“I just want you to tell me how you fell in love with dad.”
“Fine.” Henry’s already jumping back into a sitting position, excited as a kitten with a strand of wool. “But I’m not telling you who your father is, and I’m changing all the names. I decided that just now. You’ll have to guess which one he is, okay?”

Notes

Written for the CS movie month on tumblr. It's all in the title, right?
“And then the man thrusts his penis into the woman’s vagina and…”

“Please, Henry, stop talking.” Emma takes the mail out of the box, closing it with a bit too much strength that has the doorman turning his head – yeah, like having her son loudly talking about sex didn’t catch his attention before. “I will literally pay you to stop talking.”

Henry freezes for a second, mouth open with whatever he was going to say next, as if evaluating the situation. He closes it then, and Emma is ready to sigh in relief. That is, until he speaks again. “But what I don’t understand, Grace said she was an accident. How can you accidentally thrust your penis into…”

“Okay, stop.” Putting the mail in her handbag, Emma kneels to be on the same eye-level with her son – not a conversation she wanted to have now, especially not in their building hallway of all places. “It’s not the sex that was an accident. It’s Grace’s mother getting pregnant.”

Henry seems to be thinking this through for a minute, little pensive pout on his lips, until the emotions on his face suddenly shift and Emma is surprised to see sadness where there was blatant curiosity only seconds ago. “Am I an accident?”

Emma is suddenly really glad that she lies for a living, because there’s no way she could have kept a poker face otherwise – yes, definitely not a conversation she was planning to have any time soon. “No. Come on, kid, of course not. You were very much wanted.” The lie rolls almost too easily on her tongue, and she makes a mental note to send a text later in case Henry wants to ask his father the same question. “Now let’s go home, okay?”

She really expects him to drop the subject there. He obviously doesn’t, cornering her in the kitchen when she’s cooking, with his puppy eyes and sad pout – too effective for her own good. “I think you should tell me the story of how you and dad met.”

“Why are you interested in that all of a sudden?” She keeps staring at the vegetables frying in the pan, more to hide her feelings from Henry than to make sure nothing burns.

He’s never been really vocal about it, but Emma knows this is something weighing on him – how his parents are not lovers, only maintaining a semblance of friendship for their kid’s well being. New York is full of divorced parents and unusual families, but Henry has always been a romantic at heart, dreaming of his parents getting back together at one point or another.

In his little mind, telling him the story would probably be enough to have something click as she realises they were always meant to be.

“I just want to know. Is it so much to ask?” He trails on the last word of each sentence to draw pity, she knows, and it could work if she wasn’t even more stubborn than he is. “Look, mum, I know your story with dad isn’t some kind of fairytale but I really want to know.”

“And you will.”
“When I’m old enough.”

She taps the tip of his nose with a smile. “Exactly. Now set the table.”

.

He remains silent on the subject for a grand total of one hour, bringing it back with his toothbrush in his mouth while getting ready for bed.

“But like, you met when you were eighteen…”

“Not now, Henry.” She can hear the frustration in her own voice, the edge that shouldn’t be there – she isn’t the kind of mother who snaps at her kid for no reason, thank you very much – and she feels guilty for it. But her early twenties have always been a sensitive subject for her, will always be, and it is not something she wishes to discuss with Henry. Not to mention the fact his father is better at telling stories than she is, so maybe asking him would be a better option than her cynical self.

“How many boyfriends did you have when you were young?”

“None.” But she feels her willpower slipping between her fingers, slowly but surely, and she sighs in defeat. “Only three serious ones, including your father.”

“All at once?”

“No.” And then, “well…”

Henry’s eyes widen, and she takes that moment of weakness to push him in his bedroom until he falls face first on his bed.

“Tell meeeeee.” The whine is muffled by the blankets, and she snorts lightly.

She waits until he snuggles under the covers, tucks him in carefully, then sits on the edge of his bed, caressing the locks of dark hair on his forehead.

“I just want you to tell me how you fell in love with dad.”

His eyes are full of hope and dreams, and she’d feel like the worst mommy in the world if she were to crush them now. She’s perfectly aware of the dangerous game she’s playing, walking on the edge, but Emma has never been one to say no to her son. So she sighs and throws her arms in the air in sign of defeat.

“Fine.” Henry’s already jumping back into a sitting position, excited as a kitten with a strand of wool. “But I’m not telling you who your father is, and I’m changing all the names. I decided that just now. You’ll have to guess which one he is, okay?”

“Like a detective story, only it’s love instead of murder?”

Her son and his comparisons… “Yeah, you could say that.”

“Nice!”
Thank you so much for the overwhelming reactions to this fic, I really didn't expect it when posting a silly little introduction such as this one!

People have asked me about the names and, to keep it simple, the fake names in the story will be their real names on the show. Just imagine some guy named Baelfire Gold living in Storybrooke, I don't know.

This chapter is dedicated to Colin O'Donoghue's grungy teenage years. I hope you enjoy it!

“So, I was eighteen and still living in Storybrooke,” Emma begins, settling more comfortably in her son’s bed. She is, after all, here to stay, and glad tomorrow is a Saturday – no school, so Henry can sleep in. “I’d started dating this guy a few months before graduation… Let’s call him Neal, okay?”

“Oh, no…” She raises an eyebrow at the boy’s complaint. “In the stories, it’s never the high school sweetheart.”

She rolls her eyes. “Yeah, well, it’s my story so shut up and listen.” She’s doesn’t stop when Henry sticks his tongue out at her. “Now as you know, all hell broke lose in September…”

September 2001

Emma puts the biggest suitcase they have on her bed, opening it in a careless motion before turning to face her wardrobe – all the while purposefully ignoring the boy lying on her bed. She can feel his eyes on her back, and it unnerves her more than she wants to show, because the silence between them is an illusion, and he’ll break it soon enough in yet another speech she doesn’t want to listen to.

She grabs handfuls of shirts and jeans, putting them in her suitcase before doing the same with her socks and underwear. Should she take a dress? Is she even planning to do something that would involve a dress? She doesn’t thing so, but money will probably be tight and she doesn’t want to be up against the wall if she ever needs a fancy outfit. Just in case, she packs her little black one, and one or two skirts too, for good measure.

She’s trying to fit a pair of shorts in here when Neal sighs – here we go. “All I’m saying, Em, is that Storybrooke does have a police department. I don’t see why you couldn’t do that here.”

“My dad runs the police department. Excuse me if I want to be more than his personal secretary. And I already told you, it’s not just about being a cop…”
She doesn’t have to look up to know he’s rolling his eyes – the argument has been going on for days now, and will only stop by the time she boards her plane. Obviously not the way she’d expected to spend her last days in town with him but, what do you want, they’re both stubborn that way.

“No. It’s about being a cop in New York because apparently Emma Nolan has a death wish.”

She can’t help it – the folded socks hit his face in a second, and she huffs at him. If her life was a cartoon, smoke would come out of her ears right now but, sadly, she lives in the real world and settles down for glaring at him.

It’s the thing about life in such a small town, Emma knows – no one ever really expects the kids to leave and have their own life, all of them taking over their parents’ businesses, having kids who will follow the same pattern. They are all aware of it, accepting it without a word – all, except Emma apparently. Everyone had try to convince her the local university would be good for her, especially since she would attend it with her friends, but Emma has always been one to want more, to reach for the stars. It would be New York or nothing – it would be the NYPD, at the very least, or nothing. It had taken months for her to convince her parents after receiving her letter of acceptance for NYU.

The terrorist attack only a week before her moving to the city was, unsurprisingly, enough to start their arguments from scratch – it was also enough for Emma to be certain the world needs her to protect it.

“Just because you’re okay with taking over daddy dearest’s paw shop doesn’t mean I’m not allowed to want more, asshole.”

“I just don’t see the point of going all the way to New York. You can…”

“I won’t go to that crappy community college with Wendy and you! I want a place with a nice criminal law program, I want to enter the policy academy. Maybe even go to Quantico and…” She sighs, running a hand through her hair. “I want to do something that matters, okay? Not just answer the phone and buy coffee for my dad all my life. And my parents already paid for the whole year, so…”

Neal stands up then, raising his hands in surrender as he makes his way around the bed and closer to her. She eyes him warily, unsure of his next move, but his smile is warm and kind. “I know, darling. But we’re scared for you, all right? Surely you can understand that.”

She simply nods, snuggling against him when he opens his arms to her. They remain entangled for long minutes, until Wendy bursts into the room, arms full of towels and other toiletries. “My gosh, how many iron curlers do you own, Nolan?” and it is enough to break the tense mood, having Emma laugh out loud.

Emma holds back her tears through the flight to New York, trying not to think about her last goodbye to her parents, promising to call at least once a week and to go back home if the big city is too much, about Neal kissing her for the last time, swearing he’d come to visit during the next break, or the way Wendy had hugged her with a soft “I’ll take care of that idiot, don’t worry”. It was harder than expected, cutting the cord.
The subway is a freaking maze, but at least running around with two heavy suitcases and an even heavier backpack helps forgetting about her issues – that is, until she accepts the fact she is lost. It takes her three more stations before she puts her pride aside long enough to ask for directions, and an old lady kindly explains everything to her. The sun is already setting by the time she arrives at NYU, relieved to finally have her magnetic card and the number of her room – all she wants is a hot shower and a good night of sleep.

No such luck, though, because the first thing Emma notices entering the room is the leggy brunette standing up on one of the beds as she hangs a poster to the wall. She turns her head when she hears the door and offers Emma a wolfish grin, almost beaming on the spot.

“Hey, roomie!” she says, voice way too cheerful for a first meeting, as she waves. “I’m Ruby.”

“Emma,” she replies carefully as she puts both her suitcases on the empty bed. Cheerful, over-the-top people have never been her thing, but she doesn’t want to be that girl asking to change room because she can’t socialize like a normal person. So she smiles at the brunette and asks the universal question. “What are you studying?”

Turns out Ruby studies biology and environment, and Emma immediately pegs her for the kind of hippie girl who wants to change the world and save all the animals – in her case, the wolves, and did you know how few are still alive in the Alps today? But Ruby is also a nice girl and, by the time they go to the dining hall together for a late snack, Emma decides having her as her friend will not be that bad. If anything, Ruby will keep her on her toes and force her to take breaks from her studies from time to time – barely here for a day and she already seems to know everyone in their building and every party for the month to come.

Yes, Emma thinks, she could have done worse.

Her first day is a nightmare. She gets lost once again, even with the map the residential hall gave her, and arrives five minutes late to her first class – something the teacher notices, loudly, in front of the whole lecture hall –, gets lost again on the way back to her dorm, only to find out she left without her card this morning and has to wait a bloody half hour before another student arrives and opens the door for her. It’s not midday yet and she’s already done.

It’s only the beginning. She’s buying gums at the shop around the corner when it starts rainy like crazy – of course, she’s only wearing a thin hoodie because it was warm and sunny only minutes ago, what the hell. Running back to her building as fast as possible doesn’t stop her from being drenched, though.

“Wait! Hold the door!” she yells when she sees someone entering the dorm, and whoever it is hears her and is kind enough to actually do as she says.

Of course Emma runs faster, because it’s the polite thing to do, and of course she misses the huge puddle of water right after the door, because it’s simply that kind of a day. She feels herself falling backwards, unable to keep her balance, arms flapping uselessly by her sides – her ass doesn’t kiss the floor, though, for her saviour wraps an arm around her waist and holds her in place. She sighs in relief.

“Graceful as a swan, milady,” he says, voice heavy with his laughs and Irish accent.
“Well, what can I tell you? I’m just that –”

Her quip dies on her tongues as she looks up at him only to meet the bluest eyes she’s ever seen. His whole face isn’t half bad either, and she wants to roll her eyes at how cliché the guy seems to be – the handsome foreign student who’s a snarky gentleman to the ladies, how original. And, finally taking a step back, she wants to scoff because the cliché doesn’t stop here – plaid shirt over a t-shirt with some band logo, baggy jeans that have seen better days, long black hair falling in a mess on his forehead. If she didn’t know better, she’d assume he was out of a grunge music video – the kind of guy who definitely mopes over his guitar while playing Wonderwall. Urg.

“I’m Killian, by the way. Killian Jones.”

“Emma Nolan,” she mumbles as a reply.

The name seems to ring a bell. “Ruby’s roommate, right?” When she nods, already wondering what Ruby has said about her, he adds, “My room is right across the hall, 305.”

Oh, right.

“Well, I have to check something with the reception so, erh, see you soon, I guess.”

If he notices her not-so-subtle way of getting rid of him – if only not to share a lift and an awkward conversation – he doesn’t point it out and only nods with a little smile. “Aye. See you, swan.”

She’s not quick enough to complain about the nickname.

…

“I’m pretty sure Jefferson from 117 cooks meth in his room. Or grow weed. Or both.”

Emma raises her head from her book, corking an eyebrow at Ruby as she enters the room and throws her bag on the bed before dramatically plopping next to it. She stretches out her arms on the mattress as she throws a pointed look at the blonde, as if daring her to contracting her words. Emma only rolls her eyes.

“Smelling of weed doesn’t make him NYU’s drug lord.”

“One day, he’ll blow up the whole building and the joke will be on you.”

With a huffed laugh, Emma stands up, slipping student card and phone in her pocket. “What about you tell me all you conspiracy theories over breakfast, huh?”

She doesn’t have to ask twice, Ruby jumping on her feet in a second as she starts complaining about her early class and not having time to eat anything at seven in the morning. She wraps her arm around Emma’s as they go out of the room, waving at Killian who fumbles with opening the door to his room, obviously hung-over. “So cute,” she whispers in Emma’s ear, “but you should see his roommate…”

Still, it doesn’t take long for Ruby to go back to her first subject of conversation, listing all the reasons why she believes Jefferson to use the university as his cover for more dangerous means, several heads turning on them for subtlety has never been her forte. Emma replies with hums and
two-word sentences, knowing she isn’t really needed in the conversation, when her phone buzzes in her pocket. The screen reads Neal’s name, a picture of him in the background, and Emma gives her friend a thin smile before leaving the dining hall not to be heard.

“Hey, babe. How are you?”

“Fine, fine. What about you? How was your first week?” There is some commotion on his end of the call, before he adds, “Wendy says hello too.”

“No, I don’t!” comes her voice, muffled in the background, “I’m still upset at her for abandoning us.”

Emma laughs softly as she leans against the closest wall, running a hand through her hair. “I’m fine. Uni is exhausting but it’s good. We’re going to some kind of charity event tonight, you know, for the… Anyway, Ruby says it will be fun and…”

She’s cut in the middle of her sentence by both Neal’s loud, heavy, sigh and by Killian appearing out of nowhere in a fresh shirt, eyes hooded by the lack of sleep as he smirks and winks at her before entering the dining hall. She has to shake her head to focus back on her boyfriend’s words.

“You’re never going back, are you?”

It is a simple enough question, but Neal’s tone is defeatist, as if he knows the answer to that question without needing her to say it out loud. It sounds of loss and rejection and, if only for a second, Emma feels the grasp of guilt in her stomach.

“Maybe you could join me? You’d like it here, I swear!”

“Em, we already talked about it… Listen, my class starts in five minutes. We’ll talk about it later, okay?”

But she knows the subject will never be brought up again.
Of two things Emma is certain: one, she was right to pack her little black dress; two, they have nothing to do at that charity event. Ruby had talked about it as some kind of charity event organized by the university, to raise funds to help people after the terrorist attacks, and Emma had immediately thought about people selling cakes and stuff animals, or even auctioning on members of the football team for a date – the kind of things they do for broke students to spend money they don’t have. Obviously, she was wrong.

The hall is elegantly decorated, with white roses on the tables and champagne glasses made out of crystal, people speaking to each other in hushed voices under the dim lights of the chandelier. The guests are all dressed in well-fit suits and designer dresses, none of them younger than thirty. Emma frowns at Ruby, for it is obviously a party they were not invited to, one of those events made to stroke some rich men’s ego in hope they will write a four-figure check by the end of the night.

Clearly, Ruby decided sneaking in would be a good idea and, if that wolfish grin of hers is any indication, she doesn’t feel guilty at all about it. “Come on. Look old and clever, that will do the trick!”

Emma sighs, shaking her head, but she has to admit the whole idea has its perks when she manages to take a flute of champagne without the waiter asking for her ID. Maybe it’ll be fun, she thinks, if they don’t catch us.

So, for the next hour or so, the girls wander around the room with a glass of champagne in their hand, looking at the items that will be sold later on – for, much to Emma’s delight, there will be an auction, paintings and signed basketballs and the like. They nearly run into Ruby’s biology teacher, dodging him only seconds before he sees them and laughing about it for five minutes in the bathroom afterwards. Emma may be a little tipsy on champagne, but she doesn’t find her in herself to care, giggling behind her hand as she watches Ruby trying to mingle with rich bureaucrats, deep in conversation with a man who looks fresh out of business school.

“You don’t belong here,” a voice whispers to her ear, startling Emma with an inelegant yelp that she blames on the alcohol as she turns around to face the newcomer, hand theatrically pressed against her racing heart. Despite his accusation, the man’s smile lacks arrogance or amusement at scaring her, and Emma only ready kindness in his big grey eyes.

She quickly looks him over, ruffled sandy hair and stumble, smile as kind as his eyes; he doesn’t look that much older, not over twenty-five if Emma had to guess. She smirks back. “Neither do you,” for he is too young to be a teacher and his jeans-waistcoat combo doesn’t place him on the list of New York’s rich and handsome bachelors. Although, for the handsome part…

He takes a little piece of paper from his pocket, poking it twice. “That’s where you’re wrong I’m afraid. I have an invite. You, on the other hand…”

Only then does she notice his rich accent, and she frowns at him slightly – what is it with NYU and hot international students, seriously? But Emma still keeps her composure, grinning at him like it’s a game she doesn’t want to lose. “And what tells you I am not someone’s plus one? Maybe my husband is some rich old dude who’s about to die, leaving all his fortune to me.”

He doesn’t budge. “It’s a Forever 21 dress and you’re a student. Right?”

She takes a sip of champagne with a quirked eyebrow and smug pout. “Not telling.”
His laugh is as rich as his voice, shaking his head at her antics, and Emma can only hides her smile behind the glass of champagne. This whole conversation is ridiculous, but at least he doesn’t look about to throw her and Ruby out by calling the security. Instead, he offers his hand for her to check. “I’m Graham, nice to meet you.”

“Emma. And technically it’s an H&M dress, so…” She adds a small yet defiant tilt of the head, even as she is perfectly aware she is talking nonsense, and probably making a fool of herself in front of a total stranger – but the chances of meeting him again are negligible, so what the hell.

His lips curl into a smile, and he’s probably about to respond something equally nonsensical, when a perfectly manicured hand grabs his arm, startling them both out of their conversation. Emma’s eyes travel from the women’s red nails to her angular face, framed by short jet-black hair, red lips turned predatory smirk as her eyes fall on Graham. Emma can only blink in surprise at that surprising arrival.

“Graham, dear,” she says, her voice a curt whisper. “The Section Chief of the FBI is here, I want you to meet him.”

His eyes jump from the woman to Emma a couple of time before he mirrors her smirk. “I’ll be here in a minute, all right?”

She nods and leaves, making a scene of walking between him and Emma, hand trailing on his chest as she does so – good way to stake a claim, especially with the whole ‘ignore the other woman’ business. Emma refrains from rolling her eyes, before looking at the woman again, frowning.

“Wait. Was that…?” she asks, pointing at the brunette with her thumb.

“Regina Mills, yes.”

“And you two are…”

“She’s my thesis advisor. But yes, we also…”

He imitates the way she dwelled on the last, unsaid, word, effectively having her rolling her eyes. Professor Mills is well known among law students, as she runs the department with an iron grip and barely ever has contact with the crown of commoners – otherwise known as students. For Graham to have her as his thesis advisor… Well, Emma is certain he must be skilled on many levels.

Still, she scoffs and grins. “Well done.”

Perhaps he hears the sarcasm, barely hidden, in her voice, for he raises an eyebrow at her. “Got a problem with that?”

“No, of course not, look at you.” She scoffs again, more panicking that amused this time. “You’re handsome. You’re obviously smart. To please a man like you, it would need…”

“A really woman,” he finishes with her with a smirk that’s more gently mocking than arrogant.

“Exactly.” She knows herself to be talking nonsense, the alcohol in her blood not helping, but yet the words tumble out of her mouth whether she likes it or not. “Hard to compete with that.”

“Unless you like competition, of course.”

She opens her mouth, surprised and at a lose for words for a second or two, but their conversation
is cut short yet again, more abruptly this time as Ruby swoops on her with wide panicking eyes. “I’ve been spotted. We need to go.”

“Okay.” And then, turning back to Graham, “Sorry. It was nice meeting you.”

She barely registers his ‘you too’ as Ruby is already pulling her to the entrance hall and then cloakroom. Emma stumbles once or twice, the high heels she is wearing not helping, but Ruby’s hand grips her tighter every time and it has her wondering if the brunette only came face to face with one of her teacher or did something entirely worse – knowing her, the latter wouldn’t be all that surprising.

Ruby almost tears her coat from the pageboy and flees the scene – gosh what did she do? – but Emma stays in the hallway as she slips on her own coat. It’s only September, but it’s late and chilly and there is no way she’s going out only wearing that thin dress. She jumps (once again) when someone grabs her by the shoulder, and isn’t all that surprised to find Graham standing here.

“Will I see you again?” he asks, almost shyly.

She wants to say yes, because they’re apparently studying in the same department so the chances of bumping into each other in the hallways are high. She also wants to say yes, because his eyes are kind and his smile gentle, because there are not so many people out there she feels like trusting in a heartbeat and they definitely have some kind of connection – and that’s why she has to say no, she can’t take the risk, not with him, not with anyone. “I don’t think so.”

“Okay.” He nods, looks above his shoulder then back at her, and repeats, “Okay.”

And then his hands cup her face, delicately, leaving her the choice to back away – she should, but something has her staying still, even knowing what he is about to do, what is about to happen. Graham’s lips are tentative at first, but her hand comes to grab his waistcoat and he deepens the kiss even if it stays soft. One of his hand travels to her neck, her hair, as he reduces the distance between them, head tilt to the right angle, lips pressed harder against hers, warm and gentle.

The kiss ends as softly as it begun, leaving her speechless, eyes closed for a few more seconds before a smile appears on her face. “It was nice meeting you too,” he whispers as he goes back to the gala with one more glance at her over his shoulder, one more smile.

On the way back to their dorm, Emma presses her fingers to her lips and, if Ruby notices, she doesn’t point it out.

…

“So what are you going to do?”

Killian barely waits for her answer before he climbs on a chair and starts fidgeting with the tv – it’s been a week of no cable in the common room, and he volunteered to look into it because, fuck off, they’ll watch their shows whether the university likes it or not. He barely spares her a glance as he asks the question, and she leans against a wall with a sigh.

“I’m in a relationship, moron. There is nothing to do from this point.”

“Oh yeah. Neal.” She rolls her eyes at his sarcasm, not in the mood. “If you ask me, monogamy is so overrated.”
“Good thing I’m not asking you.”

“All I’m saying is that the three of you could have fun together. Or even four of you, maybe cougar Mills is into that kinky stuff.”

“What’s a cougar?”

Emma looks up to Henry, eyes widening in frightened surprise, because of course her son would focus on such a small detail – of course she had to say such things in front of him, forgetting for a second there that she is talking to a child. She shakes her head at her own stupidity.

“It’s – that’s – it’s not important to the story, okay?”

Henry only shrugs, “Whatever.”

...

october 2001

She opens the door to Killian leaning against the doorframe like he belongs here, smirking at her from the moment their eyes meet, and for a second there all she wants is to close the door to his stupid face and hide under a blanket because there is no way this night out is going to end well for her.

“Fancy meeting you here, swan.”

“This nickname has to die like, a month ago.”

His smirk only grows bigger. Bastard. “Come on, it suits you. Graceful little thing that you are.”

Yup, that’s it, she’s done for the night. But, as if privy of her thoughts, Killian pulls her outside of her dorm and closes the door behind her, never getting rid of his trademark grin. She tries complaining, struggling, even kicking him in the shin, but his only reply is to threaten her that he will have no qualm carrying her over his shoulder if she doesn’t cooperate. She pouts all the way to the bar in protest, but Killian doesn’t seem to care.

Emma has no idea who decided that a karaoke night for her birthday would be a great idea, but she is fairly certain it is not her – a good movie and some Chinese take-out would have been more than enough, thank you very much. Her money is on Victor, Killian’s roommate, because that kind of stuff screams his name, but it could also be Ruby – thought Emma wouldn’t be surprised if they teamed up to prepare the outing, those two have been joined at the hip for the past two weeks.

A hand on the small of her back, Killian pushes her towards the table where their friends are seated – Ruby and Victor, Mary-Margaret and David, even August who goes to the gym with her – as he says something about buying the first round and makes his way to the bar counter by the other side of the room. Tink arrives shortly after – Emma is yet to learn the petite blonde’s real name for everyone likes to use her nickname instead – and goes to help Killian with the beers. That’s a lot of people around such a small table, and conversations grow louder and messy within a couple of minutes, but Emma has to admit it is nice. A nice way of celebrating her birthday, that’s for sure.
The karaoke begins an hour or so and two beers later and, before she knows it, Killian drags her to the stage – she’s laughing too much, too freely, to really complain when he puts a mic in her hand, actually laughs even louder when she recognizes the first notes of piano.

“Just a small town girl, livin’ in a lonely world. She took the midnight train goin' anywhere…”

She rolls her eyes, almost annoyed, because of course the guy can sing, his voice even softer and richer with the lyrics, eyes sparkling when he looks at her – the glimmer of a challenge obviously here. She isn’t as good as he is, only singing in the shower from time to time, but she’d be damn to let him win this round.

“Just a city boy, born and raised in South Detroit. He took the midnight train goin' anywhere.”

His eyes widen in surprise, if only for a second, so maybe she doesn’t sound that bad after all. Not that it matters, not that she cares. Karaoke is made for bad singers, after all. And to have fun, something that is happening right now, staring at each other as they sing, stupid grins and ridiculous dance moves which culminate into air guitar during the bridge. Emma vaguely registers some people cheering them, too busy with the lyrics and jumping up and down in rhythm to care, her eyes never leaving Killian’s – noses almost brushing from how close they are during the chorus.

So okay, maybe the last note isn’t in tune, more high-pitched than it should be, but it doesn’t stop people from applauding – Ruby even whistles, thumb and index finger in her mouth. Killian bow with a flourish of the hand, and Emma follows suit, pretending to hold an invisible skirt as she does so. His arm snakes around her waist, pulling her to his chest as he kisses her temple with a laugh, whispering a ‘happy birthday’ to her ear.

(She sings Wannabe with Ruby and Tink, laughs at David and Mary-Margaret’s rendition of You’re the one that I want, and pretends to swoon when a very drunk Killian dedicates Piano Man to her. They all drink too much and skip class the next day to nurse their hangover and watch cartoons together in the common room.

All in all, this is one of the best birthdays Emma ever had.)
chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Preamble: I know nothing about cigarette, especially the price of cigarettes in NYC in 2001. So roll with me on that one. Some of the lines are directly from the movie, which I try to avoid as much as possible but... yeah. Here we are.

december 2001

“Come on! Stupid machine!”

She hits the side of the computer as softly as possible, if only not to be told off by the cybercafé’s owner – if she had her way with it, Emma would have already punched the damn machine minutes ago. Of course the computers from the library don’t have webcams and of course she has to pay to use one here and of freaking course the damn thing won’t do what she wants no matter what. Of freaking course. Mary Margaret, sitting next to her, squeezes her arm in what is supposed to be a reassuring manner, but it does nothing to calm her nerves because the brunette’s computer works perfectly, letting her write her essay with no problem whatsoever, and Emma just wants to scream in frustration.

She enters her e-mail address and password once again, and prays to any deity that the thing will work this time as she watches the two little green figures turning and turning until – finally! – MSN Messenger decides to work.

“Thanks the lord,” she mumbles as she double-clicks on Neal’s pseudo and then on the webcam icon, adjusting her headset with a sigh.

She hadn’t realised she missed seeing Neal’s face until it appears on the screen, the image jumping and blurry as he smiles at her with a little wave. She sighs again, in relief this time, because she hasn’t seen him in three months, the longest they’ve been apart, and she missed him. Floppy hair and chocolate eyes, he’s definitely a sigh for sore eyes.

“Hey babe,” she greets him, trying not to be too loud, even with people chatting around her and teenage boys almost screaming in their mikes as they play some online game – trying to create a false sense of intimacy, maybe.

“Em! Gosh, it’s so good to see your face. How are you?”

“Fine, fine.” She quickly looks around her as if afraid of someone eavesdropping, the crowded place making her anxious, but even Mary Margaret focuses hard on her own screen to give them some alone time – not like Emma has any other option anyway, phone calls have stopped being enough weeks ago and, gosh, she’s so bad at that long-distance mess. “Studying for finales is exhausting. Can’t remember the last time I had a good night of sleep.”

Neal’s laugh is rich and loud in her headphone, having her smile despite her sleepy state. “Maybe you should switch to coffee. Hot chocolate won’t get you anywhere.”

“Never,” she hisses, having him laugh once again as she shakes his head at her stubbornness.
(“I changed my mind about coffee two months later when I decided to write a ten-page essay the day before it was due. There’s a lesson there, kiddo.”)

Henry only laughs at her, oblivious to the struggles he’ll definitely have to face too in a few years.)

“Oh by the way,” Neal adds. “I bought my plane ticket this morning.”

“Nice! Text me with all the info, I’ll come pick you at the airport.”

She’s anxious at the mere idea – two weeks in some cheap hotel, for the campus closes during the holidays, alone with Neal, not spending Christmas with her parents for the first time in her life – but it is as scary as it is exciting – romantic, even, and she can’t wait for New Year’s Eve on Time Square. And she tells him so, excitingly, talking of all the things they’ll do and all the places she’ll show him – she knows the city like the back of her hand now, or so she thinks, and she can’t wait to share it with him.

The hour passes back fast as they talk of one thing or another – what they’re studying, the parties they attend, the friends they made – and she finally has to log off, if only because she can’t afford another hour in this too expensive cybercafé, but her heart flutters at that little time spent with her boyfriend.

“I’m heading back to the dorm. Will you be okay alone?” she asks Mary Margaret as the brunette type furiously – gosh, how can someone be that fast?

“David is supposed to arrive in a couple of minutes,” she answers, barely looking away from her screen. “Don’t worry, I’ll be fine.”

Emma nods as she slips on her coat, even if a little wary of leaving her friend alone for a couple of minutes – New York’s sense of ever present insecurity creeping into her mind after all. But Mary Margaret, always the chipper optimist one, stops typing to squeeze Emma’s wrist in a comforting manner that has her smile. She lingers as long as possible, taking her sweet time to pack her things, and heaves a sigh of relief when David finally enters the place.

“Oh, I’ll see you around then,” she tells them both, and wonders when she started caring so much about them all.

…”

It’s raining – it is always raining in this city, and one would think Emma had learnt the lesson by now and bought a damn umbrella, but no. She holds her leather jacket above her head as she runs down the street to the little shop around the corner, slaloming between the bystanders and soaking the bottom of her jeans while she’s at it. The warmth of the shop takes her breath away as she runs inside, taking a few second by the door to jump up and down and get rid of the drops of rain on her shoulders and hair.

“Pack of Reds?” the seller asks with a laugh in his voice, and Emma doesn’t want to think about how much she came here to become a regular. She wasn’t even sure you could be a regular in New York freaking City. She tries not to sigh as she takes the pack and fishes in her back pocket for a couple of bank notes.
“Muuuuuum.”

The moment she meets Henry’s eyes, wide and almost watery, she knows she suddenly just failed at parenting and should have shut up. She can read it all in those big doe eyes, the surprise and the disappointment – he doesn’t mind her kissing a stranger when she’s already in a relationship, but talk about smoking and here it is. The irony isn’t lost on her.

“You smoked?”

She hears the rightful accusation under the concern in his voice, and pinches her nose with yet another sigh. That’s exactly why she thought telling him the story was a bad idea in the first place, because he’s still young enough to see her as some kind of super-hero and the last thing she wants is to fall in her son’s esteem, not to live up to his expectations. Emma wants to be his role model for a little while longer, but this story will most likely take that away from her – from both of them.

“People do stupid thing when they’re teenagers, sweetheart. It was a long time ago.”

Thankfully he doesn’t seem too eager to ask for more details, because Emma doesn’t want to tell she only stopped when she was pregnant, the same way she only stopped getting drunk with Ruby every Friday night because of the little bean growing inside her. But Henry only pouts, and Emma knows she just lost a bunch of brownie points.

“Keep going,” he says, and it takes her a few seconds to remember where she left off her story – taking the pack of cigarettes and paying and…

The little bell rings behind her, quickly followed by a “Bloody hell!” she would recognize anywhere. Killian comes closer to the counter, and to her incidentally, and shakes his head, droplets of rain falling on her face and having her huff and roll her eyes.

“Oh sorry, swan, I didn’t notice you here,” he says with a grin and a wink, before turning back to the seller. “Pack of blue American Eagles, please.”

“Five eighty-four.”

“Five eight– you pay six bucks for a pack of cigarettes?”

She gapes at him, eyes slightly wider - the only way she can afford her cigarettes while still being able to eat is by having men offering her drinks during parties, so how the hell does he manage to pay six dollars for a single pack? He’s never struck her as some daddy’s boy, but maybe she was wrong, maybe he’s actually loaded after all.

“They put less chemicals in it,” is the explanation he gives, shaking the pack right above her nose as he pockets the few cents the seller gives him.

“Oh so they’re non-carcinogenic cigarettes?” she replies in a heartbeat, all folded arms and offensive stance – he always brings out that challenging part of her, leading to spicy discussions and nasty arguments. It’s a wonder how they’re even friends in the first place, with how mean they can be at times, but he makes her laugh as much as he infuriates her, and not many people equal her wits.

So he only rolls her eyes and pokes her nose, with that ‘isn’t she cute?’ look she wants to slap off his face. “Course not, it’s still the same nasty stuff. But they put saltpetre in yours, which makes them burn faster, which makes you smoke more. So, in the end, it costs you more, not less.”

She narrowed her eyes at him for a second or two before shifting on her feet with a slight shake of the head as the defiant part of her takes over. “Yeah, I’m not buying that for a second. What
you’re paying for is the pretty picture and pastel colours.”

“Oh, you want to bet?”

*Son of a…*

“Twenty bucks,” the competitive in her replies with a nod.

He grins like the Cheshire cat. “Easiest twenty bucks ever made.”

They leave the shop under the amused gaze of the seller, only to scoot against the wall not to be drenched by the rain. He lights his cigarette before helping Emma with hers, both of them dragging on it at the same time and intensity. She lets the smoke out of her nose, watches as he blows smoke rings, and smiles at his proud grin – what a child.

“How were you exams?”

He scoffs and rolls his eyes, which in itself is enough of an answer, but still adds, “A disaster. Pretty sure I failed half of them.”

He puts the cigarette to his mouth, cutting off her laugh as she does the same. Still, she can’t help teasing him, cigarette between her teeth. “So not only did you chose a useless major… But you’re also *bad* at it? Dude, that’s harsh.”

She’s hasn’t stopped making fun of him from the moment he told her he was not only studying geography but also had no idea what he wants to do with such a degree – like he is planning to become some kind of modern Indiana Jones or something? He’s like a walking joke to Emma and her perfectly thought out career.

“What about you?”

“Well, let’s say you’re Pinky and I’m the Brain.” Smirk and drag. “Are you going back home for Christmas?”

“Aye. It’s going to be me and my mom and,” they both drag on the cigarette once more, “reruns of John Hughes movies. Crazy fun.”

“It does sound nice.”

“It really isn’t.”

She looks at him from the corner of her eyes, stupidly long hair contrasting with his clenched jaw as he stared right in front of him. Emma knows everything about tricky subjects people wants to avoid so, when he puts his cigarette to his mouth once more, she does the same and looks for something else to talk about. But she doesn’t have to think for long, as she looks down at her cigarette butt with a deep, loud, sigh.

“Well, look at that,” Killian says, holding his half-smoked cigarette next to hers.

“Okay, okay, all right.”

She tucks her cigarette between her teeth to put both hands in her pockets, but Killian grabs her forearm with a shake of the head. “Keep your money, lass. The satisfaction of beating you is more than enough.”

She glares at him but, still, twenty dollars is twenty dollars and she’ll probably need those soon
enough. He grins down at her when her hands leave her pockets, and all she wants is to wipe the smug look off his stupid face.

“What are you doing tonight?” he asks, oblivious to her murderous thoughts. “From what I’ve heard, your room is off limits.”

The groan escapes her lips whether she wants it or not – she had forgotten about that small detail of Ruby and Victor banishing her from her own room to celebrate the end of the term in their own special (dirty) way. Hence why she had come for her nicotine dose in the first place, ready to lock herself in the library for the rest of the night.

Great, just great.

“Come on, swan. Let’s have some fun of our own.”

He wraps an arm around her shoulders, and Emma finds herself suddenly scared to ask what kind of fun he has in mind.
“Anyone ever told you you’re a walking cliché?”

If you had told Emma only a couple of hours earlier that she would spend the night in some SoHo loft, her back to some Irish sex god’s chest, dancing to Daft Punk, she would have laughed at your face. And yet here she is, Killian’s hands on her hips – she is pretty sure the song doesn’t call for such sensual dance moves, but she’s way past caring at this point and the cheap beer in her veins doesn’t help. It will most likely end in some massive hangover, which is a bad idea in itself since she’s supposed to pick Neal up at the airport the following morning, but the exams are over and Killian keeps laughing in her ear and, if only for a night, she wants to enjoy herself. So she leans against his chest and relishes in the way his fingers tighten against her hips.

“Is that so?”

“Yeah.” Her breath catches in her throat when he puts his chin on her shoulder, but she reasons he’s only doing so to hear her and not the music blasting from the speakers – nothing else, nothing more. “You’ve got this whole bad boy persona going on, with the accent and the guitar, but you’re not fooling anyone. I know you’re just a big softie inside. Probably with some tragic backstory.”

“Got me all figured out, don’t you?”

She tries to laugh, but his voice is too close to her ear and she can only manage a breathless little sound at the back of her throat – pathetic. “Well, not my fault you’re predictable.”

He twirls her around without notice, making her squeak in surprise as she lands against his chest, hands coming to grab his shoulders not to lose her balance. Emma is suddenly very aware of the lack of space between them, his face only inches away from hers, his breath hot on her skin despite the overall warmth of the room. “Am I?” he whispers, low and teasing, a smirk curling up his lips.

Emma forgets to breathe, to think, blinking hard as she tries not to drown in his blue eyes – close, too close, this isn’t good, this is so wrong, he’s just her friend. Very attractive, very flirty friend, and her real actual boyfriend is arriving tomorrow and gosh what is she doing.

“I’m hot,” she blurts out, and she hates him for the way his eyes immediately roam her body, hates herself from blushing under his knowing gaze – but he doesn’t add a cheeky innuendo, simply nods.

“Come. Let’s get some fresh air.”

His hand finds the small of her back easily, and he pushes her to a side of the room, then to the window, nodding for her to go outside. If she thought they would only stay on the platform of the fire escape, Killian surprises her by leading her up until they reach the roof. It’s not the prettiest view in the city – the building is too small and, well, she visited the Empire State Building with Ruby only weeks ago – but it is still amazing with all the Christmas lights in the streets. A smile tugs on her lips even if she has to zip up her jacket against the cold winter wind.

“Nice, huh?” he asks, handing her yet another beer that probably just appeared out of nowhere. She takes it, clinging the bottle against his before taking a sip.

“It’s all right I guess,” is all she replies as she hides her smirk, making him scoff.
She leans against the railing, Killian mirroring her position with his back to the street, and they spend some minutes in silence, only enjoying their drinks. With the sound of the city and Daft Punk as background noise, Emma closes her eyes and breathes, her cheeks turning back to a less embarrassing shade of pink. It is oddly peaceful, despite the buzz of the city and the muffled sound of the music she can hear from here. It is quiet and nice, the cold of the wind biting her cheeks and the beer warming her from the inside. She almost regrets turning Killian down every time he offered the gang to go out and party – always excuses of *I’m tired* and *I really need to study*, with Ruby recalling the few memories she had the following morning around a huge cup of coffee. Emma is all about making the best of your college years, but she’s also all about not failing her exams, and sometimes, just like tonight, she wonders if she really had to choose one over the other. Maybe they can go hand in hand after all – she should try it.

“So *Neal* is coming over tomorrow, huh?”

Killian suddenly breaks the silence and, when she looks at him, he’s looking in front of him, tongue pressed against the inside of his cheek in what can only described as annoyance. Gosh, is he jealous or something? Come to think about it, she’s never seen him with a girlfriend before, only girls he sneaks in and out of his dorm when Victor is not here.

“It’s amazing how you do that.” He finally glances at her, eyebrow raised in a silent question. “How much bitterness and sarcasm you can pour in a single name. Impressive, really.”

“I don’t do that! I told you, I just don’t believe in that relationship bullshit.” His offended tone falls flat with his smirk and roll of the eyes, though. “Is he, like, your high school sweetheart?”

“You’re doing it again!”

But he’s obviously grinning at her now, sipping his beer with a wriggle of the eyebrows, and she can’t help but punch him in the shoulder. He laughs good-heartedly, nudging her back, before settling back in a comfortable silence he only breaks by humming some Backstreet Boys song. She grins at him for a second or two before focusing again on the city landscape in front of her, sipping from her beer once in a while.

The Backstreet Boys turn into Britney Spears – gosh the party is nice but the DJ has no sense of consistency whatsoever – but they stay silent. Until Emma bursts out, “I think he’s going to propose.”

Killian chokes on his beer. Turns his head to look at her. Widens his eyes.

“He can’t possibly ask me to move in with him. But the other day he said he needed to tell me something, but he couldn’t do it over the phone. So he’s going to propose, right?”

His Adam’s apple bobs, twice, slowly, before he reaches for his beer once more – obviously avoiding the subject, and she can’t really blame him. Not when her breathes are short and her chest heavy, as if on the verge of a panic attack. He glances at her once more then wordlessly starts rubbing her upper arm, and it is strangely soothing.

“Have you worked on your surprised face?”

The question is so unexpected than she can only laugh and shake her head before she looks at him with an “Excuse me?” He laughs too.

“You know, when you’re little and you find your Christmas presents before the day and you have to act like you’re all surprised that you got exactly what you wanted. And everyone pretend not to notice your bad acting, because it’s Christmas.” He points a finger at her when she laughs once
more – the guy has crazy thoughts, seriously. “Yes, you know exactly what I’m talking about. Now, you know he’s going to propose, so you need to practice your fake surprised face. To look genuine when he asks.”

“Why am I even friends with you?” she asks, but she has to agree he has a point – she doesn’t do well under pressure and, even if she can recognize a lie easily, she’s never been a good liar herself. Perhaps some training is in order. And, as if hearing her thoughts, Killian pushes himself off the railing to face her, a wicked smirk on his lips – she catches up on his idea in less than a second.

“No. No way.”

“Come on, swan. It’ll be fun!”

She immediately wants to deny it – where is the fun in being fake-proposed by someone who is not your boyfriend, half-drunk, in the middle of a party – but he doesn’t give her the chance as he’s already taking off the heavy silver ring he wears on his thumb. One more smirk before he gets to his knee in front of her, and she can already see the few other people on the roof turning to look at them, her cheeks growing red at the mere idea of having an audience.

Oh gosh, this is such a bad idea on so many levels. And yet she can’t stop grinning – probably the alcohol.

“Emma… Would you marry me?”

The grin drops in a second with a heavy sigh. “No.”

Killian jumps back on his feet. “What do you mean ‘no’? I thought you wanted this?”

“This is the worst fake-proposal ever! I haven’t seen you in weeks, I’m only eighteen and I’m unsure about this whole thing, so the least you could do is convince me that this is the right thing to do!”

His eyes wide even so slightly, and Emma knows immediately she’s said too much in the heat of the moment – Killian may be her friend but they’re not that close, and the last thing she wants is for an almost stranger to know about her commitment issues. Still, whatever he is thinking, clouding his eyes, soon disappears, his trademark grin back in place. “Aw, honey, it’s our first fake domestic quarrel.”

She punches him in the shoulder.

“Oh, okay,” he laughs, holding his hands up in surrender, before rolling his shoulders and looking down with a sigh. When he stares back at her, it’s with a softness in his eyes she didn’t know he could muster, and he comes closer to hold her hand. “Emma Swan –”

“Nolan.”

“Emma Nolan, you are the most infuriating woman I’ve ever met. You’re stubborn and annoying and you disagree with everything I say… But you’re beautiful, and clever, and witty, and I’m yet to understand how you deemed me fitting of spending time with you… But I cherish every second by your side, and I hope you’ll never grow tired of me because I want to spend the rest of my life with you. So Emma, love, would you do me the honour of becoming my wife?”

Her small gasp floats between them for a few seconds before a car honking brings her back to reality, music and city life and everything. She blinks, her eyes travelling between his, deep and blue and soft, and the ring gleaming in the dim light. The expression on his face is all too genuine,
throwing her off for a second or two before she forces herself to brush it off – he’s a good actor, is all, this is all just an act. But, still, his words keep replaying in her mind, whether she likes it or not, and Emma finds herself dumbstruck for longer than necessary.

She coughs and shrugs, scratching her throat in what she hopes to appear as nonchalance. “Definitely… maybe… I don’t know, that’s a shitty ring.”

Killian finally looks down at the ring and shrugs too with a small, “Yeah, probably,” before slipping it back on his thumb. She doesn’t fail to notice how weak his voice sounds, missing its usual bravado and smugness – still, she tries not to focus on it, and is happy, almost relieved, when he offers to go back to their dorms.

…

She can’t shrug the disgusted look off her face, and Killian snickers every time he looks at her. Not only are Ruby and Victor not done with their business yet – seriously, it’s been hours, what even – but they even went as far as putting a freaking sock on the handle. Like you can’t lock the door from the inside. Like they’re living in some teen romantic comedy or something. It’s past midnight and she’s banished from her own room because her friends will not see each other for a grand total of two weeks – she hates them with a burning passion.

Hence the face and Killian laughing at her as he rummages his own room, looking for something to eat and soak up the alcohol, as he swears some cookies are hidden there somewhere. It gives her the liberty to scan the room – strangely clean for two guys, with a television and an old Nintendo 64 in a corner, Killian’s guitar in another. Emma doesn’t even try to tone down her curiosity as she comes closer to his desk, looking at the many maps and geography books scattered there. Her eyes wander up to the little bookshelf and she frowns at the same titles over and over again, in different editions and sizes, some soft covers and some leather bound ones – there are at least thirty different versions of the same book.

“Hey. Why do you have so many copies of *The Old Man and the Sea*?”

Killian has a little victory laugh from under his bed, before he throws the box of cookie on it and sits straighter, arms folded on his mattress as he stares at her. “That, love, is a really long story.”

“Really?” she asks, taking one of the books and going through it. “I read it in high school, it’s only a hundred pages.”

His laugh is almost bitter as he stands up and bits in a cookie, offering her one. “My brother gave it to me for my thirteen birthday, wrote that beautiful message inside. Which I couldn’t care less about at that time because all I wanted was a Playstation. Turns out it’s the last gift he ever gave me.”

“How so?”

His eyes are full of sadness now, not meeting hers, and Emma wonders if she’s too curious for it seems like a delicate subject to bring up. But Killian simply shakes his head with an even saddest smile. “He turned eighteen that year and enrolled in the Irish Naval Service. Mission gone wrong, he never came back… Mum sunk into depression soon after, and my father couldn’t take it so he just left. We had to move to a smaller flat and the *Old Man* got lost along the way.” He sniffs but his smile turns softer as she squeezes his forearm. “So now I can’t help but check every time I pass
by a second-hand store. I know there’s a chance in a million that I’ll find the book again but, I
don’t know, it’s become a habit. Hobby. Obsession…”

“It’s sweet,” she replies softly before taking another bite of her cookie. She motions to the books.
“What are those, though?”

“Oh. There are all the books I found with an inscription in it. Look.” He takes the book from her,
opens it on the very first page to read, “‘May Hemingway’s words inspire you more than his
drinking habit while you’re in college. Love always, Dad.’ I love this one.”

It doesn’t take them long after that to settle on his bed, Killian sitting with his back to the wall
while she uses his lap as a cushion, both of them too tired to notice how he never stops playing
with a strand of her hair. Their eyelids are heavy and their conversation easy, cut off by the
occasional lazy laugh, and Emma wonders if she’ll end up spending the night here – looks like
Victor won’t be coming back until morning anyway.

“No, seriously. Why geography?”

She snickers at his groan and how he rubs a hand against his face in desperation. “I have no
bloody idea. I didn’t know what to do and I’ve always loved the sea and travelling so… yeah.”

Her laugh grows stronger and she would roll her eyes if she weren’t too tired for that. “Couldn’t
you pick something useful? Like biology or international relationships or something?”

“I don’t know… I only want to travel, see the world.”

“Why don’t you take a gap year then? Take some time to travel around, to find yourself. Maybe
it’ll help, maybe you’ll know what to do with your studies when you come back.”

“Look at you, swan. Planning my future in great details like you did yours.”

She looks up at him with a frown – she hadn’t even realised she’d close them at some point. “Are
you judging me for knowing what I want to do with my life?”

“No, of course not.” His tone is soft and reassuring, but it doesn’t stop her from sitting up,
defensive all of a sudden. “Being a cop and defending the city, it’s great. You’re the next Oliver
Queen. But tell me, who’s going to take care of you when you’re too busy saving the world?”

The question startles her in its accuracy – especially with the minor freak-out she had earlier when
speaking of Neal and their potential engagement – and she glares at Killian for a second or two,
almost angrily, before frowning. “Got me all figured out, don’t you?” She only meant to make fun
of him, poorly imitating his voice, to take control of the situation, but it comes out breathless,
flirting.

Killian doesn’t miss a beat. “You’re an open book to me.”

She can’t ignore the tension between them, the tension that has been between them since the
moment she decided grinding against her handsome friend could be a good idea. He licks his
upper lip, eyes falling to hers, and Emma can only mirror him. He closes the distance between
them, slowly, tentatively, his breath dancing against her lips. They stay still for a couple of
seconds until the metaphorical rubber band snaps and then he’s all over her, hot kisses and warm
touch, hands roaming her body, tongue exploring her mouth. She moans when his thumb brushed
the side of her breath, fingers finding his hair and tugging slightly. It’s hot and passionate and
hurried, and gosh she hasn’t been kissed in weeks and she missed that, missed the intimacy of such
a moment. Especially with the way he nibbles her bottom lip and groans against her mouth, how
thorough he is in his ministrations, quickly learning what she likes best – the right angle, the right
pressure, and that thing he does with his teeth should probably be illegal.

It’s only when she moves to straddle him that Emma snaps back to reality, eyes wide as she stares at him, all ruffled hair and swollen lips – a sight to behold. Killian stares back, and what she reads in his eyes, soft and caring and – and loving, is like a cold shower, all the alarms setting off in her head. She jumps to her feet, runs to the door – she needs air, she need privacy. Needs Killian not to be sharing her space.

“Emma…”

“No! No… Stay here. Don’t follow me.”

As she closes the door and finds herself alone in the hallway, his whispered “as you wish” lingers in the air.
“Emma. Hey, Emma!”

She wakes up in a startle that has her almost falling off the couch, sitting up in a jolt and looking around her in confusion. It takes her long seconds to remember – Ruby, the party, Killian, oh gosh *the kiss*, and then falling asleep in the common room – as she runs a hand through her tangled hair. When she finally looks up, it’s to Neal’s brown eyes, shining golden in the morning light, as he watches her carefully.

“Hi,” she mumbles, wincing at the headache that comes with her own words – wow, was she *that* drunk? – and rubbing her eyes.

“Your neighbour said I’d find you there. What happened?”

Emma shivers, though from the cold night she just spent or to the mention of who can only be Killian, she isn’t sure, before frowning again. She pinches the bridge of her nose, her other hand up in a vague motion toward the door. “Roommate kicked me out to have sex, no big deal.”

No big deal, her ass. Ruby is going to pay for that, and sooner than later. But first she needs a hot shower, and probably an aspirin. And coffee. Tons and tons of coffee. She stands up on wobbly feet, ignoring Neal as he raises his hand to help her, instead motioning for him to sit on the couch. “I won’t be long, okay?”

She doesn’t wait for his answer before leaving the room and making it back to her dorm, patting her pockets for her card. Her mind is fuzzy and her tongue feel like lead in her mouth, and all she wants is to hide under her warm blanket and go back to sleep – a luxury she can’t afford right now. So a quick shower it will be, before packing the rest of her stuff and leaving for the hotel. The mere thought brings back her headache, and guilt with it, because she hasn’t seen Neal in months and this is far from the greeting she had in mind for him – which had somewhat involved the same kind of activities Ruby had taken part of last night.

She swipes her card, watching as the little dot turns green before opening the door. “You better be dressed ‘cause I’m in no mood to see Victor’s junk right now,” she says as she enters the room, only to find them both entangled and asleep on Ruby’s small bed. She rolls her eyes before grabbing some clothes and making a run for the bathroom.

The hot water does wonders to her sore body and cloudy mind, wiping the make-up off her eyes and scrubbing her skin until it turns pink and the vague smell of smoke and alcohol no longer invades her senses. She stays in the shower for longer than necessary, washing her hair and convincing herself that she isn’t avoiding Neal in the process – and that has nothing to do with the two guys she kissed that are definitely not her boyfriend, no, why would she think that? She sighs, low and deep and a bit desperate, before deciding it is time to face her responsibilities.

Still, she takes her time to dry her hair and get dressed, as if it would have time standing still, until she can no longer pretend. She puts all her toiletries in her vanity case and some stuff in her suitcase, not caring if the noise wakes the two lovers up, before leaving the room once again to go fetch Neal – only, of course, to stumble on Killian in the hallway.

They stare at each other like two frightened animals, her cheek growing pinker while his face is drenched of all colours, and he coughs awkwardly to break the tension of the moment as he adjust the strap of his travel bag on his shoulder.
“Enjoy your holiday, Swan,” he says softly, scratching his neck with his free hand.

“Yeah… You too.”

None of them move, though, as they keep staring at each other awkwardly for a few more seconds, before he looks away and coughs once again. With a nod to himself, he finally walks away, and she watches him go until he disappears around the corner. She shakes her head then before walking in the other direction. Her smile feels too forced and fake as she greets Neal once again – properly this time, with a kiss and a hug.

“I just need to take my suitcase and we’re good to go.”

“Actually…” She stops in her tracks, raises an eyebrow at him. “What about breakfast? I saw a coffee shop around the corner.”

And just like that, everything comes back to slap her in the face, his phone call and playing pretend on a rooftop and I need to talk to you. Her palms grow sweaty in an instant, trying not so discretely to rub them on her jeans as she nods in approval. She was so sure, only hours ago, that he would propose, but there is something about his face, or maybe his eyes, that has her doubting her first idea – her wariness goes through the roof by the time they make it to the coffee shop.

... 

The hot chocolate she nurses between her gloved hands does nothing to ease her mind as she sits on a bench in Washington Square Park. It’s still early and cold, white clouds forming in front of her face with every breath she takes, the place not crowded with tourists quite yet, giving a false sense of intimacy. Neal sits next to her, careful that his thigh doesn’t brush hers and if she wasn’t dubious before, she definitely is now. Something is off, and she simply waits for the bomb to drop as she sips her drink, hot chocolate burning her tongue but lacking its usual comforting touch, leaving her even crankier than she already was.

“Okay, Cassidy. Spill the beans.”

Her finger tapping against the plastic lid of her drink, she waits for the shoe to drop. She doesn’t dare look at him, not even from the corner of her eyes, already dreading the worst as a hundred different scenarios run through her mind. Someone is mortally ill – something happened to Storybrooke – his father’s shop has been robbed and Mr Gold killed the culprit – oh gosh someone is dead and… Oh gosh and they didn’t tell her over the phone because…

“I slept with Wendy.”

... What?

“What?”

Her body reacts before her hangover mind truly does, discarding her hot chocolate as she jumps on her feet to face Neal. He stands up too seconds later and holds his hands up in surrender, something that only makes her laugh, the sound cold and hollow at the back of her throat. The guy has some nerve, seriously, and she’s too tired and sick for this kind of mess right now. So, when he opens his mouth, surely with some explanation he’s rehearsed during the trip from Boston, she cuts him off before he even has time to say a single word.
“No. You don’t get to talk. You don’t get to say anything right now, because you’re an asshole. You’re an asshole cheating on his girlfriend and dropping the bomb right before you’re supposed to spend two weeks with her. *You’re an asshole, Neal!*’

She takes her drink again only to throw it away in the nearby bin, before making her way back to her dorm as fast as possible without actually breaking into a jog. Her brain already in survival mode, already set on one goal – going back to her room and hide under the blankets for a few more hours, all the while ignoring the world around her. She’ll think about everything else, going back home and the like, later. First she’ll run and hide and protect her heart; she’ll simply pretend nothing happened.

Not that he gives her that chance, of course.

His fingers brand into her skin, his grip burning as he grabs her wrist, and she can only shakes it out with a jolt and a wince. She ignores the pain in his eyes – *how dares he* – and settles for glaring at him instead. Neal has always been a pig-headed idiot anyway and, while it was endearing at time, it’s just annoying now. But, still, she knows he won’t leave her alone until he’s told her this grand speech of his, so the sooner the better.

“I could already feel you slipping away. The way you talked over the phone, like New York is the best thing that ever happened to you. I knew I was losing you, I knew it was only a question of time before…”

“Before what?”

She can feel her patience growing thinner with every passing second, with every word out of his mouth, and wants him to shut up, *just shut up*, because his explanations simply adds fuel to the already huge fire that is their relationship. So she folds her arms against her chest, both as a defense mechanism and to refrain herself from punching him, and squares her shoulders for the fight.

“Before you forget I even exist.”

It would have moved her, had the situation been different – the sadness in his eyes and the damn puppy face he masters and the heart-breaking confession. She could have understood, because god knows she hasn’t been the best girlfriend of all times, if her behaviour the preceding night is telling. She could have understood, but images of Wendy just keep popping in her mind and… no, just no.

“So you had to fuck my childhood best friend because you couldn’t man up and do things properly? Shit, you really are your father’s son…”

He wouldn’t have looked more stunned if she had slapped him – this is a low blow, she knows, but Emma can’t find it in herself to care right now. Instead she relishes in the break it offers her to turn on her heels and flee the scene once again.

“Emma…”

Her name sounds weak on his lips, a soft plea that has her turn around once again and sigh deeply. “Not now, seriously. Not now.”

She doesn’t stop walking, dodging the few people she meets and running past a car as she jaywalks, until she’s in front of her dorm house. A whimper escapes her lips then, as she looks over her shoulder, almost tempted to knock on the other door. But she knows he’s not there, saw him leave only half an hour ago – it feels like hours, ages. Ruby is still in bed when Emma enters
the room, Victor nowhere to be seen, but the brunette jumps on her feet immediately, eyes wide with surprise and concern.

“Oh god, Emma. What happened?”

Only then does Emma realise her cheeks are damp with tears, body shivering and teeth chattering, upset that her body is finally giving up but relieved that nobody but her roommate is here to see the mess. Her friend guides her to the bed, hand warm and soothing as it draws patterns on her back, and she gives in — lets the tears out in painfully loud sobs that have her chokes for air and bite on her lip until she tastes blood. Ruby doesn’t ask, just holds her and comforts her until she cries herself to sleep.

It’s late into the afternoon when she wakes up next to her friend, her mind somewhat registering that they should be out of the dorm by now, but Ruby reassures her — she asked the residence director, they can stay in the dorm until the following day. Emma feels like crying again at the silent statement, at the fact that her friend is willing to stay with her if she needs her, and she bites on her lip again, drawing some more blood, before she manages to explain what happened. Ruby listens carefully, with colourful curses at all the right moments, and it feels good somehow, sharing that with her.

The sun is setting on New York when Emma finally finds the strength to grab the phone on her desk and dial the number she’s known by heart since she was ten. Relief courses through her veins with a deep sigh at her father’s simple ‘hello’, a smile finally settling on her lips.

“Hey, it’s me. Can I come home for the holiday?”

…”

They lie side by side in bed, feet propped up against the wall above the headboard. Her hands are carefully placed on her stomach, Henry’s folded beneath his head and, for long seconds, minutes even, they simply stay in that position, both silent. Then he sighs, deep and loud, and Emma turns her head to look at him as he keeps staring at the ceiling.

“You were right,” he says at last. “Maybe I wasn’t ready.”

Her smile is sad as she leans to kiss his cheek — her son, so brave and wise beyond his years. Of course it was a bad idea, she realised it the moment she started telling the story, but it’s as if they both know they’re over the point of no return by now — they can only go forwards from there.

“We can stop here for tonight if you want,” she suggests, both for him and herself, unsure that she can keep going tonight — not without a nice glass of wine at least.

Not answering, Henry suddenly turns to lie on his belly, grabbing the notepad and marker by his side in the process, tongue sticking out in concentration. She mirrors his new position, curiously glancing at the list he’s been working on through her tale, as he carefully crosses out Neal’s name.

She smiles to herself at the notes he wrote down, the so called clues that should help him solve the mystery. “Neal: high school boyfriend, doesn’t like NY, cares about mom’s safety. Graham: gentle, really smart. Killian: likes music, funny, teases mom a lot.” She isn’t sure how helpful those will be in the end, but it is endearing to see Henry so focused on her story and its main mystery — even with what she just told him.
“So, what happened next?” he asks with a curiosity he obviously takes from her, all thoughts of break-up and cheating boyfriend forgotten for the sake of the story.

A breathless chuckle escapes her lips as she shakes her head.

“I went back home for the holiday and so did Neal. I avoided him for a few days, and then we had a heart to heart discussion, like the grownups we most definitely weren’t at that time, until we realised we were both at fault in this story – him more than me, mind you. We decided it was better not to speak to each other for a while and that was it. I went back to New York in January and…”

“What about Killian?”

She laughs again at his eagerness, even if the memory is bittersweet. “Killian had dropped out of university over the break. He’d left me a letter, thought, telling me I was right and he needed a new life. Next letter I received was from Argentina, where he was working as a bartender. He kept writing to me every other week, and I’d reply by e-mails, so we never really lost touch. And that’s basically it for the next three years. I graduated from NYU and entered the police academy. Nothing much happened in between.”

“So… What’s next?”

“Well, that’s when Graham returns.”
chapter 6

Chapter Notes

It's been exactly two months since the last update... sorry? Here, have some fluffy Gremma with a dash of Captain Swan as an apology for the delay.

october 2004

She slips into the room as quietly as possible, both hands pressed against the door for it not to close too loudly. The party is already in full swing, Regina Mills standing on a stage as she gives her speech, and the last thing Emma wants is to stand out at the girl who arrived late to the gathering. Thankfully, she is as quiet as a mouse and manages to enter the room with only the old man closer to the door looking up at her with a disapproving frown. She shoots him a thin smile before walking forward on the tip of her toes for her heels not to click on the hardwood floor, going to lean against a column near the bar – the sooner she can get her hands on a drink, the better.

Professor Mills is in the middle of her speech, something about excellence and greatness, everything the school aims to be, allowing Emma to switch off for a minute or two. It is funny, verging on ironical, that Ruby and she sneaked into such a party not three years ago, and here she is now, with a proper invite in her handbag and a proper dress hugging her every curves – hell, she even took the time to do her hair into an intricate braid, it goes to show! Still, she feels just as out of place as the first time, among those learned professors and rich businessmen – she knows exactly why she is here, knows she’s only here to put on a show and be used as a dancing monkey, and it doesn’t help with her nervousness. If only Ruby was here, if only Ruby could entertain –

“Forever 21 dress.”

It effectively startles her, both physically and out of her thoughts, and Emma looks up to the stranger. Who turns out not to be such a stranger after all, in his puppy-eyed sandy-haired glory as he smiles adorably at her, as if pleased to have surprised someone – or pleased to see her, she isn’t quite sure. Still the curve of his lips reminds her of how soft they were against her, the sparkle in his eyes how delicate in the way he appraised her. She almost blushes at the memories of such an unexpected kiss – and such a great one too.

A grin tugs up her lips in reply. “Regina’s toy boy.”

The face he makes is immediate and just shy of over-the-top as he flashes his teeth in a pout of disgust and embarrassment, looking away from her. Emma can only snicker, hiding her laughs behind her hand not to attract attention on them.

“You’ve been invited this time. That’s progress.”

She bites on her bottom lip to hide yet another grin at their inoffensive battle of quips, rolling her eyes at such childish antics. It is easy, obviously so, to tease him and being teased back – as easy at it was three years ago, as if no time had passed, as if they had always been great friends mocking each other on a daily basis.
And they have only exchanged three sentences, her brain notes dryly. She chooses to ignore it. She leans more casually against the column, legs crossed at the ankles and arms folded on her chest as she looks up at him with a cheeky smile. “Are you here for Professor Mills?”

She swears he blushes, like a little kid caught with the hand in the cookie jar, as he gives her a half-hearted chuckle and a shake of the head. “She dumped me last year,” he starts, hesitates for a second, and adds, “She’s dating Robin Locksley now.”

“She’s dating Robin Hood?” Her hand seems to have a mind of his own as it rises up to hit him on the chest, mouth opening in a shocked expression. “Shut the front door!”

Perhaps not that discreet this time, since an older woman in a too-expensive dress shushes them both with a murderous look – it only widens Emma’s grin as she moves closer to her improvised friend so they can whisper to each other without being scolded.

“Yeah, and rumour has it it’s pretty serious,” he whispers back.

Emma can only snicker at that. Robin Locksley is famous around town, and not just for what a great lawyer he is, but mostly for all the pro bono cases he and his companies deal with on an almost-weekly basis – hence the well-deserved nickname, of course, for his company is funded by rich clients so they can help the poorest ones. He’s kind of a living legend at NYU, mostly because he studies there when all the other lawyers come from the Ivy League.

For a guy like that, kind and compassionate, to date a woman like Regina Mills… Yeah, it makes one hell of a gossip, that one is sure.

“I can’t believe –”

Her sentence dies in thunderous applause, startling them both out of their little bubble to notice Regina indeed just finished her welcoming speech. Emma finds herself clapping too, if not as vigorously, only happy about the opening of the bar next to them – gosh she needs alcohol, and right now, if she wants to survive what will obviously follow.

As if reading her mind, Graham puts a hand on the small of her back and pushes her softly toward the bar. As the first one in line, they are served rather quickly, and she relishes in the glass of rum between her hands, the sip she takes burning on her tongue and warm in her belly.

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“I’ll admit, I didn’t expect to see you tonight,” he says, nursing his own glass of whiskey.

She rolls her eyes at the pretty words and replies a simple, “I didn’t expect to see you at all.” All things considered, she had completely forgotten about him until a few minutes ago, but the surprise isn’t all that unpleasant.

(It was a nice kiss, after all. And she’s single now. Which shouldn’t matter, but still.)

“So, what are you doing now?” he asks next.

She almost wants to thank him for that, the delay he offers her before she has to force herself to mingle with those rich people and convince them investing in the university is indeed a good idea look at me and my shiny new diploma. So her smile grows wider, fonder, as she replies, “I’m in the middle of my training at the police academy, actually. You?”

Instead of replying, he simply takes a card off his pocket and discreetly shows it to her – FBI – before putting it back in with a smile. She gapes as he adds, “White collar.”
Her low whistle of appreciation is swallowed by a snobbish “Graham, darling” that has them both turn their heads in the direction of the sound. Regina Mills swaggers toward them – well, toward him, really – her usual feral smile on her lips as her hand grabs his forearm with a possessive strength. She kisses his cheek soundly, so close to his lips Emma frowns a bit, and then laughs as she brushes her thumb against his skin to wipe the smudge of red lipstick.

“How are you, my dear?” she asks, voice smooth and charming.

That’s when she notices Emma by his side, her features growing hard and strict again – Emma forces herself not to take a step back under that glare, plastering a polite smile on her lips as she holds up her hand to be shaken.

“Hello, I’m –”

“Miss Swan, yes. The valedictorian wasting her potential at the NYPD.”

The smile falters immediately as Emma blinks once, twice, taking as deep a breath as discreetly as possible. A slap to the face would have been less painful. Still she takes it in stride, painting another smile on her lips as she excuses herself politely.

It only takes her a few steps before she downs her drink, alcohol burning her throat almost painfully but welcomed in the cloud it sets on her mind. She spots another of her professors in the corner of her eye and settles for speaking with him instead – mingling she will, and putting on a show she will, even as the cutting words of the head of department keep replaying in her head. Waste of potential, her ass. She is exactly where she’s always wanted to be, and she curses herself for letting Regina Mills get to her.

(She feels Graham’s eyes on her all night long, and is barely surprised, when she makes a move to leave, that he stops her in the hallway. He smiles shyly even as he gives her his number, almost begging her to call him.)

…

“Wait, are you kidding? Dude is still into you after three years?”

Emma rolls her eyes as she goes through her mail, sparing Ruby a glare. “Thanks,” she replies, barely concealing the sarcasm in her tone. She rolls her eyes once more as Ruby jumps on the kitchen counter like she belongs there – it is sometimes hard to believe they no longer are roommates with how at home the brunette is in the cramped apartment.

Bills and ads are promptly discarded from the stack of mail, until only one envelop remains, a bright smile illuminating Emma’s face as she swiftly opens it.

“Is it Killian?”

Ruby doesn’t need an answer to that because of course it is Killian, nobody else bothers sending handwritten letters these days. So she simply nods as she grabs the picture inside the envelop, a shot of the Taj Mahal taken with an old polaroid, colours washed out and greyish at best – it gives a certain and undeniable charm to the whole thing. She stares at the picture for a long time, smile still on her lips, before showing it to Ruby only to have the picture torn from her fingers as her best friend stares at it too.
“India, nice,” she comments. “This one definitely goes on the fridge.”

Ruby finds a free magnet for the picture – not an easy task when the fridge is already full of them, Paris and Tokyo and the Australian desert and all those places Killian has visited and shared with her through the years – while Emma grabs the letter still inside the envelop. Her eyes jump from one line to another, force of habit of a student who needs to read as many books in as little time as possible, and her smile grows wider at Killian’s words.

Nonsense, mostly, as always with him, rambling about one thing or another, about the places he sees and people he meets, the little jobs he finds to pay for crappy hotel rooms and cheap plane tickets. His life is so different, so out of her reach, that reading about it makes her somewhat dizzy every time.

He signs it ‘yours, Killian’, as always, and she finds herself tracing the curves of the letters tenderly. As always.

“So are you going to call him?”

She blinks up at Ruby, confused for a second – why would she call Killian? – as her best friend replies to her lack of reaction by folding her arms to her chest with a raised eyebrow. Emma hates that, the face that means so much, mostly because she’s never able to tell what Ruby is thinking in those moments. It is annoying at best, especially when said thoughts are about you.

“FBI guy. Not Killian, god knows this ship has sailed.”

“Killian and I never –” She stops right there, shakes her head, because now is not the time.

“Should I? I mean, Mills’ gigolo, really?”

“He’s cute and he’s into you, what more do you need?”

Emma’s only reply involves her tongue pressed to the inside of her cheek and a roll of the eyes as she’s thankful for her best friend and the way they manage to communicate their feelings even without words – especially in such an occasion, where she doesn’t want to put words on her feelings, because saying them out loud would make them real and she can’t allow that to happen. Instead, Emma focuses back on the letter – yours, Killian – as a sigh escapes her lips before she folds it and tucks it in the back pocket of her jeans.

“Come on, girly.” Ruby’s voice is suddenly softer. “It’s been two years and a half since Neal. You need to date other people! This guy seems nice, you like him. What more do you need?”

To prove her point, Ruby hands her the landline phone with a pointed look, as if daring to be contradicted. It works – of course it does – as Emma grabs the phone with a loud, forced sigh, then her handbag, looking for the business card that is hiding there somewhere.

“But just so you know, I’ll blame you if it ends up badly.”

“Kay!” Ruby replies cheerfully, with a smile and a shrug.

…

The bar he picked isn’t too noisy or too crowded, far from the ones where she used to spend her nights when she was still a student. It actually reminds her of Mary Margaret in how classy it is,
from the beautiful counter to the tastefully decorations. Not too cheap but not too expensive either, the perfect place for a first date with an almost stranger. Which, clearly, is a relief, as Emma finds herself nervously playing with the straw of her colourful cocktail – why did she pick that, she doesn’t even like cocktails that much – and knows it would have been far worse if the crowd had been too loud or too cheerful.

If Graham notices she’s been sitting on the edge of her seat for the past hour or so, he is gentleman enough to ignore it, all smiles and kind eyes as usual. And, she has to admit, it is a rather nice date indeed. He makes her smile and laugh, is easy to talk to, and seems like a good listener. He doesn’t speak too much, and they find themselves in passionate debates once or twice, always followed by conversations where they mock their former professors – she laughs out loud at his imitation of Professor Hopper who taught them civil rights, and it ends in ridiculous little snorts she’s almost ashamed of, cheek red with laughter and embarrassment. But his jokes are just as lame as her laugh, so he isn’t one to talk.

“Wanna play darts?” he asks after a while, with a little nod to the game on the opposite wall. She stares at it for a while, almost frightened by a simple target, before shaking her head. “I’m really bad at it, seriously.”

“Come on, they’re teaching you how to use a gun. How bad can darts be?”

As it turns out, very bad indeed.

The only time she doesn’t miss the target is for the dart to land at the very edge of it, while Graham shoots in the bull’s eye every time, which of course adds to the humiliation of the moment. Emma isn’t sure if she is too drunk or not enough for that game but, as it turns out one beer later, it doesn’t really matter because she sucks at it no matter what. Even nice, polite, gentleman Graham finds it hard not to laugh after a while, pressing his lips into a thin line not to openly mock her – which, all right, cute, her plastered brain agrees.

“Wait, I’ll show you.”

Before she has time to protest, she finds herself with Graham’s hard chest pressed to her back, his breath hot and tickling to her neck, as he grabs her hand and shows her how to throw the dart. He is so very obvious that Emma can only smile, biting on her bottom lip as his other hand comes to grip her hip, nodding at the instructions whispered to her ear.

Despite his best efforts, the dart still barely grazes the target, and they sigh in unison as she desperately leans her head against his shoulder. It’s easy and simple and she likes it, like the way his fingers tighten on her hip, the way his hand caresses her naked arm. It’s easy, carefree, and everything she needs right now – a nice guy with a steady job and a lovely smile. So she angles her head just so to kiss his jaw, beard tickling on her lip.

It doesn’t take him long to properly kiss her, and it’s exactly as she remembers and some more – soft and slow and warm, butterflies in her belly and firework in her head as she wraps her arms around his shoulders and plays with the curly hair at the name of his neck. They sigh when they end the kiss, nose brushing and lips grazing, not caring that they’re in the middle of a bar for everyone to see.

“Your place or mine?” she finds herself asking, a whisper against his mouth as a smile curves up his lips, claiming hers once more.

And in the morning, she simply elects to ignore the ten unanswered calls and fifteen texts on her cell phone – all from Ruby, she doesn’t even need to check – as she paddles to the kitchen in an
oversized plaid shirt, following the smell of waffles. He’s cooking in his boxer briefs, hair a rightful mess on his head and eyes sparkling with happiness as he leans in for a morning kiss – it is adorable and dorky, and somewhat the most erotic sigh she’s witnessed in a long while.

She sighs happily, a small grin gracing her lips when she realises she doesn’t want it – whatever it is – to stop.
chapter 7

december 2004

The fabric of the shirt feels heavy under her fingertips as she smoothes the collar and fastens the buttons at her wrists. She is uncomfortable at best in such stuffy clothes, but perhaps that’s the point, perhaps it is meant for you to feel the pressure on your shoulders every time you wear them. The reflexion in the mirror barely looks like her under the cold neon light of the bathroom, casting shadows under her eyes and on her cheeks, making her look more severe than she actually is. Emma squares her shoulders, looking quite the part even if a small grin tugs up her lips – she did it, finally, she made it at last.

A soft knock on the door startles her out of her thoughts and, with one final nod to herself in the mirror, Emma finally turns around to leave the bathroom. Graham is sitting on the bed by the time she opens the door, whistling when he finally sees her, big goofy grin having her roll her eyes.

“Do they know they don’t have to dress a woman as a man to give her authority?” she asks as she looks down at her outfit.

It is black and unflattering at best, unlike those you see in cop shows, and she wonders if the outfit is even for women to begin with or if they simply gave her the smaller size of the lot. The fabric is heavy and scratchy, the tie almost choking her, and she doesn’t even want to get started on the freaking cap. They could dress her with a potato sack and it would be as effective – she can’t wait to be promoted detective so she can go back to casual clothes. (And, gosh, she hasn’t even started working yet and she’s already complaining, how great.)

“You think you could get people to do what you want in that red coat of yours?” she asks as she rolls her eyes once more as she comes closer to him, swaying her hips on purpose and relishing in the way his eyes almost pop out of their sockets – interesting. She only stops when she’s standing between his opened legs, leaning down until her breath caresses his lips. His eyes are hungry, grey blackened by lust, and she doesn’t know if it’s her little show or the uniform turning him on that much. Both, most likely.

“I’m always getting you to do what I want.”

He growls at the back of his throat, the sound going straight to her core, and grabs her hips to pull her to him. She giggles and takes off her cap to put it on his head, nodding in approval before capturing his lips in a hungry kiss.

“You know the perks of that outfit, though?” she asks between pants as they break away. Two of her fingers tap the handcuffs on her belt, and she can only laugh at the wolfish grin he offers her then.

They fall on the mattress in a tangle of limbs and concert of breathless laughter, outfit and handcuffs soon forgotten in the passion of the moment, hot skin and desperate kisses, whispered declarations and loud moans.

And later, basking in the aftermath of the moment, glittering skin and red cheeks, she cuddles against Graham’s side, kisses his shoulder tenderly. He smiles as he hugs her to him, arms solid around her tiny waist, breath hot in her hair. She feels used, sore, content – happiness running in her veins and settling in her heart, mind buzzing with exhaustion and passion and love. She feels
good, safe, for the first time in forever, and that thought alone has her snuggling closer to him, inhaling that scent that is them both and that always clings to his skin.

“Let’s stay in bed,” she mumbles, too lazy to get up and do something, too lazy to even raise her head and meet his eyes. “I’ve never spent a whole Sunday in bed with a guy before.”

He draws patterns on her hips with the tip of a finger, circles and flowers and swirly nonsenses, and smiles against the top of her head. “I’ve never spent a whole Sunday in bed with a guy either.”

Slapping his stomach is a reflex – her boyfriend and his terrible, terrible jokes – even as she chuckles under her breath, grateful for the comic relief he provides in that moment of weakness from her. She barely ever opens up about her previous lovers, if only because she doesn’t want to think about the train wreck that was her relationship with Neal, and Graham respects that. Never probing, never pushing her, never even asking about that guy who keep sending her letters from all over the world. He isn’t jealous – the word doesn’t seem to be part of his vocabulary – and isn’t curious which, basically, makes him the perfect man.

And he’s hers.

She still doesn’t understand how that happened.

“All right, babe, let’s stay in bed all day.” His voice, low and gravelly with his accent, is music to her ears. “Let’s just watch crappy movies and cuddle and tonight, I’ll make you French toasts and…”

And whatever happens after French toasts (he loves to cook for her, did she mention how perfect he is?) remains a mystery as the ringtone of his cell phone interrupts him in the middle of his sentence. That has Emma raising her head, turning around in his embrace until her arms are folded on his chest.

Graham makes a face, so obviously trying to ignore the phone call, says “And…” once more before his landline phone starts ringing too.

She hides her head under one of the pillows with a loud groan as he stands up to take the call. One day off, it is all she is asking, one day without their friends or the Bureau bothering them. Too much to ask, apparently.

“Hello? … Yes, it’s me… Yes… She what? Okay, I’ll be right there.”

By the time Emma emerges from under the pillow, he’s already put on a pair of jeans and is struggling with his shoes, jumping up and down on one foot, hips bumping against the kitchen counter in the process.

“What happened?” she asks when she understands he will not explain on his own.

“Regina. She’s at the hospital. She had a heart attack.”

Emma doesn’t ask why the hospital called Graham of all people – he’d been dating Regina for a while, after all, and changing your emergency contacts isn’t high on the list of things to do after a
break-up. What she does wonder, though, is why Graham seems so distraught about the whole thing. She isn’t the jealous type, would never be the kind of woman who checks her boyfriend’s shirts for lipstick smudges and remnants of perfume, but the face he’s making, like his whole world just collided below his feet, has her stop for a second there.

So much for the FBI agent with nerves of steel.

She follows him through the hospital hallways and ignores the pressure of his hand against her, knuckles growing white with how tightly he holds on to her. She cannot let those toxic thoughts infest her mind, not when he so obviously needs her, so she takes a deep breath before pointing to some nurse around a corner. One of them, all polite smiles and baby blue scrubs, leads them to the doctor in charge of Regina’s case.

Graham’s whole body sighs in relief when told Regina survived the intervention after her heart attack and is now resting in her bedroom.

“Do you want to see her?” the doctor asks, and Emma watches as her boyfriend nods all too eagerly.

Emma somewhat wonders what the nurses will think, for surely the nature of the relationship must be written next to Graham’s name and phone number. He still hasn’t let go of her hand, and she follows him silently once more. The nurse must pity her, the new girlfriend who doesn’t quite make the cut next to the old, wealthier and more beautiful, one. She will be the talk of the day, surely, poor, poor her.

Quickly, discreetly, she rubs her eyes, glad not to feel the tears against the back of her hand – at least she’s not making a fool of herself in public – as the doctor points them to one room in particular. Graham thanks him profusely before knocking on the door and opening it softly.

Emma can only feel bad at the point of joy she feel when she sees what a rightful mess her old law professor looks right now, no make-up to hide the purple bags under her eyes, hair not perfectly combed. She feels guilty for taking pleasure in the other woman’s pain – she just went through surgery, for Christ’s sake! – but not so much when she remembers their last encounter and Regina’s bitter words to her.

Not that the brunette cares anyway, too busy fluttering her eyelashes at Graham as he comes closer to her bed and delicately takes her hand in his. Never has Emma felt more invisible, and she takes a step back to be further away from the scene in front of her. Not that she’s afraid Professor Mills would chew her up, she’s never quite been afraid of her before. Only annoyed. Emma is all about picking your battles, and this is one she is not willing to fight for today.

Perhaps she can merge with the wall or something.

“Graham,” Regina coos, voice uncharacteristically soft. “You came.”

“Of course I did,” he replies, lacing her fingers with his.

Emma feels like gagging.

She also pinpoints the exact moment Regina notices her presence behind Graham, because it’s the exact moment her soft look disappears behind the emotionless features of her face – cold and strict, eyes burning holes in Emma’s head as she stares down at her from her metaphorical throne. Emma forces a tight, almost mocking, smile on her lips as she offers her old professor some kind of hand wave.

“What is she doing here?” is the only answer she gets as Regina looks back to Graham, voice icy
and scolding.

Emma’s smile is definitely mocking now, not that it matters for she seems invisible to Regina once more as the brunette is having so kind of telepathic argument with Graham. So, not wanting to add more fuel to the fire, Emma slowly walks backward to the door, muttering something about calling Robin Locksley to warn him. The last thing she hears, once in the hallway, is an angry “You told her?” that makes her cringe.

Finding a nurse who isn’t busy proves itself easy, and so does convincing her to look up the lawyer in the phonebook, so Emma decides a coffee might not be such a bad idea right now. If anything else, she needs the comfort coming from the hot drink, and she spends more time than necessary just holding it between her palms. The day had started out so well, all cuddles and breathless laughs, and she is bitter about someone taking that away from her – days where both she and Graham are on leave are too rare and should be fully appreciated. All she wants is to go back to bed and hide with him under the blankets, away from the world and its problems. Sad, she’s stuck in a too clean hospital, with its too bright lights and too kind nurses, and it just gets on her nerves.

Throwing her now empty cup in a nearby dustbin, she goes back to the bedroom, leaning against the wall next to the door to wait until Graham is done with whatever he’s doing inside. She takes her phone off the pocket of her jeans – a shiny new thing her parents offered her when she aces the police training, with a colour screen and everything – and checks her texts before settling for playing Snake. But the game, as fascinating as it is, doesn’t quite manage to get her full attention and soon she finds herself listening to the conversation through the half-open door.

To her surprise (or maybe not, after all), the conversation is about her.

“It’s killing me that you’re going out with that girl.”

“Really?” Graham replies in that sarcastic tone of his, the one that makes him sound like a five year-old brat instead of an actual sarcastic adult. “Not the coffee or the parties or the workaholic attitude?”

A smile finds its way on Emma’s lips because, if anything else, Graham still manages to stand up for her. She feels bad for even doubting him in the first place – gosh they’re almost living together by now, and she knows the last time he saw Regina was also the night they started dating – but the insecurities always find their ways inside her mind whether she likes it or not.

“You could do better,” Regina goes on, and it’s really difficult not to take it personally at this point (not that it wasn’t before, mind you).

Emma doesn’t realise she’s been holding on to her cell phone a bit to tightly until she looks down to her white knuckles, and decides to put it back in her pocket before she has to explain why it didn’t make it through its first month. Her nostrils still flare angrily, and perhaps the cup of coffee wasn’t such a good idea after all. She’s on edge, muscles drawn and tense, and it takes all her willpower to wait through that humiliation instead of leaving and letting Graham behind. He wouldn’t really appreciate the gesture.

“You almost died today and you want to talk about my love life?” she hears him say, and it is reassuring, the bitterness of his tone matching the bitter taste in her own mouth.

“I worry about you, Graham, that’s all.” Even without actually seeing Regina’s face, Emma imagines all to well the patronizing smile and pat to the hand. “We both know you’re too kind for your own good. I don’t want someone abusing your trust.”
Emma’s derisive snort somehow matches Graham’s hollow laugh. “I don’t remember you caring that much when you dumped me for that lawyer of yours.”

“Come on, darling. Don’t be like that.”

She doesn’t imagine the patronizing tone this time – the woman has some nerve! – but is still startled by the scraping of a chair against the floor. She waits for Graham to storm out of the room but he doesn’t, and so she holds her breath and waits for the conversation to go on.

“I shouldn’t have come. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

His voice is higher, his accent thicker, and those are the only clues as to him losing his patience while his tone remains calm and even. He’s always been good at that, keeping his emotions in check – Emma doesn’t, she either erases them entirely or lets them out violently, and he has always impressed her for that. She knows it’s most likely the FBI training that taught him to remain composed no matter the situation, not to mention he would never hurt a fly, but she’s still appreciative of his cool demeanour.

“You’re wasting your time with her. Dump her now while you can, or she will drag you down with her and you will never shine at the FBI.”

There are angry footsteps, and Emma pictures him pointing a finger at Regina in that actual menacing way of his, the one that means business and that he rarely uses in his everyday life. His voice in angry at last, barely more than a whisper, but it still rings clear as a bell to Emma’s ears. “Don’t you ever talk like that about the woman I love ever again.”

Emma’s breath catches in her throat but, before she has time to actually register the words, a solid hand wraps around hers as she is pulled from the wall she leans against. Surprised, she lets Graham pull her to the elevators and watches as he pounds on the button until the doors open in front of them. He pushes her inside and follows, and only then does she manage to even her breathing as she looks up at him.

She’s never seen him angry before and, with his clenched jaw dark eyes, it may be the closer from upset he’ll ever be. But he looks down at her then, and his eyes soften, going back to a lighter shade of grey, when they meet hers as he offers her a tight smile, before focusing back on the doors in front of him.

She can only mull over her own thoughts – the woman I love – as an uncomfortable silence settle between them in the enclosed space, and she starts playing with her necklace for the sake of having something to do. Thankfully no one else needs to use the elevator right now, which leaves them alone and which is better than letting a stranger invade their bubble of awkwardness.

The words keep replaying in her head – the woman I love – even as they both wait for a taxi by the side of the road – the woman I love – and then Graham opens the door to her and she enters the car without a word.

They’ve been dating for a few weeks now, and things were doing great so far – even more than great, if she says so herself – but the impromptu confession, one she isn’t even sure she was supposed to hear, still took her by surprise. She entered the hospital thinking about him loving another woman, some sort of unattainable goal until he had settled for the consolation prize Emma represents and – and now she isn’t so sure anymore, everything confused and blurry in her head. It’s too much too soon, and the walls she had constructed around her heart all through her college years snap back up in an instant. Fly or fight. Except she’s confined in a car right now.

It’s only once back in Graham’s apartment, and once she’s made a stop in front of the liquor
cabinet, than she feels like breathing freely again. Graham’s eyes never leave her as she kicks of
her shoes and settles on the bed – her police uniform is still scattered all around the place and she
wants to laugh at that detail. He sits next to her then, fingers grazing but not quite touching her
hand.

“Emma, I’m sorry, I didn’t think she’d –”

But she doesn’t let him finish, and the words tumbling out of her mouth catch her by surprise, as if
they have a mind of their own and don’t care about what her brain has to say on the matter. Words
she hasn’t said in a very long time, and they almost feel hollow on her tongue, as if they’ve lost
their meaning after remaining silent for so long – but, also, somewhat, so meaningful, precious and
fragile in the vulnerability, in their rareness.

“I love you too.”
chapter 8

Chapter Notes

You're my followers and I love you and I'm so glad you're ready my fics so please don't hate me for that one. Okay? :D

january 2005

Everyone has to start somewhere. That’s what Emma tells herself as she writes yet another file about yet another New Yorker pressing charges for a minor crime – and what’s this with Brooklyn and burglaries? She’s been at it for months now, paperwork and working at the reception desk and even more paperwork. She’s seen enough people complaining about their neighbours making too much noise and their lost cat and their wallet been stolen for a lifetime. Obvious not the kind of job she had in mind when she joined the police force, but it’s only been a few months and she’s still planning to be made detective soon enough – her boss says her reports are well written and her work serious, so she keeps hoping.

(Sometimes she thinks she should have listened to Graham and joined the FBI instead. Not that she would willingly admit it aloud.)

(Hell, even Storybrooke’s task force of one sounds more thrilling some days, and that’s a new low altogether.)

She’s listening to a woman with heavy red lipstick and a leopard print coat telling her that she definitely isn’t a prostitute and those charges are ridiculous, when her colleague puts her aside. Not that the news he shares are any better anyway.

“We arrested a guy an hour ago and he won’t shut up about you. Says he wants to see you, something about knowing you. Nutcase, if you ask me, but maybe if he sees you he’ll cooperate? Please?”

The guy’s eyes are as pleading as his voice, verging on desperate at this point, and Emma wonders how much of a choice she has on the subject – not that the prospect of facing a crazy stalker, from the sound of it, is all that appealing. But her colleagues have all been nice to her so far, helping when guys on crack started threatening her a bit too violently before Christmas, so the least she can do is to return the favour.

She nods, then gestures for someone else to take care of the Vivian Ward lookalike, before following the guard through the precinct. She discreetly stretches her sore muscles in the process, cursing the less than comfortable desk chairs and the knots in her back – she can’t wait to go home and pour herself a hot bath, along with a huge glass of wine.

The cells are smelly from too many a homeless guy and drunk moron, and she crunches her nose when she enters that part of the precinct, glad she doesn’t need to spend that much time here.

It’s his laugh she hears first, loud and husky and joyful, despite the guard telling him to shut up for what feels like the hundredth time. He doesn’t, of course, just keeps laughing – it is enough to bring memories back at the front of Emma’s mind, of dorm rooms and a wild party.
Then she sees him, and everything falls back in place.

The blue of his eyes, more vibrant than in her memories, the shit-eating grin and stubble, the stupid, stupid mop of hair.

“Killian.”

The name escapes her lips in a breathless, almost embarrassing, whisper, and his grin grows only bigger then as he shuffles on his feet with the level of excitement of a five year old on Christmas morning.

“Did you miss me?”

She turns to the guard with the biggest sigh on earth. “He’s not a criminal, he’s just a moron.”

…

He was arrested for making a fool of himself on the streets (typically Killian, if you ask her) and has to call Victor to pay for his bail and get him out of there, something about him being loaded now that Emma barely believes. The blond man rolls his eyes at his best friend’s antics when he signs the check, and Emma can only agree with the sentiment. Especially when Killian winks at her on his way out, saying something about waiting for her until she’s done with her shift. It’s pretty obvious to her at that point that he did everything on purpose, and she rolls her eyes too – Killian Jones, making his way back in her life with a bang.

She wouldn’t have expected any less from him, to be honest.

Still, she didn’t think she would see him any time soon. His last letter had arrived when she was in Maine for Christmas, and he was lost somewhere in Argentina then, bartending by the beach and enjoying the summer. She wonders what brought him back home after so many years without setting foot on American soil. It has her curious all through the rest of her shift, which helps with dealing with people’s complaints.

When she goes out two hours later, back in her casual clothes and exhausted, he’s leaning against the precinct wall, cigarette tucked at the corner of his mouth and eyes boring into her. She comes closer to him with a smile (gosh she missed him, their written correspondence never did their relationship any justice) and can’t help but mess with the fringe falling in front of his eyes, laughing at the ridiculous ponytail he now sports.

“Travelled the world and couldn’t even find five minutes to cut his hair. Pathetic.”

“Insults already? Don’t I even get a hug first?”

She pouts, pretending to think about it, but laughs when he pulls her to him with a frustrated groan. His hug feels like Daft Punk and cheap beers and a fake proposal, his body warm against her and his arms tight around her shoulders, and Emma finds herself breathing him in – he still smells the same, but the scent is stronger, more masculine somewhat. He has taken some weight too, all angles and hard muscles, and she smiles because he no longer is the gangly teenager who living next door and she missed him.

“What happened to Argentina?” she asks as she breaks away from his embrace.
He shrugs half-heartedly even as mischief dances in his eyes, and follows her easily when she walks away form the precinct. It only takes him a couple of seconds before throwing himself in a tale of a pub by the beach and colourful cocktails, of never-ending parties and women—so, so many women. It all sounds lovely and perfect, and still doesn’t make any sense as to why he would want to come back to New York when having the time of his life somewhere sunny and warm, away from responsibilities and adulthood. (And bills, god, bills.)

“...And so there is this party on the beach to celebrate the end of the festival, with lanterns everywhere. Truly breathtaking, you would have loved it. And there is the girl I met, Ariel, redhead with stunning grey eyes, dancing against me with my hands all over her body…”

Emma makes a face at the unwanted details, with a “Gross!” he doesn’t even hear as they wait by the side of the road for the traffic light to turn green for pedestrians. He draws the curves of that Ariel girl with his hands open in front of him, having her rolling her eyes.

“Four days of wooing and she finally kisses me. Under the star, on the beach, with all those lanterns around me – perfectly romantic, all right?”

Killian is so deep in his tale that he opens the door to her when she stops in front of a shop and follows her inside without questioning her actions. She rummages through her handbag as he keeps talking, and laughs at the angry looks the other patrons send his way as he goes on with the story, voice lower but still loud enough to be heard of all.

“So she’s kissing me, full intense French kiss. The kind that could turn your world upside down and – Swan, what are we doing here?”

He looks around him, confused and lost as to why he would suddenly find himself in a jewellery store. She rolls her eyes once more, something she had forgotten she does a lot around him, as she gives the man behind the counter her receipt.

“Just need to pick something up. Go on.”

“Yeah, right. She’s kissing me and – nothing. Nothing at all. No fireworks, no passion, I’m not even half-hard yet.” He says it in a fake whisper and she makes a face because gross. “So I stopped the kiss, let go of her arse, and I walked away.”

Eyes big as saucers and at loss for words, Emma can only nod in reply since she has no idea what she is expected to say after such a story. ‘Congrats on your life decisions?’ No, it doesn’t sound appropriate, even if nothing about this one-sided conversation is.

“I walked away!” he says again, with more strength in his voice. “From Ariel! Nobody walked away from girls like Ariel! But it felt so good, liberating, like I could breathe again for the first time. And I needed to tell someone, needed to share that, and it was so bloody obvious whom so I jumped in the first plane and – what’s that?”

She looks away from him and to the jeweller who came back from the backroom with her receipt and the little velvet box, opening it for her to see. The shop’s artificial lights make the diamond shine. Graham, bless his heart, hadn’t thought of stealing one of her rings before shopping, so this one had obviously been way too large for her finger and in need of being resized. It looks quite perfect now, with its white gold band (“Like your hair,” the smooth bastard) and discreet stone.

She glances at Killian, frozen on the spot, and loses her smile.

“There’s something I need to tell you too.”

Which is something stupid to say, because he can (and already has) put two and two together and
draw his own conclusions as to what the ring is, what it means. Still, she needs to say it out loud, for some reason, needs him to hear it even if she doesn’t know why it feels important all of a sudden.

Killian looks at her – flash of hurt and betrayal in his wide blue eyes that has her stomach in knots.

He runs away.

Emma hurries to snatch the velvet box from the jeweller’s hands, promising it looks perfect and that she will return if she had any problem with the ring, before putting it in her bag and running after Killian. His long legs allow him to walk fast, and so she really does have to run after him, pushing annoyed passers-by out of her way. Even when she finally reaches him and grabs his arm, Killian keeps walking as if ignoring her.

“Woah, Killian. Stop. Stop!”

He does, but even then he doesn’t look at her, head purposefully turned away.

“What’s wrong with you?”

The muscles of his arm tense against her fingers, jaw so clenched his teeth might hurt, yet he scratches that spot just below his ear, looking down almost sheepishly. When he meets her eyes again, it’s with the same glimmer of hurt she spotted in the shop, along with some anger – at her, or at himself for his outburst, she isn’t sure. His voice is clipped, raw, when he finally decides to speak.

“We’ve been writing each other at least one a month for four years, and you somewhat forgot to mentioned you are engaged? Don’t you think there’s something wrong about that?”

Is that jealousy she hears in his voice? No, it can’t be right, it’s that ridiculous an assumption. Killian is just upset because she is his best friend and they are supposed to share everything – writing instead of talking to him in person has always help with that, has always made her open up more easily to him about her life and her problems.

She broke his trust, and she’s at loss for words.

“I – I told you I was dating someone.”

“Aye,” he replies immediately. “Not that you were planning to buy a house in the Hamptons with him.”

(Killian Jones, professional drama queen.)

So she does what she used to do every time he used to pull that kind of act on her: she rolls her eyes and huffs dramatically enough to draw a smile from him. It doesn’t work quite much this time, but she notices the way he represses a tug upward of his lips, there, right at the corners. It’s a start.

“Because you would have reacted so positively to me settling in a monogamous relationship while you’re fucking your way through the world.” She isn’t sure if it’s the reminder of his point of view on commitment or the curse word, but he really does smile this time, so she takes that chance to add: “Graham is a great guy. I love him. And I know you’ll like him too. Just – please, be happy for my love life, just this once.”

He looks away once more, but his features are softer, his eyes less hard.
“All right,” he says in a (pained) whisper. “Aye, I’ll make an effort.”

... Killian calls a week later, asking her out for dinner. The restaurant is a cosy little place not that far from where she lives, neither too cheap nor too fancy, and they don’t have to wait long until a waitress shows them to their table. It doesn’t take long for them to order drinks and throw themselves in a conversation from then.

Writing wasn’t enough to convey everything that happened in their lives, and so they catch up on all those years they were apart. It feels like those few months of college together all over again, with cutlery instead of chopsticks or a pizza fresh out of the box. The same stupid jokes, the same laughs, as he explains this or that adventure he had with extravagant hand motions and passion in his voice. Her cheeks hurt from too much smiling as she remembers why she has established him as her best friend in the first place – talking to him is easy, natural, as if they’ve known each other all their life and not just a handful of weeks before life pulled them apart.

“So,” he says halfway through the main course, leaning against the back of his chair as he folds his arms on his chest in a way that means business. “There is a joke about you getting engaged waiting to be made.”

Emma only rolls her eyes at first – not dwelling on what had happened with Neal. She was young and naively in love, and has the benefit of hindsight now to know everything that was wrong about that relationship. Something about love being blind. (And she will not dwell on the night before the failed engagement but successful break up, will not think of Killian fake-proposing to her and what had followed once in his dorm. She just won’t.)

She washes down her food with a sip of water, stalling in her reply as she thinks of the best words to use on the particular subject of her real, official engagement. She doesn’t even know where to begin, how to explain Graham – the eyes and the smiles and the kindness, and him proposing during Christmas break after meeting her parents for the first time. He is everything and so much more, and she’s at a loss for words when it comes to him, to them. So she isn’t all that surprised when a smile curls up her lips at the thought of him before she even starts talking – Killian notices, if the way he tilts his head like a confused puppy is anything to go by.

“His name is Graham and he’s an FBI agent. And actually, you already know about him because you told me to have a threesome with him, Professor Mills and my ex boyfriend at that time.”

His laugh is loud enough for people from other tables to glare and even shush him, but he ignores them in a very Killian Jones fashion. She does too, folding her arms on the table as she leans closer to him with a mischievous look in her eyes.

“And what about you, Mister Jones? How many women have you bedded since coming back?”

She expects a smirk and some bragging she could do without. Not him looking away as he scratches that spot below his ear with a smile that can only be described as bashful and – is he blushing? Oh gosh, he is!

“One, actually,” and his voice is soft all of a sudden, so unlike his usual smugness. “Her name is Milah and –”

She cuts him off before he has time to finish. “Seriously? What about all those speeches about
monogamy being the worst thing in the world you threw at my face when I was dating Neal?"

Killian Jones and long-term relationship are a bit like the Loch Ness’ monster: many people want to believe in it, even if they all know it doesn’t exist. And Emma isn’t one to run on belief – he’s been single for so long, she never even stopped to think he could settle down at some point. It just doesn’t feel right, somehow, like it isn’t meant to happen.

(Is it what growing up feel like?)

“Don’t get too excited already, it’s only been a week. And she went through a nasty divorce, so I’m probably nothing more than a rebound for her at that point…”

There is a joke about half your age plus seven on the tip of her tongue when her ringtone startles them both – speak about bad timing. She apologizes as she fishes for the device at the bottom of her bag, only to frown at the out-of-state number displayed on her screen. Graham has to work late, but he hadn’t say anything about heading to Quantico, and that alone leaves her confused as she turns away in her seat with yet another ‘sorry’ for Killian before answering the call.

“Am I talking to Emma Nolan?” come the voice at the other end of the line.

“Yes?” she answers, even more confused with each passing second, heart drumming against her ribcage and mind going blank all of a sudden. A shudder runs through her spine, sweat cold at the back of her neck.

“I’m Agent Lancelot Troyes, I’m calling about Agent Huntsman. He was on a mission tonight when his team was ambushed. I – I’m sorry, miss, he took a bullet to the heart, he d–”

The screen of her phone breaks when it falls on the ground.
Henry paces in front of her – six steps, turn around, six steps, turn around, six steps… She can only feel bad about this, can only feel like the worst mother on earth, for telling him such a story knowing fully well how it would affect him. Henry’s heart is too big for his own good, and of course he’d get attached to the people in her tale, of course he would.

(He sniffs as silently as possible, wipes the tears off her eyes.)

It’s been years but, regardless of what she likes to say, Emma is still not over it either. It still hurts, especially when comes the middle of January, and she hates herself for putting that kind of weight on her son’s fragile shoulders. She’s been mourning for way too long, there, at the back of her head, that sometimes she forgets what it feels like not to live in such a state. Her fingers find the shoelace around her wrist, the brush of skin against leather delicate and reverent, and she smiles sadly as Henry turns around once more with a loud sigh.

“You were right,” he says, finally, even as he doesn’t look up at her. “It is complicated.”

It might be the understatement of the year, but she doesn’t say so. Henry comes back to the bed eventually, lying with his body pressed against hers and head on her stomach, and Emma can only play with his hair for long moments.

“Do you want us to stop? I know it’s a lot to take in.”

“No!” He offers her an indignant pout that screams of hours spent with Ruby, making her smile despite the sadness clinging to the air around them. “I want to know the truth.”

“Yeah, kid, but it’s late. Maybe we could continue…”

“No,” he says again.

So she sighs, and goes on.

....

“Emma, it’s Ruby. Are you still coming to the party? Please, call me back.”

“Hey Swan. Ruby says you’re not returning her calls so… Do it for me?”

“Come on, Swan. At least text someone, so we know you’re all right. You’ve got us all worried for you there, darling.”

“Emma – god I hope it’s the right number. It’s – it’s Neal. I’ll be in town in two weeks, so I though maybe we could have coffee or something? I don’t know. Call me, okay?”

“I swear to god, Swan, if I find you singing Mr Brightside in your knickers, I will personally kick you out of your flat.”

“Miss Nolan, Belle French here. You came to our bookstore last month? We haven’t found the book you want yet, but we’re still looking. I’ll call you as soon as I have updates on the question.
Have a nice day.”

“You know what? I bloody don’t care. Ruby wants you at the party so you’ll be at the party. I’m picking you at 6, be ready.”

…

**February 2005**

She wakes up in a startle, and it takes long seconds for Emma to find her bearings as she blinks at the room around her. She fell asleep in her living room (again) and there’s someone knocking on her door (that’s new).

The TV is still on, MTV’s quality programs casting weird shadows on the room as the sun is setting behind the buildings she has as a view from her window. It gives a gloomy feeling to her apartment, perfectly matching the mood that has followed her for the past few weeks.

There’s another loud knock, startling her once more, and it’s with a groan that Emma stands up, wrapping a blanket around her shoulders. She paddles her way to the door, cursing under her breath with each step she takes – she was clear on the ‘no visit’ rule, and so far both Ruby and Mary Margaret have been kind enough to follow it despite their complains and soft words. For them to break the pattern now is weird to say the least, and Emma doesn’t like it one bit.

“Yeah, yeah, coming,” she grumbles at the knockings making themselves more insistent and loud – she winces at the headache that comes back, matching the pounding on the door.

She turns the key in the lock and heavies a sigh, not ready for her first human contact in – a very long time.

(The guy bringing her take-out every night obviously doesn’t count, because she has no other choice but to talk to him, and it always lasts for a grand total of twenty seconds as she gives him a bank note and ‘keep the change’ before closing the door once more.)

“Bloody hell,” is the first thing that comes from the hallway, in a breathless voice she knows all too well, and Emma braces herself against Killian’s too-knowing eyes.

She feels self-conscious all of a sudden, in ways she hasn’t felt in weeks – her mascara has smudged on her cheeks and her hair is a bird’s nest and she can’t even remember the last time she showered. ‘Bloody hell’ sums up her situation quite nicely indeed. For a couple of seconds, Emma is too busy taming her wild mane to notice Killian surging forwards, and so he budges into her apartment under her soft (and useless) protests.

If her body is a mess, it is nothing compared to the state of her apartment – empty take-out boxes on the coffee table, TV still playing reruns of Pimp My Ride, dishes pilling on the kitchen counter. She would have felt ashamed of it a month ago – she doesn’t find it in herself to care right now.

“Emma…” Killian says as he looks around, and it sounds equally patronizing and pitying – neither suits him and both pisses her off, because how dare he judge her when he ran from his life and responsibilities for three years. She’s an adult and she pays her taxes, so she will do as she damn pleases without an Irish asshole judging her grieving process, thank you very much.

“When’s the last time you went out?” *The funeral*, she thinks, but she doesn’t reply anything, so
he adds, “What about your job?”

“I quit.”

His eyes widen almost comically at her answer, and it would have made her smile at any other given moment. But not now. Now, it’s only a painful reminder of that conversation they had, years ago, the one that had ended in a kiss and had gone along the lines of *you need someone to take care of you when you take care of the world*. It’s the biggest bullshit ever, because that was Graham’s job.

But Graham’s gone, Graham was eaten by the world that he’d sworn to protect, and where does that leave her?

Haunting her own place, living off the generous check the bureau had gave her after her fiancé’s death (no close relatives beside her; she had stared at the check, at the too many numbers written there, for days because it was a generous offer but it was also putting a price on her fiancé’s head and it disgusts her to no end) and pretending that if she forgets about the outside world, maybe the outside world will forget about her too.

It’s pathetic, and she reads it all in Killian’s eyes, and she hates him for it.

“You know, whatever. Go take a shower, I’ll find something for you to wear in the meanwhile.”

His tone is authoritative, but mostly confusing. “Wear what for what?”

Surprise flashes through his eyes before they grow softer, a kind smile curving up his lips as he says, “Ruby and Victor’s engagement party. You’re the maid of honour, remember?”

Yeah, and he’s the best man, how could she forget that?

(She hasn’t forgotten, she just chose to ignore it until further notice.)

“Because I’m so in the mood to celebrate love, obviously.”

Emma almost feels bad for the bitterness in her voice, for snapping at him for no other reason that his standing in front of her, and maybe she’s going through the anger phase of grieving. Which is a change, after being stuck in denial (or maybe depression) for so long. But Killian knows better than to be affected by her mean words, and he just keeps smiling as he moves closer and puts both his hands on her shoulders.

“No, we’re celebrating *life*. After my brother died, I closed myself off, not caring about anything. Don’t do that to yourself, darling. You friends love you, they care about you. Just come and show them you’re all right.”

She wants to laugh at his face because, well, look at her, she’s everything *but* all right. She also wants to tell him to fuck off, to leave her alone, to let her do as she goddamn pleases.

She doesn’t.

Instead, she simply nods, before locking herself in the bathroom with a heavy sigh.

…
Ruby’s engagement party is in Brooklyn, at the little diner owned by her grandmother – she’d chosen this place for the sentimental value, of course, but mostly because she and Emma had found it fun to have pancakes and coffee as a buffet, instead of the usual hors-d’oeuvres and champagne. The place, in all its old school glory, has been decorated for the occasion, with red and white roses everywhere. It does look pretty, Emma will give it that, even if she feels out of place in her party dress and elegant up-do, Killian’s hand on her back anchoring and comforting her both.

She’s grateful for her friends and their tactful behaviour, because none of them make a big deal of her finally coming out of her cave – Mary Margaret hugs her a bit too tightly for a bit too long, but that’s pretty much it. Instead, they let her sit at a booth with David and a hot chocolate, and her friend settles in an easy conversation about summer plans. She finds herself smiling for the first time in forever when he tells her he’s planning to buy a farm house in the middle of nowhere despite Mary Margaret’s complains, and he looks pleased with himself at the curve of her lips.

The petite brunette joins them soon after, and Killian follows suite with Tink in tow, and suddenly it feels like college and cheap beers at a bar before finales all over again. Her cheeks hurt from too much smiling, the muscles no longer used to that kind of effort, even if the happiness doesn’t quite reach her eyes – but it’s a start, at least, and she’s trying. If her laughs are a bit too loud and a bit too forced, nobody points it out, and Emma remembers why she loves her friends so much and realises how deeply she’s missed them during the past few weeks – not enough to start going out with them every night but, well, it’s a start, isn’t it?

They’re startled out of a debate about the best pizzeria in New York – a endless one that has Killian and David worked up in their arguments every time – by the sound of metal on glass coming from Granny.

“Time for the speeches, don’t you think?”

Emma shares a glance with Killian, face going pale all of a sudden, but he gives her a nod and squeezes her thigh before standing up with a bright smile. She hides her sigh as best as she can, relieved for the few minutes he gave her to calm her frantic heart and compose herself. (Truth is, she hasn’t prepared her speech and makes for the worst maid of honour the world has ever seen.)

His is perfect, of course, funny and clever and the right side of inappropriate in the jokes he makes and stories he tells, managing to make the bride-to-be hide her blush in her fiancé’s neck, which isn’t a simple task. Killian never lets go of his cocky smirk, pleased with himself and the reactions of the audience.

It’s too much, all of a sudden, the air around her too heavy, the atmosphere too oppressive. Emma’s breaths grow uneven, black spots appearing at the corners of her eyes. She needs air, she needs to get out, she needs to leave.

So she does, as discretely as possible – which isn’t that hard, when everyone is engrossed in the best man’s speech, listening to his every word like it’s gospel truth. She can sneak out of the dinner without being seen.

(She doesn’t hear her name being called faintly after the door closed behind her.)
The air is cold and crisp that time of the year, and Emma curses Killian for forcing her into a strapless dress, her leather jacket no enough to protect her from the winter winds. Her feet are killing her in those heels, but not as much as her head, pounding restlessly at the front of her skull even as she takes deep breaths. She doesn’t know where she’s going, just aimlessly following her steps, until she stumbles upon a little park, desert and only lit by a few street lamps.

She lets herself fall on a bench with a moan – of pain or something else, the jury is still out – and leans forwards with her elbows on her knees and her face in her hands, fighting against the sob in her throat. She can’t let herself be weak, not now of all moments. She was doing so great so far, she can’t just lose it now, even if everything is too much.

(It should have been her in the pretty dress and in Graham’s arms, laughing at jokes made at their expense, kissing him softly for the photographs. It should have been her, looking for wedding dresses and wedding food and flowers and balloons and all that useless crap. It should have been her, hiding her face in Graham’s neck, embarrassed by Killian’s jokes and Ruby’s stories during their speeches.

It should have been her, and him, and she hates life for being so unfair.)

She doesn’t know how long she stays like that, just staring at her shoes and trying to even her breaths, white clouds escaping her mouth every time only to disappear as it brushes her knees. Minutes, hours maybe, alone in Brooklyn with the sound of cars and nightlife to keep her company. It is peaceful, and she would enjoying it were the situation different, weren’t she fighting against the panic attack with each passing second.

She isn’t all that surprised when she hears the soft paddle of footsteps nearby – it is New York, after all, there is always someone outside – and so barely reacts at the “Here you are” to her left. A woollen coat is draped around her shoulders, shielding her from the unforgiving winds. It smells like him, like salt and sea and leather, and she snuggled closer to the fabric, looking for warmth, as she looks up to Killian with a grateful smile. He smiles back – he always does – before sitting next to her on the bench and rubbing his open palm against her back. The motion is comforting in ways it shouldn’t be, but her numb mind doesn’t register anything wrong with that as she leans toward him and lets herself be taken care of, be comforted – she deserves it, she craves affections from too many a lonely night, from waking up in the middle of the night from too many a nightmare.

“You missed the cake,” he says eventually. “Granny made a terrific red velvet for the occasion.”

She bites the inside of her cheek not to say she doesn’t care about the damn cake, but the motion bring tears back to her eyes, they one she had valiantly fought against so far – she refuses to cry, and she particularly refuses to cry in front of Killian Jones.

“I couldn’t…” she starts, but whatever she wants to say next dies on her tongue.

“I know,” is his only reply, is the only reply she needs.

Because he does know, doesn’t he? He’s always known her so well, like a mind-reader of some sort, able to guess what she needs, what she wants to hear, despite being away from her for years. She doesn’t like it – it’s a weakness, after all, being so open to someone, so attached to someone. She learnt it the hard way and her mind whispers never again. She can’t afford to get attached to people, because love only leads to misery, to loneliness. She’s been burnt to many times to dare playing with fire again.

Especially with Killian, his too smug grins and too knowing eyes. Killian isn’t just a fire, he’s the spark that would lighten up the whole forest, that would destroy the entire world. She can’t afford
And yet Emma snuggles deeper into his coat and closer to him, until he wraps an arm around her shoulders and pulls her to him. She snuggles with her cold nose against his warm neck, closes her eyes to the feel and smell of him, close her eyes against the warning messages her brain screams at her. She just wants to feel, if only for one night, just wants to stop being lonely and empty. So she raises her head, Killian still against her as she brushes her lips to his jaw. (She ignores his lack of reaction, or misreads it maybe.)

Her lips are on his in a matter of seconds, so unlike their first kiss. It is soft where it was hurry, careful where it was reckless – but the warmth is the same, the comfort too, just the right side of drunk with the hot chocolates Tink spiked for her.

He responds to the kiss, if only for a moment, before catching himself and pushing her away, hands on her shoulders and bottom lip stuck between his lips. They stare at each other for long seconds, breaths mingling in white puffs of coldness. His next words, three simple little words, are sharp as a knife in the winter air.

“Not like that.”
chapter 10

She jerks her head away from him, eyes wide and breathing ragged. His eyes are wide opened too as he stares back at her, and it isn’t dark enough not to notice how blown his pupils are, blue disappearing in an ocean of black – her brain wants to brand it lust, but his rejection speaks of other, less stellar, emotions.

“What?” she demands, voice barely more than a murmur despite the harshness she puts into her tone.

“I can’t, Emma.” He speaks softly, slowly, like one would talk to a child when addressing a particularly delicate subject. “I told you, I’m dating someone.”

Her thoughts are muddled as she forces herself to remember, vague memories of a conversation weeks ago. The divorcee one, whose name eludes Emma at the moment. Mica? Lila? Not that it matters much anyway – it’s already a miracle she even remembers that part of the evening, what with the events that followed soon after. One cannot blame her for having repressed that memory when facing what she has now dubbed the Worst Night Ever.

Still, Emma’s fingers are wrapped around the collar of Killian’s coat, going white at the knuckles – she forces herself to let go, but it’s as if the communication between brain and limbs no longer exists. She feels cold all over, from the air inside her lungs to the tip of her toes, frozen in place while still half-straddling him. Cold but for the blush creeping up her chest and high on her cheekbones, setting her skin on fire.

It’s the most embarrassed – not to mention humiliated – she has felt in months, years, and she wants to crawl into the tiniest of holes, never to be seen again. She shouldn’t have left her apartment, she thinks dryly. It was a bad idea and look where it got her, misreading her best friend’s signs and making a fool of herself in the most pathetic way.

(But she thought… She was certain… How could she be so wrong?)

“But you like me,” she finds herself saying – the communication between her brain and her mouth is gone too, apparently.

Killian pinches the bridge of his nose with a sigh and, seriously, between that and his tone, he couldn’t be more patronizing. She wants to slap this attitude off his face because this isn’t him and she doesn’t recognize the man she is facing any more. But his breath is hot against her cheek from how close they still are to each other’s face, and she lets her angry thoughts die down for a couple of seconds, lets him past her defences once more.

Grave mistake.

“You’re a mess, love. Even if I weren’t seeing someone, I’d only be a rebound for you right now. It wouldn’t be fair to neither of us.”

Back with his tone, and back with her angry thoughts. This is good, she thinks, this is progress from wanting to cry herself into oblivion. His words hurt more than if he had slapped her, though, and she finally lets go of his collar, fingers stiff as they fall on her (his? who knows?) lap. She can only stare at him, forcing herself to breathe, not to let the anger win over. But she has always been impulsive that way, needing to lash out on someone, something, needing to let all her emotions bubble out instead of letting them take roots in her chest and into her heart.
So she lashes out. Obviously.

“And you don’t think that bitch you’re dating is using you, maybe? You’re just a pretty face to her, just a distraction after a nasty divorce, and you don’t even care as long as you get to fuck her. It’s pathetic, even for you.”

His nostrils flare and, yeah, definitely not lust in his eyes as he glares at her, clenching his jaw not to fight back – his resolve disappearing with each passing second.

“Oh you want to talk about pathetic? How about writing letters for three bloody years, only to learn that your best friend moved on with her life without telling you? How about she only makes a pass at you because she can’t get over her dead fiancé? Aye, Emma, I’m pathetic. But so are you.”

Yeah, a slap would definitely hurt less.

Which is why she slaps him, hand leaving a red mark on his cheek before she can think twice, if only to put them on equal footing for a second or two.

Tears gather at the corners of her eyes, those damn traitors, but she doesn’t let them fall, instead stands up on wobbly legs and stares Killian down. She slaps him a second time, for good measure – he deserves it, even if she started it, deserves so much more for bringing Graham into this and –

“Fuck you, Killian.”

And when it comes to fight or flight, Emma has always been better with the second option. She turns on her heels and runs, ignoring her laboured breaths and the icy February air in her lungs, only stopping to collapse in a subway seat. She isn’t even sure she took the right one, hopes that it’s going in the general direction of Manhattan, if only not to add one more humiliation to tonight’s list.

It’s only in the comfort of her apartment that Emma notices his coat is still wrapped around her shoulders.

...

Henry doesn’t move from his place on the bed, snuggling against her side. Still he tilts his head to look up at her, even with his cheek pressed to her stomach, and sends her the most exasperated and jaded look he can muster at such a young age. It would make her laugh out loud in a whole different context. But she agrees with the emotions poured in his pout and big chocolate eyes, for they are the same she’s feeling about herself at the moment.

Emma Nolan, international disappointment.

Sounds about right.

...
Mary Margaret shows up two weeks later, and has the bright idea of calling first so Emma has time to shower and brush her hair not to fall under the same trap twice. (She wonders what, if anything at all, Killian told their friends, but thinking of Killian hurts and she forces herself not to care.) (She fails.)

The petite brunette’s smile is a sight for sore eyes when Emma opens the door. She’s wrapped in a plaid coat and holds a large binder against her chest – the thing is huge and, god, color-coded, one more reminder of her terrible job as a maid of honour. Not that Mary Margaret seems to mind, all bright smiles and easy small talk as she enters the apartment and gets rid of her coat, only to open the binder right after. It’s full of pictures and scribbling and samples of fabric in pastel hues (so unlike Ruby, what’s up with that?), and it makes Emma’s head spin just looking at it, so she busies herself with making tea to delay the inevitable.

But there’s only so much you can do with hot water and sugar, and soon Emma finds herself sitting at the table and drinking her tea as she nods to almost everything Mary Margaret suggests for the bachelorette party – *that*, at least, is something she’s familiar with, because it doesn’t take a genius to know Ruby will want strippers and stupid outfits and enough alcohol to drink Hemingway under the table.

They work on that for a good two hours, picking a place and drafting a list of girls to invite and looking up hot half-naked men on Emma’s shitty computer with her even shittier Internet connection. Mary Margaret’s calm present soothes Emma’s troubled mind, and she even finds it in herself to laugh at the brunette’s gasp when she suggests forgetting about the boring party and going straight to Vegas instead. (She knew Mary Margaret would refuse but, oh well, it was worth a shot.)

It’s well into the afternoon when they decide they’re done for the day. Emma makes them both mugs of hot chocolate – they were delighted to find out they both liked it with cinnamon when in college, and have shared such a drink every so often ever since – and even opens a box of cookies now that she found it in herself to drag her sorry ass to the grocery store and to fill her cupboards.

“So,” she says as she sits back at the table, nibbling a cookie. “What about that farm David and you are buying?”

The look of sheer frustration Mary Margaret offers her over the rim of her mug brings a smirk to Emma’s lips. “Please. He’s planning to buy a flock of sheep. I don’t need you to entertain his fantasies.”

She breaks a cookie in two, obviously frustrated, and nibbles it with a raised eyebrow, as if daring Emma to comment any further. She does it anyway, of course. “Teaching a bunch of little rural kids. You’d love it.”

Mary Margaret huffs and shoves the whole cookie in her mouth, washing it down with a sip of her hot chocolate. It makes Emma smile, what an old couple she and David make despite not being engaged yet, what with being high school sweethearts and all – she realises it no longer hurts, thinking about another couple’s happiness. Not the way it did only two weeks ago.

“What about you?” her friend asks at last, almost tentatively. “Did you find a new job yet?”

So Killian did tell them. Or Mary Margaret is just perceptive that way – it mustn’t be that hard, since Emma is spending a Wednesday home instead of being at the precinct.

She forces a smile on her lips and nods. “I did, actually. I have an interview next week.”

“Good, that’s good.” And then, after a pause, noticing Emma isn’t going to give more details on
the subject, “All right, Emma Nolan, hold on to your secrets.”

Emma shrugs and hides an impish smile by take a sip of her own drink. It doesn’t take a lot of probing before Mary Margaret leaves the subject altogether – no question about Emma quitting her other job, nor about what happened at the party – and goes back to good-heartedly complaining about David as they eat more cookies that recommended, until the kitchen clock strikes six and Mary Margaret looks up at it with wide eyes.

“I’ve got to go,” she says as she stands up and shrugs on her coat. “We have a dress fitting on Saturday. I’ll pick you at 3?”

She has her ‘mum voice’ on while saying that, and Emma knows better than to decline the offer. She can’t very well miss a dress fitting anyway, even if she can’t remember for the life of her it’s for Ruby’s or the bridesmaids’. Well. It will add an element of surprise to the outing.

Not that Mary Margaret leaves her room to refuse, already pulling her into a hug before grabbing the binder. She offers Emma yet another smile as she leaves, one that the blonde can only mirror.

…

That’s official, Emma’s best friend has gone mushy over the last few weeks, because there is no way in hell the Ruby she knows would have picked pink dresses for her bridesmaids.

(Well, not pink exactly. More like a really pale kind of red.)

(Yeah, okay. Definitely pink.)

That’s probably Mary Margaret’s influence, anyway. And it’s not as if the dresses are ugly – they’re actually quite beautiful, and Ruby didn’t fall in the trap of forcing them all in the exact same dress without any regard to their tastes or body shape.

It’s just… Emma had forgotten how romantic and soppy a wedding could be.

But she doesn’t have a saying in things when everybody else worked so hard to have this wedding happening without a breakdown from Ruby, so Emma plays along and tries on the dress without so much as a raised eyebrow towards the fabric. Mary Margaret isn’t duped, if the little snort she gives is anything to go by. But, oh well, Ruby is her best friend and she loves her, so Emma will force herself to wear that for a day if she has to. That’s what friends are for, after all.

She stays still on the platform while a seamstress move around her, pin between her teeth, while Mary Margaret lounges in the nearby sofa with a glass of champagne – Emma is suddenly reminded of how loaded the Whales are.

Add that to the obvious fact that Emma’s dress is a size too big for her, and it has nothing to do with Ruby giving the shop the wrong measurements and everything to do with Emma’s less than stellar diet in the last few weeks, and you’ll understand how uncomfortable she feels under the too white light of the shop and too knowing gaze of the seamstress. She’s professional enough not to comment when Emma asks for the dress not to be made too tight, just in case, and simply nods in reply, but that’s enough for the blonde’s cheeks to burn with an embarrassed blush.

She’s all too happy when she’s done and it’s Mary Margaret’s turn, plopping in the sofa with her clothes back on and swallowing a large gulp of champagne for good measure. The alcohol barely
burns her throat, unlike her usual vodka, but this will have to do for now.

Even from her place standing in front of five different mirrors (or maybe because of), Mary Margaret notices her distress for she smiles kindly over her shoulder and promises they’ll stop at that little coffee shop around the corner once they’re done. It has the merit of bringing a smile to Emma’s lips.

And, true to her words, Mary Margaret links her arm with Emma’s when she comes back from the dressing room, pulling her along as she waves the seamstress goodbye and grabs her purse. The day is warm for late February, and they both enjoy the sun on their face for the first time in months as they avoid colliding with passers-by. They don’t get as far as the little coffee shop, though, for something catches Emma’s attention from the corner of her eye, and she drags the petite brunette with her as she makes her way towards one display window in particular.

It is nothing but a bookstore, like there are so many others in New York – small and dusty and smelling of old paper, just how she likes them. Still it is not the store in itself that piqued Emma’s interest but, rather, one of the books on display behind the window.

She knows it well by now – knows all the covers of all the editions, for having checked them multiple times through the years. She knows how they feel under her fingertips, how much they weight in her hands – never much, it is but a small book, only a hundred pages, after all. Still, she can’t let go of that pan in her chest every time her eyes fall on one of the books, that sparkle of hope whispering what if in her ear.

She has half a mind not to ask Mary Margaret’s opinion and drag her inside whether she likes it or not but, well, it’s Mary Margaret, and Emma can’t find it in herself to be rude to her. Not that she says no anyway, nodding and humming under her breath as she follows Emma inside, only to wander the store on her own, finger delicately caressing the books’ spine.

“Can I help you?”

Emma almost jumps out of her skin at the unexpected entrance of the seller, heart drumming against her chest as she turns around to face a man in his sixties. He looks worried, mostly because he was that close to killing someone in his own shop, but kind too, like the nice grandpas in Christmas movies.

“Hmm – yes. The book on display, can I see it? The Hemingway one.”

She makes a fool of herself on the spot, but the man doesn’t seem to mind, what with being a nice grandpa and all that. He simply goes to the window and takes the book, with such a gentleness Emma is afraid the thing will break into pieces once she grabs it.

“It’s quite the old edition we’ve got here,” the bookseller tells her as he flips the book open. “There’s a really nice dedication inside, if you’re in that sort of things.”

Her heart starts beating faster once more, for a whole different reason altogether, as the bookseller comes to stand next to her and shows her the message on the first page of the book, right beneath the title. The cursive is beautiful, especially for a man’s handwriting, each letter drawn with care in black ink on the yellowing paper – it seems out of time, almost, more Victorian than modern.

*My dear younger brother, it reads. I hope that book and its words of wisdom will follow you for years to come. Never forget, “But man is not made for defeat. A man can be destroyed but not defeated.” With all my love. Liam J.*

Emma’s finger is trembling as she presses it to the paper, following the beautiful curve of the last J
– she ignores the tears prickling at the corners of her eyes, ignores the lump in her throat because this is it, she found it.

“Miss?”

She looks up at the bookseller once more, eyes wide and mouth open in surprise. “Yes, yes,” she says, and it’s barely more than a whisper. “I’ll take it.”

Afterward, sitting at a small table with a hot chocolate in front of her, Mary Margaret asks her what she bought, and why – it is, after all, the kind of book you read in high school, paperback copy you keep in your room at your parents’ where it gathers dust. (At least, that’s what happened with Emma’s.) But she doesn’t want to share the story – it feels personal, someone, a tale that is not hers to share – so she only shrugs and changes the topic of conversation.
She stays in front of the door – fidgeting and raising her closed fist to the door and nibbling on her bottom lip – for a good five minutes before taking a large inspiration and knocking. Her heart is dancing the samba against her ribcage, and she’s certain she is only a couple of minutes away from black dots appearing in front of her eyes from not breathing properly.

She’s a rightful mess.

Which is made worse by the fact that a blond – definitely blond, not the black mope of hair she was expecting – man opens the door to her. He raises an eyebrow as he leans against the doorframe, folding his arms against the baby blue fabric of his scrubs.

“Well, look who the cat dragged in.”

Emma forced a smile on her lips. Despite his dating Ruby for years now, Victor and she never really got that close and it is not surprising then that he lacks some kind of delicacy when he talks to her.

“Hey Vic,” she replies, trying her hardest not to look above his shoulder and inside the apartment. She fails.

“The missus isn’t here. She had an appointment with the florist… or something.”

Yeah, she knows. That’s exactly why she is here now – because she knows Ruby won’t be home at the moment, leaving Emma the much-needed space she needs for what she is about to do.

“I’m not here for her, actually.”

“Oh.” Victor glances above his shoulder, then back at her. “He isn’t there either, actually, but you can waiting inside if you want.”

There is some tension in Victor’s voice, like he doesn’t really want her to come in (which is stupid, she knows the place as well as her own), but she needs to do this, and she needs to do it now, so she walks past him and inside the apartment.

Nothing much has changed since the last time she was there, beside the obvious fact that someone else lives here – it’s in the few more pairs of shoes next to the door, in the familiar stack of books in a corner, and the overall tidiness of the place. He’s always been anal that way, especially compared to both Ruby and Victor, and it doesn’t surprise her that he would clean and tidy everything around him. Probably did it at three in the morning too, knowing him.

“His class finishes at two, so he should be back soon.”

“His class?” she finds herself saying, unable to hide the surprise in her tone.

Victor replies with another raised eyebrow, unsure if she’s kidding or not. “Didn’t he tell you? He’s been back at NYU ever since he came back to town.”

No, no, he didn’t tell her that.

He didn’t tell her a lot of things, apparently.

Victor then leaves the room with some mumbled excuse about getting ready for his shift, or
something along those lines, and Emma finds herself alone in the living room. She presses her lips into a thin line, not knowing what to do but knowing fully well she feels too restless to just sit on the couch and wait. So she starts touring the room, looking for all the details that have changed since her last visit, all the proofs that he lives there. If she goes to the kitchen, she’ll find the boxes of tea leaves perfectly aligned on the counter and the mugs in the sink, but for now she smiles at the guitar leaning against the wall and the collection of books in a corner. Just like that one time in his dorm room, a lifetime ago, she picks one and opens it to the first page, reads the message inked into it. Her handbag feels heavy on her shoulder all of a sudden, reminder of the reason of her presence here (how could she even forget?) and so she puts the book back in place with a shake of the head.

That’s when she notices it. Ruby has always been a fan of pictures, as far as Emma can remember, sticking them to the walls of their college room and taking them at parties and outings. It is no surprise that she never lost the habit, framing them now and putting them on display on various pieces of furniture. Still, one of those pictures catches Emma’s eye, for the people shown on it aren’t Ruby or Victor, or even their group of friends.

No, it is Killian on this one, eyes turned a vibrant blue by the picture and smile as dazzling as the flash of the camera, his arm wrapped around a pretty brunette with an equally bright smile. The angle of the picture is all wrong, since he took it himself, but Emma recognizes Central Park in the background. Not that it matters, because she can’t look away from the woman – she looks young, younger than Emma had imagined, not even in her thirties yet. And beautiful, gosh so beautiful Emma almost feels inadequate just looking at her.

I’m dating someone.

He looks so happy on the picture. She can’t remember ever seeing him happier – no, that’s a lie. She can. She remembers it vividly, for it wasn’t that long ago, excited as a kid on Christmas morning, after getting arrested to see her again for the first time in years.

She had made him happy then. But it is another woman’s job now, and Emma pretends she doesn’t feel her heart squeezing painfully in her chest, black dots definitely appearing in front of her eyes now, along with the familiar prickle of tears.

“Hello?”

She turns around so suddenly she makes herself dizzy, even more so when her eyes land in the woman standing in the doorway of the guest room. The woman she was staring at in the picture only seconds before. Emma feels like she is going to faint from embarrassment before she even has time to run away – far, fast – yet she finds it in herself to smile, no matter how forced and fake the thing is.

The woman doesn’t smile back.

“You’re Emma,” she continues. Never had her name sounded like both a threat and an insult at the same time – gosh, what he told his girlfriend about her, she doesn’t want to know.

“Yeah. Hi. I’m here to – ”

“Apologize for your drunk behaviour of the other night.”

Oh shit.

“Listen,” the woman – Milah, she remembers all of a sudden – continues, her voice cold and unimpressed. “I don’t know what happened between the two of you, but you broke his heart.
More than once. And I love him too much to just stand there and watch it happen again. So if you’re here out of selfish reasons, and I believe you are, please don’t bother and leave before he comes back.”

Emma opens her mouth to reply – to give Milah a piece of her mind because how dare she – but the brunette doesn’t leave her a chance to speak up as she goes back to the room and closes the door behind her a little too forcefully. Emma is left blinking at the piece of wood, lost and confused.

Is she there for selfish reasons? No, she’s there for the book, she’s there to give him the book he’s been looking for all those years. And then what? Did she really convince herself than nothing more would happen, than he would simply thank her and that would be it? She doesn’t know what she was expecting, but truth is she was expecting something out of this moment. She’d been drunk and heartbroken that night, but not enough to lose all memories of the moment when waking up the following morning, and she remembers the ‘but you like me’ she’d given him, the desperation she’d felt while the words escaped her mouth.

She looks at the picture one last time, at the happiness and love on his face, in his eyes. She can’t do that to him, she can’t take that away from him – not because she misses Graham, misses being hugged, taken care of. He was right about the rebound thing, right about a lot of things actually. She can’t do that to him, to them, can’t ruin everything out of selfish reasons – she already did, and maybe he’s better off without her, without that broken sad ghost of a person.

She leaves the apartment.

The book stays in her bag.

…

She stops at the first coffee shop she finds, if only because she needs the soothing warmth of a hot cup against her palms. They’re out of cinnamon and her hot chocolate tastes like water, and she finds herself staring at the cars passing by, too lost in her thoughts to really focus on the word around her.

At least you’ve got a new job, a voice that dangerously sounds like Graham tells her. That’s a start.

Yeah, it is. She’s got a job, and a good one at that, one that will pay the bills and the apartment, one that will keep her busy and exhausted so she just has to put her head on the pillow and fall asleep immediately. She’s got a job, and her friends no longer hate her – never hated her in the first place but, still, she’s working on it.

But she feels that… hollowness inside, like her heart is missing a broken piece and she doesn’t know how to fix it. It doesn’t help that she can feel Graham’s ghost in every corner of her apartment (maybe she should sell it, find something smaller), and it now goes along with the ghost of her broken friendship with Killian. She’s a mess through and through.

(She’s getting better – hell, she brushes her hair every day now, gotta count for something – but there’s still work to do. Maybe she should see someone, like that Hopper guy Mary Margaret told her she was seeing after her father’s death. Maybe, but it would be admitting she has a problem, and she isn’t sure she is ready for that kind of weakness.)
Emma takes a sip of her drink, luck-warm and tasteless, before playing with the bootlace around her wrist – definitely a nervous habit by now, she isn’t proud of it. She’s thinking of what to do next, not feeling like going home just yet, perhaps she could…

“Emma?”

Her head turns to the sound of her name, eyes widening at the sight of dirty blonde curls and a kind smile. “Wendy?”

Of all the people in New York…

She’s on her feet in an instant, hugging her high school best friend with a breathless laugh – she still smells the same, that cheap perfume she would buy at the drugstore in Storybrooke, and Emma feels sixteen all over again. “What are you doing here?”

Wendy laughs too, the sound small and happy. “I live here now. Found a job, move in a few months ago.”

She looks the same as ever, with her floral dress and loose ponytail and cute little shoes. Some things truly never change, Emma thinks, surprised in the lack of bitterness over the girl who slept with her boyfriend a few years ago. Water under the bridge and all those things, apparently.

“It’s so good to see you again!” Wendy all but screams, with yet another hug. “Tell you what. My boyfriend Peter and I are organising a party this weekend. Why don’t you come so we can catch up?”

Emma’s eyebrows rise immediately, and she doesn’t know if she wants to laugh or face-palm – maybe both. “You’re dating a guy named Peter?”

“I know, right?” Wendy laughs. “People always think we’re making it up. But he’s nice, you’ll like him.”

Yeah, Emma tends to like the guys Wendy sleeps with.

Oh, here’s the bitterness after all.

Not that Wendy notices, too busy rummaging through her handbag to find a pen and a piece of paper, then leaning against the table to scribble her address and phone number – her handwriting is still so neat and pretty, Emma’s always been jealous of it.

“Come, okay? Even if it’s just to say hi for five minutes,” she goes on as she hands the piece of paper to Emma, who can only nod and put it in the back pocket of her jeans (it will most likely be washed away the next time she does the laundry, but oh well).

But there is something in Wendy’s eyes, akin to sadness and guilt, that tells Emma her old friend is sincere in her will to atone of her past mistakes. And, truth is, even if she loves Ruby and Mary Margaret with all her heart, Emma wouldn’t say no to a few hours spent with Wendy – there is something in growing up together, sharing diapers and tampons and make-up, that cannot be copied, replaced. So her smile turns more sincere as she nods one more time and promises she will be there.

Wendy hugs her once more, because that’s what Wendy always does – it feels awkward, so much cuddling, after weeks spent alone in her apartment. “See you on Saturday then.”

“Yeah, see you.”
Henry is… restless, to say the least.

Emma has moved to sit by the window, watching New York’s nightlife and the lights of the skyscrapers as she tells her story. But now, her son can’t keep still for more than a few seconds, sitting and lying down and sitting again, moving the pillows, moving his teddy bears, drawing the blanket up and down his body. It would be annoying were it not for the look of distress on his little face as he mulls over the pieces of information given to him – he always needs to move when his brain is working, for reasons she doesn’t really understand.

“Maybe it wasn’t such a good idea,” he says after a while, putting into words the thought she’d had in her mind from the moment she started talking.

No, it really wasn’t. And even if she doesn’t give him all the details that come with the memories – she isn’t *that* bad a mother, thank you very much – Emma knows the story will change his perception of his father, and of her. There is no going back from there.

“What if I don’t like who my father is?”

Her boy, so clever, so telepath.

“Come on. Of course you love your father.”

They’d managed to hide the truth for him this far – the unexpected pregnancy, the freaking out leading to the ultimate break up – and she feels bad for telling Henry now. At least, without consulting his father first. He’s still a young boy, he doesn’t need that weight on his shoulders. But he is loved, so very loved, even if his parents’ couple was doomed from the beginning – he was nothing but a rebound, after all, like Killian had refused to be.

She sighs. “You don’t have to wait long to find out because – ”

“It’s a whole different man, isn’t it? You’ve been leading me on all night long and…”

“Wow, kid. Take it easy.”

But Henry’s eyes are already a little wet around the edges, crunching his nose like he always does when trying very hard not to let the tears fall, and Emma stands up from her place to go back on the bed.

“It’s just a story… And this one has a happy ending.”

Not the words her son wanted to hear, apparently, for they upset him the moment they’re out of her mouth – if the emotional side of him comes out of nowhere, the impulsivity is definitely hers.

“How? How can there be a happy ending? Graham is dead and Killian hates you and my dad, whoever he is, didn’t give you your happy ending.”

He takes his pillow and presses it to his face, screams of frustration swallowed by the fluffy fabric as he lets himself fall head first on the mattress. Emma sighs once more as she pinches her nose, rubbing his back with the palm of her other hand.
“Let’s stop here for tonight.”

“No!”

“Okay but I’ll make ourselves a nice cup of tea to calm down. Sounds good?”

A muffled ‘okay’ can be heard despite his face still being pressed to the pillow, and she pats his back one last time before standing up and leaving the room. The apartment is eerily quiet and dark since they moved to Henry’s bedroom before the night fell, and she switches on the lights on her way to the kitchen before filling the teapot with water. She takes two mugs from the cupboard, adds the tea bags and the sugar, then leans against the kitchen counter, staring at the fridge without really seeing it.

Some of those stories – the book, meeting Graham, Ruby’s wedding – she hadn’t thought of in a very long time, and the trip down memory lane is more painful than she’s willing to admit. She feels old, all of a sudden, like she’s lived a hundred different lives, and all she wants is to hide under her blanket, fall asleep, and forget about her past. She’s so good at compartmenting she doesn’t know what to do of that assault of memories and feelings.

The teapot whistles, startling her out of her thoughts. She glances at the fridge one more time – take-out menus and school papers and some pictures with cartoonish colourful magnets. One of the pictures is from Henry’s birthday, sitting between Ruby and David with a big cake in front of him and stupid hats on their heads. He may not have the best parents in the world, but at least he’s got this, this big dysfunctional family who loves him like their own. Maybe it’s enough.

It is enough, she thinks as she grabs both mugs and makes her way back to the bedroom.

Emma pushes the door open with a shoulder, careful in not dropping a single drop of the burning drinks on herself, and is welcomed by the sound of little snores. Of course. She smiles as she puts both mugs on the little desk to her left, and moves closer to the bed to tuck Henry in – something he hasn’t allowed her to do in a while, because he’s ‘old enough now’. But, oh well, it never hurts. She drops a kiss to his forehead, her smile growing even larger when he mumbles some kind of “night m’m” in his sleep.

The end of the story will have to wait, after all.
Emma wakes up to the sun on her face, and blinks several time in mid-panic before remembering it’s Saturday and she doesn’t have to hurry if she wants Henry not to be late for school. With a groan, she lets her head fall back against the pillow, throwing the blanket over her in the process.

Even if she went to bed early (oh the joy of being a single mother on a Friday night), sleep evaded her until late into the night and she feels groggier than if she hadn’t slept at all. Damn those memories, damn her brain for over-thinking everything so much. She didn’t expect such a thing to happen, and now she feels melancholic over the simple thought of Graham making her breakfast in bed – pancakes, freshly pressed juice, the whole package – when they had a day off.

(It’s been a decade, fuck, she’s still not over it.)

Now is her turn to make breakfast for her loved one, so she takes a quick shower before heading to the kitchen, wet hair falling lazy down her back. She’s in the middle of her cooking when she hears some ruckus coming from the other room and she smiles to herself – her son, the spitting image of discretion. He paddles through the apartment with the same quiet demeanour, flashing her a smile as he climbs up the stool and folds his arms on the kitchen island, chin resting on top of them. His Iron Man pyjamas top fall down one shoulder, eyes hooded with sleep and hair a rightful mess – he’s so adorable, her heart melts every time.

“Slept well?” she asks him as she puts a mug of hot cocoa in front of his little face.

“I think I know who my father is,” he replies.

Emma groans – can’t they talk about anything else, just for five minutes?

She doesn’t gratify him with an answer, though, just puts his omelette in a plate and forces him to eat his breakfast, then pushes him toward the bathroom. Henry doesn’t go without a fight, of course, whining and complaining the way only kids do, but complies anyway – not without his loudest sigh and most obnoxious roll of the eyes. He’s not her son for nothing.

It may be the quickest shower in the history of mankind, and she doesn’t put it past him to have ‘forgotten’ to brush his teeth, for he sits next to her on the couch only five minutes later, cross-legged and grinning.

“So…”

“So the last time we saw Emma Nolan, she had just discovered that the man she truly loved, Killian Jones, was in love with an other woman…”

Emma can only gape at him, eyes widened with each word out of his mouth – not what she was expecting, clearly. She… actually doesn’t want to think about it. Or about the reasons that have Henry believing such things. Or about him.

She mentally shakes her head.

“Hey, that’s my story, don’t hijack it!”

Henry shrugs and follows with a little hand motion that can only mean ‘go on, then’.

She complies.
march 2005.

It’s funny, but she had always imagined that if Wendy were to live in New York, she would be the Staten Island kind of woman – she was the mom friend in high school, and the girl who’s had her wedding day planned since she was six, the perfect example of the future soccer mom with two kids, a Labrador and a white-picket fence around her house. So when Emma realises that the address she was given leads to the middle of SoHo, right above a tattoo parlour, it is… surprising, to say the least. She wonders who that Peter guy is and what he did for Wendy to start acting like a girl her age.

A tall guy with dirty blond hair opens the door to Emma, his staring making her uncomfortable to say the least. He doesn’t greet her or tell her to enter, but she does it anyway, trying her better not to look around her too obviously – the loft is big, in an industrial way, and packed up with guys in their early to mid twenties, all with beers in their hand. It feels like a college party, almost, the kind she’d attended with Ruby, where the music is too loud and the people too drunk.

(The number of guys is quite impressive, actually. Emma only finds one girl, a pretty brunette with tanned skin and a loud laugh. Beside her – and Wendy who must be hiding somewhere – the crowd is masculine, and it makes her somewhat uncomfortable as she is used to spending time with her girl friends more than anything.)

She already pictures herself saying hello to Wendy only to sneak out of the apartment as soon as she can, when someone grabs her by the arm, effectively startling her.

“Emma! You came!”

Wendy’s pupils are a little too much on the wide side, but she stands out like a sore thumb in this place, with her floral dress and blue headband. She looks happy though, large grin and flushed cheeks, so Emma smiles back and relaxes into her old friend’s embrace. It is nothing but a party, after all. Even if she doesn’t know a single person in the room, she’s seen worse – she can do this.

“That I did.”

Emma finds herself with a beer in her hand in a matter of seconds from there and, even if the drink is luck-warm and not as strong as she’d like it to be, she welcomes it with a long sip as she nods to everything Wendy tells her – jobs and houses and boyfriends and past college years, a mess of information she throws at Emma’s face. It’s weird, to say the least. Wendy and she used to be joined at the hip during their high school years and now, the more she talks, the more Emma realises the woman in front of her is nothing but a stranger. They no longer share the same hobbies or the same friends, having drifted apart so much during those few years since Emma moved to New York.

She doesn’t know what to think of this, but misses Ruby and her carefree attitude – she could do with a bit of that tonight.

“Oh, by the way! There’s someone I want you to meet!”

Emma thinks boyfriend at first, since the infamous Peter must be in here somewhere, but there is an edge to Wendy’s voice – that hasn’t changed, but Emma can’t really take relief in that small
detail as the other woman drags her around the apartment.

“Wendy, I’m really not into dating at the moment.”

Hell, she never even told Wendy she was single, how can she jump into matchmaker mood without that vital piece of information?

But Wendy just offers her a *tsk* and drags her to another room (this place is *huge*, what kind of job her Peter has to pay such a rent?). “It’s an old friend of mine, and I know you guy will get along.”

She taps on some guy’s shoulder, and he turns around to look at her.

Emma gasps.

“Neal?”

In the flesh – same brown mop of hair, same chocolate eyes. They’re a little wide as he stares her down, obviously as surprised as she is, even as a grin spreads on his face. He’s changed of course, shoulders a little broader and standing prouder, but between him in front of her and Wendy by her side, Emma feels like she suddenly travelled back in time. The feeling isn’t uncomfortable, just… unexpected may be the word.

“Emma,” he breathes. “Wow, it’s – you look good.”

“Thanks. I mean, yeah, you too.”

Wendy says something about checking on other people and makes a quiet exit, while Neal moves closer with that nonchalance she always liked – she liked his confidence, too, and the way he didn’t seem to care about anything in the world. Yeah, sixteen-year-old Emma Nolan was into that kind of guys, it’s so weird she went and fell in love with Graham – the exact opposite of Neal.

“What are you doing here?”

*What are the odds*, she finds herself wondering for the second time in so many days. That is why she loves New York in the first place – to be able to disappear into the crowd if she feels like it, not knowing your neighbour’s name and barely talking to people around you. Everything Storybrooke isn’t, with its small community where everyone is on a first name basis and the gossips run like wildfire.

In less than a week, she managed to find Wendy *and* Neal.

What are the odds, indeed?

“I live here now.” Because of course he does. “I’m working security at a jewellery shop.”

She nods as she takes a sip of her beer, trying to wrap her mind around everything. Maybe it is some kind of sign sent by some kind of deity, telling her it is time to move on with her life – literally. She could go to Boston. Or maybe somewhere warm and sunny, with a view on the sea. California and Florida both sound like good ideas, all of a sudden – far away from New York, her past, and her less than glorious romantic record.

“I tried to call you, actually, but you never called back.”

She remembers that, a voice message lost among many others, when even talking to people on the phone felt like the most difficult task in the world. She feels guilty, almost, especially with the puppy eyes Neal gives her in that moment.
“Yeah, sorry. It wasn’t a great time for me…”

Neal seems oblivious to her problems – Storybrooke’s gossip network doesn’t go as far as spreading news about dead fiancés, good to know – but she doesn’t feel like throwing a pity party and explaining the hows and whys, so she simply shrugs to leave it at that. It surprisingly works.

(But then again, Neal was never great at reading her mind and seeing her lies. Something that has never bothered her all that much, if she’s honest with herself.)

“Yes. It’s good to see you again, Em.”

And he means it, she can see it in the softness of his eyes and the curve of his lips. She hadn’t missed him – too busy with her life and problems to think about her high school boyfriend – but it feels good to see him again. Familiar, almost.

“Yes. You too.”

“Stop.”

Emma raises an eyebrow at Henry’s interruption, but the kid is already bouncing on the couch, eyes wide with excitement.

“Say it again. What he told you.”

She tries her hardest not to grin – her kid, her brilliant clever kid. “He said ‘it’s good to see you again’ and I replied –”

“Em! He called you Em!” He gives her a gleeful laugh. “That’s how I knew! Dad is the only one who ever calls you Em, everybody else calls you Emma. I’m right. Say I’m right.”

Emma laughs too, and raises her hand, palm open towards him.

(All I’m saying, Em, is that Storybrooke does have a police department.

Em, we already talked about it… Listen, my class starts in five minutes. We’ll talk about it later, okay?

Em! Gosh, it’s so good to see your face. How are you?)

Henry high-fives her with yet another giggle. “I’m so good at that stuff,” he says, proud as a peacock.

“Tired you long enough, though.”

He sticks his tongue out at her.

...

He asks her, eventually, when his excitement dies down and he has time to think everything through. The most dreadful ‘but what next?’ She mulls over her answer before deciding there is nothing like the truth, and tells him his dad asked her for coffee the next day, and they started dating not long after. It was never meant to work – Killian was right about the rebound thing, after
all, it wouldn’t have worked no matter the guy – and her unexpected pregnancy, a few months later, didn’t help.

Henry takes it all in stride, even if his frown stays in place for long minutes – he’s never been naïve enough to believe his parents would ever go back together, but it doesn’t make the truth any less ugly. At least he doesn’t go back to the ‘was I an accident?’ from the previous day. That alone is a relief.

He’s still pondering her words by the time his father comes picking him up for the weekend, and Emma finds some excuse for Henry to go back to his room so she can explain the situation in quiet whispers. He only nods before saying, “Come on, buddy. We’re going to be late to the movies.”

The door closes on them seconds later, leaving her alone in the apartment – too big, too silent all of a sudden.

Emma half fancies herself spending the rest of the weekend in front of the TV, perhaps with a marathon of romcom movies, but decides against it. (She almost wants to take on a case, if only to keep busy while Henry is at his father’s but, then again, she doesn’t feel like it.) So she does the dishes and cleans her bathroom and does the laundry and, at some point in the afternoon, finds herself climbing on a chair to reach the high shelf of her wardrobe.

The shoebox is old and used, washed away of its colours, and she puts it delicately on her bed, sitting cross-legged next to it. There are pictures, mostly, taken during a time when digital cameras were barely a thing and printers did the worst job in the world – still, she smiles at those pictures, taken at parties and on lazy Sundays, of her and Ruby mostly, sometimes with Mary Margaret or Victor. She also finds a mess of little objects – theatre tickets and rings and even the cap of a beer bottle – that used to have a meaning, that have some kind of memory attached to them. She laughs at the key to her dorm room, definitely stolen, and bites back a sob when she finds Graham’s FBI card and badge.

But, mostly she frowns when she reaches the bottom of the shoebox and finds a book.

The book.

She opens it to the first page, reads the message even if she still knows it by heart a decade later. “But man is not made for defeat. A man can be destroyed but not defeated.” The words still ring true to her, just as they did to Liam Jones all those years ago, just that they could have to Killian had she decided not to let Milah’s words affect her. But she did and here she is, holding a book that doesn’t belong to her.

She looks at the alarm clock on her bedside table – barely over three – before grabbing her phone. The number is on speed dial, Ruby’s voice heard after only two rings. “Oh my god, you’re calling me. How very 90s of you.”

“I know. I’m so retro.” She stops of a second and coughs lightly. “Hey, can I talk to Vic for a second?”

“Alright…”

The disbelief is obvious in Ruby’s voice, yet Emma can hear her moving around her apartment, the soft sound of feet against wooden floor. Some more noises later, as well as hushed whispers, and Victor greets her.

“Hey. Hi. So…” Another cough. “I know you’re still in touch with Killian and…”
“Jesus,” he interrupts her. Then, loudly, “You won the fucking bet, Rubs.”

(Shes hears a muffled “whaaaat?” in the background and, holy shit, there were bets?)

(Of course there were. Even Henry believes she was in love with Killian, and he only heard the story, didn’t actually witness it like her friends did. But is it all in their heads? Or is she just really good at not accepting the truth? Not that it matters. She only wants to finally give him the fucking book, like she should have all those years ago, and be done with it. Who cares about bets, or even repressed feelings, or what-have-you?)

(Ruby takes the phone back then, and Emma finds herself explaining the situation is so many words. She gets a “Oh my god, you how-I-met-your-mother’d your kid!” before Victor grabs the phone once more.)

“I just lost a hundred bucks because of you, Nolan,” Victor says and – what is going on? “What do you need? Phone number? Address? I think the moron still has a Myspace page, so I can give you that too.”

She. Is. Mortified.

Which is why she ends the call as fast as possible, cheeks burning with embarrassment and Ruby laughing like a maniac in the background.

Victor texts her everything – phone number and address and even where he works, for fuck’s sake – a minute later. She stares at the text, then at the book, then at her alarm clock, and at the text again, nibbling on her bottom lip. What is on her mind is textbook bad idea, she knows it. It can only bring problems, and a lot more repressed memories with them.

She stands up and grabs her jacket anyway.
It suits him, she thinks as she gets out of the elevator and into the offices.

Everything is large windows and bright lights, huge posters on the walls depicting the most beautiful places in the world – places she barely even dares dreaming of visiting one day, the kind you only see on TV and in magazines. The iconic yellow rectangle of the National Geographic logo is painted on the wall, right above the reception desk, and Emma moves closer to it, confused about what to do next. Should she just announce herself? Gosh, what if they refuse to let her in, since she doesn’t have an appointment? Should she have called first? She definitely should have.

But the woman behind the desk smiles at her, kind and welcoming, so Emma finds herself saying, “I’d like to see Killian Jones, please. I was told he’s working today.”

The receptionist only nods, showing her to the small waiting area before picking her phone. Emma grabs one of the magazines on display – same gorgeous pictures in there than on the walls of the offices, of course – but her mind is somewhere else and she can’t focus on the words in front of her. Instead, she listens to the phone call happening only feet away from her.

“Someone is asking to see you… She didn’t give a name, actually… A blonde woman… Yes, a red one, yes.” Emma looks down at her jacket, smiles. “All right, then.” She hangs up, coughs, and then, “Miss? He’ll see you now.”

Emma all but jumps on her feet, magazine falling back on the coffee table with a soft ‘thud’. The receptionist shows her the way – down the corridor, to the left, down that other corridor, third office to the right – and Emma thanks her before following the instructions. The place is quiet, not a soul to be seen, which isn’t all that surprising for a Saturday afternoon. Of course he’d be among those working during the weekend, no wife or kids to spend time with during that day.

That she knows of.

Gosh, Ruby would have at least told her if it weren’t the case, right?

Emma sighs deeply, ignoring her every cell telling her to run while she still can as she forces herself to move forwards, one foot in front of the other. Her heart is drumming against her chest – and, damn, that’s exactly why she refused to attend their college reunion last year, she’s awful with that kind of things. Still, it barely takes more than a few seconds before she stands in front of a closed door, staring at the plate there.

Killian Jones, assistant editor.

One more sigh for good measure, before she throws away the decorum and enters without knocking first. She’s quiet enough – he doesn’t look up from his computer, leaving her the time to glance around her. The office is perfectly neat, of course, but what else was to be expected of him? Just like at the reception, his walls are decorated with huge framed pictures. The one behind him is impressive, that of a blue whale jumping out of the water, and Emma smiles at the sight of it.

“Nice pic of Victor.”

Her joke may be bad, but it has the expected effect – that of startling him. He looks up at her, eyes widening behind his reading glasses (god) before a grin settles on his lips. “I knew it was you,” he says, his accent deeper than in her memories (dear god), and he stands up. He wears a suit, jacket
discarded on the back of his chair and sleeves rolled up to the elbows (holy shit), and all she can think is that, yeah, he finally cut that damn hair of his. It was about time.

(She thinks many other things, but that particular detail stands out somehow. She remembers the way it would always fall in front of his eyes, and how he’d pull it into a ponytail sometimes, not to be bothered. His hair is shorter now, but not too short, enough to run your finger through it and hold on to it if needed.)

(He has no idea where that last one is coming from.)

Killian moves around the desk and closer to her – at least his saunter hasn’t changed, moving with the same cat-like confidence and ease. He goes for raising his arms, no doubt in some like of greeting hug, but thinks better of it and instead scratches the spot behind his ear. His grin grows bigger as he takes her in, before he offers her a seat.

There is some awkwardness to the whole scene, but she can’t ignore the comfortable feeling between the two of them. That hasn’t changed either, and it feels good, familiar almost, like coming home after a winter afternoon outside.

“So, what are you up to these days, Swan?” he asks her, nickname rolling easily on his tongue, as he closes his laptop and gives her his full attention. He comes back to her side of the desk after that, leaning against it with his arms folded on his chest and legs crossed at the ankles.

“What am I up to? Come on. You’re wearing a suit and your name is on the door, what’s up with that?”

He blushes – Killian Jones actually blushes! –, the red high on his cheekbones as he bashfully adverts his eyes, hand twitching against the desk as he represses the need to scratch his ear once more. It makes Emma smirks, but also wonder. What happened in his life for turning shy, almost, what did she miss? Or maybe it was there all along, well hidden behind his cockiness and easy grins.

“I’m a bail bondsperson, actually,” she adds.

His reaction is priceless, eyes widening as he whispers a slow and impressed “Shut the front door!” that has her giggle and bite on her bottom lip. Yeah, not exactly the kind of career you imagine for a woman such as her, but the element of surprise is what makes her so good at her job, after all.

“Victor told me you got a kid with what’s-his-name.”

She wants to laugh once more. It’s been years and he still manages to pour sarcasm and bitterness into his voice every time he talks about her ex-boyfriend. Emma wonders if he’s aware of that small detail, because she feels like he doesn’t even do it on purpose, just has a knee-jerk reaction every time they talk about that one particular subject.

“Yeah, Henry. He’s ten, and awesome… Same thing can’t be said about the father, though.” She wrinkles her nose and Killian mirrors her somehow. “What about you? Still with Milah?”

The small talk is uncomfortable to say the least, every word coming out of her mouth sounds wrong to her ears. Even more so when Killian bursts into a loud laughter, shaking his hand.

“God, no. Milah, she… I wanted to start her family, she didn’t. End of the story.”

There is more to the story, she can tell, but it is not her place to pry for more details. Still that thought alone – that of Killian wanting to start a family, Killian as a husband, as a father – is so
foreign she has a hard time imagining what it might look like… Even if images of him holding a
baby with dark hair and vibrant blue eyes – yeah, it makes for a compelling thought, that much is
certain. He’d be good with kids, it seems almost too obvious.

(Gosh, she hasn’t gotten laid in a very long time, if her thoughts are anything to go by. It’s
problematic.)

“Not that I don’t like the impromptu visit and small talk,” he says after a wild, tilting his head to
the side as his blue eyes bore into hers. “But why are you here, swan?”

And here we are.

As if she could avoid that particular subject – that’s why she’s here after all. It’s not as if she
expected him to believe she was just dropping by for the sake of it, not after the way they parted
ways and so many years of radio silence. But knowing why she’s here and telling him are two
whole different things altogether, and suddenly she doesn’t feel so strong anymore, isn’t sure if
she’s capable of doing it. Coward, a small voice whispers to her ear, one that sounds a lot like
Ruby.

“I –” she starts, but the words die at the back of her throat somehow. “There’s something I need to
give you.”

He raises an eyebrow as she reaches into her bag.

Everything dawns on him the moment his eyes fall on the book, mouth opening in an expression
of silent shock and eyes widening even so slightly. His eyes are trembling when he takes the book
from her, even more so when he flips it open to the first page – more as a confirmation than
anything, just to make sure it is the real deal and not a trick of the eyes. Just like she did when she
found it, he traces the name written there with a fingertip – he lips his lip too, Adam’s apple
bobbing with the sob stuck there, eyes rimmed with red.

“I – Emma – how?”

She doesn’t want to lie – he deserves nothing but the truth, at that point – but she doesn’t want to
tell him how selfish she’s been all along either. There is no words to convey ‘Your ex girlfriend
told me to leave and then life happened and I forgot about it until yesterday’ without him hating
her. Again.

“I’ve had it for a while, actually,” she replies, voice low and weak as she folds her arms against
her chest in a self-protective motion, looking away from his too-knowing gaze. It’s like the gates
are open now, thought, words tumbling out of her mouth before she can stop them. “I found it
after Ruby and Victor’s engagement party. I wanted to give it to you, and I dropped by, but Milah
was there and she told me to piss off and… I don’t know. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, Killian, I…”

She – doesn’t know what to add, how to convey everything that was on her mind that day and
everything that’s been on her mind since the previous evening. It’s too much, and too confusing,
and he doesn’t deserve to deal with her mess once more. Deserves more, better.

But Killian says, “Why today?”, in a voice too gentle to carry the anger he should feel right now,
and she looks back to him only to drown in the sea blue of his eyes. Emma would like to say she
doesn’t know how to read the emotions he’s showing her – it would be a lie, because everything
is clear as day on his features and in his eyes. That softness, that understanding even… and
something else, strong and powerful, something she doesn’t want to name.

It scares the shit out of her.
Because Ruby and Victor are bets going on, and Henry came to those conclusions too, and it all concurs with the way Killian is looking at her in that moment. Like she’s precious and beautiful and perfect – she isn’t. She’s an awful human being who hoarded the last thing he has of his brother because she was scared and selfish. She doesn’t deserve his understand, and she specifically doesn’t deserve his – his love.

“Emma,” he says again, a little more insistent this time, and the use of her real name isn’t lost on her – it show how serious he and the conversation are. But she doesn’t want serious. She wants ‘swan’ and easy grins and carefree flirting. (But was it really carefree? She isn’t so sure anymore.) “Why are you here?”

She opens her mouth, to find a reason, an explanation, something. But the words don’t come, leaving her speechless and confused – mostly scared, too.

So she decides to stop listening to her brain and let her instincts kick in instead.

They don’t disappoint her.

....

“And then you just left?”

Henry’s eyes are wide opened as he stares at her, mouth opening in an expression that screams disbelief. She feels like blushing under that too-knowing gaze, but settles for a simple “Yep” instead.

It’s Monday night and she’s making grilled cheese for dinner – because it’s pretty much established that she’s the worst mother in the world, so junk food is the least of her worries at the moment. Henry had sensed something was up the moment he came back from his weekend with his father, but had waited a whole day, dinner being a particularly good moment for an interrogation. And since she’s way past everything at that point, the story of her Saturday meeting with Killian had tumbled out of her mouth all too easily.

She feels so ashamed, saying it out loud like that.

Henry looks scandalised – both at her keeping the book for so long and at her flying the scene as soon as things got too emotional for her own good – but Emma ignores him as she finished her (poor attempt at) grilled cheese sandwiches and put them into plates. The kid is still pondering over everything when she settles at the table and gives him his diner, lips pursed into a pout with a frown on his forehead.

“How could you change every name but his?”

Emma takes a bite of her sandwich, chewing slowly in a not so discreet attempt at stalling. Henry grows impatient of course, sighing loudly even as he chomps on his own grilled cheese.

“What do you mean?” she asks back.

“Well, you know. Dad became Neal, and Graham was that Hunter guy you and Aunt Ruby talk about when you think I’m not listening.” Here goes nothing, she guesses. (She was certain they were quiet about that particular subject, only addressed once a year, but her son is a goddamn ninja apparently.) “But you didn’t change Killian’s name.”
She doesn’t have an answer to that question. It had been automatic, changing the names of the former two but keeping Killian’s real name. She can barely explain it to herself, for it would have been easy to give him an alias too, to go on with that pattern in her storytelling. But she didn’t, and she can’t even begin to wrap her mind around some kind of why.

“Why do you care about that anyway?”

“Because I want you to be happy, mom.”

It sounds so obvious, like he’s been keeping that to himself for a while now. It scares her, how transparent she is. She’s happy with the life she has – good job, good home, and mostly a kid that she loves and who loves her back. But there is this… hollowness, in her chest, that’s been here ever since she became a widower, this need for love and affection that the occasional one-night stand never managed to satisfy. She’s happy as a fulfilled mother, but she also isn’t – as a woman, as a potential lover. It would piss her off (she doesn’t need a man in her life to feel whole, thank you very much) but it’s been so long since the last time she was held through the night and…

“I’m happy, kiddo,” she replies. “We’ve got a good thing going here, just the two of us.”

None of them is convinced by the blatant lie.

“Yeah, and we’d still have a good thing with three of us.” When she doesn’t replies and only stalls the conversation by finishing her grilled cheese, he goes on, “I know things weren’t good with dad but… Killian, he’s not like dad. Don’t you see? You told me he was always coming back for you. Just like in the fairytales Mary Margaret told me when I was a baby.”

Oh no, not fair, using the fairytales he’s been fed on since he was a toddler. It’s been giving him impossibly high standards about love before he even knew what romantic love was (and even during his ‘love is icky’ phase), and Emma knows she doesn’t stand a chance against the book. The book is everything.

“I just want you to find your happy ending, mom.”

She wants that too. Henry is the best kid in the world, and she loves him to no end, but he will grow older sooner than she wants to admit – find a girlfriend, go to college, and then she’ll be alone in a too big, too quiet New York apartment like the spinster she is. Not the most thrilling prospect when one thinks about their future.

But Killian?

Really?

She’s certain she can find a hundred different (and logical) reasons as to why this is the opposite of a good idea. But then again – he wrote to her every month for three years, and was there for her when she was at her lowest, knows her flaws as well as her qualities, knows her better than herself sometimes. Well, he did, but who’s to say it no longer is the case? And he wants a family, told her so two days ago, far from the womanizer, no string attached, guy he used to be. And he’s got a good job, and he’s not a freak. Those are valuable qualities, these days.

(And the way he looks at her.)

(Her heart does that weird flip-flop in her chest every time she thinks about him, fighting against a blush like a schoolgirl with her first crush. And he’s handsome. And clever. And funny. And…) (Gosh, she really did repress those feelings for a really long time, didn’t she?)
Emma adverts her eyes, staring at the floor and nibbling on her bottom lip. This is a bad idea. But don’t they say that you’d better regret something you did than something you didn’t? And what about not regretting anything at all? It’s a possibility too, no matter how frightening the prospect is to her.

She looks back to Henry, mouth full of grilled cheese and crumbles all around his lips. He raises an eyebrow at her – a dare.

“Grab your coat.”

The kid cheers.
Here we are. The last one. Thanks to everyone for the kudos and comments. Means a lot!

He doesn’t know what to do with himself.

So he spends his whole Sunday watching Doctor Who on Netflix, just to think about something else – it works where drowning himself in his work failed, so there’s that. Still, every time he raises his head from the screen, it’s to look at the book, proudly on display on the shelf, and the sight of it throws him off the loop once more. He can’t believe it’s here, can’t believe it came back to him after all those years, waiting to be read, to be loved.

He looks at the book and he thinks about her, too.

It’s inevitable.

He didn’t think Emma Nolan could be any more beautiful, and yet she had surprised him. (She seems to do that a lot.) She’s grown into an even fiercer woman than she already was, with fire in her eyes and gold in her hair, and he hasn’t been able to get her out of his mind since the moment she entered his office and turned his world upside down.

Here goes nothing, he supposes.

He’s tried so hard to forget about her – almost succeeded, too, but she was always there, in a corner of his mind, impossible to erase. He’d refuse to go to Victor’s wedding knowing she would be there, had estranged himself from his group of friends in fear of ever running into her. Losing his friends had been the price he was willing to pay, less it cost him his sanity.

And it had worked (almost) until she burst into his life again with her smiles and her bad jokes and the bloody book. Now he feels like a young lad all over again, with his damn unrequited puppy love. No wonder Milah never wanted to take the next step with him – the ghost of Emma was always there, haunting him, reminder that he had never been enough while she was everything.

And now he’s watching Doctor Who and thinking about her like the fucking idiot he is – never learning from his mistakes, like a moth flying too close to a flame only to get burnt, over and over again.

Killian can’t even find it in himself to be upset at her for hoarding the book the way she did for the better part of a decade, and maybe that’s the pathetic part. He knows he should be pissed at her – especially since she’s one of the very few knowing of the importance of it. But he just can’t. Because every time he thinks about it, he imagines Emma in a bookstore, looking for that one book in particular. And then he’s smiling like an idiot – his swan, caring so much even when she doesn’t mean too. Maybe she never quite forgot him either, maybe he’s stayed in a little corner of her mind for all those years too.

That’s wishful thinking, though.
But – but she came back. Something happened that had her decide to come back and give him the book. He saw it in her eyes, the uncertainty, the questions, saw it all – can’t stop wondering about the how’s and the why’s. It’s a mystery, one he’d gladly decipher, if only she let him.

He thinks about Emma and he can barely function, leaving the officer later than usual that Monday with the hope than keeping himself busy for as long as possible with quiet his mind. It’s a failure, of course, and he paces his apartment as soon as he comes back home, not knowing what to do with himself.

(He could call Victor. He knows Ruby and Emma are still in touch, because the brunette keeps posting pictures of them and the lad on Facebook. It would be so easy, just a phone call – and then what? Call her? Ask for her address and drop by? He’s not that desperate.)

(At least, he thinks he isn’t.)

(He doesn’t know anymore.)

He’s a rightful mess, an Irish ball of anxiety and relationship issues, and he hates her for that – loves her, loves her, loves her. Loved her from the moment she barged into his life, with her graceless manners, wet hair sticking to her forehead and cheeks. He was a goner from the start – playing it cool like the cocky moron he was, ignoring the frantic beating of his heart every time they were in the same room and brushing off his feelings as lust, only to run halfway across the world when she kissed him. What an idiot.

He lets himself fall to his couch, ignores his phone on the coffee table whispering ‘use me’, and grabs one of the cushions to hold it tight against his chest. He closes his eyes with a loud sigh, trying (and failing) to get a grip. But no amount of focusing on his own breathing manages to calm his inner turmoil. Another night with David Tennant it will be, then. Killian sees no other alternative.

He reaches for his laptop while not standing up from his place on the couch, and so it doesn’t come as a surprise when the buzzer of his intercom startles him and he topples on the floor in a tangle of limbs and mortification.

Nursing his bruised arse (and ego), he walks towards the front door and grabs the intercom phone – did he order something? He doesn’t remember ordering something, but it could have happened without him noticing.

“Hello?”

He’s only replied by silence for long seconds. Stupid pranksters, they seem to do that a lot lately, even if Killian fails to see what’s so funny about jokes that were already old when he was a teenager.

And he’s about to give up and go back to his lovely evening with British time-travelling, when he hears a small and tentative, “Yeah. Hi. It’s me – Emma.”

His heart misses a beat, the pathetic sod.

She follows with an hesitant, “Killian?” and only then does he realise he’s been giving her the silent treatment too, and for longer than is appropriate. So he shakes his head – get a grip, mate! – and moves closer to the intercom, as if it had any influence over things to come.

“What are you doing here?”

Another silence stretches between them, long enough to have him wonder when exactly things got
so awkward, until a small voice chirps in. “Go on, tell him,” the lad says, and Killian almost imagine the way he nudges his mother in the ribs with his little elbow.

“You brought your son?” he finds himself asking, before she even has time to tell him… whatever she’s supposed to tell him. It seems rather unfair to use her lad in such ways, to hold him as a witness of what is about to unfold between them – especially since she was the one to run, and Killian still has no explanation as to why. “What am I supposed to do now?”

“Well, you could let us in? Maybe?”

That’s… a possibility, yes. Tucking the phone between his cheek and shoulder, he slightly turns around to look at his apartment. It is fairly tidy, as far as the place where a bachelor lives goes, and so he would feel no shame having visitors in. But it’s the reason as to why they’re visiting in the first place that worries him – and he knows she won’t tell him over the intercom, but doesn’t feel like being entrapped within four walls with her (and her son!) to find out.

“I don’t think he’s going to let us in,” Emma continues, sounding more distant, probably because she took a step back from the front door. The sound of New York muffles her voice, but he still hears her saying, “This is useless, let’s go.”

To which her son replies, “One more minute,” with so much hope in his voice Killian wants to bang his head against the wall.

He hears them talk to each other in half-whispers, oblivious to the fact he’s still listening, but can’t focus much on their words when the blood is rushing to his ears in an incessant and almost painful buzzing. Even more painful is his heart trying to dig a hole into his chest, one beat after the other, so fast it could almost frighten him – if only he was capable of formulating coherent thoughts.

But all his mind can focus on basically comes down to she’s here and she doesn’t mind me meeting her son and god that woman.

He comes back to his senses, eventually, blinking at the wall in front of him to stop the vertigo that overtook him. Only then does Killian realise Emma and her son have stop talking to each other. No, they’re counting instead – counting down to the moment they leave.

He stops listening at ten.

…

It’s only when he steps outside that Killian notices he isn’t wearing any shoes – ruining a pair of socks is a minor detail, really, when he’s busy frantically looking left and right after her golden hair in the dark of the night. She’s there, right around the corner with a tiny human by her side, and so Killian breaks into a jog as soon as his eyes settle on her.

He’s spent the last decade and some more letting her slip between his fingers. Not today.

No, today he grabs her by the elbow and holds her back. Emma’s eyes are wide when she turns around to face him, a blush high on her cheeks he hopes has little to do with the cold. He’d forgotten how vibrant her green eyes could be, almost, his memories not doing justice to their colour, their depth. Her mouth opens in an expression of surprise, even more so when he jumps right into the conversation with, “Why now?”
Emma nibbles on her bottom lip as she glances at her son – he replies with a simply and brief nod, but Killian easily guesses he isn’t privy of some kind of silent conversation they’re sharing in that simple exchange. When she looks back at him, it's with a frown, yet she replies. “Because I deserve to be happy.”

He shifts from one foot to the other.

His toes may be cold but his blood is on fire.

…

The lad – Henry, his name is – chats with him all the way up the stairs to the apartment while Emma follow them in silence. Killian glances at her over his shoulder once in a while, to which she always reply with a stiff smile, but is ultimately drawn by the never-ending monologue her son offers. It helps put the pieces together – she apparently told the lad of her younger years, even though Killian fails to understand why, or even how it would lead to the current situation. Not that it matters, come to think about it – she’s here, that’s what matters.

Henry makes a beeline for the couch the moment the door opens, but Emma is more reserved, as if not daring to impose. Killian feels self-conscious at the way she looks around her, forcing himself not to blush at the twitch of her lips when her eyes find the guitar in a corner, or the books on display on their shelf. It would feel comfortable and familiar were it not for the lingering tension between them, even more so with the way she sways her arms as if not knowing what to do with herself.

(Even more so with her son staring at them so intensely the hair stands at the nape of his neck.)

Some kind of painful silence stretches between them before he asks, “Tea?” in a too cheerful voice – more to give himself something to do than anything else, really, to keep his hands busy even if his mind won’t stop wandering. He doesn’t have juice or coke to offer, only has an old bottle of rum in the back of a cupboard so, in true British fashion, tea will have to do.

The lad replies a happy little “Yes!” and Emma nods her approval, so Killian offers her a sharp nod back before heading to the kitchen. He lets out a loud sigh as soon as he is out of their sight, pinching his nose and shaking his head when he realises he has no idea what he’s doing – or what he’s supposed to do, for all it matters.

Maybe spiking his tea would help.

The thought doesn’t sound half as bad, as he turns the kettle on and opens a cupboard to grab three mugs. He spends way too long wondering which tea Emma would like best, knowing fully well hot chocolate is her drink of predilection anyway so it bears little importance, and is finally reaching for the box of Earl Grey (the classics never hurt) when the door to the kitchen opens.

Tea infuser in one hand and box in the other, he turns around to face Emma, eyes going wider, heart beating faster at the sight of her. Get a grip, he thinks, but it proves to be as useless as advices go when she gives him a sheepish smile and leans against the door to close it softly.

“I can make you happy,” he finds himself saying before he can think better of it.

Her eyes go slightly wider, breath catching at the back of her throat. But she’s slipped through his fingers twice already, and damn him if he won’t make sure that the proverbial third time’s the
charm applies to them. So he moves closer, until she’s all but pinned between him and the door, transfixed in the way her tongue darts to wet her bottom lip, the black of her pupils swallowing the green.

“Let me make you happy, swan,” he goes on, not caring about the pleading edge in his voice.

She doesn’t reply.

Not in so many words, at least.

Before he has time to react, or even anticipate what she’s about to do, her hand is wrapped around the collar of his shirt and her mouth is pressed to his. Her lips are soft, her taste intoxicating, and he melts into her embrace, hand reaching to tangle in her hair, arm snaking around her waist to pull her to him. Henry turns on the telly in the other room and the kettle whistles behind him – none of this matter when Emma nibbles on his bottom lip and soothes it with a flick of her tongue, a groan escaping him before he can think better of it.

He isn’t sure how long the kiss lasts – it may be minutes or it may be hours, too lost in her to mind about such trivial details – but they’re both out of breath when it stops, looking at the other with wide eyes until a grin settles on his lips. He can’t help it, really, he smiles like an idiot as his hand falls to her hip, squeezing to hold her in place against her chest.

“That was…”

“Yeah,” she replies in a hushed whisper before giggling, the laugh tickling and magnificent to his ears. He steals another kiss just then, a quick peck of the lips, satisfied when her grin matches his. Until she grows serious again, a frown settling on her brows and, “Did you know Ruby and Victor had bets about us?”

He – no, actually he didn’t, and so he frowns too. “Is this what this is all about?”

“No.” A pause, and then, “Kinda.” She pouts, the sight so adorable he has to kiss her once more, and they get lost in the moment for long seconds. “You were always here for me, and everybody noticed and – god, I’ve been so blind, Killian, I…”

He cups her cheek with his hand then, tilting her head just so for them to look into each other’s eyes, Hers are soft, and he can only bite on his lip as everything finally dawns on him – her body pressed to his, her lips swollen with his kisses, looking at him the way he’s always dreamt. (Her son in the living room, watching the telly like he just belongs there.) He can barely believe his luck, doesn’t dare blinking for too long in fear of opening his eyes to an empty kitchen. But she’s there, all warmth and soft flesh and Emma.

“It’s okay, sweetheart. I’ve always been a patient man.”

A blush blossoms on her cheeks and down her neck as she looks away – it may be the loveliest sight he’s ever witnessed. But it’s her smile, bright and tentative and beautiful, that holds the truth – whatever may happen after tonight, they will be fine.

And it’s all that matters.

End Notes
Okay so for people who've seen the movie, we roughly have Neal as the mum (obvz), Graham as Summer and Killian as April, so the story will jump between the three but (once again, if you've seen the movie or basically looked at my other fics) you know which one will be endgame.
But the three of them will still be explored so you've been warned.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!