up the ante a little bit, and raised her eyebrow daringly. “Perhaps you'd like to dance, Ms. Swan?” she asked with a small challenging smirk. No other gay couples around. How daring are you? She stood and held out a hand. “Shall we?”

Emma hesitated only a moment, which she spent wondering what Regina’s angle was now. Is she trying to tell me she thinks I’m gay? Is she telling me she’s gay? It would explain why she was showing no interest in dad. Or is this just another ploy? She shrugged and stood, taking Regina’s hand.

Regina smiled at her and nodded at David, who didn’t seem to be either surprised or offended by the fact that a woman had just asked his daughter to dance. In fact, he seemed to still be stuck on his fish stories. “Did you ever fish the Rockies?” he called after Regina.

Regina turned her head but kept walking. “Have I? Fisher Falls, Gluckman's Point.” Those were places she remembered reading about and hoped it was enough to placate David for a while. She was really ready to spend a few minutes in his daughter’s arms. She could hear David’s happy and somewhat envious sigh, but then she fully focused on Emma and started leading her into a dance.

“I’m afraid that dancing isn't exactly my line,” Regina said, trying to sound smooth.

Emma raised an eyebrow at that. “I’d say it was definitely part of your line.”

To Emma’s surprise, Regina just chuckled. “May I be frank, too?”

Emma simply shrugged. “Why not?”

Regina pulled Emma a little closer and whirled her around. “You dance superbly.”

Urgh. Here we go, another line. Emma rolled her eyes. She didn’t know what she had expected, but she was feeling a definite sense of disappointment. “I was hoping for something original,” she said sarcastically and twirled Regina right back.

Regina smirked. “Dear, life is so full of disappointments.” She twirled Emma again, deliberately almost tripping her with her right foot, then tightening her hold so as to not let her actually fall. “So sorry,” she whispered.

Emma glared at her. “Just the lurch of the boat, I’m sure.” She was confused. One moment she was certain that Regina was going to start coming on to her, the next the woman behaved as if she couldn’t stand her. Emma was beginning to feel out of control, and she didn’t enjoy it one single bit.

“Afraid I wasn't concentrating,” Regina said with a smile. “It was your eyes.”

What the hell? Emma met Regina’s eyes. Fuckin’ whiplash with this woman. “Yeah, yeah, beautiful, aren't they?” she asked, her tone as bored as she could make it.

“They remind me--”

“Yeah, I know,” Emma interrupted. She’d heard that so many times before, she couldn’t even count them anymore. She’d really expected more from this woman. “Sparkling sapphires, deep emeralds, depending on my dress.” Blah, blah, blah.

Oh, yeah, I’m getting to her. Regina made a mental note. She’s one of those women that react more favorably to insults than flattery. “No,” she replied, looking straight into those incredibly beautiful blue-green eyes. “They remind me of ... angry marbles.”
Emma stared at her. *What the ...?* But before she could say anything, a shrill voice sounded from a table close to them. “Emma, darling!” Mrs. Burns-Norvell called loudly. “You must have lunch with us tomorrow, promise?”

“I have a bone to pick with you,” her daughter chimed in.

Emma paled. “I'm afraid I ... I--"

Regina twirled them, so she was facing the Burns-Norvells. “I'm sorry,” she said sincerely, “but we can't work on our book without Emma, I'm afraid.” She smiled brightly at the woman in her arms. “She's our inspiration, you know.” With a nod at the gaping Burns-Norvells, she moved Emma away from their table and back into the throng of dancing couples.

“I thought that was rather clever,” Regina mentioned after a moment.

Emma snorted. “Yeah, I thought you thought so.”

“Aww.” Regina put on a wounded look. “Don't I get a vote of thanks?”

Emma rolled her eyes. “By all means, if you think you need it.”

Regina ignored the testy look. “It just dawned on me that I seem to have made myself a permanent member of your party.”

Emma sighed. “Yeah, that's dawned on me, too.” She stopped dancing. “Let's go sit down, okay?”

Regina led Emma back to the table, hand in the small on her back, feeling a strange sort of loss. She had enjoyed the dance and the banter, and she had a distinct feeling that Emma would end their evening soon. She let out a small sigh, wondering if she had miscalculated her approach.

“So, you've fished Gluckman's Point?” David said as soon as they got back to the table. “You're an angler alright.”

“I should say Ms. Mills is *quite* an angler,” Emma said as she kept standing behind her chair. “Will you both excuse me? I'm exhausted.”

Regina nodded, unsurprised. “Well,” she said with a smile. “See you tomorrow then.”

“I don't think so,” Emma replied. “I'm going to stay inside and read books the rest of the trip.”

“Are you feeling okay, Emma?” David asked.

“Oh, yeah, I’m fine,” she replied, waving off his concern. “That's going to give you a chance to talk fish till New York.” She nodded at her father, and glanced at Regina. “Good night, Dad. Ms. Mills, don't keep my dad up too late with your *fishing* ...” With that she turned to leave, feeling Regina’s eyes on her all the way to the exit.

“Good night, baby girl,” David called after her, already turning back to Regina. “I could talk fish from here to Shanghai,” David said, excitement brightening his eyes. “Couldn't you, Regina?”

*Yeah, sure.* Regina tore her eyes away from Emma’s assets with some difficulty to smile at David. “Yes, yes, and back again.”

“So you fished Gluckman's Point?” David asked again.

Regina grimaced slightly. *Here we go again.*
It was going to be a long night.
Emma settled into the deck chair and pulled a blanket over her legs. It was a chilly morning, but she had been cooped up inside for too long and needed some air. Hopefully, she’d be left alone for a while. It was not like the dreaded Burns-Norvells were up at this ungodly hour of the morning, so she should have some peace. Unless Regina Mills – the woman she had successfully avoided so far while also spending an ungodly amount of time thinking about her – decided to come and ... harass her some more. Emma could have kicked herself when a part of her wanted the other woman to show up. Just to get a better grip on her intentions, of course. Nothing else.

“Are you sure you’re okay out here?” Graham asked, breaking into her thoughts.

Emma sighed. Sometimes he was really good at getting on her nerves. “I’m fine, Graham, really,” she said as nicely as she could manage. She pretended not to see his hurt expression. He really needed to get over this crush on her.

“Sunglasses?” Graham asked as he handed over her aviators.

Emma pulled her baseball cap low over her face and added the sunglasses. “How do I look?”

Graham gave her the once-over. “Nobody will recognize you.”

“Good, that’s the idea.” She gave Graham a short wave as he slowly backed away, then opened her book. It was disgusting how little reading she had actually managed to do in the past few days as her thoughts had strayed to Regina Mills again and again. Her stack of books was almost untouched and she swore she would change that right now.

She had only just gotten lost in the world woven by the words of Kurt Vonnegut – her dad had gotten her a first edition of *Mother Night* recently, and it was an eternal favorite – when something blocked the little bit of sunshine that made it through the clouds.

She ignored it, but movement to her right made her look up, and look straight back at her book right after. Regina Mills. Of course.

She buried her face in her book, pretending not to be the least bit interested in the other woman’s presence.

Regina pulled a deck chair as close to Emma’s as she could and sat down. “Catching up on your reading?” she asked with a grin. She didn’t even pretend to be interested in the newspaper she’d brought. When Emma didn’t react to her question, Regina leaned over the armrests separating them and whispered close to Emma’s ear. “Remember me?”

Emma leaned away and rested her book on her lap, holding the pages open with one hand, while the other pulled her aviators a short distance down her nose. “Oh, yes,” she drawled. “I just left my dad ... He enjoyed his three-day fish fest.”

Regina smiled. “So did I.” *At least the time I could get him to talk about the fishing trips he did with you, Ms. Swan.* The rest was a blur of fishing locations, fishing gear, and fishing stories ... and
studying up for those every free minute of the day with the books from the ship’s library.

Emma shoved her sunglasses back up to her eyes and looked back at her book, determined not to talk to Regina more than she had to. Her voice did things to her insides, and she way she smelled this close ... Emma mentally shook herself. “Dad’s waiting for you,” she said against her own wish not to engage with the other woman.

Regina’s lips twitched. Emma was trying so hard to get rid of her, but she really didn’t want to leave her be just yet. She had fun riling the other woman up, and she had been deprived of fun for three days now. “He won't mind waiting,” she replied with a shrug.

Emma sighed. Apparently that woman couldn’t take a hint. “You don't know my father,” she tried once more.

“You know the man. I know the angler.” Regina settled back into her chair.

“It's nice you have so much in common,” Emma said. Not. “I won't detain you.”

“Are you trying to get rid of me, Ms. Swan?” Regina leaned over to Emma again and laid a finger on her book. “What are you reading, if I may ask?”


Dismissed again. The story of this trip. Regina smiled to herself. Too bad she wasn’t done yet, no matter what Ms. Swan wanted. On the contrary ... She shuffled her chair impossibly closer to Emma’s and leaned way over into Emma’s personal space. “You've got to help me,” she said conspiratorially, her breath a warm caress along Emma’s ear. She grinned at the small shiver that went through the blonde. “I'm in a bit of a jam with the Burns-Norvells,” she continued when Emma didn’t look up.

I wonder where she's going with that. Emma turned to face Regina, not counting on the fact that the movement would bring their faces very close together. Her eyes zeroed in on Regina’s beautiful, kissable lips, and she wondered what the scar would feel like if she ran her tongue over it. What if I just leaned a little closer ... What the hell? God, no. Please, not that. I am not thinking that. She was so busy chastising herself that she almost forgot what Regina had been talking about.

Regina was surprised when Emma’s face was suddenly close enough that the smallest movement could lead to a kiss. She realized she was staring at Emma’s mouth but couldn’t bring herself to stop. Oh, she was definitely planning on kissing those lips, at least once, for their little plan, but there was a tiny part of her that wondered if she could get more. Not if I actually go through with all this, I guess. The thought brought her up short. Was she really thinking of ignoring a contract worth a million dollars for this woman? Nope, no can do.

“The Burns-Norvells?” Emma finally ground out when the silence between them became too thick to breathe. She leaned back, creating some distance between them.

Regina swallowed. “Yeah,” she said a little hoarsely, also pulling back. “I've been trying to duck them, but they finally caught me.” She shuddered. “Cocktails and dinner tonight.”

Emma couldn’t help herself. She grinned evilly. “How nice. I'm sure you'll enjoy it.”

Regina gave her a look. “Now wait a minute,” she complained. “It's your turn to come through for me. After all, I inherited them from you.” She gave Emma a pointed look, and Emma looked a little contrite. ‘I'm going to tell them that you and your father will also join me for cocktails before dinner.”
Emma raised an eyebrow. *Cocktails with the Burns-Norvells? Oh, hell no. Why should we all have to suffer?* “Ms. Mills, you think of the sweetest things,” she said sarcastically.

“I know.” Regina mock-bowed her head to her. “Now, when the Burns-Norvells arrive you come in without your father—”

“Dad gets all the breaks.”

“... and announce that he wants to see me right away,” Regina continued. “A brilliant idea for our book ... and of course we'll have to work the whole evening. Could you do that for me?”

_Is that all?_ Emma studied Regina’s face. There _had_ to be more to it than that. She hesitated, but finally nodded reluctantly.

“Good,” Regina said with a satisfied nod. “Then it’s cocktails in my cabin at 7:00.”

_And there it is, Emma thought. If she thinks I’m falling for that, she has another thing coming._ She smiled as a plan formed in her head. “In your cabin?”

“Yes,” Regina confirmed lightly. “You see, the bar is too near the dining room.”

_You’re good, Ms. Mills, I have to give you that._ “Yes, I see.” She paused as if in thought. “Fine, I’ll be there.” She raised her book. “Can I go back to reading now?”

Regina nodded with a relieved smile. _That was easier than I thought it was going to be._ “All right. Until then.” She stood. “Enjoy your book, Ms. Swan.”

● ● ●

Regina stopped at the railing to look over the vast ocean. A man paused next to her to throw a cigarette over the water. She turned to give him a look, but he just shrugged, and she turned back to enjoy the view, ignoring him.

“7pm,” Regina said after a moment without looking at her companion. “She'll be alone with me in my cabin. Give us about ten minutes to get a little _comfortable_.”

“Cool,” he replied. “How did you manage that?”

Regina smiled. “She thinks I invited a lot of other people.”

The private investigator nodded to Regina’s back and walked away, leaving Regina to the calm ocean view and her swirling thoughts.

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Regina moved the vase with the flowers three inches to the left, took a step back to judge its place on the side table, then moved it back again with a shake of her head. She checked her watch. Five minutes.

She scrutinized her appearance in the mirror again. Did her hair look okay? She wondered if the dress was a little much. She had chosen one she’d never worn before, a tight black dress with one strap that brought out her toned shoulders and arms, and clung to every curve of her body. This was not the kind of dress you wore underwear with, and anyone who knew anything about clothes would know. So why had she worn it?

She was close to running her hands through her hair. She didn’t understand herself. First she put on
an incredibly enticing dress – and she didn’t even pretend it had been for the setup – and now she was actually nervous. Nervous and excited. The way she and Emma had bantered over the past few days, the couple of times they had actually seen each other, that is, had her hoping for more of the same, more excitement, and maybe, just maybe ...

There was a knock on the door. Regina closed her eyes for a second, taking a deep breath before she walked to the door to open it with a bright-but-not-too-bright smile.

She almost closed it again straight away as the smile froze on her face, but it was too late for that.

“How do you do?” Mrs. Burns-Norvell’s high-pitched voice screeched as she stepped over the threshold and into the room.

“Are we late?” her daughter asked. She looked around the roomy cabin with unabashed curiosity. Regina opened the door wider, even though her two unexpected guests were already inside. Her brain refused to accept the reality of her situation for a moment. When her wits returned, she closed the door and leaned against it. “Late?”

“It was so sweet of you to send a message through Emma asking us to have cocktails with you,” Mrs. Burns-Norvell explained.

Regina swallowed. “She asked you to ...” Did her voice sound as weak to them as it did to her?

“Yes, she did,” Barbara Burns-Norvell added. “She said that you were too shy to ask us yourself.”

Well played, Ms. Swan. “Where is Ms. Swan now?” she asked, having a really bad feeling.

“Oh, we don’t have to worry about Emma,” Barbara said dismissively.

“We forgot to tell you,” her mother chimed in. “Emma isn’t coming. She has another one of her headaches. She really should see a doctor about those.”

Well played, Regina repeated inside her head and swallowed again. Really well played, Ms. Swan.

Regina managed to escape the Burns-Norvells three hours later on a walk around the ship that she had insisted on after an excruciating dinner with the two women. They wouldn’t take no after the most boring cocktail hour of Regina’s life, and she’d had no way to get out of dinner unless she wanted to be extremely rude.

She had been sorely tempted.

Now she was enjoying the night air as she climbed the stairs to the next deck as quickly as her four-inch heels allowed it. She could hear the Burns-Norvells calling after her, but she was in no shape to deal with them without resorting to throwing one or both of them over the side of the ship.

She looked down the flight of stairs she had just run up and breathed a sigh of relief when she couldn’t see the Burns-Norvells. She decided to stay outside for a while for some peace and quiet, and the view of the full moon over the ocean.

She turned to walk over to the railing when she saw the unmistakable form of Emma Swan standing there, bundled up in a dark leather jacket against the evening chill that Regina was enjoying against her bare arms. “Hello,” she greeted tonelessly as she joined Emma at the railing.
Emma turned her face but remained leaning against the railing. “The inevitable Ms. Mills,” she drawled. “How was the cocktail party?”

"Delightful.” Regina’s tone was dry.

Emma tried not to feel too bad. Replacing herself with the Burns-Norvells had been cruel and unusual punishment, but she wanted to teach Regina that she wasn’t to be trifled with. “So sorry I couldn't come,” she said, sounding not particularly apologetic. “I trust the Burns-Norvells consoled you.”

“I found them very charming,” Regina lied through her teeth, hiding her grimace well. Inside she was furious. Furious at having been forced to spend hours in the presence of a pair of entitled socialites with no taste, common sense, or shame. Furious that she had looked forward to spending time with Emma beyond the wish to trick her into dropping the libel suit. Furious that she was finding the other woman so damn attractive, no matter how much she didn’t want to. And, most of all, furious that Emma didn’t seem to share the attraction. Not that that was needed for her to get tricked ... it would have just been nice.

“Far superior to many people you meet when you’re traveling,” Regina added for good measure, looking straight at Emma. She saw the other woman look away, out over the water, and Regina wondered if she only imagined that the look had a striking resemblance to irritation.

Finally, Emma looked back at her, but didn’t meet her eyes. “Yes. Babs is one girl in a million,” she said sarcastically. Emma had no idea why she was feeling the way she was. She should be happy, right? But the thought of Regina actually enjoying the company of Barbara Burns-Norvell and her mother made her anything but happy. She didn’t dare meet Regina’s eyes for fear of what she would see in them. “And she’s so rich, too. Or didn't you know that?”

Interesting, Regina thought. If she wasn’t completely wrong, Emma sounded actually jealous for a second there. And the look in her eyes ... holy crap, she might have to rethink her theory on her attraction being one-sided. Regina decided to needle Emma a bit more. “At least she has good manners.”

“Then ...” Emma hesitated, unsure of the question or whether she wanted an answer. “Everything went off all right?”

“Oh, yes,” Regina replied mercilessly. “In fact, I'm glad now that you didn't come.”

“You are?” Emma’s head shot up. She hadn’t expected that at all. “Why this change of heart?”

Regina let go of the railing and turned to face Emma. “You're so fragile,” she said, looking Emma up and down as if judging her state of fragility.

“Fragile.” Emma wasn’t sure where this was going but the longer she was standing here, the worse she felt.

“Yes,” Regina confirmed. “You damage so easily.”

Again, Emma could only repeat what she had heard. “Damage?”

Regina straightened her posture and chuckled. “Sues for 80 million dollars.” She shook her head lightly. “That fascinates me ... asks for 80 million dollars in damages.”

Emma sighed. “So the Burns-Norvells told you.”
Regina nodded. “It gave me a new light on you,” she explained, her voice thoughtful. “Who is this marvel, I wondered ... Mother Teresa? Jeanne d'Arc?” She looked at Emma. “What has she done to earn such a precious reputation? Found a cure for death and taxes?” Her tone had turned to slightly mocking now.

Emma flushed, both in anger and frustration. “Aren't you being a little absurd?”

Regina turned serious in a heartbeat. “Aren't you?” With that, she turned to leave.

A hand on her arm stopped her. “Wait a minute, you don't understand--”

Regina carefully removed Emma’s hand from her arm and put it gently on the railing. “Do be careful, dear. It might break.” She raised her hands as if in surrender and took a small step back. “I'm not accustomed to handling anything so ... delicate, so valuable.” She pointed at Emma’s hand that was clenching around the railing so hard her knuckles were turning white in the moonlight. “That should be touched only by royalty, dukes or princes,” she said, knowing she was pushing Emma harder and harder with each word. “As a matter of fact,” she finished with a smirk, “you probably should be kept under glass.”

Crack.

Ouch.

Regina had seen the slap coming in the blazing of Emma’s eyes and the fury dancing across her face. She should have known it would end this way, but there was a part of her that hadn’t been entirely sure if their argument would end in a slap or a frustrated, heated kiss, fueled by animosity as much as their mutual attraction.

As Emma stormed away, Regina rubbed her burning cheek. She would have preferred the kiss. Ah well, slap it is, then. And not one that was delicate or fragile at all, she thought with a smile.

But it definitely was the first slap she’d ever received that felt a lot like something else.
“... and that, my dears, is the last I saw of Emma Swan until we reached New York.” Regina finished her report to Helena and Myka as they were all sitting in Regina’s suite at the Grand Plaza.

“Great.” Helena groaned. “Five days on a boat and all you manage to achieve is that she slaps your face. That’s great progress.”

Myka grinned wickedly. “So, Wonder Woman lays an egg.”

Regina wasn’t in the mood. “Would you tell your girlfriend to shut up?” she told Helena.

“Nobody tells me to shut up,” Myka said, her voice dangerously low. “I’m about ready to walk out of this arrangement and have our pathetic fake marriage annulled right now.”

“We’ll need to postpone that, if you want Helena to keep her job,” Regina replied with a shrug. “Personally, I don’t care one way or the other.” Which wasn’t entirely true, but the other two didn’t need to know that.

Helena snorted. “I’m betting a million to one we’ll never see them again.”

“You’d lose.” Regina plucked an invisible piece of lint off her shirt sleeve. “Nolan’s already invited me for a weekend of fishing.”

“Just you and the father?”

Myka laughed. “What do I do, bust in on you and the old man?”

Regina shook her head. “Emma will be there,” she said with conviction. “I’d take bets on that, too.” She unconsciously rubbed her cheek and smiled. “That was no farewell slap.”

Helena shrugged. If Regina believed that, it was good enough for her. So far, she had always come through for them. “When are you going?”

“Day after tomorrow. We’re driving up early on Saturday.” And by early she meant the middle of the night basically. She hadn’t even known people actually got up at that time of the day. “Apparently we need to be at the cabin early enough to wake the fish or something.”

Helena jumped up. “That’s perfect,” she crowed. “Alone in the mountains, away from the world ...” She pointed at Myka. “That night, Myka and I ... no, wait, I’d better stay away. Just Myka--”

“What?” Myka asked. “You want me to go alone?”

“No,” Helena replied. “With a detective.” She pictured the scene in her mind. “Emma rushes from her room, scantily clad. You come from yours, follow her, also not exactly dressed.”

“What will I wear?” Myka asked with a raised eyebrow.
“Flashlights, bang!” Helena cried, and Myka wasn’t sure if that was an actual answer to her question or not. “The case is in the bag. Nice work, Regina. I knew you’d deliver.”

Myka rolled her eyes. When Helena was that lost in her work – and smelling success – there was no talking with her. “I think I’ll wear that blue dress of yours,” she said to Regina. “I look good in blue.”

Regina gave her a strange look, but nodded before she focused on Helena again. “There's only one problem.”

“Problem?”

“Fish.”

“Fish?”

Regina nodded. “I told Nolan fish stories that would curl your hair and I’ve never even had a rod in my hand.”

Helena dismissed her. “I'll have an instructor here in the morning. That’ll give you a day to learn. Myka can help you.” She got up to leave.

“Wait a second.” Myka stopped Helena with a hand on her arm. “Here? In the morning?” she asked. “And you’re gonna leave me here alone over night?”

“I'm here,” Regina reminded mildly, enjoying Helena’s sudden discomfort.

Helena was a little flustered. “It'll be all right, Myka. It's just a business arrangement, and this is a nice suite.”

“Pretty funny business,” Myka grumbled.

Regina decided to move things along a bit, and walked into the bedroom. She was tired and wanted to be alone. Since that was apparently not going to happen, she at least wanted Helena gone so she could get some sleep.

“Where are you going?” Myka asked suspiciously.

Regina poked her head out the door. “To get some bedclothes,” she explained. “I'm sleeping out here.” She pointed to the couch.

“Well, ...” Myka started.

Helena wrapped her arms around Myka. “You see, it'll be all right,” she said softly. “Regina out here and you in there.”

Myka gave her a look. “So what you’re saying is that you’re willing to let your fiancee, the girl you love, spend the night with ...” A woman you called the most successful womanizer you ever met?

Regina raised her eyebrow but didn’t say anything as she dropped the sheets onto the couch, quietly whistling the Wedding March.

“Myka, please. Darling, I ...” Helena looked at Regina. “No funny business, okay?” she said sternly.

“Oh, please.” Regina snorted and went back to whistling. She really wasn’t interested in Myka that way.
Myka wasn’t done with her rant. “I've done plenty for you and the Star but there's a time to draw a line, and I'm drawing it now.”

Helena pecked Myka’s cheek. “Please?” she asked sweetly. “I trust Regina like she was my sister.” Which wasn’t true at all, but she did trust her with Myka.

Myka snorted. “Yeah, but she’s not my sister.” She looked at Regina and the bedclothes, then back at Helena. “Okay, I guess one night won’t hurt,” she finally agreed. “But one false move, and I’m out of here.”

Regina saluted her. “Fine with me.”

“It’ll be fine, darling. Thank you for doing this.” Helena kissed Myka goodbye and opened the door. “Regina, I'll have that fisherman here first thing in the morning.” She sent Myka one last, loving look. “Good night, darling.” I am so dead.

“Good night, beast.” Myka watched the door close behind Helena, then stalked into the bedroom without another glance at Regina, who shook her head with a small smile and loudly whistled the first few notes of Here Comes The Bride. The bedroom door closed with a bang and Regina was sure she heard it being locked.

Myka really didn’t have anything to worry about, Regina thought as she got ready for what promised to be an uncomfortable night on the couch. There was only one woman on her mind these days, and she couldn’t wait for the weekend to see her again.

Emma paced up and down in the dining room. “Dad, really?” She threw up her arms. “You don’t even know her.”

David looked up from his papers. “I know enough about her to know that she’s a great angler.” He paused. “You know that’s all there is to the weekend, right?”

Emma laughed. “Yes, I know, Dad,” she said, walking over and running a hand through his short, thinning hair. “You haven’t looked at another woman since the day you met Mom.”

David studied his daughter. “What do you think of Regina?”

“Me? Nothing? What? Why would I think anything?” She fired off her questions way too quickly, she knew, but she hadn’t been prepared for the direction this conversation was going.

Her father gave her a knowing look. “I may be old, darling girl,” he said with a smile, “but I’m neither blind nor deaf.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Emma scowled as she gracelessly dropped onto the love seat, slinging one leg over the armrest.

“Well, let’s just say that you react rather ... strongly whenever she’s mentioned,” David replied. “And you have been since that first night we had dinner with her.” He saw Emma frown. “What happened between you, baby girl?”

“Nothing,” she muttered.

“Did she ... try something untoward?” He flushed a little.
Emma burst out laughing. “Untoward? God, Dad, you need to work on your vocabulary.” She shook her head. “Nothing like that.” Unfortunately, tragically not, a part of her kept thinking. She knew Regina was dangerous, but that was probably what attracted her to the other woman in the first place. And definitely not her flawless body or gorgeous eyes or the way they lit up during their verbal sparring. “I just think she’s after something.”

“Like what?” David asked. He knew better than to ignore his daughter’s instincts. She’d had too many suitors who had been after her for only her money, but he just knew she was wrong this time. “She didn’t exactly behave like she was that interested in you,” he commented mildly. “Or me, for that matter,” he added.

“No, I know.” Emma hesitated. “I don’t know what she’s after. She probably wants you to invest in something or sell you a bridge somewhere. Or another emerald mine.”

David grinned. “Well, if that happens, I promise to talk it over with you.” He looked back at his papers, feigning disinterest. “You could come with us this weekend to make sure she’s not up to anything shady,” he suggested, watching his daughter over the top of the contract he was ostensibly checking. She looked torn.

“Come on, baby girl,” he coaxed. “You love it at the cabin.” And you want to see her again. He had no idea how he knew that, but know it he did. He had a feeling Regina Mills could be good for his daughter. Well, if she was on the level, like he thought she was. If not, he would take care of it, like always. “Come on, say you’re going to come.”

Emma bit her lower lip. “I’ll think about it.” She decided to ignore the butterflies in her belly at the thought of seeing Regina again.

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Regina almost fell off the couch when the phone on the table next to her rang loudly. She shook herself to wake up a little and stretched to get the kinks out of her body. Much as she had expected, that couch had not been made for sleeping on it.

“Hello?” she rasped, running one hand through her messy hair. “Huh? Flowers?” She tried desperately to wake up a little more. “On the way up? – Oh, yes, thanks.”

She dropped the receiver and jumped up and threw on a robe before grabbing her blanket and pillow in one fluid motion as she made her way to the bedroom door. “Open the door, will you?” she asked loudly. “There are some flowers on the way up and we gotta get these bedclothes out of here.”

Myka jumped up, instantly awake. She got up to put on a robe and ran over to the door, but the key wasn’t in the lock.

“Hurry up!” Regina husked, her voice still deep and raspy from sleep.

Myka swallowed at the voice, and it wasn’t all because of what she had just realized. “I lost the keys,” she said in a bit of a panic as Regina groaned on the other side of the door. She heard Regina walk away from the door and back, and suddenly the door swung open.

“Good morning,” Regina muttered before passing by Myka and dropping the blanket and pillow on the bed.

“Where did you get that key?”

Regina smirked. “The front-door key always fits both doors.”
“You mean that key was there all night?”

“Of course.”

There was a knock on the door and Regina went to answer it, which is how she missed the thoughtful look Myka gave her.

“For Mrs. Mills,” the voice behind the huge bouquet told Regina.

“No, Myka,” Regina said. “Just wait a minute.” She waved Myka over, who looked surprised.

“For me, honey?”

“Yes, my sweet little peach.” Regina tried to hide her grimace behind a kiss to Myka’s cheek. *I’m going to throw up in my mouth in a second.*

“Are they lovely? Thank you, sweetie,” Myka asked, sounding almost sincere. She waited until Regina gave the delivery guy a tip and closed the door. “How did you know white roses were my favorite flowers?”

“What?”

Myka showed her the card that came with the flowers: *With all my love, Regina.*

“Oh,” Regina said. “Helena must have sent those.”

Myka scoffed. “Helena has never sent me flowers before.”

“No?” *Then she’s even more of an idiot than I thought she was,* Regina thought. “It’s all part of the plan, I think.”

Myka put the flowers in a vase, watching Regina out of the corner of her eyes. “Where are you off to?” she asked when Regina walked in the direction of the bedroom.

Regina stopped. “I thought I’d get dressed and go down to get some breakfast.”

Myka had another idea. “I thought the plan was to stay here and look married.” The way she said it was almost challenging.

Regina tried to hide her surprise, but failed. “Well, if you don’t mind.”

Myka smiled. “I don’t mind if you don’t mind.”

“Oh, I don’t mind if you ...” Regina stopped and grinned. “Who started this?”

Myka laughed out loud, the first time Regina could remember seeing her actually laugh, and grabbed the receiver to call room service. “Well,” she asked with a broad grin, “what do you want to order?”

“Breakfast, of course,” Regina replied with a smile as she walked into the bedroom and to the shower. “You know, coffee, fruit, ...”

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Myka let out a frustrated huff. *Newspaper people ... they’re all the same.* Across the table all she could see of her breakfast companion were Regina’s hands as they held open *The New York Times.* Myka had now read the headline on the front page about 200 times and was getting very, very bored.
“More coffee, Regina?”

“No, thanks.”

Myka poured herself some coffee and sat the pot back down none too gently. “Well, this certainly looks married,” she said. “A little too married for me.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” Regina lowered the paper. “Here, have a piece.” She checked the various parts that were lying on her lap. “Would you like the feuilleton?”

“No,” Myka replied. “I want to talk.”

The paper went down completely. “You do?” That’s unexpected. I thought you didn’t want anything to do with me. “Well, all right, let’s talk.” She leaned one elbow on the table and studied Myka. “Who goes first?”

“I’ll start.” Myka tried to read Regina’s expression but all she saw was a soft smile. “You are ... very strange, Ms. Mills.”

Regina leaned back in her chair. “I bet you say that to all the girls.”

A knock on the door interrupted them. “I'll get it,” Myka said, already getting up.

An older man was at the door, followed by three bell boys carrying various boxes. “Good morning,” the man said, doffing his cap. “Mrs. Mills?”

“No ... I mean, yes,” Myka said. “Just got married, sorry.”

“I'm Evans from the Angler Supply Company,” the man explained. “I brought some supplies.”

“Bring them right in.” Myka opened the door wide and led Mr. Evans over to Regina. “And this is the Ms. Mills you actually want to be speaking to.”

“Good morning, Mr. Evans,” Regina greeted as she shook his hand.

“I've brought everything ... a complete outfit,” he told Regina. “You'll have no trouble at all learning to fish with this equipment.”

Well, I guess it's time to learn how to fish, Regina thought as Myka asked the bell boys to clear out the breakfast trays.

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“No, ma’am,” Mr. Evans said for what seemed like the hundredth time after two hours of Regina hitting chairs, curtains and the odd picture frame on the wall with her fishing hook. “The elbow low and close,” he explained again. “Muscle has nothing to do with it. It's the natural spring of the rod, ma’am.”

“Too bad I'm not fishing for curtains,” Regina muttered with a frown. “I'd be sensational.”

Myka pulled the hook from the latest victim – the curtains – with a small smirk. “Well, I suppose you could always break your leg, then you can stay home.”

“That's what I call constructive.” Regina glared at Myka. She would go on this fishing trip with David and Emma – she refused to even consider the fact that Emma might not be there – and she would not look like a fool in front of them. If fishing was what it took, she would learn how to fish.
It couldn’t be *that* difficult.

Myka shrugged. “Just trying to help.”

Mr. Evans cleared his throat. “Now, a little patience, ma’am. Try again. And remember, the elbow low and close.”

“Low and close,” Regina repeated and tried again. A lampshade just barely missed Myka as it came flying by at the end of the hook.

“Bull’s eye!” Myka cried as she caught the base of the lamp as it fell over. “Give the lady a cigar.”

Regina’s shoulders sagged. “I don't quite seem to get it.”

“It's your wrist, ma’am.”

*I doubt that*, Regina thought. *You should see what I can do with my wrist.*

“Keep it easy and fluid like rippling water.” Mr. Evans demonstrated by waving his hand up and down. “This way, ma’am.”

Regina tried to mimic the way his wrist moved, waving back at him. Myka looked up to see the two of them waving the hands loosely at each other, and she burst out laughing.

Regina looked a little miffed. “Dear, don't you want to powder your nose or something?” She really didn’t feel up to embarrass herself any further than she already had.

Myka grinned broadly. “And miss this? Not for the world, sweetie.” *This was the best payback ever.*

Mr. Evans looked like he had an inspiration. “Pretend there’s a nice five-pound trout in that pool over there,” he said, pointing to a spot at the far end of the room. “Just behind the jutting boulder.”

“What jutting boulder?”

Mr. Evans motioned for Myka to follow him to a side table between Regina and the spot he had named as the pool. “Mrs. Mills, would you mind bending over this corner of the table?”

Myka put her elbows on the table and bent over. *I’m never mentioning this to Helena. Ever. Bent over a table for Regina Mills.* She cleared her throat. “And now I'm a jutting boulder.” She sighed.

Mr. Evans nodded and climbed onto the sofa behind Regina. “And I'll be a tall, spreading tree just behind you,” he said as he spread his arms. “Don't forget the wrist.”

“And remember there's a man on second,” Myka said sardonically.

Regina looked dubious as she handled the rod. “I know I'm never gonna get this. I was never cut out to be an angler.” She changed the grip on the rod. “Look, this is the way I would do it.” She moved her arm as if she was hitting a backhand with a tennis racket.

The hook flew out in a beautiful arc, hitting Myka directly on her butt. “Ouch, dammit!”

“You did it, ma’am,” Mr. Evans jumped off the sofa in excitement.

“I'll say she did it,” Myka straightened, rubbing her backside. “And how. Ouch.”

“That cast, ma’am.” Evans was still completely excited. “Not one angler in fifty can master the
underhand stroke.”

“Underhand is right,” Myka muttered, still rubbing.

“You mean it’s all right to do it like that?” Regina asked.

“It’s perfect!” Evans exclaimed. “Could you do it again?”

“Not with this boulder, she can’t,” Myka said.

Regina shrugged and did it again. “It’s just like a backhand at tennis.” She hit the right spot twice more, then looked at her teacher.

“Simply perfect, ma’am,” he said reverently. Even Myka looked a little impressed.

“Yeah?” Regina just wanted to be absolutely sure.

“Trust me, you won’t look like a fool,” Myka had said.

Of course Regina looked like a fool.

And she knew it as soon as she saw David and Emma in their simple, used, and functional fishing gear while she looked like a fishing store had thrown up on her. Mr. Evans had indeed brought her all of his available equipment. *Great, now I look like a complete idiot in front of her. Them, I meant. Them.*

“This is what makes life worth living,” David said, spreading his arms wide. “A breath of this early morning air is worth all the medicine in the world. Don’t you agree, Regina?”

“Certainly is,” Regina mumbled around a yawn she couldn’t stop in time. It was way too early for her.

“We're not keeping you up, are we, Ms. Mills?” Emma asked, barely able to hide a grin at the sight of Regina stumbling through the underbrush to get to the little stream.

“Me?” Regina carefully stepped over a large root. “No. I'm always up at the crack of dawn.” *Just not this particularly early crack.*

“Shhh.” David held a finger to his lips. “Here we are, Regina,” he whispered. “My favorite spot. How do you like it?”

“Looks great,” Regina replied politely. “Much like a stream I know in the Lake Taupo country.”

Emma gave her a look that let Regina know that she hadn’t fooled her with that line. “Well, go ahead, Ms. Mills,” she said, readying her own rod. “As our guest, we'll give you the first cast.”

“Oh, er ... yes,” Regina said, pretending to stall a little. She knew Emma doubted her fishing abilities – and rightfully so – and she wanted to play with her a little longer. She had practiced her underhand cast so many times now that she felt completely confident in being able to pull this off, although she had no idea if she could convince any fish to bite. “I erm ... I think I'll go on up that way a little.” She pointed to a spot about 50 yards upstream. “The ripples are faster there and the brush is less dense.”

She walked off along the stream, fiddling with her new gear, knowing Emma’s eyes were on her the whole time.

“This is going to be good,” Emma casually told her father. “I still bet she can't fish.”

“Nonsense,” David disagreed. “She's the best-informed person on angling I've ever met.”

Emma chuckled. “You’re such a sucker, Dad.”
“Now listen to me, darling girl,” David protested. “I know a first-class angler when I see one.” He gave her a pointed look. “And a first-class woman, too.”

Emma snorted. “If she’s first-class, I’ll travel coach, thanks.”

“What did you come up here for?” David asked. He had been happy, of course, and it had been exactly what he had wanted, but now he doubted his idea.

“I didn't want to see my favorite father tossed to a wolf,” Emma answered truthfully.

“What are you talking about?”

“I'm talking about that,” Emma said, pointing at Regina. “She's after something, and it isn't fish. Look at those new togs ... a new rod ... new everything. Not one piece of her gear was ever used.” She saw Regina getting ready for her first cast. “Watch this.”

Regina made sure both Emma and David were watching her, then let go of her first perfect cast.

“Great guns!” David exclaimed loudly enough to scare the fish away.

Regina just made another perfect cast.

“I take it all back,” Emma said, impressed against her will. “She's good.”

“Good?” David cried. “She's magnificent. I wish I could master that underhand cast.” He cast his own rod somewhat despondently, but got a bite straight away. “I've got one!” He unhooked the trout and checked it. “A beauty.”

Emma smiled as she felt her own line tighten. “Got one, too!”

Both Emma and David kept catching fish with almost every cast while Regina was still mostly glad to get her casts in the water.

“Not having much luck, are you, Ms. Mills?” Emma called over.

“Yeah,” David chimed in. “I'm surprised you're not catching any fish, Regina.” He pulled another one out of the water.

Regina surreptitiously checked her angler’s handbook that she had stashed inside the little fish basked strapped to her waist. I have to be doing something wrong. “It won't be long now,” she called back. She pointed further upstream and walked away from Emma and David until she couldn’t see the two anymore. She stopped and looked around to ensure she was completely alone once more before pulling out the handbook.

She saw a fallen log in the middle of the stream and walked over to sit down for a little bit of reading time. Unfortunately, she missed the deep spot between her and the log and gasped when she took a wrong step and fell into the water face first, drenching herself and her book.

“Fuck,” she mumbled and immediately checked if anyone had witnessed her little accident. She sighed when she realized that she might have been monumentally stupid, but at least she’d been entirely alone while doing it. She made her way over to the fallen log and sat down, shaking her whole body in an attempt to shed some of the water.

That’s when she realized that the book wasn’t in her hands any longer. She looked around and saw it floating downstream, bobbing merrily on the small ripples of water. “Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit,” she
said. She couldn’t have the book floating right past Emma and David. They’d know immediately that she was a fraud, and all her plans would be over.

She scrambled after the book, splashing water everywhere until finally she just jumped after it, arms outstretched as much as possible in all her gear, and managed to get her hand on it just before the bend in the stream that would have brought her into full view of Emma and David.

Relieved, she tossed the useless book in her basket and slowly made her way back to the log. “What do I do now?” she asked her rod, which remained mockingly silent. With a sigh, Regina slung the rod over one shoulder, just letting it rest there for a minute. She’d just have to cop to being a complete failure at fishing ... but only after wallowing in self-pity for a few more minutes.

She scratched her nose, not realizing that she made the rod move with every twitch of her finger. Suddenly, there was a huge tug and she got thrown off the log and backwards into the water. “What the hell?” she sputtered as she came back up for air. Then she saw a huge fish at the end of her line, jumping in and out of the water, heading downstream and pulling her with it. All she could do was hold onto her end of the rod and scramble after it. She tried to reel the fish in but she couldn’t get it to work against the fighting monster trout.

Emma looked upstream when she heard the splashing sounds coming from there. A second later, Regina came into view fighting with her rod and a fish, looking completely overwhelmed. “Dad, look!” she shouted.


So not helpful. Regina still had the time to roll her eyes at the conflicting instructions.

“Reel him out. Reel him.” David shouted again.

Emma threw down her rod on a log and ran to help Regina. “Here, hold his head up.” She grabbed her net from her belt.


Emma proudly showed off the huge fish in her net. “Damn, what a beauty,” she shouted with a bright smile. “How'd you do it?” she asked Regina.

Regina grinned happily at the excitement on Emma’s face. She was incredibly beautiful like that. “I just followed the boo ... er, the hook.”

Emma laughed out loud, not even noticing the slip. She was too mesmerized by the glint of joy and delight in Regina’s dark eyes. Now that she was certain that Regina was just another fishing enthusiast, she allowed herself to enjoy her attraction to the other woman without any mental anguish. Damn, she’s so, so beautiful.

David finally made it over to where Regina and Emma were standing smiling brightly at each other. “Walleye. You've got Walleye.”

Regina tore her eyes from Emma’s with difficulty. “Who?”

“Walleye,” David repeated. “The biggest, most elusive trout in Glen Arden. We've been fishing him for two years and you got him.”
“I’m sorry if …”

“Nothing to be sorry for,” David interrupted the apology. “But I'm ashamed of you, Emma.” He turned to his daughter who blushed immediately. “Spoiling her sport with a net. Nine-tenths of the fun is reeling him in.”

Emma looked contrite, which would have worked better, Regina thought, if she weren’t also still grinning from ear to ear. “I know,” she told her father before turning back to Regina. “I'm so sorry, I was just so excited.”

Regina wanted to tell her that it was okay, but David spoke before she got the chance. “Unhook him,” he said.

“What?” Regina didn’t like where this was going at all.

“Yeah,” Emma agreed. “Come on, unhook him.”

“Okay,” Regina said, trying desperately to come up with a way of getting out of touching the slimy creature in the net. Suddenly she shook her head. “No, no,” she said. “You invited me up here, and I practically stole your catch,” she told David. “You should at least have some of the glory.” She smiled winningly. “So you unhook him.”

David looked eager, but he held back. “I don't like to spoil your fun.”

Regina hoped Emma and David missed her shudder at the thought. “No, no, quite the contrary,” she said. David was already pulling Walleye from the net by the hook in its mouth. “There's plenty of glory to go all around,” she added, trying to keep a straight face as David expertly unhooked the fish.

“It's mighty sporting of you to let me do this.”

“Oh, not at all.”

They agreed quickly to end their day of fishing after all this excitement and all Regina could think was, Thank God that’s over.

Now for the fun part.

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One thing was certain, Regina thought as they were all sitting at the dinner table in the center of the cabin’s main room downstairs. Walleye had looked good all dressed up with a lemon in its mouth. And it had tasted extremely well, too. Who knew Emma Swan could actually cook?

“I think a toast is in order, if you don't mind,” David said. “To Walleye, king of trouts.”

“Hear, hear,” Emma said.

“How have the mighty fallen,” Regina said, raising her glass.

“Undone by a Parmachene Belle,” David said with a chuckle. “And I thought his weakness was a Pink Lady.”

“Another batch coming up,” Emma announced, pointing with her spatula.

“You certainly have a way with the griddle.” Regina smiled softly at Emma who was standing at the head of the table making them flapjacks for dessert.
“She's a remarkable girl,” David commented softly.

“I'm beginning to think you're right,” Regina agreed with a wink to Emma.

Emma raised an eyebrow at her father. “I resent the understatement.”

David shrugged. “Just a spoiled brat then, okay.”

Regina laughed. “So, are we getting some more of that goodness sometime tonight?”

“Yes, ma'am,” Emma said. “Coming right up.” She dropped a pancake on Regina’s plate from about three feet above the table.

“Bulls eye,” Regina congratulated.

“Never miss,” Emma said flippantly. “Queen of the flapjacks. There’s a career for me in that, I think, if anything else doesn’t work out.” She turned to David, holding out a flapjack. “Dad?”

David shook his head and stood. He had been planning to leave the two women alone from the moment he had sensed Emma had overcome her problems with Regina. He patted his belly, pushing it out as far as it would go. “I must think of my figure.” He kissed Emma’s cheek. “A nice walk, if you can spare me, and then eight hours of sleep.”

“But we need help with these, Dad.”

“No more for me.” He smiled at Regina, trying to express his approval of her somehow, and left.

“Imagine you and flapjacks,” Regina said mildly as Emma joined her at the table. “How did that happen?”

“Our cook,” Emma mumbled around a huge bite of her own flapjack.

“I still think it's a trick.” Regina grinned. She enjoyed this bantering with Emma, even more so now that she felt the reticence from Emma was gone. This was plain and simple flirting, and Regina was feeling herself sink deeper and deeper.

Emma grinned right back. “Nothing in my hands, nothing up my sleeves.” Emma showed off her well-defined arms.

Regina swallowed. “Oh, I know,” she said hoarsely. “It's all done with mirrors.”

Emma closed her eyes for a second, letting that voice wash over her. She smiled at the butterflies in her belly this time. She wished she could make Regina see that there was more to her than the newspaper articles and the rumors about her. “There are many sides to my nature,” she said with a small grin, trying to hide the seriousness of what she was saying. “Depths you'd never dream of.”

Regina studied Emma carefully, noticing the shift in the conversation. She knew she had Emma almost where she wanted her, but she suddenly realized that that wasn’t what she wanted at all. She simply wanted her. Not for show, not for the Star. For herself. She was falling in love with Emma Swan. “I'll conduct a study,” she said softly, hoping it conveyed the right message. It might take a long, long time.

Emma’s eyes grew a shade greener. “Please do.” She decided to take down the intensity a little bit. Her father would probably be scandalized if she jumped Regina across the dining table. He was a tolerant man, but maybe not quite that tolerant. Time to take this somewhere a little more private.
“How’d you like a swim in the moonlight?” she suddenly asked.

Regina was surprised. “Swim?”

“Yeah,” Emma said with a nod. “You do swim, right?”

Regina chuckled. “Yes, I swim ... almost as well as I dance, in fact.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t let you drown,” Emma replied dryly.

Regina wondered if she was being tested somehow. “Isn’t the water pretty cold?”

“Extremely.” Emma shrugged. “Do you mind?”

Now Regina was certain this was a test. “What, me mind?” she scoffed. “My friends call me “Polar Bear” Mills,” She hated cold water. She hated cold anything. But if it meant spending time with Emma, she’d probably go and sit naked on an iceberg.

“We’ll see, Ms. Mills,” Emma said mischievously. “So, did you bring a bathing suit or do you need one of mine? Or are you more of a skinny dipping person?”

Regina swallowed the lump in her throat at the images that question provoked. “One of yours,” was all she could croak.

Emma smiled devilishly, already planning which of her skimpy bikinis to give Regina.
Helena had decided to drive Myka up to the cabin herself. There was no way she was going to miss out on this. She could already see Emma’s panicked face in her mind’s eye, could see Regina’s triumphant smirk, and could feel the relief that she knew would flood Myka at all of this being over. And she would be glad to have Regina out of her life again, too.

“We're only 20 miles from the place,” she remarked, mostly to Myka. “We’ll be there in 45 minutes.” Those winding country roads were difficult to handle at night.

“But I'm not supposed to show up until midnight,” Myka reminded her. “Wasn’t that the plan?”

Helena shrugged. “What's the difference? You'll bust in on them half an hour earlier, that's all.” She gave Myka a smile. “The sooner the better, I’d say.”

“I’m fine with that,” Myka said quickly, and the private investigator in the backseat sniggered at her eager tone. “Can’t be over soon enough.”

“I’m sorry I made you go through this,” Helena said quietly. “And I’m glad it’ll be over tonight.” She reached out to take Myka’s hand and pull it over to her thigh when another snigger from the backseat stopped her mid-motion.

“Hey, are you two going to give me a preview on the girl-on-girl action?” the investigator asked from the backseat, leaning forward and leering at Myka and Helena.

“Shut it, Leroy,” Helena shouted and slammed her foot on the brakes before speeding up again. She heard a groan as Leroy was being tossed around, and smiled in utter satisfaction.

Myka just took her hand and pulled it over to her thigh with a smile.

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Regina looked down her own body with a raised eyebrow. To call the bikini Emma had given her skimpy was actually a vast exaggeration. The black triangles barely covered the necessities, and she could see by the look on Emma’s face that the woman had wanted her on display and was enjoying it immensely.

Not that Emma’s bikini was any better ... or worse, Regina mused. The main difference was that it was white. Complementing each other ... her light to my darkness, Regina figured. And it’s not like either of them had occasion to be shy about their bodies. Regina knew damn well what her body looked liked, and Emma’s was just ... all long limbs and toned muscle. A runner’s physique.

Emma had started to reconsider her choice in bathing suits for Regina the second the other woman had stepped out of the little cabana by the lake shore. Holy hot damn. Her brain began to tune out anything but the sight before her, and she knew she had to get into the cold water fast or all she’d get
Regina Mills.

Emma turned away and ran into the cold lake, splashing water all around her and getting Regina wet in the process. And not just on the outside, Regina mused, as she followed Emma at a more leisurely pace. She wanted to enjoy the view as long as she could.

As predicted, the water was really cold and Regina could feel her body tighten in some very interesting places. She tried to ignore her hardening nipples and dove after Emma who had disappeared under the surface. They played in the water for a while until it became too cold to bear, and then swam over to a platform in the middle of the lake. Regina could see that it was anchored to the ground somehow and also tied to some buoys and it looked like an open room on the water, roof and all.

They climbed up and Emma handed Regina a towel and a thick, fluffy robe. “It’s my dad’s,” she said. “I hope you don’t mind. He hasn’t been out here in years, so it’s actually unused.”

Regina shrugged and dried her hair with the towel before putting on the robe. The night was warm, but the robe felt good on her cooled skin. “It’s pretty palatial up here,” she commented as she looked around the room that was filled with a settee and all sorts of cushions to sit on and several large candles in glass holders. There was even a radio and a small bar.

Emma wasn’t sure if Regina just meant her little lake refuge or everything including her family’s rather large cabin, but she just shrugged. She’d known it since she’d been a small child and to her it was normal. “Like it?”

Regina watched as Emma lit a couple of candles, bathing them in soft light. “I think it’s great. Very private.”

Emma laughed. “That it is.” She plopped down onto the low settee, sinking into a pile of cushions. “I always come to the lake for a plunge after a day of fishing,” she said, getting comfortable. “I’ve even stayed out here all night.”

Regina fiddled with the old-fashioned radio and finally managed to turn it on. “What? Here, alone?” she asked over her shoulder.

“Yeah, there’s nothing to be afraid of.”

“Very nice.” Regina pointed to the radio, but talking about everything.

Emma listened to the soft sounds for a few moments. A big band was playing something old-fashioned and nostalgic. “I like music with my moonlight.” She patted the cushions next to her, trying not to be too obvious.

Regina swallowed. She knew if she got anywhere close to Emma right now, she would not be able to stop herself from kissing her senseless, and quite possibly more. And she still had to take care of something tonight. She decided to lighten the mood a little and still learn something about Emma.

“You know, you’re a funny kid,” Regina said with a smile. She held out a glass to Emma in silent question and received a nod. “That’s what you seem like up here, a kid.” She handed Emma her drink. “Very different from the woman I met on the boat.”

Emma took a sip and set the glass down on the floor. “I feel different up here.” She pointed out over the dark lake. “This place, it’s all tied up with my childhood. The trees, the air, the water.” She paused, letting nature’s sounds take over for a moment. “Even the frogs,” she continued with a wide grin. “I’m crazy about frogs.”
Regina couldn’t stop herself when she saw the bright smile on Emma’s face. She sank down onto the cushions next to her, although she tried to keep a little distance between them.

Emma was having none of that. She simply moved herself closer to Regina. “I love it,” she continued, still smiling. “My mom loved the cabin. We always had heavenly times up here. Every minute completely filled.” Her eyes met Regina’s. “Like today.”

Regina was getting lost in the bright eyes that shone in the moonlight and the flickering light of the two candles. “Yes. It’s been perfect,” she husked.

“It has, hasn’t it?” Emma’s voice was turning gravelly.

“Almost too perfect,” Regina muttered, leaning in a little closer. She was so ready to kiss Emma, she could almost feel their lips touching.

“And it's costing me a fortune,” Emma muttered, her focus on Regina’s lips.

Regina leaned back in surprise. “What?”

Emma sighed. Dammit, Swan, next time just stop talking and kiss her. “I'm paying dearly for this day of fun,” she explained.

“What?” As if Regina didn’t have a pretty good idea.

“It's my own fault for daring to bet with my dad on women.” She turned to her side and leaned on an elbow. “I'm a terrible judge of women.”

Regina chuckled. “Aren’t we all?”

Emma gave her a long look. “I bet him a new plane that you'd tip your hand in the first 24 hours,” she said.

“It's rather nice of your father to back a dark horse,” Regina said quietly while secretly wondering about David’s motives. She turned on her side as well and mirrored Emma’s position, their faces close together now.

“Dad's a great judge of character,” Emma whispered. “He placed you right away: Charming, friendly, enthusiastic, guileless.”

Regina’s head reared back as her eyebrows shot up. “Guileless?” she frowned. “Not so sure about that,” she muttered. “What's your analysis?”

“Well, I said to dad on the boat that you were just another fortune hunter chasing the billion dollar girl.”

Regina grimaced. “And?”

Emma sighed. “Then you told me off for being fragile but I still said she's got something up her sleeve she wants to sell.” She smiled at Regina and reached out to play with a few wayward strands of dark hair. “An oil well, an invention, or an emerald mine.” She ran her fingers through the hair that rested on Regina’s shoulder. “The last guy we took on had an emerald mine.”

A guy? Regina frowned. Emma saw it and gave her a look that told Regina exactly how much of chance that guy had had. Regina had no idea why she was so incredibly relieved at the thought.

Emma’s hand unconsciously moved closer to Regina’s face. “And will you believe,” she murmured,
“I even bet you didn't fish?”

Regina smiled softly. “And you lost.”

Emma nodded. “Live and learn, I told myself. Next time, don't bet on a woman.”

Regina’s face clouded over. Emma had been right about her from the beginning, had known exactly that somebody was trying to play her, and Regina was starting to feel nauseous at the thought of destroying Emma’s good instincts simply by being lucky enough to escape detection. But she couldn’t tell Emma that she had been right because telling her would ensure that she never saw her again. She just couldn’t risk that. At least not yet. Maybe not ever.

Emma saw the clouds moving across Regina’s face. “What are you thinking?” she asked, wondering if she had over-shared. “I didn't hurt you, did I? I really didn't mean to hurt you.” She swallowed. “That was just my way of saying I hope we can be friends.”

Regina swore right then and there that she would do whatever she could not to hurt this woman she came to appreciate more and more with each passing second up here in the mountains. “That's about the nicest thing that's been said to me this lifetime,” she replied thickly, staring into Emma’s eyes.

Emma got lost in the dark gaze. “So ... friends?” she asked, while already moving her face closer to Regina’s.

“Yes, please,” Regina whispered thickly before all thought was driven out of her mind by the feeling of Emma’s lips on hers.

The kiss started out tentative and gentle, both still a little unsure if they were on the same page. But from one second to the next, with a soft swipe of a tongue along a bottom lip, the kiss turned hot, deep, and fiery. Regina moaned at the velvet feel of Emma’s mouth, at the gentle yet passionate way her tongue caressed Regina’s, the way their kiss was at the same time serious and playful, tender and wild, patient and desperate.

Emma knew from the first second their lips touched that she would never get enough of kissing Regina. Her insides coiled tightly when Regina moaned, and she couldn’t hold back a low groan in response. She tangled her hands in Regina’s wet hair and felt the answering pull at the back of her head, bringing them impossibly closer still. She felt one of Regina’s hands tangle in the soft cloth of her robe and then she was being pulled on top of the other woman.

Emma was the first to draw away after who knew how long. She withdrew slowly, placing one, two, three gentle kisses to Regina’s lips before she finally had her fill. For the next ten seconds or so, at least. She smiled softly when Regina’s eyes remained closed beneath her.

“So,” Emma whispered, her lips so close to Regina’s that they touched as she was speaking, “do you forgive me?”

Regina’s only reply was to close the minimal distance between their lips again and roll them over. When she pulled back after long moments, she cleared her throat. “Don't ever apologize for suspecting people, Emma,” she husked, smiling down at Emma. “Keep right on doing it. There are lots of wooden nickels in circulation.”

Emma laughed. “You sound like my dad sometimes,” she said. “No wonder he likes you so much.”

Regina let go of Emma with a grin and sat up. “Should we head back?”

Emma sat up as well but pulled Regina back to her side. “Nooo, I want to talk,” she said playfully.
“You're the first person in years I can trust enough to talk to, so you’re in for it now.”

Regina could see the seriousness behind Emma’s playful words. She cuddled up to Emma and nodded expectantly.

Emma smiled as she rested her head on Regina’s shoulder. “So, the story of my life ...” She felt Regina’s hand as it came to rest on her lower back and she pressed into the feeling with pleasure. “The kitten who died when I was six, the story of my mom, and all those twisted newspaper stories you read about my romances.” She met Regina’s eyes and only saw understanding in them. And maybe something else she didn’t dare put a name to yet. “And why they weren't romances at all,” she whispered.

“There aren’t going to be any more twisted stories,” Regina said softly, looking determined. “What do you think a paper could make of this?”

Emma snorted. “You, me, out here alone on a raft? With my being gay splashed all over the papers constantly? They’d have a field day with this one.”

The music on the radio switched to the news. “It’s 11 o’clock,” the announcer said. “Time for the news.”

Shit. Regina had almost forgotten that Myka and probably Helena were on their way to surprise Regina with Emma. She had to stop them. She jumped up and blew out the two candles, then turned off the radio. “Lights out,” she said.

Emma slowly got up as well, sensing the shift in mood. “And who are you?” she grumbled. “Cinderella? What happens at the stroke of 12:00?”

Regina pulled Emma into her arms and kissed her sweetly. “You’ll never know, I hope.”

Emma kissed her back wondering what was going on in the other woman’s mind. She really didn’t want their evening to end just yet. In fact, she didn’t want it to end at all. “What’s going on, Regina?” she asked.

Regina closed her eyes. You knew she would ask. “I just remembered that there’s something I need to take care of before midnight tonight,” she said. “Trust me?” She knew that was asking a lot, but she had to try.

Emma gave her a long look, but finally nodded. Regina kissed her again before she tore off her robe and tossed it to the side. “Come on, I’ll race you,” she said as she jumped over the edge. “Fuck, it’s still colder than a witch’s tit.” Then again, the water helped clear her head for what she needed to do.

Emma jumped in after her. “All right,” she said. “First one to the cabin gets a kiss.”

It didn’t take them long to reach the shore and walk to the cabin without all the horsing around in the water they had done on the way out to the raft. Emma beat Regina handily, and took a bow when Regina applauded, grinning widely.

Regina walked Emma to her bedroom upstairs and stopped at the door. “You won fair and square,” she said softly, mindful of the fact that David was sleeping nearby.

“That I did,” Emma replied. “Too bad the woman I want to kiss has to go take care of some mysterious business.” She winked at Regina’s glare and walked into her room, closing the door
behind her. At the last possible moment, she leaned back out through the door and pulled Regina into a kiss, wet and hot, and full of unbridled passion.

“Do what you need to do,” Emma said breathlessly when she let Regina go.

Regina made up her mind in a split-second. “It won’t take long. Wait up for me?”

Emma smiled and kissed her again, much more softly now, before closing the door to her room, leaving Regina standing in the hallway.

Was that a yes?

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“Emma Swan, you've taken from me the one thing in the world I love ... my wife.” Myka was practicing her big scene in the passenger seat, dramatically pressing Helena’s hand to her chest. “How was that?”

“Great,” Helena said, withdrawing her hand to make a turn onto an even smaller side road. Damn these woods.

“Yeah, next week the Shubert on Broadway,” Leroy drawled from the backseat.

“You just don't appreciate art,” Myka shot back. But yeah, she wouldn’t be giving up her day job any time soon. She just hoped it would look convincing enough on the photos Leroy was supposed to take. Everything else – the writing, the spinning of the story – was Helena’s job anyway, and she was good at it. “Hey, look,” she suddenly cried. “What’s that?”

“What?” Helena couldn’t see anything. But then a pair of long legs in jeans could be seen in their headlights in the middle of the road, and she hit the brakes.

“Is that a carjacking?” Myka asked loudly.

Regina rolled her eyes and walked the last few feet to the stopped car. “Shhh,” she tried to keep the newcomers quiet.

“Regina!” Helena hissed.

“What the hell?” Leroy echoed.

“I had to stop you before you got to the lodge,” Regina whispered. “She's long gone.”

“What?” Helena asked incredulously.

Myka groaned. “You mean we aren't going to finish this tonight?”

Regina managed to look vaguely apologetic. “She only came to put the place in order, then she went right back to town.”

“Why didn't you call?” Helena wanted to know. Something felt off to her.

“No reception up here.” Regina saw Leroy check his cell phone and shake his head at Helena. Phew. “I'd better go,” she said, trying to send them on their way. She really had somewhere better to be right now. “Somebody might see you here.”

“Aren't you going with us?” Myka asked. “We can take you back right now.”
Oh, hell no. “I can’t just disappear in the middle of the night.”

“Great seductress you are,” Helena said as she started the car. “She takes one look at you and runs off.”

“Calm down ... Rome wasn’t built in a day,” Regina reminded.

Helena growled. “Yeah, well, it probably didn’t cost 80 million dollars to build either,” she called after Regina who was already walking away from the car.

“At least we had a nice long drive,” Myka said as Helena turned the car around for the drive back to the city.

Helena only grunted.

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Regina paused in front of Emma’s bedroom door. She had said yes, hadn’t she? She took a deep breath and scratched softly at the door. It really wouldn’t do to wake up David by making any loud noises. And if maybe she had misunderstood Emma, the scratching wouldn’t wake her up and she’d just keep on sleeping.

Nothing happened for so long that Regina turned away with a deep sigh, resigned to a lonely night, when the door behind her opened and a long arm snaked out and pulled her inside.

Emma shut the door by pressing Regina against it with her whole body. There was a loud thud as their bodies came in contact with the heavy wood and the door fell closed. Before Regina could remind Emma that it might be better to be quiet, her mouth was covered by a pair of very insistent lips. Her hands shot out to hold on to something and found purchase on Emma’s hip and shoulder.

Which was when Regina realized that Emma was mostly naked. She tore herself away from Emma with a groan and brought some distance between them.

Oh my God.

She saw that Emma had changed into a different bikini, one that covered about as little as the one before. The difference was that now Regina could see every single detail of Emma’s body in the soft light of the room. Her jaw dropped and her hand reached out without any conscious thought on her part, to run a finger down the front of the perfect body.

“What do you like what you see?” Emma asked huskily as she pulled Regina deeper into the room.

Regina could only nod dumbly.

“I like you like this, too.” Emma smiled softly as she pointed at the blue jeans and black t-shirt Regina had thrown on to meet Helena and Myka. “I think it’s the most casual I’ve seen you wear. It looks good on you.”

“It does?” Regina made a mental note to buy more casual clothes.

Emma nodded. “But I’m sure you’ll look even better out of them.” She grabbed the hem of Regina’s t-shirt. “May I?” she asked, and when Regina nodded, she pulled the t-shirt up and over Regina’s head.

Now it was Emma’s turn to stare. She hadn’t really been prepared for the fact that Regina had neglected to wear a bra after their swim. “You are beautiful,” she said quietly.

“And you are exquisite,” Regina echoed.
“Mutual admiration society, huh?” Emma quipped, taking the intensity down a notch.

“Definitely.” Regina grinned and pulled at the string that held up Emma’s bikini top. “Fair is fair,” she said when Emma raised an eyebrow at the move.

“Is that so?”

“Hmm.”

“All right then.” Emma grinned widely and pulled off Regina’s jeans with as little fuss as possible. Regina was glad she had dropped her boots in her own room before coming here, while Emma was disappointed that Regina hadn’t gone commando.

Regina laughed softly at the expression on Emma’s face before pulling her into another kiss. “I would very much like for you to make love to me, Ms. Swan,” she rasped between kisses.

Emma felt all her blood migrate to places south of her belly as she pulled Regina closer in pure reflex. “It will be my pleasure, Ms. Mills.”

After that it was a flurry of movements as mouths collided again and again, hands sought out skin to touch, and bodies stumbled to the large bed.

The last thing Regina remembered thinking clearly was: *I guess it was a yes.*

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Regina woke up feeling warm and comfortable, her legs tangled with Emma’s and her head nestled against blonde hair. She smiled when Emma let out a soft, content sigh and burrowed deeper into Regina’s body.

“Good morning,” Regina whispered softly. She pressed a soft kiss to Emma’s ear.

“G’morning,” Emma rumbled deep in her throat. She turned her face and offered herself up for a real morning kiss, an invitation that Regina couldn’t resist.

Their kisses were soft and sweet and not nearly enough to satisfy the hunger Regina still felt deep in her body. She pulled Emma closer and kissed her deeper as her body woke up more and more.

The knock on the door was more than unwelcome. “Emma, honey?” David asked hesitantly. “Come on, it’s time for another exciting day of fishing!”

Emma groaned as she pulled away from Regina. Fishing was the last thing on her mind right now. “I’m coming!”

“Well, you certainly would have in about five minutes,” Regina whispered in her ear with a wicked little grin. Emma groaned as her insides clenched in desire.

“Great,” David replied. “Oh, and tell Regina to come too, okay. And good morning to you two.” Then he walked away with a wide grin.

Emma couldn’t help herself. She burst out laughing at the shocked look on Regina’s face. “Told you he likes you.”
Monday night saw Regina and Helena arguing, while Myka sat in an armchair with some paperwork she needed to read. “What are you talking about?” Helena asked again. “We can't miss. The setup is perfect.”

Regina rolled her eyes. Any more of this and her eyes would get permanently stuck that way. “The setup is crazy. We don’t stand a chance.”

“At the end of the 10th round, it's a draw,” Myka drawled, not looking up from her files.

Helena took a deep breath. “The girl was there in the mountains?”

“But only for a short time.”

“That’s enough.” Helena got up and started to pace. She always thought better when she was in motion. “You told your wife you'd been called to Washington, remember?”

“Like it was yesterday,” Myka answered.

Helena kept talking to Regina, trying to make her point. “Yeah, but you lied. You didn't go to Washington,” she explained. “You went to the Nolan Lodge for a hot date with Emma. Leroy will swear he followed you up there.”

Regina threw up her arms and sighed. “But her father was there.”

“That was a smokescreen.”

“She left in the afternoon.”

“Sure. A guilty conscience.”

“You're absolutely insane.”

“What a mind,” Myka muttered. “Now I know where you get those stories about working nights.”

Helena shot her a questioning look before turning back to Regina. “Then you come home, you're indifferent to your wife.” She paced faster as her thoughts kept spinning in her head. “You fight with her. It's as neat a case for alienation of affection as I've ever seen, and we print it tomorrow!”

Regina growled. “No, we don't.”

“Why don't we?” Helena stopped right in front of Regina.

“Because you can't get away with it!” Regina tried to remain patient as she got up to face Helena head on. “They'd throw that case out of any court in the world.” She turned to Myka. “You, too.”
This time, Myka looked up. “Not if I wear blue,” she said simply. “I'm pretty appealing in blue.”

Regina raised an eyebrow at that skewed piece of logic. “A: I was Nolan’s guest, not Emma's,” she reminded Helena. “B: I was never alone with her. C—”

“I know the alphabet,” Helena growled.

Regina was becoming more and more exasperated with each passing minute. If Myka filed for divorce now, citing Emma as a reason, and if Helena printed the story, her relationship with Emma was as good as over, and she couldn’t bear to have that happen. She had to make Helena see reason. “Look,” she tried again. “You don’t have a leg to stand on. Take it easy, will you?” She sighed. “I'm getting a real in with the family and I'm developing an open-and-shut case.”

Helena shook her head. “We have a case now and we're going to file suit tomorrow.” She turned to Myka. “Be at Britton & Britton's office at 9:00, and I can catch that noon edition.”

Myka sighed. “You'd make your crippled grandmother do a fan dance for that paper.”

Helena met Myka’s eyes, surprised at the bitter tone in her voice. “Myka ...”

Myka shook her head and went back to her files. Helena shrugged helplessly and walked to the door.

Regina stopped her. “Wait a minute, please.” She waited until Helena faced her. “Give me one week and I guarantee to put her in a real spot.”

Helena snorted and turned away again. “Not a chance. She's walked out on you twice already.” She opened the door. “You know, Regina, I'm beginning to think you've lost your touch.” She turned to Myka. “Goodbye, darling. Don't be late tomorrow.”

Myka dropped her files. “You're actually leaving without even kissing me goodbye?”

Helena hurried over, pressed a kiss to Myka’s cheek, and walked out.

Regina slammed the door close behind her. She was angry and a little desperate to come up with a way out of this conundrum. She leaned against the door with a sigh. What the hell do I do now?

“Well,” Myka said casually. “That's Helena for you. Crazy about me, but boy, how she conceals it.”

Regina watched Myka for a moment, a plan forming in her mind. It was unfair to Myka, she knew, but if it could give her some more time ... All is fair in love and war. Isn’t it?

She put on a thoughtful face, adding a little worried frown for good measure. It only took a few moments for the silence in the room to make Myka look at her.

“What's the matter with you?” Myka asked after a minute of studying Regina.

“Oh,” Regina replied slowly, as if just pulled from some deep thoughts. “I just can't figure her out.” She pointed at the door. “I can understand that she has no problem tossing me to the dogs for the paper, but the woman she loves ...” She trailed off.

Myka sat up. “Who's tossing whom to what dogs?”

Regina bit her bottom lip. “If she goes through with this in the morning,” she said haltingly, “we’ll all be in jail by tomorrow night.”

“Jail?”
“Jail,” Regina confirmed solemnly.

Myka got up and walked over to Regina. “I don’t understand,” she said. “It's the plan we've had all along.”

“Yes,” Regina agreed. “But we don’t have enough evidence to convince a backward child.” She sighed heavily. “If we spring this, Nolan and Swan are bound to smell a frame job!”

“Do you really think so?” Now Myka bit her lip.

“I’m sure.” Regina looked at Myka and decided to put a little more effort into convincing Myka. “But to think that she'd do this to you, a beautiful girl who loves her, who's doing everything in the world ... Believe me, Myka. You've put up with a lot from her.” She softened her voice, lowering it a little in the process, and took Myka’s hand. “You know, you’re one woman in a million.”

Myka had a feeling that she was missing something, an important detail, but Regina’s hand felt good in hers, so she squeezed it for a second before letting go with a sigh. “You don't know the tenth of it,” she replied. “You wouldn't believe what I've had to take.”

Regina patted her shoulder compassionately. “I know.”

“The night I met her, she stood me up for two hours.” Myka closed her eyes as she remembered that day. “And for what? A woman in Jersey had quadruplets ... and it's been that way ever since.” The problem was that Helena had been so damn charming about all of it that Myka had fallen for her straight away, despite knowing that she would probably never come first.

“I know. It's tough,” Regina said with a small smile. “Beautiful, sensitive woman like you.”

Myka shrugged. “That's love for you.” *And she did love Helena, didn’t she? But there had been so many things ... and now this whole affair? “The things I could tell you ...”* 

Regina smiled, knowing she was one step further in achieving her goal. “I'd like to hear all about them,” she said. She walked over to the phone. “Let's have a bite to eat.”

“All right.” Myka gave her a bright smile. Why *shouldn’t she enjoy the company of a charming woman like Regina Mills? She at least knew how to treat a woman.*

●●●

They had talked for hours over a lovely room service dinner and a bottle of champagne, and then had switched to dancing to the sound of some big band show playing on the radio. The music reminded Regina of her night with Emma on the lake.

“You dance divinely,” Myka said softly, interrupting Regina’s memories.

“Thank you.” Regina smiled, thoughts going back to Emma and how she had felt in her arms when they had danced that first night on the boat. She hadn’t been able to stop thinking of Emma all night. “There have been complaints,” she added with a private smirk, remembering Emma’s comments during their dance.

“Then you must have been dancing with amateurs.”

*No, Emma Swan was certainly no amateur, in any way, shape or form. Regina pulled her thoughts away from the woman she had last kissed more than 24 hours ago. Far too long. “I hope Helena won't mind our dancing like this.”*
“What? Her?” Myka actually giggled as she shook her head, making her curls dance around her face. She had drunk most of the champagne while Regina had only taken small sips every now and then.

“AFTER ALL, IT'S PERFECTLY INNOCENT.” Regina whirled them around. “JUST A LITTLE BIT OF FUN.”

“SURE,” Myka agreed. “CERTAINLY A GIRL CAN DANCE WITH HER OWN WIFE ... AND YOU ARE MY WIFE.” She poked her finger in Regina’s clavicle.

“YES, QUITE.” Regina sneaked a discreet look at the clock on the mantle behind Myka. *Time to wrap this up.* If she hurried, there might be a chance she could still drop in on Emma for a good night kiss, and maybe even more. “Besides, this is our last night,” she remarked casually.

Myka stopped dancing. “WHAT DO YOU MEAN?”

Regina dropped her hands from Myka’s body. “WELL, IF YOU'RE GOING TO FILE SUIT TOMORROW, YOU'LL HAVE TO MOVE OUT OF HERE TO PROVE THAT WE'RE ALIENATED.” She put on a sad face. “YOU KNOW, I'M GOING TO MISS YOU.” And it wasn’t even a lie. She really did like the woman she had gotten to know over dinner that night. She was bright, enthusiastic, and full of idealistic ideas.

“I'LL MISS YOU, TOO.” Myka looked around. She missed her apartment, sure, but living in a fancy suite at the Grand Plaza had been all kinds of fun. And Regina had listened to her more in two hours than Helena had in two years ... or at least that what it had felt like to Myka.

“You'RE A WONDERFUL WOMAN, MYKA.”

“You'RE NOT SO BAD YOURSELF, REGINA.”

Regina sighed. “I HATE TO SEE YOU GET MIXED UP IN THAT MESS TOMORROW.” She handed Myka her glass.

Myka downed the champagne, feeling slightly parched from all the dancing. “LOOK,” she said as she set the empty glass down on a side table. “YOU DON'T WANT ME TO FILE THAT SUIT, DO YOU?”

“No, I don’t.” Regina sipped from her glass. “For your own sake.” *And mine and Emma’s.*

“Then I don't.” Myka squeezed Regina’s hand. “I don't start anything until you tell me to.”

Yes, thank you. Mission accomplished. Regina closed her eyes in relief. “That will mean a fight with Helena.”

“It won't be the first one, won’t be the last.” Myka grinned, enjoying the champagne mood she was in. “Let's dance some more.”

Regina stopped her with an apologetic smile. “It's pretty late.”

Myka didn't care one bit. “I could dance all night with my sugar pie.” She gave Regina a wink.

Regina smiled as she extricated herself from Myka’s arms. “My darling wife should get some sleep though.”

Myka pouted a little but let Regina go. “You're kind of cute when you say that.”

Regina slowly walked towards the door, grabbing her keys and phone. “I'm going to say good night, Mrs. Mills.” She blew Myka a kiss. “I'm off to get some air.”

“Air?” Myka sounded disappointed.
“Yes, I haven’t slept much the last two nights.” Emma had made sure of that. “Must be insomnia.”

Myka’s face brightened. “Oh, I can fix that. My father used to have it,” she explained. “When he did, I’d rub his head with cologne, like this.” She demonstrated by rubbing Regina’s temples. “You sit down. I’ll go get the cologne.”

Regina sighed. Why did Myka have to be so damn nice? “It’s not that kind of insomnia,” she said, stopping Myka. She was very sure that her yearning for Emma wouldn’t be chased off by a bit of cologne. She smiled at the thought and got even more impatient to leave. “You know, different people respond to different things.” Myka looked at her questioningly. “Some people respond to a temple rub. Others drop off to music. Now, me ...” *I need a certain blonde woman wrapped around me, it seems.* “I need the sound of frogs.”

“The what?”

“The sound of frogs,” Regina repeated. “That’s what it takes to put me to sleep. The sound of frogs squawking.” She made a frog sound in her desperation to get out. *Oh God, stop it, Mills.*

At least it seemed to work as Myka gave her a strange smile, but allowed her to go. Regina missed the dreamy look that followed her all the way down the hallway.

Regina pulled her phone out as soon as she was in the elevator and dialed. “Emma?” she asked and couldn’t believe the flood of happiness that flowed through her when she heard her lover’s voice on the other end. “Any chance of a good night kiss?” She smiled brightly at the reply and strode purposefully through the empty lobby. “I’ll be there in five minutes.”

● ● ●

Helena was not happy the next morning when Myka called her after breakfast to tell her that she wasn’t going to go through with filing the suit. Helena growled low in her throat when her fiancee explained to her that Regina had convinced her that it would be the wrong thing to do for all of them.

The last thing Myka said was that Helena needed to give Regina more time. To give *them* more time. Helena frowned at the wording of it all, but shrugged the feeling off. There was a train crash in Jersey, and what else was she supposed to do?

She sighed as she picked up her phone to report the news – or lack of news rather – to Mrs. Frederic.
Myka looked at the note beside the coffee pot on the breakfast table.

I’m getting some air. Hope the coffee is still hot when you wake up.
I’ll call you later,
Regina

This had been the pattern for the past ten days. Myka woke up, Regina was gone. She would show up in the evening to spend some time talking to Myka, then leave again. Myka smiled. Don’t think you can fool me, Ms. Mills.

Myka got dressed and had her first cup of coffee, thinking about Regina all the time. She wasn’t easily fooled, and she had the feeling that Regina had tried to do exactly that, at least at first. Now, they were simply becoming friends. At least I thought so, Myka thought with a sigh.

She fanned herself with the note and went over everything Regina had said and done since she’d come back from her trip to London where she first met Emma Swan, the woman who was behind all of this. Of course. Myka almost slapped herself for her stupidity. Regina would never be as incompetent as she wanted to make Helena believe. She remembered how Regina had behaved that night in the woods, and how hard she had fought afterwards to keep Helena from printing the story about that weekend cabin visit. And how she had tried to get Myka on her side. That one wasn’t fair, Regina.

But Myka could understand her now. Regina had never been unsuccessful with Emma Swan ... on the contrary. Myka grabbed her phone, but she wasn’t surprised when it went to voicemail. “Regina, this is Myka,” she said, using the no-nonsense voice she usually reserved for her clients. “Call me back, we have to talk.” She decided to gamble. “I know what you’re up to. Say hi to Ms. Swan.”

She wasn’t the least bit surprised when her phone rang barely ten minutes later. “Hello, Regina,” she greeted with a smile. “So nice of you to call. How’s your morning going so far?”

“Myka,” Regina said hesitantly. “My morning’s fine. What did you want to talk about?”

Myka laughed. “Straight to the point.”

“Myka,” Regina warned, not in the mood to play games. She could see Emma watching her from a distance.

“Regina, I’m not planning to hurt you,” Myka replied softly. “Just answer one question ... and answer honestly, please.” She swallowed, hoping she had come to the right conclusion. “You’re in love with Emma Swan, aren’t you?”

Regina closed her eyes. How had Myka figured her out? She couldn’t answer that question without ruining everything. “Myka, I ...”
“Regina,” Myka pleaded. “I know you think telling me will ruin everything but it won’t, I promise.” She waited another few seconds but Regina remained quiet. “Everything can go just the way you think it should, but I think we can help each other, if you trust me.”

At that, Regina’s eyebrow shot up. “How?”

Myka smiled triumphantly. “That doesn’t quite answer my question, but I’ll take it.” She heard Regina sigh. “I’d like your help in teaching Helena a little lesson. Gods know I love that woman, but she has lots to learn.”

Regina chuckled. She certainly didn’t disagree. “And I take it you have a plan?”

“The beginning of one, yes,” Myka said. “Now, here’s my idea.”

Emma smiled brightly as she brought her horse to a stop. The last two weeks had been a dream come true. She had spent every possible waking minute with Regina – and most of the nights as well – and there hadn’t been a second where she was ever even remotely bored.

She watched the woman on the horse next to her. Just as she had imagined on the boat, her lover was a natural on a horse, and she looked like she belonged on the back of the animal she was riding currently. It didn’t matter that she had only met that particular horse a few days earlier on their first ride. The horse had loved her from the moment Regina had touched the little white star on its forehead and handed over an apple.

Emma watched as Regina came to a stop next to her and gracefully slid to the ground with only a gentle thud. “He loves you,” she said softly. “I love you.” She had realized her feelings after their weekend at the cabin, and had even accepted them over the course of the days since, but so far she hadn’t been able to bring herself to actually say them. What if Regina didn’t love her back?

Regina walked up to her with the sandwiches Emma had made for their picnic. Emma unwrapped hers and held it out to Regina, who took a healthy bite. “Hmmm.”

“Good?”

“Always,” Regina replied with a soft smile.

“Are you amenable to reason?” Emma asked as she walked over to a bench under an apple tree.

Regina made a noise that could be considered agreement as she bit into her own sandwich.

“Good,” Emma repeated, sitting down on the bench. “Then you will come to my charity bazaar.”

Regina remained standing next to the horses that were peacefully munching on the grass in the shade of the tree. “No,” she said simply.

Emma sighed and her shoulders slumped. Regina was getting bored of her, she just knew it. “You turned me down for the horse show.”

“But I ride with you every morning,” Regina countered.

“You didn’t come to the concert with me.”

“But I dance with you every night.” Regina grinned broadly. They spent quite a bit of time in each other’s arms, dancing to the radio and those old-fashioned big bands they both enjoyed. They also
danced horizontally and made music of a different kind together.

“And now you refuse my invitation for tomorrow night,” Emma continued, not feeling in the mood for banter. She wanted to show off Regina to the world, dammit.

“But I'm dining with you and David this evening.” Regina softened her voice, sensing Emma’s mood. She leaned down to Emma and pushed a strand of hair behind her ear.

Emma smiled at the familiar gesture. “It's your last meal, Ms. Mills,” she said mock-sternly. “I'm beginning to detect a pattern here.” She took a healthy bite out of her sandwich, not even noticing the mustard dribbling over her chin. “I do very well for the back alleys and my home but you're ashamed to be seen with me in public.”

Regina smiled at the adorable pout on Emma’s face. “Absolutely,” she agreed easily. “I can’t be seen with a woman who smears mustard all over her chin.” She leaned close and kissed the mustard off, dabbing the spot with her napkin when she was done.

“Thanks,” Emma said sheepishly. “Beautiful now?”

“Nah, just clean.” Regina grinned at the look on Emma’s face. Adorable.

Emma scrunched her nose. “Stop trying to seduce me,” she said and threw her napkin at Regina. “Now, for the record, what time will you arrive at the bazaar tomorrow?”

Regina sighed loudly. Emma could be really persistent. And there wasn’t much that Regina wanted more than to be with Emma every minute of every day, in private as well as in public, but she was playing a dangerous game here. So far she had been able to keep both Emma and Helena in the dark, while also keeping Myka happy. The much-publicized Nolan charity bazaar was absolutely out if she wanted to keep her secrets. “Once and for all, I am not attending the bazaar.” She turned to what had become her horse and leaned her forehead against its neck.

Emma grew serious. “Regina, what is it?” Her green eyes filled with worry.

Regina couldn’t bear to see the good mood of their morning disappear. “What is it?” she asked, pointing at the horse. “It is a horse, dear. Ein Pferd. Un caballo. Un cheval.”

Emma stood and walked straight into Regina’s personal space. “Stop clowning around,” she pleaded. “There's something wrong. Please tell me what it is?”

“I can’t,” Regina muttered. I wish I could.

“Why? Please.”

“Because I swore I'd never mention it again,” Regina explained resignedly.

“The libel suit?” Emma scoffed. “What's that got to do with my party?”

“Plenty.” Regina led Emma back to the bench and sat down next to her. “Emma, drop the suit, will you?” She wasn’t above begging at this point. “I know you feel that the paper hit you deliberately.”

“Of course it was deliberate,” Emma cried. “To hurt my father.”

“So you're striking back.”

“And you think I'm heartless.”
Regina shook her head. “No, just foolish.” She put away her sandwich, appetite long gone, and took Emma’s hand. “You think you're gonna end all publicity but instead, you'll be smeared over every paper in the country.”

“And I don't care, because ...” Emma stopped herself with a sigh. “Let's not go all over it again.”

Regina smiled sadly. “You asked for it.”

Emma studied Regina. “That's why you won't be seen with me in public,” she concluded.

“All you need now is one more good scandal,” Regina replied.

Emma raised an eyebrow. “Why is there any scandal in my being seen with you?”

_Uh-oh._ “Because you're in the public eye more than ever.” Regina fumbled for an explanation. “If the gossip columns link your name with a woman's now don't you think that it's going to make you look ... I don't know ...” _God, I have to tell her soon or I'll go crazy._

Emma laughed. “You're taking this way too seriously, Regina. After all, it's my fight.”

“And that makes it mine.” Regina was adamant.

That was all it took to melt Emma. “You're sweet.” She kissed Regina softly.

Regina looked away. “If I had 80 million dollars, I'd give them to settle this thing.” She really would. She was so sick and tired of these games. All she wanted was to be with Emma and left in peace.

“Shall I drop it, Regina?” Emma asked softly.

Regina looked up, hope in her eyes. “Will you?” _Please, please._

“I'll tell you tomorrow at the party.” Emma grinned wickedly. “Now you'll have to come.”

● ● ●

“How about the Athletic Club? Try the Yale.” Helena growled into the phone. “Try it again! I have to get her!” She groaned as she watched Pete walking into her office shaking his head. “Two hours late,” she said to Pete putting down the receiver. “This woman is driving me mad. She hasn't even seen that Swan woman in ten days.”

“I can't figure it out,” Pete said. “It's not the old Regina Mills, that's for sure.”

Helena picked up the receiver again. “I’m going to try her suite.”

“No use,” Pete told her. “Myka just called from there. She's looking for her, too.”

Helena dropped the receiver. “Didn't you tell her I was here?”

“She wanted her.” Pete shrugged. “She's afraid she's offended at something she said this morning at breakfast. She wanted to apologize.”

“Myka wanted to apologize to Regina?” Helena stared at Pete.

“Mills was to meet her at lunch and didn't come,” Pete explained. “She wanted us to try local hospitals and the morgue in case of an accident.”
“She never tried the morgue for me.” Helena scratched her neck. “What the hell is going on here?”

“Maybe Regina’s working on the wrong girl.”

“Working on the ...” Helena stared at Pete. “What are you talking about?”

“Well,” Pete said with a strange expression on his face. “After all, she is her wife.”

Helena jumped up. “She may be Regina’s wife for now, but she’s engaged to me!”

Pete turned to go. “Oh, the reason I came in here ... Mrs. F. wants to see you right away.”

“Yeah, all right.” Helena dropped her shoulders. “Regina’s wife,” she muttered in disgust. She knew there had been something fishy going on. First things first, though. She straightened her shirt and made her way up to see Mrs. Frederic.

Then she would take care of Regina Mills.

● ● ●

“What about this Mills woman?” Mrs. Frederic got right to the point as soon as Helena strode into her office. “I thought she was supposed to be clever.”

Helena closed the door. “She’s clever, all right,” she replied darkly. “A lot cleverer than I thought she was.”

Mrs. Frederic turned around. “What are you talking about? I thought she hasn't had any success yet.” She gave Helena a look over the top of her glasses. “Do you call that being clever? Dammit, Ms. Wells.” She walked around her desk and sat down. “We have to do something. Do you realize what this means?”

Helena nodded. “More than you know.”

Mrs. Frederic pointed at Helena. “It's your job to find out what she's been doing.”

“That's exactly what I’m going to do,” Helena promised. “I'm going to take the matter into my own hands.” She paused. “I'm going to go and see Emma Swan personally.”

“What makes you think you will even get anywhere near her?”

Helena gave her boss a confident smile. “Mrs. Frederic, when I was a reporter, I could talk my way into places even a burglar couldn't break into.”

Mrs. Frederic eyed her dubiously. “All right, try it. Make her see.” She sighed. “Appeal to her reason.”

Helena scoffed. “She has no reason. We’re talking about Emma Swan, the spoiled daughter of one of the richest men in the States, without a brain in her head!” She leaned on the desk and looked straight at Mrs. Frederic. “But I know how to handle her kind. I'm going to throw myself on her mercy and appeal to her heart.” She turned to leave. “I'm going to pull out all the stops and give her a nice sob story!”

“Good luck,” Mrs. Frederic said to her closed office door after Helena had stormed out. “I’m quite sure you’re going to need it.”

● ● ●
Helena tried to ignore the fact that she was standing in a 3,000 square foot penthouse on the Upper West Side with a perfect view of Central Park. She tore her eyes away from the view and faced Emma Swan who was sitting comfortably in an armchair, patiently waiting.

“You know, Ms. Swan, this situation has outgrown a petty fight,” Helena began her spiel. “We have to consider the humanitarian aspect. I must appeal to your social conscience.”

Emma’s eyebrow climbed up. “Oh, thanks,” she said dryly. “I didn’t know your paper thought anyone in my family had one.”

Helena cringed. “If you go through with this case, 500 people are going to lose their jobs.” She tried to make a convincing case. “Men and women, jobless, walking the streets, women like yourself, tired, cold, and hungry.” Emma shot her a look at that. “Driven to drink and ruin.”

Helena had her back turned to Emma and couldn’t see the looks Emma gave her. “You write the editorials, don’t you?” Emma’s tone was extremely dry.

Helena whirled around. “Yes, I do.” She leaned closer to Emma. “Now, I know what you’re thinking.”

“You do?” I can guarantee you have no idea.

“You’re saying to yourself, it’s not my fault if people starve. It’s the fault of the paper.”

“Isn’t it?”

“No,” Helena insisted. “It’s my fault, it’s my mistake.” She tried to gauge how thick she should lay it on with Emma. Pretty thick, she decided. “And all my life I shall be faced with the knowledge that I wrecked the lives of 500 people.” She turned to the window again.

Emma rolled her eyes behind her back, not fooled in the slightest.

“That’s all I care about, Ms. Swan,” Helena continued. “Those poor, unfortunate souls. After all, they shouldn’t suffer for--”

Emma had had enough. “You’re right, they shouldn’t suffer for your mistakes.”

Helena smiled brightly. “Thank you, Ms. Swan! I knew you’d feel this way.” She sat down on the armrest next to Emma and leaned close to her.

Emma subtly leaned away. “Well, they must be taken care of.”

“Bless you, Emma ... erm, Ms. Swan.”

Emma smirked. “And you, too, for calling it to my attention.” She made a small pause. “I’ll see to it personally that the whole 80 million goes into a trust fund for them.”

Helena’s jaw dropped. “You mean you’re gonna go ahead with the case?” She jumped up from her perch on the armrest.

Emma nodded. “I have to,” she said sweetly. “To get the money. Now I have to push twice as hard. Now I have a cause.”

“But-but the paper will go under,” Helena stammered. “It will fold.”

Emma gave her an innocent look. “Yes, I know, but you said that was secondary.” She smiled evilly
at the look on the other woman’s face. “The main thing is to take care of these poor men and women.”

“Yes, I know,” Helena said, developing a sudden headache around this woman. “But there are other considerations.”

Suddenly there were footsteps coming down the hallway and Emma’s face lit up. “Is there anything to eat in this house for a hungry woman?” a familiar voice yelled.

“In here, stranger,” Emma called back with a laugh. Helena took a couple of steps back and just watched with interest. I don’t fuckin’ believe it. She fell for the Swan. She’s been playing me the whole damn time.

“Hello, darling,” Regina said as she rounded the corner into the room. She smiled brightly at Emma before spotting Helena and stopping short.

“Excuse me,” Emma said to Helena as she pushed by her to get to Regina’s side. “Hello, honey.” She took Regina’s hands in hers and pressed a chaste but loving kiss to her lips.

Regina pulled back quickly. “Hello.” She looked over to where Helena was lurking. She had not expected that. Damn.

Emma remembered the pesky reporter’s presence. “Honey, this is Ms. Wells of the New York Star. Ms. Wells, this is Regina Mills.”

“Not Regina Mills, the writer?” Helena asked with a smirk.

“Yes, I am.” Regina replied carefully. She needed to tread very lightly here. Helena’s face was stormy and she did feel a little guilty for that.

Emma linked her hand with Regina’s, lacing their fingers, blissfully unaware of the currents in the room. “She writes travel books,” she said proudly.

Helena came over to shake Regina’s free hand and squeezed it as hard as she possibly could. “That takes you to a lot of interesting places, doesn't it?”

“Yes,” Regina winced a little as Helena let go of her hand. “It's all in a day's work.”

Helena nodded knowingly. “Yeah, I'm just becoming familiar with your work.”

“Yes?”

“Yes,” Helena conformed. “I thought perhaps you might do something for our paper,” she suggested. “Of course, it'd be a little change from what you're doing now.”

Regina laughed uncomfortably. “I'm afraid that I'm pretty full up.”

“Up to your neck, I suppose.” Helena was skirting dangerous waters, but she was furious with Regina for having played her.

Emma got between them “I object,” she said. She pulled Regina deeper into the room. “Do sit down, Ms. Wells,” she said over her shoulder, pointing at a settee.

Helena smiled. “Thank you.”

Emma pulled Regina with her into the wide armchair. “No more work,” she said playfully. “I only
Regina tried to stop her. “Emma, you shouldn’t exaggerate.”

Emma rolled her eyes with a grin. “Okay, if we must be factual, twice a day sometimes, maybe three.”

“What is that so?” Helena asked.

“Emma, you’ll give Ms. Wells the wrong impression,” Regina cautioned. “After all, she’s a reporter.”

Helena dismissed her comment. “Don’t worry about impressing me.”

“Besides, she’s not a columnist.” Emma smiled at Regina. “She didn’t come to discuss gossip. She came to discuss the case.”

Regina sat up. Maybe something good could come of this nightmare surprise. “Yes, the case. By all means.”

Helena nodded at Regina with a smirk. “Yes, that’s right.”

“And it’s all settled,” Emma continued.

Regina tightened her grip on Emma’s hand. “You mean you’re dropping the suit?”

Finally!

Emma shook her head. “No, but thanks to Ms. Wells’ social conscience all of the employees will be taken care of with the 80 million I’ll win from the Star.” She smiled winningly at Helena, but Regina knew her well enough by now to see the mischievous glint in her eyes. “That was all she cared about, wasn’t it, Ms. Wells?”

_Helena, you stupid idiot. You underestimated Emma Swan and got yourself into an even deeper mess. And if you ruin this for me, I’m going to destroy your happiness, if it’s the last thing I do._

Helena smiled at Emma and Regina just wanted to scream. “Absolutely all. And now that you’ve been so generous,” she said to Emma, “I think I’ll say thank you and run along.”

_No, no, no. Regina knew exactly what Helena was going to do next. Shit, I have to get out of here as soon as I can to call Myka._

“Please don’t hurry,” Emma said. “You spoke of other considerations before …”

Helena only wanted to get back to the office to get the early edition going. Once she sent Myka here to break up this love fest, they’d have a major headline and their case in the bag. “They really don’t matter at all,” she said, getting up and walking to the door. “Just so long as those poor men and women don’t starve. You’ve taken a great load off my mind.”

Emma looked dubious. “Have I?”

“Yes, indeed,” Helena said. “I don’t think there’s anything else to discuss.”

“There certainly isn’t,” a new voice came from the door.

“Mr. Nolan,” Helena said in greeting. “I’m Helena Wells, the managing editor of the New York Evening Star.”

“I know,” David said with a low growl. “The butler told me you were here. He’ll show you to the
Helena inclined her head. “Then I won’t keep him waiting.” She nodded at Emma and winked at Regina.

“And you can tell Mrs. Frederic,” David called after her, “that we’re not entertaining anyone from her yellow rag in this house.”

Helena stopped in her tracks. “I'll make it a point to tell her,” she said calmly and shot a long, meaningful look at Regina. “You're entertaining no representatives of the Star.” She smiled at Emma. “Good night, Ms. Swan, Ms. Mills. It was a surprise, but a great pleasure seeing you here.”

With that she almost ran out of the penthouse. As soon as she was out of the building, she pulled out her phone. “Hello? Hello, Myka?”

“Yes,” Myka replied slowly, and Helena didn’t like how she sounded almost disappointed.

“Regina is at Emma’s penthouse, playing happy families with her.”

_Holy crap._ Helena hadn’t been supposed to find out quite so soon. _Okay, time to play along._

“What?” Myka sat up. “You just saw her there a minute ago?” She listened to Helena. “She's been seeing her every day?”

“Sure,” Helena said. “She’s been protecting her. She's in love with her, that’s why she's stalling us. But we got her now, and the case, too,” Helena continued. “How long will it take you to get to the Nolans?”

“Well, I have to make myself presentable first,” Myka said slowly. “At least half an hour, 45 minutes. Maybe longer.”

“That’s all right.”

“Are you sure she’ll be there?”

“Oh, yeah,” Helena confirmed. “She can't get away. They were just sitting down to dinner when I left.”

“I'll be there as fast as I can,” Myka said.

“Great.” Helena finally got a cab to stop. “Make a nice scene, and get in touch with me at the office as soon as you've done your stuff.”

“I will,” Myka said. “Talk to you soon.” She ended the call and went back to her paperwork. Might as well get some work done while she waited for Regina to call like she knew she would.
“By this time tomorrow, I'll be dining on airport food,” Regina said casually.

Emma looked up. “What? Where do you think you're going?”

“I'm having dinner with my publisher.” Regina put down her fork. “He's flying out to Sydney tomorrow, the 8th.”

David put down his glass. “Today is the 8th.”

*I know, David, I know.* Regina shook her head. “No, tomorrow is the 8th. Friday the 8th.”

“No, Regina,” Emma said slowly. “Today is Friday. Tomorrow is my charity bazaar. We talked about it this morning, remember?”

“This is terrible.” Regina put on a shocked face. “He has a contract waiting for me to sign. I have got to see him.”

Emma dabbed her lips with her napkin. “What time is his flight?”

“11pm, from Newark.”

“You can make it,” David said.

Emma jumped up. “I'll drive you in.”

Regina stood and stopped Emma with a shake of her head. “No, please finish your dinner,” she said. “I'll grab a cab.” She walked to the door of the dining room. “I'm so sorry. This is terrible.”

As soon as she was outside, she called Myka. “Hey there, Myka.”

“So ... what excuse did you come up with? Dinner with your publisher again?” Myka had heard that excuse several times when Regina had run off to be with Emma.

Regina chuckled. “Well, it's a pretty good excuse you have to admit.” She paused. “I take it Helena called you not too long ago?”

“Oh, yeah,” Myka replied. “I’m supposed to be on my way over there right now to make a huge scene.”

“Please don’t.” Regina got into a cab.

“Well,” Myka drawled. “Don't forget you're my wife, and I should tell Ms. Swan right now.”

“Wouldn’t you rather meet me at the *Paradise Roof* in 20 minutes for a nice dinner and some good conversation?” Regina asked with a laugh. “I'll explain everything to you.”
“See you there.”

Helena sat at her desk when Pete came in. “Yeah?”

“Here’s the headline proof on the Swan story.” He handed over the front page mock-up.

“Nice,” Helena said. “‘Emma Swan Steals Wife’. Elegant, magnificent. I like it.” She put it down and looked at Pete. “We’ll write in the gory details when we hear from Myka.” She checked the clock on the wall. “I wonder what’s keeping her? It’s after midnight already. We can’t wait much longer ... we have to go to print soon.”

Pete shrugged. “The old man’s probably trying to bribe her.”

Helena’s eyes lit up. “That would make a great subhead: ‘Rich father tries to bribe wronged wife’.”

Pete smiled. “I wonder where Mills is now.”

Helena snorted. “She probably ducked to China or Africa or something. It’s what she does ... she ru-” She stopped as the door opened, revealing Myka and Regina, arms linked.

“Hello, Helena,” Myka said in greeting.

“Where have you been?” Helena didn’t like how close Myka was standing to Regina.

“Dancing.” Myka shrugged and smiled at Regina.

“What did you say?”

“Dancing,” Regina repeated slowly. “You know that thi--”

“You mean you didn’t go to the Nolans’?” Helena interrupted, jumping up and glaring at Myka. “You didn’t--”

“No,” Myka answered. “We decided against it.”

Helena stormed around her desk and came straight for Regina. “You sneaky--”

Regina stood her ground. “Self-control, Helena. Very important for a woman in your position.”

Helena growled, but took a few steps back. She grabbed the proof from her desk and pressed it into Pete’s hands. “Here. Throw this out. Go on.” As soon as Pete had left, Helena looked between Myka and Regina with confusion in her eyes. “Now what have you got to say for yourselves?”

“Oh, don’t shout, Helena,” Myka said, moving even closer to Regina. “We’re not used to it.”

“Are you going to tell me what happened?” Helena leaned against her desk. She was confused and angry, and she had to take several deep breaths so she didn’t strangle Regina immediately.

“You'd better tell her, Regina.” Myka patted Regina’s arm. “Her blood pressure ...”

Regina nodded understandingly. “Yes, perhaps you're right.” Regina turned to Helena. “What would you say if I told you that I had almost persuaded Ms. Swan to drop the case?”

Helena snorted. “I'd say you were a dirty, double-dealing liar, and I'd be right.”
Myka stepped in front of Regina. "I won't stand here and listen to you being insulted." She glared at Helena. "Come on, Regina." She took Regina by the arm and pulled her towards the door.

"Is that so?" Helena asked. She was bordering on furious now. "Wait. Listen to me. Not four hours ago, I heard your two-timing Juliet over here whispering sweet nothings into the ears of Emma Swan. What do you think of that?"

To Helena’s confusion, Myka just nodded. "Regina told me all about it. That's technique, H.G. You wouldn't understand it.

Helena threw up her arms in surrender and turned to Regina. "Why didn't you tell me you were seeing Emma Swan?" Her voice sounded almost resigned.

"Sure, and have you spoil all my good work," Regina replied dryly. "Just as you did tonight, barging in just as I'd about convinced her to drop the case."

"We didn't need any charity from her," Helena protested. "All Myka had to do was bust into the house!"

"And have you smear our names all over your paper?" Myka asked. "You're just hunting for a great headline."

Regina saw Helena bristle at the comment and decided to step in. Maybe Myka was taking this a little too far. "Believe me, this way is better and cleaner," she said sincerely. "Tomorrow evening, Emma and her father are giving a huge charity party at their estate in Connecticut. I'll be there."

Helena looked at Myka and raised a questioning eyebrow.

Myka replied by smiling at Regina. "Go right ahead, Regina. I trust you." Helena rolled her eyes in frustration.

"And I'll get her to drop this case, once and for all," Regina continued. "That is, unless you decide to barge in again."

"Yes," Myka added. "You need to be a little more subtle, H.G."

"How do I know that you can get the Swan to drop the case?"

"You'll have to take my word for that, I'm afraid."

"That's good enough for me," Myka added.

Helena rolled her eyes and went around her desk. "Maybe you're right. Maybe this is the best way." This smelled to the high heavens.

"That's much better," Regina said with a smile.

"Yeah, I'm sorry I overreacted." Helena put on a conciliatory face. Not a single bit. I should never have hired you for this job.

Myka smiled. "This is much better. After all, I want you two to be good friends." She turned and walked out. "Come on, Regina. Good night, H.G."

"Good night," Regina added over her shoulder as Myka dragged her out the door.

"Yeah," Helena said under breath. "Good night."
Regina and Myka held it together until they were in the elevator before grinning at each other. “You think it worked?” Regina asked.

“Of course it did,” Myka replied. “Did you see her face?”

● ● ●

Helena was fuming. *How dare that woman? How the hell dare she?*

Pete saw the storm clouds over Helena’s head. “What's up, boss?”

Helena looked up. “That low-down, conniving evil bitch,” she said in a low voice. “Making Myka believe she's in love with her.” She slammed her fist on the desk. “Making Myka fall in love with her. She won't get away with it. I won’t let her.”

“Can you stop her?”

“I'm going to wash up the Swan case and Regina Mills right with it.” Helena’s mouth twitched in an evil smile. “Myka may be eating out of her hand now, but before I get through, she’ll be biting it with a vengeance.”

She called in a runner. “Here.” She handed over a freshly-printed piece of paper. “Tell Douglas to print up one copy of the morning edition, and to put that item at the head of the society column.”

“One copy?” the young runner asked.

“That's what I said.”

“Man, our circulation is certainly falling off.”

● ● ●

Late Saturday afternoon, Myka was having a pedicure at the hotel beauty shop, while Regina was getting ready for her date with Emma at her charity bazaar.

The pedicurist left Myka for a moment, both feet in a refreshing peppermint and strawberry foot bath. “I'll be right back.”

Myka nodded and went back to her novel.

“Mykes!” Helena’s voice suddenly sounded in the beauty parlor.

“What are you doing here?” Myka asked suspiciously. Helena was in too good a mood for this to be a coincidental visit.

“I just had to see you,” Helena replied with a huge grin and kissed Myka’s cheek. “I got fantastic news.” She waved the newspaper in her hand.

“It’d better be good for you to burst in on me like this.”

“It’s about Regina,” Helena said. “Looks like I certainly had her all wrong. Your *wife* is a wonder.” She couldn’t sound more sarcastic if she tried.

Neither of them noticed the two very curious women watching and listening closely, nudging each other excitedly.
Myka eyed her curiously. “Congratulations,” she drawled. “When did you crawl out of your hole?”

“Yeah, I never should have doubted her,” Helena replied. “She just called me a minute ago.”

Myka doubted that, given that she had been with Regina most of the day and the other woman had never mentioned a plan to call Helena.

“She told me she’s getting Emma to drop the suit tonight,” Helena explained. “Then off she goes on an around-the-world cruise ending up at the altar hitched to an ten-figure fortune. What a woman!” She smiled.

Myka didn’t even have to pretend to be confused. “What are you talking about?”

Helena just continued. “You know she's got Swan and her father right in the palm of her hand.” She looked at the folded newspaper she had brought with her and read the column she had put in:

“It seems the charity bazaar at the Nolan estate on Long Island tonight is something in the way of a farewell party. David Nolan and his attractive daughter, Emma Swan, are sailing for a four-months, around-the-world cruise. Accompanying them will be the Swan’s current favorite, Regina Mills. Do we hear wedding bells?”

Helena looked up. “How do you like that?”

Myka held out her hand. “Let me see the paper.”

Helena handed it over with a huge grin. “I have to run. Just thought you'd like to hear the good news.” With that she walked out as quickly as she could.

Myka checked the article in the paper. She just knew there was something weird going on here. She was certain that Regina would have told her something of this magnitude. “Somebody get me a towel and my shoes!” she demanded loudly. “Hello, I need to get out of here!”

Outside the hotel, Helena called Pete. She was pretty certain that Myka would storm the Nolan estate after receiving the fake news. “Have a photographer at the Nolan's charity bazaar at nine tonight. There's gonna be fireworks there.”

The entire grounds of the Nolans’ estate looked like a fun fair. This charity bazaar had been a pet project of Emma’s mother when she had still been alive, and after her death Emma had taken over. She had always loved everything about it – the fun, the fair food, and doing good while having a great night – and neither she nor her father had any qualms about charging more than a thousand dollars just to get inside. It was the main event of the summer season and the whole East Coast elite came to Greenwich, CT to enjoy the festivities.

There were games and food stalls everywhere, but Regina enjoyed the look of delight on Emma’s face much more than the actual fair. It definitely was the strangest fair she’d ever been to, with every single person there dressed in their finest evening wear. All the men were in tuxedos, and so were some of the women, Regina noticed, while most of the women wore the latest in evening couture. Emma looked gorgeous in a long green dress, while Regina had once again opted for black.

“Step this way for a great game of skill,” a man in a tuxedo said as they were passing by. “Throw a dart and win a beautiful prize,” he continued. “Only 10 dollars a dart, and cheap at half the price.”

Regina’s eyes widened at the price, but before she could say anything Emma had already dragged
“Woo lady luck at the wheel of chance,” another man shouted. “Pick the winning number and win a priceless prize for the lady.”

Regina just laughed as Emma continued to pull her over to one of the food stalls. It looked like her lover was desperate for some funnel cakes. Regina just grinned and followed.

“Come one, come all,” Emma yelled in childish delight. “I love the bazaar.” She took Regina’s hand and laced their fingers. “Thank you for coming, it means a lot.”

Regina gave her a soft smile. “It’s not like you left me much of a choice, you blackmailer.”

“Well, you didn’t leave a choice but to leave you no choice.” Emma shrugged and ordered them funnel cakes.

● ● ●

“Where’s Emma? I must see Emma.”

David took a deep breath before turning to Mrs. Burns-Norvell. “I’m sure she is somewhere around here.” He wasn’t in any hurry to subject his daughter and Regina to the two dreadful women.

“I’m so anxious to tell her about Ms. Mills’ wife,” Mrs. Burns-Norvell continued, ignoring him completely.

David looked up sharply. “Ms. Mills’ wife?”

“Yeah,” the younger Burns-Norvell added eagerly.

“You know Ms. Mills, that fish woman on the boat?” Mrs. Burns-Norvell explained. “We met her wife.”

“A most amazing creature,” Barbara Burns-Norvell said. “So many curls.”

“That’s nonsense,” David said, shaking his head. “Regina’s not married.”

“We never dreamed she was married,” Barbara stated. “She didn’t look married, and she certainly didn’t act married.”

“The married ones never do,” Mrs. Burns-Norvell said with a dismissive gesture.

David wondered what he had missed on the boat. In his memory, he and Regina had spent most of the trip talking about fishing. He frowned. This didn’t seem right. He had trusted Regina with his daughter after the trip, had even encouraged Emma to give her a chance, and now this? If what the Burns-Norvell said was true, he’d skin Regina alive. But it couldn’t be true. “I’m sure there’s a mistake.”

“No, there isn’t,” Mrs. Burns-Norvell replied curtly and rather shrilly. “We saw her this afternoon coming out of the Grand Plaza. We called her, both of us, but she was getting into a town car.”

David looked around and saw that several guests had stopped to listen in on their conversation. He took both women’s arms and gently pulled them to a more secluded spot. “Let’s have a drink.”

“I had to run half a block, trying to make her see me,” Barbara whined as David led them to a table.
“But she'd gone,” her mother continued. “So we went into the hotel to leave a message. The clerk asked if we wished to speak to her wife.” She accepted a glass of champagne from the waiter. “I said, "Naturally" and he said that she was in the beauty parlor.” She took a sip. “We saw her. She was sitting with some other woman and they were talking about her wife, Ms. Regina Mills.”

“But before we could speak to her, she rushed past us,” Barbara finished their story.

David grimaced. That didn’t sound good at all. He just hoped he got to Emma before the two hyenas with him did. He knew he had to be the one to break these news to Emma. Gently.

“Look, there's Emma and Ms. Mills now.” Barbara pointed to a photo booth in the distance, where the two were posing for a photos with their heads sticking out over the top of some cheesy 1920s musclemen cut-outs.

“All ready. Hold still, please,” the photographer called.

“Why, honey, what big muscles you have,” Regina said dryly, with only a slight eye-roll. She was constantly patting herself on the back for enduring all of this with a smile. Mostly.

“The better to hit you with, babe,” Emma replied sweetly.

David couldn’t hear what they were saying, but he could see even from this distance that Emma was happy. She hadn’t smiled like that in years. He saw his opportunity, and turned to the Burns-Norvells. “You wait here. I'll get them. We’ll make a party of it.” Yeah, right. He called over the waiter. “Paul, champagne cocktails for five, please. I'll be right back.”

Regina was a couple of steps behind Emma when David caught up to them as they were walking away from the photo booth. “Emma, I have to talk to you,” David said urgently.

“What is it, Dad?”

“I can’t talk to you here,” David said as he took Emma by the arm and tried to pull her away.

Emma turned towards Regina who was just being accosted by a small group of teenagers selling all sorts of things for a few dollars and had yet to notice Emma’s absence from her side. “But Regina ...”

“You’ll find her later.” He pulled Emma to a part of the backyard that was left mostly private.

Regina bought a few trinkets that she thought Emma would enjoy and sent the teenagers on their way. “Emma?” She looked around when she realized that she was alone. “I think I’ve been robbed.”

She shrugged and wandered off in search of her girlfriend.
Myka bit her bottom lip as she checked her watch. 8:30. She hadn’t been able to reach Regina on the phone, so she was currently in a cab on her way to the Nolan estate. She had a bad feeling about this whole thing.

“Can’t you go any faster?”

The driver shrugged. “I can, lady, but this old cab can't.”

Myka went back to biting her lip. *Come on, come on, come on.*

● ● ●

“What is it, Dad?” Emma asked once David had dragged her to a secluded spot where nobody could hear or see them. “I haven't seen you this worried since I stole your favorite fishing rod.” She frowned when David didn’t even smile a little at that.

“Emma ... baby girl ...” David started haltingly. “How much does Regina mean to you?”

Emma gave him a look. “You’re not jealous, are you?” She poked his nose and stuck her tongue out at him.

David was far too worried to react to her good mood. He bit his bottom lip and decided to forge ahead. “Tell me, are you in love with her?”

Emma had no idea why her father was asking, but she turned serious in a heartbeat, just in case he had some newfound problem with Regina’s presence in her life. “Madly,” she said. “You have no idea how much ...” She met her father’s eyes. “More than I ever dreamed I could love anyone. The way you were in love with mom, and she with you.”

David closed his eyes and sighed. He had been afraid of that. “Are you sure?” he asked again.

“I’m sure. Surer than sure, Dad. She’s the one.” Emma replied with a couple of nods. “Why? You like her, don't you?” she asked with a frown. “I was certain you liked her.”

“Yeah, yeah ... of course I like her.” David felt weak as his voice sounded to his own ears. If Regina was really married to someone else, than his little girl’s heart would break into a million pieces tonight.

Emma’s frown got deeper at her father’s tone. “Then what are you being so mysterious about?” When David didn’t reply, Emma got really worried. Her dad usually didn’t mince words ... unless he was trying to protect her from something. She just couldn’t even guess what that might be. “What is it, Dad?”
David took Emma’s hands. “The Burns-Norvells say Regina's married.”

Emma closed her eyes as a strange kind of pain shot through her. *Could it be possible? Have I really been fooled that hard? No, Regina wasn’t like that.* She shook her head in denial. “I don’t believe it,” she said, but her voice refused to show the conviction she wanted to project. “You know the Burns-Norvells.”

David pulled Emma into a hug. “I’m afraid it's true, Emma. They even met the woman earlier today.”

Emma pulled out of David’s arms and held him at arms’ length. “No. I don't believe it. I won’t.” If she believed that, her world was going to end right now.

“Emma, please.”

“And yet it explains so much,” Emma continued softly, her mind suddenly swarming with images from the past few weeks. “Why we always have to meet alone...” She paused. *No, I refuse to believe it.* “It's horrible even suspecting her,” she began again, but there was a tiny kernel of doubt forming inside her. “And yet...”

David straightened and pulled his tuxedo jacket down a little, determined to find out what was going on once and for all. “We have to know,” he told Emma.

He looked around and called over the butler who was standing at a discrete distance.

“Yes, sir.”

“Roberts, please find Ms. Mills and ask her to come here.”

“Of course, sir.” He vanished without a sound.

Emma put her hand on David’s arm. “Let me ask her, Dad.”

David shook his head. “No, Emma—” *I'm your father, let me do this for you.* “Please.” Emma was adamant. “It's my problem. Let me handle it my own way.”

David looked doubtful and a little hurt that he wouldn’t get to protect his daughter, but he had learned long ago to pick his battles with his late wife and then his daughter. “Are you sure you don’t want me to...” Emma nodded. “And you’ll ask her point-blank so that she can't misunderstand?”

“Yes.” The sad look in Emma’s eyes was killing David. “I’ll ask her so she definitely can't misunderstand.” Emma shook herself and patted her father’s shoulder. “Go on, Dad, take care of our guests. I'm all right.” *Yeah, right.*

With one last look over his shoulder and a heaving sigh David went the way the butler had gone.

Alone with her thoughts, Emma sat down on a stone bench and tried to figure out the best way to ask Regina what she really wanted to know ... without insulting her in case the Burns-Norvells had been as wrong about Regina as Emma hoped. She was so lost in thought that she didn’t hear Regina approach.

“And so the flying princess, tired of this Earth flew back to her home, the moon,” Regina said softly as she got closer to Emma.

Emma didn’t look up, and barely acknowledged her presence. “There is no princess,” she commented, her voice flat.
“No?” Regina wondered at the defeated tone in Emma’s voice.

“There is no moon.”

Regina sat down close to Emma. “Just Emma then, and that's all right with me.” She held out a rose she had bought from one of the teenage girls selling charity trinkets, but Emma didn’t make a move to take it. Regina began to wonder what had happened to change her lover’s mood this dramatically. “I'm glad you found this spot,” she said softly. “It's much nicer here.”

Emma still didn’t look at her. “Regina, there's something I have to ask you.”

“Animal, vegetable, or mineral?” Regina tried to keep the worry out of her voice.

Emma sighed. “It's just ...” She paused, curling her hands around the edge of the bench so hard she feared she was leaving dents in the stone. “I don't know where to begin.”

Regina dropped all attempts at levity and frowned. Whatever was going on had Emma really worried. “What is it, dear?”

Emma grimaced. “We've had such fun together, such happy times.”

Regina closed her eyes. This sounded like ... Oh God, Emma was going to break up with her. Her vision became blurry as her eyes teared up. So this is what heartbreak feels like. “But, Emma, what's the matter? What happened?” She didn’t care that she most probably sounded panicked.

Emma looked as pained as Regina felt. “There's a question ...”

“Yes?” Regina swallowed. Just ask it, please. I’ll tell you everything you want to know.

“It's the most important question I'll ever ask,” Emma said slowly. “Just answer yes or no, but ... but ...” She finally looked at Regina. “If it's no, don't explain.”

Regina nodded. She reached out to put her hand on Emma’s forearm and winced at how tense the other woman was. She still had no idea what was going on. “Well, go ahead. You can ask me anything.”

Emma took a few deep breaths. “Regina, have you been proposed to much?”

Whatever Regina had expected, it certainly wasn’t that. “Have I been what?”

“You know, proposed to?” Emma kept talking. “Your hand in marriage.”

Regina shook her head. “Not enough to turn my head,” she replied with a small chuckle. “Why?”

Emma rolled her eyes. “I'm asking you to marry me.”

Regina’s jaw dropped. “What?” Had she heard that right? “Is ... is th-that the question?”

“Yes.” Emma wondered if she hadn’t been clear enough and decided to try again. “Will. You. Marry. Me?”

Regina opened and closed her mouth a few times, but no words came out. The feeling of relief that was coursing through her system was unlike anything she’d ever felt before, and for a second she felt like she was going to pass out. She was also absolutely gobsmacked. “Well, ...”

“Will you?” This time it was much more of a demand than a question.
Regina’s whole face lit up in a smile. “What do you think?”

Emma’s body sagged in relief as she smiled. “When?”

“When?”

Emma was beginning to doubt Regina’s powers of understanding simple questions, but maybe it could be forgiven under the circumstances. “Now?”

Regina was still confused. “Now? As in soon?”

Emma shook her head and turned her body towards Regina’s. “I mean now as in tonight.”

“Tonight?” Was that even possible? And do I care?

“Will you, Regina?” Come on, say yes!

Regina grabbed Emma’s shoulders and pulled her closer. “Do you want to do it right here at the house? Is somebody here who can marry us?” She thought she had spotted a few well-known judges who could probably perform the ceremony if asked.

Emma shook her head. “Not here. We'll take the car, I know where to go. We'll drive--”

She didn’t get to finish her sentence as her lips were covered in a searing kiss.

● ● ●

David was saying goodbye to some guests when his butler came looking for him. “What is it, Roberts?”

“Sir, there's a woman here who is demanding to see Ms. Mills immediately.”

David wondered if that was Regina’s alleged wife. He didn’t believe in coincidences, so he decided to check it out. “Where is she?”

“I took the liberty of asking her to wait on the terrace, sir.”

“Thank you, Roberts. I'll see her.” He walked through the house to the terrace. “Good evening. I'm David Nolan.”

Myka whirled around. “Pleased to meet you,” she replied. “I’m Myka Bering. I’m--”

“You’re Regina’s wife?” David interrupted.

Myka was caught off guard. Had Regina already come clean to Emma and her father? “Well, technically .... but--”

David interrupted her again. He was furious that Regina had managed to play him and, even worse, his beloved daughter. “Don’t worry, your wife will be returned to you intact,” he said coldly. Mostly. “Just as soon as I can find her.” And kill her after I remove a few limbs. Is drawing and quartering still frowned upon?

Oh God, he has no idea. Myka felt panic flare up. “I'll go with you.” Regina deserves a warning.

“No,” David shook his head and gave her a smile meant to placate the unwashed masses and wives of his daughter’s girlfriends. “I think it would be wiser if you stayed here.”
Myka hated being condescended to. “Afraid I’ll make a scene?” she quipped.

“Oh the contrary, I’m looking forward to it.” David’s jaw clenched. “I’ll bring your wife to you directly.” In little pieces. He stalked away on the hunt for Regina and his daughter.

Myka threw up her arms in frustration and groaned. She should probably just head back to the city now. She turned to see if the cab was still in the driveway, and by pure chance saw Emma and Regina get into a nice sports car and drive off together. Myka rolled her eyes and ran over to the cab before it could drive off too. Make things difficult, Regina, why don’t you? “Follow that car,” she told the driver as she got in the cab.

He beamed at her. “I got it.”

Myka got out her phone and tried to call Regina again, but it went straight to voicemail. Myka growled and leaned back in her seat. Great fuck almighty.

She didn’t see Helena and the Star’s photographer coming up from behind one of the hedges. “Perfect,” Helena said. “Follow them. Don’t lose them, and try to get pictures.”

“No worries, I won’t lose them.” He ran to his car, determined to stick close to his targets.

Helena smiled and strolled to her own car, a clear amount of swagger visible in her steps. “I’ll be getting the special edition ready.”

She was tempted to whistle an appropriately cheerful melody.

● ● ●

Myka didn’t know what she had done in a previous life to deserve this kind of sucky luck, but not ten minutes into the chase her overexcited driver managed to get stopped by the police for reckless driving. He possibly shouldn’t have cut that last corner and hit the trash cans, Myka mused as the driver tried to explain that they were on an important mission.

Myka got out of the car with a drawn-out sigh. This sounded like she should get involved before the cabbie talked them into the local sheriff’s office. While she and the driver dealt with this problem, Myka missed the Star’s photographer passing them with a smirk and a sarcastic little wave.

It took thirty minutes and the entirety of the admittedly not very large arsenal of Myka’s feminine wiles to get the cop to let them go their way without a fine. At least the cabbie drove her back to New York with a smile on his face, she thought as she got out at the Grand Plaza.

The local sheriff smiled as he watched them drive off, and lovingly folded the piece of paper with Myka’s phone number. He chuckled lightly. Damn, it took him almost thirty minutes to get the number.

Myka smiled in the back seat. She wished the sheriff all the best when he called Mrs. Frederic. Then she closed her eyes for the rest of the trip home.

Later, as she opened the door to Regina’s empty suite, she wondered what Emma and Regina were up to.

● ● ●

Emma couldn’t believe her own luck as she stood nestled in Regina’s arms, watching Archie Hopper fill out a form. The drive to his house had been just long enough for some good conversation, and
Emma had explained that Archie would marry them, no questions asked. He had been one of her mother’s oldest friends, and he also was a Justice of the Peace.

“Regina Mills,” Archie said, looking over his shoulders at the woman holding Emma and sharing sweet smiles with her. “Ever been married before?”

Regina met his eyes as she shook her head. “Not to speak of, no.”

Archie saw Emma pat Regina’s arm and wondered what that was about. He noted Regina’s reply in his form. “You’re lucky Ruby is here this weekend,” he said to Emma. “Otherwise we would have had to use Pongo as a witness.”

Emma laughed and Regina bent over to pat the Dalmatian’s head. “You would have made a good witness, wouldn’t you?” she cooed. Emma thought it was adorable.

The door opened and a tall brunette in a very short skirt walked in, a big smile on her face. “Hey, Emma!” She pulled Emma into a firm hug.

“And here she is now,” Archie stated the obvious.

Ruby studied Emma and the woman with her, saw the bright eyes and wide smiles. “Are they sober?”

“I think so,” Archie said. “Emma knows better than to drink and drive. Right, Emma?” He tried to give her a stern look, but he had never managed to pull that off with her.

Emma chuckled, but didn’t take her eyes off Regina’s. “This is love, not liquor, Uncle Archie.”

“Well then.” Archie got up and stood in front of them. “Join hands, please.” They did. “Regina, do you take Emma to be your lawful wife to have and to hold, in sickness and in health, to love, honor, and cherish...”

Emma tuned Archie out and just watched the way the light played with the depths of Regina’s eyes. Regina was saying something, and then stared at her, and Emma realized that she was supposed to do something, say something. Given where they were and what they were doing, she blurted the only thing that came to mind. “I do.”

Regina chuckled. “I’m so glad you do, darling. Even if Justice Hopper was only taking a deep breath...”

“It’ll do,” Archie said through his laughter, which Ruby joined. “I declare you married,” he added. “You may now kiss the bride... brides.” Archie concluded the ceremony, pulling Ruby away from newlyweds to give them some privacy. They needed to sign the marriage certificate anyway.

Emma blushed a little at her blunder, but the embarrassment died at the look of love and devotion she could see on Regina’s face. “I love you,” she whispered, voice not strong enough for more. “I’m so in love with you.”

Regina pulled her in for a tender kiss. “I love you, too,” she said softly. “I never thought I could ever love someone as much as I love you.”

“And I managed to propose to you before telling you that I love you,” Emma hid her face against Regina’s shoulder.

Regina grinned. “If that wasn’t a declaration of love then I don’t know what was.” She paused for a
second, simply enjoying the feeling of Emma in her arms, but this was as good a time as any to have one of her questions answered. “Why did you?” she asked. “Propose to me tonight, I mean?” Emma looked up and blushed again. “It didn’t exactly look planned.”

“It wasn’t,” Emma admitted. “It all started when--”

Regina stopped her with a kiss. “Not now. Tell me on the way back to the city? There’s someone I’d like you to meet, and then I’d really rather like to be alone with you.”

Emma nodded and turned around to thank Archie and Ruby. After promises of another, longer visit soon, they ran out and started their drive back. As soon as they were on their way, Emma turned to Regina for a moment before she began to explain.

“So, it all started when the Burns-Norvells arrived tonight claiming you were married ...”
Lessons Learned

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: see Chapter 1.

A/N: Well, this is it. Thank you all for reading and leaving lovely comments. I apologize that this update took a little longer, but real life slapped me in a face a time or three the last two weeks, and I didn't have the time (or head) to finish this.

It was late by the time Helena met up with the Star's photographer in front of the Waldorf Astoria. "Are you sure they're here?" Helena asked. She wondered why Regina and Emma would have chosen a different hotel.

"Yep."

"Did you get Myka on the phone?"

"Sure."

"What did you say to her?" Helena hurried him up with a motion of her hand.

"That I was looking for you with some important information."

"And?"

"She fell like a log." The photographer snickered. "She asked me what information I had, so I dropped the bomb. I told her I was driving by the Waldorf and saw Emma and Regina go in." He scratched his neck and pointed to the hotel entrance. "On investigating, I found they'd been assigned the penthouse suite as a married couple."

Helena looked satisfied. "What did she say?"

"She used some swear words that were new even to me and then she hung up on me." The photographer studied Helena. "You know, I've been thinking," he said. "That was a justice of the peace they went to. Maybe they really did get married."

Helena scoffed at that. "How could she? She's got a wife already."

"I know, but it isn't it all just fake?"

Helena stopped listening and hit his arm when she spotted what she had been looking for. "Look, there's Myka now." She pointed. "Okay, you wait out here until I call you. Looks like we’re off to the races."

She followed Myka into the hotel with a smirk.

 Regina put down the room phone with a frown.
“So?” Emma asked.

Just then there was a knock on the door, a second before it opened and Myka came in.

Regina recovered first. “Myka, this is a surprise.”

Myka grinned. “I just bet it is,” she said. Then she smiled at Emma. “I’m sorry to break into your little party, Ms. Swan, but I need to talk to my ... Regina.”

Emma raised her eyebrow at that but motioned for her to continue.

Myka walked over to Regina and pulled her away from Emma. “Helena set something up,” she whispered urgently. “Does Emma know? You know about ...”

“She knows.”

“Thank God.” Myka breathed a sigh of relief. “She obviously didn't kill you, so it wasn't too bad?” She saw the smile on Regina’s face as the other woman shook her head and looked at Emma. Damn, I want that kind of happiness as well. “Well, time to take care of mine then. How about a little help?”

“Absolutely,” Regina agreed. “Listen, if I know H.G, she’ll be outside trying to listen, so I guess you should make a nice scene and we just play along.”

“All right,” Myka agreed. “Keep your fingers crossed for me.”

"What you said before should work nicely ... just try it with some good old righteous anger." She winked at Myka, who nodded as they walked back over to Emma. “Okay, start over,” Regina mouthed to Myka, so she did.

“I’m sorry to crash your little party, Ms. Swan,” Myka shouted, with a healthy dose of snark in her voice and an apologetic smile to Emma, “but this woman happens to be my wife.”

Regina nodded and turned to Emma. “Dear, this is the woman I told you about,” she said louder than strictly necessary. “Ms. Myka Bering.”

“Mrs. Mills is the name,” Myka insisted with a grimace. Like she would ever change her name.

Emma played along, curious where this was going to go. She did enjoy a good hoax and Helena had this coming from all she had heard. “Pleased to meet you,” she said with a smile. “I’ve been looking forward to meeting you.” She couldn’t help but add, “Regina told me so much about you.”

Myka was actually surprised and almost dropped the act. “She told you about me?” she said with a smile, her voice a lot softer now.

Emma chuckled. “Yes. Come on, sit down.”

Regina tiptoed over to the door while Emma and Myka continued their introductions, and Emma poured Myka a drink.

“Hey, where do you think you’re going?” Emma asked with a grin when she saw Regina by the door.

“Don’t worry, I’m not leaving,” Regina said softly. “I just don’t want Helena to miss anything,” she added loudly and opened the door, revealing Helena crouched down low, one ear pressed to where the door was a second before.
“Good evening, Helena.” Regina’s greeting was almost cordial.

Helena simply refused to be embarrassed about being caught eavesdropping. That was part of her job after all. “Hello.” She straightened.

“Could you hear all right or do you need a summary?” Regina asked as she bid Helena inside.

“Hello, Ms. Wells,” Emma said in greeting. “So nice to see you again. Let’s all sit down.”

“What are you doing here?” Myka demanded.

“Naturally, she didn’t expect you,” Regina commented, keeping up with the act.

Myka gasped dramatically. “I had no idea she was out there.” She winked at Emma before facing Helena. “This has nothing to do with you or your newspaper, so you keep out of it.” Helena flinched but stood her ground. “As Mrs. Mills, I demand—”

Regina jumped in. “There must be some mistake,” she said. “You see, this is Mrs. Mills.” Emma cleared her throat and Regina nodded. “Okay, okay, so we kept our names,” she added with a grin and a shrug.

“What?” Both Myka and Helena asked.

Emma and Regina nodded. “We have been married for more than an hour now,” Regina said.

Myka and Helena stared at Emma, looking for denial or confirmation. “Yes, we were just married,” Emma confirmed.

“Have you gone crazy?” Helena gasped, staring at Regina.

“We are married. Really.” Regina got a piece of paper from the sideboard. “I always have our marriage certificate close by just in case.” She handed it over to Helena.

“They’re married all right,” Helena said after checking the certificate. “But that’s bigamy!” she yelled. “Ooh, what a story: Emma Swan marries bigamist. That’s even better than I think this would be!” She chuckled gleefully.

Emma cleared her throat. “Print that in the paper and you’ll have another libel suit on your hands.”

“I’m not a bigamist,” Regina said seriously.

“You married Myka, didn't you?” Helena was still thinking about the headline she could come up with.

Regina laughed. “That doesn't count.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about the fact that my dear, shady friend Killian is a drag queen with no particular right to marry anyone, so the paper we and the witnesses signed isn’t worth the ink it was printed with.” She didn’t add that it also was an almost empty page with some fake names as she had counted on the witnesses being too engrossed by the goings-on to actually look at the paper. She had been right.

“Then you and Myka were never really married?”

“Just like we planned it ... fake marriage.” Regina smiled at Helena.
“But I made an honest woman of her,” Emma said as she wrapped her arm around Regina’s shoulder.

“Dear, don’t forget the letter,” Regina whispered in Emma’s ear.

“Oh, yeah. This is for you.” Emma handed Helena a letter.

Helena scanned the piece of paper. “You dropped the suit!” She dropped the letter on the table and hugged Emma. “I just can't thank you enough,” she said excitedly. “Emma Swan marries author. What a story! What a scoop!” With that Helena ran for the door.

“Ms. Wells,” Emma’s voice stopped her. “Didn’t you forget something?”

Helena looked at her hands and then around the room. Her eyes glanced over Myka and landed on the letter. “Oh yeah, the letter, thanks.” She went and picked it up.

Emma was getting angrier by the second. “The letter and Ms. Bering,” she said icily.

“Myka, of course.” She turned to Myka and pulled her into a hug, not noticing the sad look on Myka’s face. “Listen, I have to run back to the office. Call me there in the morning?”

“I won’t,” Myka said.

“What?” Helena asked. “Why not? This is all over now and we can go back to our life.”

“Our life?” Myka yelled. “What is that, our life?” She glared at Helena. “All those little tricks you pulled today alone, to get me here, to trick Regina and hurt Emma. Not once thinking about what I might have to say about all of that.” She started pacing. “You think you were so smart, don’t you? Coming up with this plan?” She rounded on Helena. “All building up to a nice happy ending ... You win the case, Regina gets the girl, but what about me?”

Helena was speechless, and all she could do was stare at Myka.

“You didn’t even care when I fell in love with Regina,” Myka continued, her voice resigned. “Oh, I know she tried to play me, too ... but at least she had a great excuse. She was in love with Emma!” She took a deep breath. “But you pushed me aside for the sake of a newspaper!” She pulled off the ring Helena had given her not too long ago and threw it at her fiancee. “So, marry the paper and be the proud mother of a lot of headlines!”

She tried to run past Helena and to the door, but Helena stopped her. “Myka, please, let us--”

“No!” Myka wrenched herself from Helen’s grip and ran to the door to the suite’s bedroom and vanished through it.

“Myka!” Helena ran after her.

“Wait!” Emma yelled, stopping Helena from following Myka. “Let me talk to her. You two have done enough.”

Regina looked slightly offended by that remark, but she knew Emma was right. Myka had been the one who had really gotten hurt in all of this. “Please take care of her.”

Emma nodded and followed Myka.

Regina whirled around to face Helena. “You damn idiot!”
“Me?” Helena shouted. “You were the one who played her.”

“I didn’t,” Regina replied. “We were just trying to make you jealous,” she added.

“But ... why?” Helena sank down in a chair.

“Because you’re an idiot,” Regina repeated. “Myka loves you, really loves you.” She pulled a chair close to Helena’s and joined her. “And you let your work come between you again and again.”

“I ... I’m just trying to be good at my job,” Helena said. “You know how it is, Regina. The pace, the rush ... always something else to chase after.”

Regina nodded. “Which is why I got out.”

“You got out because I fired you,” Helena reminded her.

Regina chuckled. “The day you fired me, I was on my way to Mrs. Frederic to hand her my notice. You firing me just made sure I got a nice little severance package.”

Helena chewed on that for a while, looking absolutely lost. “What do I do, Regina?”

“Sorry about that scene,” Myka said when Emma closed the door behind herself. “I’m sure you’re not used to anything like that.”

Emma snorted. “You have no idea.” She sat down next to Myka on the bed. “I’m sorry about all of this,” she said. “If I had known what would happen, I’d never have sued the paper.”

“Then you never would have met Regina,” Myka pointed out.

Emma sighed. “That’s true, and that would have been too sad.” She smiled at Myka. “I really love her, you know.”

“I know,” Myka whispered. “And she loves you, too.”

“And you love Helena.”

“Yes, as much as it pains me sometimes.”

“What would you like to see happen?” Emma asked. “Ideally?”

Myka thought about that. “I just want to see her more, you know ... be an important part of her life, not just some afterthought.”

Emma nodded. “She does love you though, doesn’t she?”

Myka hesitated. “I think so, yes,” she finally said. “She proposed to me. At work,” she added sarcastically.

Emma laughed. “Probably still better than my proposal tonight.”

Myka gaped at her. “You asked?”

Emma nodded. “Regina’s attentions must have seemed great to you ... right?”

“What do you mean? There was nothing going—”
“I know,” Emma calmed Myka. “It’s just ... People can be starved by neglect, and the little attentions Regina paid you had to seem so much greater because you weren’t getting them from Helena, at least not regularly.”

Myka shook her head so furiously, her curls were bouncing. “The only time she sent me flowers, she signed them with Regina’s name.”

“I can understand why you tried to make her jealous,” Emma said. “Do you think a job change would help Helena? Say, what do you do for a living?”

“I’m a child advocate,” Myka said, a little confused as to what Emma was after. “I mostly work with groups that fight for children’s rights.”

“That’s admirable,” Emma said. There was an idea forming in her mind.

“But I don’t know if Helena could ever be happy without that blasted newspaper,” Myka said resignedly.

“Not even with a job that allowed her to spend more time with you?”

Myka sighed. “I really don’t know.”

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“What do I do?” Helena repeated.

“Do you love her?”

Helena nodded.

“Do you love her more than the Star?”

This time Helena hesitated a second too long.

“You really are an idiot,” Regina hissed.

“No, no,” Helena protested. “It’s not that ... I do love Myka more than anything ... but I need a job that I like doing.”

Regina raised an eyebrow. “You enjoy the drivel you have to spout for the Star?”

Helena looked up. Regina had a point. “Not all of the time,” she admitted.

“Good.” Regina got up. “Were you even a little jealous when you thought Myka was falling for me?”

Helena stood, too. “You have no idea how close you came to being strangled,” Helena ground out. “Half the reason I did the things I did over the past few days were because I was so damn jealous, not because of the suit.”

“Maybe you should do something to show her, then,” Regina said slowly. “Say, Helena, how often have you dreamed of hitting me?”

“The whole time we’ve known each other or just in the last half hour?” Helena smirked. “The answer to both is the same: lots of times.”
“Okay, do it.”

Helena stared at her. “You want me to hit you?”

“Yes, but be careful,” Regina cautioned. “I’m pretty sure Emma could beat you up, if she thinks you deserve it.”

“And how is that supposed to help?”

“At least Myka would see that you’re fighting for her, quite literally.” Regina tensed for a blow, but then held up a hand. “Oh, and once she forgives you, you will take her out, you will woo her, and you will make sure she never has reason to doubt your love for her again. Understood?”

Helena nodded. “Can I hit you now?” she asked. “Because I can’t stand any more preaching about my love life.”

“But sadly, you need it. I could ... ouch!”

In the room next door, Emma stilled Myka. “Listen, they’re fighting.”

Helena had slapped her, quite a bit harder than she had expected her to. “Shut up,” Helena yelled for good measure. “You don’t deserve someone as good as Myka!”

“Well, you don’t seem to want her,” Regina replied loudly, holding her cheek. She took a lamp from a side table and dropped it to the floor.

“Helena!” Myka yelled, anger replaced by worry. She stormed into the other room to find Regina and Helena facing each other, fists clenched. Emma followed more slowly.

“Regina, what did you do to Helena?” Myka demanded.

Helena got between them. “No, it’s my fault, darling,” she said, taking Myka by the shoulders. “I’m just a stupid reporter, Myka, but I love you.”

“Let me look at you,” Myka said softly.

Regina looked at the scene incredulously. “She hit me, not the other way round.”

Emma walked over and wrapped her arms around Regina from behind, resting her chin on Regina’s shoulder. “I’m sure you deserved it.”

Regina turned her head and winked, pointing at Helena and Myka who were talking softly. She smiled. “Kiss me and make it better?”

Emma pressed a kiss to her cheek. “Better?”

“Not much.”

“I’ll kiss it better all night once we’re finally alone,” Emma whispered. “I gotta say that this was not quite what I envisioned my wedding night to be like.”

Regina winced. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine.” Emma patted Regina’s stomach. “You think they can work it out?”

Regina shrugged. “They love each other,” she said. “It’s just Helena’s job that gets in the way.”
Emma looked at the two women thoughtfully. “You think they’d like a change of employers?” she asked after a minute.

Regina looked back at Emma again. “You have something in mind?”

Suddenly the door to the suite flew open and David came in. “What is this? What's going on here?”

“Hey, Dad,” Emma said from her position behind Regina.

David stared at his daughter and Regina, then Helena and Myka. “You ... you just disappeared,” he said, pointing at Myka. “And you,” he growled, addressing Regina. “Step away from my daughter.”

Regina raised her hands and took a step away from Emma, but her wife held on. “Don’t talk to my wife like that, Dad,” Emma chastised him.

“Your wife?” David asked. “I thought that was her wife?” He pointed at Myka.

“I did try to correct you,” Myka said, “but you didn’t really let me talk.”

“So the Burns-Norvells were talking nonsense again,” David muttered, sagging in relief. “I’m so glad.”

“Well, not quite,” Regina said.

“But it’s a long story,” Emma added before David could say something. “One that we’re going to share at some point down the road. One that is not our wedding night.”

David sank heavily into a chair, shaking his head. “I’m too old for this kind of stress.” He looked around. “Anybody want a drink?”

In the end, Emma and Regina never got around to enjoying their wedding night, but Myka and Helena managed to start talking.

David got drunk and forgot that he wanted to kill Regina.

Four months later

“Swan.”

“Hello, dear. Everything ready?”

“Yes, we’re just waiting for you two. Where are you?”

“About five minutes out. I can’t wait to see you.”

Emma chuckled. “It’s not even been 24 hours, honey.”

“Way too long.” Regina blushed. “It was the first night we spent apart since we got married, and I still can’t believe that you made me go through this for the repeat performance.”

“Did you miss me?” Emma smiled at the thought, glad she wasn’t the only one who had trouble sleeping. She ran a hand over her white dress.

“Absolutely,” was Regina’s short and somewhat muffled reply.

“Helena is making faces at you, isn’t she?”
“Indeed.”

“Hurry up,” Emma said with a grin. “I missed you, too.”

She hung up and turned to the woman standing next to her. “They’ll be here soon.”


Emma laughed. “I had no time to be nervous the first time,” she replied. “It all happened too fast and I was just so relieved that Regina had said yes. And today ... well, that’s just for grins and giggles and my dad’s desire for beautiful wedding pictures.”

Myka grinned. “God, your proposal ... that must have been nerve-wracking.”

“You have no idea.” But Emma was glad that marrying Regina had been spontaneous and intimate. Today’s big event was only because her father insisted that he needed to make sure his daughter got her dream wedding. He didn’t much care that it wasn’t her dream wedding, but she accepted it because she knew he was organizing her mother’s dream wedding for her and Regina.

“Emma, listen.” Myka was suddenly serious. “I really want to thank you, for everything.”

“My pleasure,” Emma said softly. “Our backyard is just perfect for--”

“No,” Myka interrupted. “Not just that, although it’s amazing, and I’m glad we’re doing this together. I want to thank you for everything.” She took Emma’s hand. “For being our friend, even after we’ve had a sort of rough start, for changing our lives ...”

Emma shrugged, a little embarrassed by that much praise. All she had done was offer Myka a new job as the head of the Swan Children’s Foundation, and get her father to jump over his own shadow and hire Helena as the new public relations manager for all the various charities the Nolan family ran.

Her father had grumbled a lot, but had finally relented by saying that it was always better to keep enemies close. Helena and Myka had accepted the offers, which resulted in them actually having to work together a good deal, and they were both much happier for it.

Emma smiled at Myka as these thoughts ran through her head. “I did like you from the beginning, Myka,” she reassured the other woman. “And Helena ... well, she grows on you.” She and Regina have that in common.

“She does,” Myka agreed. “I really love her, you know.”

“I hope so,” Emma said. “Otherwise this wedding is going to be pretty awkward.”

Emma’s phone beeped once. “They’re here.” She smiled widely. “Ready?”

Myka nodded and followed Emma out to the backyard, where Regina and Helena were waiting to start the rest of their lives.

The End

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