The Tellings of Yule

by Paradoxalpoised

Summary

Emma, Regina and Henry celebrate their first holidays together, melding old and new traditions into something that just might resemble a happy ending for all of them.

Notes

[Setting | Post S02E16 'The Miller's Daughter', the following winter, about six months after the events in 'Acting Like a Family'.

Thanks to Marynesq for the beautiful cover art, and have a happy Yule season.

Lz & C.
"We've been walking for a while, Ma." Henry is whining as they hike through the forest, looking for the perfect Christmas tree. He actually lets go of the sled they are both pulling.

"Oh c'mon kid, this is family fun!" Flexing her fingers, cold even in her gloves, Regina thinks that Emma has a unique version of fun. At times.

"He does have a point, dear." Regina is slightly out of breath. Emma is having an emotional type of sugar high. Regina's calling it the Christmas effect. "We still have to carry our tree all the way back home." *If we're not using magic,* because for Emma, *'real'*, involves sweat and runny noses, in the cold, boots calf high in the snow and frozen bits.

Emma is loving it. That makes sense, of course, but watching her is... it hurts and it makes her happy. Contradiction, by Emma Swan. Regina is more than willing to indulge the woman who holds her heart and never had what all children should. She wonders if maybe Henry picked up on that too. It wouldn't surprise her.

"You guys are party poopers, where's your Christmas spirit, Mills?!"

Emma turns around to face them as they trail behind her and the bow-saw dangerously slides off her shoulder, landing by Regina's feet.

"No, dear, we're just concerned for our lives." She smirks and gives a sheepish Emma Swan an amused eyebrow. "I am particularly concerned for your limbs. They do have their uses."

Emma sticks her tongue out to Regina. Which makes Henry laugh.

"Well that has a use, too."

"Ewwww, Moooooom!" Henry pretends to barf. "That's gross."

"That was the point, sweetheart, I am glad I managed." Emma's also caught the double entendre, if her crooked smile is any indication. Their banter and sass had always been something Regina cherishes, but trying to be "good" was never what Emma had wanted of her. She'd only wanted for Regina to be herself, which hadn't been that bad, truly, although she had done terrible things.

Now Emma truly has her heart, and Henry, too. She has a family, and a life to see that being herself is actually good enough.

Reaching a thick patch of trees, Regina decides they've had enough.

"I think we should look around here, Emma."

"All right. What are we looking for, Henry?" They both look at Henry expectantly.

"Well, in 'Today we learn how to cut a Christmas tree' they say we should look for a tree with a full body and even branches and a straight trunk."

They spread out in the glade of firs, looking for the perfect one. Emma goes straight for the
gigantic unmanageable ones, and Henry is pointing at even bigger ones.

"Look, Mom, what do you think of that one?"

"That one would take half the living room, Henry. It's too large. keep looking." She does too, taking a few steps away from them.

The cold grass and snow crunch underfoot as she studies the trees. These are smaller, obviously sheltered from the sun by the canopy of bigger pines and oaks overhead. Then she steps around a sparse fir to see what lays near the edge of the glade.

A fir seems to glisten with dew, its body shape full and branches evenly spaced and a rich, healthy green. Regina feels a shiver as she steps closer. She turns and realizes the glistening is in the air around her. She hesitantly reaches out, and her hand passes through a curtain of light. It's a fairy circle. A lump forms in her throat. She sees Emma and waves to her. There's no recognition on Emma's face when Regina sees she passes through the light curtain.

The tree she stands next to catches Emma's attention. "Is this the one?"

Regina nods, taking Emma's non-saw wielding hand. Emma leans and kisses her. When Regina opens her eyes the fairy ring has faded from sight.

"Kid, c'mere, your mom found the perfect tree!"

Henry catches up to them, holding up Emma's beat up smartphone, "Okay," he pants, "I've got the rest of the instructions."

"What does it say?"

"We need to keep a little over a foot and half of trunk and just cut it."

Emma hefts the saw and kneels down. "All right everyone, take a step back. I got this."

Regina takes a step back, or three, and puts a firm hand on Henry's shoulder to keep him with her. They're watching Emma roughly measure where she's going to take the saw to the tree when Henry tugs at her coat.

She leans over and he whispers, "Do you think it's safe?"

"I heard that!"

Regina chuckles.

"Just carry on, dear. Don't mind us."

"Maybe you could make sure she doesn't cut her hand, or make the tree fall on us?"

Regina actually turns to look at Henry, "She's the one with the saw, sweetheart."

"Magic." Henry shrugs.

"I heard that too! I said no magic, kid." Emma is looking at them, the bow-saw halfway through the trunk of the tree. "We're doing this the old-fashioned way, and that's all there is to it!"

Everyone hears an ominous crack just as Emma finishes speaking...

"Emma!" Regina is extending her hands and the falling tree stops in mid-air, levitating a few
inches above Emma's head.

"Well, that's that." Regina is smiling, diffusing the fright that surprised all of them.

"You could poof all of us home with the tree while you're at it." Henry grins.

Emma is still crouched under their falling tree, hands in the snow. Regina studies her for a second. "No, Henry, we're going to carry the tree home, like your mother asked of us."

"Okay." Henry pockets Emma's phone. "I'll get the sled."

Regina lowers the tree to the ground next to Emma, stepping closer to offer her hand. She helps Emma up and into her arms.

"Mi hermosa corazón..." Regina shakes her head slightly, amused.

Emma blinks and blushed. "Thanks for the save."

"Thank you for the... experience," Regina replies.

"You just laughed at me." Emma pouts. She can't help but kiss it.

"With you."

"And the kid."

"You are quite funny, Emma." Regina kisses the tip of Emma's nose next.

"You think this is good?" Emma asks, clearly checking for Regina's approval.

"The tree is perfect." Regina tucks some of Emma's hair back. "Let's go home?"

"Is it holding up straight?" Emma is laying on the floor, adjusting screws in the trunk.

"Yeah, Ma, I think." Henry's helping, she can hear them from the kitchen. "We should ask Mom."

They should. Because it's nice to be asked.

"Regina!"

That's her cue. Regina pulls off her apron and sets it on the counter, taking the tray of hot chocolate mugs and moving out quickly through the house to the living room.

"You bellowed?" She sasses at Emma looking up at her from her back on the floor.

"Is it straight?"

"Not much of anything you do is straight, dear."

Emma curls her lip at Regina. Regina smirks back. "Just tell me which way to move it."

"A little to the right, towards me."
Emma dives back under the tree and does something Regina can't see, but the tree jerks several inches toward Regina. "Too far."

From beneath the boughs Regina hears an unmistakable growl. Another adjustment and the tree tilts slightly back toward the left. "That's good."

Sitting up, careful not to touch anything, Emma uses her teeth to pull the index tip of Regina's 'special Christmas tree' gardening gloves.

"Let me help you…” Regina kneels in front of Emma and helps her pull the sticky gloves off.

"Thanks." Emma's tone is warm, admiring almost.

Regina offers Emma a mug of hot chocolate in exchange for the gloves. Her eyes settle on Emma's humming face as she takes an appreciative first taste of chocolate and cinnamon goodness.

Emma's legs splay out in front of her. After a snuffle over the steam, Henry gingerly drinks from his own mug.

Regina settles back on the couch and sips at her own hot chocolate, content to simply watch them both enjoying the drinks she has made for them and warming up from their adventure in the forest. Warming up from the inside.

Emma sets aside her mug and looks up the length of the tall tree. "So, decorations next?"

"There are several boxes in the attic," Regina says.

Regina leads the way upstairs to a door at the end of the corridor of bedrooms. A twist of a skeleton key - she gives Emma a wry smile - and the trio is inside a narrow staircase leading up into darkness. Regina reaches over her head to a small pullstring lightbulb. It casts a faint light pool around them and Henry leads the way up the stairs.

Emma takes Regina's hand before they reach the top step. The light has illuminated a short space that fills the headspace under the pitched roof. There are old furnishings up here, and a few chests of old clothes. Regina points when Emma turns to her curiously. "Henry knows."

Indeed Henry is in the midst of pushing aside a large leather trunk Emma thinks might have been Cora's; it looks like a steamer trunk. Regina must have brought the woman's things up after her mother's passing. Behind the trunk however, Henry has thrown open a brightly painted box. "Here," he says excitedly.

Emma follows Regina forward and the two look on as Henry removes and stacks five non-descript white boxes of various dimensions. "These are the balls and bells," he explains. "We've got lights, garlands and icicles too."

While Emma fills her arms, Regina steps away and opens another chest, withdrawing a shirt box tied with braided child's shoelaces. She looks over at Emma, the woman's arms brimming with boxes, and says, "I think we have enough for the tree, Henry. We'll come back when we decorate the rest of the house."

Henry stands carrying several boxes himself. "Okay."

"Careful on the steps," she warns as he rushes to leave, Emma preceding him. She picks up a box herself, putting her other cargo on top of it and follows after them.
Once settled, Emma and Henry first figure out how to disentangle the lights for the tree. Regina is glad to let them decide what to put up. She opens the boxes of ornaments, smiling to herself as she goes through Henry's handmade angels and snow covered balls, or glued together garland. All the crafty things he would always rush home with, excited to be able to put them up himself. Each had increased in complexity to match his growing motor skills. The angel he had brought home when he was four, however, was still her most precious. He'd glued together precut parts given to him by the preschool teacher and drawn with fat crayons on the white paper bits, telling her proudly it was her face. Because she was his angel.

When he was still quite little, she could lift him up so he could choose what was the most appropriate branch of their tree for his art.

Emma steps up to Regina and gingerly reaches for the angel in her hands. "You wanna put this one up?"

"It's Henry's," Regina says, letting it leave her fingers into Emma's. Henry looks over at the sound of his name.

"You still have those," he says.

"Yes, of course I do," Regina replies. "Every one."

Henry moves alongside Emma and looks at the angel in her hands. "Oh, when did I do that?"

"When you were four," she reminds him.

He reaches into the box and withdraws another. "Now this one I remember. I was eight. Miss Armpit had us trace onto cardboard and then use acrylic paints."

Regina laughs, fondly remembering him telling her his teacher's name the first time at eight years old. She once again corrects, "Miss Amphitrite, dear."

"Really? Who?" Emma asks.

"She is Ariel's mother."

"Ariel? You mean the Little Mermaid?" Emma questions incredulously.

"Yes."

"She was the art teacher. But she told us she'd been an Olympic diver when she was younger," Henry says.

Henry puts his "Miss Armpit angel" onto the tree. Regina looks at the decorated tree and smiles. It's really beginning to look and feel really like a holiday, for the first time in several years. "It's a lovely tree," she remarks.

"Did you use to put up Christmas trees in the Enchanted Forest?" Henry asks.

"We didn't celebrate Christmas. We had a winter holiday though, it's called Yule."

"Oh! That's what Snow meant," Emma says. "She was asking me about some you-thing. Yule, huh?"

"Yes, it was a way for us to celebrate that Winter was half over. That Spring would come soon, as part of the natural cycle."
"What was that like?" Henry asks. His eyes are glistening with curiosity, the same he has when he looks at his book.

"I am not sure what to say." Regina is a bit nervous. She's never enjoyed Yule. Like she's never enjoyed Christmas. Until Henry.

"Oh come on, Mom, you're great at telling stories." He grabs a fluffy pillow off the couch and settles himself on the thick rug on the floor before it.

"Henry…"

"I'd like to know too." Emma’s hand softly strokes her lower back before she leans in to grab another pillow and goes to sit on the rug by Henry, resting against an armchair with her pillow for cushion.

"Very well." Regina sits on the couch, two expectant faces looking at her. She's struck in that instant, as she is many others, by the amazing and beautiful resemblance she's come to cherish between her son and his mother.

"I should warn you, I have never really enjoyed Yule myself, because my mother never cared much for such frivolity. Our celebrations were always quite hollow."

"I think it's sad your mom didn't like Christmas." Henry blurts it out with a frown.

Regina takes a breath and holds it for a short moment. She's looking at her son and his compassion.

"I think it's sad too, Henry." She smiles at him, because it is sad, and she remembers thinking the same at his age. "My father just told me to hold it in my heart." She smiles wistfully. "Papi was… he thought of the holiday as a nice time. We had a few special things."

"Your father's traditions?" Emma's voice trails off.

"He… I suppose what I treasure most is the apple tree. It was a Yule present from him when I was twelve."

"So, you got plants as presents?" Henry asks.

"Yule is a celebration of nature's cycle. Plants and baby animals were frequent presents."

"So, who knew, Regina Mills, tree hugger." Emma chuckles and Regina is grateful for the lightening of the mood.

"And don't you forget it," Regina replies.

"So what's up with the feast? And there's a dance?" Emma asks.

"Traditional celebrations were days of feasting in the Royal houses and courts."

"Castles?" Henry asks.

"Yes."

"So you hung out with kings and queens and stuff?"

"When I was very young, we went to my grandfather's castle. They held feasts for days. And the last night, all night, from sundown to sunup on the longest night of the year, there was a huge
ball." She turns to Emma. "We did the same in White Castle for many years while Snow was young."

"So she's trying to recreate something from her childhood."

"Possibly. The few memories that are good."

"We had parties in a lot of the group homes where I lived," Emma says. "But it was simple stuff. A few presents from Toys for Tots, and a donated meal from the Salvation Army."

Regina meets Emma's eyes as the woman looks away from Henry. "There were a lot of gifts given from the lords to their vassals and the peasants' children."

"Really?" Henry asks.

"Yes. It was a sign of being able to care for those who depended on you for their protection to be able to provide lavish foods and toys, which were useless, simply because one could."

"Showing off," Emma says.

"In a manner of speaking. It was one of the reasons my mother disliked it, I think. Everything was meant for a purpose. Frivolity, toys, served no purpose. Even dancing was only a courtship ritual. She despised charity."

"Charity was sometimes all we ever had to wrap ourselves in," Emma says quietly. "I wonder if Snow is going to do anything like that for this celebration."

"We should ask her!" Henry throws in.

"You could, you are the White kingdom's Princess. It wouldn't surprise anyone if you wanted to be involved." Regina smiles, she knows Emma dislikes the title, but it is hers nevertheless.

"I'm no princess."

"Just like you say you are no Savior, dear. They are your people too." Her people too, Regina thinks, whether they want it or not. But there are the people you're given and the people you choose.

Emma sags back onto her pillow. "Well, maybe I can do some good with the darn thing. I'll bring it up tomorrow when I see Snow and David at the warehouse where they're putting on this thing."

"It'd be cool for everyone to get together for Yule, or Christmas, or whatever," Henry says. "We shouldn't all be doing different things, we're family."

Emma glances at Regina before answering Henry, "Everyone's already coming to the Yule feast or ball thing."

"But what about Christmas morning? And the presents?" Henry asks. Regina smiles indulgently at him, thinking already of the present she has set aside for him that is hidden in a corner of the shed.

"Well, how about you extend an invitation to your grandparents to spend Christmas Day here, with you?" Regina blinks. She just offered that, didn't she? She twists her lips from a frown to a pained smile.

"Regina?" Emma asks. Flabbergasted, she looks like her father. Charming.

"Quickly accept before I change my mind."
Henry rumbles up from the floor and throws his arms around her. "Thank you, Mom!"

"You're welcome, sweetheart." She wants to say 'don't mention it', but then she would really want him not to mention it, and it seems pointless.

Henry seems thoughtful though. Emma has picked up on it, too. "What is it, kid?"

"Well..." He's looking at the carpet. The tone of his voice tells her she's about to be cornered by a puppy eyes look. "Archie and Pongo are going to be alone for Christmas, too, and Ruby and Granny..."

"Archie and Pongo?" Emma's face is scrunching up, no doubt at the mention of the dalmatian. "Kid..." She sighs and looks at Regina.

"But Ma, you said nobody should ever be alone for Christmas." She must admit, their son runs a tough bargain. He has Emma wrapped around his little finger. Especially since he started calling her "Ma".

"Well yeah..." Regina rolls her eyes. She's already putting up with the idiots, she might as well have someone enjoyable to talk to.

"Why don't you call Archie and ask him yourself, Henry? I will handle the Lucases, and Emma can have the joy of talking to your grandparents."

"Yes, Mom!" He's already running to the parlor for the downstairs phone receiver.

Regina chuckles lovingly. It's so good to have him home.

"You totally rolled on that, Mom," Emma teases.

"And you weren't about to?"

Strong but gentle arms wrap around her waist, once she accepts the hand helping her off the couch.

"Yeah... but it's your house."

"Yes, and now it looks as if my home will be positively overflowing with holiday cheer." Regina lets her voice roll with mock dismay. Emma rolls her eyes and Regina can't help but end with a smirk. They know each other too well.

Emma nuzzles her neck, under her ear, where the younger woman likes it most. "Thank you."

"I am going to regret this, aren't I? There isn't a chance this little gathering could go well."

"There is always a chance," Emma says.

"That's your White optimism speaking."

"Probably."

"I love you." Regina leans slightly away from Emma still resting against her neck to see her precious face shining with the brightest smile.

Emma's fingers sift through her hair and the gesture makes Regina close her eyes. She wonders if this is what it means to simply have someone to lean on. She feels much better.
"I know. There isn't a chance you'd be doing this if you didn't." Emma kisses her lips tenderly. "And I've got you."

"You've got me?"

"Yeah." Emma is playing cryptic, as she does sometimes, so she doesn't have to explain how she feels. It means whatever she's trying to say is important, and Emma wants her to know it is.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I know you hate that kind of intrusion, and I won't leave you alone to deal with it."

It's important because that's how Emma commits.

Just entering the warehouse is a challenge. There's people everywhere. Emma takes Henry's hand to pull him away from a nun on a ladder with … Grumpy holding the sides down below. The nun waves to her and Emma thinks of her name - Astrid - just as Grumpy smiles big in her direction as well. It's a bit startling and she stumbles over her own feet.

"Emma, you all right?" Henry takes her hand. "Mom wasn't exaggerating when she said their Christmas is big."

"No kidding." Snow's gone all out.

"Hi there, sister! You came to help?" Grumpy sounds...cheerful.

"Hello, Leroy," and Emma's surprised that her voice actually doesn't sound as surprised as she feels. "Is Mary… my mom inside?"

"Hi." Henry's never quite forgiven Leroy for his school play disaster.

"Hey, munchkin," Leroy says to Henry. "Yeah, she's in the middle in there, as always."

"Thanks." Emma backs up and then turns around only to sidestep - thank god for fast reflexes - a pair of men traipsing through with a stack of wood planks heading into the warehouse. "What?"

"Just setting up the stage," one says. She thinks it might be Ariel's Eric. She recalls Regina's story about Miss Amphitrite the night before.

"Cool," Henry says. "Is there going to be performances?"

"No, it's for the high table," Eric replies. "For the Royals and your grandparents, we will be sitting up there for the feast, and then it'll be where the orchestra sets up for the ball."

"Wow! A whole orchestra?" Henry pulls away from Emma and follows the men. "Can I watch?"

"We're just going to be hammering, kid, you stick with your mom."

"I didn't even know Storybrooke had a whole orchestra…" Henry's trying hard not to pout, given the grimace he's making with his mouth.
Emma would've been okay with Henry going off. She's still working on being comfortable as the daughter of Snow White and Prince Charming, and being Henry's mom at the same time is kinda like being squeezed. But she takes him by the shoulder and starts looking in earnest for her mother's dark head among the throng. Finally, a veritable veil of garlands and plexiglas sheeting parts and she spies Snow bent over a table. She's pointing at something on a drawing and talking with Marco - Gepetto - and de-aged August - Pinocchio.

"He's been coming to school."

"That's gotta be weird," Emma says, remembering too easily the scruffy biker-writer who had pushed his way into her life a couple years ago in his efforts to get her to break the curse.

"Yes," Henry shrugs, "it's totally weird. It's Storybrooke though."

"Yeah."

"He's getting a bike for Christmas. And he wants a leather jacket with sunglasses like yours. He says it's to practice for when he gets a real motorcycle."

Now that Emma believes. She laughs aloud.

"Don't tell him, but I have August's motorcycle in the station yard. I'll just hold it 'til he's old enough. He is gonna grow up, right?"

"Man that would be cool. You think I could have one too?" Henry chuckles, "Yeah, Emma, he's gonna grow up. You broke the curse."

"Your mother would kill me, then you, then me again, if I even answered that question without checking with her first."

Henry grins at her.

"She totally would." They only cut their laughter short when they reach Snow.

Snow looks up at the sounds and smiles at Emma. "Hey?" Emma starts.

"Hi, Grams." Henry's forgiven his grandmother, but sometimes, it sounds like maybe he misses Mary Margaret just as much as Emma does.

Snow's smile widens at Henry. "Hello, Henry. What brings you by?"

"We can help for a little while, but I also wanted to talk with you." Snow's wide smile falters a little as she turns to Emma's voice. "It's just holiday stuff," Emma says. Snow's been working on being less demanding of Emma's time, and for the most part it's made things easier.

"Is there something specific you want to do?" Snow asks. "I can make it happen."

"Yeah, actually." Emma feels shy for just a fleeting second, then she figures she should just come out with it and relax. "I was wondering if I could plan the part of the party where you give away toys to the kids."

Emma winces inwardly at the suddenly incandescent glow her mother gives off between the brightness in her green eyes and the smile on her face.

"That would be wonderful, Emma! It's a great sign of what we want the town to be about to give away gifts." Snow has managed to make this about appearances, missing the part where she's
doing it for the soul of Storybrooke, not politics.

"See, we used to get gifts from charities in the homes, and it would mean a lot to me to do something for the kids the same way."

Snow's brightness fades a bit, but then she rolls her lower lip between her teeth and nods. "Is there a particular way you want to do it?" she asks, sounding cautious.

"It's usually someone dressed up in a Santa costume, distributing candy and toys."

"Do you want to wear this costume?" Emma hears the hesitation in Snow's voice.

"I want to be part of the gift-giving. Make it special."

"I'll help you, Emma." Granny's voice sounds firm behind her. When Emma turns, the elder Lucas nods once in greetings and decision. Ruby's at her shoulder.

"Eugenia?" Snow queries the older woman.

"You'd do this?"

"It'd be fun," Eugenia Lucas says with a smile. "I can make toffee and fudge, and I am sure Ruby will love the opportunity to make me, what's the word…"

"Cosplay, Gran." Ruby's right behind Henry. She ruffles his hair.

Emma smiles and glances at Snow, looking for approval.

"I guess that would be all right? You want to do it as the dinner is winding down?"

"Will that be very late?" Emma asks. "Some kids might be gone by then."

"So you want to do it before we eat?"

"We can do it with dessert!" Henry chirps.

Emma thinks about her celebrations. "That's the way we did it when I was a kid."

"There is gonna be dessert, right, Grams?"

Snow nods. "Then we'll do it that way, too." Her voice sounds like a decree, and Emma is both pleased and nervous, because she is having such a hard time with the fact that her mother just does stuff like that. Decree it, and it happens.

"And yes, Henry, there will be dessert. Your favorite, actually."

"Cool, thanks."

"Eugenia, will you need a place to change before you eat?" Snow's in full organizing mode.

"I wasn't exactly planning to wear a fancy dress," the older woman says. "Not my place. I'll be happy in the costume." She looks at Emma. "What are you wearing for the feast and ball, girl?"

"I don't suppose I can get away with an elf suit, huh?"

Snow shakes her head. "You need a proper dress." Emma winces; the glowing smile is back. Undoubtedly, Snow is picturing her in something frilly and pink.
"Emma." Ruby's laughing at her bit. "imagine Regina's face if she finds you in an elf costume for the ball."

"Point taken."

"Regina would wear the most amazing gowns when we had the Yule ball at White Castle. She was the most beautiful person I had ever seen. Her darker skin when she wore white… That one year, she wore a red dress like her apples, with white ribbons in her hair. I had a white dress with red ribbons from her dress in my hair."

It surprises Emma to hear the note of nostalgia - good memory - in Snow's voice. "How old were you?" she asks, carefully, wanting to store away this information of a time before.

"I think I was Henry's age." Snow's smile is quick, but it's there. "She made me dance, she taught me."

"Dance? 'Oh god', Emma thinks. "I don't suppose we're doing anything modern in the way of dancing, huh? I've never actually… uh, just… no."

"That's what a ball is," Snow says. She chuckles. "We'll get your dress at the dressmaker's and then I will teach you to dance."

"Don't worry, Ems, we'll get you all proper for your Ladylove."

Emma feels Ruby's backhanded slap to her butt and rubs the spot, looking ruefully at a gleefully smirking Ruby Lucas, the wolf playful in her eyes.

"Who's getting a dress?" David's voice sounds amused.

"Emma, so she can be pretty for my mom," Henry answers.

David studies her a moment. "Well then, I'm sure you'll look fantastic, sweetheart."

He turns to his wife. "Snow, do we have any idea where to get mistletoe? Kathryn was telling me it'd add to the romance of the evening."

"That's a great idea, but we're going to need a lot. I don't think the flower shop actually sells any."

"I think Regina's got loads in the backyard, she was talking about getting rid of some last week." Emma grab's her phone and hands it to David. "Here, why don't you call her and ask? I'm sure she'll help."

"Oh yeah," Ruby supplies, "she's got some in the trees at the edge of the forest."

Her phone is in his hands, the number is dialed. Suddenly they all go quiet and watch David with attention.

"Well…no, God no! It's David." He grimaces. "No, no, everyone's all right. No, nothing's blown up."

Ruby is chuckling already. Emma wonders if her keen hearing actually hears the other side of the conversation. Emma would believe it. She rolls her eyes.

"Yes, I promise." David clears his throat, "Well yes, I called to ask you something."

He startles on the spot. "Yes…uhm…We were wondering if you'd agree to supply us with
mistletoe for the Yule ball."

He's quiet for a moment. Then he blushes and Ruby is bent in half with laughter. "Yes, that'd be great. I...I'll come to help you."

"You want Emma?" His eyes bulge. Ruby looks like she's going to pee herself; her face is red and she has slapped her hand over her mouth, dancing in place with the other around her middle. "No, I didn't mean want… please, I don't want to know."

"Yes, okay." His smile is a lot warmer and he looks a lot less horrified. "I will tell her. Thank you, Regina."

He hangs up, and hands the phone back to Emma without a word. Everyone is expecting a report apparently, but David shrugs. "She'll help. And Emma, she wanted you to remember your main purpose for visiting the warehouse this morning."

Emma nods. "Yeah. I've got a message from Regina… from all of us, really." She takes Henry by the shoulders and tugs him partially in front of her. "We'd like you to come to the house for Christmas Day."

Snow and David exchange looks, Granny and Ruby do as well, with Ruby giving a nod, which Snow finally returns. "We… did she say what time would be acceptable?"

"Anytime," Henry says. "We're doing presents in the morning."

"Presents?" Snow looks worried at that. Emma wonders if she's thinking what to get a former Evil Queen stepmother for a present, or if she's thinking about her as Regina, the young woman who taught her to dance at her first ball.

"And I'm supposed to wait for you guys to arrive before I can open mine, so don't come too late, please?"

"We won't make you wait too long, Champ." David settles a hand on his shoulder. "I'll make sure to thank your mom when I'm at the mansion for the mistletoe tomorrow." He's looking at her saying that.

"We're going, too." Ruby smiles at Snow. Suddenly Emma is grateful that even Pongo is coming to their Christmas gathering.

"That's great," Emma says. "Now, can I steal Gepetto from you for my presents giveaway plans?"

"Oh, no," Snow says, and she and Ruby exchange looks. "We'll leave the boys here to work on gifts lists with Gepetto. You are coming with us to find your dress."

Emma closes her eyes and rolls her head with a sigh. "Now?"

"No time like the present."

Emma concedes. "All right."

"I do have to stop by the restroom first though," Ruby's laugh chimes, "Regina's simply too funny for my bladder."

Emma leans close to Ruby as they follow Snow out of the warehouse. "All right, spill, what did she tell him?"
"Absolutely not."

"It's been an interesting weekend." Emma is coming down the stairs at the mansion. Henry fell asleep the second they kissed him goodnight.

"To say the least." Regina is before her, and damn these legs of hers will be Emma's death. "I am glad it went well with your parents."

"Yeah, me too." They're in the foyer. Emma doesn't feel like going anywhere, but she's a bit nervous about what she needs to discuss with Regina. "Thanks for helping with the mistletoe."

"I do have some, it had to go anyway." Regina links their fingers, "I know it's Monday tomorrow, but… stay?"

Emma smiles as she pulls Regina into her for a kiss. It's tender and loving; Regina's lips are soft, so soft and warm. It's becoming harder and harder to leave. She kisses Regina's jaw to her ear, in that spot of her neck she loves so very much. Just for her.

"I'll take that for a yes." Regina chuckles. Her voice is low and husky, gentle. Emma loves it when Regina is affectionate. Everybody thinks she's the ice queen type but Emma knows better. Regina is warm, she's generous and tender, she's got so much to give. Her heart is so big, it's like pouring the bag of marshmallows on top of the best hot chocolate.

"If you give me some of that hot chocolate you're hiding. There's no way we finished that big jug you prepared this morning." She gives Regina a kiss right there, underneath the ear. It's like a shiver vending machine. You kiss the right spot and Regina shivers every time. Sometimes she even moans.

"I see it's to be blackmail." Regina has her arms encircling Emma, petting her hair with one hand and kneading at her lower back with the other. Emma would purr if she knew how. She waits, grinning in Regina's neck.

Regina sighs, faking exasperation. "Go feed the fireplace. I'll be right over."

Emma, still grinning, kisses Regina on her magic spot for one last shiver, hearing the cherished moan, and then makes her way over to the living room. She focuses on getting the fire roaring, feeding it a couple of logs, so that she and Regina can be comfortable for the relaxing part of the evening.

Maybe with the right setting, she can bring up that text Neal sent her, and Regina won't keep for too long the worried look she always gets when they discuss Neal.

"Here, dear, why don't you join me over here by the tree." Emma notices a few pillows have been thrown with a blanket not far from the tree, under a light fixture. Regina is carrying a tray with cookies and hot chocolate. She settles it on its legs, on the floor.

"Sure, but isn't the couch more comfortable?" Emma is curious, but also cautious.

"I want to show you something."

Regina produces a shirt box tied with braided child's shoelaces. She settles herself close to Emma,
the box in front of them.

She delicately unties the shoelaces to reveal the content of the box. "These are a lot of Henry's crafts, and also photographs." Emma breathes in the scent of kept memories in boxes, in attics, and Emma decides to be patient and let Regina explain, because it feels like they're going to look at treasures of very intimate and secret things. She doesn't want to break the spell.

"In most of the albums I have, the ones you've already seen, a lot of the photographs are very…"

She's looking for her word but Emma decides to help her. "Posed, or meant in a certain way?"

"Yes. I… I wanted a lot of things to be perfect, I wanted Henry to have everything, to be happy, to never feel like I wasn't a good mother to him."

"You're a great mom, Regina."

"I am a better mother now, Emma. When he was very little, when his whole world resided with me, I was the most dedicated mother, we had a perfect life for just the two of us. But when he started to grow into himself… when it came time to let him be his own person, I… I constricted him because I was terrified he would leave me. He wasn't happy. He sought you out."

"Yeah," Emma takes her hand, and as she often does, kisses Regina's knuckles softly, "to bring me home with him."

"I didn't see it that way then."

Emma chuckles. "I thought you were a crazy bitch with a stick up your ass."

"That first night, dear, I thought you were an insignificant insect, very much like your car, on my front porch and my shoe was too expensive to squish you with."

There's a smirk on Regina's lips.

Emma is smiling too; she knows better now. "It was so weird. The kid showing up, after all these years never ever allowing myself to linger too long on who he was, where he was, what his parents were like."

Emma scoots closer to Regina, pushing the box over to her slightly.

"I looked at your house and I thought, wow, maybe his mom's an ass but she's loaded. And then you rushed out, you were so scared and worried, so possessive, too. I saw on your face all the things I've always dreamed of seeing in a mother. For me."

"Emma…" Emma's fingertips gently touch Regina's lips.

"I thought you were absolutely breathtaking." Emma kisses Regina's lips with her fingers between them. "I thought you were so fucking hot. I thought I was losing my mind. I knew you were going to drive me nuts."

"You found me attractive then?" It's incredulity in Regina's voice.

"Don't you know?" Emma blushes, "I've thought you're beautiful since the very first moment I laid eyes on you, Regina. I just didn't know how to handle all the aggressiveness, the tension. I don't think I truly realized how much I've been attracted to you until later."

"You infuriated me. I thought of killing you."
"I know."

Her hand weaves through Regina's hair to the nape of her neck. Regina leans her forehead against Emma's.

"I thought of kissing you too."

"Often I wished you had. The insane angry sex we'd have had..."

Regina giggles. There isn't a sound Regina can produce that is happier and sweeter to Emma's ears than a giggle. She has different ones, but this is the spontaneous one, the one that makes Emma feel like she is good at something at last.

Regina backhand slaps Emma's thigh. "Miss Swan you are so cliché."

"What?" She smiles defiantly, taking a kiss from Regina's lips before dropping in her ear, "Tell me you never thought about me fucking you standing up against your front door or on top your desk at the town hall."

Regina swallows hard. That's all the answer Emma needs. "I have no idea what you mean."

"You're lying." She whispers it softly in Regina's ear with a chaste kiss to her cheek. "Show me all the goofy photos of Henry that didn't make it to the albums."

Regina nods with a fond smile. And reveals the contents of the box. There are albums, because even with these shots, it seems Regina wasn't able to throw out a single picture of the kid nor let them be stacked to deteriorate. They're organized like the other ones in the albums in Regina's parlor and she ordered his crafts with sheets of silk paper between each of them to preserve the glitter and paints, leaves and other glued collages.

They go through each of them slowly, enjoying their trip down memory lane. Regina tells the stories and answers each of Emma's questions with deference. These photographs are spontaneous and warm, livelier. Regina's in a few of them, too.

When they're done, and Regina quiets down under Emma's marveling gaze, Emma asks softly, "Do you think maybe we could start taking pictures, too? Make albums to keep the new memories? He's not too old, right?"

"Albums with photos of you in them? No, he's not too old, and neither are you."

A tear rolls from Emma's eye; Regina kisses it away. And the next one. And the next one. Until she's covering Emma's face with tender kisses and they're both laying on the floor, among boxes of ornaments, glittery garlands, photo albums, pillows and blankets.

Emma's sigh is loud, heavy with emotions. "Can you keep these albums in your library with the others?"

"Do you like them better?" Emma loves all the albums she's seen. But she likes these the most, because they show Regina is human. They show Regina is a good, kind hearted mom with a smile and goofy grimaces, stained sweaters and disheveled hair. That's actually possible, and not only because sometimes Regina is so high after making love that she forgets - or maybe she doesn't care, Emma never dared to ask, just in case - to fix her hair in that perfect way her hair just is.

"Yeah."

"Because Henry looks happier?"
"Because you aren't trying to be perfect and you look more like you, and he looks like a kid with food in his hair, snot on his nose, paint on your shirt, and dirt on both your shoes."

Emma hoists herself on one arm and leans over Regina so she can look into her eyes. "Because you're just Henry and Regina in these photos, no pressure, no expectations."

She feels Regina's arms cross at the nape of her neck. She's being pulled to Regina's face and chest. They lie down quietly for a long time. Regina smells so good, her skin is soft and the beat of her heart is always soothing.

Emma closes her eyes, in Regina's neck, by her favorite spot under the ear. Regina is petting her hair, in gentle regular strokes. It hits her like a ton of bricks, but it's not unbearable or anything. It's just that she's never had this before and it's a little scary, a little intimidating, but really, really good. She's home now. It's Christmas. She has a family. She belongs.

"Regina?"

"Emma?" Regina's voice tells her she knows Emma is apprehensive about something.

"I need to tell you something."

"Then tell me."

"I don't want to ruin the moment. I like it."

"I won't get mad."

"You won't?"

"I like this moment too."

"I ruined it already…" Emma sighs in defeat.

"No, darling, you haven't. Tell me what you're thinking." She feels a kiss to her forehead.

"I got a text from Neal." Emma waits. She listens for Regina's reaction. She's cursing herself but, really, she didn't want to keep anything from Regina too long. Emma used to do that, before. Loving Regina is teaching her a thing or two.

"What did Baelfire want?" Regina's voice is calm. She did say she wouldn't get angry. It sounds like Regina already knows what's coming next.

"He's coming to town with his fiancée Tamara to visit Gold and Belle for Christmas. He's staying over until the weekend."

"He wants to see Henry." Regina's tensing a bit, but still no temper shows through.

"Yeah."

"What do you think is best?" It's not like it's the first time Regina asks her what she thinks when it comes to parenting Henry. It's just that it always surprises her as if it were.

"I think Christmas Day is booked. And I don't want Henry to have to worry or anything." She pauses for Regina's reaction, but when none comes, she goes on. "We should ask Henry what he feels like doing. Maybe we can offer for Henry to see Neal the next day. Like in the afternoon. But maybe we should have lunch with the kid, and Neal and his fiancée. What do you think?"
"I don't want Henry anywhere near Gold." There's a death sentence in Regina's tone of voice.

"Will you tell me what happened with him some day? The whole story I mean."

Regina's sigh is as heavy as Emma's earlier. "I will, but not tonight."

"'kay." Emma can work with that. Regina always walks her talk.

"I suppose your idea of having lunch with Baelfire and his fiancée would be agreeable. If Henry wants to see him at all. At the diner."

"That's a good idea, Ruby can keep an eye on them for us if they stay for dessert or something."

"I am not leaving our son with strangers, unsupervised, without having made a few things clear."

Regina's arms around her tighten. Emma kisses Regina's throat and jaw. She caresses the arm encircling her with her free hand. She waits, never stopping, but not assailing, and gently, Regina relaxes around her.

Emma thinks for a moment how to put a smile on Regina's lips again.

"Regina?"

"Yes, dear?"

"Do the thing." Emma is smiling already, she never tires of seeing it.

"What thing, dear?" It's not exactly a code or a game, but Emma's said it a couple of times, and Regina is a dork, against all odds. Chances are high she knows exactly what thing Emma wants her to do.

"You know, the thing."

"What thing, dear? I am a witch, not a mind reader." She can feel Regina's smile poking at the corner of her lips. Regina knows.

"The thing. With your fingers." Emma bites her lip the instant it comes out, because yes, that is what she said.

"I do many things, with my fingers, Emma." Of course. It's not like she didn't walk right into that one.

"The thing with your magic." Emma deflates and gives in. Mills one, Swan zero. "The Emma Swan Magic thing."

"That thing?"

Suddenly, the ceiling comes to life.

Emma turns into Regina's arms so her back is to the floor but she still has an arm around her shoulder and neck. There are lights of all colours threading from Regina's hands, mixing and dancing on the ceiling. And then snow is falling. Actual snow is falling from a beautiful gray and pink sky, with clouds moving around, looking like polar bears. And a frozen lake, with an ice skating girl. She's got blond hair and a red coat.

"Regina!" Emma actually squeals. "It smells like roasted chestnuts!" Because there is an old man
pulling a smoking cart walking around with a big white moustache.

"How do you even know…" Emma is in wonderland. "You can tell stories?"

The snow gently stops, the sky and clouds dissipate; a smile lingers on Emma's lips.

"I used to, when I was younger."

Emma is looking at Regina now, resting on her elbows by her side. "You're amazing."

"You've said that." Regina does that; when she's moved, she collects herself like she's not affected.

"Could you make it last?" Emma has an idea.

"What do you mean?"

"The things you create, the scene."

"You mean like snapping a photograph?"

"More like a movie." Emma nods in her hands. "Like in Harry Potter."

"A moving picture." Regina's tone is ruminating; Emma knows she's thinking. "Would you like to have something special?" Regina asks. "Some particular scene?"

"Yes." Emma feels shy suddenly, because it's another thing Regina doesn't like to talk about and Emma's been lucky with the whole Neal situation already. "For Snow."

"For your mother?"

"Yeah, I… it was an idea for a present."

"You want me to use magic to create a present for your mother?"

"Maybe you just teach me, and I'll make it."

"Emma, I didn't say no," Regina responds, "but why? What is it you want to make your mother?"

"I thought that maybe, if she could see like I do that magic isn't always to hurt people, and what you can do, or what we can do together, it could… help."

"Help for what?"

"They miss the Enchanted Forest."

"Is that it?"

"And maybe it could help you and my mother be in the same room without wanting to hurt each other." Emma deflates.

"You really want this."

"I saw how devastated she was when we were there. It's really wrecked, Regina."

"And I did that." Regina's voice is not bitter, just matter of fact.
Emma dares a look at Regina, still on her elbows. Regina seems deep in thoughts, her eyes are swimming with eddies of emotions Emma can't really translate. She doesn't think she should ask, but it feels right somehow to be able to witness Regina without a mask, or a shield. To get a peek behind the Great Wall.

"I suppose we could try, together."

Emma rests her head on Regina's chest. "I love you."

"You better." Emma closes her eyes, revelling in the feeling of Regina's fingers combing through her hair.

She's almost asleep when she hears Regina's voice again. "I love you too."
Chapter 2

Chapter by LZielinsky, Paradoxalpoised

Chapter Summary

Emma, Regina and Henry celebrate their first holidays together, melding old and new traditions into something that just might resemble a happy ending for all of them.

Regina stands to the side, keeping an eye on Henry, who has, in an attempt to mimic his mother, donned an elf costume to help keep the kids entertained as they wait in a line to meet "Mother Christmas". Eugenia Lucas wears a cotton trimmed red suit as she takes each child onto her lap. Emma is in a striped red and white shirt overlaid with green overalls, digs through the stacks of presents "spilling" decorously out of a huge sack that is half box frame to hold it all. The overalls are cut short just below Emma's derrière, which dances in the air as she bends and turns and smiles and laughs. On her head is a sort of jester's hat, with four points all ending in jingling bells.

"Someone's having a blast." Ruby pipes in, "I couldn't not have her wear the thing. Isn't she cute?"

"She's adorable," Regina breathes honestly, knowing Ruby won't take her softness for weakness.

"Happy suits you." Ruby smiles, inclining her head. "Maybe I should stick you in the elf costume next year."

"Try it and I'll skin your wolf," Regina returns low and dangerous. That only makes Ruby laugh more.

"She growls and barks… I don't see a lot of biting."

"You are incorrigible," Regina remarks.

"Yep, that's why you love me."

Regina turns to Ruby. Honesty in her voice, she nods and says, "Yes, actually it is. Thank you, Ruby. For everything."

"My pleasure. You two deserve everything, y'know?"

"Emma does at any rate," Regina says, turning her gaze back to watching Emma present another gift and accept a hug from a little blond girl in denim and a t-shirt. Her father, well-worn face scruffed with a day's beard growth, stands nearby, clutching his cap. He says something to Emma that Regina can't hear, but it makes Emma smile and stand, and shake his hand.

Regina feels arms around her and a soft kiss to her cheek. "You deserve it just as much."
Ruby is gone as fast as she came, as usual.

Henry then comes to Regina. "We're almost done. It's time to go out back and build our snowman, Mom, we could win the contest!"

"What's the reward?" Regina asks him, amused.

"An honorary deputy badge, a whole box of chocolate & peanut butter fudge and a real job at the library for the kids who win! Belle said it'll pay two dollars an hour!"

"Then we will definitely have to make the best snowman. Is Emma joining us?"

"She can't, she's judging the contest with Kathryn and Belle."

Regina notes that's three princesses from their world. Some traditions die harder than others. She lets Henry lead her outside by the hand.

"All right. The snowfall last night was more than enough for two dozen snowmen." David is standing out by the back door. On the other side is the Blue Fairy who nods at him. Regina smirks. Looks like there was a little magical help for the snowfall this year. It hadn't been quite cold enough overnight, she'd thought, and there hadn't been a snowfall over on Mifflin Street.

Regina looks around at the others gathering to build the snowmen. There's Michael and Ava and Nicholas, and Gepetto and Pinocchio. Regina nods to Jefferson who stands with a hand on Grace's shoulder. "Jefferson," she greets politely.

"Regina," he answers in kind. "No magic," he says.

"It's a children's activity. I'd never."

She feels Henry stiffen under her hand. "Mom's just helping me. Like you're helping Grace."

"I am teasing," Jefferson smiles, "You two need to relax and have fun, okay?"

"Dad," Graces nudges him with her elbow, "Hi, Mrs. Mills."

Regina eyes Jefferson in askance, but accepts Grace's greeting with a warm smile. "Happy holidays, Grace."

"Good luck." The secret to Jefferson's softness has always been young Grace.

"You, too," Henry says.

They sign in, officially registering that they intend to enter the contest. There are some who are just outside to play in the snow. They're given a loop of rope with a placard and a number. Henry races toward a promising drift, kicking up the snow as he goes. Regina is just reaching him when he's already started rolling the base together.

They only have thirty minutes, and though their snowman's head is pretty well done and expressive, his belly is tanking a bit. There's a supply of items to use for buttons and noses, and mouths. Henry selects a carrot for a nose and big green gumdrops for the eyes.

Jefferson and Grace win first place. Their snowman has a very nice hat—no doubt one of Jefferson's many failed hats from his years trying to recapture the magic. It's perfectly tilted on the snowman's head. Henry and Regina come in second, for the green gumdrop eyes, and Gepetto and Pinocchio come in third, for the nose, of course.
Grace smiles at Henry when she choses Emma's honorary deputy badge. Henry is the happiest Regina has seen him in a long time when he races to Belle, promising to be the most hardworking employee. When it comes to Pinocchio's turn, he seems more than content with Kathryn's homemade fudge, popping one in his mouth immediately and grinning around it for the winners photograph.

"If you wish to change, Regina," David speaks and leans closer to her. She hadn't noticed him. "I took the liberty to move your dress and vanity to the changing rooms, where Snow's things are."

He moves decisively to the entrance of the warehouse. "Ladies and gentlemen, and children, we're all very glad you had some fun, toys and candy. The food was delicious, compliments of Granny and her helpers." The crowd cheers at that, David laughs joyfully. "It's time we all transform into our most elegant selves so the Yule ball can begin! For those who aren't staying, be safe going home, enjoy Yule and happy holidays!"

People shake hands and give goodbye hugs. Emma receives many of them, especially from happy, chocolate-mouthed children.

Regina loses track of Emma in the crush of people. She lifts out her cell phone and texts quickly, "See you later."

A quick, "Yep." is her only reply.

Now to change. Regina could snap her fingers and magic herself into the dress in a matter of seconds, but the tradition has caught her fancy too, and she brought her dress to change in the warehouse offices that have been converted to changing rooms. She starts down a corridor, looking into open doorways hoping to see her gown. It's not in any of the open rooms. When she comes to a closed door, she knocks tentatively.

"Come in," she hears and, turning the knob, she lets herself into the room.

"Is my dress…?"

"Regina, yes, come in. David has it here."

Snow. Regina blinks. She hesitates.

"I asked David to put it here. I thought we… it's Yule, right?"

Regina nods. "It is. Emma's first."

"I remember my first," Snow says quietly. "I thought… it, well, never mind. Your dress is there."

"I remember. I did your hair and surprised you with ribbons from the fabric of my dress. You'd said you liked it so much."

"I was so proud to be matching with you." Snow turns back to her vanity and settles onto the chair pulling on her crinoline and tying it at her waist. "You were the most beautiful of all the women I had ever seen."

Regina moves to her things and fingers the fabric, thinking back to those balls in White Castle. She glances over her shoulder at Snow, who isn't the young girl of those days, nor the bitter enemy of later years. Not tonight, maybe not as much in the years to come. She's Emma's mother. "Emma's first ball will be special," Regina assures.

Snow looks up. She hesitantly smiles. "She has already altered the traditions a bit."
"That's her way."

"She's happy."

"I hope so," Regina replies.

Snow nods. "I know."

Regina undresses and sets her day clothes carefully on other hangers. When she is working herself into her gown, she catches Snow watching her in the mirror. The younger woman stands and without a word, reaches forward and finishes Regina's zipper.

"You still are the most beautiful of all the women I have ever seen."

They look at each other in silence, for a moment that feels like forever and a minute.

Snow takes Regina's hand and looks up from their connection. "Emma's very lucky."

"Thank you, Snow."

"Are you happy?" Snow asks.

"I think I am, yes. As much as I know how." Regina studies Snow's hair. "You can't really have ribbons anymore."

Snow fluffs her short locks. "I'm learning to like it."

"How far along are you?"

Snow blinks. Regina shakes her head. "You haven't told anyone, have you?"

"No, I haven't told Charming either." She looks panicked. "How did you know?"

"There is truth in the saying that a woman glows," Regina replies easily. 'And a mother knows.' "And I know you," Regina adds.

"I... can you keep it a secret?" Snow winces when Regina raises an eyebrow. "I mean. I want to hold the news until tomorrow."

"I will keep your secret."

Snow nods and turns away. Regina is applying her makeup when she hears ticka-ta-ticka-ta clickings and glances over to see Snow texting someone on her phone. After a moment, there's an answering sound. Probably her Charming, Regina thinks. She reaches for her own phone and sends a quick text to Emma, "Where'd you run off to, Princess?"

The text, however, goes unanswered. Though Regina meant the name in jest, perhaps Emma is not amused. She texts, "I'm sorry. Emma, how are you doing?"

That text, too, goes unanswered. In the meantime, Snow has sent and received two more texts. Regina frowns.

Snow notices. "Regina, everything all right?"

"I don't suppose your Charming has run off on a police errand?"

"No, he's actually on his way here."
Regina nods. Worry, and that feeling that's never quite gone away that things she has are about to disappear, nip at her. "You should probably get outside to meet him."

Snow stands. At the door she pauses though. "Come with me?" she asks.

"It's your ball, dear."

"Please?" And now Regina notes Snow is glancing at her watch.

Regina stands. "A queen is never late."

Snow smiles. "That's absolutely true."

The two women walk together out of the front of the warehouse where a cobblestone drive has been cleared and a number of people are entering from the parking lot and street beyond. Snow receives hugs and some people even smile at Regina.

Snow pushes her way through to the edge of the cobblestone. Regina follows, for no real reason that she can fathom other than she really doesn't want to be standing alone somewhere.

She hears, "Mom!" and turns to see Henry rushing toward her.

"Oh Henry, you look very handsome, a true prince." Snow says. He does indeed look like a young prince, in a golden jacket and cream-colored pants. His shirt is crisp white accented with a gold tie. Obviously his grandfather Charming dressed him, as it reminds Regina of something the shepherd-turned-prince wore once in the Enchanted Forest.

Regina is pleased when he steps up to her and bows perfectly. "You look wonderful, Mom."

"You do look very handsome, Henry," Regina says. She finds herself imagining his high school prom. She wonders a moment at the glimpse of a future. She's been living day to day so long, it's a rather novel feeling.

Snow has moved a bit away and then suddenly she is grabbing Regina's hand. Before Regina can react though, the crowd parts and she hears and sees a carriage coming to a stop. David is stepping down revealing another passenger. It's Emma, who stands unsteadily and reaches for her father's hand.

Regina is surprised enough that her heart catches on a beat. Her hand is squeezed by Snow. She feels her knees go weak.

Emma is absolutely stunning. Her gown isn't pink. It isn't even frilly. It's full length, so deep blue, it looks like a midnight sky. The taffeta is sewn back, revealing the black underskirt which isn't too unmanageably full. The shoulderless bodice hugs her figure, presenting her flawless skin and toned arms and shoulders as a feast for the eyes. Her golden hair is partly up, but ringlets hang artfully down, curling around her throat and spilling onto her breasts.

David brings Emma to the pavement. Regina catches sight of the midnight blue pumps before the skirt hides them once more.

She's drawn forward by Snow, who steps aside. "Uhm...Hi."

"Emma..." She's speechless. Regina is drinking the sight before her, wanting nothing more than to pull Emma into her arms and never, ever let her go. "You are breathtakingly beautiful."
The rush of emotions and feelings is so overwhelming it hurts. In a good way. She feels tears at the corner of her eyes, but she smiles. She extends a hand; Emma takes it.

"You like?" Emma is smiling, too.

"Do I like?" Regina, huffs and feels her eyes dart upward in hope for oxygen and countenance. "I adore you." She lifts a hand to Emma's cheek, stroking it softly, feather-light, careful to not disrupt the delicate balance of Emma's make-up. "Don't you know?

"I adore you in these skinny jeans of yours and that stupid leather jacket I never want you to part with. Imagine what you're doing to my fragile heart with such a dress, dear."

"Good things?" Emma's expression is one she's never seen before. It's full of joy and hope, satisfied and trusting. Emma's in love, and she's showing it to the world. They're in love and showing it to the world.

"Yes, mi hermosa corazón," her voice breaks slightly on the endearment, "the best of all things."

Emma glances away from Regina, who turns to see what caught the attention of green eyes. Snow and Charming are standing together, smiling at Emma. No, Regina corrects, catching Snow's studied look. They're smiling at both of them.

"Happy holidays, Emma," Snow says. "Why don't you go inside and get this party started?"

Regina is surprised; the gesture is a key mannered moment. To start the dancing is to be the celebrated couple. Snow inclines her head toward Regina, but she says nothing more. Emma takes her hand, there's a small squeeze, conveying nerves. Regina takes the lead, guiding Emma inside alongside her. The people of Storybrooke converge like a sea behind them.

Emma leans close. "I'm sorry I didn't return your texts. David was playing keep away with my phone."

Regina nods. "I believe Snow wanted to keep you a secret from me." Her tone is light. Emma smiles.

"Or you a secret from me. You look incredible, Regina. That's such a beautiful dress."

Regina looks down at herself, pleased with the assessment. She's in black, but it's figure hugging, floor-length. The single shoulder design drapes the fabric down her body, accenting the curves of her hips. It flares slightly at her feet, sensual but discreet, simple and elegant.

She glances back up to see the sparkle in Emma's vibrant green eyes. "I like you very much in it. Like it was made for you."

Regina smiles, pleased and moved. She can't remember the last time she's ever felt how she does now. Maybe this is what it is to be elated.

They stop at the center of what would be the dance floor, suddenly an island of just the two of them.

"I don't know how very well." Emma is trembling in her hand.

"Trust me." Regina steps in Emma's space, wrapping an arm around her waist. Emma's right hand caresses its way to Regina's left shoulder. Regina lifts Emma's left hand to her chest, letting it rest there for a moment, "Look only at me, in my eyes, and relax. There's only you and me." She extends Emma's left hand with hers, in a typical waltz position.
On cue, the orchestra produces the beginning notes of a beautiful Brahms waltz, suiting the winter festival and Emma's beauty. The music is soft and romantic, slow enough that Emma isn't jostled.

"Are we doing okay?" Emma asks, sounding so very shy.

"Yes, darling, we're doing well."

She turns Emma and they both see her parents now stepping into the dance area, Charming sweeping Snow in a wide arc, bellowing out her full skirt. The two are in cream white, with gold trim, befitting their royal station. With their leadership now on the floor, after two turns, the rest of Storybrooke's citizens take the floor to share in the beautiful music and beautiful company.

Regina knows she has the most beautiful company of all, however, right here in her arms. She leans in, holding Emma briefly behind the neck to whisper in her ear, and brush her lips across the shell of skin. "Mi corazón."

She can feel the heat as Emma blushes and smiles, drawing back.

"Is it going to break the spell if I kiss you right now?"

"We might want to stop dancing, I wouldn't want to have you fall. Or faint," Regina teases.

Emma's grip becomes firmer and Regina stops moving them around the floor. She steps intimately closer, feeling the crush of Emma's bodice against her chest. Emma is in control in this and Regina willingly gives in when Emma cups her cheek and draws their mouths together. For a long moment they are only breathing one another's air, heartbeats falling into matching rhythm. Then Emma does the most delicate brushing of their lips. Regina can't stand it. When it is over, she moves in again, pressing with more urgency. Emma smiles against her lips. She knew she'd do this to her, the beautiful wretch. Regina laughs into the kiss and Emma returns with another of more fervor.

They part with a laugh, but before Regina can resume her hold of Emma, a deep and reverent voice asks, "May I?" David is asking her permission to dance with his daughter, a hand behind his back, bowing.

"You may." She nods, although Emma seems slightly nervous.

"I'll keep you safe, Emma." David smiles; he's seen it too.

Regina lets them step in the waltz, another one, Chopin she muses, and thinks about leaving the dancefloor, maybe finding Henry.

"Dance with me?" Snow is facing her. "Like you did for my first ball?"

There's no way to refuse. These Charmings are going to be the death of her emotional balance yet. "Snow?"

"I know. Do it anyway?"

Regina nods. "Very well." She holds out her hands and Snow steps close. It's forty years ago, an adoring Snow White, guileless child, smiles up at her from her feet. Regina takes Snow's hands in hers. Gloves, just like then, too. "Follow my lead."

"This isn't the form you taught me," Snow says before she changes their hands into proper waltz positions.
"May I still lead?" Regina asks, a bit sassily. "I'm afraid I don't follow very well."

That actually earns her a chuckle from Snow. "Of course."

Regina steps into the next beat perfectly, taking Snow around the dance floor.

"You've done well, Snow. The ball is a success."

"I am glad you think so. I didn't think Emma would want to be part of it."

"She did, and she's happy. It's all that matters."

Snow glances toward Emma dancing with Charming; Regina's eyes follow father and daughter too. "She didn't grow up like we did."

"No, she didn't." She says this with strength; Emma's strength. Regina has mixed feelings about it all though. Emma's life was so hard here, alone, without love. But if she hadn't cast the curse, hadn't come here, Regina wouldn't have found the happiness she now has, in Henry, and in Emma.

"You don't seem to have regrets, Regina, why is that?" Snow asks, but it's more curious than accusing, a mature question from a mature mind.

"To regret is to suggest that I might not do it all again, given the same circumstances," Regina says. "But I have Henry. And Emma. How can I regret anything that happened that put me here, in this place, in this time, to be with them now?"

Snow looks pensive. "But we suffered so much."

"Emma's past pain can't be changed, Snow. But her present is always within my power to protect. And yours."

Emma and David are moving closer. Regina knows, from the glances, that both think Snow and Regina are reaching the end of their biddable time together. She meets Emma's eyes, sees a pinch of worry and smiles. "I believe that we have each other's dance partners, Charming."

"Regina, I believe you're right." His smile is beatific as he releases Emma's hand toward Regina and takes Snow under his arm, sweeping her away into the next orchestral movement.

Emma stares after them; Regina simply stares at her. "You, uh, want to continue?" she asks Regina finally, reaching toward her.

"I want you in my arms. Here or in the gardens?" Regina's voice is throaty; she's only a little surprised at how close to the surface her desire for this woman is at all times.

Emma blushes, as Regina knew she would. "Some air would be good."

Regina finds herself taken by the hand. She bites her lip in amusement. Emma's hunger is never that far below the cool surface either.

They stop by the buffet to get two glasses of apple cider, but never make it to the waterfront. Henry is standing next to Archie and Pongo, who looks quite the charmer with a bow tie as a doggie collar. Their son seems absorbed in watching Grace, who is waltzing and laughing, as she dances perched on her father's shoes.

"Someone's got a crush," Emma tells her in confidence. "He's just like me though, no idea what to
"Isn't he too young to have a crush?" Regina really wishes she could be Henry's angel a little while longer, considering she just made it back to his list of favorite people.

"Yeah, maybe, but he's got one anyway."

"The girl seems oblivious." Regina scowls, watching Grace. "She better not hurt his feelings."

"I wouldn't bet on her being unaware." Emma smiles. She seems to know something Regina doesn't. "She knows he's watching her."

"Is this where you tell me to stay out of it?" Regina has been trying to learn how to "let go." She positively loathes it.

"Yeah." Emma gives her a crooked smile, "but you can still teach him how to dance, so if he finds the courage, or he gets into the apple cider, he might ask her to try with him."

"Emma!"

"What? I'd rather that than having him do the wallflower with his psychologist. And the dog." Emma nods towards Henry, "Look at him, poor kid."

"Very well, let's go and rescue him." Regina begins to move towards Henry.

"Just don't tell him that." Emma drops in her ear, catching up with Regina and taking her hand.

"Hey, kid!"

"Hey, Emma." Henry smiles warmly at his mother. "You really look good in a dress. Really good."

"Thanks. So, you having fun?"

"Yeah." He shrugs. "I had some cake, and I saw you and Mom dance." He stuffs his hands in his pockets.

"Henry, dear," Regina smiles to him warmly. "Would you dance with me? I would like that very much."

"Well… Gramps showed me a little, but I am not very good at it." He's shuffling his feet, looking at his shoes. "I am not good like Emma."

"Few people can match Emma's… abilities, darling." Regina's eyes dance in amusement toward Emma.

"Go on, kid," Emma says, nudging his shoulder.

"Okay… but don't be mad at me if I step on your feet."

"Never." Regina takes his hand which he holds out to her. "You're my little prince. Always."

Henry smiles; he hasn't heard that nickname in years, but here, in this time and place, Regina is glad to remind him he's the only man she will ever again willingly give her heart to.

They fumble a little into the proper waltz form. He's got a frown on his face when he tries to put his hand on her hip. Regina smiles, adjusts his placement, and bends her arm to meet his
outstretched hand. She steps backward into the musical beat. He follows after her. She changes their stride lengths several times to find the most comfortable for them both. "Wonderful, Henry," she tells him, when he eagerly turns his face up from watching their feet to ask her how he's doing.

Henry steps in and wraps his arms around her waist. She puts her hand to the back of his head against her chest and closes her eyes. His voice wraps around her heart and squeezes. "I love you, Mom."

She brushes her lips in his hair and murmurs back, "I love you, too, my prince."

Emma's at her shoulder in another moment, a gentle hand low on her back. She turns both her and Henry, enfolding them into her. Then all three move from the dance floor.

"Ma?" Henry is sitting on the rug, by the tree, very carefully surveying three iPhones and Regina's and Emma's old cell phones. "Can I choose the ringtones for you and Mom when it's us calling?"

He is in charge of transferring over all their contacts and settings. Emma figured it would keep him busy enough until everyone else is supposed to arrive, so he doesn't open all the presents waiting for him under the tree.

"Sure thing, kid." Emma is rather occupied going back and forth from the living room to the kitchen, as Regina passes her things for their brunch buffet. She's nervous, but judging by the amount of food and culinary choices on the table, Regina might actually be feeling worse than she is.

"I don't see what's wrong with a good nice slice of fruit cake."

"Fruitcake is deplorable," Regina replies. She has in her hands, moving now to the table a coffee cake, its streusel drizzled perfectly over the tube cake's curves.

"Deplorable? Really? Want to be more dramatic?"

"It's dry or gritty and overly sweet," Regina states.

"Well, I happen to have tried lots of different brands of fruitcake, and yes, some may be a tad on the too sweet side, but other than that, a good fruitcake is certainly not 'deplorable'." She quotes the words with her fingers.

Emma moves absently to answer the doorbell. She's stepping back, still looking at Regina who has her hands on her hips about to make a return volley in their discussion.

"There is no way I am the only one who likes it."

"Likes what?" Snow asks. Emma turns and smiles at her mother.

"Fruitcake. Hi!"

Charming has just stepped in and is taking Snow's coat when Emma sees their faces in matching grimaces.
"Well, it really isn't my thing." Snow is diplomatic.

"I told you," Regina said. "David," she greets. "You can put your coats in the closet there."

Snow looks at Regina; Emma stares at them both. The shock of hearing the two women agree on something is disrupted by Henry's cheery lunge at his grandparents. "Gramma, Gramps!" He plows into David, but there is silence as Regina catches Henry's shoulder before he can slam into Snow's stomach.

Snow smiles at Henry and cups his chin. "Merry Christmas, Henry."

"Traitors," Emma pouts. "Fruitcake is good."

"I like it too," Ruby chimes in. "Granny makes a mean one."

Emma hadn't noticed Ruby or Granny, but apparently stealth runs in the family. "When did you guys get here?"

"We were going to knock on the door, girl, but since you insist on letting all the warmth escape, we just stepped in." Granny nods her head once. "Regina. Merry Christmas." Their hands are full.

"Merry Christmas, Eugenia." Regina smiles at Ruby which earns her a wink. "Let me take your coat."

"Yeah, and I'll take the fruitcake." Emma quickly relieves Granny of the trays of food she is carrying. Ruby disappears into the living room, no doubt to the tree, her packages in hand, barefooted.

Emma knows that Ruby spends time at Regina's, but it always surprises her how comfortable the woman is in the house, or with Regina for that matter. Often Ruby seems more comfortable around the Mills domain than anywhere else. Emma sees Regina note the bare feet but not say a word. Emma smiles. Ruby doesn't get a scolding for the mere possibility of bringing mud in the house. It's favoritism, but still.

Granny is shaking her head lightly, close to her, and the older woman links her arm with Emma's. "So, girl, I heard you know how to make your eggnog."

"Yeah," Emma chuckles and walks with Granny to the living room, straight for the buffet table where she lined up a bowl of eggnog close to the insulated carafes of hot chocolate and coffee. She serves a glass with the crystal ladle for Granny. She follows Granny around to where Henry is now picking up the iPhones from his rug tech station.

"Emma got us all iPhones." Henry sounds quite satisfied, and that's really great, because she is too. "That way we're always connected." For the exact same reason.

"Oh I know," Granny tells him with a ruffle to his hair. She half lifts a black apple device from her cardigan pocket. Henry beams and Granny hides her phone back where it must always be.

"You're being patient, Henry, I am sure you can open your other presents soon."

The doorbell rings again. "Wait until I get your mom, Henry," Emma cautions before sending Henry to the door; she's not looking forward to Pongo.

"It's only Archie, Ma." Henry rolls his eyes at her. He looks like Regina so much sometimes, she wonders if genetics actually mean anything in a child's development. "You're just scared of Pongo."
He scampers off with a laugh from Granny. "I am not scared of any dog."

"Of course not, dear." Regina is smiling, next to her. "You're only jealous of the dog."

"I'm not." There is definitely a crowd in the living room. Suddenly, it feels good to be standing next to Regina. Even if she's being teased.

Regina whispers, "I love you more," only for her ears.

Emma jumps despite herself when Pongo's bark sounds in the foyer. Then Regina has taken her hand and pulled her forward. Archie's smiling at Henry hugging his side, and Pongo is tugging on his leash toward Regina's other hand held out to him.

"Why don't we let him be free of his leash.," She bends to pet the dalmatian on the head. "You'll be a perfect gentleman won't you, Pongo?"

Pongo barks once and licks Regina's hand. At least he doesn't slobber. When the leash falls loose at Archie's side, Emma watches the dog closely. His muzzle swivels between Archie and Regina, and then lands on Emma. Dark eyes blink and then there's a tilt of the head. Emma ventures, "Hi, Pongo."

Henry has already started pulling Archie away. Pongo moves to stay at Archie's side. Emma turns to watch the trio go. Regina's hand slides onto her shoulder. "There."

"You are the dog whisperer. You want me to call you the next time Archie tells me Pongo's gone?"

"You just have to know what they want," Regina says.

"Regina's always been great with animals," Snow adds, nursing a mug of hot chocolate.

"You're the one who talks to them, dear," Regina reminds Snow.

"That's a myth… almost. I can figure out what birds say." She gives a small chuckle. "And squirrels. Nothing bigger than a rabbit."

"Regina speaks to wolves." Ruby is grinning.

"Only one, dear."

Emma looks at Henry showing Pongo unopened presents, apparently getting his doggy insight into which to open first.

"Maybe we should let the kid open his presents, before he's guessed all of them."

Emma takes Regina's hand and sits on the edge of the couch.

"Where is David?" Snow asks.

"I'mff rightff here." Or so it sounds like he's saying, because his mouth is stuffed full of Regina's brownie. He gulps a big mouth full, bounces his fist on his chest and coughs a couple of times. Everyone looks at him speechlessly until Regina extends him a mug of coffee as if out of nowhere.

"You shouldn't choke in my living room, dear, it could appear suspicious."

David drinks gingerly, and laughs good heartedly. "Blame it on that brownie. I just can't get over
"So I've heard." That's when Emma realizes that Regina probably baked it especially for her father, and that the brownie platter was still in the kitchen last she checked.

"You managed to sneak in the kitchen already?"

He shrugs with his typical charming crooked smile.

"Guys!" Henry tries over the animated conversation. "What about the presents?"

"Regina?" David defers.

"You may open your grandparents' presents first, Henry."

Snow smiles and brings out two items from the bag she had been carrying on her shoulder. Settling on the couch opposite Emma, she passes them into Henry's hands. "I hope you like them," she says.

Henry tears into the more unusually shaped one. Emma looks at Regina with concern. It looks like a sword.

"It's sharp," David explains, "but we also got you a proper cap to go over it. That way nobody gets hurt by accident."

"I love it!" Henry is already looking at his mom and her for acceptance.

"There are a lot of traditions around the knights in the Enchanted Forest, Henry," Snow says. "You can learn everything you need." She gestures to the other present.

"It has the story of Camelot in it, Mom!" Henry rushes over to Regina with the book opened to the content pages. Emma is glad they're both sitting together on a sofa; she can also look. Maybe Regina is reading her mind, because she places a hand on Emma's thighs under the leather cover of the book in their lap, and squeezes gently, stroking a couple of times.

"It's a wonderful book, Henry. One I haven't seen in a long time. I am glad there is a copy here, in Storybrooke."

"Thanks Grams! And Gramps, too."

"We'll work with the sword on the days you come to the stables, if your mothers say that's all right," David says, looking again to Regina and Emma for permission.

"Maybe Henry should open my present next," Regina tells them. "David, you should also get yours."

Henry passes a thin long package to David and starts to attempt lifting his large box marked "For Henry, love, Mom." "Gosh," he says. "It's really heavy!"

"It's a very important piece of equipment for any prince who wishes to be a proper knight," Regina says. Emma's pleased to hear the delight in Regina's voice. She wouldn't even tell Emma what she had gotten Henry.

"Open it, kid, let's see." Henry rips apart the paper and reveals a finely tooled leather saddle with a matching bridle.

"Regina, it's beautiful," Snow says. "Is that the White family crest?"
Henry finally wrestles the saddle off the floor. "There's another shield on the other side."

"That's the family crest of my house, Henry. My father's, the Southern kingdom and his specific emblem, modified with the heritage of my mother's lineage." Regina says quite gently. Emma squeezes Regina's hand under the wrapping paper discarded onto their laps.

"There is a Swan in the White crest." Her dad's voice is reverent.

"Really?" Emma looks at the crest again. "Oh, wow. That's really pretty."

"You actually did that?" Snow is looking at Regina, her eyes are full of tears.

"Henry is the inheritor of proud people," Regina says. "He should know that."

Emma looks between Snow and Regina and suggests, "I actually have some things for you, too."

She leaves the couch and ferrets out several packages, wrapped in Santa paper, the red and white jolly man dancing on a background of holly green.

"Oh, wait." David remembers the package in his lap. "I didn't open mine."

"You can open it with Emma's," Regina says.

"And uhm… Mom, here's yours," Emma passes over a squat, square box and sits back. She said Mom. It feels kind of strange on her tongue, but she's been thinking about it. Maybe once in a while it wouldn't be so awful. Like for Christmas.

Emma's foot bounces a little as she watches her parents - her *parents* - open her Christmas presents to them. She swallows down the lump threatening her throat. Snow, it seems, as she swallows, too, is equally moved by the awareness.

"David!" Snow gushes at the leather tooling on David's new scabbard, courtesy of Regina. The scabbard is enwrapped with the White crest and edged in burnished, hand-pounded gold.

"Uhm… Thanks." David smiles at Regina gently.

"I will give the brownie recipe to Granny." Regina waves the shyness away by looking at Granny. Emma knows then she's the only one to know it's actually shyness. "Maybe if you're good, she'll put it on the menu for you."

"Give me the lasagna one, too, and I'll consider myself spoiled." Maybe Granny reads minds, too, Emma thinks, like Regina.

"I think I'll keep that one my secret. I have to have a calling card, after all," Regina teases.

"Oh, Emma…” Snow is crying for good this time. In her lap she has the snow globe. Emma looks at Regina for a split second before she goes to her mother, kneeling by her side and David's.

"I'm sorry."

"It's beautiful," Snow says. "How did you…?"

Rocked back on her heels a bit by the quick change in emotional contexts, Emma asks, "It's good?"

"It's incredible, Emma, a perfect replica." David is looking at her with a wet smile himself. "The snowdrop flowers…"
"My mother loved them. She named me- Oh David look, they're blooming again." Snow's hand flies to her mouth.

"How did you do this?" David asks, his hand rubbing his wife's shoulder.

"Well, Regina and I..." Emma had been so proud of the idea, now she's bashful. Her magic is still something she's getting used to.

Regina rescues her. "Emma and I combined our magic."

Emma forestalls Snow's worried expression. "I wanted her to show me what it had looked like, when it was home for you."

Snow looks at Regina who nods once, shortly. "Thank you."

Thankfully, Henry has gone digging in the piles under the tree again. "Archie!"

Emma looks over to see that Archie had just put a piece of food in his mouth. "Give him a sec, kid," she advises. Once Archie swallows, he dusts his hands together and walks over to the tree. Henry smiles big at him and hands him a wrapped box.

Recognizing his bashful expression, Emma realizes the man had not expected a gift, more than the friendship of time spent together. She is proud that Henry thought to include him, even if it did mean having Pongo a little too close for comfort.

Archie wipes his hands on a napkin before taking Henry's obviously self-wrapped present. He carefully untangles the box that contains a calendar. "It has a quote for each day." Henry smiles. "It's for your desk."

"That's very thoughtful of you Henry, thank you."

"Henry, would you get the present labeled for Mrs. Lucas," Regina says.

"Mrs. Lucas?"

"Granny, kid."

Henry nods. "OK," he answers before diving back into the boxes. "Here!" He holds up a box and a certificate. "This second one's from me."

Granny takes the present.

"I do believe you asked for a recipe a moment ago," Regina says. Granny grins and opens the wrapping paper. Inside is a small hand-printed book titled simply "Recipes."

Granny lets out a hum of appreciation, "That's a neat handwriting you have, Regina."

"I had 28 years to perfect it," Regina said.

"And your cooking." Granny smiles. "If you ever get bored of being a stay at home mom, the kitchen is yours."

"I am not sure I could cook for as many people as you do and still find it entertaining."

"And the customers would freak out," Ruby adds, forever her bratty self.
"Maybe Regina should let you have the vegetables from her garden, Granny. It's quite the variety she's got out back, and a beautiful orchard." David sounds appreciative.

There's a lot of wrappings and gift bags everywhere. Regina gets up and starts cleaning up the mess.

"What's the certificate for?" Snow asks.

"Good for five complete lawn mowings," Granny reads out loud. "Thank you, sweetheart, that's going to come in handy."

"Hey kid," Emma gets his attention, "let's clear out some of this mess so we can find what's left of your presents, all right?"

They both pick up most of what's on the floor and Emma returns from the kitchen with a garbage bag for all the recyclable paper. She smiles at Regina, nodding to their couch so she understands that she's got this. She promised she would be there and she intend to make sure Regina doesn't regret her generosity and opening her home to all their friends and family.

David joins in to help out Henry with the pieces he has forgotten. He then goes to the tree himself, and hands what looks to be the same certificates as what Henry just gifted Granny, to Regina.

"I thought you might like it." He's looking at her with something somewhat shy, somewhat matter of fact. "I didn't mind helping you with the mistletoe."

Regina reads carefully; Emma moves behind the back of the couch to have a look over her shoulder.

"Seems like you got yourself a handyman for spring."

"You'd work for me?"

"Yeah." It sounds so much like herself, Emma is forced to rethink about that genetics and influences theory she was questioning earlier.

"I suppose I can find use for you." Regina is sassing, but the teasing is kinder than it sounds.

"Just don't break him, please." Snow is smiling with a hint of mischief and pride.

"If I may." Archie walks over to the tree and retrieves a box he places in Emma's lap on the couch by Regina where she's sitting again. "I hope you'll enjoy it all together."

"Apples to Apples," she announces, and Ruby cracks up. Emma soon follows.

"Nice one, Archie!"

"Well, it actually is a great game." He beams. "I have to admit the pun was intended."

Regina doesn't outright laugh at Archie, but she smiles a bit more genuinely when Henry sums up, "Well, as long as we don't have to eat any turnovers. Although it's a shame. They're really good."

"I still haven't ever had any." Emma wraps an arm around Regina's waist. "Maybe we should reconsider the ban on apple baked goods?"

"Maybe." Regina doesn't say more, and she's tense against Emma.

"You should open mine, girl."
Ruby places Granny's gift bag at Regina's feet. Granny is watching Regina with attention, and Emma knows she meant for her to open the present, even if she addressed Emma about it.

"Wanna go for it?" Emma nudges Regina softly with a hand on hers.

Regina slowly reaches for the bag and puts her hand inside. She lifts an amalgam of what looks like warm and fuzzy wool. Once the pile resolves in her mind and Regina's hands, Emma realizes that Regina has three identical beanie hats in her lap.

"Oh cool," Henry joins them. "They're matching." Regina smiles at him and hands him the smallest beanie.

He puts it on immediately, asking, "Which one's Emma's?"

"There's initials in each," Granny says. "Winters in Maine will give 'em good use," she adds.

Emma takes one from Regina's hands and looks inside the hem, finding an RSM. She lifts it toward Regina's head. When the woman resists ducking away, she says, "This one's yours."

Regina's eyes raise toward her head as Emma sets the beanie on the dark hair. Regina doesn't wear hats that Emma knows, but she glances toward Granny before putting her hand atop the wool and leaving it in place. "Thank you, Eugenia."

"You're welcome."

Regina looks absolutely adorable in a beanie hat. Emma wonders why she's never thought of it before, seeing she owns a good many of them. Maybe it's because she's not Granny and she didn't dare. Luckily, Regina is way too polite to refuse the older woman.

"You look fantastic with that hat," Emma makes sure to tell Regina as she's placing the remaining beanie on top Emma's head. "I like it on you."

"We're doing good you know?" Emma whispers it, because it's just for Regina.

"I should check on the casserole in the oven," Regina announces, getting up to follow in the kitchen.

"I am hungry," Henry agrees. "Maybe we can do more presents after brunch?"

"You are your mother's son." Ruby laughs, because really, Emma has never seen a kid so secure in the love he's got that he can be hungrier for food than Christmas presents.

"Only for the stomach reference." Emma bumps Ruby's hip.

Henry tugs on Ruby's skirt and points up. Ruby notes the mistletoe and kisses him sweetly on the cheek before pulling him into the kitchen.

Emma is behind Regina who has awkwardly handed off a platter to David because he held out his hands when Ruby points up. "Ruby," Emma gives a quick shake of her head.

"It's mistletoe, Emms." Ruby laughs.

David smiles at his daughter and busses Regina on the cheek. Snow's eyes widen as she's just straightening from picking up a bundle of discarded wrapping paper. "Mistletoe," he tells her.

Regina has already moved into the kitchen when Snow reaches David in the doorway. He kisses
her upturned face with a warm smile.

With everyone circulating, Emma finds herself stopped in the doorway just as Ruby is headed in and she's headed out. Ruby says her name and when Emma turns her head, she gets a quick kiss on the lips from the cheeky girl. "Merry Christmas, Emma."

Emma nods and looks back to see Regina watching them. She nods, and Regina smiles, clearly not bothered by the display. Obviously Ruby has earned some sort of play-pass from Regina for her holiday antics.

Henry catches his mother next under the mistletoe. Regina accepts his hug and bends down for him to kiss her. "Merry Christmas, Mom," he says.

"Merry Christmas, Henry."

Archie busses Granny's cheek only to have the older woman pull him back in and give him a kiss. "Now that's a proper kiss, Jiminy," she says. He blushes.

"If everyone is quite done kissing each other," Regina announces, "we should eat before the food gets cold."

Emma lets Archie and Granny pass her, and the kitchen, she wonders now why everybody followed in, empties itself.

Emma waits patiently until Regina is ready to leave.

"Miss Swan?" Regina is being formal, which means she's ill at ease, and definitely enough that she hasn't even noticed she's calling her such.

Emma wraps her arms around Regina's waist, "Brunch-"

"Is fine."

"But our guests-"

"Can dig in without us there for a couple minutes."

"I am not standing under the mistletoe."

"We don't need it." Emma kisses Regina's lips with tenderness and simple, strong love, how she feels. She kisses Regina's jaw and throat, to that magic spot under Regina's ear, as she always does.

Regina lets out a long breath and her body relaxes in Emma's embrace.

"Better?"

"I suppose." Emma kisses her again, for good measure.

"For now." Regina smiles.

Snow is sitting next to David and sees Emma and Regina stepping back into the room. "I… have another present." She looks at David, then Emma. "It's kind of impossible to wrap. At least in the traditional sense."

Emma lowers to the couch next to Regina who has taken her hand. "What's up?"
"I'm… we," Snow corrected, taking David's hand and looking into his face. Emma thinks he looks a little confused. "We're going to have a baby," Snow finishes. Now David definitely looks surprised, and then his face splits in a wide grin. He kisses her and pulls her into his chest.

"That is wonderful news, honey," Granny says.

Emma blinks; she feels Regina squeeze her hand. "Congratulations," she says. Regina's squeeze shifts to circling strokes on the back of her hand. "That's uhm… big."

"When's the baby due?" Ruby asks.

"Not until late spring. Dr Whale says June."

"That's a good time for a birth," Archie says.

"Why is that?"

"It's my birthday," he says with a chuckle.

Everyone laughs a little. Henry, sitting to Snow's right, says, "I think I'd like a little sister or brother."

Regina says, "The baby will be your uncle or aunt, dear."

Henry's face twists up in consternation. "I know, that's why I would like a brother or a sister. I'm going to have an uncle or an aunt who's younger than me."

Emma smiles. "Don't strain yourself too much, kid." He laughs and it releases the little bit of tension in her own chest. This baby will be her little sister or brother, nevermind her son's uncle or aunt.

Henry must have realized the implication of his reaction, or Emma's lack of one, because he adds, "Don't worry, Grams, I'll still like the baby. I get to be the oldest now."

"I'm glad, Henry." Snow beams in his direction.

"Regina?" Ruby's voice breaks the awkward silence, "Can I dig in now? I am starving and it smells really nice."

"I suppose, you have been good after all."

The group rises and follows Regina, who directs their attention to a side table in the dining room. "Buffet is ready. Help yourselves. I'll be right back."

Emma, who had started for the plates, pauses. "Regina?"

"Just fetching the canapes, dear."

"I'll help you!" Snow follows after Regina quickly.

Puzzled, Emma follows to the doorway between the kitchen and the dining room, wondering what her mother is up to. That was too cheerful, even for Mary Margaret. Behind her, there's the clatter of silverware, and china, as people avail themselves of the food Regina - well mostly Regina - made.

Regina has a hand on the fridge's handle, her back to Snow. "I don't require any assistance, Snow, you can go back to brunch."
"I wanted to thank you for keeping my secret."

Emma's eyebrows go up at that revelation. So Regina knew about Snow being pregnant. She wonders how long. But then there's a bump on her back and she glances away from her mother and Regina to see Ruby at her shoulder.

"It's naughty to eavesdrop."

"My girl, my mother," Emma replies cheekily. "Not exactly chums."

Ruby laughs. "OK. So what're they doin'?" Her voice drops to a matching whisper.

"Like you can't hear it just fine."

"Humor me, Swan."

Emma returns her gaze to the kitchen. Regina has stepped away from the refrigerator now and Snow follows her to the counter, lifting something from her pocket. Squinting she can see it's a drawstring bag, black velvet, Emma guesses.

"What's this?" Regina's voice sounds wary.

"I found it among my things. It's something I want you to have." Snow presses the bag into Regina's hand, cupping it. "Back."

Regina cautiously and slowly opens the pouch. She gasps and presses a hand to her mouth, holding something that looks like a necklace in her other hand.

Emma feels a strong hand on her upper arm. A glance back at Ruby finds her looking just as surprised.

"You. You had this all along? It was lost many years before… we were still in White Castle."

And Emma knows that tone. Before the curse. Before Regina had nothing but anger. It's like Regina is having a part of her innocence restored. She really wants to know the story behind that necklace. Maybe when Regina wears it, she'll ask.

"It was so pretty. I…"

Snow's voice sounds so young. It's obviously a memory for her as well.

"You took it?" Regina's voice turns to ice.

"Father…" It seems hard for Snow to speak suddenly but she goes on nonetheless. "You were always so beautiful and he… He looked at you like you were the most beautiful. I thought it was because he loved you as much as my mother." She steps to Regina who is dead quiet, or soon to be deadly quiet.

"I coveted the necklace because I saw him look at it on you. I heard him say he should take it from you, and I didn't understand. I was… I wanted to be beautiful like you and I took it."

Emma watches several emotions cross Regina's face, which she admirably withholds through Snow's confession.

"I only understood why Father wanted to take it away from you once I thought of opening the locket. It was several years after."
Regina's shoulders lift up and down with her breathing. Emma realizes she's trying to calm herself. Emma's of half a mind to walk in and interrupt before someone gets hurt, but Ruby's hand on her shoulder stops her.

"Wait," Ruby says.

"I denied it for a long time. I denied it then. And after that, he was dead, because you killed him, and I never wanted to accept how miserable you must have been. That it could have been justified in any way."

Regina's jaw works hard, and Emma can practically hear the grinding of perfect teeth. "You knew what you took from me." 'More than the locket' is unspoken in Regina's hard tone.

"I want to wish I had never been on that horse that day. The truth is I needed you so badly, and I wanted you to love me so much." There are tears rolling down her mother's cheeks. Emma isn't certain how to feel about them. "I only wish with all my heart that I had been capable of selflessness and kept your secret."

Regina is silent for a long moment and Emma wonders, as the woman she loves stares at the locket twirling in the air between her mother and her girlfriend, exactly what she's thinking. Her brown eyes are dark, but there is a melancholy there too. Emma senses the moment the forgiveness takes over; she's seen it directed at her more times than she can count after all.

Snow is suddenly wrapping her arms around Regina's neck and Emma's surprise is surpassed by Regina's in a split second. Regina stiffens and her face takes on an almost comically horrified expression. As though pushing through molasses, Regina's arms slowly lower, touching Snow's back. Emma can see the strain in Regina's hands as she struggles with what to do. Finally she grasps the back of Snow's sweater and tugs the woman back a step.

Snow quickly asks, "Can you ever forgive me?"

Emma feels her lip rolling between her own teeth, wondering what Regina will say or do next. Regina slowly tucks the velvet bag into the pocket of her pants, never taking her eyes from Snow's face. "Would you take the tray to the table?"

And Emma knows then, with Snow's quick dip of her head, the firm wipe to her cheeks and move to take the tray, that forgiveness between them will never be with words. Only actions.

Emma is rooted to the ground by the kitchen door. Luckily for her, Ruby is quick to save both of them and pulls Emma to the buffet before Snow or Regina sees either of them.

"Hey, Regina?" David asks. "Do you think we could go mess up the snow in your backyard after brunch?"

"Please, Mom, I want to practice with my sword!"

Regina walks to Henry and smiles, her warm and gentle Henry special. "Of course, sweetheart, that's what snow is for."

Emma's filling up a plate for herself, but then it dawns on her that's not what she wants to do. She arranges food on another plate, neatly - well, as best she can - picking all the things she's learned to recognize as Regina's favorites.

Henry is eating at the table next to Granny. Snow has found her place by David on a sofa. Ruby is having Pongo do tricks for chicken, on the rug by the fireplace. Archie is leaning against the
mantle watching them.

"You hungry?" Emma presents her food arrangement to Regina.

"Not that much." Regina gives her a small smile, because she doesn't want Emma to feel rejected, Emma can tell.

"I spiked the apple cider." Emma nods at Regina's glass. "You should eat just to be safe."

"Are you suggesting I cannot handle my own liquor?" Regina sasses.

"Me? Never." Emma feigns innocence.

She is rewarded for her foresight however when Regina lifts an hors d'oeuvre from the plate Emma prepared with two fingers and pops it in her mouth.

The plate is then taken from her hands. Always a woman of action her Regina, Emma thinks, her grin widening. A dark brow lifts. Emma covers her mirth with a quickly stuffed petit four.

Regina rolls her eyes and moves away toward Granny who, by the look of it, is trying to discern the recipe for the shredded chicken wrap she is nibbling.

"Hey, Emma." Henry stands as his mother sits. She accepts a kiss to her cheek before he steps away.

"Hey, Kid." Henry follows Emma out of the dining room back into the living room.

They both plop down to the floor by the tree, with pillows, and chocolate cake. Well, enough chocolate cake in Henry's plate for both of them.

"So what do you think? You like Christmas so far?"

"It's really cool." He seems to be thinking for a little while. "I think I'm glad everybody came, but I also like it when it's just us."

"You and me?"

"You, me, and Mom," he corrects, and there is a pointed note in his tone. "Mom's being really nice."

"Yeah. She's really nice." Emma nudges him. "I like our family too."

"You're going to have a brother or a sister." Henry looks at her then, "That must feel weird."

Emma nods, burying any verbal response behind the bite of chocolate cake. Devil's Food, she grins. Sinfully delicious. The thought makes her smile and glance toward Regina at the table.

"Ma," Henry sighs.

"Whuat?" Her mouth is full.

"You were thinking about Mom again."

"Yeah, so." She swallows big, bumping her chest with her fist like David earlier.

"You were thinking about Mom," he reiterates. She swallows again quickly, feeling her cheeks burn. "Henry."
"It's OK."
"Yeah?"
"Yeah." He scrunches his nose like she does, she realizes. "Just don't ever tell me."
"No deal." She chuckles, "Where is the fun, if I can't gross you out?"

Henry rolls his eyes, just like his mother, and stands before walking over to his grandparents.
"C'mon, Gramps!"
"Ready to head outside?" David asks, clearing his mouth and wiping it with a napkin after he sets aside his plate.

Pongo barks, answering for everyone.

Henry takes Pongo's collar. "You wanna stay here?" he asks Archie, "I can take Pongo out."
"I think I'll join you," Archie says, dusting his hands with a napkin and standing with his plate and cup.

"The food was delicious, Regina, thank you."
"Yeah, it was." David adds.

David puts a hand on Henry's shoulder. "C'mon, Henry." The three men leave the living room, shrugging into layers of scarves, hats, and coats as they go.

"There's plenty. You can enjoy some after playing in the snow." Ruby snorts. Regina rolls her eyes; Emma chuckles. Regina's so motherly.

"You'll find your Christmas present outside, dear." Regina is so evil, Emma can't help her laughter. "We got you beef, I know you find pork too greasy."

Because it's Ruby, and she's cool like that, she sasses right back. "I'm not done with my chicken yet."

"Well, don't let that stop you, girl," Granny adds. The laughter from the older Lucas is rough and Emma wonders if she was a lot like Ruby growing up, despite her frequent eye rolls and disapproving frowns toward her granddaughter now.

"It wouldn't be polite," Snow comments, her voice so very like Mary Margaret, Ruby just bursts out laughing.

"Okay, Okay, you win." Ruby is holding a hand up, looking at Regina. The two are true friends, and even if she sometimes envy them a little, it warms Emma's heart. "Tell me you got me something much cooler than a bone."

"It was still more appropriate outside," Regina states.

Emma follows Ruby to the back door, Regina and Snow, and Eugenia on their heels. Archie is already throwing snowballs for Pongo to "catch," and Henry's taking practice swings with his sword.

Ruby is out the door, Regina stepping up beside Emma. "When did you put it there?" Emma asks.
"This morning before you or Henry were awake, while I was collecting herbs for breakfast," Regina explains.

"What is it?" Snow asks.

"It's an agility course." Ruby laughs.

"One has to continue to exercise, dear," Regina smiles wickedly. "Or you'll get out of shape very quickly."

Ruby jokes, "It's all on your cooking if I do."

"Dude, you got a hammock!" Emma is just seeing it now.

"And a closet with clothes and blankets…" Ruby is preening.

"For when you visit." Regina concludes. She sounds satisfied. And nobody finds it weird that Ruby likes to sleep in Regina's backyard more often than not.

Snow pulls on her coat. "C'mon, Ruby, let's go check it out." Granny is right behind them. Emma holds Regina from following gently with a hand on her elbow.

"Hey,"

Regina looks at her. "Hey?"

"You…?" Emma doesn't know how to word it, but she wants Regina to know she's there for… whatever she needs.

"How about you?"

Emma looks out at the yard where their friends and family are playing in the snow. "It's going well, right?"

"I do think perhaps it is."

"What was that my mother gave you?"

"A present."

Emma rolls her eyes. "I know that."

Regina's lips quirk. "You were eavesdropping."

"You were upset there for a minute."

"I was."

"You're not ready to tell me why?"

"Not yet." Regina shakes her head. "Are you ready to talk about your mother's pregnancy?"

"Not just yet." Emma purses her lips. "You can tell me anything, you know that, right?"

Regina nods. "I know." She kisses Emma's cheek softly. "Just as you can."

Emma pulls Regina into her body as they walk onto the back porch. Emma steps closer to Regina,
wrapping her arms around her waist from behind and fitting her chin onto Regina's shoulder, as she's very much been wanting to do for a while now. "Yeah, I can."

"Happy Yule, Regina."

"Merry Christmas, Emma."

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