When Swanprincess Met EvilQueen101

by amycarey

Summary

Emma Swan never expected her vlog to take off like it did, but she likes the community and occasionally getting drunk and ranting into a camera is a decent way to make a bit of cash. Regina Mills films a rather higher class of vlog, a chance to be creative after days working analysing bacteria samples in a lab and to discuss day-to-day life as a single mom. When Regina has a bad day and posts a video she immediately regrets, she doesn’t expect for it to become as notorious as it does, and she vows to destroy the person who popularised her deeply embarrassing rant, some idiot known as 'swanprincess'.

But when rumours spread about sexual harassment in the Boston YouTube community, the pair may be forced to put aside their differences and work together.
In which we meet the swan princess (who is more of an ugly duckling)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

_Uglyducklingfolife: Have you abandoned us, Emma?_  

_Lokisbitch35: Emmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm. More drunk rambling pls._  

_Louise4564: You think you ’re hot shit but your vlogs are crappy quality and embarrassing._  

_CptnHook: Swan, would love to catch up for a drink sometime. Reminisce over past experiences ;)_

-- A selection of comments on swanprincess's video entitled 'Emma Rants: LGBTQ Rights in Indiana'

Emma sighs as she makes her last coffee for the day — a skim mochaccino with whipped cream for a lady with a yappy dog and the ugliest handbag in the universe — and then wipes down the counter top, coffee grinds clinging to the damp fabric. To her left, Ruby is cashing up the till. “That was quite a sigh,” she says. “Rough few nights?”

She nods. “I had two assignments due this week,” she says. “And people are getting up my ass about making another video.”

Ruby pulls her hair out from the tight bun, flipping a streak of red over her shoulder, and grins. “As they should. You’re fucking hilarious when you’re trashed.”

She frowns. “It’s kind of embarrassing, isn’t it?” she says. “Being well-known online for getting drunk and talking shit.” ‘Intoxicated with Emma’ is only one small segment of her vlog, but it’s the part that gets the most views and it’s what she’s become notorious for in YouTube circles.

“Only if you let yourself be embarrassed,” Ruby counters, kicking the fridge door shut and removing her apron in one swift, practised move. “As one of your most ardent fans, can we expect a vlog anytime soon?”

She laughs. “Mulan’s coming over tonight,” she says. “We’ll get some footage then. Promise.” She grabs her jacket — red leather, and worn soft at the elbows and shoulders from years of use — and heads out into the cool Boston evening. It’s not dark yet, won’t be fully dark for another hour or so, she guesses, but it’s Fall and there’s a chill in the air and she pulls her jacket tight around herself in a desperate effort to ward off the cold. She’s lucky, she knows, to have a job close enough to her apartment so that she doesn’t have to deal with catching the T but sometimes she wishes she lived just that little bit further away and could at least spend a little of her commute in a warm compartment.
Her key sticks in the front door lock and she jimmies it about until she gets access, grateful that at least she doesn’t have to buzz up and hope like hell her roommate’s home. Tamara’s a surgical intern at Storybrooke General, frequently does shift work and is catlike in her ability to sleep anywhere and at any time, and so their schedules rarely intersect. Emma’s been locked out of the apartment building before. Not tonight, although it’s a close call. She climbs the three flights of stairs and lets herself in, dumping her bag and jacket on the couch and barely resisting the urge to collapse there herself. But Mulan will be there in half an hour and she needs to have eaten by then or she’ll end up getting drunker more quickly than anticipated and throw up everywhere. Last time that happened, Tamara threatened to evict her.

Leaving work now, Mulan texts while Emma’s looking in the fridge. She finds pumpkin soup in a plastic container and there’s the crusty end of a baguette in a paper bag on the counter, which will be fine if she microwaves it for a few seconds.

She never expected ‘Intoxicated with Emma’ to take off online. Honestly, it was a joke borne out of boredom, several bottles of wine and Mulan having borrowed a video camera for the weekend to complete part of a project for her teaching certificate. “C’mon, Emma,” she’d said when she hadn’t managed to convince anyone else. “It’ll be fun.”

So Emma had ranted at the camera for a couple of minutes about people who are rude to hospitality workers, climbed up on the table in Mary Margaret’s kitchen and broken it, and been sent home in disgrace in a taxi. The next morning she had a YouTube channel (@swanprincess) and Mulan had edited her ramblings, added text and a title sequence, and ‘Intoxicated with Emma’ was born. People liked it. People clamoured for more. She’d become something of a minor YouTube celebrity, her loyal band of acolytes — who had named themselves ‘Ugly Ducklings’ — organising meet-ups and sending her lovely messages. The advertising now gathers enough revenue now that she can rent with only one roommate in a nicer class of apartment building, and work at just the deli rather than supplementing her pay with waitressing.

She’d shared her last place with four other people and at least one of them had been dealing. It had been a point of contention between her and Jasmine, who kept asking her to move in with her. “Dad pays for my place,” she’d said, pouting and widening her eyes in the way that had usually rendered Emma incapable of refusing her anything. “Old man would hate you moving in with me, which is reason enough. Come on, Em.”

The buzzer goes as she’s mopping up the dregs of pumpkin soup with her bread and she leaps up, dripping soup down her hand as she does so. “Hey,” she mumbles into the speaker while trying to lick soup off the side of her hand. “Come on up.”

Mulan lets herself in and eyes Emma with some distaste. “There’s soup on your shirt,” she says.
“Shut up,” Emma says, glad that at least she got rid of the evidence of soup all over her hands. “I’m getting cleaned up.”

“Doesn’t seem to be much point,” she says, heading over to the fridge and grabbing herself a beer. “You’ll just get drunk and sloppy later on.”

Emma sighs. “Yes, but if the viewer can’t see my journey from sober and sophisticated—” Mulan coughs “—to drunk and sloppy it’s not nearly as amusing.”

“Is Tamara home?”

“No,” Emma says. “I’d have cancelled if she was. She hates this.”

Mulan rummages through drawers, finally locating a bottle opener. She eases the cap off with a hiss and takes a swig. “Pretty sure Tamara hates everything,” she says. She puts her beer down, grabbing Emma’s camera and setting up the tripod. Emma had invested in a decent camera eventually, realising this wasn’t going to go away overnight. “Do you have a topic?” she asks.

“Apparently people are really interested in my drunken ramblings about the latest season of *America’s Next Top Model,*” Emma says. She’s scrolled through the comments. She doesn’t always let people choose; in her last video she’d been sober and had a bit of rage about the state of LGBTQ rights in Indiana because she’s not about to talk about anything too serious under the influence. Right now there’s nothing she particularly wants to talk about but it’s been a week and sometimes Mulan goes on about ‘audiences’ and ‘retaining revenue streams’ by posting regular content. So, sighing, she grabs a bottle of cheap red wine from on top of the fridge, unscrewing the cap and pouring herself a generous glass. “Let’s get this started.”

Half a glass down, she feels pleasantly buzzed. It’s incredibly fortunate for her bank balance and her liver that she’s a cheap drunk and, to be perfectly honest, she’s become pretty good at acting drunker than she feels. She skulls the rest of the glass and then motions to Mulan to hit ‘record’.

“Hi,” she says, grinning into the camera. “I’m Emma Swan and you’re watching *Intoxicated with Emma* where today I will be discussing the worst reality television show of all time, *Top Model.*” She hums the theme song. Tamara watches it, mainlining episode after episode on the rare occasions she has days off. While Emma avoids the living room during these times because Tamara has no sense of humour about the TV shows she loves, the apartment is small and she can hear everything that goes on in the living room, even with the door shut.

She stumbles over the word ‘intoxicated’ and Mulan snorts. “Have you ever even seen *Top*
Model?” she asks.

“Nope!” Emma says, downing her second glass of wine and pouring herself another. She shakes the bottle at the camera. Over half of it is gone already, which is ridiculous. “Like, maybe half an episode once. But I didn’t inhale.”

Mulan just stares at her.

“The Ugly Ducklings appreciate my humor,” she grumbles and then adds, miming typing, “Dear Emma, your jokes are so stupid they make me feel better about myself. You guys are so nice to me.”

By the end of filming, she’s drunk and exhausted. Mulan plugs the camera into her laptop to download the footage — and Emma will spend her Sunday sorting through all her ramblings and finding the gems that are all too few and far between — and helps her out of her clothes when Emma struggles with the catch of her bra. “Good night, idiot,” she whispers, after she’s placed aspirin and water beside her bed.

“Night, loser,” Emma replies, making smacking noises with her lips in Mulan’s direction.

She wakes the next morning with cold sunlight glancing over her skin because she forgot to close the curtains the evening before. Her head pounds and she scrambles for the aspirin, dry swallowing one and gulping down water when it makes her retch. Her phone dings and she knocks it off her bed, groaning and crawling out of bed to grab it. If it’s work calling her in, she’s going to murder someone. Probably a customer. Probably by puking on them until they drown.

Look alive, Emma, it reads and she is going to actually kill Mulan when she can work up the energy to move. Her phone beeps again and a new message appears. Seriously, get up. You’ve got shit to do.

Grumbling all the while, she pulls on leggings (Tamara has vetoed Emma from wandering around the apartment pantless while she’s home because she is No Fun At All but she doesn’t want to risk a fight, not with a hangover the size of Canada) and a hoodie she stole from an ex, which is just on the right side of so large it’s comfortable but not so large that it’s ridiculous. When she stumbles into the living space, she finds Tamara, cross-legged on the wide ledge of the window, mug of coffee in one hand and cigarette dangling out the window, dangling from the edge, ready to be whisked away with the breeze. “You look rough,” she says, raising her eyebrows.
Emma grunts. “‘Intoxicated with Emma’ is now ‘Hungover with Emma’.”

“You know,” Tamara says, “drinking that much is super bad for your health.” She takes a long drag of the cigarette, blowing smoke out the window.

Emma stares incredulously at her for a moment. “You’re literally smoking as you tell me that.”

Tamara looks down at the cigarette as though surprised. “I have a highly stressful job,” she says and Emma rolls her eyes, pouring herself a bowl of Froot Loops and using up the last of the milk. Another job for today.

“Whatever,” she says. “I don’t judge.” Her phone beeps. Unknown number. _Em, you still have my copy of Persuasion. Said I’d lend it to a classmate. Can I drop by and pick up today? Jas xx._

She frowns. After eight months out of a relationship, most people give up on crappy editions of books. Not Jas though, apparently. Fucked if she knows where _Persuasion_ is. She doesn’t think she got past the first chapter, to be perfectly honest, and that was when they were together and she was trying to impress her. She’s more of a Lee Child, Janet Evanovich kind of woman, but Jas wouldn’t stop going on about her beloved Austen, so much her favourite that she was doing a masters thesis on Austen and colonialism. “She’s a genius, Em,” she’d said. “Really.” And Emma had just smiled and said she’d give her a go and kissed her.

“Jasmine might be coming round later,” she says. She’ll have to check under her bed for the book, hope like hell it’s somewhere about.

Tamara groans. “You’re not going to get back together, are you? It’s been almost a year.” Emma hadn’t been living with Tamara when she and Jasmine had broken up but Tamara’s bordering-on-unhealthy disdain for humans has made her apprehensive every time Jasmine is mentioned. She has been very happy with Emma’s predilection for the occasional one-night stands who leave before breakfast. “More people means more mess,” she had said once when Emma had asked her about it. “I don’t like complications.”

“Shut up,” Emma says and shovels the last couple of spoonfuls of cereal into her mouth before setting the bowl to rinse in the sink. Then she finds the book — under her bed as she’d expected, keeping three unmatched socks and a half-used box of Kleenex company — texts Jasmine back, and grabs her laptop and headphones, settling in on the couch to edit the footage into something that might pass as vaguely entertaining.
She tweets to say that there’s a new video coming up, however, because hopefully that’ll keep people off her back for a few hours.

There’s a definite cringe-factor in watching herself, which hasn’t dissipated in the six months she’s been making YouTube videos, and though she is now accepting of her sober videos, for which she at least writes a vague outline before ranting, she’s never going to get used to watching her drunk, pink-cheeked self ramble at length to the camera (and, usually, to Mulan behind the camera). Still, there’s some funny moments in amongst the deeply embarrassing trash; she knows her viewers will like the incredibly stupid re-enactment she does of some all too famous cat fight on the show (for which Ruby had been showing her YouTube clips during quiet spells at work all week). Her viewers are always on at her to do more ‘costume theatre’.

She’s so immersed in editing that she doesn’t notice Tamara cleaning around her or that it’s gone one and she hasn’t had lunch. She also doesn’t notice the buzzer, just as she’s adding in the title sequence and final graphics. This means she’s left unawares when a hand touches her knee. She jumps, startled, and the keypad mouse skitters, placing the title sequence in the middle of the video. “Fuck,” she mutters.

“Sorry,” Jasmine says. “I didn’t mean to startle you.” She’s smiling — though it’s the nervous, half-smile to which Emma had become so accustomed in the latter days of their relationship. She tucks a curl that has fallen loose back underneath her hijab and Emma thinks she spots a pink flush in her cheeks beneath her brown skin. Emma removes her headphones and looks around for Tamara, who must have buzzed Jasmine up. The door to her room is shut so Emma’s not getting any help from that avenue.

“It’s fine. I’ll just get the book, shall I?”

Jasmine follows her into her bedroom. “This is a nice place,” she says. “I’m glad you’re out of that old house share. I kept checking the news to make sure no one had stabbed you.”

“They were good people,” Emma says, grabbing the book from the end of the bed and thrusting the tatty paperback at her. They hadn’t been good people. In all honesty, it had been a terrible living situation but it had been cheap accommodation and she’d scored the occasional free toke and one of the guys downloaded everything so her hard drive was fully stocked with every TV series ever made. Except Gilmore Girls. He’d had a real bugbear with Rory Gilmore for some unfathomable reason.

Jasmine raises an eyebrow. “Well, thanks for this,” she says and Emma just wants her to leave but she can’t be rude. They had such an amicable breakup, the only one Emma’s ever had that ended with promises to stay friendly and didn’t end with breaking things or tears or, in the worst case, jail time (though in fairness to Neal — not that she ever wants to be fair to Neal — he’d never actually broken up with her so much as set her up to take the fall for his theft and then scarpered).
“How are you?”

“I’m great,” Emma says. “Awesome. You look good.” She pushes up the sleeves of her hoodie, falling over her hands, and crosses her arms.

Jasmine throws her a faintly pitying look and straightens the wrinkled duvet on Emma’s bed. “I’ve seen your videos.”

“So you know I’m fantastic,” Emma says.

“Online obsessions and fan adulation,” she says. “It’s not real, Em. You need to meet people, do things with your life.”

“I think you lost the right to lecture me about my life when we broke up,” Emma says.

“Just because I broke up with you doesn’t mean I stopped caring about you,” Jasmine says. Emma doesn’t miss the fact that she’s turned Emma’s neutral statement into one where she wins, where she’s the one who did the breaking.

“Right,” Emma says. “Well, that’s lovely. I have shit to do though so if you wouldn’t mind…”

“Of course,” she says, letting herself be guided out of Emma’s room and to the door, which Emma holds open for her. She presses a soft kiss to Emma’s cheek. “Take care of yourself.”

“Goodbye, Jas,” she says and shuts the door.

Tamara pokes her head out the door. “You know she’s, like, checking up on you,” she says. “You’ve got to cut her loose.”

Emma knows this is true. It was true six months ago when Jasmine had a fight with her new stepmother and came to restaurant where Emma had been working, furious and upset, and they’d had a weird sexual encounter in the backseat of Emma’s car that had ended when Jasmine started sobbing as she went down on Emma, which put something of a dampener on the whole multiple orgasms thing Emma had selfishly been hoping for. It was true three months ago when she’d bumped into her at a bar and hooked up in a bathroom because Ruby had ditched Emma for some
guy and Jas’s date hadn’t panned out. It’s easier said than done, however. In as much as Boston’s a big city, they run in a lot of the same circles. Jasmine even still gets coffee from the deli if the queues are short because it’s on her walk to the university.

She sticks her headphones back on and finishes the video, setting it up to upload to her YouTube channel, before padding into the kitchen in search of food.

Chapter End Notes

POV will alternate from chapter to chapter. Despite the title, has nothing to do with When Harry Met Sally, I just genuinely cannot manage titles.
In which Regina has the worst Sunday ever (but EvilQueen101 gets an update)

LuisaC: I really like what you have to say about raising a child to know your culture when you still don’t really know your culture. It is hard even when you were brought up to be proud of your heritage. Good on you for taking Spanish classes.

Meninism101: People like you shouldn’t be allowed to raise boys.

HolaLadies23: My dad used to call me mija and I miss it.

— A Selection of comments on EvilQueen101’s video entitled ‘Great (Unrealistic) Expectations’

“I’m sorry, Regina,” Robin says, hands nestled around the coffee mug in front of him. Only the dregs remain. The worst thing is, she knows he is sorry; the redness at his eyes, the nails bitten down to the quick, the pained expression, all come together to form a man who desperately doesn’t want to be doing what he’s doing. “I just don’t see any way around it.”

“We could try long distance,” she suggests, though she scrunches her nose at the thought. They barely see enough of each other to call what they have a relationship as it is; between their jobs and their sons, there’s little time left for romance.

“And prolong the inevitable?” he asks, grimacing. “The New York job is permanent and it’s my dream job.” It’s a position working for this environmental law firm, one that he’s been in love with as long as she’s known him. “The founder is my hero,” he’d told her when he’d said he was thinking about applying. “It’s a ridiculous fantasy, I know, but I have to meet him. I have to know if I’m good enough,” he’d told her.

She’d never thought it would come to anything much. She had clearly underestimated him.

“And you’re just abandoning Roland?” she asks, her own anger flaring, and for a moment something that looks like rage might flash across his all too placid features — jaw clenching, eyes narrowing — and she’s horribly, savagely glad because he’s too good and noble and it infuriates her. Break ups should be violent and hurtful and make her hate the person who’s trying to destroy her.

He stands. “That’s between me and Marian, don’t you think? Look, I really like you, Regina, but long distance never works. It’s best we make a clean break.” He leans forward, pressing a kiss to her cheek, and she stiffens, feels the scratch of stubble against her jaw. She will not cry in public. Mills women do not show weakness. “Goodbye.”
She sits, frozen.

(Sometimes she wonders if she’s Pygmalion’s statue, with the way people chip away at her, smoothing out imperfections and creating scars. She often thinks of the way her mother carved pieces from her to create her perfect daughter, the one who never quite measured up, who was never polished enough. The way Daniel buffed the thousand hurts and nicks away. The way she felt as though her heart was cut out of her when he died. The way Henry has clumsily used play-do and clay to make her whole again, imperfect but a facsimile of a human once more.

She had told Marian this once, in the early days of their friendship, and she’d cracked her head on the wooden edge of the couch, from laughing so hard.)

One of the deli workers comes and cleans her table of plates and cups. “Bad break up?” she asks, red lips pouting in sympathy. Her name tag reads ‘Ruby’ and she has bare legs beneath a skirt too short for the cold temperature that seem to go on forever.

“Do I look as though I wish to talk?” Regina asks, standing and straightening the collar of her shirt. Time to go. A glance at her phone confirms this; it’s past time to pick up Henry from Marian’s. She strides past the waitress, shooting her one final poisonous look as she goes, heels clipping against the wooden floorboards of the deli.

It’s a short walk from the deli to Marian’s place and by the time she gets there Regina is moving past hurt and denial and is instead ballooning with rage. She has this damaging tendency to get stuck at step two of the five stages of grief for an unhealthy period, and then oscillate wildly between anger and depression. She has become better at moving through to acceptance over time, however. Henry helps.

She rings the bell — steadying her breathing, dampening down the anger, because it’s not fair to Henry — and she hears the immediate sound of thumping footsteps, followed by Marian yelling, “Henry Mills, your mother will make me into a hat if I let you answer the door on your own.” She smiles at that.

Henry reaches the door before Marian, however, opening it and peering through the screen. “Mom!” he says and opens the screen door. “Can we have pizza for dinner?”

“Hello, my darling only child,” Regina says, bending to his height and holding out her arms. “It is so nice to see you.”
“I love you, Mom,” Henry says, wrapping his arms around her and she lets herself be weak for just a moment, burying her face in his hair and smelling his scent — grass and soap and laundry detergent. It’s so inexpressibly Henry that it almost hurts at times. The effect of the hug is ruined somewhat by him pulling away from her embrace, his arms looped around her shoulders still. He smiles, making his eyes as large and round as possible. “Pizza please?” His smile is particularly charming because he had a visit from the tooth fairy only two nights ago.

“Perhaps,” she allows because she’s liable to burn salad in the mood she’s in now and it has been a while since they’ve indulged in take-out, a while since they’ve needed to, because Regina isn’t currently running tests, instead compiling data for her supervisor, a job mind-numbing in its dullness but offering the benefit of regular work hours, rather than experiments where samples have to be checked at all sorts of unusual hours.

Henry’s grin broadens and he takes off down the corridor, back to Roland, who is a few years his junior and idolises him. Marian, who has been standing standing back, leaning against the wall and watching the interplay between mother and son, moves forward. “How are you?” she asks, mouth twisting into a wry grimace and shoulders hunching forward.

“You knew,” Regina says and Marian pulls her into a hug.

“Of course I did,” she says. “Roland.”

It’s a strange thing, being best friends with your boyfriend’s (now ex-boyfriend’s, Regina reminds herself) ex-wife but then that was Marian all over. They’d met in a single mothers support group, the only two non-white women in the room. “We used to have an African American lady who came along,” one of the women had said to the pair of them, “but she left.”

“I can’t imagine why,” Marian had muttered, which had made Regina let out a most undignified snort.

She lets herself be held for just a moment, before wriggling out of Marian’s embrace, because the urge to cry is nearly overwhelming and she can’t deal with Marian battling sympathy and a need to say ‘I told you so’ because she’d warned Regina that Robin put his work first, and always had, when she had agreed to set them up. “It’s why we didn’t work out,” she’d said. “I mean, that and I realised I was super gay.”

“That might have been the key factor,” Regina had suggested, but the thought had stuck, coiling its way into her brain, and now Marian has been proved correct.
“Henry,” she calls, voice loud and rather higher than usual. “Quickly, darling.”

“I’m a phone call away if you need me, sweetheart,” Marian says, resting her hand on Regina’s arm and she nods.

Henry runs back to the door and grabs his bag from Regina, slinging it over his shoulder. “Bye, Marian!” he says. “Thanks for having me.”

She takes a moment to be proud of her son’s manners. Whatever her mother might say (and, on the rare occasions she speaks to Cora Mills, she says a lot about every life choice Regina has made) she has raised Henry well. “Do up your coat, mijo,” she says. “It’s cold out.”

“Are we walking?” Henry’s nose wrinkles. He has the Stableton nose; one day he will grow into it, but for now he’s amused by his resemblance to a puffin. It comforts her at times to know that there is some connection between Henry and Daniel, even if it’s as insignificant as them sharing a nose. Henry’s biological mother was Daniel’s cousin, young and pregnant and then dead, and she’s grateful Daniel will always be a part of him even though he’s not their child biologically. “They’re my fourth favourite bird,” he had told her once solemnly.

“There wouldn’t be any sense in having pizza if we weren’t hungry for it, now would there?” Regina says. “Thanks, Marian.” She nods at her friend, who rolls her eyes and waves her phone at her, before shutting the door.

Henry wriggles his hand into hers as they walk down the street and, even though sometimes he drags at her arm, straining her shoulder, or walks too slowly for her, she wouldn’t let him go for all the world. One day he will be too old to hold his mother’s hand and the thought makes her clasp his hand tight. “Can we have pepperoni on our pizza?” he asks.

“Only if it’s extra spicy,” she says and she smiles across at him.

“And are you going to make a video later?” he asks. “It’s been ages.”

“It’s only been a week,” she says. “I don’t think I’m in the best frame of mind to make a video tonight.”

“Momma,” he says, a whine in his voice. “You’re never in the mood.” He lets go of her hand and
stomps ahead.

It’s devastating how her eight-year-old son has made her heart so strong and simultaneously so fragile because as she watches his back, brown boots kicking at leaves, she wants to cry. Perhaps it’s simply a measure of the effects of the break up, but Henry is her whole world — that one precious thing that hasn’t yet been destroyed or taken from her — and the smallest of slights can annihilate her. But sure enough, by the time they reach the house, he grins at her, jumping from foot to foot as she unlocks the door and racing inside to find the take-out menu.

When the pizza arrives, Regina breaks all the rules and lets them eat on the couch, the pizza box nestled between them and a movie on. Henry has chosen *The Incredibles* and he giggles in delight throughout, despite having seen it approximately a million times. As the final credits roll and all that is left is a couple of pizza crusts in the box, Henry curls up against her side. “Are you okay, Mom?” he asks.

“Robin is moving to New York,” she says, her hand stroking his hair, and Henry nuzzles his head against her shoulder.

“I’m sorry you’re sad,” he says. Henry’s always been ambivalent towards Robin and she knows he won’t notice his absence for long. “I don’t really know him, Mom,” he had said, when she’d pressed him, concerned that Henry disliked someone she was dating, which would always, always be a deal breaker. “He just tries a bit hard.”

“Thank you, *mijo,*” she says, almost whispering, and she presses a kiss to his forehead. “Now,” she adds, sharpening her tone, “I think it’s bed time for you. School tomorrow.”

Henry scowls but drags himself off the couch. “I’m not tired,” he says, even as he yawns.

“I’ll be up in fifteen minutes to say good night,” she says.

She clears the pizza box away, places her wine glass beside the sink. She knows it will get used again tonight. When she makes her way up stairs, Henry has fallen asleep across his blankets, his book of fairy tales open on his stomach. She prises his fingers from it gently, places it on his bedside table. His chest rises and falls slowly and he’s snoring. Daniel snored. She remembers being irritated by it at the time. “Good night, *mijo,*” she whispers, pressing a kiss to his forehead and tucking him in. He stirs, mumbling something and making smacking noises with his lips before rolling over onto his stomach.
She sits there for a minute, watching her baby boy (“I’m not a baby,” he’d say and she’d laugh) and remembering.

Eventually, however, life must continue. She returns downstairs and heads into her study where her phone flashes. She has three missed calls, all from the same number. Her mother. It’s tempting to ignore them. The last thing she needs is Cora Mills, criticising her life choices or, worse, trying to ‘fix’ her. But she knows her mother will just keep trying. The urge to insinuate herself into Regina’s life is rare and fleeting but when she does feel it, she really goes to town.

Her phone rings for a fourth time and she answers, a sigh on her lips as she speaks, “Hello, Mother.”

“Three missed calls, Regina dear,” is Cora’s only response. She can hear classical music playing in the background and can imagine her mother sitting in the high-backed chair in her study as though it is a throne, a glass of scotch resting on a coaster and manila folders of documents to be signed stacked neatly before her.

“I was putting Henry to bed,” she says, pacing the tiny space of the study. She lets a finger run along the window sill, gathering invisible dust.

“Isn’t the boy eight now? You coddle him.”

“Don’t start…” Her fingers tap a jerky rhythm against the oak table top of her desk.

“I heard that your friend Robin got a job in New York,” Cora says and Regina stills.

“Please tell me you didn’t have anything to do with that,” she says.

“Of course not, dear,” Cora says, voice as smooth and sibilant and a snake. “I’m simply good friends with one of the founding partners of the firm. They were impressed by him. A pity you aren’t going with him. You could have moved up in the world.”

“I’m very happy with my place in the world,” Regina says. She feels the beginnings of a headache forming and moves into the kitchen, pouring herself a glass of wine and drinking rapidly while Cora speaks.
“You could be so much *more*, dear,” she says.

“Mother,” Regina says, eying the wine and wondering if she can justify another glass so soon after she has finished her first. “If you continue along in this vein, I will hang up. I like my work. Henry is happy. I have friends and shelter and food and hobbies. Everything important in my life is in order. Can we please change the subject? How are you?”

“The town is ticking along nicely,” Cora says. She’s the mayor of Regina’s hometown, has been for so long as Regina can remember, and it’s one of the reasons that Regina will never go back to Storybrooke to live. If she lived there, her mother would own her. “Leopold Blanchard was asking after you.”

Regina swigs straight from the bottle at that. Another reason to never return to Storybrooke. She used to babysit for Leopold’s daughter when she was sixteen and Mary Margaret was eleven and she didn’t like the way he looked at her then. She likes it even less now that she’s old enough to know precisely what those ‘innocent’ touches to her shoulder, the hand guiding her at the small of her back, and the gaze that never quite met her eyes mean. “You can tell him I’m fine,” she says, stiffly, and takes another drink.

“I’m just trying to pass on a message from someone who has been one of my strongest political supporters,” Cora says, ice in her voice. “There’s no need for such a belligerent attitude, Regina.”

Regina shivers. ‘Belligerent’ is a word she’s heard before and it never leads anywhere good. The Chilean maid they’d had during her freshman year was fired when Regina talked back after Luisa was admonished for helping Regina with her halting Spanish. Cora suggested the stables sold that beautiful chestnut mare after Regina turned up to a debutante practice defiant in jodhpurs and muddy boots because she’d lost track of time. Her violin broke because Regina so carelessly placed it beside the stairs so that Cora tripped and sent it flying down the staircase, even though she was certain she had packed her violin away in the den and the incident took place just after an argument about Regina wanting to take Music Studies instead of Debate in her senior year.

And, of course, ‘belligerent’ followed her long after high school. Daniel had paid the price for that one.

“I’m sorry, Mother,” she says. “It’s been a long day.”

Regina makes a non-committal noise. “When it’s less busy here. Good night, Mother.”

When finally off the phone, she collapses on the couch, pouring herself another glass of wine. It’s making her head fuzzy, which can only be a good thing. It has been too long since she got blind drunk but a break-up and a conversation with her mother on the same day make this seems like a more than appropriate time.

Two glasses later, she goes onto Twitter. She has a few notifications, people asking when she’s going to post a new video. ‘The Single (Mom) Life’ isn’t especially popular in the scheme of YouTube vlogs, for which she’s mostly grateful because the idea that it might become successful enough for her technologically inept mother to discover it keeps her up some nights, but it’s popular enough that some of the women at Henry’s school watch it and compliment her on it and for her to have a few hundred Twitter followers.

Her phone beeps with a message from Marian. You holding up okay, sweetheart?

She replies: Coping but just had a conversation with the mother. Most of a bottle down.

Want me to come over?

I’m fine. Perhaps dinner during the week?

Absolutely. Love you.

When she’s finished the bottle, she finds she’s shifted back from exhaustion to anger. She’s angry at Robin. Angry at her mother. Angry that the people she loves die or leave her or are awful human beings. She tweets: Going to make a video. Her Twitter notification sounds several times in quick succession but she doesn’t check her phone, instead checking her reflection and reapplying lipstick, bold and dark. She runs fingers through her hair. She settles down in front of the camera, set up on a tripod in front of her desk.

She presses record.
In which Emma gains a crush (and an enemy)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Emma (@Swanprincess): Uuuuuuuuuuuuuugh.

Emma (@Swanprincess): When you have to get up for work and it ’s still dark out.

Emma (@Swanprincess): Ruby is far too cheerful for Monday morning. Suspect she ’s still drunk from weekend.

Emma retweeted Rubes (LittleRed1984): @Swanprincess fuck you, Em

Emma (@Swanprincess): istg if anyone else tells me to smile …

Emma (@Swanprincess): loving your comments on latest vid btw. Will reply when damn assignments finished.

— A selection of Tweets by Emma Swan, on Monday morning

The deli is quiet on Monday morning, aside from a brief influx of people in suits and tailored coats in the early hours, and their tables are occupied by college students, headphones in and laptops out, making one sandwich last several hours and abusing the ‘free refills on filter coffee’ policy. Emma spends most of the morning completing orders for the owner and leaving front of house to Ruby who is a) better at it and b) actually enjoys it. She’s only out on the shop floor during the lunch rush.

“Hey!” A girl — maybe nineteen or twenty, who’s wearing round glasses that make her look like an owl and a crisp, new Harvard sweater — looks at her, grinning, her eyes alight with recognition. “You’re Emma!”

Emma looks down at the name badge, pinned at an angle to her apron and frowns. “Yes?”

“I love ‘Intoxicated with Emma’!” the girl says and Emma desperately contains the sigh that threatens to overwhelm her whole body. “I’m a total Ugly Duckling! I’m Alice, by the way. Can I get a photo with you?”

Ruby cackles and tries to pass it off as a cough when Emma glares over at her. She smiles at Alice — though she knows her grimace-like grin must be screaming insincerity — and comes out from behind the counter, posing for a selfie with the girl. She’s too grouchy to be any good at being a minor YouTube celebrity but at least Alice is polite. Some people expect her to be drunk 24/7 as if she doesn’t have a life outside of her YouTube channel (or, at least, a job and school work towards her associates if ‘life’ is a bit of a stretch right now).
Shortly after the encounter with her ‘fan’, as Ruby insists on calling her, the lunch rush dribbles to an end and Ruby goes on her break, leaving Emma to the solitude of sweeping up, humming along to the easy listening playlist the deli owner created and unloading and reloading the dishwasher. On her return, Ruby is laughing over something on her phone and she beckons Emma over. “Emma,” she says. “You **have** to watch this. It’s beautiful.”

She takes Ruby’s phone, gesturing for her to cover the counter, and steps into the back room, pressing play on the YouTube video. It’s entitled ‘The Evil Queen is never ever getting back together (with him)’ and features a very beautiful woman, judging by the image currently frozen on the screen as the video buffers. Emma is immediately struck by the regal tilt of her chin, and her hair, which is short and choppy and looks as though she’s run her fingers through it a few too many times over the course of the day, if the volume and the beginnings of a curl in the body of it are any indicator. She’s seated at a desk with all the poise and sophistication of a queen, her dark red lips pout and Emma curses the size of Ruby’s iPhone screen while she waits for the video to load on the hideously slow deli wi-fi.

And then the video starts, no opening credits, no editing, no scripting so far as Emma can tell. And she can tell this woman is drunk, would know it even if there wasn’t an empty bottle of wine (expensive wine, wine Emma could never in a million years justify purchasing) sitting on the varnished wooden desk. “So,” the woman says, hyper articulate, though she can’t help the fuzz at the edges of her words. “I was dumped today and then had to go through an emotionally manipulative conversation with my mother in short order. It’s been the best Sunday ever!” Her lips curl into a sneer of a smile, revealing straight, white teeth, and her tongue flicks out to lick her bottom lip.

“Filming myself right now is probably a mistake. I don’t have a thoughtful topic to discuss. I don’t have cute stories about *mijo*. What I do have,” and here she pauses, smiling, brown eyes glinting with amber in the soft lamp light, “is an excellent selection of terrible break-up songs and a desperate desire for some cathartic dancing.” In an effort not to slur the word ‘cathartic’ she places extra emphasis on each syllable.

And then Taylor Swift’s ‘We Are Never Getting Back Together’ blasts from speakers and the woman starts to dance at her desk, toned arms flailing above her head and an intent look on her face — lips pursed, brow furrowed — as she nods her head to the guitar intro. Emma’s chuckling until her attention is diverted by the fact this woman is now standing, dramatically lip syncing with her hand bunched into a fist as though holding a microphone and dancing and, God, that body! She’s wearing a dress that leaves nothing about the curves and planes of her body to the imagination and her hips pop and twist to the beat in a way that Taylor Swift could only ever dream to achieve. Her hair moves as though with a life of its own as she shakes her head. She’s making just enough fun of herself for this to be funny, rather than deeply, tragically pathetic, and her melodramatic, exaggerated facial expressions as she sings, “I say, ‘I hate you,’ we break up, you call me, ‘I love you’,” with her hand held out like a phone make Emma’s shoulders shake in a desperate attempt to contain the hysteria that is bubbling up in her.
It’s only a short clip, not even the whole song, and as the music fades, the woman returns to her seat, chest rising and falling and cheeks flushed. “Marian will never let me live this down,” she says and rolls her eyes. “I promise I will make a worthwhile video soon.” And she winks at the camera (and she can’t even wink properly and it’s so beyond adorable) before leaning forward to switch it off.

Before Emma knows what she’s doing, she has sent the link for the video to her email address and, switching to her own battered and dying cell phone, she uploads it to her Tumblr and Twitter with the comment, *Look at this baaaaaaaabe. Always nice to know I’m not the only person who makes a dick of herself when drunk, though I wish I looked as good doing it.*

“Great, right?” Ruby says, grinning as she makes herself a coffee.

“Hilarious,” Emma says, ignoring the flutter in the pit of her belly that suggests she might just have the mildest crush on EvilQueen101. She’s not making the mistake of crushing on someone so beyond unattainable again. For all she knows EvilQueen101 lives in, like, California. For all she knows, she’s straight. She thinks she talked about having a kid, a son.

(*Mijo.* She’d had a Mexican foster family when she was nine and her foster mom, who was this terrifying, no nonsense woman with a stubborn chin and sparkling eyes, had called her *mija* sometimes, the word slipping out as she dished out bowls of Birria — “eat up, *mija*, or no dessert” — or brusquely tucked Emma in at night — “sleep tight, *mija*”. The word enveloped Emma in warmth every time because Mrs Benitez called her real son *mijo*. Sometimes Emma got to feel real too.

The Benitez family had been one of the good ones and she had been pretty gutted when she’d had to move on to a new family, Mr Benitez losing his job and relocating to Ohio making Emma’s continued stay with them impossible.)

She’s grateful that the owner comes in at that point, making her forget all about EvilQueen101’s ill-advised but hilarious video. After critiquing everything in the store, he offers one of them the opportunity to go home early. “It’s so quiet,” he says. “It doesn’t make sense to have you both here.” Emma would normally decline but school work is piling up and she could use the extra couple of hours, so she shucks her apron and pulls on her jacket, waving Ruby goodbye and practically running home. She’s relieved to discover she has the apartment to herself (with Tamara having left a mildly passive aggressive note on the kitchen bench suggesting that at some point Emma might want to, like, vacuum) because she’s crap at studying when there’s anything going on around her — even if it’s just Tamara reading or talking to her boyfriend. She’s still not used to this whole studying thing; she left high school at sixteen, got her GED in prison and worked for a bail bondsperson when she got out. She’s never had to *work* at anything academic before.
She had enrolled at community college to get an associates in business when she hurt her back, apprehending a defendant who’d missed his trial date and made the mistake of running from her. Her back still twinges sometimes, when she hunches over a screen too long or wears impractical shoes to work — or the rare occasions she does something inexpressibly stupid while drunk.

Her phone chimes with a message from Mulan. *I can’t believe you put that video out there,* it reads. For a moment, she doesn’t know what Mulan’s talking about, but then she remembers linking the video.

*Why? It was funny.*

Mulan’s reply is swift. *Because EQ101 is going to kill you. Think about how many followers you have.* A second message comes through a moment later. *I really like her vlogs! If she goes to jail for murdering you, I'll be really upset.*

*If people don’t want to be tweeted about or whatever they shouldn’t make videos,* she replies.

Checking her Twitter notifications, she discovers a similar message coming through from her followers (*girl, you're going to get in troooooooouble,* one user writes). She shrugs, pouring ground coffee into the coffee machine and setting it to filter through, before returning to the kitchen table where she sets up her laptop and tries to avoid the temptation to go online.

She has barely got into the swing of writing when the doorbell buzzes and she bites back irritation at the intrusion to her train of thought, standing heavily and pressing the buzzer. “It’s Mary Margaret!” says an altogether too chirpy voice from the intercom and Emma sighs internally because this won’t be a quick visit. Mary Margaret Nolan, Blanchard as was, is one of her roommates from her bail bondsman days. She’s also the one person Emma knows who thinks it’s acceptable to turn up on someone’s doorstep without warning for a ‘friendly visit’, which says a great deal about her to be honest, but also Emma did break her kitchen table at her housewarming six months ago so she’s loathe to say anything about it.

“Letting you up,” she says, pressing the button to unlock the front door and hoping it works. Sometimes it doesn’t and she has to run down to let people in but their super won’t spend the money to fix it. She hears nothing further from Mary Margaret so she assumes the best, tidying her school books and notes into a pile before swiftly loading the dishwasher because she’s so not in the mood to be judged today.

There’s a sharp rap at the door and then it swings open. “Hi, Emma,” Mary Margaret says. She’s holding a Tupperware container and Emma eyes it, thinking she might forgive her everything if she’s brought cookies. “Is this a bad time?”
“I could use a break,” she lies. “Come on in. Coffee?”

“Thank you,” Mary Margaret says, settling in at the kitchen table, crossing her legs and smoothing her flared skirt over her knees. It’s patterned with something — probably birds because she’s a bit of a budding ornithologist, she and her husband, David, going hiking on weekends to bird watch. “Oh, you’re doing an assignment! I’ve interrupted.”

“Yeah,” Emma says. The coffee in the machine is still hot and she remembers the two teaspoons of sugar Mary Margaret takes, stirring vigorously before adding milk to both mugs. “It’s alright though. This essay’s doing my head in.”

“I so don’t miss school,” Mary Margaret says, which is a ridiculous statement to come out of the mouth of an elementary school teacher but never mind. Emma’s not one to judge.

“So,” she says, placing the mug in front of Mary Margaret and cracking open the Tupperware, which, yes! Snickerdoodles. She sneaks one and Mary Margaret rolls her eyes at her attempts at being stealthy. “Any particular reason for the social call?”

“It’s been far too long since I saw you,” Mary Margaret says. She takes a cookie, dunking it in her coffee.

“I’ve been busy,” Emma says, gesturing vaguely at her assessment work with the Snickerdoodle. Crumbs spill into the crack of her Accounting text book, where they will probably be nestled forever.

There is the faintest whine in Mary Margaret’s voice when she says, “not too busy to make those ridiculous videos with Mulan.”

“Look,” Emma says, her irritation rising in waves now. “I’m sorry. You guys aren’t so close by anymore. The last thing I want to do after work and school is make the forty-five minute trek on the T.”

Mary Margaret unclasps one hand from her mug of coffee and reaches out across the table to Emma. “I just miss you,” she says and her fingers tangle in Emma’s, her skin warm against Emma’s cold hands. “I don’t mean to be a nag. I worry about you.”
“How’s school?” she asks, because she’s pretty sure if they go down the ‘worry’ line Emma’ll say something she regrets (and she’s so tired of people worrying about her, like she’s a child needing constant supervision instead of a grown adult with a life plan and a job and a stable living situation). Mary Margaret, always easily distracted when conversation shifts to herself, is diverted into a discussion of her fourth graders. Emma can sip coffee, pilfer cookies, and smile and nod at appropriate intervals. “You have to come to dinner,” Mary Margaret says. “David says it’s his turn to win at darts.”

“He wishes,” Emma says, laughing. “Your husband has the aim of a six-year-old.” She loves Mary Margaret, she really does, but she gets on better with David, who is easy-going and undemanding. Mary Margaret wants so much from her, more than Emma has the energy to give sometimes. It’s not that she doesn’t love her; hell, Mary Margaret’s the oldest friend she has because she’s never been much of one for keeping in touch. But as time goes on it’s increasingly clear they have nothing in common, not even shared experiences especially. She has her work friends and Mulan; Mary Margaret has her ‘married couples’ friends.

Reluctantly, Mary Margaret stands. “I should let you get back to it,” she says. “You have my Tupperware so you have to return it.”

“A very cunning plan,” Emma says, grinning.

“Perhaps dinner next week?” Mary Margaret asks. “The sixth grade teacher is coming to dinner on Sunday. She’s lovely…” Emma grimaces at the signs of a set up and shoots a baleful look at the Tupperware. All cookies come with a price. Mary Margaret’s been trying to set her up since she and Jas broke up, mostly with men, even though Emma keeps explaining she’s not especially interested.

“But you’re bisexual!” Mary Margaret had said the last time Emma tried to tell her that the never-ending cycle of nebbish, scruffy guys wasn’t really doing anything for her.

“Technically, yes. I’m also fairly uninterested in dudes,” she had replied. David had shot her a wounded look at that point and she’d added, “obviously, since David’s already married… Do you have a twin?”

They had laughed and Emma had hoped maybe that would be the end of it. Apparently not, though at least Mary Margaret’s found her a woman now. She lets Mary Margaret out, accepting the hug with minimum squirming, before opening her laptop. Finding her place in her essay document, she paws through her notes for the plan she made of the third paragraph. She’ll worry about Mary Margaret later.
It’s late in the evening when she finally finishes her assignment and she rewards herself with a beer, leftover Chow Mein and time on the internet. When she opens her emails though, she’s surprised to find an email from someone called Regina Mills.

Dear Ms Swan,

I see you have reblogged my ill-advised video from Sunday night. I would very much appreciate it if you could take down the link. Your hoards of followers have made the video more popular than I would like and I do not wish to be eternally ridiculous on the internet. Some of us have reputations to maintain.

Yours sincerely,

Regina Mills (EvilQueen101)

Emma scowls, running her fingers through her hair. The insinuation that she’s ridiculous rankles her. At least she posts her drunk YouTube videos intentionally, unlike some. She swigs her beer, contemplating a reply, and takes what Mulan would consider far too much time crafting the eight words she sends in response.

Just delete it from your YouTube account, lady.

Then, she goes on to Tumblr and makes what is probably an incredibly ill-advised post. Hey! Rumour has it EvilQueen101 is going to take down the video any minute now. Do me a favour and gif, my ducklings. Gif like the wind. Make this lady a freaking meme.

She wakes the next morning with a ridiculous number of Tumblr notifications that lead to gifs of EvilQueen101 dancing, a text from Mulan that is literally just a series of knife emoticons, and an email from Regina Mills.

I will destroy you.

Chapter End Notes

I realise having written this that I may have been mildly inspired by coalitiongirl's Tumblr fic here? Sorry.
In which the evil queen gets her revenge (and it is best served hot)

#hot lady dancing to Taylor Swift
#pick a better song mami
#look if you don ’t think this is funny just unfollow already
#taylor swift for ts
#oh evilqueen101
#unf

— a selection of tags on the gif posts of Regina Mills ’ video

It could have been a better morning.

She wakes early on Monday with a splitting headache, still in her dress from the previous day (her ‘break up’ dress, the dress she’s probably never going to feel particularly comfortable wearing again) and with lipstick smeared down one side of her mouth. Her hair should be declared an actual, literal state of emergency. She crawls out of bed, taking a moment to stand with a hand resting against her dresser to stop the room from swaying, before she pads down the hallway and knocks on Henry’s door. “Up!” He groans but she hears the thump of feet on the floor a moment later, which tells her he’s getting up, so she locks herself in the bathroom. The steam from the shower quickly masks her reflection.

She’s certainly not the fairest of them all this morning.

The hot water helps some, at least with externalities. She manages to make herself up to look vaguely human, even if she still feels more like a swamp monster, before heading downstairs to Henry. He looks up from a bowl of Cocoa Pops, trying to hide them behind his arm, despite the tell-tale signs of chocolate dust on the kitchen counter and the stool positioned in front of the high cupboard where the ‘sometimes’ foods are located. “Aren’t they a Saturday only treat?” Regina asks, running a hand through his hair. He has switched on the coffee, set up to be ready to percolate from the night before.

“I’ll have boring cereal on Saturday instead,” he says and grins.

She’s too tired to argue, simply pouring herself a coffee and buttering toast — slightly burnt because she’s too exhausted to keep an eye on the toaster, which is notoriously unreliable. Henry’s eying her suspiciously and she smiles and, God, even her mouth hurts when she stretches
it into a grin. “You okay, Mom?” he asks.

“Just tired, mijo,” she says. “You have everything you need for school?”

He nods, draining his bowl of milk. The slurping makes her wince. “Are you coming to my soccer practice?”

She nods. “I’ll be there by the end of it at least,” she says, and forces toast down her throat. “Now, we need to go.”

He grumbles but stands, putting his bowl and spoon in the dishwasher, before running upstairs and giving her a moment of blissful solitude. Ordinarily on a Monday night, Robin meets her at Henry’s soccer practice and then comes for dinner with Roland. The boys play after they’ve eaten and she gets an hour or two of couch time with him, a chance to watch a movie, kiss, talk, take time out from their busy lives. She supposes that won’t be happening tonight and she’s struck with a pang of nausea so severe she almost vomits on the kitchen table. She makes it to the sink just in time though and retches, choking up the toast and coffee. She runs the tap, washing bile down the drain.

“Mom? I’m ready,” Henry yells. She grabs her handbag, slings on her coat and follows Henry out the door, walking him until they’re in sight of school, and watching him from the corner until he is safely inside the school grounds.

It isn’t until she gets to her T station and tries to bring up her emails that she realises she didn’t plug in her phone to charge last night.

She feels anxious and out of sorts at work, and is grateful for the current job her supervisor has her on; data-crunching is time consuming and tedious, but mercifully brainless. Normally this irritates her — she’ll have to go back to school if she wants to do her own research but she can’t, not while Henry’s young, because a PhD would take over her life — but today it is bliss. She’s taking a break for lunch, her head held up by one hand while the other clasps a mug of black coffee like it’s a lifeline, when her boss, Kathryn, checks in on her. “Big weekend?” she asks, pouring herself a coffee from the shared pot. It’s always made too strong and Kathryn waters hers down with boiling water from the zip before taking a sip and grimacing. “Bitter.”

“Just, not a great Sunday,” she says, sitting up, though her head pounds. She’s taken two Advil, but the effects haven’t kicked in yet. “It’s not affecting my productivity, I promise.”
Kathryn laughs and slides into the seat beside her at the break room table. “Definitely what I was worried about, Regina,” she says. “Need to talk?”

“Break up.” Regina’s never been one to discuss her personal life at work but Kathryn knows about Robin, having bumped into him in the foyer of their building a couple of times when he’d come to pick up Regina for lunch or after work. It would’ve come out eventually.

Kathryn hisses in sympathy. “Oosh, that’s not fun. Rob, right? He was cute.” She places a hand on Regina’s forearm, and she fights the urge to flinch away from the contact. “How are you holding up?”

“I’m fine,” she says. She likes Kathryn, but they’re not friends no matter how chatty her boss is.

Still, she takes her up on the suggestion that she clock out early and finds herself at Henry’s soccer practice only ten minutes in. She waves over at him, smiling as he grins and waves back, no embarrassment at his mom coming to watch him play, only pride. There are a few other mothers there but she’s not in the mood to socialise with these women who are ten years her senior and who look at her and see the ultimate stereotype — young, Latina, no ring on her finger. There’s a reason she always attends anything school-related of Henry’s in heeled pumps and pant suits, even sports games. Instead, she sits on the stands and focuses all her attention on Henry, who is running through skills drills with his team, dribbling a ball through cones. His tongue pokes out the side of his mouth in concentration.

The light fades to grey as she watches and she pulls her coat tight around her body, wishing she’d had the presence of mind that morning to include a scarf in her outfit. She is lost in thought when a large coffee appears before her, and she turns to see Marian. “Thought you might need this,” she says, grinning.

Regina looks over at the far end of the field and sees Roland in his orange coat, clambering up the steps of the playground slide. “Thank you,” she says. “Yesterday was … unpleasant.”

“I know,” Marian says, and bumps her side with her elbow. “I saw the video.”

For a moment, Regina’s mind goes utterly blank, before she’s seized with a wave of nausea and an overwhelming terror. “I posted that, didn’t I?”

“Yes,” Marian says. “Yes, you did. It got popular too this afternoon.”
Regina sinks her head into her hands. “I don’t even *like* Taylor Swift,” she mumbles. She thinks she might have danced. She’s never been a religious person exactly, at least not since her mother stopped trying to control every aspect of her life, but she prays to every deity she has ever heard of that she didn’t sing. She doesn’t deserve that humiliation, no matter what evil deeds she obviously committed in a past life.

Marian’s laughing. “How did you not notice?”

“My phone’s dead,” she says, and pinches the bridge of her nose, her headache returning with a vengeance.

“Some vlogger posted it on Tumblr,” Marian says. “You’ve been getting so many hits.”

“No,” she mutters. “I can’t be.”

(“The internet is forever,” she remembers her father saying when she’d first been allowed a Facebook account at fifteen. “Be careful, *linda.*”)

Henry runs over at that point, face shiny and red from practice. “We’re done, Mom!” She hands him a bottle of water, purchased on her walk to his school, and runs her fingers along his jaw as she draws back, cracking the seal. He gulps down half the bottle in the space of a minute, panting.

“I’m coming over for dinner,” Marian says. “Roland!” she yells out, gesturing at her son who drops the jumps down from the playground on spotting Henry — something of an idol for five-year-old Roland — and runs over, stocky legs whirring over the grass.

“Oh, are you?” Regina asks, though she picks up Henry’s school bag and gym clothes, and follows Marian to her car. Henry’s slow to move, farewelling a couple of friends, and she calls out for him. He’s in shorts and he’ll catch a cold if he’s not careful. She walked over, the T station just a few minutes from Henry’s school, so the idea of a ride home is bliss, even if Marian’s car is junk.

“I mean, I just stuck a tray of empanadas in your fridge,” Marian says. “If Roland and I don’t eat with you, I’ll have to take him to McDonald’s.”
“Perish the thought,” Regina says dryly. “I might have a pint of Rocky Road buried in the freezer.”

Henry shoots her a look of abject betrayal. “You said we had no ice cream left the other night.”

“Your mother is a dreadful liar,” Marian says, wrapping an arm around Henry’s shoulders, and he laughs, the sound high and healing.

When they’re back at Regina’s, Marian prepares dinner, handing her two Advil and a glass of water and telling her to ‘relax’. She plugs her phone into her charger and is horrified to discover that the Tumblr post of her video has garnered several hundred likes and reblogs. She clicks on the link in the source’s Tumblr blurb and finds Swanprincess’s email address at her YouTube account. Pausing for a moment at the site to note that this woman is clearly no stranger to drunken vlogging if the series title ‘Intoxicated with Emma’ is any indication, she sends off a quick email requesting politely that the Tumblr post be deleted so as not to gain further traction.

She doesn’t notice the notification of a response until after dinner, while she’s making hot chocolate. It’s her father’s recipe that he used to make for her when she was upset, with real chocolate and cinnamon and vanilla and a pinch of chili (even if Henry will destroy the blissful beauty of it by chucking marshmallows in it). She almost burns herself against the side of the saucepan when she reads the email, swearing under her breath. Henry looks up at her from where he’s doing his homework at the table while Roland draws and frowns. “Language,” he says, almost primly, and Marian cackles.

“Sorry, mijo,” she says and passes her phone over to Marian, so she can keep whisking the mixture before it burns.

“She has a point, you know,” Marian says. “Just delete the damned thing.”

“Can you…” Regina asks. Marian’s silent for a few moments and then, “done!”

She feels a surge of relief, ladling hot chocolate into mugs. Cora has not seen it yet (because her mother would never miss an opportunity to berate Regina for something like her vlog). Now Cora never will. She hands out their drinks and sits at the kitchen table, her own mug — the chipped blue one with an R painted on the side her father gave her when she and Daniel moved into their first apartment together — cradled in her hands. “How’s Kindergarten going, Roland?” she asks.

“Good,” he says, looking up and flashing his dimpled smile. She is struck constantly by the
difference between the two boys. When Henry was five, he talked constantly, to everyone. Roland’s much more laconic. It took him a while to warm up to her, head constantly hidden in Marian’s shoulder for the first month of their friendship and then there was the bout of shyness when she started seeing him as his daddy’s girlfriend.

Marian rolls her eyes. “He’s lucky he’s good looking,” she says but her fingers coil through Roland’s curls, an almost protective gesture. He yawns. “Come on, Sleepy,” she adds. “We should vamoose.”

Roland grumbles, but not too much — an indication that he is truly exhausted — and hands Regina the picture he’s drawn. “It’s you,” he says, pointing at the stick figure lady with a round brown crayon face and a purple dress. “That’s Henry.” She holds out her arms and he hugs her, breathing loudly in her ear.

“Thank you,” she says, and sticks the drawing next to Henry’s last report card on the refrigerator.

She sleeps well that night, the restful slumber of someone who whose mother is not going to discover her video blog where she has been less than charitable on occasion. When she wakes, however, it’s to a series of messages from Marian.

Regina!

Please check Tumblr.

You’ve been giffed.

This is the greatest thing that has ever happened. And the worst.

She doesn’t bother wrapping her gown around herself or throwing on her slippers, and the hardwood floors chill her feet. She’s at the computer in her office in moments and then she has Tumblr up. It’s all over that awful woman’s blog and, worst of all, all over her own dashboard, these hideously embarrassing images of herself dancing. People seem particularly taken with this hip wiggle; that gif has close to two thousand notes.

She’s not thinking when she opens her emails, fury blinding her as she types four words in response to Emma Swan’s last email. I will destroy you.

On her train ride to work, she sends an old friend a message. Sidney Glass is more an acquaintance than a friend really, though one she has found useful over the years. They’d been the only two mature students in a third year history of science class and had formed a study group
together. Since then their paths had diverged, Sidney chasing an investigative journalism Pulitzer — that so far has only led to working for a trashy conservative newspaper — and Regina majoring in biomedical science, but they have found each other useful over the years. She got him an interview with her mother that put him on the New England map briefly, so he owes her.

He calls her during her lunch break and she spends a few minutes engaging in small talk. “I assume you didn’t get in touch just to chat,” he says eventually and she can imagine the raised eyebrow, the quirk at one side of his lips.

“Sorry,” she says. “I need anything you can get me on Emma Swan.” She fills him in on the past forty-eight hours, focusing on the wrongs done to her, rather than the break up and her own embarrassing drunken idiocy.

Sidney laughs. “Oh, Mills,” he says. “I’ll have you something by the evening. Dinner?”

“Can’t sorry,” she says, endeavouring to sound regretful. “Henry.”

“Oh, yes.” He pauses. She wonders if he’s hoping she’ll offer another evening for him to wine and dine her but she remains silent and he adds, “I should be able to email you some information by tonight.”

Her phone beeps while Henry’s grating cheese for macaroni cheese. It’s a rare indulgence but Henry is starting to take an interest in cooking and she wants to encourage it. Her father — his namesake — had been an excellent cook. She picks it up, stirring white sauce with one hand, and can’t help the grin that spreads across her face at the email.

*Dear Regina,*

*Attached is some rather intriguing information about Emma Swan.*

*Sidney*

“Why are you smiling?” Henry asks, looking up from the block of Gruyere.

“I’m just happy,” she says and bends to press a kiss to his forehead.

He giggles and squirms away. “Momma,” he protests and her heart is so full of love for her
precious boy, who still calls her ‘Momma’ in unguarded moments and doesn’t wipe her kiss from his forehead (and lipstick stains his forehead until he takes a shower that evening). Later, tucked into bed and propped up against pillows, he asks, “do you miss Daddy?”

And there it is, the one question about Daniel Henry hasn’t asked before. She had talked to him about Daniel constantly when he was a toddler and he’d gone through a curious patch at five, wanting to know everything about his daddy (“What colour eyes did he have?” “Did he play soccer?” “What was his absolute worst food?”). They had spent whole afternoons leafing through photo albums, looking at pictures of Daniel when they were fifteen and first in love, utterly convinced it would last forever. Junior and senior prom pictures, Daniel gawky in his suit and bow tie, and Regina, too skinny in her awful peach satin gown and smiling with her lips shut to hide her braces. A whole slew of selfies and tourist shots taken when they’d first moved to Boston so Regina could go to college. Their first apartment, rented at the start of her sophomore year, a studio, barely big enough for a bed. Pictures of Daniel holding Henry, barely a day old (“look at your tiny feet,” she’d say and he would lean forward, fascinated).

“Yes,” she says carefully. “I miss him very much. Shall we read?”

Henry nods and curls up at her side while she reads him chapter four of the third Harry Potter book. He’s old enough to read to himself really — and sometimes he chooses to — but there’s something comforting about the ritual for both of them. When Harry has discovered he’s the target of escaped murderer, Sirius Black, she closes the book, turns off his light and pulls the covers up to his chin. She almost misses it when he whispers, “I think I miss him too. Is that dumb?”

“No, mijo,” she says, choking down a gasp of breath. “Not dumb at all.”

It takes a cup of tea to calm her down. Daniel is a dulled pain now, an ache in one corner of her heart. Sometimes she can go days without thinking of him and she’s certainly not been a nun in the eight years since his passing. The scars have healed, only itching sometimes, and other hurts fill his place.

In her study, she opens Sidney’s email and grins at what she reads in the attached document, before opening a new file and typing out a script.

She checks her makeup and sets the camera to record. “Good evening, viewers,” she says. “You may have seen how a certain vlogger has attempted to make one of my more embarrassing, vulnerable moments a meme.” She lets the smile spread across her face. “Today’s video comes as a list: Five things viewers may not know about swanprincess.”

She brushes her hair back behind her ears and continues. “Five: Emma Swan ran away at ten and
was found stealing pop tarts from a Roslindale convenience store. Four: at twelve, she was a runner up in an essay writing competition sponsored by an engineering firm.” She will edit in the image Sidney sent her, a picture of a twelve-year-old, bespectacled Emma Swan holding a certificate on the front of the firm’s newsletter. It’s delightfully dorky. “Three: she once almost won a pie eating contest but the prize was stripped from her when she puked over the judge’s shoes. Two: at eighteen, she dated a certain senator’s estranged, criminal son. One: said relationship led to her year long stint in prison at eighteen for theft.”

She raises an eyebrow. “And that’s only scratching the surface. Payback’s a bitch, Ms Swan. Good night, viewers.”

It’s close to midnight when she finishes editing and uploads the video to her channel. She will be tired at work the next day, but she falls asleep with a smile on her face.
The last thing Emma expects when she gets off the worst shift ever at the deli (broken cash register, lines of grouchy people, temperamental coffee machine, phone running out of battery two minutes into her lunch break) and returns home to eat and recoup in the hour before her evening class is that some of her more humiliating life experiences are being paraded across that awful woman’s vlog.

And yet, it’s exactly what she discovers. Several people have linked her to it — EvilQueen101 isn’t exactly a highly subscribed vlog but she’s gained a bit of traction since the ‘drunk dancing’ incident, mostly from Emma’s Ugly Ducklings — and she clicks on the link without expecting much. She’s only ever watched that one video posted her channel and it didn’t exactly make her think of EvilQueen101 as a force to be reckoned with in the vlogging world.

But as she watches she feels her skin burn and her eyes itch and her jaw tense. It’s embarrassing. It’s embarrassing and it’s mortifying and she feels this sick anger rising in her like vomit as this woman — EvilQueen101, Regina Mills — mocks the lowest point in her adult life, her ten months in prison. If she’d bothered to watch any of Emma’s videos, she would have known that it’s no big secret to her followers; Emma had been pretty open that she was talking lived experiences when she had discussed prisons in America a couple of times. She even made a whole vlog where she talked about her own experiences of America’s justice system, where rich white men whose daddies are senators get a free pass (even when they’re utterly estranged from said senator father) but their teenage girlfriends get stuck taking the fall for them, and how she got off lightly in comparison to if she’d been black or Native American or Hispanic. Mulan had pushed her to make the video and had coached her through it, helping her with the research side of
things. It had been hard — sobbing hard, and Emma likes to pretend she never cries — but if she had to point a video she’s like to represent her YouTube career, it’d be that one.

It’s not like Regina Mills has found anything on her that a careful Google search or a flick through old newspaper records wouldn’t uncover, though she wonders at the woman’s commitment to seeking revenge.

She’s plugged her phone in to charge and it’s already buzzing with Twitter alerts, private messages asking if she’s okay and offering to go to war for her. She dreads to think what her YouTube channel looks like right now or, God, what some of the comments on Mills’ video are like. She can’t think right now. She grabs her books, leaving her phone to charge, and leaves for class.

It’s impossible to concentrate on the lecture ethical business practices, and instead she draws down the margins of her notebook instead of taking notes. Mostly her doodles involve stick figure Emma’s destroying stick figure Regina Millses in various ways — mostly extremely violently. She’s particularly proud of one involving a lasso. Her neighbour leans over and whistles, saying, “someone’s got issues,” and she shoots him a dark look, lips a tight, thin line and eyebrows drawing close. He raises his hands in the air. “Calm down.”

She pushes past him and walks home, the cold biting her cheeks raw and nipping at the tips of her ears. She regrets forgetting a scarf and gloves, burying her hands in the sleeves of her coat and pulling the collar of her jacket up to her jaw. She really doesn’t want to go home, doesn’t want to face the video. Tamara’s working — as usual — and the thought of being home alone with that video playing on her mind and the night stretching before her is unbearable. However, when she reaches her apartment, she finds Mulan, sitting with her back against the door, long legs stretched out across the hallway. “Hey, buddy,” she says, putting away her headphones and leaping up. She’s far too energetic for eight at night; it’s one of the perils of being best friends with someone who got into college on a soccer scholarship and whose dream in life is to teach gym to high school kids (and, like, literally the only reason she’s doing a masters in education instead of getting the bare minimum qualification is because of the hefty weight of parental expectation).

“You saw it?” Emma asks, horrified to hear a waver in her voice, and then adds, “stupid question. Of course you did.”

Mulan laughs softly. “Little bit,” she says. “I mean, I could’ve told you that would happen. EvilQueen101 is not a forgiving lady.”

“I think you did tell me that,” Emma replies. “Or something like it.”
“You should get it tattooed on your forehead. Mulan knows everything. Do whatever she says.” She looks at Emma for a moment, eyes scanning her face, checking that she’s not utterly broken. “You going to open up or are we just super into appreciating the ambiance of the hallway right now?”

Emma rolls her eyes but unlocks the door, fingers clumsy with cold. It’s blissfully warm in the apartment; Tamara’s half-lizard or something and doesn’t do well in anything less than broiling hot temperatures. Because she also pays the heating bill, Emma couldn’t care less. She shucks her coat, throwing it, along with her bag, into a corner. Mulan falls onto the couch, lying across it with her bag nestled on her stomach. “Make yourself at home,” Emma says, rolling her eyes.

“Thanks.” She sits up though. “Nāinai made bao,” she says, rummaging through her bag, and hands Emma a container. “I brought you the leftovers.”

“Beer?” Emma asks, heading towards the kitchen.

Mulan nods and then gestures at the table, where Emma’s laptop is. “Want me to go through the messages?” she asks. She’s already up with a bound and grabbing the laptop before receiving Emma’s response.

“Would you?” she asks, grabbing a couple of beers from her shelf in the fridge and setting one down beside Mulan. “I just, ugh. I just want to forget I ever saw that stupid dancing video.”

“You’re not going to retaliate, are you?” Mulan asks.

Emma shrugs. “Part of me wants to.” She downs a gulp of beer and opens the container of pork buns, steam rising out from it. Condensation lines the lid. “They’re kind of warm still. How do I heat them?”

Mulan grimaces. “Probably should steam them again,” she says. “Microwaving doesn’t end well. Trust me.”

“Too much effort,” Emma says and bites into one. They’re still satisfyingly warm, the meat tender and aromatic and the dough soft. She grins over at Mulan and says, “it’s good,” between mouthfuls, her words muffled.

“Heathen,” Mulan says, leaning back against the arm of the couch, but there’s no bite to her
Heathen,” Mulan says, leaning back against the arm of the couch, but there’s no bite to her words. She washes down her mouthful with another drink. “Doesn’t your grandmother normally only make you these for breakfast?”

“I’ll admit,” Mulan says, “I told her you were sad and she steamed a bunch of frozen bao especially for you.”

“I feel so special,” Emma says. Mulan’s grandmother has always been inexplicably fond of her, in the way that most of Năinai’s actions are inexplicable. The cricket she made Mulan keep in a cage as a good luck charm during her exams last semester was one of the more bizarre moments for Emma. She finishes a bun and licks her fingers. Already her head feels like it’s spinning and she suspects she probably shouldn’t have downed most of a beer on an empty stomach. “I kind of want to punch Regina Mills in the face.”

Mulan looks up from the laptop and pulls a face. “Emma, chill,” she says. “She did a shitty thing but, like, if you retaliate you lose the moral high ground.”

“I don’t care about the moral high ground,” Emma grumbles and grabs another bun. “The moral high ground’s for suckers.”

“Well, I do,” Mulan replies and swigs from her beer. “And you will too. Mills will get enough hate for this.” She types something at Emma’s laptop and then sets it down on the floor beside her, looking altogether too pleased with herself.

“What did you do?”

“Updated your official Twitter,” she says. Emma checks her phone and reads: EQ101 doesn’t tell you anything you didn’t already know about me. I’m just shakin’ it off. Video to come.

“Okay,” Emma says, wrinkling her nose. “That’s kind of cute.” She drains her beer bottle and heads to the freezer, fishing around for ice cream. If she drinks anymore she’ll be in no state for opening shift tomorrow and it’s an ice cream sort of evening. “Can we talk about something else now?”

“Okay,” Mulan says. “Speaking of cute…”
“Don’t tell me you have a crush,” Emma says, incredulity lacing her voice.

On the rare occasions they’ve talked seriously about sexuality, Mulan has described herself as “like one of those dogs that can never bond with another owner when their first owner dies” and “possibly demisexual” and “not at all into Shang no matter what my grandmother thinks” and, the morning after Rory and Philip’s wedding where Mulan had been the maid of honour, “definitely still Rory-sexual”. Emma had thrown one of Mulan’s Introduction to Educational Psychology text books at her for the last one because when your closet case of a freshman roommate marries a man you really need to move on already.

“There’s this social worker,” she says. “She came and spoke to our class last week about how education and social work intersect.” She places the back of her hand against her forehead and feigns swooning. “I think I’m in love.”

“Of course you are,” Emma says. In as much as Mulan is kidding around, there’s an element of truth in her voice that Emma can spot and it concerns her. “Did you even speak to her?”

“We made eye contact when she brought up being culturally sensitive when you’re discussing issues with students,” Mulan says. “And then I cowered like an idiot and pretended Shang was saying something super insightful.” Her cheeks flush pink even talking about it — or perhaps that’s the beer kicking in? Emma can’t be sure.

“Does the mysterious social worker have a name?” she asks.

“Marian, I think,” Mulan says and then sighs. “She has these eyes…”

“Well,” Emma says. “Seems like you’ve had a much better week than I have.” She clinks the ice cream tub against Mulan’s beer, which is dangling loosely in her hand. “To cute social workers.”

“I’ll drink to that,” Mulan says and finishes her beer, before grabbing Emma’s spoon from her and digging out a chunk of Rocky Road ice cream.

When Mulan leaves, shortly after eating all of Emma’s precious ice cream and responding to every single Direct Message on Twitter, Emma resists the urge to go on YouTube — or any social media platform for that matter. She will follow Mulan’s advice. She will remain atop the moral high ground.
For now, at least.

Later in the week, she finally cedes to the inevitable and lets Mary Margaret force her out to the suburbs for dinner. “My workmate couldn’t make it,” Mary Margaret says when she answers the door to Emma and Emma desperately holds back a laugh at the disappointment etched on her face. “You would have really hit it off with Ingrid, I’m sure of it.”

The name — possibly unfairly — conjures up terrifying German women wearing hiking boots and sporting braids and possibly a dirndl. Emma feels lucky to have escaped. “Well,” she says, settling on a head tilt and nose scrunch to attempt to convey some vague sense of disappointment. “I brought pie. I mean, it’s deli-made, not Emma-made…”

“That’s probably a good thing, isn’t it?” Mary Margaret says, because she still persists in believing that Emma can’t cook. She’s not sure how people think she’s survived this long on her own without picking up a few rudimentary skills but it’s almost impossible to shift the perceptions that Mary Margaret creates of people. She still has this idea that Mulan is the stoic, honour-bound, diligent type, despite the fact that Mulan’s the enabler of ‘Intoxicated with Emma’ and Mary Margaret has seen her let loose at parties on more than one occasion.

(Mulan’s never exactly warmed to Mary Margaret. “She’s so white,” she’d said when Emma had pressed her for a reason.

“So am I,” Emma had said, bemused.

Mulan had laughed. “Yeah, but you try a bit harder.”)

Mary Margaret takes the pie and stands aside, ushering Emma into the warmth. “Sorry, come in. David’s in the lounge.”

The house is small and narrow and dark and Mary Margaret persists in calling it their ‘House of Dreams’. David takes this all in his stride, which is indication enough to Emma that it’s probably true love that will last the test of time. That, or David is equally enamored with pretending he’s in an ‘Anne of Green Gables’ story. She shrugs off her shoes and jacket, hanging it over the banister, before padding into the lounge. “Swan!” David says, nudging her with his shoulder and handing her a dart. “Best of three? We probably have time before dinner.”
“Shouldn’t we, like, help out?” Emma asks, though she accepts the darts.

“I’ve learned it’s best not to,” he says, twisting his lips into a smile. “Mary Margaret gets… stressed when we have guests.” He rubs his head. “She threw a pot at me once. My head still twinges when it rains.”

“You should get that looked at,” Emma says, lining up the dart to throw, tongue poking out between her lips.

He just laughs. “It’s fine. How’re you, kid?”

“Just grand,” Emma says. “Ready to kick your ass at darts.”

They’re two for two when Mary Margaret calls them to dinner. She has a splodge of gravy decorating one cheek and Emma is about to point it out but David murmurs, “best not to.” She watches, trying not to grimace, when he pulls her into a hug and gives her a loud sloppy kiss right where the sauce is, wiping it clear.

Mary Margaret blushes prettily and twists out of his grasp. “David! Poor Emma.”

“Sorry,” he says, grinning over at Emma. “Just couldn’t help myself.”

They’re just horrifyingly cute, she thinks as she follows them to the dining room. She’d forgotten; it’s been so long since she spent time with them. It used to be funny when she was dating Jasmine and they could be ‘couple friends’. Jas would roll her eyes at each nauseating Public Display of Affection (and the term P.D.A. seemed to be made for the charming couple) and, after a few glasses of wine on Emma’s part, she and David would get mildly competitive about who could be the most demonstrative towards their girlfriend.

“So, Emma,” Mary Margaret says, when they’re seated and she’s passing Emma a plate of green beans. “Anything new going on for you?”

“Since I talked to you a few days ago?” Emma asks, taking the beans and spooning a few into her gravy-soaked mash. “Not really. I got a weird-ass YouTube stalker.”
The gravy boat falls from David’s hand to the table with a clatter, gravy slopping over the sides and staining the crisp, linen tablecloth that Emma suspects is from Mary Margaret’s hope chest. “You what?”

She laughs. It’s not quite convincing. She’s still not there yet, but the more she pretends it doesn’t bother her, the closer she gets to believing it. Mulan won’t let her make any more vlogs until she’s reached acceptance. She came around the day after the video was posted and confiscated Emma’s camera. “Not really. I annoyed the wrong YouTuber so she looked into my past and made this video that, like, exposed stuff.”

“Anything she wouldn’t have found legally?” David asks. He’s a cop, in computer fraud (though Emma has her suspicions that he secretly yearns to be a homicide detective).

“Nothing you couldn’t uncover with a good Google search,” she says, “or a useful contact in a newspaper somewhere.” She digs into her mashed potato and hopes this will be the end of it.

But Mary Margaret has her phone out and she’s watching the video. Emma cringes as she hears those words, in that low, husky voice, again. But then Mary Margaret lets out a gasp of recognition. “I know her!”

“What?” Emma asks. “You know EvilQueen101?”

“Regina Mills, right?” Emma nods. “She was my babysitter until I was, like, thirteen. I worshiped her.”

Emma smiles at the misty quality in Mary Margaret’s voice. “I take it she wasn’t evil in human form then?”

“She was so sweet and kind and beautiful,” Mary Margaret says. “She taught me how to ride a bike and she’d read to me and she used to French braid my hair. I wanted her to be my best friend.” She sighs and Emma wonders if eternally straight Mary Margaret is maybe harbouring a latent crush on her former babysitter. David catches Emma’s eye and mouths ‘gaaaaay’ at her and she can practically hear the extended ‘a’ sound. “She had this boyfriend,” Mary Margaret adds. “Darren or Daniel? Something like that anyway. He was from a kind of dodgy family and her mother didn’t like him at all but she didn’t even seem to care. Daddy told me she’d, like, adopted his cousin’s baby after she died from complications at the birth and Cora Mills disowned her.”

“They can’t have lasted,” Emma says. “Unless he was the person she just broke up with.”
“No,” Mary Margaret says. “I think he died too not long after. Daddy might have sent me the obituary.” Her face is pinched, lips pursed, as she tries to recall buried memories. “That was all years ago. It’s a shame she turned out so…”

“Evil?” Emma suggests. Her knife scrapes against the good china as she cuts off a chunk of chicken and she flinches at the sharp, jarring screech.

“Emma!” Mary Margaret exclaims but then she shrugs. “I was going to say hard.”

“No,” David says around a mouthful of chicken. “Definitely evil. Messing with our little Emma…” He leans over and ruffles her hair.

“I’m older than you, dickhead,” Emma says. He flicks a bean at her.

The vague and half-remembered story of Regina Mills haunts Emma on her T ride home. Regina Mills has a kid. She kind of knew that; her bio had said something about life as a single mom. She can’t be more than a few years older than Emma and while she can understand keeping a child if you get accidentally knocked up, the idea of actively adopting a baby terrifies and impresses Emma equally. She resents feeling even the most grudging respect for Regina Mills.

Damn Mary Margaret.

Explicitly going against Mulan’s instructions, she opens her email app and finds Regina Mills’ last missive. Clicking reply, she types in a message.

Thank you for that delightful attempt at assassinating my character. You’ll have to do better than that though.

PS Mary Margaret sends her regards.

She exits Gmail, satisfied. Moral high ground maintained and a mildly sinister postscript. Who says she can’t have her cake and eat it too?
In which Regina meet cutes (and isn't so okay after all)

Regina (@EQ101): Normal vlogging service resumes when I am not laden down with life.

Regina (@EQ101): Any suggestions of topics for discussion?

Regina (@EQ101): To clarify: any suggestions that don’t involve a certain feathered friend?

Regina (@EQ101): Does anyone else have that feeling sometimes like they can never do anything right?

Regina (@EQ101): If I didn’t secretly suspect Henry stalks my Twitter account, I would swear copiously right now.

— a selection of Tweets by Regina Mills over the course of her Wednesday

Marian calls her the next day as she’s cooking dinner. Henry’s doing his math homework up in his bedroom — or at least she hopes he is, though she has her suspicions that he’s actually reading the first ‘Percy Jackson’ book and pretending he’s Grover — and she’s chopping onions and crying when her cell phone rings. “You freak,” Marian says in lieu of a greeting.

“She started it,” Regina responds, tucking the phone between ear and shoulder as she scrapes onion into the pan to fry. The diced onion makes a satisfying sizzle as it hits hot oil.

“She started it? You doused it with gasoline and threw a match at it,” Marian replies. “I thought we’d agreed you’d talk to me before approaching Sidney ever again so I could tell you why it was a terrible idea.”

The onion hisses and she stirs it a bit too venomously; a spit of oil leaps out and burns her hand. She winces. “How did you…” she starts but Marian interrupts.

“Please.” She sighs and Regina can visualise her rolling her eyes, feet curled up beneath her on the couch and a glass of red wine on the coffee table. She wonders where Roland is, though Marian doesn’t have nearly the same qualms about expressing anger or disagreement in front of Roland as Regina does with Henry. If Henry were doing his homework at the kitchen table this conversation would not be happening. “This has his fingerprints all over it.”

“He’s a good friend,” Regina says, because for what it’s worth she actually quite likes Sidney. He’s good company when he’s not acting like a total sycophant around her and, more to the point, he’s useful.
“He’s an enabler,” Marian snaps and then adds, “I really hope this isn’t how you teach Henry to behave when people piss him off.”

It’s a low blow and Marian knows it, knows Regina constantly worries about screwing up, about parenting wrong, about following down her mother’s emotionally abusive path. “Fuck you,” Regina says, voice low and angry. “Until you’re the perfect parent, don’t you dare talk to me about parenting my son.”

“Fine,” Marian bites back and she can hear huffy silence down the phone line for a moment. “I’ll just avoid expressing my opinion at all from now on, shall I? Be a bit more like your best buddy, Sidney?”

“I have to go,” Regina says and hangs up, throwing her phone onto the bench forcefully and slicing tomatoes into satisfyingly messy chunks.

Her foul temper does not dissipate and by the time she calls Henry down for dinner she has the beginnings of a tension headache. He’s quiet too and she hopes there’s nothing bothering him beyond her bad mood, but this is definitely not the time to try and pry information from him. She tries to live her life like a good person — or at least a better person than her mother — but sometimes she wonders if the resemblance really ends at their physical similarities. Cora Mills’ vindictive nature was legendary around her hometown when she was growing up, and she wonders, in bleaker moments, if she’s inherited it.

Aside from a single tweet — playful and a little bit too forgiving to be entirely convincing — Emma Swan is silent. Regina starts dreading every time her phone chimes. Perhaps this is her punishment for her anger and revenge, the constant feeling that at any moment swanprincess will wreak vengeance.

And then, on Friday night as she’s about to go to bed, the email comes.

There’s something faintly ‘Game of Thrones’-ish in the message — *P.S. Mary Margaret sends her regards* — though to Regina it chills her more than any Lannister could. Mary Margaret Blanchard, as she remembers, is an incurable gossip and spent her adolescence with a frankly hilarious girl crush on Regina (Daniel had thought it adorable, teasing Regina about her little shadow at every opportunity). She could tell anyone about Regina’s YouTube channel. She could tell her father. And Leopold Blanchard would definitely tell Cora. She contemplates running down stairs, switching on her computer and shutting the channel down all together, but the stubbornness in her refuses to give in, to show Emma Swan that she’s concerned.

She doesn’t sleep well though, plagued with nightmares of a young Mary Margaret, following her
around, asking squeaky and irritating questions and she imagines herself hidden and paralysed, watching Cora draw information like pus from a wound. “Regina’s pulled away. I love her so much but she’s not letting me help her. All I want is her happiness.”

“They watch her videos,” tiny Mary Margaret (the Mary Margaret she remembers with the dark curls and the wide eyes and the round cheeks) says and Regina tries to scream but her voice is frozen too. “She made me promise not to tell but they’ll help you understand. She can’t lose you.”

She wakes with the image of Cora’s curved, cruel smile imprinted in her brain. Unrested and irritable, she is distracted all Saturday morning, snapping at Henry, burning toast, making four separate cups of tea and forgetting about them. She also forgets that she desperately has to go grocery shopping. The contents of the pantry are extremely unappetising when she and Henry rifle through them at around noon. Henry, who has been alternating clingy and cross all morning, begs her for McDonald’s for lunch. They compromise with somewhere that she can get something edible and they end up at the deli where she and Robin broke up. It’s just a couple of blocks away and Henry chooses it. “Sometimes Marian takes us here,” he says, dragging on her arm when she looks ready to demur. “They make the best hot chocolate in the universe.”

“Well, if it’s the best in the universe” Regina says, sighing, and lets herself be pulled inside. It’s warm, at least, and she can smell pumpkin soup. “I’m a little hurt you think it’s better hot chocolate than mine though,” she adds.

He wrinkles his nose. “Yeah. It’s from a shop.” She wonders at this attitude. When she was his age, home made was best. Her father’s baking — rare and often when she needed cheering up from one of Cora’s emotionally manipulative conversations — was a salve for any hurt. Even now, she pulls out her father’s recipes when she needs comfort (she’d made a giant batch of chocolate chip cookies the evening after the conversation with Marian). However, for Henry, the prospect of store bought cookies or slice is the ultimate excitement. He loves going to Marian’s after school for that very reason.

“See if I ever make you anything again,” she says but she bumps against him with her shoulder, unable to stem the tide of fear that he might take her seriously.

They queue up. Henry eyes up a slice of the most disgustingly decadent chocolate cake behind the glass and she can just see the gears turning in his head, trying to figure out an argument for it.

The couple in front of them shift away and Henry pulls on her arm. “Hi!” the woman behind the counter says. “What can I do for you?” Regina’s drawn to her immediately, struck by the fair curls falling loose from her ponytail and the strength in her arms, uncovered since the woman only wears a light tank top beneath her apron. She’s always had something of a thing for biceps; Robin’s ability to pick her up had been one of his more attractive features. There’s something unnervingly familiar about her, a sense of deja vu or kinship or something entirely unquantifiable,
and she darts a glance at her name badge in case that jars her memory. It reads ‘Ruby’. When she looks up again, the woman grins knowingly and Regina blushes, fighting the desperate urge to explain herself, to tell the woman she had not been staring at her rather enticing assets, but rather at her name tag. She wipes her hands, suddenly sweaty, against her jeans, and regrets the hair pulled back into a choppy ponytail and the lack of makeup. She looks frightful — dark circles under her eyes because a good night’s sleep has become something of a luxury since the breakup and her skin is almost sallow from her recent lack of sun exposure.

“Hey, kid!” the woman — Ruby — says. “Didn’t notice you there. Not with your little buddy today?”

Henry grins. “Hey!” he says. “This is my mom.”

“Are you sure she’s not your older sister?” the woman asks. It’s almost unbearably cheesy but then she shoots her an appreciative glance and Regina’s just vain enough to be flattered by a little innocent flirtation so she just smiles and orders for them, including a slice of the chocolate cake without Henry having to plead. “To share,” she says, and he rolls his eyes.

“Yeah, yeah,” he says, but he squeezes her hand and she knows he appreciates it really, just as he also knows she’ll have a few bites and let him eat the rest.

“I can never finish a full piece,” the woman says, noting down their order, and the other woman making coffee snorts something that sounds like ‘liar’. “Okay, so I can,” she admits.

Regina nods. “So could Henry, given half the chance,” she tells her. “But the aftermath is generally less than pleasant.”

The woman’s laugh is almost intoxicating. Loud and clear and unconstrained, it breaks through the chatter of the deli and there’s sheer, perfect joy in the sound. She finds her own smile broadening, until she’s grinning, showing all her teeth in a way she typically doesn’t, in a way that Cora has often described as “so unladylike, Regina dear”, that ‘dear’ something of a threat.

The woman stares for a moment, the smile staying on her lips, and Regina feels briefly self-conscious (is there spinach in her teeth? Does she thinks she’s a weirdo?) until she speaks. “Wow,” she says. “You give great smile,” and Regina wouldn’t have thought it possible for her grin to broaden further but it does, stretched so wide her cheeks hurt almost.

She hands over her credit card and Henry, puzzled, glares at the woman a moment. “Hey, why
does your name tag say ‘Ruby’?” he asks.

The woman — who is apparently not Ruby after all — grins at him. Her teeth are pointy and Regina’s brain flashes with the thought of what they’d feel like against her skin and she feels her skin flush. “Lost mine,” she says, and shrugs. “Ruby here let me borrow her spare.”

Henry seems satisfied by the response and takes their drinks over to their table. She’s grateful that the table where she sat with Robin is taken by an elderly couple, and she sits at the seat with her back to it, devoting her entire attention to Henry, who is playing with the seal of his apple juice and frowning. “Are you all right, mijo?” she asks and he looks up at her, eyes wide and dark and serious.

“Are you and Marian fighting?” he asks. She feels the table shudder when his sneakered foot kicks against the leg.

It’s Regina’s turn to frown. “What makes you say that?” She’s careful with her words. She hasn’t spoken to Marian since the phone call — or nothing beyond a terse ‘thank you’ when she picked Henry up on Thursday — and she hates it. She hates fighting. Some weeks, she’ll talk to Marian every day, and it’s hard without her best friend to call on, especially when she’s stressed about Emma Swan and still upset about the break up, the wounds still fresh, scabbing over but hurting.

“When you picked me up on Thursday we left straight away,” he says. “Normally you hang out for a bit or have a glass of wine or whatever. And you haven’t seen her or talked to her on the phone since you, like, yelled at her while you were making dinner. It’s weird not hearing you laugh your Marian-laugh on the phone when I go to sleep.” The woman who’d been manning the coffee machine places a bowl of soup in front of Regina and gives Henry his grilled cheese but doesn’t linger, seeming to recognise that there’s a serious conversation going on.

She sighs and reaches across the table, staying the hand that is now pulling the label of his apple juice to pieces. “We had a disagreement,” she admits. “I’m cooling off.”

“Don’t, like, break up with Marian too,” he says. “I’d miss her.”

“Of course I’m not ‘breaking up’ with Marian,” she says, and laughs. “Sometimes friends fight. You fight with Nick and Ava sometimes.”

“Yeah, when they’re being stupid,” he says, glumly picking at his grilled cheese.
“Well, Marian’s being stupid,” Regina says, tearing into a piece of the crusty bread and dipping it into the soup. Henry snorts. “Or I am. This is where the disagreement lies. We’ll be fine by next week. Okay?”

“Oh, he says and returns to his sandwich, appetite renewed. She’s discomfited, however, stirring the soup idly. Henry shouldn’t have to worry that he’s going to lose the only other constant adult in his life because his mother’s a grouch. He shouldn’t be worrying about anything. She wonders, not for the first time, how much the stories of death surrounding his birth have impacted on him and his abandonment issues — his birth mother and not long after, his father, and then his abuelo before he was old enough to form memories beyond the vaguest memories of smells and smiles. Perhaps it’s time for another appointment with Dr Hopper, even if he’d vehemently protested the last time, only convinced by the reminder that sometimes Doctor Hopper took him out to walk Perdita instead of staying in his stuffy office.

It seems though that Henry’s reassured after their talk because soon enough he’s telling her about how his clarinet teacher totally thinks he’ll be ready for the saxophone in another year and how he definitely would have got 100 in his spelling test yesterday “if Miss Miller hadn’t pronounced ‘eschew’ really weirdly” and how Nick drank his milk so quickly at lunch yesterday that he turned green and had to run to the bathrooms to puke. He’s resilient, her boy.

As they’re readying to leave, he goes to the bathroom and she remembers she had run out of coffee beans that morning and so orders a take away coffee and a hot chocolate for Henry. The blonde at the counter is now working the coffee machine, but she winks at Regina as they leave. She cradles the warm cup in her hands all the way home, letting Henry run ahead, burning off the ‘chocolate cake’ energy. He doubles back before he gets too far ahead, her precious boy always coming back to her.

At home, she sets the cup on the counter and opens the pantry again. They have beans and she thinks there’s some old tortilla wraps in the freezer. She could create a make-shift nacho dish for dinner. She could send Henry to the corner shop for tomatoes and maybe an avocado if there’s any ripe ones. Anything to put off actually grocery shopping. “Mom,” Henry says from behind her. “Why is there a phone number on your cup?”

She whirls around, nearly dropping the can of beans. “What?” Sure enough, scrawled down the side of the takeaway cup, is a phone number in purple marker.

“Your face is all red,” he says. He’s holding the cup in his hand and he’s grinning. “Did you flirt with her?”

“Of course not,” she says quickly, though she snatches the cup back from him. He smirks at her,
the little shit, and she directs her darkest glare at him. Setting the cup on the counter again, she ruffles through her handbag and unearths her purse. “Fancy a run to the store?”

It’s late evening before she has a chance to think, the afternoon taken up with Henry. He’s obsessed with board games at the moment and she indulges it, so grateful that it’s not X-box or Playstation. She knows he’ll be into all that stuff in a couple of years, that he plays a few games when he’s over at Nick’s — or other friends — but she’s keen to put that stage off as long as possible. So they spent the afternoon playing Monopoly, on the ancient set that was hers as a child, and Henry ended up owning the most lucrative properties and utterly bankrupting her. He has inherited her competitive streak and lack of grace in victory, whooping and crowing around the house until she had to threaten sprouts for dinner.

A mug of peppermint tea in one hand, she sits on the couch, a book open on her lap. She keeps looking at the takeaway coffee cup, picking it up, tracing the permanent marker number on the side, the smiley face drawn beneath it, setting it back down.

She could do it. She could text the woman, or call her, organise a time to meet up. She could date casually (she’s never really done casual dating particularly well but there’s a first time for everything) because someone who leaves their number on a virtual stranger’s coffee cup can’t be looking for anything serious, surely. She and Robin had pretty much immediately fallen into the routine of a serious relationship. She misses him staying over, spooning her at night, misses the kisses pressed to her forehead when he left for work in the morning, her still in her dressing gown and trying not to fall asleep in a mug of coffee. She misses having someone to curl up next to watching television and having a hand to hold at Henry’s soccer games and gentle, comfortable sex in the quiet stillness of the night. She hadn’t loved him, not yet anyway, but she had thought she could, given time, and that was a possibility she hadn’t encountered since Daniel.

But she could do casual. Surely. She could do a rebound or a fling or a one night stand.

She draws in a deep breath, feeling it rattle wetly through her, shuddery as though she’s on the verge of sobbing. Then, she picks up her cell phone and dials.

She’s in tears by the time Marian answers. “What is it?” she asks and there’s actual concern in her tone because Regina never backs down first when they argue. Never.

“I’m not okay,” she says, sobbing. “I thought I was but I’m not.”

“Oh honey,” Marian says and the warmth in her voice just about sets everything right. “Talk to me.”
So Regina talks. She talks about Robin and the slow-rising guilt over that video and her fears that she's *exactly* like her mother and, slowly, things get a little bit more okay.
In which Emma has never been more humiliated (and no one is the least bit sympathetic)

*Emma (@Swanprincess):* I ’m in love. Asfkjsl.

*Emma (@Swanprincess):* I mean not really but God my day is so much better when pretty ladies come into work with their adorable sons.

*Emma (@Swanprincess):* FML FML FML

*Emma (@Swanprincess):* @LittleRed1984 I am going to block you if you don ’t stop cackling Ruby

*Emma (@Swanprincess):* That ’s it @LittleRed1984. Blocking you.

*Emma (@Swanprincess):* Don ’t even ask ok? Video up soon, I promise.

*Emma (@Swanprincess):* Emma ’s asleep. Mulan hacking her account. Video loading now.

— A selection of Tweets by Emma Swan, on Saturday afternoon and evening

Emma can’t help but grin as she watches Henry and his mom leave the deli.

There was something about the woman. She seemed familiar somehow; that spark of kinship during their brief conversation was too sharp to be denied, even by Emma who is the queen of denial. She liked the way she talked to her son, the way she blushed when she was caught checking Emma out, the way her smile seemed to have the power to devastate Emma.

This woman — and, shit, she doesn’t even know her name — has made her take a chance. Emma never does this. She never gives out her number to strangers, her usual mode being to avoid all contact with human beings that has the potential to lead to awkwardness or rejection. It had irritated Jasmine no end.

She’d met Jasmine at a party. She’d known no one there except for Mary Margaret, who had disappeared off with her old college roommate who was having an emotional breakdown, leaving Emma cradling a beer and wondering how soon she could leave without incurring Mary Margaret’s wrath. And then Jasmine had come over, draping her arms around her, crying, “darling! It’s been too long!” and whispering, “getting hit on by douchebag standing stage left.” Her breath had ghosted Emma’s ear and the filmy fabric of her hijab had grazed her bare shoulders and she’d shivered at the sensation. The asshole had given up at that point and Jasmine had thrust a hand forward. “I’m Jas, damsel-in-distress in training!” Emma had laughed at that and they’d migrated to a quiet corner where they’d talked into the early hours of the morning and, when Mary Margaret had dragged Emma away, she had been half in love already.
And even then Jasmine had been the one to track her down and ask her out a couple of days later, the one to make all the first moves and, ultimately, the one to break off a relationship that wasn’t working out.

Ruby has taken her break and the deli is quiet. Emma cannot help but dance along to the softly playing store sound system as she wipes down table tops and restocks the paper napkins. One of the college students occupying the large table bathed in light from the large windows smiles over at her, amused by Emma’s *joie de vivre*.

Her good mood doesn’t last.

Ruby returns from her break and she’s grinning and that never leads to anything good for Emma. “I just realised,” Ruby says, pulling her phone out of her pocket. “You know that woman with the kid? The one you were flirting with?”

Emma nods, returning to the counter where a customer waits. She takes his order, before moving to the coffee machine and beginning preparations for a take away cappuccino.

“What about her?”

“I knew she looked familiar.”

“Does she come in here a lot?” Emma asks. The milk steamer whirs loudly, clattering against metal. She scoops milk, sprinkles the coffee with cinnamon and hands it over to the customer. “Here you go, sir,” she says, before turning to Ruby whose smile is positively predatory.

“Oh, Emma,” Ruby says. “I was so hoping you would say that.” She has plugged her phone into the deli speakers and clicks play, grinning all the while at Emma. The first tinny beats ring out and Emma feels cold sweat seep through her pores. “*I remember when we broke up, the first time*,” Ruby warbles, shimmying at the counter.

The last time Emma felt this heady rush of humiliation and fear flow through her whole body was when she had realisedNeal Cassidy had abandoned her and she was going to be arrested. “No,” she whispers. Her head pounds. She squeezes her eyes shut, hoping against all hope that this is some particularly cruel and humiliating nightmare.

“Yes,” Ruby says and she’s practically vibrating with glee as she continues to dance along to what is now Emma’s least favourite song in the entire universe.
“I gave her my number!” she wails.

“What?” Ruby is startled at this, head darting over to Emma. She has paused, mid-hip jerk, and appears torn between laughter and concern.

“I wrote it on the side of her coffee,” Emma says. She slides down, back against the wall of the deli, burying her head in her apron. It is taking all her willpower not to bang her head against the wall. “What if she calls me?”

“So what if she does?” Ruby asks. “Don’t answer. Or do. Perhaps you could turn this hate-thing you’ve got going on into some really satisfying angry sex?”

“I can’t believe I put myself out there for that terrible excuse for a human being,” Emma says, throwing the cleaning cloth clutched in her hand at Ruby’s face. “I’m never doing that again.”

Ruby just laughs, offering Emma her hand and hauling her up.

The worst thing is, Emma reflects, that she can’t stop thinking about Regina Mills all afternoon. Her mind plays their brief conversation over and over again. Had she known? She couldn’t possibly have. The woman she’d seen in those brief videos and received that email from would never have been able to keep her cool long enough to mess with Emma like this. Had she imagining Regina checking her out? She didn’t think so. Ruby had described it as flirting, though, admittedly, Ruby thought even the most innocent of encounters was flirting.

What gets to her the most is that Regina Mills doesn’t seem like a totally terrible person in the flesh, even in hindsight. As she walks home from work, she wonders if she’d just been a girl in a deli, flirting with a customer at the counter, how far their relationship could have gone. Quite without her permission, her mind flashes with images of cozy coffee dates, candlelit dinners, time spent playing video games with Henry, kisses pressed at the curve of Regina’s bare neck… She feels her skin tighten with red hot embarrassment.

Tamara’s home when she returns from work, perched on the window sill and hands coiled around a mug of coffee. “There’s fresh in the pot,” she says and Emma takes it as an invitation to talk, returning from the kitchen with a mug of milky coffee and curling up on the couch.

“How’s Lance?” she asks, referring to Tamara’s on-again, off-again Adonis of a boyfriend. She
hasn’t seen — or heard — him in a while. It’s a shame really because he’s a lot nicer than Tamara and he often walks around the apartment with his shirt off. Emma is all in favour of blatant objectification when it serves her purposes.

“Working crazy hours in trauma over the other side of town,” Tamara says, sighing. “I am hugely sex-deprived.”

“I can recommend you a good vibrator,” Emma says and Tamara snorts.

“Oh sweetheart,” she says and her smile is so beyond patronising that if Tamara didn’t pay more than her share of rent and utilities, Emma might hate her a little bit. “It is so cute that you think I need help there.” She takes a sip of coffee, draining her mug, and looks over at Emma, one thin, perfectly plucked eyebrow raised. “What’s up with you? You look like someone killed a puppy in front of you.”

“Do you ever fuck up so completely?” she asks, mumbling into her coffee. She knows the answer because she’s pretty certain Tamara’s never fucked up anything in her entire life and, even if she had, she’s so closed off she’d never tell Emma.

“Jesus, Swan,” she says, placing her mug by the sink before returning to the window. “What have you done now?”

“Given my number to someone really unsuitable,” she replies.

Tamara laughs. “Because it’s the 1920s and Papa wouldn’t approve? God, do you even hear yourself when you talk?”

Emma scowls at her. “Shut up,” she says. “Mulan would’ve been much more sympathetic.”

“Mulan’s a marshmallow,” Tamara says. The description of her best friend makes a smile form on Emma’s lips completely against her will, mostly because she knows it would utterly enrage Mulan. “I couldn’t give less of a shit.” She looks at her phone. “And I have to get to work.”

“As always, a pleasure talking to you,” Emma says. Tamara pulls the finger at her and disappears into her room, reemerging with her giant handbag, coat and boots on, and pulling on her gloves as she walks out the door.
Emma orders pizza, texts Mulan and settles in on the couch, shoulders slumped and laptop on her knee. Someone has emailed her a link to a YouTube account with the message, *really great new talent*. She clicks on it and is taken to the account of TheSeaWitch. She’s an adorable moppet of a girl, giant eyes and this luminous dark skin and a cocky quirk to her lips that says she knows exactly how great she is.

And she is great. She has this husky, jazzy voice and she sings covers of, like, Nicki Minaj and Janelle Monae. It’s all very Post-modern Jukebox and Emma is absolutely entranced.

When she delves into the comments she realises she’s not the only reasonably big name YouTuber to find TheSeaWitch thoroughly impressive. Nestled in amongst the comments singing her praises are some from him. Killian Jones or CptnHook as he styles himself on YouTube. He’s twenty-six. He basically seems to lounge around writing poetry and smoking cigarettes all day and he has an insanely popular YouTube channel where he posts a bizarre combination of weird songs about the sea and rum-fulled rants and mildly offensive prank videos.

They’d met before. There had been a Boston YouTubers meet-up last year, when Emma was just getting into the game. She’d been charmed by him, having never really watched his videos or heard anything about him. A series of bad decisions had led her to his bed that night.

“I was turned by the accent,” she’d told Mulan over Sunday brunch.

Mulan had look absolutely disgusted and had thrown a rasher of bacon at her. “At least tell me it was good for you.”

Emma had screwed up her nose, though not before picking the bacon from her cleavage and eating it. “Eh.” Mulan had sighed her disgust.

Jones contacts her periodically, suggesting a catch up, always written in such terms that it’s obvious what he *really* wants, enough innuendo in the basic message of ‘we should catch up’ that she can *see* the wink and sleazy eyebrow wiggle. She deletes all his messages and she’s dreading this year’s Boston catch-up coming up soon because Jones’ll be there and she desperately doesn’t want to see him again.

And now he’s commenting on TheSeaWitch’s videos, a winking emoticon at the end of every line.
Great voice, love ;)

I see you’re a Bostonian. We should meet up sometime ;)

I’d love to be part of your world ;)

She thinks he’s attempting a Disney joke with the last one but she can feel the sleaze actually rising in cartoonish stink lines from the screen. She feels fury building up in her. The girl is eighteen if she’s a day — her profile says she’s a senior in high school — and just about every other comment on her latest video, barring the few awful racist and misogynistic ones which seem to be all too depressingly constant if you’re a black girl on YouTube, is so positive. How dare he be such a sleaze? She reports every comment of his she finds as abuse and sends TheSeaWitch a message urging her to steer clear.

Then she promotes the hell out of TheSeaWitch on every possible platform because a) no one should have to deal with Jones as their primary fan and b) the girl’s amazing.

When Mulan arrives and hears the whole ‘giving the evil queen her number’ saga, she can’t stop laughing. “You are such an idiot, Swan,” she says, shaking her head.

Emma grabs a second slice of pizza and takes a generous bite. “Thanks so much. Like I don’t already feel like the biggest dick on the planet.” Her phone beeps and she checks it.

Thanks for the warning and the promo, TheSeaWitch writes. I trust any woman with half a brain has better taste than to get with that.

It’s a little embarrassing when a teenager has better sense than you do, Emma reflects. Still, she’s glad.

“So,” Mulan says, picking olives off her slice of pizza and chucking them over at Emma, who adds them to his slice. “I have a plan for revenge.”

“I thought we were set on maintaining some sort of moral high ground?” Emma asks.

“There’s nothing wrong with a little light-hearted mockery,” Mulan says. “Now you’ve moved past the worst of the whole ‘hurt feelings’ thing.” Emma’s not sure but she feels she should be resentful about the finger quotes around ‘hurt feelings’. The humiliation that had dissipated over the past week is now running full bore again.
“And this plan is?”

“They say imitation is the sincerest form of flattery,” Mulan says and she grins.

For a moment, Emma’s horrified. “You’re not suggesting a list of my own,” she says. “I’m not that cruel.”

Mulan sighs. “Oh my God. No.” She grabs the bag she had dumped at Emma’s front door upon entering. Emma had assumed Mulan was planning to sleep over but apparently not. “I’m suggesting costume theatre.”

“Can we not call it that?” It’s too ‘Lizzie Bennet Diaries’ for words and Emma feels like she’s plagiarising every time Mulan says it.


Emma opens it. “You’ve got to be shitting me,” she says, pulling out Mulan’s one dress that her mother bought her for job interviews. It’s a tailored black shift dress, high-necked and short. It is, in fact, remarkably similar to Regina Mills’ dress in her ill-advised, drunken video. This intuition is proved correct when the next thing Emma pulls out of Mulan’s bag is a brunette wig and plastic tiara.

“Mockery,” Mulan says. “You’ll make a dick of yourself, which your viewers like to see, but you’ll also remind her — and everyone else — of that video.”

“You’re a bit evil,” Emma says, though she can’t help the admiration in her tone.

“Don’t get on my bad side, Swan,” Mulan says and for a moment her easy smile turns sinister. “I could actually destroy you. Now, get changed.” Sometimes she forgets that Mulan wants to be a gym teacher, that when she’s not studying she’s at the gym, that there is not a spare ounce of fat on her, and that she can take men down who are three times her size.

She pulls off her jeans and tank top, slipping the dress over her head. It’s a fitted dress on Mulan, who is slighter than Emma, and shorter. So the demure, professional outfit is mildly obscene, taut across her breasts and hips, and baring a large expanse of thigh. “You didn’t think this through,”
she says, tugging at the hem.

Mulan stands, zipping her up, and then looks her up and down. “No, it works,” she says. “Tie your hair up.”

Wig pinned in place and tiara crowning it, Emma starts to inhabit the role, feeling herself stand a little straighter, lips tightening and chin jutting up in that regal way she noticed in Regina Mills’ video and, she is now realising, in the deli. “I take it I’m dancing,” she says. “Shake it Off?”


“Obvious is good though,” Emma argues, and then she mimics Mulan. “The average viewer has a short memory.”

So Mulan agrees and Emma sticks the music on, setting it to play on repeat several times so that she can just keep dancing, hoping Mulan will get some decent footage over an extended period of time. It’s actually quite cathartic, mimicking Regina’s swaying hips, her gesticulations, her butt slap at the end of the song (though Emma’s pretty sure her butt isn’t nearly as impressive). Mulan is laughing so hard she’s struggling to keep the camera steady and when the song stops Emma stalks forward, trying desperately to control her breathing, and sneers at the camera. “I will destroy you if it’s the last thing I do. Evil Queen out!”

Mulan actually falls over.

All told, it’s a good night. She struggles out of Mulan’s dress, throwing it over the arm of the couch, and pulls on a hoodie and pyjama pants. Mulan’s at her laptop, uploading footage. “You want to edit?”

“You’re better at it than me,” Emma says, slumping onto the couch. She yawns. It’s been a long week. “Tell me about your social worker.”

“Bed time story?” Mulan asks and Emma nods. “She’s running a seminar next week,” Mulan says. “The way she talks, Emma… I just can’t even handle it. She’s so passionate about young people.”

“Is she into ladies?”
“Yeah,” Mulan says, and Emma’s got her eyes shut but she can hear the smile in her voice. She hasn’t heard Mulan talk like this since Rory. Sometimes she worries that their friendship is really one-sided — Mulan gives and Emma feels like she’s always taking — but then she hangs out with Mulan’s other friends and realises that she’s the only person Mulan opens up to. None of them know she’s queer. None of them see the marshmallow.

Resting her head against a cushion, Emma drifts off to sleep to the sounds of Mulan’s fingers clacking over the keys and her voice, telling Emma all about Marian, the beautiful social worker.
In which the penny drops (and Regina vacillates wildly between hurting and healing)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

LittleRed: OMG. You dork.

CptnHook: Looking hot in that dress, Swan.

LuisaC: Maybe this wasn’t the best way to poke fun at EvilQueen101? There’s something kind of... uncomfortable about a white woman dressing up as a Latina woman imho.

EllaDeVil: Please tell me you weren’t sober for this.

Uglyducklingfolife: YOU ARE THE GREATEST EVER.

EvilQueen101: A touch derivative, dear. I hear another YouTuber has cornered the market on Taylor Swift.

— A Selection of comments on swanprincess’ video entitled ‘Haters Gonna Hate’

Marian sends her the link, with the subject line ‘LOL’. She’s been making an effort to be more understanding of Regina’s various mood swings and fits of vengeful, malicious behaviour since Regina’s meltdown the other weekend, but crying hysterically over the phone seems to have helped. Allowing herself to cry, to admit weakness, has in a strange sort of way made her feel stronger. She’s sleeping better. As each day goes by, she misses Robin less and less. They haven’t kept in touch since his move; Regina gets information about his new life through Marian, and she can’t even bring herself to be pissed off when she hears that he’s gone on a couple of dates.

She’s starting to realise that their relationship was safe, but it wasn’t love. She wasn’t in love with him. She misses the idea of him, but not the man himself.

Perhaps this is why, when Regina realises the link is to the latest swanprincess video, she doesn’t feel that seething rage that has accompanied every thought she has had of Emma Swan since the Tumblr incident. Alone in the break room, she clicks on the YouTube link and watches.

The woman in the video is dressed like her, she realises, complete with a cheap dark wig and a surprisingly tasteful black tailored dress — even if it is clearly a size too small, if the expanse of toned thigh on show and the fabric that bunches tight at the hips is any indication. She dances to ‘Shake it Off’ and it’s silly and a bit offensive because she’s clearly poking fun at Regina. Honestly though, Regina doesn’t have the energy to be angry about it. It’s been over a week since the email that had her in a state of panic and her mother has said nothing. Maybe Mary Margaret Blanchard is no longer a terrible gossip.
She watches the whole video through and can’t resist commenting at the end. A *touch derivative, dear. I hear another YouTuber has cornered the market on Taylor Swift*. However, it is then that a previous video loads and Regina watches a traditional swanprincess video for the first time, a video where Emma Swan’s face and hair haven’t been obscured, and her stomach drops because Emma Swan is more than just vaguely familiar in that generic, blonde, white girl way. She’s met her before. She’s the woman from the deli.

She exits the YouTube app, hands shaking and heart thumping. She *flirted* with her. She almost messaged her, arranged to meet up for a coffee. She had contemplated a *fling*. Did Emma Swan know? When she gave Regina her number? She can’t possibly have. If she knew, if it was a plot to humiliate her… She shakes her head. There had been no flash of recognition, no sign that Emma had been anything but sincere.

She sighs. Time to return to work. Somehow she knows her brain won’t stop obsessing over this though.

When Marian comes around that evening with Roland and Henry, Regina has a lasagna in the oven and her second glass of wine in hand. Marian takes the boys on Thursdays, it being her half-day at work, and Regina repays her with dinner. “Darling,” she says, pressing a kiss to Henry’s hair. “Good day?”

“We built bird houses for technology,” he says, and Regina tries not to scowl. Honestly, though? Bird houses?

“I look forward to seeing yours,” she says instead. “Go and get your math done before dinner, *mijo.*”

“Okay!” Henry says and scampers upstairs to his bedroom eagerly. Roland moves to follow him, but Marian stops him.

“She has to do his homework, Dimples,” she says. “You can hang out with me and Aunty Regina, okay?” Regina smiles gratefully. Henry and Roland get on well enough but hanging out with a four year old is exhausting for even the most tolerant of eight year olds, and Henry’s a pretty introverted kid so it’s hard for him to handle sometimes. About a year back he’d started throwing tantrums, sulking and being rude to Marian and mean to Roland. So now they’ve worked out a system on Thursdays, where she finds some excuse for him to have time alone before dinner.

Marian hefts Roland onto her lap where he sits with his head leaning against her chest, his eyes
dark and impossibly round as he watches Regina pour Marian a glass of wine and Roland an apple juice into a plastic wine glass. “Thanks, love,” Marian says and Roland echoes her, holding the plastic cup in both hands. “Did you watch the video?”

Regina nods, frowning. “You remember that woman I told you about?” she asks, screwing the cap back on the wine and returning it to the fridge.

“Not-Ruby?” Marian asks. “The cute one with the number on the coffee cup?”

“Well,” Regina says, slicing bell pepper into thin strips for a salad. “I figured out her name.”

For a moment, Marian’s brow remains furrowed, and then her eyes widen and Regina has never seen the resemblance between her and her son more clearly. “No!”

“Yes,” Regina replies, ripping open a bag of arugula with unnecessary force and piling it into a salad bowl.

Marian starts laughing, which is a totally reassuring and delightful response, and not at all upsetting and offensive. “I’m sorry,” she says, gasping for air. “That’s beautiful. Do you think she knew?”

“She can’t have,” Regina says, adding the rest of the vegetables to the arugula. Still, she adds, “I hope.”

Marian laughs again, eyes squinting shut and white teeth on full display, and Roland looks between the pair of them, puzzled by the joke he is not getting. “What’s funny, Mama?” he asks and she tugs one of his curls.

“Aunty Regina,” Marian says. “She’s hilarious.”

Roland nods as though this explains everything, as though it is perfectly obvious and normal for Regina to have told a joke so funny that Marian is still laughing in a way that now borders on mild hysteria.

“How would you like to go and get Henry?” Regina asks, pulling the lasagna from the oven; it’s
perfect, cheese bubbling and golden. “Then you boys can set the table.”

Roland scrambles down from Marian’s lap, narrowly missing her wine glass with his elbow, and runs to the stairs. Marian wipes her eyes. “Sorry,” she says. “I shouldn’t laugh.”

“No,” Regina says. “It was a funny response video. More embarrassing for her really. I just can’t believe I thought…”

“You could still call her,” Marian says and Regina scowls.

“I still hate her.”

“Just don’t escalate,” Marian warns and Regina sighs. She doesn’t intend to; the threat of Leo Blanchard finding out was sufficient. She doesn’t think Emma Swan is malicious — at least not in the way that she can be — but she doesn’t want to test how far she can push her. She just doesn’t want to see her or hear from her ever again.

“How are the education seminars going?” she asks, changing the subject.

“Oh, they’re a bunch of earnest little delights,” Marian says. “Ready to change the world one student at a time.” She can’t disguise the fondness in her tone, however. Marian has always enjoyed the seminars she presents for education students, though she frequently bemoans the naivety of teaching graduates. “Too many optimistic kids who think they’re going to get into a classroom and, like, save the world,” she had said several times. “Not enough people who actually get the needs of at risk youth.”

“There’s an interesting little group this semester actually,” she says. “The contingent of future gym teachers seem to get it more than most, which makes a nice change.”

“Isn’t one of them cute?” Regina asks.

“And very, very queer,” Marian says.

“You should ask her out,” Regina says.
“Should I write my number on a coffee cup?” Marian asks, and tries to hide her cackle by downing her wine. Regina throws a dish towel at her.

Later, Regina contemplates emailing Emma Swan to ask her what’s up with this whole business. She needs to know. But perhaps Emma didn’t recognise her. Perhaps Emma is still blissfully unaware that she flirted with her YouTube nemesis. Perhaps, in emailing, Regina would open a whole new can of worms best left well sealed. She sighs. If only she knew how much she should hate Emma Swan.

It’s drizzling the next day and Henry claims he’s sick. She should be more suspicious but his temperature is a little high and she has enough sick days accrued and so she calls in and stays at home with him. After breakfast in bed, she bundles Henry up on the couch, where he coughs pathetically and dramatically at regular intervals, as if to prove how sick he is.

She boils water, making him a lemon and honey drink, before settling down with him as he watches cartoons. The knitted blanket — the one she’d made when Daniel’s cousin had been pregnant, the only thing she has ever successfully crafted since time immemorial — is draped across Henry’s shoulders and his feet are in fuzzy slippers.

“I’m glad you’re friends with Marian again,” he says, resting his head about her shoulder.

“Me too, mijo,” she says. She has a notebook on her lap, trying to do her Spanish homework. She takes classes every two weeks at the community centre and she’s so behind on her vocabulary homework it’s becoming embarrassing. She wishes, not for the first time, that her father had spoken it with her, instead of her having to pick up this part of her heritage piecemeal as an adult. Cora had thought it more practicable for her to study Mandarin at high school — she had wanted her to go into business or politics — and Regina had dropped languages as soon as she was able, not seeing the relevance for what she wanted to do with her life.

She had learned mijo from a Mexican Spanish teacher, wanting some way to link Henry to her culture (and her father had always called her linda, one of the few Spanish phrases he had slipped past her mother who had thought Regina’s Hispanic roots would limit her and so strove to stamp them out of her). It wasn’t until after she and Henry had grown to like it as an endearment that she had learned it wasn’t common parlance in Puerto Rico.

After soup for lunch, Henry has perked up and grows restless. “We should go out,” he says. “A hot chocolate would make me 100 percent well, Momma,” he says, batting his eyelashes and pouting in what he thinks is an appealing way (and he’s right that it’s a lethal force, in combination with the childish ‘Momma’).
She knows he wants to go to the deli, but she can’t go back there, not if she risks meeting Emma Swan again. Instead, she makes him a hot chocolate herself and reads to him from ‘Matilda’ until he falls asleep with his head in her lap.

She’s grateful that he has recovered by Saturday because her mother calls that morning and tells Regina she will be in Boston for a function that evening. “I will be at your home in time for lunch, dear,” she says and Regina can only acquiesce. She is short-tempered all morning, cleaning furiously and making such a mess of carbonara sauce to the extent that she nearly starts to cry. She doesn’t know why she’s making pasta anyway; her mother will only make snide comments about carbohydrates and fats and what a pity it is that she inherited her father’s metabolism. She scrapes burnt sauce from the pan, before leaving it to soak in the sink and fishing out frozen leftover lasagna.

Henry wisely hides in his bedroom all morning and she wonders whether she would be considered an alcoholic if she knocked back a few stiff drinks before her mother’s arrival.

Cora’s perfume overwhelms her when she enters the house, that heady mix of rose and musk that has Regina spiraling back to her childhood. “Traffic was dreadful, darling,” she says, tucking a strand of hair back behind Regina’s ear. “These are interesting earrings.” She purses her lips and Regina fights the urge to touch them.

They had been a gift from Henry last Christmas. He’d picked them himself. “Because you like horses,” he’d said, when she had unwrapped the silver horse shoes, and she had kissed his cheek and replaced her pearl studs immediately.

Henry thunders down the stairs at this point and her mother winces at the sound. “Give your grandmother a hug, Henry,” Cora orders and he dutifully obeys. He doesn’t much like his grandmother, but just in the ordinary way a boy doesn’t want to spend time with an imposing and controlling woman.

For Regina, however, there is too much hurt. Regina cannot forget being disowned, her funds cut off, and left alone with a two month old baby, mourning her partner and his cousin, in an apartment hours away from the only family she had left, an apartment that she could no longer afford.

It hadn’t been easy. She had dropped out of the final year of her degree, worked at a diner, and lived in a house share with another single mom. When her father had died, however, he left her a house. Not large, but enough — a comfortable space for her and Henry, in a good neighbourhood, and out of reach of Cora, the deeds in her name only.
She is grateful for the distraction Henry creates because Cora’s attention, however briefly, focuses on him. “When was the last time you had a haircut?” she asks and Regina sighs.

“He’s due a trim next week, Mother,” she says.

“And are we having lunch any time soon, dear?” Cora asks. “One does have other commitments.”

It has barely passed noon. “Dining room,” Regina says tersely. She’s not an alcoholic, she swears, but, God, she could use a drink.

It is over the main course that Cora brings up the Blanchard family and Regina tenses. “Leo Blanchard is in Boston next month, visiting Mary Margaret,” she says, fork picking through the lasagna, though Regina notes she isn’t really eating it. She had sniffed when Regina had brought it out, and made a comment about the effort most people put into meals with her. “I suggested that you might like to have dinner with them.”

“Mother,” Regina starts.

“It would be prudent,” Cora continues, “not to cut yourself off from every good connection in your life.” Though her tone is, as always, sweet, Regina shivers at the ice in her voice.

“Give him my email address,” she says, sighing. “I will endeavour to meet up with them both.” She stresses the final words; it would be just like Cora to set her up with someone old enough to be her father.

Cora lets out a small sound of disbelief, but fortunately does not press further, instead asking Henry about his latest school report and how he is tracking at soccer.

By the time Cora leaves, three hideous, life-draining hours later, Regina is exhausted. She orders pizza for an early dinner and she and Henry lie on the couch, watching ‘Jurassic Park’ and very determinedly not talking about her mother.

“We should make a video,” he says, looking over at her as the credits roll over swelling music. “You need more stuff on your channel for when you go to that thing next weekend.” There is a Boston YouTubers meet-up next Saturday and Henry has already organised himself a sleepover
with the twins. He’s more excited than she is though, admittedly, there are a couple of people she chats to in the community who she’d like to meet, a woman who does book review vlogs, and a couple of regular commenters with whom she has developed a rapport.

“What about?” she asks.

He thinks a moment, forehead crinkled and lips pursed. “Something fun,” he says. “Something about cool stuff to do with your kids.”

He should really be going to bed soon, but it’s Saturday night and Henry’s been so good. She knows how much impact Cora’s passive aggressive tactics can have on someone’s psyche, and Henry only sees his grandmother a few times a year. So Henry runs off to grab her camera and starts to map out a structure for her. “It’s gonna be called ‘Five Things to Do With Your Kid When He’s Sick’, ” he says.

“You know I don’t want you in the videos,” Regina reminds him.

Henry nods. “I’m your cameraman,” he says. “Do you need to get dressed up?”

She looks down at her outfit — loose sweater, yoga pants, changed into the moment Cora left. “I’m fine like this,” she says and Henry raises an eyebrow.

“Perhaps some lipstick, Mom?”

She reaches over and ruffles his hair. “Everyone’s a critic.”

When she returns from freshening up her makeup, Henry has an outline prepared for her, in his neatest printing, and he’s set the camera up. “When you’re ready,” he says.

She sits on the couch, cross-legged, unusual for her videos, which are normally filmed at her desk. “Sometimes,” she says. “Your child gets sick — not violently ill, not ‘hovering at his bedside, terrified’ ill — but coughs a bit and wants to lie on the couch for hours at a time and loses interest in food that isn’t in liquid form…”

And as she speaks, Henry giggling at the camera, the hurts of her mother’s visit wear away. She
has her precious boy and a good life and she can be perfectly content with that.

It’s not until she goes to bed that night – screeds of footage ready to cut into a video the next day – that she realises with something akin to horror that Emma Swan might be at the YouTubers gathering.

Well. Shit.

Chapter End Notes

Apologies for the delay. Writer's Block, Teacher Flu, Swan Queen Week and Swan Queen Big Bang have all contributed.

Next time: our intrepid heroines meet again.
In which Regina and Emma are reunited (and it feels so awkward)

Chapter Notes

Warning: discussion (and brief depiction) of assault.

Mari (@fandomscapegoat): OMG.
Hera (@Grkgoddess): @fandomscapegoat What?
Mari (@fandomscapegoat): @Grkgoddess EQ101 is totally coming face to face with sp for first time ever.
Hera (@Grkgoddess): @fandomscapegoat Battle to the death? WHY AM I WORKING? I WANT THEM TO FIGHT AND MAYBE MAKE OUT.
Mari (@fandomscapegoat): @Grkgoddess FIND YOUR CHILL, TRASH BAG.
Mari (@fandomscapegoat): @Grkgoddess (also, I really really hope so)
— a selection of tweets between YouTubers at the Boston Meet-up Bar Event

Lance is at the apartment, reading one of Tamara’s trashy magazines, and he wolf-whistles Emma when she leaves her bedroom. “Hot,” he says, nodding in approval. She can hear the shower spray and is grateful she got ready when she did, because Tamara has been known to commandeer the shower for upwards of an hour.

“You too,” Emma replies instead of saying ‘thanks’. She feels the heat rise to her cheeks and Lance laughs, this deep, booming chuckle. He is quite possibly the most attractive man on the planet and, while she’s normally virulently opposed to being objectified by men, with him it is a) so genuine and b) so not sexual that it honestly feels like she’s being inducted into some kind of special club of beautiful people. “It’s not too much?” she adds. The dress is bright pink, bordering on too tight, and was worn in her previous life to disarm idiots who’d skipped bail but were stupid enough to fall for a little manipulative flirtation.

“Unless you’re going to church — or maybe a job interview — it’s perfect,” he says and sits up, rolling the magazine up and stretching; the hem of his tee-shirt lifts to display a strip of dark, muscled stomach. Emma stares just a little bit too long, but then objectification goes both ways, she figures. “Is there a girl involved?”

She shrugs. “Not really,” she says and then adds, “well, my nemesis.” Lance laughs again. “Last time I met her, I had coffee grounds stuck under my fingernails.”
“Well,” Lance says, “I hope this is one of those nemeses where you hook up scandalously because, God, you look good.”

“Really don’t see that happening,” she says, but she grins as she slides her feet into painfully high heels. “Have a good night.” And, pulling on her jacket, she runs out the door and down the street to the T station.

It’s a little bit like being a celebrity, Emma imagines, as she enters the crowded bar, which has been rented out for the evening’s festivities, and sees people point and whisper. Last year she was virtually anonymous, was able to attend the events at the Boston Meet-up unrecognised, and privately fangirl from a distance over YouTubers who impressed her. Now she’s one of those vloggers and, while she is so grateful people like her stupid-ass vlogs, there’s something terrifying about hoards of fangirls to an introvert. She tries not to meet anyone’s eye and people mostly keep a respectful distance. “I really like your videos,” one girl says as she walks past, and she smiles at her. She’ll be at the teen-friendly portion of the meet-up tomorrow, and is even part of a panel about women on YouTube.

She spots Mulan by the bar, who waves her over; she is holding a bottle of beer in each hand and Emma really hopes one is for her. “Thought you might need this,” Mulan says, handing her the drink.

“You’re a goddess,” Emma says, taking a long swig from the bottle and feeling her shoulders relax infinitesimally.

“Yeah yeah,” Mulan says, though she’s smiling and she bumps Emma’s shoulder with her own. “You look good, lady.”

She resists the urge to tug at the hem of her dress and runs a hand through her curls instead. She doesn’t normally bother with the curling iron, but it’s an important night. A good chance to network, to make connections. She definitely didn’t spend half an hour in front of the mirror, swearing at her hair, solely to impress a particularly disagreeable individual who, for all she knows, won’t even show up. “Seen anyone we know yet?” she asks, scanning the crowded bar.

“She hasn’t made an appearance yet,” Mulan says, disconcertingly knowing exactly who she’s talking about, and then adds, “but your other buddy’s here.”

For a moment, Emma doesn’t know to whom Mulan is referring, but then a leather-clad arm winds around her waist and she smells what has to be axe body spray, pungent and triggering a
host of memories she really wishes she could repress forever. Killian Jones. “Hullo, love,” he says, pressing a kiss to her cheek. His stubble scrapes against her chin, leaving behind a sharp reminder of why she’s taking a break from men. A long break. “Long time, no see.”

“Killian,” she says, dodging out from under his arm. She brings up a hand to scrub at her cheek. “How are you?”

“All the better for seeing you, Swan,” he says, and manages to drape his arm across her shoulders this time, his fingers tapping out a rhythm against the bare skin of her shoulder. She can feel the leather of his jacket cool against her skin. “I’m loving this feud you’ve got going with the evil queen, by the way. Very hot.” He laughs and she squirms, aware the disgust will be all too evident on her face and equally aware that he won’t notice. Up until recently, she’s thought Killian to be a lech but a harmless one; since reading his comments on Ursula’s profile, she’s not so sure. She’ll be keeping an eye on him this weekend.

“You know, I’ve always wondered how many fingers I could break in one go,” Mulan says conversationally, cracking her knuckles. She’s a quietly intimidating presence, not a spare ounce of fat on her and Emma, whose own biceps are nothing to sniff at, is envious of Mulan’s muscles. When Killian smiles ingratiatingly at her, her lips harden further into a thin line and her eyes narrow.

Killian removes his arm from Emma hastily, though she can still feel its presence linger on her skin. There’s a trio of fangirls standing a careful distance from them, and they shoot Emma a poisonous glance in unison. One of them is wearing a pirate hat and what appears to be a serving wench getup and she remembers that Killian’s fans call themselves ‘Hookers’. She grimaces. Of course he’d like that. Still, at least these women look to be well over the legal drinking age.

“I’ve seen…” she says, intending to excuse herself and find someone, anyone at all, to speak to. And then she sees her — EvilQueen101 — walking towards the bar.

Seeing her now, it’s so obvious that the woman from the deli and the beautiful YouTuber are one in the same. Her dark hair is perfectly coiffed, instead of dragged back into a ponytail, and she’s made up, lips a deep shade of red and eyes dark. As Regina approaches, Emma’s gaze drops to the high heeled pumps, the sharply defined calf muscles, the legs clad in translucent stockings. She wonders idly if they’re pantyhose or stay-ups — or, God forbid, held up with a garter belt — before realising her brain is heading into dangerous territory. “Hey,” she says, when Regina reaches the bar.

Regina looks over at her and her head jerks in surprise, before her eyes narrow in recognition and lips purse. “Swanprincess, I assume?” she says, upper lip curling. “Here for another opportunity to humiliate me? Merlot, please.”
“Me? Humiliate you?” Emma says. “That’s rich.” The woman at the bar pours the wine and hands it over to Regina, smiling appreciatively as she does so. Emma feels her hand clench into a fist at that.

“Keep the change,” Regina says, before she turns and walks in the opposite direction.

Emma should leave it at that, should let her walk away, but she can’t. “Regina, wait,” she says, running after her, and abandoning Killian. She notes it has not taken him long to find a new victim; Emma vaguely recognises her as the pretty brunette who makes YouTube book reviews and teaches Pinterest-style craft skills, like how to make muffins that look like donuts and tea cosies styled like TARDISes. Not Emma’s thing but Jas had liked her book reviews. “Let me explain.”

“Explain what?” Regina turns. Pink blotches high in her cheeks and her eyes flash with amber light. Despite the snarl, or perhaps because of it, she is beautiful, a stunning inferno of tightly contained fury, and she’s horrified at herself for the thought because she really shouldn’t be thinking about Regina Mills that way.

“I… don’t know,” Emma says. “I didn’t realise it was you. At the deli that day. I wasn’t—it’s not —” She’s utterly horrified to find herself stuttering; she can talk articulately — while intoxicated — about any subject under the sun, but put her in front of Regina Mills and she apparently becomes a blithering idiot.

“I’m terribly sorry for your disappointment on that front,” Regina spits. “May I go now?”

“No,” Emma says and for a moment she considers reaching out and grabbing Regina’s arm, before remembering how much she hates it when people restrict her movement, pull her back. She’s seen it in a thousand romantic comedies, watched with Mary Margaret over the years, and when Mary Margaret swooned, she was left feeling queasy. “I mean, I never do that. Give out my number.”

“Wonderful,” Regina says and she takes a long sip of her wine. Emma is definitely not fixated on the smooth lines of her throat as she gulps. “I feel so special.”

“As you should,” Emma says, and she hopes the grin she flashes is enough. “Look, can we, like, start over?”
“There’s nothing here to start over,” Regina says, and she sneers again. There’s a scar above her lip; Emma’s not noticed it before, though it’s not like she’s watched many of Regina Mills’ vlogs, and she wonders how she got it. “You are nothing to me.” These last words are spat out, sharp pinpricks, intended to pierce Emma’s skin.

However, while the words are intended to hurt, Emma’s internal lie detector is pinging so hard and she knows, she’s just positive, that if she went to Regina Mills’ house she’d find that coffee cup with her number scribbled on it somewhere. Somewhere safe, out of sight of the kid. Somewhere where treasures are stored. “That’s lovely,” Emma says. “But it’s also total bullshit.”

“Leave me alone, Ms Swan,” Regina says, and she turns away, scanning the crowds and walking purposefully in what Emma suspects is a totally random direction.

Heedless of the curious glances darting her way, of the hundred eyes staring, as she runs after the self-proclaimed evil queen of YouTube, Emma yells out after her the first thing that pops into her head. “I want to be friends.”

Regina, whirling around, just stares. “What?” She laughs but she sound anything but amused, the sound bitter, almost a bark really.

Oh well, Emma thinks, in for a penny, in for a pound. She nods. “Yes?”

For a brief moment, Regina is silent, staring at Emma. When she walks away this time, heels clacking against wooden floors as she almost runs, Emma doesn’t follow her.

She returns to the bar and Mulan nods at her in a sort of amused sympathy. “That’s rough, buddy.”

“Screw you,” she mutters and Mulan — too amused for her own good really — throws a coaster at her. It clips Emma’s ear.

“Could have gone worse,” she says, shrugging.

Emma supposes Regina Mills could have thrown her cheap red wine in Emma’s face. She could have slapped her. She could have found a million more humiliating, horrifying things about Emma and broadcast them across the bar. Listing off how much worse it could have been doesn’t do
much, however, to make her feel better; it’s ridiculous to feel disappointed that a woman she detests, a woman she referred to as her ‘nemesis’, rejected her offer of friendship, and yet here she is. “Hey,” she says, looking to change the subject and noticing the distinct lack of unwashed leather and stubble. “Where did Killian get to?”

Mulan shrugs. “Dancing, I think. With the Pinterest girl. You jealous?”

She pulls a face. “Worried would be nearer the mark.”

“She was sober,” Mulan says. “And Captain Douchebag seemed to be behaving himself.”

“I guess,” Emma says. Soon, though, Mulan’s drawn into conversation with a content producer she met at some event and Emma finds herself barely keeping up with the conversation. “Back soon,” she murmurs and Mulan nods, attention focused on the producer.

She winds her way across the dance floor, and runs into a couple making out in the dingy corridor that houses the bathrooms, the smacking sounds of them sucking face audible over the beat of the music coming from the bar. “Ew,” she says, squeezing past. And then she realises it’s Killian and the urge to puke rises.

He detaches and cranes his head, leering when he sees her. “Care to join us, love?” he asks. Emma looks past him to the woman, and recognises her as Pinterest Girl. There’s something about her eyes — deer-in-headlights wide — that makes Emma wants to get her out of there.

“Hey you!” she says, grabbing her hand, her palms clammy at Emma’s touch. “God, it’s been too long. Sorry, Killian. Need a girly catch-up!” And she drags the woman to the bathroom with her.

Once safely entombed in the ladies, the woman falls against the wall, sliding down until she’s seated, head in her hands and shoulders shaking. “He’s going to kill me,” she murmurs, and draws in several deep, shuddering breaths. Emma feels a stab of genuine fear for the woman in front of her. She doesn’t think Belle means Killian; he might be a lot of things, but he doesn’t ping as violent in that way.

“Hey, kid—” she says, crouching down in front of her.

She looks up at that. “It’s Belle.” She laughs, though the sound is anything but amused. “Pretty sure I’m older than you, Emma.”
There’s that moment of confusion about how Belle knows her name, before Emma remembers her semi-notorious status in this crowd of people. “Okay. Belle.” She pauses. “Who’s going to kill you?”

“My boyfriend,” Belle says. She runs a hand through her hair. “He didn’t want me to come to this without him, but he hates this scene. God, I just wanted to dance and then Killian got handsy and led me away from the dance floor and one thing led to another…” She sighs, her eyes bright and wet.

Emma is silent, taking in what Belle has said — or rather, what she can infer from what she has said. Then, she says, “that sounds a hell of a lot like assault.”

“No!” Belle exclaims. “It was nothing. I’m fine.” She stands, scrambling up from the tiled floor, tottering momentarily in the stilt-like heels she’s wearing. “I think I should get going though.”

“I’ll wait with you while you hail a cab,” Emma says, though she’d rather be kicking Killian in the face. She walks close beside Belle, out of the bar, and stands with her while she waits for a taxi. It’s drizzling, the street slick with rain, and the water seems to shimmer on the black of the road. “Are you sure you’re okay?” she asks, reaching out a hand as if to touch Belle’s shoulder but withdrawing at the last minute.

“I’m fine,” Belle says. “Honestly.” She does seem to have calmed down from the brief period of distress and now just seems exhausted, swaying where she stands and eyes drooping shut.

“Put my number in your phone,” Emma says. “If you need anything, I’m there.” Belle pulls out her phone and Emma recites her number, watching Belle programme it into her phone. A moment later she receives a message. Now you have my number too.

A cab pulls up and Belle jumps in, holding up her hand as if to wave before she shuts the door. Emma watches the cab leave and, when it has turned a corner, she starts to walk back towards the party. Her steps feel sluggish and she doesn’t want to be anywhere Killian Jones is and so, after a moment’s guilt-ridden indecision, she shoots Mulan a text. Going to head home, sry.

Mulan’s response is swift. Still chatting to a couple of producers. See you tomorrow. You ok?
Just tired. And she is, though it’s not from lack of sleep.

Her shoes pinch her feet and she wraps her jacket more tightly around herself, as though this will help her ward off the chill. She stumbles in her shoes, cursing the slippery sidewalk, the three block walk to the train station, her stupid shoes... As she walks, her mind runs over the situation with Belle and Killian. Does she take this further? Belle clearly doesn’t want to, though Emma suspects she’s motivated more by a controlling boyfriend than anything else. She wishes now that she’d returned to the bar; Mulan would know exactly how to handle this situation. Emma’s all action. It’s Mulan who gives her strategy.

She doesn’t notice the taxi crawling along beside her at first and, when she does, she waves it on. It draws to a halt just ahead, idling by the curb, and she scowls, fists balling. When she reaches it, she’s readying herself to start screaming obscenities at the creepy driver or, worse, his passenger. She could really go for a rant after tonight. But then the cab door swings open.

“Get in,” Regina Mills says, and holds the door open for her. “We need to talk.”

And, against her better judgment, Emma slides into the taxi beside her.
In which Regina accidentally embroils herself in an operation (and Henry is a little too helpful)

Spotted: Emma Swan (aka swanprincess) getting into a taxi with one Evil Queen. This blogger wonders whether there’s more going on between the supposed rivals than we might think. Either that or Emma Swan’s going to turn up dead. Xoxo

Reply from mydrunkprincess: Stop pretending like you’re gossip girl, idiot.

— from the Tumblr blog of Guineverexoxo

Emma slides into the taxi seat beside her, tight pink dress riding up and baring an expanse of toned thigh for a moment before she tugs it down. Regina tenses reflexively when Emma’s hand slips on the smooth leather of the seat and slides forward, mere inches away from her own hand, but they don’t touch.

She had been in the bathroom when Emma had entered with the other woman — Belle — and when she’d heard that all too familiar voice, she had stayed in the cubicle, too furious and humiliated by Emma Swan’s antics to face her again. Consequently, she’d heard everything.

“Look,” Emma says into the frozen silence of the cab. She rubs her hands together, her teeth chattering from the chill. “I’m not apologising if that’s what you’re after. Pretty sure I’m not sorry, not really, and, God…” She’s rambling and Regina can’t help but let out a loud sigh.

“For God’s sake,” she says. “I’m not after an apology, Ms Swan.”

“Then what?” Emma asks and she appears genuinely puzzled, forehead crinkling. “Wait, you’re not taking me back to your lair to murder me, are you?” The taxi driver turns around, flashing Regina a concerned look, and she rolls her eyes.

“I have a town house, not a lair,” she says. Then, before Emma can make even more of an idiot of herself, she adds, “I was in the bathroom cubicle. I heard you come in with Belle. I heard everything.”

“Oh,” Emma says. She is silent, leg jiggling, fingers twisting at the cuffs of her jacket. She seems to be an interminable fiddler; it’s almost endearing, or it would be if Emma Swan didn’t irritate her so much.
“So have you contacted the organisers yet?” she asks. “They have to be informed that there is someone predatory registered for events. There will be underage women there tomorrow.” At Emma’s head shake, she pulls her phone from her coat pocket and types a message, copying Emma into it. For a moment, the only sound in the cab is the tinny music from the radio and Emma’s breathing, too quick. She shoves the phone in her direction when she’s finished her email. “Acceptable?”

Emma takes the phone, her fingertips brushing against Regina’s own as she does so, and reads. “Perfect,” she says, returning it. “Just, why do you care?”

“Seriously?” Regina asks. “I may not like you much—” at that Emma coughs out a sound that sounds suspiciously like ‘understatement’. “However,” Regina continues as though Emma has not rudely interrupted her, “I care about people. I will not have a community made up of a great many women under siege from a sexual harasser like Jones.”

“Well, that’s… good, I guess,” Emma says.

“Yes,” Regina replies. “Now, where do you live?”

Emma gives an address two blocks from Regina’s own home and the rest of the taxi ride is spent in silence, the air between them fraught with tension. She almost wants to breach the silence, but she doesn’t want Emma Swan to think that they’re friends now. They’re not friends. They will never be friends.

(“I want to be friends,” echoes through her mind and she dismisses it. Emma Swan cannot want friendship. Not after what they’ve done to each other.)

Emma thrusts cash at her when they stop outside an apartment building, rather nicer than Regina had anticipated. “Put your money away,” Regina says. “I absconded with you. The least I can do is pay the fare.”

“Dirty,” Emma says, raising an eyebrow, and Regina most certainly does not flush. “Thanks, I guess.” She exits the cab, the pink fabric of her dress pulling taut across her buttocks as she does so, not that Regina’s watching. She nearly trips on an uneven patch of pavement. The cab idles at the curb until Emma has gone inside.

“Pretty girl,” the cab driver observes and Regina scowls.
Her house is dark and cold when she unlocks the front door. She had forgotten for a moment that Henry was at a sleepover with Nick, not with a babysitter. She misses him, feeling pathetic for doing so, but on the rare occasions she goes out, there’s something comforting about returning home to look in on her sleeping son, watch the rise and fall of his chest, and reassure herself that he’s still alive.

(He’s glad he’s independent, honestly she is. Her mother had been making comments about ‘Mommy’s boys’ and ‘apron strings’ the last time she took him to Storybrooke because how dare her son be nervous in a new place, with a grandmother he cannot be comfortable around? She doesn’t take Cora’s comments too seriously except in her darkest moments because what if she has screwed up Henry irretrievably?

Sometimes she wonders if the ‘apron strings’ comments are directed at herself, not at Henry.)

The next morning, she picks Henry up from Nick’s. He’s exhausted, in that post-sleepover, ebullient sort of way, chattering on and on about the movies they watched and the prank they played on Nick’s sister (”she was so mad, Mom!”) and how Mr Tillman let them have two serves of ice cream and popcorn with their movie. Regina’s exhausted as well, awake half the night pointedly not thinking about Emma Swan.

It’s as they walk from the parking lot into the conference centre that her phone beeps.

Dear Ms Mills, her email reads.

We are sorry to hear the rumours of events at last night’s mixer. However, without more substantial evidence than hearsay or a complaint from the victim herself, we cannot take this further.

Enjoy today’s events!

“Mom, are you okay?” Henry asks and she realises that she’s holding his hand too tightly. She loosens her grip and grimaces in a desperate attempt to smile.

“Sorry, mijo,” she says, stopping for a moment to adjust her heel. “It’s nothing.”

Henry, who is far too perceptive for his own good, appears unconvinced but accepts her response with a skeptical look and pursed lips. “I think I see Marian,” he says a moment later, pointing
through the crowd at a blur of brown skin and maroon sweater dress and so they push their way through the crowd.

“How was last night?” Marian asks, wrapping her arm around Regina’s shoulder and kissing her cheek. “Twitter tells me there was a dramatic encounter with your nemesis.”

“Hardly,” Regina says, scoffing. She lifts Roland up, hugging him tight to her.

Henry’s eyes are wide with curiosity. “You have a nemesis?”

She glares at Marian over Roland’s head. “No,” she says. “Just someone I don’t get on with very well. We were very civilised. I’ll talk to you about it later,” she adds, speaking to Marian. “After dinner.”

The conference centre is packed and they make their way through the crowds to the first event. Regina has been looking forward to this particular talk since the meet-up programme details were released, described as a discussion for and by women on YouTube, and today she is grateful it’s an event where she’s guaranteed not to see Killian Jones. With the rage simmering just below the surface, she’s liable to punch him in the face or something equally unsuitable in front of her son.

They are there in plenty of time and settle into seats near the back, Henry pulling out his book from her handbag and Marian handing Roland a pad of paper and colouring pencils. “Your job is to draw all the people on stage,” she says and he nods solemnly, eyes large. She suspects the boys won’t last the day, but Marian’s promised to take them to a nearby park when they get bored if Regina’s still enjoying herself.

Regina wraps an arm around Henry, and he snuggles up against her without breaking his reading stride. He’s always extra cuddly after a night away. “How was last night?” she asks Marian, because Robin had been back from New York for the night — his sister’s birthday — and they’d had dinner at his folk’s place.

“Fine,” she says. “Food was bland but it was great to catch up with Sarah and Harry.” Marian has admitted that she had always been more in love with Robin’s family than the man himself. “I wanted them in the divorce instead of the house,” she’d joked. Marian’s own parents had died years back, before she got married, before Roland, and before realising she was gay.

“Is his sister still finishing her masters?”
Marian nods and then she stiffens and looks down, biting her lip. “Don’t look now,” she whispers. “But the cute education student I told you about just walked in.”

Regina, of course, immediately turns and looks. A Chinese woman in jeans and a hoodie — vaguely familiar though she can’t quite place her — has just entered and is scanning the room. She looks over in their direction and Marian waves, almost hitting Regina in the face in her enthusiasm. “Hey!” she says when the woman approaches, standing in the row before them, and Regina suppresses a chuckle at the squeak in her voice. Marian talks a good game but she is such a loser when she likes someone. “Mulan right? You came to my seminars.”

“Yes,” Mulan says and Regina’s gratified to see Mulan’s own cheeks glow. “How’s it going, Ms Alvarez?”

“Marian,” Marian says, grimacing at the formality. “Please. Sit with us. Roland, this is Mulan. Mulan, my son, Roland.” Roland looks up, bares pearly teeth, and then buries his head in his mother’s sweater. “And this is my friend, Regina, and her kid, Henry.”

Mulan glances at Regina for the first time since her arrival and her eyes grow wide. “Oh my God. Regina Mills?”

“Yes?” She’s puzzled, honestly. Has this woman watched her vlogs?

“You’re my best friend’s nemesis,” Mulan says. She’s grinning now and, with a flash of recognition, Regina knows where she’s seen her. She was at the bar with Emma the night before. She squeezes her eyes shut.

Henry looks up from his book. “Mom, I can’t believe you lied,” he says, shaking his head in mock disappointment. “Way to role model.”

“I don’t have a nemesis,” Regina insists, though her voice is not convincing, even to herself.

Mulan sits in the row in front of them, twisting around in order to keep talking. “You totally do,” she says. “Emma’s been alternating between sulking and raging for the past few weeks over this whole feud.”
“Regina’s mostly just been raging,” Marian says and Regina kicks her ankle. She yelps.

“For what it’s worth,” Mulan says. “I think your videos are great.”

“Thank you,” Regina says. “Is Ms Swan here today?”

“She’s speaking in this event,” Mulan says and Regina feels nausea rise. Sure enough a group of women make their way onto the stage, Emma Swan amongst them.

“Mom,” Henry says, putting down his book and nudging her. “Isn’t that the woman from the deli? You know, the one you liked.”

“I don’t know where you get these absurd ideas, mijo,” Regina says loftily and Marian snickers.

“Which one’s Mom’s nemesis?” Henry asks Mulan.

“The blonde on the left,” Mulan says and Henry swivels, looking at Regina.

“Mom!” he says. “Wait, did you flirt with your nemesis? This is so like Batman and Catwoman.”

“Tread carefully, Henry Mills,” Regina says. “Because if I find out that I am Batman in this scenario I will disown you.”

Marian laughs. “Emma’s the blonde one, Regina. Suck it up.”

“I hate everyone here,” Regina says darkly. Roland looks over at her and pouts. “Except you,” she adds, running a hand through his curls. “Roland is my only friend. The rest of you — dead to me.” She kisses Henry’s forehead because even though she knows he knows she’s joking, she can’t help the fear bubbling up inside of her that he might take her seriously.

“Ew,” Henry says, rubbing his forehead free of lipstick and returning to his book. The room quietens and the panel begins.
She finds it hard to concentrate on what is being said, not helped by the most vocal of the women being the most obnoxious. She hates the Girl Power Sisters (because she can’t remember their channel name and that’s kind of how they behave) with their basic feminism and weird braid obsession.

The question about safety for women in vlogging is posed by the moderate and Emma manages to speak first. “I think we have to be really careful,” she says, “about who we let become powerful in the community. I think every woman on the panel has had more creepy comments than they can count from predatory men. We need to speak out when people — when men — are making the community unsafe.”

At that point, one of the sisters interrupts. “I totally agree,” she says, and tugs at a ginger braid. “But, like, it’s important to have proof. We don’t want to just accuse people.” Her sister nods from beside her, and the moderator moves on. She notices Emma frown at this.

She hopes to make a speedy exit from the panel but Marian is chatting to Mulan again, flirting in the most blatant possible way, and she doesn’t have the heart to drag her away. So when Emma Swan makes her way over to her friend, Regina and Henry are still there.

“Please tell me your friend isn’t the dreamy social worker Mulan’s been mooning over for the past few weeks?” Emma asks, her breath warm on Regina’s cheek. She shivers at the ghosted breath.

“Afraid so,” she says. “Boston is too small.”

“Hey, kid,” Emma says. “Henry right?”

Henry nods. “And you must be Mom’s nemesis,” he says and then hums the Batman theme tune. Regina covers his mouth with her hand and he licks her palm.

Emma raises her eyebrows at Regina. “Aw, you’ve talked about me,” she says. “Cute.”

“Don’t flatter yourself, dear,” she replies and can only hope that the warmth she feels spreading to her cheeks isn’t visible. “I take it from the beginning of your answer before you were interrupted by the Girl Power Sisters that you also received the less-than-satisfying email.”
Emma snorts at the name. “Anna and Elsa are all right really,” she says. Then, she adds in a more serious tone, “I saw Belle before. She’s okay, I think, but doesn’t want to lay a complaint.”

Regina sighs. “Can we not just expose him? Post a video?”

Emma frowns at that. “He’s too well liked. There’d be backlash. Particularly since…” She blushes scarlet. “Well, let’s just say, we’ll need some evidence for me to be credible.”

There’s a curious feeling in the pit of Regina’s stomach at the word ‘we’. One email does not make a team. She does not want to work together with Emma Swan. Honestly, she would be quite content if their paths never crossed again. It seems, however, that the universe has another plan in store for them. “Perhaps this is not the place for such a discussion?” she says, because Henry is clearly interested. She is about to suggest she will email Emma.

However, Henry pipes up. “You should come over for dinner,” he says. “I’ll do my homework and you can plan your operation.”

“Henry,” Regina says.

“What?” he asks. “You’re doing an investigation, right?” He looks up at her too innocently, eyes wide.

Regina curses being a good mother and reading her son ‘Harriet the Spy’ over the summer. Perhaps if she’d let him watch more television his mind would be numbed and he wouldn’t pick up on the conversation being held — or care for that matter. “Henry, you can’t just invite people…”

“It’s okay,” Emma says, interrupting. “I can just, like, email you.”

Henry scowls. “Mom,” he says, whining. “You’re being rude.”

“Henry,” she says, mimicking his petulant tone. “Until you can cook dinner yourself, you don’t get to invite guests without my permission.”

They have acquired an audience. Marian and Mulan are watching the three of them. Mulan’s lips
are quirked at the corner and Marian is outright grinning. “For God’s sake, Regina,” she says. “It’s one dinner. It’s not a proposal of marriage.”

She huffs. “Fine. Ms Swan. Dinner tomorrow night. We will discuss strategy.”

Emma looks between Henry who is nodding and grinning, and Regina who can feel the scowl etched into her forehead intensifying by the second. “I don’t want to impose,” she says, shoving her hands into the pockets of her jeans, looking up hopefully at Regina from beneath thick lashes.

“Don’t be indecisive, Ms Swan,” Regina says. “It doesn’t suit you.”

“Fine,” Emma says, and she juts out her chin defiantly. “Dinner sounds great.”

“I’ll email you our address,” she says. “Seven o’clock. Don’t be late.”

“I’ll get Mom to make lasagna,” Henry whispers loudly to Emma. “She makes the best lasagna.”

“You’ll be lucky if I ever make you lasagna again, mijo,” Regina says after she manages to drag Marian away from Mulan.

This whole affair is going to be excruciating.
In which Emma goes to dinner (and Regina gains some petty revenge)

Emma (@Swanprincess): That feeling when you have to do something you REALLY don ’t want to.

Emma (@Swanprincess): I hope y ’all are grateful I’m taking one for the team here.

Emma (@Swanprincess): Also, why do people keep saying I have a nemesis? My life is not a graphic novel.

Mulan and 5 others favourited your tweet.

Emma (@Swanprincess): Help! I don ’t know what wine is good. Having a nervous breakdown in the bottle store.

― A selection of Tweets by Emma Swan, on Sunday afternoon

“Well,” Emma says, turning to Mulan as they watch Regina stride away, hand tucked into Henry’s, as Marian and Roland amble along behind. “This is going to be a disaster.”

“What?” Mulan asks. There’s a dreamy look on her face, one that speaks of too many minutes talking to the woman she is crushing on worse than a thirteen-year-old girl. “Don’t jinx me.”

“Oh, not you and Marian,” Emma says. “She seems lovely and normal and not at all over the top about seeking revenge for perceived slights. I’m having dinner with Regina tomorrow.”

“Are you now?” Mulan asks and she grins, waggling her eyebrows, so Emma throws her balled-up sweatshirt at her.

“People who have debilitating crushes on their teachers should not throw stones,” she says.

“She is not my teacher,” Mulan says, horror etched into every line of her face. “Oh my God, Emma!” Emma cackles but then spots Killian, surrounded by a crowd of teenage girls and her mirth disappears in an effort to remain hidden from him. She cannot deal with speaking to him today.

Still, Mulan’s teasing plays on her mind the next day as she’s walking around to Regina’s home. She finds herself nervous. She knows at some point in this investigation — or operation as Henry called it yesterday — she's going to have to admit to sleeping with Killian. She can picture the disgust on Regina’s face, can picture her laughing and throwing her out of her home. She spent
yesterday evening watching all of Regina Mills’ YouTube videos and, God, it kills her that she’s actually kind of cool. The stuff she talks about, it’s funny and dorky and sometimes really important. She speaks about adoption and being a single mom and racial micro-aggressions and feminism, and she’s funny, in a snarky, rude sort of way. Marian’s in the occasional video — one where Regina interviews her about being a self-described ‘slow blooming lesbian’ — and even Henry makes brief, blurred appearances, either asking questions or running through the frame when Regina’s speaking.

She turns onto Mifflin Street, and finds herself in front of a row of narrow, semi-detached houses. Something about Regina Mills made her think she’d be the sort to live in a mansion; she exudes wealth, from her accent to her clothing. She’d dressed up because of that, found a skirt at the back of her wardrobe and a pair of stockings with no visible runs in them. 108 Mifflin Street is astonishingly ordinary, and something in that gives her courage. She takes a deep breath and knocks at the front door.

There’s thumping footsteps and then the door swings open, Henry standing behind the screen. He grins. “It’s Emma, Mom,” he yells. “Can I let her in?”

Regina enters the hall, a tea towel in her hands. She’s obscured by the dim light and the screen. “If it was a robber or a murderer at the door, do you think a screen would stop him, mijo?” she asks. “You wait for me before any doors are opened.”

“You couldn’t stop a murderer either,” Henry retorts and Emma gets the feeling they’ve had this conversation often.

“I would glare at him so fiercely, he would run in the other direction.”

Emma can’t help but laugh at that and Regina seems to realise that she’s still outside, so she reaches forward and unlocks the screen door. “Come in, Ms Swan,” she says.

Emma enters, standing awkwardly in the hall. Both Regina and Henry are barefoot, so she bends down to unlace her boots, regretting her footwear choice already, and lines them up against the wall. Regina seems the sort to want things anal retentively neat and tidy. She then thrusts a paper bag at Regina. “Wine,” she says. “I hope you don’t mind shiraz.” It had, in fact, taken her a good twenty minutes in the liquor store, roaming the aisles and trying desperately to dull the panic rising in her to choose what she hopes is an acceptable bottle of wine because she gets the feeling Regina Mills is a snob about such things.

“Thank you,” Regina says. “Henry, why don’t you show Ms Swan into the living room while I finish dinner?” She stalks off without waiting for an answer, leaving Emma to hang her jacket up
on the hooks by the door.

Henry shrugs at her. “C’mon,” he says and the next thing she knows, his fingers are laced through hers and he’s dragging her down the hall. “This is the living room,” he says, opening the door. It’s a warm room, painted terracotta, wooden slat blinds drawn down and furnished with an age-worn couch and a colourful, patterned rug covering most of the floor. A doorway at the other end appears to lead into the kitchen. Instead of trying to catch a glimpse of Regina as she cooks, she turns her attention back to the living room, walking over to an entire wall lined with books.

“Who’s the comic book fan?” Emma asks, nodding at the bookshelf, which has two long shelves dedicated to comic books.


“Of course she does,” Emma says. “I used to read Captain America when I was a kid.” She’d had a foster family when she was about Henry’s age, one of the good ones, where the dad was really into comics and he’d let her read to her heart’s content. She’d been so careful with them, turning the pages carefully at the corners, never eating or drinking anything while she read, always returning them to their place on the shelf when she’d finished reading…

“I like the Bat family too,” he says. And then he changes the subject. “I’m reading ‘Percy Jackson’ at the moment. They’re really cool. Have you read them?”

She shakes her head, fingers strumming along the spines of the books on his shelf. She can see the cracks in the spines, well loved, and everything about this room speaks of how much Regina cares for her little family. There are framed photos on the bookshelves, mostly of Henry at various stages in his life. Henry’s nattering away about the books, something about Greek gods and a girl called Annabeth and how his mom says that her favourite character is in the sequel series. “They’re heaps longer,” he says. “I’m only onto the second book.”

She pauses at a photo of Regina and Henry. This one isn’t framed, just tucked into the frame of one of Henry’s posed school photos (solemn face and neatly combed hair), and she thinks that’s because it’s a little blurry, and with someone’s thumb marring the edge of the shot. But it shows Regina with Henry; she’s laughing and he has his face painted like a cat and Regina has a butterfly painted on her cheek, and Emma feels this inexpressible longing. God, to have had even *one* parent who wanted her that much. She would have given the world for that. “That was a good day,” Henry says, coming up beside her and she realises she has the photo clutched in her hands. “There was a street carnival.”
“Cool,” she says, and she’s horrified to discover her voice is a little husky, words coming out cracked. “I might see if your mom needs any help.”

“Don’t poison dinner,” Henry says, returning to the rug and his Lego. “I know you’re her nemesis but I’m really hungry.”

She snorts. Standing in the door frame to the kitchen, she watches Regina for a moment. She stirs something in a pot on the stove, dips a teaspoon into the mixture and tastes, pink tongue dipping out. Emma forgets for a moment that she’s supposed to dislike this woman — that she does dislike this woman, she corrects internally — and simply admires the way the fabric of her slacks clings to her form, and the curl and bounce of her dark hair. She’d expected Regina to dress up for this dinner, to intimidate, but instead she is casual and relaxed on her home turf, making Emma feel like a child pressed and polished in her Sunday best. “Anything I can do to help?” she asks, leaning against the door frame and resisting the urge to adjust her tights.

“No,” Regina says shortly. Then, “actually, you could pour the wine.” It’s begrudging, but she’s setting the table and checking the food simultaneously and Emma feels a brief sense of triumph in Regina needing her, even for something so stupid.

Emma notes that her bottle of shiraz has disappeared elsewhere and a bottle of pinot noir has taken its place. She tries hard not to feel offended. She didn’t know what Regina was cooking, after all. Her wine mustn’t suit the meal. Surely Regina wouldn’t be so petty as to bring out a different bottle out of spite. She pours a healthy glass for herself and for Regina. She gets the feeling they’re going to need it. The silence of the kitchen is heady with tension and she’s relieved when Henry runs in. “I’m so hungry I could die,” he declares and Regina laughs, running fingers through his hair. She’s so tactile with him.

“Well, we can’t have that,” Regina says, spooning rice into bowls. “Milk or water?”

“Milk,” he says, grabbing a glass from the table and pouring himself a tumbler-full, slowly and very carefully. Emma sits across from him at the kitchen table, sipping wine.


“This looks amazing,” she says, smiling appreciatively at Regina, whose lips pinch.

“Mom’s the best cook,” Henry says, grabbing a piece of crusty bread from a platter, before offering it to Emma.
“Well,” Regina says, settling down across from her. “I suggest we eat before it gets cold.”

The gumbo smells delicious and Emma had been too nervous to eat much earlier that day so she takes a hearty bite. She almost immediately realises her mistake. The gumbo is hot. Not ‘straight from the stove top’ hot, but spicy, the combination of cayenne pepper and spicy chorizo overwhelming her senses. Her face warms and she can feel tears well in her eyes. Then, she notices Regina is watching her a little too carefully as she eats a delicate mouthful and she realises Regina has done this deliberately.

Emma’s competitive instinct kicks in and she swallows. “Delicious,” she says and takes another large bite and then another. She can feel beads of sweat attack her hairline and her eyes are welling with tears. She can’t feel her tongue.

“Are you okay, Emma?” Henry asks. “You’ve gone really red.”

Regina is smiling a practised, politician’s smirk. “Yes, Ms Swan,” she says. “Are you quite well?”

“I’m fine,” Emma chokes out. She takes a sip of wine. It doesn’t help. Henry’s milk is looking extremely appealing now. She hiccups twice.

“You don’t usually make gumbo with spicy sausage,” Henry says. “I like it.”

Emma scowls at Regina, who beams back at her. “We have a guest,” she says. “I thought I’d go all out.”

Emma uses a slice of bread to wipe up the remains of the gumbo and rice at the bottom of her bowl and it’s tragic how proud she feels of herself of having conquered the gumbo. She will not allow Regina to win this battle. “That was great,” she says. She can still taste the heat in her mouth and has to actively resist the urge to pant. She forces herself to breathe slowly, deep, even breaths through her mouth.

“Seconds?” Regina asks. “There’s plenty left.” She raises an eyebrow, challenging.

_I will not rise to the bait_, Emma chants internally. _I am a grown up. I can say no._ “Yes, thank
“You,” she says and she doesn’t miss the look in Regina’s eyes, a strange combination of triumph and respect. “That would be wonderful.”

After her second helping, she waits an appropriate amount of time, asks politely where the bathroom is, and, when safely ensconced in the bathroom, throws up twice. She returns to the kitchen to find Regina scooping the remains of the gumbo into a Tupperware container and Henry loading the dishwasher. “Could you grab me the milk?” Regina asks. Emma passes it to her automatically, before sitting, clutching her empty wine glass and watching Regina make hot chocolate on the stove top. She winces when she sees her sprinkle a liberal serving of ground chili into the mixture. “Henry, the cookies,” she says and Henry grabs a stool, clambering up and pulling down a cookie jar.

“Mom made chocolate chip cookies,” he says, putting a couple on a saucer. “Can I eat at my desk?”

Regina nods and Henry balances a mug and the saucer carefully, disappearing from the kitchen. Regina places a mug in front of Emma, before settling down across from her at the kitchen table. Emma’s tentative with her first taste of the hot chocolate, but it’s not so bad, even with her queasy stomach. “Did you vomit?” Regina asks.


Regina laughs. “Got to get my kicks where I can.” She dips a cookie into her mug and takes a bite, a crumb sticking to her lipstick. “Besides which, I am apparently your nemesis.”

“You spat in my hot chocolate, didn’t you?” Emma asks, resigned, though she takes another sip regardless.

“Don’t be crass, Ms Swan,” Regina says, though she smiles into her mug, which reads Number One Mom along the side in childish writing. “So, have you spoken with Belle any further?”

Emma’s surprised because for a moment she’d forgotten the reason for dinner. “She won’t return my texts,” she says. “She can’t be the only one who has had … issues with Jones though. I know he was making skeevy comments…”

“On TheSeaWitch’s page?” Regina nods. “I reported them. Did you know she’s only seventeen?”
Emma nods. “We might need to do some investigating,” she says. “I’ll share the doc with you that I made with some thoughts. I also thought perhaps a vlog about keeping yourself safe? Letting people know that we’re there for them if anyone in the community is despicable?”

“Us making a vlog? Together?” Regina laughs, deep and throaty, a sound that seeps into Emma’s very bones and makes her squirm.

“It was just an idea,” she says, faintly embarrassed.

“No,” Regina says. “I suppose it could work. It would have to go on your channel though,” she adds begrudgingly. “More traffic.” Emma tries — and fails — not to feel smug.

“I’ll write an outline,” she says. “We could film next weekend if you’re free?”

Regina nods and they sit in quiet that almost feels companionable, the dishwasher whirring the only sound. It’s pleasant; Emma wonders for a moment what things could be like had the deli been their first proper meeting. Would Regina have called her? Would this be an entirely different dinner? One where they sat curled on the couch rather than with several feet between them at a kitchen table? Dinner that wasn’t a competition? Chocolate-y kisses and promises of something more?

Regina tucks a strand of hair back behind her ear, baring her neck, and cocks her head to the side, stretching. “So you said something about needing evidence to be credible…”

So they’re going there. She feels her skin flush and looks down into the dregs of her hot chocolate. “Last year,” she says, breaking a cookie in half and crumbling it into her mug. “I made an inadvisable decision after the meet-up.”

She looks up, meeting Regina’s gaze. She’s surprised to see a grimace mar her features before she scoffs and raises an eyebrow. “You didn’t? With that cretin?”

“Not my proudest moment,” Emma says.

“Oh, Ms Swan,” Regina says, shaking her head.
“I have much better taste in women,” Emma blurts out and then freezes. Her face feels like she’s pressed up against a furnace and she wonders if spontaneous combustion is an actual, real thing because she wouldn’t be opposed to it happening right now if it meant she could end this whole hideous conversation.

Regina laughs. “Forgive me if I don’t believe you,” she says and glances at the clock on the wall. “It’s past Henry’s bedtime,” she says and Emma stands.

“Well, this has been a suitably humiliating evening on all counts,” she says and lets Regina lead her to the hall. She sits on the staircase to do up her boots and tries not to fumble the laces as Regina watches her, a curious expression on her face. When she stands, she realises they’re a hair too close, and she can smell an intoxicating array of scents on Regina’s skin, hints of cinnamon and chocolate and cayenne. The hall light is dim and shadows bounce off Regina’s skin and a lock of hair falls across her face and Emma has never been more conscious of her own breathing.

“We’ve all made mistakes,” Regina says and she reaches out and touches Emma’s arm. “I honestly didn’t intend to shame you for that.”

“Just for my inability to handle spice,” Emma jokes and the wall of tension between them shatters.

“I never claimed not to be petty,” Regina says, agreeing. “Next weekend?” she asks. “I’ll email you.”

Emma nods and steps into the frigid air. When she looks back, she can see Regina’s silhouette framed in the light from the doorway. She checks her phone and sees a message from Mulan. 

Disaster?

As she walks away, she types a reply. About a 4 on the disaster scale.

Not so terrible then, is Mulan’s response and Emma can’t help but agree.
In which the greater good is considered (and denial is not just a river in Egypt)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

FrozenSistas: Girl power!

UD1269: NGL I ship it.

LuisaC: It’s great to see women supporting each other in our community. I’m glad you seem to be over your feud.

CptnHook: Love the (lack of) pants, Swan.

TheSeaWitch: Offering my support to this. Come at me, dick weasels.

— A selection of comments on swanprincess’ video entitled ‘Burying the Hatchet for the Greater Good’

Henry is in bed, though sitting up and reading, when she makes her way upstairs. “Is Emma gone?” he asks. She takes the book from his hand, setting it on the bedside table, and he immediately slumps down in the bed, burrowing beneath the covers.

“Yes, miño,” she says. She sits beside him, her hand rubbing up and down his leg above the blankets.

“That was funny,” he says, voice slurred with sleep. “With the gumbo.”

“I’m glad you think so,” she says. Emma had taken it well — or so badly she supposed, remembering the vomiting, it had actually impressed her. Henry was used to spicy food, Regina refusing to coddle his tastebuds, and she feels as though, if he can handle heat at eight, a grown woman deserves what’s coming to her. “Good night, darling,” she says and presses a kiss to his forehead. “Te quiero.”

He wriggles. “Love you too,” is mumbled, and she smiles as she turns out his light and closes the door.

The week passes in its usual way. She works, she comes home, she spends time with Henry, she drinks wine with Marian, who is practically having a nervous breakdown about this Mulan woman. “What if she thinks it’s grossly unprofessional to ask her for coffee?” she asks. “I wasn’t her teacher exactly, but it’s on that creepy border. Oh God, am I that seedy, desperate professor
who preys on younger students? Am I a literary fiction cliche?"

“You’re not actually a professor,” Regina feels the need to point out.

“I’ll end up on some reality show about predators,” Marian, who is spiraling out of control, says. She downs the rest of her wine — Emma’s shiraz that Regina had refused to serve with dinner in a fit of pique actually and it’s surprisingly decent — in one gulp.

“You are so uncool,” Regina says. “I don’t know why I spend time with you.”

She emails Emma Swan on Wednesday. Is Friday night still suitable? Or do you have some drunken licentiousness to attend to?

Emma responds with ‘ha ha ha’ and Regina smirks. Her phone beeps a moment later with a second email.

*I’ll only give up my plans for drunken debauchery if your friend asks mine out soon. Mulan’s one swig of gin away from a crying jag and she never cries. She’s started talking about emigrating.*

Marian is delighted when she hears this — and when Regina offers herself up as a babysitter for Roland whenever Marian gets her act together. “You know,” she says, sly smile practically audible over the phone. “I can take Henry if you need some alone time on Friday night.”

“Why on earth would I want to be alone with Emma Swan?” Regina asks, though she is grateful that they are speaking over the phone. Some rather graphic images flash through her mind — glimpses of naked curves, of a wide mouth gasping in ecstasy, of hands clenched in bedsheets so tight the knuckles are blanched white (because she didn’t always think of Emma as the idiot nemesis and some imaginings are difficult to shake loose) — rendering her cheeks a rather unflattering dappled scarlet, and Marian so doesn’t need any more mileage.

“You’re blushing, aren’t you?” Marian says and Regina hangs up on her, reflecting that that action was rather more satisfactory in the halcyon days of handsets.

Soon enough it’s Friday. Regina leaves work early, picking Henry up from school and stopping by the supermarket where she buys expensive fresh pasta and tomatoes and several different cheeses. “Lasagne?” Henry asks and he beams at her. “I knew you liked her.”
“It’s an easy meal,” she says and places the bag of Maltesers Henry has sneaked into the trolley back on the shelf.

Henry raises his eyebrows dubiously but says nothing. At home, he retires to his room to do homework and she settles into cooking, putting the lasagne together with what she tries to tell herself is the usual level of care for presentation. When she hears the knock at the door, she reaches it before Henry has a chance to. The screen is unlatched and swings open with the door. “What if I were a murderer?” Emma asks and Regina scowls at her. “Okay,” she adds. “You’re right. That would send even the most hardened criminal running for their life.”

She steps aside and Emma enters. As she brushes past her, Regina catches a waft of coffee and sweat and she notices that Emma is wearing a ratty pair of chucks and that her jeans have flour on one knee. “So casual so soon?” she asks, as Emma kicks off her shoes. “Last week you wore pantyhose.” She’d noticed the effort, and appreciated it. This week, Regina has not yet changed from her work clothes — a pencil skirt and blouse — though she freshened up her makeup. She’s been trying to tell herself that this is a laziness thing, not born from the knowledge that business attire is a good look for her.

“Came straight from work,” Emma says, using her left foot to straighten up her shoes by the door. Her socks have pandas on them and Regina doesn’t know why she finds this unspeakably adorable.

“Well, you definitely must be due a drink,” she says and leads Emma in. This time, instead of relegating Emma to Henry, she guides her with a hand hovering at the small of her back into the kitchen, settling her at the table and handing her a glass of red. “Henry’s doing his homework.”

“On a Friday night?” Emma asks. “Taskmaster.” She takes a sip of wine and Regina certainly does not watch the curve and movement of her neck and throat as she swallows, nor does she care for the low grumble of pleasure at the taste.

“His choice,” she says, defensive. “He has soccer and then a sleepover on Saturday night.” She leans against the bench, taking a sip of her own wine.

Emma frowns. “I was kidding,” she says. “You don’t need to defend yourself to me. It’s pretty obvious you’re a great mom.”

The faint praise shouldn’t have Regina’s mouth stretching into such a wide grin, shouldn’t have her so flustered she drops the tongs with a clatter to the floor. She bends down, taking a moment
to compose herself. It’s so rare to have her parenting praised; the only time her parenting is discussed is as a critique — Cora and her false concern for Henry’s welfare, Henry’s teacher’s worries about his isolation in grade one (“is there something going on at home?” he’d asked), Marian lashing out… “Yes, well,” she says, when she straightens up, brushing at her skirt to smooth it.

“Trust me,” Emma says and she’s serious now. “I’ve known enough shit moms to recognise someone doing it right.”

Regina’s caught in her gaze — her eyes wide and intent and very, very green — and time seems like sludge, thickening and twisting around her. It’s ridiculous how much her response is to cry in this moment and she knows her eyes are wet and if Emma says something about that, she’ll have to murder her and having Henry help her hide a body would probably make her a bad mom so that just can’t happen. Emma reaches out a hand as if to touch her and knocks the wine glass from the table, glass shattering over linoleum and red wine splattering over Emma’s jeans.

“Fuck,” Emma hisses, and the moment is lost in Regina cleaning up glass and Emma ineffectually dabbing at her jeans with a tea towel.

“Do you want to borrow pants?” Regina asks when the glass is safely wrapped in newspaper and the floor is clean, and before waiting for a response she grabs Emma’s wrist and drags her upstairs. It’s halfway up the staircase that she realises just how forceful she’s being and drops Emma’s hand abruptly. Her skin feels too tight and she rushes ahead, opening drawers and finding a set of yoga pants. She thrusts them at Emma. “These should fit.”

But Emma is looking at the photograph, framed on her bedside table. “This Henry’s dad?” she asks.

It’s a picture from their wedding day — a hasty affair at city hall, Regina in a blue sun dress and Daniel wearing a tie for the first time in his life. She remembers how he kept tugging at it while they waited, grumbling, “how do people wear these nooses every day?” and she’d just laughed, buoyed up by the pure joy of marrying the love of her life, two years into college, because Daniel hadn’t wanted to wait any longer. “I love you, Mills,” he’d said. “That’s never changing.” She’d been charmed by it, by him.

“Yes,” she says shortly. It’s astonishing how the wounds are still fresh even after so much time, even after eight years.

“He looks nice,” Emma says, and there’s something strangely wistful in her tone.
“Bathroom’s next door,” Regina says and leaves, returning to the kitchen, where she centres herself by steaming vegetables — cauliflower, broccoli, baby carrots (which are Henry’s favourites because of their resemblance to fingers).

Emma returns, settling down at the table, and she laughs when she sees that Regina has poured her a fresh glass of wine in one of Henry’s old sippy cups. “Bumped into the kid,” she says, sipping red wine through the straw. “He was just washing up. What can I do to help?”

“You’ve already broken one wine glass,” Regina says. ”I think that’s enough to be going on with.” She takes the lasagne from the oven, setting it to cool on the bench. “I read the outline,” she says. “Looks good.”

“Yeah?” Emma beams, that sweet puppy dog smile that reminds her — rather bizarrely — of Henry. “Cool.”

“Cool,” Regina echoes. The air between them is fraught with tension and she’s not sure how to handle this situation in a positive, non-evil-queen-ish way. She is reminded of Marian’s insinuations, which are, of course, utterly ridiculous.

And yet…

Henry interrupts and she plates lasagne and greens. Emma digs in tentatively this time, biting off a tiny corner and Regina fights to suppress a chuckle. “This is amazing,” she says. “Sometimes lasagne’s really bland…”

She resists the urge to make a snarky comment about Emma’s supposed liking for bland food. “Red pepper flakes,” she says instead. “Gives it that extra kick.”

Emma laughs. There’s a fleck of sauce at the corner of her mouth and Regina has to stop herself from wiping it away. Tonight has been all about resistance, it seems. Emma’s contribution to dinner is large, gooey slices of chocolate cake. “From the deli,” she says and smiles and Regina just knows she’s remembering that day at the deli, when they were just two women flirting over hot chocolate and salad. Her eyes soften and Henry grabs ice cream from the freezer, stretching onto his tiptoes to reach it.

He voluntarily returns to his room after dinner, an impulse she suspects is born less from a desire
to do homework and more from the fact that he’s into the third ‘Percy Jackson’ book. Regina looks forward to him being up to the sequel series because she has this sneaky feeling that he’ll love Leo Valdez.

(He’s a Reyna girl through and through. Puerto Rican, with a name that means queen and feeling like she is cursed to be unloved, there had never been much of a contest really.)

She and Emma retire to her study, where Regina busies herself, pouring cider and settling in at her desk. “So this is where you normally film, right?” Emma says, glass in hand and scanning the wall of books. The yoga pants stretch tight across her buttocks and the slight height advantage of which Regina is so conscious meaning that the pants are too short.

“You watched my videos?” Regina asks.

“Yeah,” Emma says. “They’re important.” She can’t quite fathom Emma — who is somewhat glib and frivolous — watching EvilQueen101 and she finds she is not entirely opposed to the idea.

“Yes, well,” she says and is grateful for the dim light of the study. “I suppose you could pull a chair around.”

“We need to marry up our styles somehow,” Emma says. “I’d never sit at a desk.” She ends up perched on the arm of Regina’s chair — too close really, though it’s not unpleasant precisely, the touch of Emma’s thigh in yoga pants (barely fabric at all really) against her forearm. Emma’s ponytail flicks as she switches on the camera and brushes against Regina’s shoulder. She shivers. “Some of you may be aware of a slight disagreement between the Evil Queen and myself,” Emma says, smiling into the lens.

“Slight,” Regina scoffs and Emma laughs.

“Slight feud to last the ages, slight battle of mutually assured destruction.”

She’s gesturing wildly and Regina genuinely fears for her glass wear as cider threatens to slop out the sides. “Do you need another sippy cup, dear?”

Emma cackles. “Rude.”
“They don’t call me the evil queen for nothing,” she says but she can feel her lips curve into a smile. This is good. This… chemistry. Viewers will like it. Viewers will respond to it. And then perhaps progress can be made.

“Anyway,” Emma says, drawing out the final syllable. “We’ve both heard some stories about the treatment of women at the recent meet up — and before — and we want to do something about it.” She looks over at Regina, worrying her lower lip between her teeth.

“Obviously, we can’t make accusations without proof,” Regina says. “But we want people to know that men preying on women in our community will never be acceptable and we are here to listen — both of us — and to take action where we can.”

“Email us, PM us, send a message by carrier pigeon,” Emma says. She points downwards, presumably gesturing to where she will edit in their contact information.

“Ravens are my messenger bird of choice,” Regina interjects and Emma rolls her eyes.

“Seriously though,” she says and she leans in, her hair ghosting Regina’s face and Regina can smell strawberries. “We want this vlogging community to be a safe space and we don’t want dick weasels like… well, who we suspect, to ruin this.”

“Dick weasels?” Regina mouths, but her lips quirk into a smile and Emma shrugs. “And just a message for any misogynistic dick weasels out there,” Regina says, gratified to hear Emma splutter, trying to disguise her snort as a cough. “If you hurt women, if you continue with your harassment and fan manipulation and non-consensual activities, I will destroy you if it’s the last thing I do.” She deepens her voice, twists her lips into a sneer, glares into the camera. Emma rather ruins the effect by laughing.

“If I can work in harmony with my nemesis, you can be brave and talk to us.” Regina scowls at her (because nemesis, again? She’s only just managed to stop Henry talking in such terms) and shoves her lightly.

Emma, her balance on the arm of the chair precarious as it is, tilts and falls. There’s the sound of breaking glass and muffled, hysterical laughter.

“That’s the second glass she’s broken tonight,” Regina says, sighing into the camera, before reaching forward to switch it off. She stands, looking down at Emma who is lying on her back
and still laughing, top hiked up to bare her navel and cheeks pink. “Well, she says. “That was a bit rough but with some editing…” She holds out a hand to haul her up but Emma’s grip is surprisingly strong and instead Regina is pulled down, ending up on top of her. Her knee nudges Emma’s groin and hand gropes her left breast as she lands.

“Oof,” Emma grunts in pain. “Didn’t think that through,” but her eyes glint with merriment and she seems to be struggling with a desire to laugh.

Silence. Regina becomes remarkably aware of her own breathing, of the lock of hair falling across her forehead, of the warm breath from Emma’s mouth ghosting her skin.

“Oh,” Emma says and she realises that she hasn’t moved and therefore her hand is still cupping Emma’s breast, soft flesh warm and electric beneath her palm.

She rolls off her and stands hastily. “My apologies.” She doesn’t wait for a response, rushing to the kitchen and pulling the brush and shovel from beneath the sink. Leaning against the bench, she draws in one breath and then another, trying desperately to steady herself.

Emma must have followed her and she stands with her hands in her jacket pockets in the doorway. “So, I’ll take the footage home,” she says. Regina just nods, moving to the sink where the lasagne dish soaks. “Should we…”

“I think I’ve spent quite enough time on this project for one evening,” Regina says with a degree of finality in her voice, speech clipped. She doesn’t look across at Emma, instead scrubbing at a tiny speck of grime on the dish, picking at it with her thumb nail.

But Emma stays. “Hey, would you want to get a coffee sometime?” she asks and there’s a horrible vulnerability in her voice.

“I hardly see how that would help the investigation.”

“No.” She shuffles. “Like, as friends maybe.”

“We’re not friends, Ms Swan.” She doesn’t have to look to see the tightening of Emma’s jaw, the thinning of her lips. Doesn’t have to look up to know that Emma has believed her, has heard the truth in her words. They aren’t friends. Friends don’t have to deal with this inexplicable pull between loathing and lust — and something softer, undefined.
“Fine,” she hisses. “I’ll email you if there’s any new developments.”

“See that you do,” Regina says, scrubbing at the now entirely scoured clean lasagne dish. “You can find your own way out, yes?”

“Great,” Emma says. “Cheers for dinner, your majesty.”

It would seem to be impossible for someone in panda socks to stomp and yet somehow Emma manages it, her footsteps loud and heavy as she stomps out of the kitchen. When Regina hears the front door slam, she returns to her study, hands shaking as she clears up the glass.

Chapter End Notes

So, thank you heaps for your support with this story. Updates might be a little sporadic for the next few weeks because I am leaving the country in five days for two weeks and, while I will probably write when I am bored at airports or on public transport, I don't want to promise anything I can't deliver, given the next chapter is ten words on a piece of leftover exam paper.
In which Emma makes some inroads (and falls deeper)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Emma (@Swanprincess): Ugh, so didn’t need to see my roommate’s bare ass.

Emma (@Swanprincess): That was just the cherry on top of a banner day.


Emma (@Swanprincess): @EvilQueen101 video’s up.

Emma (@Swanprincess): @LittleRed1984 DM’d you.

Emma (@Swanprincess): @EllaDeVil Not comfortable discussing in public. DM me?

— A selection of Tweets by Emma Swan, on Friday evening and Saturday morning.

“She’s a monster,” Emma says, calling Mulan as she storms off down the street. The air is cold and she holds her phone between shoulder and ear as she zips up her jacket and shoves her hands into gloves. Regina’s street is a quiet one, but there’s a party going on up the road, the music thumping and muffled voices filling the air.

Mulan groans. “Emma, I was sleeping.” Too late, Emma remembers that Mulan starts at six on Saturdays, coaching a girls’ football team at one of the local high schools. Her best friend has always been cranky with anything less than ten hours sleep. She winces, but she’s had a couple of glasses of wine and that rather potent cider and her need to whine overrides her care for Mulan.

“You can sleep any time,” she says. “I’m upset. I need my best friend. Regina was awful to me.”

“You’ve got a crush,” Mulan says, sighing. “You’ve got a hideous, childish crush on a girl and you keep pulling her pigtails and acting surprised when she doesn’t like it.”

Emma scowls. “I don’t have a crush and that is so not what happened.”

“I actually don’t care right now,” Mulan says.

Emma knows she’s woken Mulan, knows that she’s in the wrong and that her best friend has the right to be cranky, but she’s still angry and it makes her vicious. “And how’s your teacher?”
Mulan hangs up on her and Emma stomps the rest of the way home, where she takes three tries to unlock the front door to her apartment building, and gets yelled at by her downstairs neighbour for making too much noise on the stairs. She opens her apartment door only to encounter Tamara and Lance making out on the couch. “Ugh,” she mutters at the view of far too much of her roommate’s thighs and butt. “Gross.”

“Someone didn’t get any from their cute YouTube nemesis,” Tamara calls after her, as she storms into her room, slamming the door with a satisfying thud and collapsing on the bed. She allows herself a solid fifteen minutes of sulking before she boots up her laptop and edits the footage she’s taken from Regina into something vaguely resembling a video. Mulan would do a better job but she wants to post the video now, get it done, and hopefully never have to deal with Regina Mills again beyond professional responsibilities.

It’s a good vlog, which irritates her even more. They have this chemistry, riffing off each other perfectly, inhabiting roles that come so very naturally to them, and she is furious all over again because apparently, despite the fact that they gel like this, she’s not worth anything to Regina. Well, fuck her.

“I don’t even care,” she mutters and uploads the file, tweeting a link and tagging EvilQueen101 (whose Twitter account is just links to her vlogs because, honestly, Regina Mills is pretty terrible at social media). She falls asleep with her laptop open on the bed beside her.

She wakes up to more notifications than she can even deal with and a text from Mulan. Nice work, asshole. She smiles despite herself; she doesn’t like to admit it but Mulan’s opinion means more to her than pretty much anyone’s. After replying with a pretty grovelling apology for the previous night’s temper tantrum, she scrolls through the rest of her messages and comments; no names are named in the comments, but she’s had a couple of DMs asking her if she’s talking about Killian. She suspects they’re just after gossip and doesn’t reply, letting the comments sit. She’ll deal with them later.

She has a rare weekend off work and she’s trying to concentrate on an assignment when she gets a message from one of her followers — a girl who calls herself ‘uglyducklingfolife’, a username about which Emma is kind of amazingly embarrassed. Apparently Killian Jones is filming at The Rabbit Hole tonight and my friend reckons he’s being a sleaze.

A chance for action! She grins, grabbing her jacket and stuffing her feet into boots. It is not until she’s at the T station, waiting for the perpetually late Green line, that she realises she should probably let Regina know what’s going on. She doesn’t want to, doesn’t want to communicate with her at all, possibly ever. But she promised. Regina’s in on this.
Oh well. It’s not like Regina will come down to the club. She has Henry. She can’t run out at the last minute on a Saturday evening, like Emma can. She texts her and, relieved that she has done her duty, she jumps on the on coming train and thinks nothing more of it. Until she arrives at the Rabbit Hole and finds Regina leaning against a car, trench coat wrapped tight around herself and feet in stilettos. For one mad moment she contemplates ignoring her, contemplates going into the bar by herself, but one look at Regina’s face, lit by the dim glow of a street lamp, tells her that would be a bad move. “Where’s the kid?” she asks, scuffing her toe against the pavement.

“Sleepover,” Regina says and Emma experiences some relief in the knowledge that Regina looks as uncomfortable as she feels, arms crossed protectively over her torso and her whole body tensed as though ready to bolt.

“Cool,” Emma says and then stands there like an idiot, just twisting her mouth and staring at the ground.

“I assume you have a game plan here,” Regina says, voice cutting through the thick silence.

“Yeah,” Emma says and reaches for her wallet. “Fuck.”

“What?” Regina snaps.

“I forgot my ID,” Emma says. “They’re hardcore about checking here.” The Rabbit Hole may be a sleazy dive of a bar but it’s a sleazy dive of a bar that’s one citation for under age drinkers off being shut down so they ID everyone.

“Wonderful,” Regina says, voice icy.

“It was an accident, okay?” Emma bites back.

“I don’t know why I’m even surprised,” Regina continues, as though Emma hasn’t spoken. “You get drunk and post videos of your ridiculous exploits on the internet. You’re hardly a role model for responsibility.”

“Hello pot,” Emma says. “Meet my good friend, kettle.” She hums a couple of bars of ‘We are Never Getting Back Together’ and is rewarded with seeing Regina’s cheeks flush almost purple in the glow of the streetlights. “Look,” she adds. “This is salvageable.”
“I don’t see how,” Regina says. She’s shivering and Emma curbs the insane desire to hand over all her warm clothes in an effort to keep her warm. Probably Regina Mills could heat her body with the power of her bitchiness if she wanted to.

She shrugs. “He has to leave sometime.” At Regina’s puzzled look, she adds, “get in your car. I’ll be back in five.” And she runs off down the street, heels of her boots clipping against the pavement, to where she saw a Dunkin’ Donuts. They’re going to need coffee for what comes next, and lots of it.

* 

“So this is a stakeout?” Regina asks, breaking the most awkward silence Emma has ever experienced in her brief time on this planet.

“Yeah,” she says, sipping the remains of her coffee. She wishes, not for the first time that she hadn’t been the most colossal idiot in all creation and forgotten her ID. Instead, they’re sitting in Regina’s Mercedes, parked across the street, drinking coffee and watching the entrance to The Rabbit Hole. Still, she keeps telling herself that he has to leave eventually and, well, if he leaves with one of his adoring fans then they’ll have somewhere to start.

“Pretty dull,” Regina says.

“Yeah,” Emma says again. Silence permeates the car once more. In the gloom, she can just make out Regina’s profile, eyes fixed on the door of the club; her chin juts out stubbornly and she has her hair pulled back into a loose ponytail. Emma wonders what she was doing with her evening alone when she received the text message, wonders whether she was alone with a glass of wine, curled up on the couch with a good book — or watching some trashy TV show she doesn’t want Henry to know about. She wonders if they’ll ever get to the stage where Emma might know these things about Regina, rather than having to guess. She wonders why she is so desperate to form a relationship with someone who 90 percent of the time is such a disagreeable individual.

“You’re staring,” Regina says and Emma looks away quickly, feeling heat rise to her cheeks. “It’s creepy.”

“You’re creepy,” Emma mutters and is rewarded with a delighted snort, cut off before it can become full blown laughter.
Silence again, the only sounds the distant screech of sirens and the muffled noise of patrons leaving The Rabbit Hole. Emma finishes her coffee, putting the takeaway cup in one of the cup holders, feeling like she’s littering in such a pristine vehicle. Her hands, robbed of the warmth offered by the coffee, grow cold and she buries them in her sleeves, wrapping her arms around herself.

“I’m sorry,” Regina says. She speaks quietly but her words echo in the confines of the car.

Emma looks across at her. “I’m—what?”

“You heard me.” Even in the dark, Regina’s discomfort is all too evident, her body tensed and angled away from Emma. “I won’t repeat myself just to satisfy some childish need of yours.”


“I want to try… being friendly?” Regina says, voice ticking up at the end as though she’s not entirely sure that she buys what she’s saying. “I—despite myself, I don’t dislike you.”

“Aw,” Emma says and nestles her head against Regina’s shoulder. She elbows her in the ribs, which makes Emma draw back, wincing. “I like you too.”

“Why?” Regina asks, and she sounds genuinely bewildered.

Emma shrugs. “Dunno. You’re pretty obnoxious all told.”

“I’ve changed my mind,” Regina says. “No friendship for you.”

“Uh-uh,” Emma says. “No take backs.” She’s grinning and when she looks across at Regina she sees the reluctant smile start to spread across her face.

“I—” But Regina stops, staring across to the door of the Rabbit Hole, from where someone has just exited. “Isn’t that Jones?”
Emma recognises the coat and the swagger. He’s not alone, his arm wrapped around someone’s waist. The girl stumbles, tripping in high heeled shoes, and Emma feels her heart race. “She’s drunk,” she says.

Regina starts her car, fingers fumbling with the keys, and follows the pair down the street, turning a corner until they disappear into the subway. “Damn it,” she hisses. “Get out, Swan.”

“Rude,” Emma says, though she leaps out, phone in hand, and heads down the stairs of the station. It’s crowded, people heading home on the last trains for the night, and she’s jostled by drunk idiots as she pushes through crowds, looking for Jones’ tell-tale black leather.

But there are two lines running from the station and she doesn’t even know where Jones lives (when they’d hooked up he’d been out in Somerville but neither train departing from this station goes anywhere near there) and she’s lost them. She kicks at a turnstile, swearing, and is rewarded with a dirty look by an MBTA worker.

Lost him, she types and receives a response moments later.

Idiot. I’m out front.

She returns to the surface and slides back into the passenger seat of the car. Regina eases into traffic without saying a word. She doesn’t listen to music while she’s driving — Emma’s always been unable to drive without background noise — and perhaps that accounts for the oppressive silence that seems to weigh them down, though more likely it’s disappointment. Emma’s self-flagellating, worried about the poor girl with whom Jones absconded, furious they spent so much time and came up with nothing of value. Regina seems flat too, mouth down-turned, hands gripping the steering wheel too tight. When she pulls up outside Emma’s apartment, she keeps the motor running, but Emma doesn’t get out straight away. “Thanks,” she says.

Regina shrugs. “Didn’t help much. Still, we’ll get him eventually. Perhaps Belle will speak out after all — or another girl. I doubt she’s an anomaly.”

Emma finds her hand touches Regina’s arm, grasps hold of her wrist beneath the heavy wool of her coat. “No. I meant for, well, for friends.”

“Let’s not go overboard,” Regina says but she smiles and she doesn’t pull her arm away immediately. “Are you getting out?”
"Yeah," Emma says and opens the door. The car stays, idling at the curb, until Emma has entered the building. As she makes her way up the stairs, Regina’s earlier question pounds through her head. Why? What is it about Regina Mills that has made Emma fight for a friendship she’d normally run a mile from? Emma’s never been one to work at friendship, all too happy to let people float in and out of her life. And yet, here she is practically begging for scraps of friendship with someone who has spent most of their relationship actively loathing her. Besides, the lady has baggage. A dickhead ex-boyfriend, a kid, an evil mother from what her videos have told Emma… Jas would have words with her about this. “It’s too much for you, Em,” she’d say. “You practically leapt out the window when my cousin handed you her baby.”

She falls asleep thinking about Regina and she dreams about them. Though the images are blurred and hazy, shifting from one scene to the next, it’s enough. It’s horrifyingly domestic, waking up curled around Regina, Henry thumping downstairs, a baby, cooing in a crib by her bed. A fireplace, bare skin hot to the touch beneath her fingers, a low, discordant moan of want and longing.

She groans as she wakes to a distant beeping and the stark realisation that she doesn’t want friendship. She just wants.

Fuck. She can’t feel like this. Friendship has to be enough. She bangs her head against the pillow. Mulan’s going to be insufferable.

The beeping continues and she realises it’s her phone ringing. Scrambling for it, she unplugs from the charger and answers it. “What?” Her voice is husky with sleep and she can’t help the irritation that seeps into her tone.

“Is that any way to answer your phone?” Mary Margaret asks, snippy. She can picture her, sitting at the kitchen table with a cup of peppermint tea steaming in front of her, dressed in her Sunday best, about to go to church (or would she have returned from church at this point? She has no idea what time it is). She lived with Mary Margaret long enough to know her routines.

“Sorry, Mom,” Emma says, rolling her eyes. “Maybe don’t call me before noon on a Sunday?”

“Have you been shooting one of your vlogs?” Mary Margaret asks, and Emma can hear the criticism in her friend’s voice.

“Don’t start,” she warns. “I’ll hang up.”
“Fine,” Mary Margaret says, and sighs. “Look, I was calling because Daddy’s in town next weekend and we’re going to this charity function. Fancy clothes. Dancing. We have a spare ticket and he’d love to see you…”

Leo Blanchard has always inexplicably liked Emma, though the feeling hasn’t exactly been mutual. There’s nothing she can point to — and she feels guilty for feeling this way because he’s been incredibly generous to her over the years — but Mary Margaret’s father creeps her out. “Sounds good,” she mumbles and starts to ease herself out of bed, before giving up. She’s exhausted and she collapses back on the covers with a sigh.

“There’s something else,” Mary Margaret says. “You should know—”

But Emma cuts her off. “Just text me the details. I need another six million hours of sleep.”

“Fine. I’ll let you get back to your napping then,” she says and Emma imagines Mary Margaret pursing her lips, narrowing her eyes, before the image fades and she returns to sleep.

She wakes up a couple of hours later with her phone stuck to her cheek, her heart thumping for Regina Regina Regina, and a message from Mary Margaret that reads 7.30 Saturday, at the Venezia, red dress. Don’t be late.

Chapter End Notes

Right, I think I’m back to being able to update on a more regular schedule, though the next couple of weeks are still possible a bit mad.
In which Regina is a damsel in distress (and can handle it thank you so much)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Imagine what happened after the end of the video. Emma heading home, unable to stop thinking about Regina, unable stop thinking about how close they were, how their arms brushed against each other. There’s something about Regina that is just perfect, that makes her stare at her like she’s the sun. She wants to impress her, to make her see that she’s more than this drunk idiot. Imagine that she goes home to an empty apartment and cold Chinese food and just wants so much.

Then imagine Regina feels the same.

#trash life #rpf for ts #swanprincess #evilqueen101

Uglyfuckling likes this

Trashaesthetic likes this

Yters-af said: hOW DARE

Saraaaaaaah posted this

— a Tumblr post from Saraaaaaaah entitled ‘Take Me to the Dump’

The house is cold on her return, cold and dark, and she misses Henry. She’d been almost pathetically grateful when she’d received the text from Emma, having been readying herself for a dismal night at home alone, dodging calls from her mother who had sent her four emails today (because Mother doesn’t send text messages), which got increasingly passive aggressive.

Regina, dear. Call me when you get a moment.

I tried to call you earlier. Pick up.

I am sure you can take two minutes out of your terribly busy schedule to call your mother back.

Have we misplaced our phone, dear?

She sighs, plugging her phone in to charge. It’s too late to return Mother’s calls and if she sends her a message now, she’ll be questioned about what she was doing up so late and who she was with and what he (always a he because Mother hasn’t given up that Regina might find an acceptable partner even after all this time) does for a living. She doesn’t bother changing, simply shucking her shoes and removing her bra, before curling up under the covers of her bed, desperately clinging to warmth. Her mind whirs in spite of the exhaustion plaguing her bones with thoughts of Emma Swan. Are they friends now? Is that what this is? She’s never been great at friends, Marian being the only person who has stuck with her for any length of time. Somehow
she cannot imagine texting Emma to go and get a coffee, or to see a movie. She can’t imagine them every being in a place where they are entirely comfortable around one another. There’s too much tension still between them, too many might-have-beens and what-ifs.

Slowly, she drifts off and wakes feeling unrested.

(What had she been dreaming about? She can never remember her dreams, but her body is grimy with sweat and she feels unsettled and exhausted.)

She barely registers that her phone’s ringing and, groggy and disoriented, she doesn’t think to screen the call. She answers. “Yes?”

“Is that any way to answer your phone, Regina?”

Her mother. “Sorry, Mother,” she says. “Your call woke me up.”

Her mother tuts. “It’s past eight, dear. Time’s wasting.”

“Did you have a particular reason for calling?” she asks, attempting to maintain a facade of courtesy.

Cora’s tone turns businesslike. “Leo Blanchard intends to contact you,” she says. “He’s inviting you to a function.”

“A function?” Honestly, that could mean just about anything in Cora’s world. Last time Regina went to a ‘function’ with her mother, it turned out to be for the Republican candidate for state senate on a yacht in the Boston harbour.

“One of the charities the Blanchards support. Heart disease? Orphans? Who knows.” She laughs, the sound high and false. “There will be a nice dinner, dancing, at any rate.” She can imagine her mother waving a hand as though swatting at a fly. She’s utterly dismissive. “It is next Saturday. You will attend.”

She bristles. “Will I?”
“It would be wise, dear,” Cora says, the warning quite clear in her voice, and though Regina knows that realistically there is little her mother can do to her these days, that old fear is still there, memories of childhood punishments, of horses put down, of instruments broken, of staff fired. And there is that old fear too; what if Henry gets really sick? What if she needs Cora — or her money at least? Her mother is certainly not above holding people’s lives ransom because Regina doesn’t cede to her wishes.

She knows that all too well.

“Very well,” she says, voice clipped. “I have to go now. Henry needs to be picked up.”

“I’ll call you next Sunday for a full report,” her mother says and, her capacity for small talk so small it might as well be non-existent, she hangs up.

It turns out that Henry doesn’t want to be picked up until closer to lunchtime; when she calls the Tillmans, Michael tells her the boys are still asleep. “They were still giggling at three in the morning,” he says, sighing. Roland is with his grandparents’ this weekend and Regina is curious about Marian’s coffee date so she does the mature thing and texts her repeatedly until she wakes up, sending Regina a slew of knife emojis in response to her suggestion they meet for coffee. Once she is halfway through a large skim latte, Marian is less grouchy and Regina sits back, drinking her own coffee and content to watch Marian wake up. “So,” she asks, picking apart a blueberry scone. “Tell me everything.”

“It was sweet,” Marian says and she’s smiling, dimples forming in her cheeks. She swipes her fingers through the icing on her cupcake. “She’s—I just—She’s so smart and funny and kind. Did I tell you I had to bring Roland with me?”

Regina shakes her head. “I’m sorry,” she says. “If I’d known—”

Marian cuts her off. “No, it was totally last second. Anyway, she helped him colour and then suggested we take a walk to the park and played soccer with him. He’s totally smitten.”

“And you’re not?” Regina asks, smiling. Marian scowls at her, bunching up her napkin and throwing it at her.

“And you like her,” she says and Regina laughs. And then, “I like her,” she says after a moment’s silence,
voice soft and tentative. She looks so vulnerable; sometimes Regina forgets that Marian’s extroversion doesn’t make her invulnerable.

Regina reaches out a hand, touching Marian’s arm. “If she doesn’t like you back, she’s the biggest idiot in the universe.”

She parts ways with Marian after this and wanders around to pick up Henry. His lack of sleep is all too apparent; he’s blinking rapidly as they walk home, Regina shouldering his sleepover gear, and she notices he’s trying to hide a yawn. “Perhaps a nap when we get home?” she suggests gently.

“I’m not tired,” he whines, kicking at someone’s verge.

“Whatever you say, mijo,” she says. But when she leaves him on the couch with his book, she returns from the kitchen ten minutes later to find him fast asleep, book folded open on his stomach. She smiles, placing the book mark between the pages, pulling a blanket over him and pressing a kiss to his forehead. “Sleep well.”

*

Regina’s not been at Venezia for five minutes before it is made disturbingly apparent that Leopold Blanchard believes this to be a date. He picks her up, without Mary Margaret and her husband, in a private car, and kisses her cheek, his gray beard scratchy against her cheek. When they arrive, he helps her out of her coat, and links arms with her as they enter the function room. From anyone else, she might think these are gentlemanly gestures — her father would have treated any young woman in such a way — but she knows Leopold Blanchard. She knows he is attracted to her, has liked her since she was much too young (and still is really). More than anything else though, she knows he likes the status of having a beautiful, young woman on his arm to parade around like a pet or prized possession. It sickens her.

“Shall we dance?” he asks and barely allows for a response before he’s leading her onto the dance floor, guiding her with a hand on her lower back. She’s paralysed because surely, surely, her mother would not have insinuated that Regina might be okay with this. Surely.

And yet here they are.

The music — a simple waltz — seems too loud and she can hear it pulsing in her ears, off rhythm with her own heartbeat, which pounds too quick. She feels flushed though the room is not warm,
and she can feel the panic rise in her. She is suddenly desperately grateful she wore the more modest of the two gowns she owns. The other one is mostly backless and she feels like the touch of his hand on her bare back might tip her over the edge.

She can feel herself tipping. She feels Leopold’s hot breath on her cheek. “It’s lovely to see you again, Regina dear,” he says. “It’s been such a long time.”

She nods tersely. “Henry and I rarely have time to visit Maine.”

He chuckles. “Ah, the boy. How is he?”

“Fine,” she says. The music crescendos. Leopold’s hand on her back is warm and moist.

“You’re very——” But he is interrupted.

“Mind if I cut in?” Emma stands behind Leopold and in that brief moment Regina privately forgives her everything, past and present. In fact, all she can do is stare, speechless, because Emma’s in a tight red dress, those incredible arms bared and her hair curled around her shoulders. In that moment, she wonders how she’s possibly been kidding herself since she found out the identity of the woman in the deli that she wasn’t attracted to Emma at all?

Leopold smiles jovially. “I didn’t know you two knew each other!”

“We go way back,” Emma says, smiling though her grin seems forced, and she manages to insinuate her way between Leopold and Regina, alarmingly smooth for someone who gets drunk and rants about terrible television. As though on auto-pilot, Regina places her arm across Emma’s shoulder and joins hands with her, Emma’s palm warm and skin rough. She has long fingers, thin and unadorned and the nails cut short and for one brief moment Regina thinks of lesbians and stereotypes about short nails and then her brain darts in a direction it really cannot be heading and she feels hot all over. “You looked like you needed a saviour,” Emma says, leading Regina away from Leopold who is, when she looks across, headed towards the bar.

“I am quite capable of rescuing myself, Ms Swan,” she snaps, flustered.

Emma laughs, the infuriating idiot. “You’re such a grump,” she says, looking down at Regina.
fondly because, of course, Emma’s wearing heels.

“Don’t patronise me.”

“Cutie pie.” She spins her out, Regina unfurling away and curling back, safe once more in Emma’s arms.

“Where on earth did you learn to dance?” she asks.

“Some foster home or other,” Emma says. “One of the good ones.” Her fingers tap against Regina’s spine, sending an electric shock pulsing through her body. “How’d you end up being Leo Blanchard’s date?” Her nose wrinkles.

“Not by choice, I assure you,” Regina says. “My mother…”

Emma nods. “Say no more.” The song ends and Regina looks over to where Leopold stands with Mary Margaret and her husband, a glass of red wine in each hand. He smiles at her, holding one glass aloft, beckoning her over. The gesture revolts her. “Want to make a quick getaway?” Emma asks.

“If I flake on this, Mother will find out,” Regina says and sighs. “No, I should stay. It’s one evening.”

Emma wrinkles her nose. Then, “go and get your drink. Trust me.”

Regina shoots her a dubious look, but makes her way over to Leopold who, sure enough, holds out the glass of wine to her and wraps a proprietary arm around her waist. Regina flinches and Mary Margaret grimaces. But, “Daddy,” she says. “You saw Emma, right?” She’s weak, Regina thinks. Always has been.

Leopold nods, though his grip doesn’t loosen and Regina can feel his fingers dig into the flesh of her waist. She shifts, stabbing an elbow into his side as she does so under the pretense of bringing her wine glass to her lips. “Sorry,” she murmurs, but she moves away, closer to Mary Margaret’s husband. “Derek, right?” she asks, trying to angle her body away from Leopold.
“David.” He smiles, dimples forming and holding out a hand for her to shake.

And this is when Emma chooses to return. “Regina, heeey,” she says. She’s swaying slightly and she gives Regina the finger guns, mouth shifting into a dopey grin. “Bit of an emergency.” Regina notices the split of her skirt is torn almost to an obscene height, toned leg on display. Regina realises her gaze has drifted down and she jerks her head. Emma gives her a look that is all too knowing for someone feigning intoxication. “You can sew, right?”

“I can—” Mary Margaret says, before her eyes widen in recognition of what Emma’s doing. “Regina’s a whiz with a needle, remember, Daddy?”

Leopold nods vaguely. Of course he wouldn’t remember Regina making Mary Margaret’s ballet recital costumes three years running. She had been glad to help, back then, sewing fairy dresses or gluing sequins to ballet slippers. “Go and help, Emma, dear,” he says, placing a proprietary hand on Regina’s arm. She flinches. “We’ll see you later.”

“Thanks, buddy,” Emma says, a touch too loud.

“Perhaps you could also help Emma sober up?” Leopold suggests, whispering in her ear before releasing her arm.

Regina manages a weak smile and follows Emma through the crowd to the bathrooms. However, instead of going to the bathroom, Emma veers a sharp left and they end up in coat check. “Where —”

“I know a guy,” Emma says, the act dropped. She settles down on the floor, sitting on what Regina hopes is her coat and rummages around in a box of coat hangers. She lets out a whoop of delight and pulls out a bottle of wine. “Will, you beautiful man,” she murmurs, unscrewing the cap.

Regina is still standing, half ready to run. “I can’t believe you ruined your dress to get me here.” This is almost too much, something deeper than a superficial friendship.

Emma shrugs. “Friends don’t let friends get groped by creepy old men.” She kicks off her shoes, leans back against the wall and closes her eyes, the very picture of contentment. “I figure we’ve got an hour before we have to get back out there,” she says, “by which point point old Leo’ll be so drunk and deep in talks with his Boston old men buddies he won’t notice you. So…” She pats the carpeted space beside her. “Sit, enjoy a glass of cheap red wine and the outstanding ambiance.”
The skirt of her own dress is tight, not exactly conducive to sitting on the floor, but she does her best, hiking it up to mid-thigh and half-falling onto the ground. “Mother would be horrified by this,” she murmurs.

“Good,” Emma says, eyes fixed on the expanse of thigh bared by her unladylike behaviour. She tops up Regina’s glass and takes a swig from the bottle. “Forgot to ask Will for a glass,” she says.

“Very classy.” She clinks her glass against the neck of the bottle.

“We should make another video,” Emma says. “Intoxicated with Emma, featuring the Evil Queen. I bet I could find some appropriate trashy pop song for us to lip sync.”

Regina slaps Emma’s thigh. “Rude.” Emma just laughs and leans her head against Regina’s. She’s so tactile; it surprises her. She feels like Emma keeps people at a distance and she’s not sure why she’s deemed Regina worthy of letting in. She’s not sure she’s worthy, not sure she trusts herself especially. So why would anyone trust her?

“I like you, Regina Mills,” Emma says, taking another swig from the bottle. “The combination of abrasive and caring creates such wonderful emotional whiplash.”

The coat room is warm and she feels this wave of serenity sweep over her. Quite without her permission, her fingers dance across the jagged tear in the skirt. “I could fix this,” she says, rolling stray threads between her thumb and index finger.

“Trying to get me out of my dress, Mills?” Emma asks, waggling her eyebrows, and Regina’s face feels warm and she can hear her heart, beating too loudly, a steady rat-tat-tat, water on a tin roof. It’s a moment of madness, one possibly brought on by a full glass of wine on a too-empty stomach (or so she might tell herself later), but Regina’s hand drifts up to Emma’s cheek and she moves closer until there is barely an inch between them.

Emma’s tongue darts out and she licks her lips. Her whole body has tensed, anticipatory, green eyes wide. Regina’s so close she can see the suggestion of freckles dotted across her skin and the thin creases at the corners of her eyes. “Is this—” Emma begins, her voice hoarse.

Regina’s lips curve into a smile. Her hand caresses Emma’s cheek, moving from the velvet soft, into her hair, fingers coiling through her curls. “If you want,” she says. “One must reward one’s
saviour, or so Henry’s fairy tales tell me.” Emma nods wildly, hands at her sides, fists clenched, arm muscles taut. Every fiber of her being expresses want, need, and who is Regina to refuse that?

So she closes the distance and kisses her.

Chapter End Notes

:D
In which there is a kiss (and a punch)

Calling all Hookers. Getting ready to film an exciting new video and we need you! Send me an ask or fanmail to get location details and to get involved.

Your Captain

— from CptnHook ’s Tumblr, reblogged ad infinitum


She can taste the tart wine they had shared, the waxy texture of her lipstick. She’s going to look totally ridiculous when they part, lipstick smeared around her mouth, but she banishes that thought from her mind, because who cares? She doesn’t, not when Regina’s tugging at her bottom lip with her teeth and her hands shift from Emma’s cheeks to her hair, threading through her curls and pulling her closer. She smells Regina’s perfume, the heady orange blossom aroma mingling with the wine and the mothball scent of too many coats. She’s intoxicated by the smell, by the closeness of her, by the ever-present thump-thump-thump of her own heart, too quick.

Emma moans when Regina’s tongue flicks out, and her hands shift from clenched uselessly at her sides to Regina’s back. She runs her fingers down the nubs of her spine, light and dexterous in her movements as though playing the piano, reaching the curve where back meets ass and feeling Regina’s muscles jump beneath her hands. She then slides her hands up, ghosting the curve of Regina’s breasts. She almost expects to be pushed away, readies herself for the anger and affront, but it doesn’t come. Instead, Regina lets out an appreciative groan and her fingers clench harder in her hair, tugging just to the point of painful.

They part. “Hey,” Emma says. She can feel Regina’s warm breath against her cheek, can see flecks of amber in her eyes, and she can’t help but choke out a laugh, breathy and delighted.

“Hi,” Regina replies. She bites her bottom lip, eyes heavy lidded, and then presses her lips to Emma’s forehead.

It’s almost disturbingly intimate — a moment that speaks of years of shared experience, rather than of what could be described as a sordid encounter in a coat room — and Emma’s breath constricts. “We should probably get back out there,” she says weakly and, shit, when did she move from sitting upright against the wall to lying on her back, Regina positioned above her?

“Or we could stay here,” Regina says, her hands roaming, her lips kissing from cheek to neck, fluttering against her collar bone, fingers tugging at the fabric of her dress. Her hands find the lace
of Emma’s fanciest bra, tracing the itchy edge of the fabric and, God, Emma thinks she might die here and now and be perfectly, incandescently happy.

She whimpers and her fists clench in the fabric of Regina’s dress where it pulls tight against her ass. Feeling tight heat pool in the pit of her belly, she squirms and her limbs press against Regina’s; she feels her pelvis shift against Regina’s body, and hears the resulting groan.

“Yeah,” Regina says, voice throaty. “We should get out there before we do something that might sully the integrity of some of these coats.” She’s delightfully tousled, hair a mess, lips swollen, dress hiked up to mid-thigh.

Emma runs her fingers down the satin skin of Regina’s thigh one final time, feeling her shiver beneath her fingertips. “Don’t want to,” she mumbles, but then she pulls herself upright and stands, holding out a hand for Regina. She takes it and, once standing, she pulls a mirror from her handbag and fixes her lipstick.

“Can’t do much about the hair,” she says, sighing and running her fingers through her curls.

Emma smiles as she toes her feet back into her shoes. “I like the hair.”

“Of course you do,” she says, smirking across at her in a way that makes Emma’s knees feel weak. “You re-styled it.”

“Come on,” she says, taking Regina’s hand, feeling her grip tighten momentarily. “Got to get you back to your date.”

Leopold Blanchard is definitely drunk when they make it back to their table, cheeks red and volume raised, and he nods absently at them both before returning to conversation with another benefactor. He does, however, place a proprietary arm around Regina’s shoulder when she sits beside him and Emma feels a stab of rage at this. Regina lets her hand brush against Emma’s thigh, just that ghost of a touch, signaling, It’s okay.

Mary Margaret looks between the two of them and then she coughs. “You have lipstick on your neck,” she whispers to Emma.

“And it’s unusual that you spent almost an hour not fixing your dress,” she adds, glancing down at the almost obscene tear in the skirt of her dress and wrinkling her nose. She’s dressed in a high necked gown herself, the skirt full and hitting mid-calf. Emma’s always known Mary Margaret to be modest; she’s never known her to judge others for being less so.

“We couldn’t find a needle and thread,” Emma says, daring Mary Margaret to just come out with it.

David places a hand on Mary Margaret’s shoulder. “Sweetheart,” he says. “Should we dance?”

Mary Margaret shrugs him off, and her frown just becomes more pronounced. “Bathroom,” she says, yanking at Emma’s arm. “Now!” David shoots her a puzzled look, and Emma just shakes her head at him, mouthing ‘she’s your wife’.

Once in the bathroom, Mary Margaret grabs a paper towel, wetting it under the sink and scrubbing at Emma’s neck. “Ow, Jesus!” Emma slaps her hand away.

“Honestly, Emma,” she says, returning to scouring at her skin. “What were you thinking?”

Emma shrugs, hoisting herself up to sit on the counter, legs swinging. “I was thinking that Regina’s hot and I’m super attracted to her?”

“She’s straight,” Mary Margaret says, just about spitting out her words.

Emma feels the heat rise to her cheeks. Mary Margaret had said the same thing when confronted by Emma’s bisexuality. “But you’re straight,” she’d said, tone all puzzled outrage.

(Admittedly, she’d been confronted by her sexuality by walking in on Emma in flagrante with a woman she’d met at a bar. Emma could sympathise with her surprise then, to a degree.)

“She didn’t seem so straight when she was feeling me up five minutes ago,” Emma retorts, which is perhaps not the most mature response but, well, she’s pissed off. “Anyway, since when would Regina Mills tell you shit about her sexual preferences? You don’t know her.”
“Neither do you,” Mary Margaret says, and she dabs at the side of Emma’s mouth with the paper towel, now stained the berry shade of Regina’s lipstick. “Emma, I’m just looking out for you. She’s just broken up with a man who, according to her mother, she was very settled with.”

“According to her mother who she hates?” Emma hisses.

“And to add to that,” Mary Margaret says, speaking as though Emma hasn’t said anything, “she has a child. That means commitment. Are you ready for that?”

“Are you insinuating I’m some sort of fucked up rebound or are you suggesting that she’s after some commitment I’m not emotional able to give? Please, be more inconsistent, I dare you.” She jumps down from the counter, taking the towel from Mary Margaret and throwing it in the trash with unnecessary force.

“Emma,” Mary Margaret says, placing a hand on her arm.

“No,” she snarls, shaking off the placatory gesture. “Don’t ‘Emma’ me. Maybe instead of fussing about my life, why don’t you go and call out your creepy father for groping a woman young enough to be his daughter?”

Two bright red spots appear against the white of Mary Margaret’s cheeks. “I think you should go home,” she says, her voice stiff and her lips pursed. “You’re obviously drunk and this is a charity event, not some sordid episode of Intoxicated with Emma.” The venom of her words seeps into Emma’s pores and the rage boils up in a volcanic eruption.

“Fuck. You.” She’s not proud of what she does next, but her hand clenches into a fist, and she punches Mary Margaret, whose head cracks to the side. She looks, with some satisfaction, at the red mark blooming on her cheek. She’ll have a bruise. Then, she whirls around and storms out, passing by the coat room, which holds such pleasant memories, to grab her jacket.

She is at the train station when she realises that she never said goodbye to Regina. Shivering in the chilly night air, her jacket insufficient in the near freezing temperatures and the split in her skirt not helping any, she fishes her phone from her pocket. There’s a message flashing.

Are you okay? Mary Margaret said you had to go but she sort of looks like she’s been punched in the face. Emma imagines her sitting beside Leopold Blanchard, straight backed and uncomfortable, phone in her lap like a kid texting in class.
I’m fine, Emma replies, fingers stiff with cold. Sorry I disappeared on you. I’m a shit white knight.

It’s very Cinderella of you. Will I find a glass slipper on the steps from the restaurant?

She sends her an emoji of a high heel and puts her phone away as the train approaches.

When she arrives home, Tamara is smoking at her usual place at the window. “Good night?” she asks, stretching out her long legs in front of her.

Emma grabs a bag of peas from freezer, wrapping them in a tea towel and holding them to her bruised knuckles. “Parts of it,” she says, wincing at the sudden cold and the relief it brings.

Tamara raises an eyebrow and taps her cigarette against the windowsill, ash falling out the window. “That’s not broken, is it?” she asks with the vague interest of someone who fixes broken bones for a living.


Tamara hates Mary Margaret. “She’s so pious,” she’d said once after Mary Margaret had been at the apartment while she’d been home. It had been just after she and Jas had broken up. “And kind of mean to you.”

“You’re kind of mean to me,” Emma had said and Tamara had just laughed.

“Yeah, I’m allowed,” she had said, throwing a wrapped burrito at her. “I’m mean to everyone. Bowl cut over there thinks she’s being kind.”

So it is unsurprising that Tamara grins and raises a hand in a high five. Emma ignores her, settling down on the couch. “That’s not the good part,” she says. “I made out with the nemesis.”

“Boring?”

“Yeah,” Tamara says. “I mean, that was always going to happen. It’s practically a trope. I bet you, like, danced together and then hooked up in a closet or something.”

“Shut up, asshole,” she says, rolling her eyes and heading into her room, where she prepares for bed. She doesn’t want to let Mary Margaret get to her, but she can’t help but let her words play through her mind as she lies awake, tossing and turning. Regina’s a mom. God, she’s such a mom. Emma couldn’t even handle the commitment of moving in with a serious, long-term girlfriend a year ago and she doesn’t think anything has changed in the meantime.

She likes Henry. She’d hate for the kid to be hurt by a relationship with her and Regina turning to shit. As relationships with Emma inevitably do. No one sticks with her long term. Why would Regina be any different? She doesn’t want to be some lady who becomes a part of Henry’s life and then has to bail on him. Adults shouldn’t bail on kids they care about.

Still, she rationalises, when did Regina ever say anything about a relationship? Regina didn’t say much at all between the kissing and Emma punching Mary Margaret in the bathroom.

The next day, she’s in a foul mood at work, ignoring Mary Margaret’s incessant text messages. We need to talk. Emma, reply to me. Don’t push me away. Instead she throws herself into her work, making coffee on a constant rotation while Ruby mans the counter, seeming to sense that Emma is in no mood for human interaction. “What’s up with you?” she asks during a brief period of calm, leaning against the counter. She has her phone out,

“Fight with Mary Margaret,” she grunts and empties coffee grinds into the trash. She says nothing about Regina. She hasn’t even told Mulan who she would ordinarily have messaged on the train ride home, and she feels a modicum of guilt at this when Mulan comes in at midday, Marian and Roland in tow.

“Tell your friend to stop messaging me,” Mulan says when Emma pops over to see her on her break.

“Block her number,” Emma says, sitting down beside Roland and handing coffees to Marian and Mulan. “Hey, kiddo.”

“Hi,” Roland says and then returns to his colouring book, tongue poking out between his lips as he concentrates.
“You’ve met Emma,” Mulan says, touching his cheek. “She’s my best friend.”

“Like Mama and Regina?” Roland asks. He grins over at her, dimples showing, and Emma marvels at the easy way Mulan talks with him, totally comfortable. Does she even worry about where she and Marian might go?

“Yes,” Mulan says. “Just like your mom and Regina.” She looks over at Emma, eyes narrowing. “You okay?”

“Fine,” Emma says. She holds up her right hand, bruising now visible across her knuckles. “Mary Margaret might not be.”

Marian looks up, a chunk of cake stabbed at the end of her fork, trying desperately hard to keep a straight face. “I hope this terrible mood has nothing to do with the fact that you made out with my best friend in a closet.”

Mulan chokes on her coffee, hot liquid spraying out her nose. “I’m sorry, what?”

Emma scowls at Marian, who sits back, licking cake from her fork and grinning, far too pleased with herself. “And with that,” she says, “I have to go back to work.”

“Made out?” Mulan asks. “Like, made out made out?”

“Bye!” Emma says and power walks into the kitchen, heedless of Mulan yelling her name out from behind her. She hides in the kitchen until Mulan and Marian leave.

She’s home alone that night, Tamara working and Mulan’s lunch date having apparently extended into an evening thing. She’d grinned at the litany of texts she’d received. Remember how I called you my best friend? That’s over.

I can ’t believe you didn’t tell me.

Marian’s filling me in rn. You basically dry humped?

In a coat room?

I am so proud. And disgusted.
She is ignoring her phone as it rings repeatedly. Mary Margaret is big on not letting anger fester, which is great except that Emma’s not ready to have this conversation. She’s not ready to forgive the woman who brought self-doubt into the equation when Emma was walking on air. She’s not ready to forgive her for the insults because Emma doesn’t live up to her expectations.

Instead, she spends her evening productively by not thinking about Regina (and certainly not thinking about kissing her or touching her or what she might look like with considerable less clothing) and instead stalking Killian Jones. She’s friends with him on Facebook still, a remnant of that unfortunate one night stand. Mostly his feed is full of selfies of him and various women at clubs all over Boston and she grimaces as she clicks through. She trawls his Twitter (again, a lot of selfies) and then his Tumblr and his YouTube channel. He’s doing some filming, the location top secret, and she wonders if she can get in on it. She’s one stiff drink away from setting up a fake profile and messaging him on Tumblr to become part of the filming when she gets an email from TheSeaWitch.

Hey. Just so you know, Jones is meeting everyone at the Commons next Saturday morning, 8am. From what I can tell he’s basically pulling together a bunch of barely legal girls who’ll do anything for him so whatever this video’s about, it can’t be good. Ursula

Finally. This could really be something. She forwards the message to Regina with the message: Time to start planning our next move, your majesty.

She’s drifting off to sleep when her phone beeps. Dinner here on Friday. Bring your best ideas and your pajamas.
In which Regina and Emma make some progress (in the case and between the sheets)

Chapter Notes

Note: rating change.

Thanks to coalitiongirl for some plot wrangling help.

Regina (@EQ101): You know that feeling when you send a text and then want to dig a hole and die?

Regina (@EQ101): What is a meal that is ridiculously bloating and full of garlic?

Regina (@EQ101): And what's the least flattering shade on me?

Marian (@MaidMario): @EQ101 oh honey.

Regina (@EQ101): @MaidMario Don't patronise me, Alvarez.

Emma (@Swanprincess): @EQ101 you know I follow you on Twitter, right?

Regina (@EQ101): @Swanprincess …

Marian (@MaidMario): @Swanprincess @EQ101 this is the happiest day of my life tbh

Emma (@Swanprincess): @EQ101 I'm really looking forward to seeing you tonight ;)

— A selection of Tweets by Regina Mills, on Friday morning

She’s definitely not panicking on Friday as the time ticks by. She’s definitely not regretting asking Emma to sleep over. She definitely doesn’t snap at Kathryn when she dares ask her about her plans for the weekend. “Sorry,” she says because Kathryn looks so hurt that it’s ridiculous. “Under pressure.” She gestures vaguely at the data before her that she is doing a terrible job of analysing.

She had regretted the text message the moment she’d sent it. She’d obviously only thought that, since they would have to be up early to track down Killian and his film crew, it would make sense for Emma to sleep over. In the guest room. She’s even changed the sheets and laid out fresh towels. She certainly hadn’t been thinking about the pressure of Emma’s lips against hers, of her body on fire, of her heart thudding erratically.

She scowls at the graphs in front of her.
Henry is dropped off at her work by Marian, who shoots her so many innuendo-laden looks she’s surprised her eyebrows don’t actually fall right off at the rate she’s waggling them. “Roland’s in the car so I’ve got to love you and leave you,” she says. “Much like Emma did on Saturday.” Eye waggle.

Regina hits her arm. “Behave.”

“Mom,” Henry says very sternly. “We don’t hit.” He’s grinning though when she looks over at him, eyes squinting and cheeks rounded; her mouth drops open in a melodramatic display of shock over her son’s impertinence.

Marian cackles and then ducks out of Regina’s grasp as she attempts to attack again. “Have fun, darling.”

Henry chatters away as they catch the train home. He’s excited to see Emma again, who he has decided is his buddy, not Regina’s. “Is she having a sleepover?” he asks. And at her terse nod, says, “we should sleep in the living room, in sleeping bags.”

For one, mad moment, she contemplates agreeing. It’ll stop Emma getting the wrong idea at least. But, “no,” she says. “We have to be up very early.”

Emma is grateful when she hears of the narrow escape, Regina telling her as she turns roast vegetables. “I have a really bad back,” she says, pouring generous glasses of wine and handing one to Regina. “I don’t know if I’d survive the floor.”

“Well,” Regina says, aware of Emma’s proximity, of the warmth of her breath against her neck and the light touch of her fingers at Regina’s waist. “The guest room bed is apparently very comfortable.” She stiffens, worried about Emma’s reaction but she just laughs.

“I’m not going to have the worst night of my life, tossing and turning, only to discover a pea under my mattress?” Emma says, fingers drifting into dangerous territory. Regina shivers, before nudging her away with her hip and opening the oven to return the vegetables.

“Wrong fairytale,” she says. “The Evil Queen is from Snow White.”

Emma laughs, taking a gulp of wine. “Of course, because that was the point of the joke.”
“At any rate,” she says, boiling water for cous-cous, “my mother slept in the spare room last year and didn’t criticise so that means it is the best bed in the universe.”

“Well,” Emma says, “I very much looking forward to sleeping in it. I don’t want you to feel uncomfortable…”

“I had hoped we wouldn’t mention my tweets,” she says, feeling her skin heat up. Could she be any more obvious?

But when she looks at Emma she seems apologetic, twisting her lips into a grimace. “Sorry,” she says. “Pretend I never said that. But, just so you know, no expectations.”

This should not make her feel flushed and confused. She busies herself with the final preparations for dinner, stirring the vegetables into the cous-cous and adding a generous serving of feta cheese. “Henry,” she calls. “Table!”

Henry enters the kitchen and pulls out the plates. “Hey, Emma,” he says. “We should definitely watch a movie after dinner,” and he throws Regina his best puppy dog eyes. It’s a look that reminds her intensely of Daniel, but the heart-wrenching ache that comes along with that dissipates quickly.

Instead, she laughs, running a hand through his messy hair when he gets close enough, and he ducks away, giggling. They eat and it’s halfway through dinner when Emma’s foot brushes against her calf that she realises that she’s trying to play footsie with her. She kicks out. Not in front of Henry, she mouths when Emma pouts at her.

“Are you guys being gross?” Henry asks, a look of abject disgust on his face.

Emma’s cheeks flush red but she desists from footsie. Later, they sit on the couch, Henry between them, and watch ‘Jurassic Park’, which he has been bugging her about seeing for weeks. Regina, who has seen it several times before, spends much her time glancing over at Emma, watching her watch the film, watching her laugh, watching her when the raptor leaps out and Emma screeches, making Henry laugh instead of get scared. She feels a stab of fondness.

“Right,” Regina says when the music swells and the credits roll. “It’s time for sleep for you.”
Henry starts to protest but then he yawns and sighs. “Fine,” he says and leans forward so she can kiss his cheek. “Night, Mom. Night, Emma.”

And they’re alone. “Hi,” Emma says, turning to her.

“Hey,” Regina replies, moving to stand and return the empty mugs to the kitchen, but Emma grabs her hand.

“Stay,” she says. “Please.”

And what can she do but sit back down, letting the dregs of cocoa solidify in the mugs? “Hey,” Regina says again, and takes Emma’s hand from her wrist, thumb stroking against the bruises on her knuckles. Emma winces. “What happened on Saturday night?” Regina asks.

“Must we talk about Sister Self-righteous?” Emma asks, sighing. Regina just stares at her. “Okay, fine. I punched her.”

“Emma!” It just comes out, like she has any say in how Emma lives her life, what stupid decisions Emma makes.

“It was instinctive,” she says, defensive. She pulls her hand away from Regina’s. “Look, I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Fine,” Regina says, and she sits up, shuffling further away. It’s good, she thinks. This distance. This is what she needs. She can’t have her head confused by Emma, by what this does or doesn’t mean, by where it might or might not lead. “What’s the plan for tomorrow?”

“I don’t really know,” Emma says, shrugging. “I thought we’d just wing it.” She pulls her feet up beneath her, leans back against the arm of the couch.

Regina rolls her eyes. “Wonderful.”

“Stakeout?” Emma asks. “Film what he’s doing, post an expose, or go to the police depending on
Regina nods. “Do we know anything about this video?”

She shakes her head. “Ursula doesn’t know. Once he realised she was seventeen he stopped replying to her emails.”

“Well, that’s disturbing,” Regina says. The idea that this video is something for adult participants only, well, that doesn’t bode well. She shudders, and shakes her head. She’ll worry about that tomorrow. “Up at six?”

Emma yawns and then looks at her phone. “God, okay,” she says, squinting. “I should go to bed then.”

There’s this tension between them that Regina’s not sure how to breach. She follows Emma upstairs, directing her to the guest bedroom with a brush of her fingers to Emma’s hip. “I’ll let you rest,” she says, holding the door open for her. “There’s towels on the bed. Bathroom’s next door.”

Emma bites her lip and moves past her, arm brushing against Regina’s stomach. She shivers at the touch. “Night, Regina.”

Regina checks in on Henry. He’s asleep, sprawled spread-eagled across his bed, and she places a bookmark in between the pages of his novel and pulls his covers back up over him, pressing a kiss to his forehead. Then, she returns to her own room where she changes for bed, brushes her teeth, wipes her face free of makeup. She crawls into bed and turns out the light, tossing and turning for hours until sleep comes.

She wakes up early, having kicked her blankets off in the night, and she’s feeling unrested. She’d dreamed of Emma, of her warmth, of the scent of her — coffee and cinnamon and some sort of floral deodorant. She’d dreamed of the encounter in the coat room, except they hadn’t stopped at a few kisses and she wakes to an ache between her legs and flushed skin. After a moment’s indecision (because she could just take a long shower, make use of the mini-vibe buried in her dressing table, pretend that the close proximity of Emma isn’t sending her hormones wild), she pulls her dressing gown around herself and pads down the hall.

The moment she knocks at the guest room door, she regrets it, panic coursing through her mind. But, perhaps she didn’t hear the knock. Perhaps she’s not awake yet — it’s early still; Regina woke up well before her alarm. But the door opens. “Hey,” Emma says, rubbing her eyes. She’s
wearing a tank top and skimpy red underwear, nothing else, and for a moment Regina’s silent, not quite knowing where she should look. She settles on a spot directly past Emma’s left ear.

“We need to—” she says but she’s cut off by Emma kissing her, hands clutching the front of her dressing gown and pulling her into the guest bedroom. “Yeah,” Regina says, pulling away, stunned, tongue flicking out to lick her lips. “That. We need to do that. Screw talking.”

“Sorry,” Emma says, though she sounds one hundred percent unrepentant. “I’ve been wanting to do that all week.”

Regina frowns, links her fingers through Emma’s, and presses a kiss to the knuckles. “This definitely wasn’t in my plan for this sleepover.”

“Plans are for idiots,” Emma says. “But,” and she looks uncertain, eyebrows furrowed. “Do you not want this?”

So Regina takes a leaf out of Emma’s book. She doesn’t think. She doesn’t plan. Instead, she steps back and slips out of her dressing gown. It’s quite rewarding watching Emma’s face at the sudden appearance of skin, Regina wearing a rather brief, silky nightgown (and thinking about it now, she wonders how she even thought this wasn’t going to happen when she chose blue satin to wear to bed). She takes Emma’s hand in hers once more, and pulls her towards the bed.

Emma falls onto the mattress with a muffled, “oof!” and curls around Regina, one leg snaking between hers, mouth pressed to Regina’s neck.

And then the talking stops, Regina letting herself get lost in in the salty taste of her skin, in the thin fabric of her tank top and the rough texture of her lace underwear against her thigh when Emma rubs. She twists them, straddling her, kissing a path down her neck, and nipping at her collar bone. Emma laughs, squirming beneath her, and presses her knee up between Regina’s legs. She groans.

“This is so much hotter than the coat room,” Emma says, voice breathy. She reaches a hand up, brushes her knuckles against Regina’s cheek, the gesture intimate. Too intimate.

“Want to talk about hot?” Regina asks, and she’s leering, an eyebrow raised. “Or do you want me to show you?” She trails her hand down, fingers sweeping Emma’s stomach, ghosting her hands along Emma’s thighs. She feels the muscles tense and fleck and the light hairs on her upper thighs tickle her palms.
“Someone took her high school creative writing lessons to heart,” Emma says, leaning up to kiss her, and so Regina silences her with a hand between her legs, fingers gliding through wetness, before she presses one, then two, inside, twisting, scissoring, curling.

When Emma comes, it’s with a sharp intake of breath, a stiffening of her body, lip parted, but otherwise silent.

And then, oh God, and then Emma’s the one being lascivious and smug and kissing her way down Regina’s body. Slipping the thin straps of her nightgown down, she presses kisses to Regina’s breasts, tongue laving her nipples, before she continues her journey further south, until she is between her legs, licking and sucking and Regina’s trying really hard to keep quiet but she can’t help but let out a whimper when Emma’s tongue flicks at her clit.

She’s always been naturally inclined to being loud; Daniel used to tease her for it. And while years in a small house with a restless child have tempered this tendency, somehow Emma’s bringing it back out in her. She holds a hand across her mouth, muffling herself but when she feels herself fall over the edge, she hears the low, guttural moan burst from her, feels her pelvis thrust up towards Emma’s mouth, and she has to close her eyes because it’s too much, too intense.

But Emma, fuck her, doesn’t stop.

“This was nice,” Emma mumbles into her hair as she curls around her, her breasts pressed against Regina’s back, her breath caressing Regina’s neck. Normally, Regina isn’t fond of snuggling, but somehow this isn’t so bad. Perhaps it’s the four orgasms. She drifts off and wakes a short while later to the insistent blaring of Emma’s alarm. Emma is staring at her, lips curved into a smile. “You’re pretty,” she says, her voice fuzzy with sleep.

“This is an excellent bed,” Regina says in response, trying not to panic over how unconcerned she is waking up next to Emma, over how right it feels. As far as she knows this is just sex, scratching an itch, playing out an attraction, and she cannot get attached because it won’t be long before this investigation is over and Emma, slowly but surely, disappears from her life.

“We should get up though,” Emma says, fingers drawing circles on Regina’s arm. “We can’t miss the meet up.”

Regina sighs. And so, forty-five minutes later they’re dropping Henry off at Marian’s and heading towards the Commons. Regina parks and they head to the meet up spot, Emma’s arm bumping against Regina’s, fingers grazing hers as though she wants to hold her hand. “He’s never going to
believe we’re here for the video,” Emma says. “We have to stay out of sight.”

Regina nods. It’s cold, the sky gray, her breath forming smoky ribbons in the morning air. Emma rubs her bare hands together and so Regina takes her hand, simply to conserve Emma’s warmth, and pulls her across to a park bench. She pulls out her phone with her free hand: a couple of Twitter notifications and a few new comments on her last video.

Young women start to arrive, individually, in pairs, in small groups, and they watch them mill about in the meeting spot. One girl comes over to them. “Are you here for the Hookers meet up?” and Emma wrinkles her nose.

“Honestly,” Regina murmurs. “What sort of name—”

But then Killian arrives, with this pudgy, bearded guy holding a camera, and the girls converge. Killian glances their way and Emma swears, ducking her head, and so Regina kisses her, hiding her face with her hands. Pulling away, Emma buries her face in her neck, her laughter tickling Regina’s skin. “You are such a cliche,” she whispers and Regina frowns.

Killian’s friend looks over, lips curled into smirk, and he stares at Regina. “He’s our in,” she mutters. It is at this point that the group disperses, girls splitting off in all directions, Killian following a trio of markedly similar-looking blondes.

“Shit,” Emma curses.

But Regina approaches the friend, who has taken a seat on an adjacent park bench, fiddling with his camera. “Hey,” she says, sitting down beside him. He gulps. “I’m Regina.”

“William,” he says, pulling the ratty red beanie off his head and revealing the beginnings of a receding hairline.

“So,” she asks, twirling a lock of hair around her finger. She doesn’t dare look over at Emma but can feel her laughing. “What are you guys up to?”

“Killian’s, like, super famous on YouTube,” he says. “He’s doing this ‘out and about in Boston’ video.” He laughs, the sound high and reedy. “Or so he’s said.”
“That sounds super great!” she says, willing the abject disgust from becoming visible on her face. “How do you get involved?”

“You’re probably not Killian’s… type,” Smee says, eying her. Again, she schools her face into a welcoming expression, even though her instincts scream ‘run away’ so loudly she feels like he can probably hear it.

“Oh?” Regina asks.

“I mean, maybe blondie over there,” he says and she looks over at Emma who has clearly heard this judging by the face she’s pulling. Regina looks back at him, smiles, flutters her eyelashes. “The video’s going to be more than just a tourist thing,” he adds. “If you know what I mean.” He leers. “Ends in a bit of a party.”

“A party we could crash?” She gestures at Emma. “My friend over there, she’s a huge fan. A… Hooker?”

He shrugs. “Don’t see why not.” He scribbles down an address out Somerville way. “Seven. I’ll see you there, babe.” And he stands, hoisting his backpack over his shoulder and grinning. Regina watches him leave, her body cold and shaking. She feels Emma’s presence beside her, a hand on her back, and she leans into the touch.

“We should go to the police,” she says, and she can’t help the chill that pervades her words. This is too much.

“With what?” Emma asks and when she looks over at her she sees that she’s biting her lip, face drawn and anxious. “Some gross guy’s holding a party?”

She has a point. They have nothing. She stands, holding out a hand for Emma. “Well then. Let’s go and get Henry. We can find out more at this party.”
In which there is a party to attend (but not a fun one)

Chapter Notes

Please note there are references to attempted sexual assault in this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Persinette (@letdownurhair): PAAAAAAARTY.

Persinette (@letdownurhair): This punch is off the freaking chain.

Ursula (@poorunfortunatesls): @letdownurhair you 're aware that this whole party thing is skeevy af right?

Persinette (@letdownurhair): @poorunfortunatesls Aw, is little baby bitter she didn ’t make the cut?

Persinette (@letdownurhair): I think I ’ve lost @Fishtailbabe somewhere. This house isn’t THAT big.

Persinette (@letdownurhair): Ugh not feeling so great.

Persinette (@letdownurhair): Holy shit, I think the police just showed up.
— a selection of Tweets by Persinette, over the course of Friday evening

When they arrive at Marian’s, Henry is reluctant to leave. “Mulan’s coming over in the afternoon,” he says, scowling at his mother and Emma. She tries not to laugh at the look on his face, so similar to his mother’s own mulish expression, in spite of the difference in genetics.

“I see how it is,” Emma says. “Someone cooler comes along and I’m yesterday’s news.” She slides her fingers through Henry’s hair and he ducks away from her, letting out a high-pitched giggle. There’s only a few years left before his voice breaks and he becomes a possibly sullen teenager and Emma has a moment of wondering whether she’ll be around to see that — a surly, teenage Henry with acne and too-long hair — and suddenly she thinks that maybe she’d like to see that. The thought terrifies her as much as it warms her.

“Where did you go?” Regina asks, nudging her with her elbow, and Emma butts her head against Regina’s shoulder.

“Sorry.” She smiles and Regina returns it, the intensity startling. When Emma was a kid, maybe eight or nine, one of her foster families took her to the mountains. They’d gone skiing and Emma had stumbled around in ski boots too big for her an the snow had been so bright it had been
blinding. That is Regina’s smile.

Marian looks between the pair of them and then her own lips curve into a broad grin. “You totally __”

“Say another word,” Regina says. “I dare you.” It’s rather difficult to sound menacing as she leans into Emma’s touch, but she does her best. Marian’s grin only widens.

She offers up a high five to Emma, and then Regina, and finally, when both of them deny her, Henry. “You could always drop Henry back here in the afternoon,” she says. “He could even sleep over. Mulan’s teaching Roland how to make snickerdoodles tonight.”

“Mulan bakes?” Regina asks, raising an incredulous eyebrow.

“She has many skills,” Emma says. “That she only ever pulls out when she’s trying to impress pretty ladies.” Marian’s cheeks glow and in that moment Emma knows that Marian is just as smitten as Mulan seems to be. She’s glad. After Rory, well, she’s always wondered if Mulan was a one-woman kind of girl.

“If you don’t mind taking Henry,” Regina says, grimacing. “We could drop him over this afternoon.”

“I really don’t mind,” Marian says. “ Anything to support my friend making more of the beast with two backs.”

“Hit Marian for me,” Regina tells Henry and he frowns.

“Mom,” he says sternly. “We’ve talked about your rage issues.”

Emma can’t help the laugh that erupts, volcanic, from her at this.

They spend a lazy day in the neighbourhood, shopping and walking and, when Henry starts to get grouchy, they curl up against each other, coffees in hand, on a park bench, watching Henry work off his excess energy on the playground.
“Marian’s being very generous, taking Henry,” Emma says.

“It goes both ways,” Regina replies. “Though I rather suspect she’s building me up to taking care of Roland when she and Mulan finally do the deed and Marian drags her on a month long sex cruise.”

(Mulan and Marian have been “taking it slowly” in Mulan’s words and “pace of a freaking dead snail” in Marian’s.

Emma has tried not to express too much amusement over this, mostly because Mulan’s mean when she’s mocked.)

Emma smiles, leaning her head against Regina’s shoulder and squeezing her hand. They sit together in companionable silence until Henry runs over, his cheeks red and grinning. “Can we get lunch?”

It’s such a fantasy world, a world where Emma can imagine she’s Henry’s other mom, where she and Regina raised him together. He holds her hand when they leave lunch, standing between the pair of them and practically skipping.

It’s a dangerous world.

Later in the afternoon, they drop him back at Marian’s and then return to Regina’s to get ready. Without Henry, the tension rises, reminded of all that happened that morning and the potential danger to come. “We should get dressed,” Regina says, eyeing her wardrobe critically. “Something a bit more… party-friendly.”

It’s difficult to contain herself as Regina strips methodically, leaving Emma staring like a pervert at the curve of her back, the nubs of her spine, the smooth light brown of her skin, as she rifles through her wardrobe. She pulls out a dress, turns and then laughs. “Your face!”

“It’s not fair,” Emma grumbles, feeling her face grow warm. She probably has an ugly, rash-like redness to her cheeks and neck and the thought of that embarrasses her even more. “You hanging out, being all sexy.”
In response, Regina throws her a scrap of dark fabric. “Your jeans will do but you can borrow this.” Two can play at this game, Emma thinks. She holds up the shirt, backless and translucent in places, and pulls her own tank top off. Regina bites her lip, pupils dilating, when Emma unclasps her bra, shrugging it off.

“No time,” Emma says, when Regina steps forward, her intent all too clear. “We have to get to Somerville by seven.”

“Hang Somerville,” Regina says, kissing Emma’s neck, one hand coming up to rest on Emma’s breast, thumb strumming her nipple. Emma gasps, shutting her eyes, the sensation too much. And for a moment, she lets herself fall, lets the moment — Regina — overwhelm her.

But no. “This is important,” she says, shaking her head, even as Regina’s lips press to the shell of her ear.

Regina pulls away reluctantly. “Put the damn top on and stop tempting me then,” she says.

And soon after, Regina has pulled together sandwiches, eaten at the kitchen bench, and they’re in her car on the way to Somerville.

Killian’s house is a big, ramshackle place, booming with noise that can be heard from the car halfway down the block. Dread pools in the pit of her stomach, heart beating a sharp rat-tat-tat rhythm that she’s sure can be heard even over the noise. They enter the house, the room full of people — mostly girls — and ratty, stained couches. The air smells of cigarette smoke and sweat and her mouth tastes dry, her tongue scaly and throat itchy.

It’s shit music and, God, everyone seems so young and she clutches Regina’s hand like a lifeline. Regina’s palm is warm.

William Smee waves when he sees them and immediately gravitates towards Regina, pulling off his red beanie and stuffing it in his pocket. This, Emma reflects, is a mistake because it only draws attention to his bald patch. “Hey!” he says. “You came. Drink?” He doesn’t even look at Emma, obviously enamoured with Regina, but Regina does look over at her. Emma just shrugs.

“A drink would be lovely,” Regina says, pasting a smile on her face. “None for my friend,” she adds. “She’s my sober driver.”
Smee just nods, eyes fixed somewhere below Regina’s neckline (and Emma’s trying not to feel angry or possessive), and then turns towards the kitchen. Emma places her hand at the small of Regina’s back. “Just, be careful,” she murmurs.

“Always,” Regina says, lips tensing into a stern line. “Killian’s over there, by the way.” She jerks her elbow towards a corner, where Killian stands, holding a video camera and chatting to a girl. Emma swears under her breath, feels Regina’s fingers tighten around her hand.

Smee returns with a drink for Regina, some toxic-looking punch that Emma hopes Regina won’t be idiotic enough to drink. “You want I should introduce you to Killian?” he asks, noticing where her gaze is fixed.

She jerks her head away. “That’s cool,” she says, dropping Regina’s hand and running her fingers through her curls. “I’ll mingle.”

She leaves Regina with Smee and wanders, avoiding Killian. She feels like the oldest woman in the room, and though there are enough guys around to not be inordinately suspicious, it still feels rather like the university queer women’s coalition parties Jas used to drag her to on occasion. She makes nice with a redheaded woman when her friend — a woman with a thick braid of black hair that falls down past her butt — goes to the kitchen. She’s tipsy, and giggly with it. “I’m Ariel!” she says. “Like the mermaid.”

“Nice,” Emma says. “So what’s the deal here?” She shifts forward so that she’s whispering in Ariel’s ear, her tone confiding. “I kind of got dragged into this whole thing by my friend. She’s a huge fan of Killian’s.”

“Killian’s making a video!” Ariel says. “It’s, like, this ‘Welcome to Boston’ thing?”

“And this party?” Emma asks, making the mistake of leaning against the table and stick her hands in a puddle of spilled punch. “He doesn’t seem like the kind of guy who makes tourism videos.”

For a moment, Ariel looks uncertain. “…fun?” she says and then lets out a shriek. “Oh my God, Killian’s coming over. I might die.”

“Do you know where the bathroom is?” Ariel points down the hall and so Emma heads into the body of the house, the stale smell of the living area stronger than ever. She finds the bathroom, washing her hands which are sticky with punch, and then explores further. The final door in the hallway is shut and, when she opens it, she finds a bedroom. The only light comes from the
moonlight shining in from the open window, but she can see enough to see a camera set up and pointing at the bed.

This can’t be good.

“Hullo, love,” comes a voice from behind her and she flinches away from the press of a hand against the small of her back, the intrusion of his touch against her bare skin horrifying. She recognises that voice.

She doesn’t turn, hopes the combination of loose hair and dim light hides her identity. “I got turned around,” she says, pitching her voice higher and giggling nervously at the end of the sentence. “I’ll get out of here.”

“Oh you ended up in just the right place,” he says. His breath is hot on her neck and one hand pushes her hair over one shoulder, and she tenses again. “Don’t be scared, love.”

“What’s the camera for?” Emma asks, willing her body to relax as his fingers trail down her spine.

He laughs, the sound low and coarse and she feels sick. “Just a little prank I’m planning,” he says, moving so that she’s facing him, backed up against the door, his hands flat against the door on either side of her face. She’s never considered herself claustrophobic, but his closeness trapping her in has her brain in a panic. “But, you know, we could always get a little more comfortable, make a video of our—”

Just then the moonlight hits her face and he stops. “Emma Swan,” he says, jaw tightening. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

“Your buddy invited me,” she says, improvising hastily. “I wanted to see you. I’ve missed you, Killian.”

“No, you didn’t,” he says and for the first time she’s actually afraid of him, his lip curled into an angry snarl and his hands drawing into fists. He actually appears dangerous and she tries to step back, hitting her head against the door. “You wanted to spy on me. Jesus, Swan. Get out of my house.”

“You don’t see how creepy this is?” Emma asks, as he grabs her elbow, dragging her out. His cheeks are flushed, whether from alcohol or anger she can’t be sure. “All these girls…” He yanks
at her arm, fingertips digging into her skin. She’s sure he’ll leave bruises.

They’re at the back door, Hook having managed to bypass the party itself. Although there are a few curious spectators in the kitchen, he manages to open the door and manhandle her out it without anyone interrupting. “Don’t come back,” he says and slams the door. A moment later the door opens again and he throws her coat out at her.

She stumbles down the steps and kicks at the side of the house, wincing when pain jars through her toe. Pulls out her phone, she texts Regina. *I’ve been found out.*

Regina’s response is swift — and worrying, the knot in her stomach tightening. *I got this.*

She calls her and when Regina answers, she can hear music in the background and the muffled sounds of Smee talking. “Regina, I have a really bad feeling about this.”

“Emma! Just a minute. Just…” The noise and music in the background fades. “I’m in the bathroom.” Emma tells herself it’s just bad reception that makes it sounds like Regina’s slurring.

“The girls don’t know why they’re here,” Emma says. “But there’s a camera set up in his bedroom. I don’t know what he’s planning but I don’t like this.” She pulls her coat more tightly around herself, shivering.

Regina is silent, the only sound for a long moment is her breathing. “Emma, I think someone’s been spiking the punch.”

She squeezes her eyes shut. “Shit,” she says. “How much have you had?”

“A glass,” she says. “I feel really weird, Emma. All, I don’t know, fuzzy at the edges.”

She’s stuck outside, helpless, while Regina’s in danger. It was never supposed to be this way. Emma was supposed to take the risks, not Regina. She feels the fear twist in her gut and the tight claws close around her heart. “Get out of there,” she says, her voice sharp. “Now.”

“I think I can find out their plan,” Regina says and, before Emma can speak further, she hangs up.
She swears under her breath. It’s cold, even with her coat, and she looks up at the night sky, taking in a deep breath, steadying herself. “Regina, you idiot.”

She calls the police, keeping her voice steady as she explains about the party and the spiked drinks and the fact that some of the women there were definitely under 21. “We’ll send someone along,” the woman at the end of the line says. She knows too well though that they’ll take their time, if they ever show up. She’s got to get back in there.

Pacing, she gets as far as Regina’s car, and then back to the house. She imagines Regina unable to push Smee away. She imagines what use Killian could have for a camera in his bedroom, pointed directly at the bed. Her brain spirals out of control into nightmarish images, destructive and potent.

She taps her foot, clenches her jaw. Still no sign of the police. Every minute she’s out here is a minute wasted, a minute where Regina could be hurt.

And then she doesn’t think so much as she barrels forward, storming towards the house. There’s an open window out back and, adrenaline coursing through her body, she scales the wall, clambering through the window and landing in Killian’s bedroom.

It’s no longer empty. There’s a girl in the bed, passed out, and for a moment, she sees Regina there, sprawled under the covers, and she freezes, bile rising in her throat. But no. The woman has red hair and a heavier build, looks nothing like Regina in fact. She shakes her. “Hey,” she whispers, and then louder. “Hey!”

The woman groans, turning over, and her eyes open blearily. It’s Ariel, the girl from before, her hair a tangled mess against the pillows and the thin strap of her top sliding down her otherwise bare arm. “What the hell? Whose bed…”

“I’ll get you out of here,” she says, voice urgent.

It’s at that moment that Regina bursts into the bedroom. “Emma!” she says, urgent and swaying slightly. “Emma, they’re gonna film girls in bed with Captain Guyliner.”

But Smee follows directly behind her, grabbing her arm as he enters. “No one’s supposed to be —” He sees Emma and he stops. “Oh fuck.”
Emma sees red, feels the rage whirl up in a violent hurricane of emotion. “What’s the game plan here, buddy?” Emma asks, surging forward and pushing Smee into the wall, elbow at his throat. Regina ducks around her, sitting beside Ariel, throwing her jacket over her shoulders in an effort to stop her from shivering, and patting her leg, murmuring nonsense to her.

Smee chokes, coughing. “Just a prank.”

“Drugging women is a prank?” Emma asks, snarling, and slams her hand against the door beside his head.

And Smee folds. “We thought we’d drug them and when they wake up, Killian’s there, all ‘surprise, we totally had sex!’ They wouldn’t of course. It’s a joke!”

Emma stares at him blankly, stepping back. Smee rubs at his throat, gasping. “I’m not laughing.” There had been a YouTuber a couple of years back who’d filmed himself groping women; he’d called that a prank too and Emma had been horrified. The horror she’d felt then in reading about the aftermath is nothing to how she feels now. She wants to destroy Killian, Smee, all despicable assholes who think this is funny. She wants them to burn.

She hears pounding footsteps and then Killian appears in the doorway. “Smee, mate, the police—What the fuck are you doing here again, Swan?”

Then two things happen at once. The first is that Ariel retches, vomiting on Killian’s bedspread, and then starts to sob. The second is that Regina launches forward, almost toppling over in her heeled boots, and punches Killian square in the nose.

And that is literally the only thing that stops Emma from tearing him apart.

*  

It is well past midnight by the time they get home from the police station and Regina’s house is cold and dark. Emma presses close to her as the exit the car, as Regina fumbles for her house keys, as they walk up the stairs. It’s only in her physical presence that she knows Regina’s safe. “I’m glad Marian has Henry,” Regina says, sitting on her bed and pulling off her boots. She flexes her toes, still clad in thick woollen socks. “I wouldn’t want him to see me like this.” She appears to have reached a melancholy stage in her drugged state, had spent the drive home staring out the window, sighing periodically and fighting back tears.
(Emma supposes this is marginally better than the exceptionally grouchy phase, which appeared about the moment they were being questioned by the police.)

“Are you okay?” she asks, hovering.

“Yes,” Regina says, and she sighs. She holds up last night’s nightgown, surveying it with a critical eye, before bundling it into a ball, throwing it in the laundry hamper and grabbing a pair of flannel pyjamas patterned with flowers. Emma thinks she understands. She needs comfort too. “I’m fine. I just, I need to not be alone right now.”

“I can do that,” she says, swapping Regina’s top for her own tank top and pulling off her jeans. Regina’s hand grasps her, pulling her to the bathroom, and they brush their teeth, shooting each other glances in the mirror. Regina’s hand reflexively reaches out to tap patterns into the skin of Emma’s bare thighs.

When they return to the bedroom, Regina hesitates by the bed. “Look, you really don’t have to—”

But Emma stops her. “I don’t want to be alone either,” she says and Regina finally melts, folding into Emma’s arms, her breathing rapid and anxious, loud in the quiet of the room, and her tears soaking Emma’s tank top. Emma guides her to bed, curls up against her and Regina lets herself be held, her breathing evening out as she relaxes and, finally, sleeps. She presses her face into Regina’s neck, breathes her scent in, hopes.

She wakes up the next morning still spooning Regina and she looks over at her, her face bathed in wintry morning light. She’s so beautiful, so everything, and she is struck with this inexplicable wave of longing before reality hits and she remembers she’s opening the deli in less than an hour. She presses a kiss to her cheek and pulls her arm from underneath her body.

In an absurdly clichéd romantic gesture, she leaves a note on the pillow before returning to her apartment for fresh clothes.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to coalitiongirl for the advice and feedback with much of this chapter.
In which the day starts off well (and ends in the death of EvilQueen101)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**Killian Jones Sexual Assault Prank Unmasked: A Dangerous Culture**

*In the late hours of Saturday night, police were called to the residence of Killian Jones aka Cptnhook, well-known YouTuber and Boston native.*

*Jones is known for his eclectic assortment of vlogs, ranging from original poetry and songs, to pranks. Though often in poor taste, his latest intended prank — a ‘how would you react’ video where drugged girls are placed in bed beside him and tricked into believing they had sex with him while their reactions are filmed — was particularly poorly considered and was fortunately interrupted. Jones’ attempted prank is indicative of a broader culture of entitlement among young men on YouTube…*

— extract from breaking news story, published Sunday afternoon

Regina wakes on Sunday blissfully late and alone. Emma must have drawn the curtains before she left and the light streaming through the windows is cold against her back. She stretches, her head pounding and mouth scaly. Beside her bed, she sees a note, along with a couple of pain killers and a bottle of water.

*Your majesty,*

*Had to go to work and couldn ’t bring myself to wake you up. I hope your head isn’t too sore.*

*I could get very used to waking up next to you.*

*Emma*

This weekend has been like a story — not a fairytale, not with the trauma of last night. However, cocooned in the weekend, in the lack of the minutiae of day-to-day life, she has been able to imagine this grand romance, a story where Emma moves from being her nemesis to her knight in shining armour, where her kisses make her swoon, where she doesn’t have to take on the whole world by herself. Before Daniel’s death, she had been something of a romantic. She had adored the love-hate, push-pull of the romantic comedies she watched secretly late at night, after Cora and her father had gone to bed. But she knows now that romance is for suckers; Daniel died, after all, no matter how much she loved him.

Emma is starting to make her believe again and it terrifies her.

She tells Marian as much when she goes to pick up Henry, as soon as she is done poking fun of
the fact that Marian is still in her pyjamas after midday. Marian sweeps a hand through dark, unbrushed hair and yawns. “Just please don’t fuck it up,” she says. “I like Mulan. I don’t want to feel guilty for hanging out with her.”

“I wouldn’t make you—” Regina starts but Marian just laughs.

“You would,” she says and when Regina opens her mouth to speak again, she adds, “it’s fine.” The front door slams open and moments later, Henry runs into the kitchen, leaning his head on her shoulder. Shortly after, Mulan enters the kitchen, Roland on her shoulders. She’s carrying a loaf of fresh bread in one hand and she kneels to let Roland down, before pressing a soft kiss to Marian’s hair, who glows at the brief contact. Roland clambers up onto his mother’s lap and plays with the tie of her bathrobe.

Regina raises her eyebrows. “Sleepovers, huh?” she asks and grins at the flush that rises in Mulan’s cheeks.

Marian throws Roland’s hat at her. “Couch,” she says. “Unlike certain other women with looser morals.”

Regina just laughs and ruffles Henry’s hair when he stares between the pair of them in confusion. “Come on, darling,” she says. “Home time.”

He runs ahead, balancing on the edge of the pavement and spinning around power pylons, while she trudges behind, cold and feeling the effects of last night still. “Don’t cross the road,” she calls and he turns and rolls his eyes.

“I know.” But he waits at the intersection and clasps a mitted hand in hers. “You look old.”

“Thank you, sweetheart,” she says dryly. “I’m just tired.”

“Not sick?” He peers up at her, worrying at his bottom lip. His eyebrows draw together.

(He worries more than he should when she’s unwell. “You won’t ever leave me, will you, Mommy?” he’d asked when he’d been five and she’d been laid up with the flu, sick enough that she’d had to hire a babysitter for him for three days while she lay in bed, and she’d let out a croaky laugh and promised that she would go to all his first grade lessons with him and come to his first sleepover and accompany him to the bathroom and on and on until he had giggled and...
groaned, “Mommy, no!”)

Henry finally runs out of stories about how cool Mulan is after lunch. He is lying on the rug in his bedroom, reading, while she attempts to respond to work emails that have been building up. However, it proves fruitless. Instead she spends the remainder of the afternoon in the kitchen, giving it a much overdue clean and then preparing pastelón for dinner. She’d bought plantains at the grocery store a few days ago on a whim and she’s grateful for them now. She finds she wants to remember her father today, to remember his sense of decency, his quiet calm in the face of the torrent of rage that was Cora, the food and comfort provided after every argument, every punishment… Cooking his recipes is her way to do that and she allows herself to get lost in the dicing and sautéing and frying.

While the pastelón cooks, she makes cookie dough. “Yum,” Henry says when he comes into the kitchen, attempting to stealthily sneak dough.

She frowns. “Henry.” He grins and stuffs the hunk of dough in his mouth. “I hope the egg makes you sick in punishment for your dreadful manners.”

“Ish delicious,” he says through his mouthful.

“Pushing it, young man,” she says, though she can’t help but smile, wrapping the dough in cling film and sticking it in the fridge.

She makes a production of dinner, using the good dinner set (the ones Henry picked out last year with a blue and yellow floral trim to replace the cheap and battered set of Henry’s infancy) and cloth napkins, the candlesticks and wine glasses for apple juice. “Is it someone’s birthday?” Henry asks, sitting down across from her.

“No,” she says. Then, she realises. “Actually, yes it is. It’s Daniel’s birthday, well, would have been.” She can’t believe she forgot—but the voice at the back of her mind tells her Daniel wouldn’t want her to grieve, to become morbid about birthdays, to self-flagellate. All of a sudden, celebrating his birthday seems right.

Henry’s fork stills at his lips. “I didn’t know. We’ve never…”

“I know,” she says, sighing. “It’s about time we celebrated your father’s birthday, isn’t it?”
“You should make him a cake,” he says, and he’s grinning hopefully.

She’s struck by such love for her son that it nearly overwhelms her and she reaches out across the table, clasping his hand in hers. “I love you, sweetheart. You know that, yes?”

Henry rolls his eyes. “Duh. Hey, if Emma comes over next weekend maybe we could teach her to play Apples to Apples?”

“Perhaps,” Regina says. It had taken all of her self-control not to invite Emma to dinner that night. She’s glad she didn’t though; the relationship — if it is even a relationship — is too fresh, too new. Henry’s already more attached to Emma than he ever was to Robin and she worries because she doesn’t exactly have the greatest track record.

Henry retires to bed early, after a couple of cookies hot from the oven. “I’m up to a really exciting part in my book,” he’d said. She’s making herself a coffee when she realises she hasn’t checked her phone all afternoon. There’s a message. “Regina, dear, it’s your mother. I just had lunch with Leopold Blanchard. We talked about the function you went to with him and the rather… intriguing new friend you made. He made mention of some videos… Call me back.”

As she listens, a chill rushes across her, a gust of harsh wind. When was the message left? 3.07. Hours and hours ago. Her mother is utterly incompetent with the internet, something that had saved her many a time during her high school days (because the thought of her mother reading through her search history during the time when she was figuring out her sexuality is too horrifying to even think about), but it will only take her so long to find everything. Perhaps she already has. The idea of Cora watching her videos — especially the ones where she talks about the verbal abuse inflicted by Cora, where she discusses her efforts to be better than the only role model for motherhood she had — makes her want to vomit.

She has to burn everything. Destroy all evidence. Kill EvilQueen101.

She’s shaking when she logs onto her computer and systematically deletes all her social media accounts.

It’s ridiculous to want to cry over being forced into leaving a community without a trace, without warning, and yet her throat feels thick and her eyes itch. She rubs at them, glad that she didn’t bother with makeup today. Then, she picks up her phone again, taking several deep breaths, trying desperately to steady the frantic beat of her heart and the anxiety rising up in her like water bubbling up, threatening to boil over. She will be calm, she will not allow Cora to rattle her. Before she can call her mother, however, her phone rings, Emma’s picture flashing on screen. “Emma, this isn’t—”
“Hey!” Emma says, voice bright. She can hear her smile and her heart aches at it. “I’m just at the grocery store down the road from you and I was thinking, we need to make a sum up video. You, me, bottle of wine?”

“This really isn’t the time,” Regina says, her words clipped. She hates herself for her tone, but she can’t stop the chill seeping into her words.

“I can call back in a few minutes,” Emma says.

“No,” Regina snaps. “I’ll—I don’t have time for this right now.”

She regrets her phrasing the moment she hears it but before she can explain, Emma responds and she can hear the muted hurt in her voice. “Okay.” And she hangs up before Regina can say anything more.

She’ll explain later. But she’s discombobulated, Emma’s call has dissolved her thin facade of calm. She runs her fingers through her hair and ensures her clothing is presentable, as stringent with her appearance as though Cora would actually be able to see her. Unable to delay any longer, she straightens her back, crossing her legs and squeezing her eyes shut, praying to any deity who might hear her that she wasn’t too late, and calls Cora. “Hello, Mother,” she says, when Cora picks up.

“Regina, dear,” Cora says. “How kind of you to return my call.” She can imagine her, dressed in her Sunday best (because although the Mills family had never been particularly religious it looked good to go to church on Sundays in a town like Storybrooke and Cora Mills was all about appearances), seated at her desk, phone on speaker so that she can work throughout their conversation.

“It has only been a few hours,” she says. She can feel her headache returning already. “I can’t be at your beck and call.”

“Did I suggest otherwise?” Cora never raises her voice, never has, but there’s a dangerous, silky quality to her tone to which Regina has become particularly attuned and right now every hair on her body is standing upright. “Now, Leopold tells me he had a lovely time with you at the benefit.”
Regina grimaces. “A lovely time,” she says. She hears a knock at the front door, persistent, and ignores it. Whoever it is can return later. “I adore being set up with men who have known me since I was a child and who are older than my father.”

“Regina, I cannot abide this passive aggression. You really must say what you mean.” Cora’s fingers click at a keyboard. “Now, Leopold tells me there was a young woman at the benefit, some friend of Mary Margaret’s, with whom you were very friendly.”

“Emma,” Regina says, sighing. Here it comes.

“Sounded like an interesting character,” Cora says. “I would have thought you would know better than to expose your son to a drunk idiot who makes ill-informed videos. Leopold seemed to think —”

“I did one video with her,” Regina interrupts. “She was investigating a sexual predator in the community.” She pauses and realises. “But you’ve seen that, of course.” She was foolish to get involved, to put content out that she doesn’t directly control.

“And that is something you are uniquely qualified to speak about?” Cora asks.

“Perhaps not uniquely,” Regina says. “I like to think I offer a perspective though.”

“Honestly, dear. The company you keep…” Cora has never liked Marian either, perhaps because Marian isn’t afraid of her like every single other one of Regina’s friends since infancy. Perhaps because once Marian pretended they were in a relationship to ruin a set-up Cora had planned at a Thanksgiving dinner. Perhaps because Regina’s association with Marian makes her own Latinoadad all the more apparent. Cora would much prefer Regina to run in the circles of her high school days: white, affluent, and heterosexual.

“Do you have a point?” she asks.

“Evil Queen One-oh-one,” Cora says, sounding out every humiliating syllable. “It’s adorable really that you use the name from your student council days.”

“Do you have a point?” Regina asks. Her headache is back with a vengeance and she rubs at her neck.
Cora makes a noise, something halfway between a cough and a sigh. “And yet when I tried to find EvilQueen101’s account just now, it had disappeared,” she says.

“I never had an account of my own,” she says, willing the trembling in her body not to be heard in her voice.

Her mother scoffs. “I’m sure you didn’t. Hardly a good career move, dear. And as for your friend… To think she actually wants to own a business one day.” She laughs, and the implication is clear. Cora might not be able to touch Regina, and one of the benefits of going into science rather than business was that it shifted her out of her mother’s sphere of influence, but she can hurt Emma.

“Emma isn’t a friend,” she says, voice cold. “Honestly, I’ve only been civil with her for this particular cause. Now that’s over…”

“Well, that’s something I suppose,” Cora says, and she sounds satisfied.

“Did you have any other reason for calling?” she asks. “Only, I should check in on my son.”

“Yes,” Cora says after a moment’s pause. “I wish for you and Henry to come to Storybrooke for Christmas. It has been too long.”

“I’ll speak to Henry about it,” Regina says because like hell she’s ruining Christmas for her son with her mother’s passive aggressive jabs. They had a Storybrooke Christmas once, shortly after her father’s death, and Cora had been irritated by Henry’s enthusiasm within an hour. “I need to go, Mother.” She hangs up before Cora can say anything more and gulps in a deep breath, and then another.

And then she hears it. A sharp intake of breath. She whirls around and finds Emma in the doorway. She is still wearing her coat and boots, and has a bottle of sparkling wine in one hand. “Henry let me in,” she says. “He checked before he unlocked. You sounded stressed. I thought I could—”

The only sound in the office is Regina’s jagged breathing, too rapid. She can feel her skin prickle, tastes the anxiety rising in her throat. “What did you hear?”
“I suppose I should be grateful for your civility,” Emma says, not looking at her but at a point somewhere over her shoulder. “It must have been very trying for you.”

“Emma, no, it’s not—” but she is cut off.

“You didn’t have to pretend,” she says and, God, she’s almost crying, her eyes wet and red. “God, I’m such an idiot. I punched Mary Margaret for suggesting you would do something like this.”

“Emma, my mother—”

“Expects better than someone like me for you?” Emma barks out a laugh, the sound wet and rasping. “Thought so. Well, we caught Killian in the act, saved the day. I won’t make you endure me anymore.” And she turns on her heel and runs.

For a moment, Regina’s frozen in place, arms clutching the side of the chair so tightly her knuckles are white. “Emma!” However, Emma is quick and she has shoes on and Regina’s no match for her in socked feet on frigid pavement. She quickly loses sight of her, disappearing into the dark. Sitting on the front door step, she calls Emma, over and over and over again. Emma doesn’t pick up. On the third attempt she leaves a message. “Emma, you idiot, call me back,” she snaps into the phone. “It’s not what you think.”

Then, phone cradled in her hands and safe in the knowledge that Henry won’t be able to hear her, not with the front door between them, she cries, shivering and shuddering in the cold.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for your patience. I am sorry I have been so crap lately. It’s been quite a month.
In which Emma deals with her emotions in a mature and responsible way
(and Taylor Swift is terrible for grand romantic gestures)

Chapter Notes

Big thank you to Bailey who helped me figure out what needed to happen and when
<3

They’d finally banged, high on the adrenaline of kicking asses and taking names, so when Emma wakes up that morning to discover Regina has deleted all her accounts, she panics. She imagines something horrible has happened to her evil queen, or that she regretted last night so much that she can’t bear to even be a part of the community where they met.

She could never regret it, could never regret the husk of Regina’s voice, the velvet touch of her skin, the way she arched her back when Emma pressed just right...

Tags: #I am a terrible person #evilprincess101 #nsfw
— an extract from a Tumblr post from Saraaaaaaaaah entitled ‘What happened after the videos were deleted’

Emma does the incredibly mature thing upon leaving Regina’s house. She takes the bottle of wine, heads home to her empty apartment, and gets drunk. When she finishes the wine (which was too expensive really because she was trying to impress Regina and, well, look how well that all turned out), she moves on to the bottle of gin in the pantry. At some point after midnight, she’s dozing on the couch and Tamara returns home, the thud of the door waking her with a start. “Thought you’d be with your lady friend?” she asks. Emma looks up at her blearily. Tamra looks exhausted, coming in at the end of a twelve hour shift in Emergency, and she’s carrying a bag of Doritos in one hand, her cigarettes in the other.

“Turns out she wasn’t as into me as I was into her,” she says, finishing the dregs of the glass of gin resting on the floor.

“I see we’ve taken the mature path in dealing with this,” Tamara says. She dumps her belongings on the table, and pulls her phone from her pocket. “Do you need me to call Mulan?”

Emma shakes her head. “She’s dating R—her best friend. I don’t wanna ruin that.” She curls her feet up under her and leans her head against a cushion. “Just want to sleep.”

Tamara looks longingly at the door to her bedroom before sighing. Emma leans back against the
arm of the couch, closing her eyes. Everything’s blurry, the world a whirlpool, but the next thing she knows is that she’s been covered with the duvet from her bed and Tamara is placing a glass of water on the bookshelf beside her, as well as a packet of aspirin. “For morning,” she says. “Night.”

“Night,” Emma mumbles and closes her eyes.

She wakes up to a dead phone, a headache and the realisation that she has to be at work in half an hour. She stands, swaying slightly, and downs the water, popping two aspirin. There’s barely time to shower, no time for breakfast or coffee, and she arrives at work with dirty hair braided back and the mother of all headaches. “Rough night?” Ruby asks, setting up the till.

She pours her a coffee and Emma grasps it gratefully, eyeing the cinnamon rolls. Perhaps there’s a burnt one or a broken one or a runt, one they can’t in good conscience sell, and she can eat it. “Word of advice,” she says, mouth tasting gritty even with the aid of coffee. “Don’t drink on a school night.” Was the light always this bright in the deli? It seems to burn into her skull.

“Yes, Grandma,” Ruby says, and hands Emma a cinnamon roll that’s charred on one side. “Anyway, I thought you were spending the weekend with the evil queen,” she adds, filling the milk jugs. They are due to open in two minutes and she should probably feel more guilty about how unhelpful she’s being.

The bite of pastry in her mouth starts to taste of chalk and she is utterly humiliated to feel the tears prick at her eyes. “Don’t,” she snaps, taking a deep breath and throwing the cinnamon bun in the trash.

Ruby’s attitude changes instantly, a frown softening her features. She approaches, a hand darting out as if to comfort, but drawing back. Emma’s grateful; she doesn’t think she can handle too much sympathy. “Oh, honey,” Ruby says, sighing.

“Sometimes things don’t work out,” is all she says and she gets up to flip the sign from ‘closed’ to ‘open’. She needs to keep busy and, fortunately, the morning rush of people buying coffee and breakfast keeps achieves this, stops thoughts of Regina creeping in and making themselves at home in the worst possible way.

At lunchtime, her phone has charged and she turns it on, dreading the onslaught of messages from Regina — or, worse, nothing. Five messages pop up, but she ignores them, deletes them unread. As well as that, she has received various direct messages and emails about the Killian situation (including a couple of flames today because how dare she try and expose precious Killyphoo to be despicable and guilty of sexual assault?). She rolls her eyes at these, but screencaps them before
deleting. They might make for a good vlog at some point. As a result of indiscriminate deleting, she almost misses the last email.

---

Emma,

I saw the articles about Killian Jones and heard whispers online about what you and Regina did. I suppose I just want to write to thank you. I know I wasn’t exactly appreciative or helpful to you those weeks ago, but I am grateful. I shudder when I think about where that situation could have led.

It helped me see other things in a new light as well. I broke up with my boyfriend and I’m back with my dad for a little bit.

Anyway. Thank you again. If you’re ever out Cambridge way, drop me a line and I’ll buy you a cup of coffee.

Belle French

---

And just like that, everything that happened that weekend has to be worth it. Regina may think she’s nothing, not even a friend, but they did something important and that cannot be denied.

Perhaps it is because of this email that upon entering her apartment after work and finding Mary Margaret Blanchard on her couch, glaring at an aggrieved Tamara, she doesn’t immediately turn around and leave. “Your friend won’t go away,” Tamara says from her perch on the windowsill when Emma enters, dumping her bag and coat on the floor. Tamara’s tense; she finishes one cigarette and immediately lights the next. “She keeps lecturing me about second hand smoke. I had to put Lance off and, Emma, I haven’t had sex in ten days.”

“I’m sorry,” Emma says. She doesn’t look at Mary Margaret, though she can feel her eyes boring into her. “Call him. This won’t take long.”

“Because you will take her elsewhere,” Tamara says, glaring. It’s at times like these that Emma remembers Tamara is a nurse and has access to a lot of really potent medicines. She’s pretty sure that if she doesn’t get Mary Margaret out of the apartment right now, she’s going to wake up with a numb butt, or diarrhoea, or possibly stitches in unfortunate places.

“Fine.” She supposes she can’t put this off forever. She shrugs her coat back on and storms out. Although she hears Mary Margaret’s clipping footsteps behind her, she stays several steps ahead of her until she reaches the Dunkin Donuts down the road. There, she orders a small coffee and a chocolate glazed donut, before settling in at a small table by the toilets and watching Mary Margaret order. Mary Margaret smiles at the woman at the counter, engaging her in animated conversation, and holding up the queue. It’s so typically Mary Margaret, and Emma can’t help the reluctant smile that forms. When she looks over though, coffee and pastry in hand, she wipes the smile from her face, scowling down at her coffee.
Mary Margaret slips into the seat across from her. This close she can see the yellow of a fading bruise. “Emma—”

“She’s not——” and in what is one of the top ten most humiliating moments in her life, she starts to cry. It’s not even sedate tears, a few teardrops rolling down her cheeks in that beautiful way of romance movies, but deep, choking sobs. Her nose runs and her chest aches. She can’t see but she can feel people staring at her. Mary Margaret slides napkins across the table to her and she blows her nose noisily.

Then, calm now, she dabs at her eyes. “Ugh,” she says. “I’m sorry.”

And Emma tells her everything about the weekend, finishing with the overheard dismissive phone conversation. “I thought we were getting somewhere,” she says, sniffing. “I thought, well, I don’t know what I thought, but it wasn’t this.”

Mary Margaret sighs. “Perhaps you need to talk to her,” she says. “At least if nothing else you’d get some closure.”

“I can’t,” Emma says, sighing. “I’ve never made the first step before and I did for her. Look where that got me. I can’t listen to a more polite rejection.” It doesn’t matter how often she’s rejected; it still burns. It’s the family who gave her back when they had a biological child. It’s the six foster homes before she was even a teenager. It’s Neal’s betrayal. It’s Jasmine breaking up with her because she didn’t measure up.

“Has she tried to talk to you?” Mary Margaret asks.
“She’s sent a few messages,” Emma says. “I haven’t read them. She’s also deleted everything, YouTube, Twitter, Tumblr. She’s made it pretty clear that part of her life is over.” She licks her fingers and picks up the crumbs of her donut from the paper bag.

“She lives around the corner from you,” Mary Margaret says. She’s hardly disappeared.

(Emma knows what she thinks of the online world, of social media communities. ”They’re not really your friends,” she’d said after a few too many glasses of wine at a party in the early days of Emma’s engagement with the YouTube vlogging community. Emma had made some smart comment about Mary Margaret’s involvement in Pinterest communities and Mulan and David had both choked on their drinks.)

“I need time,” Emma says, sighing, and when Mary Margaret looks like she’s going to push, she adds, “don’t ruin things before we’ve even healed.”

Mary Margaret narrows her eyes but then says, “okay,” and changes the subject to David and the new veterinarian he is working for and how her fourth graders are coming along really nicely and how they’re maybe trying for a baby. They pass a very pleasant fifteen minutes until Emma finishes her coffee and excuses herself. “Dinner soon?” Mary Margaret asks, smiling tentatively.

She nods. She’s not sure she’s ready yet, honestly, but Mary Margaret’s trying and she has never rejected her and Emma’s coming to realise that means a lot. That means everything, even in the face of different lifestyles and a disposition towards busy bodying and a judgemental streak a mile wide. “Dinner would be great,” she says, and Mary Margaret beams.

Time goes on.

As the days progress, the requests for a follow up continue. She is being inundated on Twitter with questions about when she’s going to do a vlog about Killian. We want to hear your side of the story. Tell us eeeeverything. When are you and EQ101 gonna do a vlog together again? However, just as much as she’s being asked about Killian, she is also being asked about EvilQueen101, where she went and whether she’s coming back. Her mentions on Twitter fills up with questions about Regina. You had such good chemistry, one girl says, and then there are several mildly suggestive comments following that where the emoji that looks like shifty eyes is used in abundance.

She ignores them all. She knows she needs to make a follow up video at some point, but it’s too raw right now. Instead, she tweets about how busy she is (I appreciate your support and I
promise I’ll be back in action soon!) and she works, she studies, and she avoids everyone except Tamara. Emails from Regina go deleted. She only communicates with Mulan through text message because she’s not sure what will be worse, Mulan judging her for her avoidance tactics or Mulan being sympathetic because Marian has told her things from Regina’s point of view and everything will be confirmed.

Because, secretly, late at night, she imagines that it was all a big misunderstanding. She doesn’t want to talk to Regina and confirm the cruel reality of the situation.

It has been four days since her coffee with Mary Margaret and it’s a lazy afternoon in the deli, the weather unseasonably fine, drawing people outside. She is doing orders, Ruby on her break and their only customers a couple of college students on their laptops in a far corner, when Mulan bursts in. “You have to see this,” she says, dark ponytail falling loose from its elastic. “I assume you’re still deleting your emails from Regina.”

Emma shrugs. “Do you have a point? I’m working.” She gestures at the nearly empty deli and then at the clipboard.

Mulan rolls her eyes. “Emma, get your head out of your ass,” she says and drags her over to a chair, sticks headphones in her ears and shoves a tablet in her hands. It’s not a YouTube video on the screen, but a video file, and the preview screen shows that it’s of Regina. She frowns and tries to hand it back to Mulan. “Please, Emma,” Mulan says.

“Fine.” She glares at the tablet. And Mulan presses play.

Regina sits behind the desk in her study, drumming her fingers against the desktop so loudly that she can hear it. She’s in a shit of a mood, Emma can tell. She scowls at the camera, sneer firmly in place and the vein in her forehead throbbing. “This is EvilQueen101 with a message for swanprincess,” she says, voice low and sharp. “If you had stuck around for maybe thirty seconds you would know that the conversation you overheard was not what it sounded like and I will thank you to never create a situation wherein Mary Margaret Blanchard shows up at my doorstep in a state again in my life.” She glares into the camera. “But Emma, you wonderful idiot, I—Marian, do I really have to do this?”

The camera shakes. Emma hears Marian laugh and say, “suck it up, Mills.”

“Fine.” Regina sighs. “I just want to say that I am very against this choice of music and its cheesy message and this had better not get turned into a series of gifs because I will actually destroy you.” She pulls a bottle of tequila into frame, downs one shot and then a second. She stands, smooths the folds of her pencil skirt, tugs at the collar of her shirt, and then comes out from behind the
desk. She is entirely in shot, from the high heeled pumps to her perfect makeup and coiffed hair. However, her make up cannot disguise the circles beneath her eyes, the exhausted downward curve of her lips.

And then music starts and Emma starts laughing and she can’t stop and, oh God, tears stream down her cheeks, because the intro to ‘Love Story’ by Taylor Swift plays and then the singing and Regina is doing the most melodramatic lip syncing she has ever seen. Her dance moves are beyond cheesy and Emma is brought back to that first moment she encountered EvilQueen101 and was trapped in the sway of hips and defiant tilt of her lips. Marian is obviously struggling with filming, the camera jiggling, and she can hear her cackle in the background.

At the end of the first chorus, Regina blows a kiss to the camera and the screen goes black.

“Well?” Mulan asks. She’s standing behind Emma, hands shoved into her pockets and a hopeful expression on her face.

Silently, Emma pulls the headphones from her ears and hands Mulan the tablet. Then she stands, reaches into her back pocket for her phone. She dials. It rings and rings and rings and for one horrible moment, she thinks Regina isn’t going to pick up but then she hears, “Emma? Is that really you?” and there is so much hope in her voice.

“Taylor Swift’s a bit played out by this point, isn’t it?” she says and she can’t keep the grin from her face.

“I loathe you,” Regina replies but Emma can hear the smile in her voice and she figures they might just be okay.
In which Marian and Mulan finally get lucky (and it's not so bad for EvilQueen101 and swanprincess either)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

---

**Uglyducklingfolife**: EMMA YOU 'RE BACK EMMA EMMA EMMA

**LuisaC**: I’m really glad our community can band together and support each other and look at the results. We miss you, EvilQueen101.

**Poorunfortunatesls**: *thumbs up emoji*

**Fandomscapegoat**: YAS SLAYYY

**Anaugustpersonage**: @fandomscapegoat Seriously. Fuck swanprincess, fuck EQ101 and especially fuck you.

[View all 27 replies]

— A Selection of comments on swanprincess’s video entitled 'Emma Presents: On the CptnHook Controversy and What This Teaches Us'

When Regina and Henry arrive at Marian’s house on Friday evening, she is dragged upstairs by Marian before she even sets down her bag. “Help,” Marian says, strained panic all too evident in her voice, and Regina laughs, content to leave Henry to find Roland on his own. She is pulled into Marian’s bedroom, which is a mess; clothes are piled up all over the bed and from amongst the clutter of fabric, Marian finds two sets of lingerie and holds them up. “Which one do you think Mulan would like more?”

“Honestly?” Regina asks, removing several items of clothing from a chair and settling into it. “I’m pretty sure you’ve been building up to this moment for so long you could be wearing sweatpants and Mulan wouldn’t be able to keep her hands off you.” She folds a tee-shirt for something to do with her hands while Marian lets out her anxieties.

Marian laughs at this and then sits down on the bed, crumpling several shirts beneath her. “Why did we take it slow?” she asks, falling back against the bed with an audible shudder of breath. “I’ve never been nervous about sex before. I’m great at sex.” She is taking Mulan away to Providence for the weekend on what Emma has started to refer to as ‘The Great Sexual Extravaganza’ and Regina has agreed to stay at Marian’s house during this time to babysit Roland and also take care of the kitten Mulan rescued two weekends ago and conned Marian into keeping. Mulan and Roland have named the irritable ginger kitten Mushu, and though Marian pretends she hates everything about it, Regina had popped over the previous Sunday and found Marian curled up asleep in an armchair, the kitten coiled around her neck and purring loudly.

In all the years she’s known her, Regina has never seen Marian smitten, all soft smiles and
concern. She thinks she likes it, likes the potential for Marian’s happiness to be absolute. “The teal,” she says and rolls her eyes when Marian immediately abandons the teal silk for maroon lace and heads into the bathroom.

“When’s Emma coming over?” she yells out the open bathroom door.

“She has to finish an assignment,” Regina says, “but hopefully not too late.” She smiles, buttons one of the shirts on her lap.

Marian’s phone beeps insistently and she leaves the bathroom, pulling on her top as she returns to the bedroom. The brief flash Regina sees of the maroon bra suits her and she briefly pities Mulan, who is going to have to keep up with Marian. She grabs her phone, swears, and pushes down on the lid of her suitcase to zip it. “God, I’ve got to go,” she says. She pulls Regina into a brief hug. “Be good.” Winking, she hauls her suitcase out of the room, calling out to Roland as she goes.

Regina looks around the bedroom when Marian has gone, just barely resisting the urge to tidy up (Marian wouldn’t mind, but she’d also mock her ceaselessly for weeks). Amongst the framed photos and clutter, there’s a picture of Marian with the Locksley family — including Robin. She can’t believe it’s only been a few months since their break up, only a few months since she made the vlog that started everything. She’s not surprised to find she doesn’t feel anything as she looks at him in the picture; he’d never have put her and Henry before his career.

But Emma’s different; she thinks Emma might put their happiness — the happiness of the three person unit that is starting to feel like family — first.

It’s been good. They’ve been talking and kissing and talking some more over the past few weeks. Emma’s coming to Henry’s Christmas pageant next week. She has met Marian properly — the closest they’ll get to a normal ‘Meet the Parents’ situation because although Regina knows that she’ll have to introduce Cora to Emma eventually, she refuses to let her mother’s opinion count for anything. Emma has introduced her to Mulan and her roommate, Tamara, who Regina gets on really well with, much to everyone’s astonishment (“How does she like you?” Emma had asked after she’d woken up to find Regina sharing coffee with Tamara in the kitchen and chatting away like old friends. “She hates everyone!” and Regina had tried not to appear too smug). There have been chaste sleepovers where she wakes up with her limbs entangled in Emma’s, pancake breakfasts, and shared bottles of wine over quiet dinners.

She remembers last Sunday, waking up in bed alone and smelling bacon. She had gone downstairs and found Emma dressed in her favourite, silky robe, teaching Henry to flip pancakes. Batter had coated every spare surface of the kitchen and Emma had managed to spill maple syrup all over the kitchen table and Henry had a chunk of half-cooked pancake congealing in his hair, but he was grinning so broadly that she couldn’t bring herself to be cross. Emma had bitten her lip, guilty. “Sorry,” she’d said, but Regina had wrapped her arms around her waist and nuzzled her
neck in an unspoken thank you. When she’d kissed her cheek, she’d tasted maple syrup.

She’s smiling when she puts the photo back on the dresser and heads downstairs, where she finds Henry and Roland in the living room. “Hola, Roly-poly,” she says. “Cómo estás?”

Roland looks up, eyes wide and large. He has been colouring, but it’s been abandoned now that Henry’s arrived. “Momma’s gone away,” he says and his lower lip trembles.

“Sometimes when moms go away they bring back presents,” Henry says, teasing Mushu with a piece of string, and she’s so grateful for her precious, caring boy. She’ll take him over to Nick’s tomorrow so he can spend the day with his friend, and get a break from his shadow. “It’s awesome.” Roland smiles at this, young enough to be excited by the prospect of presents.

“Henry’s right,” she says, squeezing in between the two of them on the couch and letting Roland cuddle up against her. He’s warm and sleepy and she runs her fingers through his soft curls, hoping to soothe. Henry used to like it when she played with his hair, though he claims he’s too old now, twitching away from her except in unguarded moments when he’s near sleep and he forgets to be too cool for childish comforts. “How about a story?”

One story turns into five. By the time she gets to ‘The Lorax’ in the pile of books Roland has brought over, even Henry has given up on pretending he’s too old to be read to by his mom and has abandoned his chapter book to listen to her. Her phone buzzes and then there’s a knock at the door. “That’ll be Emma,” Regina says, checking her messages to confirm but, before she can move, Henry leaps up. “Check before you unlock,” she yells after thundering footsteps.

Roland tugs at her arm. “Read, Regina,” he says.

And so it is that when Emma is dragged into the lounge by Henry, Regina is reading the final pages of ‘The Lorax’, Roland cuddled up against her side, half asleep. She looks over when she finishes and there’s something there in Emma’s eyes, something she’s been seeing increasingly over the past few weeks, which is terrifying and wonderful and undefinable all at once, and she feels a fierce torrent of affection wash over her. She smiles and Emma beams back, leaning against the door frame, just watching. “Okay,” Regina says, nudging Roland. “Bed, I think.”

Roland grizzles but by the time he’s brushed his teeth, he’s sleep walking. She smooths his hair back, feeling maudlin all of sudden at how big Henry is, lying in the twin bed next to the window, in comparison. “Good night, mijo,” she says to him and he shrugs at her, engrossed in his book. “Is there enough light?” She fiddles with the lamp, attempting to adjust it.
“Don’t fuss, Mom,” he groans.

“I love you,” she says, kissing the top of his head, and he squirms.

She watches him for a moment, standing in the doorway. He’s intent on his reading, squinting — and perhaps he needs glasses, she should take him to get checked — and then he turns and rolls his eyes. “Love you too, Mom,” he says. “Go away.”

Emma has wine poured for them both when she returns to the living room and Regina takes the proffered glass of red gratefully. “Sometimes I wish he wouldn’t grow up,” she says, settling in on the couch. It’s not until her words come out that she realises how maudlin she sounds. But life stretches out like a winding road and she can’t see around the corner and she worries. What if Henry starts to resent her? What if he doesn’t need her anymore? She feels questions rise in her in a panicky flash flood.

But Emma just laughs. “He’s teeny,” she says. “Also, he’s a total momma’s boy. He’s going to be hanging out with you when he’s forty.” She sits at the other end of the couch, her feet tapping against Regina’s thighs. She’s the picture of comfort and Regina cannot help but relax with her.

“You finished your assignment?”

Emma sighs and runs a hand through her hair. “Yeah, not my best work but it’ll do.” She takes a sip of wine. “I got busy replying to emails.”

They had made that follow-up vlog after all, though Regina hadn’t appeared on camera, instead filming and adding the occasional comment. She’s still anxious that Cora is tracking her movements online. Emma is still getting the occasional flame, but for every ludicrous troll comment, there is one from someone who’d been made to feel safer, by someone grateful that they’d taken a stand, by someone who’d been made uncomfortable by Killian. “I can stand a few outraged MRAs,” Emma had said when Regina had suggested she take a break from YouTube.

She runs her hand up Emma’s calf. “Don’t work yourself into the ground.”

“I know,” Emma says. “I just. It’s important.” She sighs again, leaning back against the cushions and taking another sip of wine. “Ugh, this is so good. Hey, you think they’re banging yet?”
“You take a lewd fascination in your best friend’s love life,” Regina says, though privately she can’t wait to hear every last sordid detail from Marian on her return.

“Among all the other stuff I had to do today, I had to field twenty calls from Mulan,” Emma says. “I’m very invested in her getting laid so she calms the fuck down.”

“Marian insisted on showing me her lingerie,” Regina feels compelled to admit.

“Should I be jealous?” Emma says, and laughs when Regina throws a cushion at her. “I mean, at this point I’d put money on Marian taking her top off and Mulan fainting.”

Regina laughs and curls her feet up under her. Mushu leaps onto her lap, butting his head against her wineglass and stomping about in circles. She scratches his belly when he settles, letting him catch her hand in his paws. “I spoke to Mother today,” she says.

“Oh?”

One of the first talks she’d had with Emma when they started again was about Mother. She’d told her about the various abuses, about how even now her control over Regina is too much sometimes. “If Daddy hadn’t left me this house in his will,” she had said, and her voice had trembled as it always did when she talked about the man too weak to save her from Cora’s idea of loving motherhood, “I’d probably have gone crawling back to her. He saved me in the end.” That had been the first night Emma had slept over, holding her close in a way that has always made her feel trapped. With Emma, though, she feels safe.

“We will not be having Christmas in Storybrooke after all,” she says. It had taken some doing, but you can’t be Cora Mills’ daughter without picking up a few tricks of your own and she was able to play on her mother’s need for order and control to an extent that when she suggested they not come to Storybrooke after all, Cora was relieved. “Do you want—” She pauses. “It will just be me and Henry but you’d be very welcome.”

For a moment, Emma is silent. She stares into her wineglass and when she looks up, she says, “I wouldn’t want to impose,” in a tone that is bizarrely formal and Regina’s heart breaks for her.

“Because you’re such an imposition,” she says, lips threatening to curve into a grin. “Taking over my thoughts, making me care about someone who isn’t my son. It’s the absolute worst. I take it back. I couldn’t possibly host you for Christmas.”
“It’s rude to take back an invite,” Emma says, but she’s grinning now. “If Henry’s okay with it…”

“You’re wonderful,” Regina says, the words leaping from her uncontrollably, and she leans across, pressing a kiss to Emma’s lips. Emma lets out a soft, startled noise and fumbles with her wineglass. Mushu yowls crankily and leaps off her lap, and, smiling into the kiss, Regina takes the glass from her, setting it down next to her own on the coffee table. She ends up sprawled across Emma on the couch, feeling giddy, delirious at the touch of their bodies.

(They haven’t taken that final step yet. “We went too quickly last time,” Emma had said when things got a bit hot and heavy on the evening of the worst video in the world. “We’ve got plenty of time to get back to that.” And Regina had agreed — though grudgingly, arousal pooling in the pit of her belly.)

This close, just an inch away from being able to kiss her again, Emma seems out of focus, blurred. Her hair glints golden in the dim light and she’s dazed almost, pupils blown. “Are we?” Emma asks, lips curving into a smile, and Regina kisses her forehead and stands, walking to the stairs. She looks back and sees Emma roll off the couch and leap up to follow her upstairs to the guest bedroom.

She closes the door quietly behind Emma, before pressing her up against it, hands on her wrists and mouth caressing the delicate curve of her neck. Emma squeaks when her teeth graze skin and so Regina whispers, “We have to be very quiet,” onto Emma’s skin.

Emma lets out a shaky breath. “Don’t tease me like that, Mills,” she says, voice hoarse and fingers twining with Regina’s own, and then she pushes back, guiding Regina to the bed. Regina’s sweater sticks at her neck and elbows in Emma’s desire to get it off her, but Emma just kisses the bare planes of her stomach in lieu of untangling it. She lets her hands drift, spidering across Regina’s hips. Blonde hair tickles her skin.

She wants to tell her to hurry up, to stop teasing her and get down to business but she can’t speak, voice caught in her throat. Instead her hands coil through Emma’s hair, urging her back up and into a kiss. Those talented fingers continue to tease and Emma hums against the skin of her neck, her jaw, her collarbone, the vibrations awakening something in Regina, making her feel wild, uncontrolled, quite unlike herself. But…

“Emma,” she says, sitting up very suddenly so Emma’s head knocks against her collarbone. “Please tell me you’re not humming what I think you’re humming.”
“Just setting the mood,” Emma says, grinning up at her, and so Regina flips them, covering Emma’s mouth with her hand as she begins a one handed attempt to strip Emma. She decides to call it a win when she manages to sneak her hand into Emma’s jeans, to press against damp fabric. She feels Emma jerk, feels the gust of a gasp against her palm.

“Are you ready to be good?” Regina asks, fingers circling her clit, and Emma nods fervently.

The rest of the night is made up of soft touches, quiet moans, Regina’s heart fluttering wildly in her chest. They don’t wake the children, though she suspects it’s a close call when Emma does that thing with her tongue and Regina falls apart for the third time with a scream.

She wakes at three because Mushu has somehow wormed his way into the guest bedroom and has fallen asleep on her head. She eases him off her, and he hisses before stomping down to her feet and curling up there instead. She lets him bite her toe in recompense. Despite only sleeping a couple of hours, she feels strangely awake and she switches on the lamp before grabbing her phone, which is flashing. She has a message from Marian, containing two emojis, a pair of scissors and a tongue, and, God, Regina does not even want to know. Sitting up, she stares down at Emma, eyelashes long and dark against her pale skin, and even in the dim light of the bedside lamp she feels she can see Emma’s worries eased away by rest. She can’t resist reaching out, stroking a hand through Emma’s hair.

At this, Emma turns over. “You’re staring,” she grumbles. “It’s creepy.” But that look is there again, the one Regina keeps seeing, the soft eyes and vulnerable smile and furrowed eyebrows, and it doesn’t scare her at all really. It’s love.

And that’s everything.

Chapter End Notes

I just want to say a huge thank you for your support of this fic as I’ve been writing it. It is something that has really stretched my writing muscles and challenged me and I couldn’t have done it without help, whether that was cheerleading (particularly in the past months where writing has been slow and my brain has been... not the best), plot wrangling, letting me fictionalise your online persona for the purpose of vaguely meta comedy, showing me around Boston so I actually have a vague understanding of the setting of this story... Y’all know who you are, I think, I hope, and I love you all so much.

I appreciate everyone who has stuck with this fic, even though it took a ridiculous number of chapters for Emma and Regina to actually meet. You are amazing.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!