it's just the sweet weather and the peacock feathers

by birdbox (Bella Barbaric)

Summary

and I'd choose you; in a hundred lifetimes, in a hundred worlds, in any version of reality, I'd find you and I'd choose you.

“Hey,” David says, stopping outside the doors. “Is that--Meredith?”

Emma and Mary Margaret both follow David's pointed finger to the corner of the playground where a small figure sits in the sandbox, silhouetted by the afternoon sun.

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Notes

A visual for Meredith

It isn’t that Emma doesn’t love her job, but loving her job doesn’t mean she can’t be grateful for the peace and quiet at the end of the day after running around after a small herd of lovable but rambunctious children. She, David and Mary Margaret have a routine of clearing up after the kids, then having a coffee together but today Mary Margaret and David are in a bit of a rush because
they're going to visit Mary Margaret's parents in Maine for the weekend, but they insist on staying to help get the place in order.

Eventually, Emma finally convinces them she can handle the rest of the work on her own and gets them to the entrance of the daycare, which is no small feat, she practically has to pry their fingertips loose from the doorway-- Emma at least admires their devotion to this place that they've made their life's work. She's known them both for years, and even though she only started working for them a few months ago, she's very aware of how much they've given up for Once Upon a Time daycare.

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“Oh, gosh, her dad must not have turned up,” Mary Margaret says. “That's... strange actually. He's usually pretty good at keeping to home time, and we haven't had a call from him to say he's running late...” She turns to David. “We should wait till he turns up.”

"I'll wait, you two go” Emma volunteers. “You've got a long trip ahead of you.”

“Haven't you got to pick up Henry?” David asks.

Emma shakes her head. “He's gone to Avery's for his dinner tonight. Won't be back till later-” she sees their reluctant faces “-Seriously, it's fine. I'll wait with her for a while then try to contact her dad with the details in the file.”

Mary Margaret smiles gratefully. “Emma, you're a life saver.”

“I know. Now go, have fun!” Emma shoos them towards their car insistently.

“Oh, I'm in for the weekend of my life,” David tells her, opening the car door for his pregnant wife. “My in-laws are just wild!”

“For your sake, I'm choosing to ignore the note of sarcasm in your tone, dear husband,” Mary Margaret says primly, even though she's smiling. David rolls his eyes at Emma and gets in the other side.

Emma can see them still sniping away at each other affectionately as they wave at her and drive away. She looks after them wistfully for a moment, a little jealous of the easy intimacy that came from a relationship of years of absolute trust and love. She loves the life she has with Henry, of course, but there are times when she feels like she'd like a person her own age to come home to. Still, until she finds a serious relationship that doesn't end in her supposed 'soulmate' making off at the sight of an unexpected positive pregnancy test only never to be seen again, it seems as though it'll be just her and Henry for some time.

Emma walks over to the sandbox, where Meredith Jones is sitting peacefully patting down a castle-shaped bucket with sand. She's vaguely aware of Meredith's home situation even from the short time she's been working here, unfortunately only because it's really tragic. Mother dead in a terrible accident when Meredith was just weeks old, now brought up by a single father who works in a recording studio in the city. And honestly, Meredith is a very sweet little girl-- slightly more reserved and cautious than some of the other children but as soon as she got talking she'd talk your ear off about everything and anything. She, Mary Margaret, and David all enjoy Meredith's chattering away to them at breaktimes.

“Hey, Meredith,” Emma says when she gets close, kneeling down next to sandbox. “What's up?”
“Daddy hasn't come for me yet,” Meredith says, bashing the top of the bucket with her spade before carefully lifting it to reveal an almost perfect sandcastle. “I always wait in the sandbox till he gets me but he's not here.”

“I'm sure he'll be here soon,” Emma says soothingly. She takes a discreet glance at her watch, twenty past four. “Shall we wait for him inside and get a drink? It's warm out here today.”

Meredith considers this for a moment then nods sagely. “Okay.”

Standing up, Emma holds out her hand to Meredith who takes it and steps out of the sandbox, careful not to harm her sand kingdom. Hand in hand, they walk back to the building. “Next time, sweetie, if your Daddy doesn't get here for a long time, come inside and tell one of us, okay? It's very important we know where you are.”

“Yes, Emma.” Meredith has a very deliberate way of pronouncing people's names so it comes out like 'Em-ma'.

Once inside, Emma helps Meredith wash her hands, before getting her a carton of juice and getting out the paper and coloured pencils and crayons. Emma draws a large buttercup on her sheet and takes her time colouring it in so Meredith isn't made to feel uncomfortable or like she's being watched. “Is that a pirate ship, Meredith?” Emma asks after a while, indicating Meredith's colourful drawing. An out-of-proportion bearded man with a eyepatch and a too-large hook stands on the scribbled brown ship.

Meredith nods eagerly, grinning.

“It's amazing,” Emma enthuses and Meredith preens, proud of herself.

“I'm gonna be a pirate when I grow up!” Meredith asserts with such absolute certainty that Emma can't help but smile.

“Really?! That's a very cool job— I wish I could be a pirate!”

“Daddy tells me pirate stories every night before bedtime,” Meredith tells her, clearing wanting Emma to be jealous. “And he does all the voices! My favourite is Captain Hook cos' cos' he's the scariest pirate on the seven seas!” As though to emphasise her point, her small index finger forms a hook and she bares her teeth wickedly.

Seeing Meredith so animated and enthusiastic is the exact reason Emma does this job. “Well, If you're going to be a pirate you need a pirate's name-- have you thought of one?” Emma asks.

“Red-handed Jill, of course!” a new voice says behind them and Meredith spins in her seat gleefully.

“Like Wendy Darling!” Meredith and her father crow in unison, and it's obviously a long practised in-joke between them. Emma laughs and turns around herself to get her first look of the guy.

There's one thing Emma can say for sure: attractive is a gross understatement. Shocking forget-me-not blue eyes (the exact same as Meredith's) set in a pale face with the perfect amount of stubble covering his chin and cut glass jawline. A thick shock of dark hair covers his scalp, and there's a light sheen of sweat beading on his face, like he's been running. He's wearing a slightly rumpled three piece suit with the tie loosened around his neck like something off the cover of GQ magazine.
Meredith launches herself into her dad's arms and he lifts and spins her effortlessly before gathering her to his chest and mussing her cheek with his nose.

"Hey there, little tyke!" he says in a lilting English accent, sounding for all the world like the sight of her is the best thing to happen to him all day. Emma can relate to that feeling. "Really sorry I'm late-" he glances at Emma and does a rather flattering double take. Emma tries to hide a smile. "I, err, I got held up at work and of course, my phone chooses the most inconvenient time to die on me."

"S'okay, Daddy," Meredith tells him, leaning her head of glossy dark curls on his shoulder. "You can get me ice cream to make up."

Her dad gives her a comically disparaging look which makes Meredith giggle, then looks back at Emma. "Demanding little madam, isn't she?" He shifts Meredith onto one arm then holds out his hand for Emma to shake. "I'm sorry I don't believe we've been introduced: I'm Killian Jones."

Emma shakes his hand and she tries to tell herself she imagines him lingering a second too long, and the feel of his fingertips skating across her palm on the release. "Emma Swan. I only started working here, like, two months ago, so I haven't really had the chance to meet many parents yet," she explains, shrugging.

"Well, Emma." Emma can't remember the last time her name sounded so good on someone's lips. "I'm sorry to have been a pain and made you wait around for so long."

Emma waves it off. "Don't worry about it, it's my job. And believe me-- I really do know what it's like juggling work and childcare."

He looks surprised. "You have children?"

"A son, Henry. He's twelve."

"Pre-teen," Killian notes. "How's that going?"

"You know toddler tantrums?" He nods. "Savour them. I'm telling you, you'll be longing for them in ten years time. Henry gave me the silent treatment for three days straight last week because I told him he had to save up his allowance or wait till his birthday to get the video game he wants. Only started talking again when I waved a takeaway pizza menu under his nose!"

Killian laughs. "Duly noted."

Emma bites her lip to keep from smiling and they stand like that for a few seconds, an unmistakeable look of mutual interest passing between them. Emma feels the spark that she hasn't felt in a long time, and never this quickly, and it makes her toes curl in anticipation of what might be to come. Just maybe. "I should get this one home and let you get on," he says finally, letting Meredith play with his long fingers. His eyes flick back up, fixing on hers and he looks oddly nervous. "I- er, I hope we get to see more of each other."

"I'll make sure we do," Emma promises, holding his gaze.

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