

Who Needs Shelter

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Who Needs Shelter

by [deemn](#)

Summary

Two years post-S2 Finale. Storybrooke has settled back into the routines of small town life and no one is really willing to shatter the illusion that everything is just fine.

Notes

Ma-RIIIIII-AAAAAA. Dearest Penguin: I originally promised you Bering & Wells. Then I said Henry-centric. This is what happened instead. I am telling myself that it is still Henry-centric because it is, but, also, gay on until morning. Happy birthday!

Changes to canon: Neal died as soon as he hit dirt in FTL. Stopping the failsafe involved infusing it with all the active magic in Storybrooke, but also, you know, our ladies combining magic and true love and sparkles. Also, I genuinely don't know why Regina walks almost everywhere in this fic, because she does have her car, but... that's how it is?

Chapter 1

The worst part is that she's almost sure this isn't the first time. They have a routine, worn in after a year: when Henry gets home from school, he goes straight up to his room and showers. He's taken to biking home because getting picked up by a mother is the height of uncool. And of course Emma sided with him, not with Regina.

Normally, when Henry tramps through the foyer with his suddenly-large feet, Regina stays in her study. Henry is an angel in the mornings—where he got that from, no one knows—but a hellion between three and five in the afternoon, when his slowly-stretching body demands sleep but his schedule demands activity. After three weeks of near constant arguing last September, she realized the best thing to do is leave him alone until about 5:15, when he inevitably comes down and asks “What's for dinner?” after hugging her tightly.

Two years later and she'll still gladly trade an hour of silence for a good hug.

Today, though, she managed to spill her afternoon chamomile all over her blouse, so when the front door slams shut, she's just starting down the stairs in a fresh shirt and is face to face with Henry as he sprints up them. “Hey, Mom,” he says quickly, voice hoarse, and tries to duck to her left.

She reaches out and blocks his path with her arm, waits while his shoulders slump. “Henry,” she starts, gently, and turns his face to her, “what happened?”

He tries to smile and his swollen lip spreads to reveal three cuts on the left side of his mouth. “Nothing, fell from my bike, no big deal.”

She looks at his shirt, his hands, his jeans. There are no other signs of a fall. “Henry.”

He looks her straight in eye—comes up to her nose, now, almost a foot taller than he'd been when everything fell apart and somehow it makes a difference, makes them *different*—and says, “I fell. From my bike.” He holds her gaze and his eyes—his lovely hazel eyes—are begging her to believe him.

She sighs, removes her hand from his cheek but grasps his wrist instead. “Your lip is split. If you fell, you probably have gravel and dirt in it. Come.”

He stays gratefully quiet while she dabs at the cuts with an alcohol wipe, pinching his eyes shut at the sting. While she digs up the vitamin E oil, he tells her the relevant parts of his day, the things that he'd normally say over dinner: essay on *The Odyssey* due next week, history teacher gave another pop quiz, he really hates biology because there aren't any consistent rules and they won't get to dissect anything until AP senior year so there's no point.

“What subject actually has consistent rules?” she challenges, and holds off his response by dabbing the oil on his lip. “Certainly not English.”

“Math.”

“Wait until you’re dealing with imaginary numbers.” He smiles, eyes bright, and the cuts turn red again. “Hold a cotton round to it until it stops bleeding, then reapply the oil, all right?”

It’s a luxury to kiss his forehead, smooth his hair back and not have to worry about being pushed away. “Thanks, Mom,” he murmurs, and hugs her again.

She leaves him to his shower and heads back into her study, stares at the phone for two full minutes before picking it up and making the call.

Henry is slightly surprised to see Emma standing at the island when he comes down, but shrugs and bumps her shoulder with his before getting a glass, stumbles past her to the fridge. “Hey, Ma. Staying for dinner? What’s for dinner?”

“She is,” Regina answers, “and pork chops.”

“Baked or fried?”

She rolls her eyes. “Fried.” Emma and Henry both pump a fist in victory, mirror images of each other. “But they’re lean chops, anyway. And you’re having salad, not rice.”

“Aww, Mom, come on.”

“Why am I being punished? I’m the guest!”

“Bad influence,” Regina retorts, and Henry snickers.

Emma scowls at him, returns to slicing the few vegetables she consistently agrees to eat: carrots, cucumbers, red bell peppers. “Keep laughing, kid, I’m not the one with high cholesterol.”

“It was *slightly* high. The doctor said *slightly* high,” he repeats, putting the orange juice back in the fridge.

“That paper said just plain high. And now we’re all suffering because you went on a Twinkie binge.”

“*They don’t make them anymore*, it was a honor binge of mourning.”

“You are entirely too upset about the demise of junk food capable of surviving nuclear war,” Regina observes mildly, putting the now-washed bowl of arugula down on the counter. His glass of juice is just a few inches past her hand, so she reaches out and grabs it, steals a sip.

“You never even had one,” and he swipes his juice back, “you can’t judge.”

“Of course I didn’t, you ate every one in the state of Maine. And a single binge wouldn’t give you high cholesterol, your eating habits in general were unhealthy. Get the green Pyrex from the fridge?”

Henry turns to the fridge and Emma meets her gaze, nods slightly. Regina feels her stomach twist up, tilts her head in Henry’s direction and then smiles for him when he hands her the glass container with the marinated chops and onions, turns away and lets the two of them chatter about the touch football game on Saturday morning, whether Leroy’s ankle is healed enough for him to play again.

She’s just gotten the oil hot and the first two chops in when Emma, quite casually, drawls, “So, the hell happened to your face?”

Leave it to Emma to approach with tact.

Regina puts the mesh screen over the top of the frying pan and turns to look at Henry, who’s gone very still. “That’s why you’re here?” he asks, and then looks at Regina. “You called her?”

A look from Emma reminds her that they’re *okay*, that she can be strong about this. So she merely crosses her arms and raises an eyebrow at him. “Your mother asked you a question, Henry.”

“I fell,” he repeats, voice lower and harder. “From my bike.”

She presses her lips together because she wants to say *bullshit* and she shouldn’t. She shouldn’t, because Emma does. “Bullshit, kid. Try again.”

“I fell—“

“No marks on your bike, no new scuffs on your shoes, your mom says your clothes looked fine. Your hands look fine, too. What, you didn’t try to brace your fall, just took it to the face like a man?”

Regina can’t help the sharp inhale and glare she shoots at Emma, because they’re working on not using crap concepts like *like a man*. Not with their boy.

“Sorry,” Emma grumbles, “like a fucking idiot. Better?”

Regina pinches the bridge of her nose, but Henry laughs, and that’s worth it. So she turns back to the stove, lifts the mesh and flips the chops. “Henry, we just... want you to tell us the truth. We won’t do anything—“

“Like hell we won’t,” Emma interrupts.

“—embarrassing, if that’s your concern,” and Regina glares at Emma briefly. “But if you’re in trouble, we need to know.”

It's easier for him to admit that he needs help when no one's looking at him, which is why Regina asked Emma to wait until she was cooking, why Emma's still facing the cutting board and not their child. Because they need him to tell them he needs them, and Henry hasn't been able to ask them for anything since the day they dragged him, unconscious, through the sugar-sweet water of Mermaid's Lagoon and out to the Jolly Roger.

"I fell," he repeats, and his voice is steady.

Emma doesn't make a sound, but Regina knows that she's holding in a sigh, too. "Okay," Emma says, and Regina hates when she sounds so sad. "But... if you *fall*, again. You'll tell us you fell?"

It's quiet for a moment, the only sound the snapping oil and fat from the pan. It isn't loud enough to cover the scritch in Henry's throat, the way his voice is ready to crack from emotion and not puberty. "I'll tell you," he agrees.

It's something, even if it's awful. "Set the table, please, sweetheart," Regina manages to get out while switching the chops out for the next two. "Extra napkins for your slob of a mother."

"*Hey!*"

Emma's dozing on the couch in the living room by the time Regina comes in with Tupperware of leftovers and a mug of coffee. "I'm sorry my call woke you," she murmurs, puts the coffee directly in Emma's hand and leaves the Tupperware on the end table. "I thought he'd tell *you* the truth, at least—"

"No, no, it was the right call, I'm glad you called," Emma says quickly, sitting up to take a sip. "God—this is—you're sure you don't want to run a coffee shop?"

Regina cocks an eyebrow, settles into the armchair by the doorway. "Serving the peasantry *en masse*? Miss Swan."

Emma grins, winks at her. "How bout just for the Sheriff's station?"

"Serving the peasantry in close quarters? Miss Swan." But she smiles back, tucks her feet under her and savors the moment of not needing to put on a show. "If you'd moved with your parents, you could have stopped here before work regularly."

"Weren't you the one who pointed out that being over thirty and living with my fairytale parents was possibly the worst option when it came to establishing my independence?"

She chuckles, tugs her sweater's sleeves down from her elbows and wraps her fingers in the cuffs. "I said nothing about *your* independence. I was concerned about *Henry's*."

“Mmm, no, the only thing you said about Henry was *if Snow White gets to interfere with my parenting on a regular basis, I will destroy—*“

“*Silence*, Miss Swan,” Regina interrupts, because Emma’s impression of her is terrible. She never sounds so shrill.

Emma just laughs, leans back and sits the mug against her collarbones, closes her eyes to inhale the aroma and steam. “So,” she says after a few moments. “I was thinking I’d take the patrol car around when school lets out, do a drive by for a couple of days, see what’s what.”

Regina frowns, picks at a piece of fuzz on her thigh. “Starting when? You’re on nights until next rotation.”

“Starting tomorrow,” Emma says slowly, as if it should be obvious.

“School lets out in the middle of the afternoon.”

“Yes, it does.”

“You’re *sleeping*.”

“I can *wake up*.”

Regina closes her eyes, can’t help but smile a little. “It would be one thing if you were actually on duty, Emma, but Henry knows your schedule. You show up in the squad car any time before Tuesday and he’ll know you’re watching him.”

“So he knows.”

“Emma.”

Emma’s nostrils flare with frustration, but she just rolls her eyes and looks away, sulks for a moment. “Okay. You’re not cool with that idea. What do you suggest?”

“I think the idea of the patrol car is a good one, but you shouldn’t be the one to do it, is all,” Regina says softly, waits for Emma to give that reluctant, pacified shrug. “Who’s on days?”

“Mulan.” Of course Mulan isn’t the only one, but they both know that of the five deputies, Mulan’s the only relevant name.

“I’d trust her to observe. And to indulge us. Wouldn’t you?”

And she’s got Emma there, because Emma would trust Mulan with Henry’s life if push came to shove. Mere observation is a no brainer, and Mulan is perhaps the one person who understands how small acts of protection make a huge difference.

“To be honest,” Emma starts slowly, “I thought you’d want to be more hands-on. You know, watch in your magic mirror, hex the little shits into next Sunday, the basics.”

Anyone but Emma saying that—anyone but Emma drawling casually about *magic*—Regina smiles and can only smile because it's Emma. "Mmm. I haven't whipped up any poisoned apples in a while, maybe you're on to something."

Emma snickers into the mug, shakes her head. "*Cursed* apples. Keep talking about poison and I'll have to actually be a sheriff."

"Heaven forbid," she teases, glances at the grandfather clock on the north wall when it marks the half-hour. "So you'll ask her?"

"Yeah. I'll ask her." Emma leans her head back on the couch, sighs. "I know you're right. I do. It's better if it's not us, but—he's *our kid*, Regina. It should be us."

Two years on and it doesn't sting as much, but talking to Emma about trusting other people with Henry still smarts, still makes her stomach churn. "We've had to rely on other people before. At least this time it's someone... honorable."

Emma closes her eyes again, and if it wasn't for the slight movement of her nostrils, Regina would think she was showing grief. She doesn't think she could stomach Emma grieving over Hook. "At least there's that," Emma finally agrees, and drains the last of the coffee. "I should get to work. Thanks for dinner, and for my breakfast," she adds, picking up the Tupperware.

"Save that for tomorrow night."

"I have food at home."

"Peanut butter and jelly is not *food*, Miss Swan." Emma's sheepish grin says everything. Regina sighs heavily, shakes her head. "I'm serious. You do need to eat better."

"Says the woman who dips everything in grease and butter."

"Keep complaining and you'll never get leftovers again."

Emma opens her mouth to protest and shuts it again. It doesn't last long, though; she has to stop at the door to try to get the last word. "I'm not a slob, you know."

"Two hours and one tablecloth later."

"I'm not! I just get... things get messy when I'm eating your—"

Regina actually turns around to look Emma dead in the face, because there's no way she thought about that before she said it. Sure enough, she's blushing furiously and making that pinched-mouth face like she's praying Regina didn't hear it.

"Food! The end of that sentence was *food!*"

Regina smirks.

"Oh, shut up," Emma grumbles, and stomps out of the house.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

She's entirely content to sit in silence until Henry returns, but Emma—as usual—only lasts about three minutes. “You know, one of my favorite memories of Henry,” Emma starts, and Regina bites her tongue in preparation, “is watching you carry him up to bed that first night back.”

Henry closes the front door quietly on Tuesday, although he locked his bike up in full view of the windows so Regina knows he isn't trying to hide. He knocks on the study door three times and she bites her lip so she won't cry. “Come in,” she calls, and sets aside the revisions she's marking on the township code.

His eye is bruised and darkening, cheekbone swelling, and there's a red slash cutting across his left eyebrow. It's sick: her first conscious thought is that he'll match Emma. There are smaller scrapes on his forearms, smears of dirt on his pants and the shoulders of his shirt, a thin trail of dried blood directly below the eyebrow cut.

He lowers himself to the couch stiffly, and she has to hide her hands in her lap because they're shaking. “I fell again,” he rasps.

She chokes on a sob, then shakes her head, tries to pull herself together. “I'm going to call Emma,” she tells him, standing up, “and get the first aid kit.”

He shakes his head, winces. “I texted her already.”

“She's sleeping, she won't see it.”

“Don't wake her up, Mom.”

“Henry.”

“Don't wake her up, she—“

“*Henry*,” she says again, and he looks at her shaking, clenched fists, then looks away, tries to clear his throat. He won't ask for anything and it's going to break him. “I'll get you some water, too,” she whispers, and lets her fingertips brush the back of his neck on her way out the door.

Emma answers on the third ring with a gruff, “R'g'a” that she supposes is meant to be her name. “Hen?”

“He has a black eye. He’s moving stiffly.” She fills a glass with cold water from the fridge and pulls out one of the small ice packs she used to put in his lunchbox. “He’s cut on his eyebrow. Just like you.”

She can hear exactly how Emma jolts to alertness, pushes up off the bed and sits up. The tell-tale jingle of her service belt—cuffs, keys, that ridiculous buckle—signals her pulling on her pants. “Check his ribs for bruising. Did he black out?”

“I don’t know.”

“Ask him. Don’t worry about patching him up too good, we’re taking him straight to the hospital. Is there a lot of blood? How deep is the cut?”

“No. I don’t know.”

She hears Emma pause in the clothing shuffle. “Regina. Keep it together, okay? Just for an hour. Just until he gets checked out by the doc. Just keep it together for an hour for me, okay?”

“I’m okay,” she lies, and picks up the kitchen kit from the shelf above the sink. “Just... get here.”

“On my way.”

In the study, Henry’s got his head back and eyes closed and he looks so much like Emma but so much like her baby boy—he *is* her baby boy and people are hurting him and wasn’t this the point of magic? So no one could ever hurt *hers* again?

She puts the glass in his hand and curls his fingers around it, squeezes tightly before letting go to sit on the coffee table in front of him. “We’re going to take you to the ER,” she says—calmly, far calmer than she feels. “Did you lose consciousness?”

“No,” he says, takes a sip of water.

“Emma wants me to check your ribs.”

“Just a few punches.” And then he looks stricken, covers his mouth with his free hand. “I mean—“

She just looks at him, touches his cheek. “Baby, it’s okay.” *Just talk to me*, she wants to beg, wants to cry.

He covers her hand with his, closes his eyes again. “I mean,” he starts again, “I didn’t fall hard.”

Her throat closes up, but she just nods, takes her hand back. “Can I check them anyway?” Without answering, he lifts the hem of his t-shirt up to his sternum. There’s three small reddening marks to the right of his navel, but nothing else that she can see. The few scraggly hairs he’d been mortified by a year ago have settled into a small but consistent patch of down in the center of his chest. She remembers when his stomach used to curve out from the rest

of his body, when a precious layer of fat covered every bone. “All right. Let’s clean that cut, yes?”

It isn’t deep, just ugly and wide, so she takes her time with it, pauses to hold the ice pack to his cheekbone in one minute intervals. By the time she’s done—three antiseptic wipes later—Emma’s turning her key in the front door and stomping into the room. She’s silent and scowling while she takes Henry’s chin in her hand, turns his face from side to side. “How’re the ribs?” is her first question.

“Three marks,” Regina tells her.

“Consciousness?”

“I didn’t black out,” Henry mumbles. His voice is so small.

“Good to walk to the car or do you want my help?”

“I can walk,” he says, and no one is surprised.

“Come on, then,” Emma says, but helps him stand up anyway.

They want to do a CT scan at the hospital so while Henry changes into a gown, Emma steps away to call Mulan and get some answers. He opens the curtain and the nurse beats Regina into the bay, hustling him into a wheelchair and heading for the open corridor immediately. His face is pinched and pale and Regina reaches out, blocks the nurse’s path and squats in front of the chair, holds and squeezes Henry’s hands. “It’ll be fine, sweetheart. Just a quick pass, and it’s a lot more open than the MRI machine.”

“That’s the really big one, right?”

“Right. Big and claustrophobic. This one’s a lot better.” Henry nods, expression relaxing just slightly, and the nurse clears her throat.

Regina stands and lets them head toward the imaging lab, glances back towards Emma who is still speaking in a low and furious tone into her phone. It’s impossible to make out what Emma says; part of her doesn’t want to know. Doesn’t want to know if they got him in the school yard or on one of the back streets or if Mulan missed it entirely or was a minute too late or left too early—

Fingertips against the small of her back make her jump and turn to see Emma and her indelible frown. “He got on his bike and made it to Carnavorn Street in one piece. No one followed him. That’s all she knows.”

“What does that mean?” she whispers.

Emma's hand slides towards her hip and then leaves her body entirely. She feels dizzy without it. "If they didn't follow, they were waiting up ahead. Ambush." She closes her eyes and feels the hand on her back, again, pushing lightly. "Come sit. They'll bring him back here when it's done."

The chairs outside of the ER bay are turmeric colored and cheap plastic with sharp corners and thin, uneven metal legs. She sits because Emma tells her to, doesn't comment on the chairs even though Emma winces when she sits, shifts her back away from the straight sharp edge of the chair back. "How's your back?" Regina asks, hears her voice hollow and coarse and tries to clear her throat.

"Irrelevant," Emma answers, but shoots a small smile of acknowledgment. "Not bad. Had heat therapy this morning."

"That's good."

She's entirely content to sit in silence until Henry returns, but Emma—as usual—only lasts about three minutes. "You know, one of my favorite memories of Henry," Emma starts, and Regina bites her tongue in preparation, "is watching you carry him up to bed that first night back."

Completely thrown, Regina stares at Emma. She remembers that first night—neither of them will ever forget—remembers struggling up the stairs with a then-twelve Henry, how tight his arms were around her neck and how his legs dangled from where she had him braced on her hip. Entirely too big to be carried but she wouldn't wake him up and couldn't let him go. "He was fast asleep, Emma. Practically unconscious and exhausted."

Emma nods, stretches her legs out in front of her. "Yeah."

It doesn't make sense. "How could that be your favorite memory? Out of everything—"

That peculiar, particularly enigmatic Emma Swan smile curls across those pink, pink lips; Regina tries to look away but can't. "Because everything about his whole body said he knew he was safe. You were holding him and he knew he was safe, even asleep."

Emma would. Emma *would*. She shakes her head, turns away. "Don't."

"This isn't your fault, Regina," Emma murmurs, taking Regina's hand

"You know why this is happening to him."

"No, we *don't* know," she retorts, bringing her crossed ankles underneath her chair and frowning hard.

"Emma."

"Maybe some baby delinquent is trying to get back at me."

"Emma."

“Maybe Henry stole somebody’s girl.”

“*Emma.*”

“Maybe somebody’s a homophobic little shit.”

“What?” Regina stutters, and pulls her hand back. “Henry said he’s gay?”

Emma snorts. “I don’t fucking know. Not the fucking point. He has two *moms*, Regina. Kids get beat up for less.”

“But—we’re not—everyone knows—“

“Nobody knows anything,” Emma counters. “All it takes is one misunderstanding.”

“Everyone knows who his mothers *are*, Emma. What’s more likely, going after him because he has two mothers who are polar opposites and *not* in a relationship or because one of his mothers ruined everyone else’s life?”

Emma scowls, clenches her fist. “And the other one fixed everyone’s fucking life so really, slate’s clear.”

Regina laughs, hollow and cold. “The slate is *never* clear,” she sighs. “You know that better than anyone.”

Emma slumps in her chair, looks up at the ceiling. “We need to get a name out of him.”

“You know he won’t.”

“I need you to back me up. Like, code blue backup.”

Regina wants to roll her eyes, because she’s pretty sure even Emma doesn’t know what that dumb phrase actually means, but they keep using it anyway. “I will—you know I will, I always do—but it won’t get us anywhere except further away from him.”

“Doing it his way got him bruised up and sliced.” The tension in Emma’s jaw finishes the sentence: *that’s not happening again*. Except they keep saying that. Keep swearing he’ll never get hurt again.

Regina slowly reaches for Emma’s clenched fist, puts her fingertips on the strong, pale knuckle points. “We could give him another way.”

Emma looks at their hands, then at Regina’s face. “My way or your way?”

“Yours,” Regina whispers.

“Fuck,” Emma says, and closes her eyes.

Even though Emma's off for the next two days, they all agree that Henry will stay at the house; no one pretends that his room in Emma's apartment is nearly as plush as his room at the house. Emma comes over at the very last hour of her shift on Wednesday and drives him to school, comes back and grabs the toolkit from the garage. She does a round of quick fixes for the outside of the house and then the basement and laundry room, taking a break when Regina sets a plate of silver dollar pancakes and scrambled eggs next to a mug of milky coffee at the island seat that is maybe, kind of, labelled "Emma."

Regina starts to wonder if maybe the homophobic little shit idea is so impossible.

She has to pick Henry up from school because Emma falls asleep on the study couch around two and refuses to budge when Regina tries to nudge her awake. "Two legs and car keys, you go," she grumbles, and pulls a pillow over her face. Technically, it's the middle of her night, but she's transitioning to the day schedule and Regina knows how rough that can get for her, how letting her sleep through the afternoon is the kindest thing Regina could do.

The thing is, if the homophobic little shit idea is wrong, Regina should never go near Henry's school again.

But she parks across the street from the high school and sends him a text so he'll look for the Benz, watches the finally-aging teenagers swarm out of the building when the doors open at 2:45. Henry isn't the first or the last but solidly in the middle, chatting to two shorter classmates that Regina only vaguely recognizes. Emma probably knows their names; Henry only has friends over when he's at the apartment.

If they're friends. Friends wouldn't let him get hurt, would they? They're smaller kids, though, and the boy is particularly thin. The girl has strong shoulders and the way she walks reminds Regina of Emma, a little; half-posturing, half-defense.

Ava. That's the girl's name. Ava, and her brother Nicholas. Sometime-friends, then.

Henry pauses outside the schoolyard gate, scans the street twice before he sees the car, and his face brightens just enough to make the ugly, nauseating burning between Regina's lungs ease, just slightly. After a half-beat hesitation—probably to say goodbye—he jogs across the street, thumbs hooked into his backpack straps. "Hey, Mom," he says as soon as he plops into the passenger seat, leaning over to kiss her cheek.

"You didn't look before crossing the street."

"Mom," Henry groans, and she smiles, holds her hand against his cheek for just a second. The bandage over his eyebrow looks fresh; he'd gone to the nurse, then. "I could see."

"Still." And then she relents, starts the car again. "How was your day?"

Henry laughs, and hope bubbles up underneath that burning. "Grandma tried to ask me if you'd hit me, but I stopped her by telling her all about how we all went to fight a dragon last night and I totally got this from dodging its tail and colliding with Ma's elbow instead."

She bites her tongue, reminds herself that Snow White is Henry's beloved grandmother and Emma has been nothing but deferential to her own wishes for the past two years. It's too long to be silent, though; Henry puts his hand over hers on the gear shift, stops her from shifting into drive. "As in, *I* know she's ridiculous, and Ma knows she's ridiculous, so screw it."

"*Language.*" But she smiles for him, because this—this moment of *you're my mom*—is a precious, precious gift. He doesn't quite smile back, distracted by something out the window, and Regina turns to follow his gaze. All she sees is Nicholas, talking to two older-looking boys with lacrosse sticks. "Did Nicholas join lacrosse?"

He shakes his head. "No. Guess they're just friends." Something about his tone—hollow, shaky—makes her want to push, but he interrupts before she can get a word out. "Did Ma come back to the house after she dropped me off?"

She nods, shifts into drive and steers out of the parking spot carefully. "Yes. And she's asleep on the couch, by the way, so quiet when we go in."

After dinner, they push the couches to the periphery of the living room and set up a few piles of cushions and throw pillows. Henry helps without asking questions after just one sideways look at Emma and the too-tight, too-tense set to her jaw.

Barefoot and in the cut-off sweats she keeps stashed in the guest bedroom, Emma bounces on the balls of her feet, shakes out her shoulders and cracks her neck. Henry takes two quick steps back, towards the door, and Regina *hurts*, but Emma smiles widely. "Good, we can skip lesson one, then."

"You will skip *nothing*," Regina cuts in, and Emma just sticks out her tongue.

"Lesson one: you see a fight coming, get the hell out of there."

Henry looks between the two of them slowly, lingering on Regina for a beat longer before returning to Emma. "You're teaching me to fight," he stutters out, and looks to Regina once more.

Emma stays silent, and Regina is grateful for the chance to smile at their slowly-breaking boy, smile and nod. "We flipped for it," she says calmly, "and then your mother reminded me of the time she had me pinned in under a minute."

Henry gapes, and looks back to Emma. "You guys *fought*?"

"Chainsaw days," Emma shrugs, and Regina scowls. "Long gone. Now, come on, lesson two. If you have to fight, find a good place to stand. What makes a good place?"

Henry's just beginning to light up with energy, and he looks around the room carefully. "Exit access?"

Emma smiles, quick and bright, and when Henry smiles back with the same sideways tilt to his mouth, Regina feels her heart open and open and open.

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

He opens his mouth to explain but the door to the office swings open. “Emma.” Snow clears her throat loudly. “Regina. I didn’t expect to see you.”

She can feel Henry tense up and sees how Emma shifts her body just slightly, squaring off against her mother. “You asked to see his mother,” Emma replies. “I brought her.”

“Ms. Mills?”

“Yes, who is this?” she demands.

“This is Sandra, at Storybrooke Secondary—“

She wants to vomit. “Is it Henry? What happened?”

Whoever this Sandra is sighs, clears her throat. “There’s been an altercation. The principal is requesting a meeting with his mother and that he be picked up.”

His mother. Regina closes her eyes, tries to pay attention. “What do you mean, altercation? Is he—“

“The Sheriff requested that I tell you she’s on her way to pick you up. Good day, Ms. Mills.”

The dull click and silence that follows is enough to send her into a rage, and she almost throws her phone against the wall but stops mid-motion, feels something in her shoulder grinding against the socket at the unnatural halt. The cruiser is outside and honking, and Regina bites her tongue, heads towards the front door and grabs her coat.

As soon as she closes the passenger door, Emma steps on the gas and rockets them down the street. “I’m sorry,” she starts with, and Regina looks up from fumbling with the seatbelt, confused. “I left my cell at the apartment and these fuckers, they’re fucking idiots, apparently all this happened two hours ago but I was stuck on that webinar with Portland PD and they assumed that having you down as primary emergency contact was a mistake, some shit about not updating records, so they left me messages for two hours and then finally called the station again. I chewed that Sandra bitch the fuck out for not calling you when—“

Regina reaches out and puts a hand over Emma’s, tries not to pay attention to how her fingers fit so well between Emma’s raised knuckles. “*You* don’t owe me any apologies. Do you know what happened?”

Emma’s grip on the steering wheel tightens momentarily, then loosens, and she spreads her fingers out to take Regina’s between them properly. “A fight,” she sighs, and takes the left

turn quickly, letting the steering wheel spin through her stationary right hand. “Actual fist fight.”

“Is he all right?”

“They said they had the nurse look at him.”

“Two hours ago.”

“Two hours ago,” Emma repeats grimly, and guns it through a yellow light.

They don’t speak until they’ve parked in the fire zone in front of the school and gotten out of the car; Regina tugs on the sleeve of Emma’s uniform jacket, makes her turn to look her in the eye. “We’ll deal with their... ineptitude about contact procedures later, okay? Right now isn’t the time.”

Emma nods, doesn’t even try to act indignant. “Yeah. I know.”

Inside, Henry’s sitting on a plastic chair outside of the principal’s office with a smear of dried blood on his shirt, and Regina can’t help the sound that comes out of her mouth, the way she kneels in front of him with trembling hands and inspects every inch of him that she can.

“It’s not mine,” he tells her softly, and when she looks up at his face, he’s looking over at Emma and his mouth is making that funny shape, that *I’m not smiling* shape. “I’m fine.”

“Henry,” she hisses sternly, and pinches his knee. “This is not—“

“First blood?” Emma interrupts softly, and when Henry nods she offers him a fist bump. “Atta boy.”

Regina closes her eyes, rests her forehead on her son’s knee for a moment. “Tell us what happened.”

He opens his mouth to explain but the door to the office swings open. “Emma.” Snow clears her throat loudly. “Regina. I didn’t expect to see you.”

She can feel Henry tense up and sees how Emma shifts her body just slightly, squaring off against her mother. “You asked to see his mother,” Emma replies. “I brought her.”

With a squeeze to Henry’s hand—blood crusted on the heels of his palms—Regina gets to her feet, watches Snow White fold her lips and cross her arms in clear displeasure. “Come in, then,” Snow finally says, and steps aside to let both of them into the office.

Emma hesitates, gives Henry one last glance and a touch to the shoulder before looking back at Regina and nodding. Only then does she step into the office, and for a moment Regina is frozen, just wondering, until finally Henry nudges her and she follows Emma in.

Snow’s office is, of course, a pastel horror, with whimsical white wood furniture and more of the “rescued” decor that Mary Margaret had been so fond of. Emma doesn’t sit when Snow gestures to the mismatched visitors’ armchairs, but does pull one slightly back from the

desk. Regina takes the cue, sits confidently with her back against the uncushioned wood. She can feel Emma's hands behind her shoulder blades, focuses on the knobs of the three rings Emma wears and how they press into her flesh, uses that feeling to disperse the tension in her jaw and around her eyes. "Well, Snow?" she starts, and suppresses a smile when Snow White flinches.

It's the little triumphs that matter, because Snow always seems to have the winning hand in the end. "Henry punched John Dorman. That's how the fight started. John is now at home, nursing a nosebleed."

Very carefully, Regina pushes one shoulder back to press into Emma's hand as a warning. "Henry doesn't start fights," Emma says stonily, and Regina eases up the pressure.

"He did today."

"According to who?"

"Several student witnesses and Henry himself."

Their son's selective use of honesty is beginning to become an obstacle. "Why have you called us in, Snow White? We are all familiar with the school code and how no one approved the zero-tolerance policy in the last referendum, so any disciplinary action Henry faces is entirely at your discretion." She feels Emma's fingers press forward, blunted nails catching on her silk shirt.

"It is," Snow agrees. "I've called you in because we are all also familiar with Henry's... special situation."

She can't help it, then; her jaw snaps shut with a click and she's broadcasting anger loud and clear. Emma steps in, still pressing her fingers into Regina's back. "What does that mean, Mom? It was two years ago."

For a moment, Snow looks to have aged a decade; there is a peculiar weariness around her eyes, fatigue in the way her shoulders droop. "Look, you understand that I have to toe the line between being his principal and his grandmother." Regina zeroes in on the way Snow twists her pen around in her hands, chews at her lip between sentences. "The Dormans want him expelled, and I want him to start up counseling again."

"He does not want therapy," Regina says, clear and clipped, and the weight of Emma's whole hand is suddenly on her right shoulder, squeezing lightly.

"There have been... complaints, all afternoon, of Henry displaying unusual aggression towards other students over the past few weeks," Snow informs them.

"Only this afternoon?" Emma asks, and her thumb draws circles above the peak of Regina's shoulder blade. "Odd that they'd only come forward now."

Snow looks between Regina's shoulder and Emma's face, purses her lips. "Apparently, no one really thought anything of it until today." She shifts her weight, takes a step back to lean

against the filing cabinets behind her desk. “I think it’s clear that he does need anger management lessons. And you know that if you don’t voluntarily take him, I can mandate sessions.”

Regina’s anger is white-hot and so quick in its flare-up that she barely registers that Emma is speaking. “Do you know what made him throw the punch? What provoked him?”

“John said he and a few other boys were practicing jokes about magic for the talent show next week. I verified it; they are signed up to do a comedy act.”

“And what did Henry say?” Regina asks pointedly.

Snow looks at her for a long, quiet moment. “Nothing,” she answers. “Henry gave no details about anything that happened beyond admitting that he threw the first punch. I can’t say I’m surprised, because Henry barely talks anymore.”

“He talks plenty,” Emma mumbles distractedly, and Regina can’t help the single huff of laughter she releases. “So you’re gonna go with whatever this Dorman kid said, and you’re—what, you’re gonna expel your grandson?”

Snow frowns, and it looks so much like Henry’s own scowl that Regina has to look away. “No. Like I said, I have to toe the line between being a principal and being his grandmother.” There’s a long pause, and Regina can’t bring herself to look. “In school suspension for two weeks, including mandatory morning sessions with Dr. Hopper.”

“He doesn’t want to talk to Archie, Mom,” Emma says, and her voice trembles, and Regina reaches across her own body and covers Emma’s hand with hers. “We tried and tried and he *won’t do it*. You know this. You know we took him in, we sat with him, we waited outside, we brought him in for whole mornings—“

“Dr. Hopper will be instructed to pursue anger management counseling, not active therapy,” Snow interrupts, and the clinical bureaucratic tone to her words makes the plaintive way Emma was speaking hurt even more. “Henry’s been through a lot, and he’s still just a little boy. We have to do whatever we can—“

“Because forcing your will on an unsuspecting youth has worked out so well in the past,” Regina hisses, and rises from the chair.

“Regina—“

“Enough, Snow. You know full well that Henry would never—he wouldn’t even defend *himself*. You have to know that he’s been coming home hurt, attacked, and yet you’re standing there talking about *helping* him by—“

“I have to go with the facts I have as principal,” Snow says softly, and Regina scoffs.

“And you *always* have all the facts, don’t you?”

Snow’s chin wobbles for a moment, but her eyes are hard and her mouth sets quickly. “Perhaps not, but at least I do the right thing with what I’ve got.”

“Mom,” Emma warns, and steps forward, edges Regina towards the door with a hand to her elbow. “We’re done here.”

“You have nothing to say about Henry’s punishment?”

Emma sighs heavily, pushes her free hand through her hair. “Do whatever you want. We’re stuck doing damage control no matter what you choose.”

Outside the office, Henry is flexing his fingers, watching how the skin over his knuckles stretches and discolors with the movement. “So, Archie?” he asks, and Emma reaches out past Regina’s body, ruffles his hair.

Regina just looks at the bruises on his jaw, and how the not-quite-healed cut on his eyebrow is leaking red onto the bandage. “Molida for dinner?” she asks.

Emma says yes before Henry has even processed the question, and when Regina rolls her eyes, Henry laughs and laughs.

Anger management apparently consists of deep breathing exercises and mindless mantras of “I am not my rage.” Henry tells both of them about the first two days of ISS with eye-rolls punctuating almost every sentence. “I don’t even *have* rage, Mom,” he complains, and plops another serving of rice onto his plate.

“Jeez, kid, save some for the working stiff,” Emma grumbles, and takes the spoon from him.

“Save some for the *growing boy*, Sheriff,” Regina reminds her pointedly, but it is Henry’s third helping, and Emma said something about missing lunch. “I know you don’t, Henry.”

“Well—wait. I mean, do you? Have... rage?” Emma asks, spooning red beans over both her and Henry’s plates.

He scoffs, but then thinks about it. “I—I dunno. I don’t think so?”

“So every time you *fall*,” and Emma emphasizes it with an ugly sneer, “you don’t get mad? You don’t want to just... beat them down?”

This is so far off-script that Regina feels her throat tighten with that old, old panic, and she kicks Emma square in the ankle under the table. Emma doesn’t react, though, except to inhale sharply.

Henry glances over at Regina like he knows what’s going on, but chews quietly for a few minutes. “I’m mad before... before I fall,” he says. “I get pissed off—sorry, Mom—I get mad before anything actually happens.”

Emma's put her fork down and her left hand is twitching in the space between their place settings. Regina keeps her eyes on Emma's index finger, on the thin silver and black band that never shines. "Why?" Regina asks softly, looks up just in time to meet Emma's eyes.

Out of the corner of her eye, she can see Henry fidgeting, working out the words to tell the truth without telling the truth. "People say things," he mumbles.

They wait, and wait, looking at each other and not at their boy, their precious baby boy who needs them *so much*—they wait but that's all he gives them, and there's something in Emma's eyes that says *don't push*.

"Don't eat too much," Regina says softly, and finally looks at Henry again, manages to make a smile reach her eyes. "You have another lesson tonight."

"Arms up," Emma snaps, and Henry lifts his tired arms into his basic guard position. "You couldn't run, so now you fight. What's behind you?"

"Solid."

"Left side?"

"Solid."

"Right side?"

"Escape."

"Ahead?"

"Mark."

Emma circles him slowly, eyes scanning for *right* and *wrong*. She steps in behind him quickly, touches the middle of his back. "Too tense at the butt."

"Maaa," Henry squirms away from her, nose crinkled in embarrassment.

"Fine, strain a glute, come to PT with me every three days for the rest of your teenage life."

They might disagree about what Henry should learn and know about when, but Regina can't ever disagree with the way Emma lays out the stakes. Henry sighs, grumbles, resumes his position, and somehow meets Emma's approval.

She circles around to face him, smiles. "What's your weakness?"

"Size," he says, and sidesteps Emma's forward kick.

“Strength?”

“Surprise, speed.”

“Hit,” Emma commands, and holds up one hand with a punching pad strapped to it at roughly four inches above Henry’s eye line. He pulls back his arm and thrusts forward with an open hand, striking the midline of the pad with the heel of his palm, then returning to his basic position. “Again,” Emma orders, and again, and again.

This is how the lessons go: words and drills and words and drills until a drill turns into a spar until Henry is sweating and panting and Emma is winded and holding the small of her back and they are laughing and still trying to score hits and it doesn’t matter that they have matching scars on their eyebrows or that Emma is teaching him to fight so he can stop coming home with black eyes because this is all they have now—

They move on to block-and-hit combos, and Regina watches carefully for Emma’s small nod, rises from her chair in the corner and moves like she means to exit the room, then slips on a set of pads and circles around to Henry’s right. He’s focused on Emma until a blur of blue comes at him, and he shifts his stance and blocks all in one fluid motion, quick enough to bring a smile of approval to Emma’s face. “Good,” she says, almost shouts, and Regina winks at Henry, comes in with her left and holds up her right. He blocks and hits in sequence with his right, keeps his left up against Emma, and for a moment there’s something fierce and bright in his eyes, as foreign as his smile when they first found him on the island.

And then he is Henry again, and dodging her swing and ducking under her raised hand to tackle her back into a pile of cushions, tickling her before she can even begin to get the pads off her hands, and Emma rushes in and she thinks she’s about to get help except Emma pins her arms, still with the red pads on her hands, and it’s unfair but Henry is laughing, Emma is laughing, and isn’t laughter the point?

Didn’t they give up *everything* for laughter?

Emma stays after Henry goes to bed, sprawls out on the cushions still littered across the living room floor with her tank top rucked up to bare her stomach and a towel draped over her shoulders. “We should drink,” she mumbles when Regina re-enters the room. “We should drink a lot.”

“Should we?” Regina says carefully, and takes Emma’s hand, curls her rough fingers around the glass of water she brought in.

They look at each other in silence for a moment before Emma looks away, huffs, takes a few sips of water. “Maybe we should have stuck with the therapy thing.”

“We tried for almost a year, Emma. He wouldn’t—“

“I *know* that,” Emma says, and it’s half a howl, half a whimper. “I know that.”

Sometimes she forgets that this is so very brand new for Emma—that feeling so much for someone so dependent is a completely foreign sensation. “You were hard on him today,” Regina murmurs, and sinks to her knees next to Emma, sits back on her heels. “What are you thinking?”

It’s not accusatory, even though Emma’s first reaction is to tense and start to sit up. The muscles of her upper abdomen flex into stark relief, then soften and recede as she lays back again. “He gets mad at whatever they’re saying, and that makes him want to fight, and then he gets beat, and he doesn’t get mad at that part.” Regina waits and wishes she didn’t, because Emma chokes on a sob and tries to bury it in the water glass but fails miserably. “He doesn’t get mad that he’s getting hit, Regina. He doesn’t get mad that he’s getting hit.”

Slowly, slowly, she takes the glass from Emma’s hand, sets it to the side and reaches an arm around Emma’s shoulders. She hates how easily Emma curls into her side, how easily Emma shifts to muffle her cries in Regina’s lap, how easily her fingers take to undoing the loose ponytail Emma kept her hair in for Henry’s lessons. She won’t shush her, won’t tell her *it’s okay*, but holding her—after everything, holding her is nothing.

“We did it all wrong,” Emma finally whispers, fingers curling against the inseam of Regina’s yoga pants. “We did it all wrong. He’s broken and we can’t fix him because we broke everything that could help.” A particularly brutal thought hits her; her whole face clenches and reddens in a burst of pain that makes Regina’s lungs tighten and burn. “He wasn’t supposed to be like us,” she whispers, and Regina closes her eyes, stills her hand at Emma’s temple.

“Emma,” she says softly, and moves her fingertips to tuck a few strands of hair behind Emma’s ear. “Have hope.”

Emma opens her eyes, looks up at Regina in—shock? After everything, she’d thought they were done surprising each other. “But—there’s no *magic*,” Emma rasps, and her grip on Regina’s thigh tightens painfully.

“Silly girl,” Regina smiles. “There wasn’t for you, either.”

“He’s not supposed to be like me.”

“He has two parents who love him past all reason. He has two grandparents who spoil him rotten. No matter what he goes through now, he’ll never be like you, Emma. He’ll never be like me.”

Somehow, looking at Emma’s red-rimmed eyes and seeing the glittering dust of the diamond spilling out across the water of the Mermaid Lagoon, remembering how they’d shivered together with their baby boy in the abandoned captain’s cabin—it all makes her believe in beginning again. “He has true love without end,” she adds, runs the pad of her ring finger along the soft and creasing skin at the corner of Emma’s eye to stop the last traces of tears, “and true love is the most powerful magic of all.”

Later, she'll think it should have been her, should have started with her, but when Emma reaches up to cup her cheek, draws her down to press their lips together—softly, just a whisper of a kiss—she surrenders to it with a small sweet sigh and a smile.

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Henry chooses that moment to look up, and when the half of his mouth visible around the white plastic quirks just slightly, Regina has half a mind to beat him herself. “In my defense—I never told him to pick fights with baby grizzly bears and you know that,” Emma whispers, “so don’t you even start with the ‘your son’ shit.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

When Sandra at the front desk calls the next time, Regina is handing in her latest notes for the next council meeting and talking her way out of the now-routine lunch invitation from Kathryn. “It’s probably not a good idea,” she says, the same line as every previous week, and Kathryn gives her the same sad smile.

“We’ll never know if we don’t try, will we?” she tries, and it almost hurts, how earnestly Kathryn is seeking to forgive her.

“Kathryn,” Regina sighs just as her phone begins to buzz. She manages to look at the screen of her phone before Kathryn can add another plea, and frowns deeply, swipes to answer. “Regina Mills,” she says clearly, and holds her breath.

“Ms. Mills, this is Sandra from Storybrooke Secondary School. The principal is requesting that either you or the Sheriff come in for an immediate disciplinary meeting.”

“Is my son all right?” she demands, getting to her feet, and Kathryn rises with her, face showing the alarm Regina feels pulsing in her fingertips. “Is Henry all right?”

Sandra huffs. “Ms. Mills, the Sheriff made clear that I was to inform you of any requests from the administration, but she said nothing about informing you of the physical state of her son.”

“*Our* son,” Regina spits, and has to fight to keep her anger down below her lungs. “Is he hurt?”

“Good day, Ms. Mills.”

She stares at the phone for a moment before looking up at Kathryn, holding both of their coats over one arm and car keys in the other hand. “I’ll give you a ride,” she says quietly. “Why don’t you call Emma?”

Emma says she'll meet them at the school and pulls up with lights going, parks in the fire zone again but completely crooked. She leaves the lights flashing and manages to give Kathryn a smile before breaking every rule they've ever had and pulling Regina into a hug right away. "Bruised, that's all they said, okay? Bruised. Conscious and bruised."

She pushes at Emma's shoulders, takes two steps back and pulls all her wild pieces back in to herself. "Thank you for the ride, Kathryn," she murmurs, and turns towards the row of doors leading into the building.

"If you need anything else," Kathryn starts, and Regina can't help but turn, can't help but meet clear and compassionate eyes, "I'm here."

She has to turn away, forces Emma to say *thank you* on her behalf—and that's too much, because who is Emma to say anything for her—because Henry is bruised, Henry is bruised, and whose fault is that?

They pause outside the main office; Emma's fingertips graze her elbow but don't linger. "Jesus," Emma whispers. "Is that the kid?"

Henry sits with an icepack covering half of his face, slumped in the same chair as the last time, but across the office is a behemoth of a boy in a lacrosse sweatshirt with a swelling, purpling eye and a dark stain under his nose. Lacrosse boy is at least twice Henry's size, probably older by at least three years, golden-haired and golden-skinned except for the clear strike marks on his face and neck. Regina doesn't need to look closely to know they are just the size and shape of Henry's palm-heels.

"He's *enormous*," Regina whispers back, and the backs of their hands touch just long enough.

Henry chooses that moment to look up, and when the half of his mouth visible around the white plastic quirks just slightly, Regina has half a mind to beat him herself.

"In my defense—I never told him to pick fights with baby grizzly bears and you *know* that," Emma whispers, "so don't you even start with the 'your son' shit."

"Sheriff?" The door to the office swings open and the Abominable Sandra gestures towards Snow's office. "She's waiting for you."

Just like last time, they pause in front of Henry, and he avoids Regina's eyes like he's ten and keeping secrets again. "Hi," he mumbles.

Regina reaches out and lifts the ice pack from his face, bites her tongue to hold in the gasp. Emma doesn't, and their fingers probe the mottled flesh on his cheekbone and jaw in tandem. Henry hisses but doesn't pull away, and after a moment Emma leans over him and kisses his hair, holds him against her.

Behind them, there is a slight commotion, and Regina looks over her shoulder to see a equally stocky man and woman fussing over the Lacrosse Giant and shooting dark glares in their direction. Emma clears her throat and gives Regina an unmistakable look, opens the door to Snow's office and waits for Regina to lay a hand on the back of Henry's neck and

guide him into the office, away from the anger and judgment. For one brief, bright moment, Emma lays her hand on top of Regina's, fingers lacing together to shepherd their boy into a chair, and then the door closes behind them.

The drive to the house is silent; Emma hasn't said a word since they left the school. Snow mandated a month of ISS and anger management. A month means that Henry will need to go to summer school to make up the missed classes. A month means thirty days in which he'll come home tense and exhausted and he'll sleep fitfully and wake up stressed out and defensive.

Regina wants to just close her eyes and go to sleep and wake up—some other time. Some other place. Where Henry is safe and universally loved and won't ever need to know how to strike at the soft parts of the face and body.

Emma parks the cruiser and comes inside with them. Confused, Henry hovers in the foyer, tries to figure out if he's supposed to stay or go, but when Emma heads straight into the study, Regina nods for him to go. "Go put the ice pack in the freezer, first, then go wash up, all right?"

He nods, starts towards the kitchen, then turns around and wraps his arms around her waist, hugs her hard. "I'm sorry, Mom. I didn't—I never meant to disappoint you guys."

Everything *hurts*. "Oh, sweetheart," she sighs, and kisses his hair. "No, I know. It's a difficult situation, and you're doing the best you can. We all are." She wants to say *you didn't, you didn't*, but the truth is that he has—just not in any way she knows how to explain.

When he is upstairs and she can hear the bath running, she follows Emma's path into the study, closes the door softly. "Is it too early for a drink?" Emma asks. Her voice is raspy, rough; she's sitting hunched over with her back to the door, using her hair like a curtain.

"Depends on what you plan on drinking," Regina says quietly, and comes around the couch, sits on the coffee table facing Emma. She wants to put out a hand, lift Emma's chin, but—not yet. Not yet.

"Well, I dunno. What's the appropriate drink for 'Congratulations, you dumb fuck, your son's a carbon copy of you'?"

If this is self-pity—there's no room for that, and Regina's hands grip the edge of the table tightly to rein in the flash of irritation. "Is he?" is all she says.

Emma barks out a laugh, and lifts her head, and the look on her face—Regina deflates. This isn't self-pity. This isn't self-pity at all. "Teach him to *defend* himself, and he goes and picksa fight with the biggest fucking kid in the school? Yeah, Regina, that's classic Emma Swan right there."

For a moment, she's without words. "I thought it was more patented Mills," she finally says, and tries to smile. "After all, he *won*."

Emma's conflicted expression breaks, just for a moment, into a smile, and that's the trick; the snapping tension between them dissolves. "C'mere?" Emma asks, and Regina lets herself be pulled into Emma's lap, hums quietly when she feels Emma exhale into the curve of her neck. "Thank you for... handling everything. I should have been more... I dunno, present? But I just... I should've been there for him. So thank you."

She sighs, lifts her palm to Emma's cheek briefly. "He said he's sorry for disappointing us."

"Fuck."

It's the most appropriate reaction to the idea. "I don't know what we're supposed to do now."

"We can still do your way." At Regina's questioning sound, Emma tilts her head back, tries to smile. "Manipulation and blackmail."

"Of *children*?"

"Of their parents," Emma corrects, but even as she says it, she seems to realize how many obstacles stand in the way of that plan. They don't know who all the kids are, and now that Henry's gone on the offensive they're at a disadvantage, and getting enough material on so many people will take time that he doesn't have.

"Your way was always the only way," Regina murmurs, and kisses the very corner of Emma's mouth. "Maybe—maybe it will work out. He was smart about this, at least."

"How do you figure?"

"He went for the largest target, brought him down in front of all the other kids." Before she gets the next sentence out, she's realizing what other questions they have to find the answers to. "He... made himself the alpha?" she questions softly, and meets Emma's slowly-understanding gaze. "Has he been talking to Ruby?"

Emma furrows her brow to think. "Maybe? They chat when we're at the diner. But I don't think—nah, Ruby wouldn't give him advice like that without talking to us about it."

That's true, or true enough; Regina lets her weight sag against Emma's upper body, forces them to rest against the back of the couch. "Maybe he figured it out on his own, then."

"Hell of a thing to just *figure out*."

"He's a hell of a boy." They're silent, because Henry is and has always been extraordinary in so many ways, but not this way, never this way. "What happens next?" Regina asks softly, winds one of Emma's curls around her finger. From the way Emma's body tenses up underneath her, Regina knows that *anything* is her answer, so she doesn't push, just rests her forehead against Emma's and breathes in, and in, and in.

When Henry knocks on her bedroom door, Regina doesn't set aside her novel but does watch him approach the bed over the top of her glasses. "Hi," he says, still holding ice to the bruising on his jaw.

"Hi, sweetheart." She smiles at him, cocks her head. "Still icing it?"

"Ten more minutes, Ma said."

"Come sit with me," she urges, pats the left side of the bed. He used to insist on sleeping on her left, back when she was capable of taking away the bad dreams, so her dominant hand would always be free to protect him.

He's always thought about things like that, she realizes. How to be safe, how to be strong.

Henry clambers over her legs, just like he used to when he was five, and sprawls out on the empty side of the bed, then rolls onto his right side to face her, keeps the ice pack sitting on his cheek. "Did you take the ibuprofen yet?" He opens his hand to show her the three candy-coated tablets, and she has to laugh. "Oh, so you really just came in here because you're too lazy to go downstairs and get your own water?"

He makes a face, points to his jaw. "I'm *hurt*, Mom. Who knows if I can manage the stairs by myself."

She finally sets the novel down, leans over to kiss his temple. Everything is horrible but at least there is this: affection, freely given, willingly received. "Because you needed so much help when dinner was ready."

"I *had* help," he counters. "The gods of pork had my back."

She laughs again, combs her fingers through his hair. "I'm glad you weren't more seriously hurt," she whispers, and sees Henry's torso curl in defensively. "Fighting Teddy was a very foolish thing to do."

He says nothing, but his fingers press into the side of her knee, solid pressure to remind her that he's here.

"Come on, sit up to take the medicine." She takes the sleeve of his t-shirt between thumb and forefinger, tugs three times, then reaches over to her nightstand to pass him the glass of water sitting there while he sits up. He takes a sip of water, holds it in his mouth and tilts his head back, pops the pills in, then takes two more sips before finally swallowing. Regina takes the glass back, takes two sips herself and sets it aside.

She half-expects Henry to leave now that he's gotten what he came for, but is pleased when he leans into her side and closes his eyes. "Tired?" she asks, and he nods against her shoulder, eyes still closed.

"What happens when people die?"

Regina freezes, feels something like panic banging against her ribs. “What do you mean?”

“Like... when they die, what happens to their soul?” He doesn’t look up, but his grip on her hand is tight, tight, tight. “Is there a heaven and a hell? And what decides where you go? And how—is it like going to the Enchanted Forest, or—or Neverland, where you need a portal, or is it like the Netherworld where you just *go*, and—what happens when you die, Mom?”

She holds him close against her body and says the only thing she can. “I don’t know, baby.” After a moment, she keeps going, tries to give him *something*. “Some people, back in the Enchanted Forest, they believed that there was a heaven, and a hell, and that good people went to heaven and bad people went to hell. But they didn’t really know what to do with people who were in-betweens. There wasn’t really any room for in-betweens, right?”

He nods, squeezes her hand tighter.

“And some other people, they believed that your energy was... reallocated, let’s say. That your spirit fused with some slowly-growing thing, came back into being.”

“Like reincarnation?”

“Like reincarnation.”

“And it happened to everyone? Regardless if they were good or bad?”

“To everyone,” Regina affirms. “But if you’d done more things to benefit the world than harm it, you... *upgraded*, let’s call it. So maybe if you’d been born a peasant, you’d come back as a prince. And if you’d been born a prince, you could come back as... an eagle. Or a swan.”

She knows he smiles at that, can feel how his breathing shifts. “What if... what if something happened to you, and you weren’t in control of your body anymore, and your body did bad things?”

It hurts so much, so much, but she tamps down on the sobs caught in her throat and sighs against the crown of his head. “If there is a heaven and a hell, Henry, there is no doubt in my mind that every one of the Lost Boys went to heaven as the people they were before Neverland. And if there’s reincarnation, then half of them are princes and the other half are learning to fly.”

He says nothing, but lets her hold him quietly until he falls asleep.

Guys. Any explanations of the afterlife included within are DUMBED DOWN SO AS TO FIT INTO A SEMI-PARAGRAPH. I promise if you want to talk religion, I can send you 40,000 words on the construction of a greater reward for a mortal journey, but like... this was not the vehicle for deep musings on the fate of the soul? I'm totally lying, I can't send you 40k words like THAT but if you gave me a little while I could throw maybe 5k together?

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

They made a promise, two years ago. It didn't have words until they were back on the ship but they made it with their eyes as soon as they climbed the high ridge up to the Hangman's Tree. *Never again.*

Six copies of Chapter 80 of the municipal code are spread out around the head of the conference table, and Kathryn sighs, leans back and rubs at her temples. "Honestly, I genuinely do not care enough about special improvement districts."

Regina smiles faintly, marks down another passage that needs clarification. "Just one, Madam Mayor, and it will have significant benefits for general engagement in the welfare of this town."

"Yes, and it also means that *more* people will whine and complain to me about irrelevant things." The door to the office opens and Kathryn's assistant comes in with a brown paper grocery bag, which he sets on the coffee table on the other side of the office. "Thank you, Joe."

"Sure thing, Mayor Ladd." And then Joe meets Regina's eyes and actually smiles. "Ms. Mills," he acknowledges, and bows slightly before leaving.

Regina looks over at the paper bag, then at Kathryn. "What did you do?"

Kathryn smiles brightly. "Well, since going out to lunch seemed to be non-negotiable, I thought I'd bring lunch to us."

"Kathryn."

"Surely you won't force me to eat alone in front of you?"

Regina bites the inside of her lip, hesitates. "A working lunch?"

"For appearances' sake. I have no intention of working during it, of course, but yes, on paper it will be labelled a working lunch." Kathryn stands up, gestures towards the sofa and armchairs—the same as during Regina's tenure, but somehow the change in drapes and artwork has brightened up the office, made it just warm enough. "Come on. Mozzarella sticks and girl talk."

"Kathryn," she says again, vaguely protesting. "I'm happy to be your consultant, but—friendship is inappropriate. Misguided, even."

“Why? Because you’re the Evil Queen?” Kathryn almost seems gleeful to say it, like she saw this entire conversation coming. “We all know you haven’t been her in quite some time.”

“I had you assaulted and kidnapped.”

“And I forgive you for it.” Kathryn crouches next to Regina’s chair, places a hand on her arm. “Look. I’ve been made aware of what’s happening with Henry, and maybe you didn’t need a friend before, but I’m *sure* you need one now, and I’m offering, Regina. Still.”

She only really hears the first part, because now things make sense. “Made aware... so Emma put you up to this.”

“Emma?” Kathryn frowns, shakes her head. “No, she didn’t put me up to this. I talked to her about this, because I was getting frustrated with your ice bitch routine, but she’s not behind this. I am, Regina. I’m behind this.”

“So then who—Henry,” she says helplessly, and the knowledge clicks into place. “Snow. Snow told you.”

Kathryn nods silently.

She wants to strike out, because Snow will *never* keep her mouth shut, but Kathryn is so far from Cora—“I wasn’t aware you two were close.”

Darkness clouds Kathryn’s eyes, but only for a moment. “We talk, sometimes. Usually about David.” At Regina’s startled expression, she continues. “He was my fiancé, and my fake husband, and my friend. Sometimes... sometimes she just needs someone to understand how hard it is to see this version of him.” And then Kathryn smiles, bright and hopeful again. “And he and Fred are die-hard Pats fans, so there’s that, too.”

Regina smiles, inclines her head. “They’re indoctrinating Henry, gradually. He’s getting David a custom Patriots jersey for Christmas.”

Kathryn laughs, clear and pure, and Regina lets herself be led over to the couch. “He’s got to let Fred in on that one. He still wants to get David a sport chair and make him QB.”

“He is aware of the incompatibility of mud and wheels, yes?”

“Mmm, something about getting the mayor to approve Astroturf for the field. He claims he has an ‘in.’”

“You said—*ohh*—to talk—“

Emma's hands rake up underneath her blouse, fingers prodding at the bottom edge of her bra. "Mmmhmm," she murmurs, presses her body against Regina's even more and kisses her harder, just a little sloppier. "Yeah, in a minute," and then she's cupping a breast and of all the days to wear one of those useless, all-lace bras—Regina groans, drags her hand from the back of Emma's neck to cover the hand on her breast, tightens her grip to show Emma just how hard to squeeze, moves their hands together so that her peaking nipple is between two fingers, so that Emma can tug on it through the lace, just enough, with every movement of her hand.

Emma's mouth leaves her neck to return to her lips, muffling all the little sighs she can't really suppress. Regina drops her hands to that denim-covered ass, squeezes and pulls so that Emma grinds harder against her raised thigh, is pleased when Emma breaks the kiss to moan, pressing her open mouth to Regina's chin. "We can't do this here," she manages to get out before taking Emma's mouth again, tugging on her lower lip with her teeth.

"But we can do this?" Emma asks, shifts her focus to the other breast and whimpers when Regina lifts her thigh a little more, following the erratic rocking of Emma's hips.

She moves to the soft underside of Emma's jaw, leaves a wet, wet kiss. "Not here," she says again, drags her open mouth halfway down Emma's neck.

Emma sighs, half-regretful and half-aroused, pulls away slightly. In the dim fluorescent lighting of the interrogation room, her tousled hair and clothing and her wide, wild-eyed look—Regina tugs her back, kisses her again, again, again. It's been so long since she's *wanted* like this, and to be wanted back—she pulls Emma's body closer and closer still. "Okay, but really," Emma mumbles, then just groans, buries both hands in Regina's hair and crushes their mouths together. And then it's all about the kiss, and the slide of tongue against tongue, the back and forth and the way she can feel Emma smile before she pulls back. "We—about Christmas—"

The word snaps Regina out of her haze, and with a firm push to the center of Emma's chest, she separates their bodies, sets about straightening her clothes and hair. "What about it?" she demands.

When she looks up, Emma's watching her with a wounded expression in her eyes. "My mom's inviting—"

"No."

Emma's posture droops. "Regina, please."

"No," she repeats, just as clipped and sharp as before.

"Kathryn and Fred will be there."

"Irrelevant."

"Come on, my dad—"

“Can come exchange gifts, but Henry will not be going over there.”

Emma freezes. “Henry?” she repeats, slowly, like she isn’t sure what she’s hearing. “I was talking about *you*.”

Her body tenses, a new wave of adrenaline flooding her system and saying *get out, get out, get out*. “Neither I nor my son will enter that house with the intention of *breaking bread*, Emma. Not after everything she’s done—“

“You’re gonna pull this *my son* shit now?” Emma snaps. “You’re really gonna ruin his Christmas like this?”

“Ruin?” she hisses, and now the adrenaline’s turned, is pushing her towards Emma with burning intent. “*Ruin*? She’s standing idly by while he gets *beaten up* and then blames *him* for it and forces *him* to endure therapy he doesn’t want and summer school he shouldn’t need and *I’m* ruining things?”

“*He’s* picking fights and *she’s* just doing her job—“

“He’s picking fights because *you* taught him to fight!”

“Because *you* said it was the only way!”

“God forbid you think for yourself about *anything*, least of all how to deal with my son!”

“*Our* son,” Emma shouts, and then seems to process what Regina said, completely deflates. “You know what—just—forget it. Fine. I’ll—I’ll figure out a way to split between my parents and yours—“

“Don’t bother,” Regina sneers.

Emma snaps. “*Fuck you*, Regina. I’m spending Christmas with my parents *and* my son, and you know what, I was really fucking looking forward to spending it with you, too, but forget that. Apparently I don’t think enough for your tastes, although, shit, with your history, that means you should be all over me, right?”

The room is silent, and Emma’s shoulders are heaving with emotion, and Regina keeps her chin raised and her eyes hard while she stalks to the door, yanks it open and slams it shut behind her.

It only takes her an hour to realize that she’s made a serious mistake, but by then it’s past three and Emma’s probably gone to bring Henry to the station and—and she doesn’t want to let Henry see this, see how she’s messed up and been *small* again.

They made a promise, two years ago. It didn't have words until they were back on the ship but they made it with their eyes as soon as they climbed the high ridge up to the Hangman's Tree, just the two of them, and had to pick their way around the small, still bodies of the Lost Boys, around Hook's twisted corpse and Rumpel's barely-breathing form. *Never again.* They don't get to be selfish, they don't get to be petty, they don't get to be *at odds* like they were. Henry first, Henry always.

But Henry *only*?

Maybe it is Henry only. Maybe when Emma's sea-storm eyes meet her own while their son chatters at them, maybe she is saying *look what we made* but not the way Regina means it, not the way Regina wants her to mean it.

She doesn't want to keep Henry from his grandparents, not on Christmas. She doesn't want to keep him from Emma, ever. She wouldn't keep him from Emma—not anymore, not after Emma bit back the pain and lifted him from the Lagoon like she'd lifted him from the mine and straight into Regina's arms again. She doesn't get to be selfish, and Emma doesn't get to be petty, because Henry first. Henry has to decide whether he wants to see his grandparents on Christmas, and if he does—if he is still so full of love—then he'll go. He'll come home to her, but he'll go and she won't begrudge him that.

She pulls her peacoat tighter around herself, drops her chin into the softness of the scarf she still hasn't given back to Emma, and rings the doorbell for the house she's been lingering in front of for ten minutes. When Kathryn opens the door, hair loose from her professional up-do and a ladle in hand, Regina tries for a smile but ends up just wincing. "I—was wondering about the specifics. Of that offer."

Kathryn's eyes brighten, and she opens the door wider. "Why don't you come in? We can talk terms over a glass of wine."

Her cell phone goes off just after six, a mash-up of Junior's solos from "Colonel Hathi's March" blaring loudly in the Ladd's kitchen and a close-up of Henry's eye popping up on her screen. Ordinarily, she keeps it on vibrate just so the ringtones Henry troll-programmed in for her don't alarm the rest of society, but she might want to hear the opening snare of "Bare Necessities" more than any other song tonight.

From the stove, Fred chuckles knowingly, and Kathryn smiles at her before going over to her husband's side to give Regina some privacy. "Hello, sweetheart."

"Hi, Mom." Henry sounds anxious, nervous, and her stomach lurches at the thought that something *else* has happened, something new, and that she isn't *there* for him because her libido and her temper have messed things up again.

"How was school?"

“Good. I got a 98 on that quiz.”

She smiles, wishes to be able to hug him and say *I’m proud of you* with her eyes so that he knows she means it. “That’s very good, Henry. Did you tell Emma?”

“No.”

He doesn’t offer more, so she clears her throat to stall. “Did something happen?”

“She’s really upset.” He takes a deep breath, lets it out, then inhales again. “She’s really upset and keeps texting and then throwing her phone, so I thought I should see if you’re okay.”

Oh. “Oh, Henry—“

“So... are you okay?”

Her sweet, sweet boy. Her sweet little miracle boy. “I am.” And then—because she has to, has to, has to—she asks, “Are you?”

“How do you mean?”

She fumbles; how can she ask Henry about a thing that has no name? “Emma being that upset. I just... how do *you* feel?”

“I feel like if she keeps throwing the phone it’ll break, and all the work I did setting up things to annoy her will go to waste.” His voice is abruptly deeper, richer; it startles Regina, makes the joke unequivocally lighter since it can’t be mistaken for a whine. “Is she going to be upset for long?”

She wishes she could look at him, see whether he’s calm or frightened or smirking or disgusted. “That’s not my intention, no.”

“Okay.” It’s a single word, so simple, so trusting. “I love you, Mom.”

Four words: so simple, so trusting. “I love you, too. Go rescue her phone.”

It’s past ten when she walks up Mifflin, opens her front gate and sees Emma huddled on the steps, hands shoved in her jacket pockets and knees shaking. Regina stops halfway up the walk and just stares at her, takes in the redness to her nose and at the corners of her eyes.

“How long have you been out here?”

Emma shrugs, the movement jostling the hood of her jacket and forcing it to fall back. “A while.” She moves her feet slightly apart, keeps her knees together. “I kinda felt nauseous all afternoon.”

“What did you eat?” Regina asks automatically, and then realizes.

“Fighting with you is way worse, now,” Emma says quietly, and Regina closes her eyes briefly. “I don’t like feeling sick like this.”

It takes a moment, but she forces her body to move again, to bring her to the stairs so she can sit next to Emma, shoulder to shoulder and thigh to thigh. “I’m sorry,” she says, and clears her throat. “I’m sorry. For what I said about you, and for making a selfish decision about Henry.”

Emma stays silent.

“You—you *do* think. You think about things I never would, and you work so, so hard to be a good parent to him, and I was wrong.”

“I shouldn’t have said that—that last thing,” Emma finally mumbles. “About your history. Because this—whatever happened before, it doesn’t—that’s not *us*.”

“What is?” Regina whispers, and Emma turns her head to look at her. “What is *us*? Because—because if it’s just about having *something*, I can do that, I think, but I need to know that’s what it is. I can’t be here thinking that it’s about you and me if it’s just about having something for you.”

Emma is quiet, and just looks at her for a long, long time. “It’s about you and me, Regina. I—I’m sorry if I ever gave you a reason to think differently. But—it’s *you*. You and me.”

Regina nods, and closes her eyes again, because she won’t cry, and if she does it will only be because it’s cold. “Henry’s at the apartment?”

“My mom’s with him.”

“He’s okay with that?”

“He doesn’t hold grudges like us.” Regina smiles, concedes the point. “I should be angry with her. She’s... doing it this way is only penalizing him, and she knows him. She should know him. I just... I don’t know how to be angry with her. How to stay angry with her.”

She isn’t sure who reaches for whose hand first, but their fingers lace together, gloved and bare, and everything feels a bit lighter. “You don’t have to feel anything you don’t want to feel.”

“I want to be angry with her.”

“It’s complicated with you two.”

“I *want* to be angry with her.”

“You don’t owe me that, Emma.”

“Do I owe Henry?”

Regina runs her thumb up and down the side of Emma's index finger, traces the black and silver ring she wears. "I don't know," she admits, squeezes Emma's hand. "I don't know." She rests her head on Emma's shoulder, smiles a little when she feels Emma turn into the contact. "He asked me about heaven the other day."

Emma stays silent, and for a moment Regina wonders if she hadn't heard. Then Emma inhales sharply, trembles on the exhale. "That—that's a good thing, right? Him asking?"

"It could be."

"What'd you say? What did he ask?" The questions come out on top of each other, urgent.

Regina gets it. "He asked whether heaven and hell are real places, like Neverland, and what decides whether you go to one or the other. And then he asked how someone who wasn't in control of their actions would be judged."

"But, like, in kid-speak, right?"

Regina flicks her thumb against Emma's bare palm without saying a word, can't help but smile when she feels Emma suppress a laugh. "I told him that whatever follows this life, the Lost Boys would have been judged as they were before they were Lost."

"But he didn't ask about the Lost Boys."

"Well, not explicitly, but—"

"Regina. He could have been asking about *himself*."

She lifts her head, stares at Emma open-mouthed. Because—*if you weren't in control of your body*, he'd said. *If your body did bad things*.

"You think?" she whispers, and it's been so long since she even thought to hope for Henry to believe in absolution but—oh, God, *what if?*

Emma smiles, the same slanted-mouth smile she gave to their son. "Maybe. Maybe."

It's easy, then, to make one more concession, to take on one more little burden. "If he's okay with going, we'll go for Christmas. To your parents'."

"You don't have—"

Regina cuts her off with a kiss. Just a gentle one, just a soft *welcome home*. "I want to celebrate with my family, Emma. I'll do what it takes."

Emma raises her right hand to Regina's face, traces the rise of her cheekbone with one cold, cold finger. "You and me," she starts, and hesitates. "Me?" she asks, and for a moment Regina doesn't understand, but when she does—

When she does, she kisses Emma again, and again, and again. Always soft, always sweet. Always *yes*. "How could I not?" she murmurs, and feels something between her ribs break

open when Emma smiles, dazzlingly bright.

Emma deepens the kisses first, increasing pressure, parting her lips a little more each time they come together. It's staggering, how she can pull so much feeling out of Regina all at once. How there is *want* and then all of this... this *home*.

It's want and it's home that makes her pull back, just barely, when the tip of Emma's tongue traces the edge of her upper lip. "Come upstairs," she whispers, and squeezes Emma's hand. "Come upstairs."

Emma smiles, pushes a few strands of her dark hair behind her ear. One more kiss, gentle and calm, and she nods, still smiling.

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

All the solid rage in Emma's body collapses, and Regina ends up half supporting her weight and she can't. She can't, because Emma caving like this means—means something terrible. Means the same thing it did last time they stood here without their son, the same thing it meant the last time Henry suffered because of her.

Chapter Notes

I thought this fic would be six chapters. I lied.

It's somewhat early when Emma slides out of bed, hissing when the cold air hits her bare skin, and picks up her discarded clothes, pulling them on as she moves around the room. Regina watches from under heavy-lidded eyes, curled on her side with the covers tucked right up under her chin. The inside of her thighs are still vaguely sticky, and her muscles ache from her knees up to her navel; some spot on the underside of her breast throbs and she can feel the dried sweat on her body, craves a shower. All that and she still can't help but smile sleepily when Emma stubs her toe on the foot of the bed and curses loudly. "Careful," she murmurs, and Emma turns to face her with a sheepish smile.

"Sorry—I didn't want to wake you."

Regina hums, rolls onto her back and stretches her legs out, wiggles her toes a little. "So you were just going to sneak out of my bed without a word, then?" Emma's sheepish expression morphs to stricken, and Regina lets out a low, throaty giggle, and another—higher-pitched—when Emma sticks out her tongue petulantly. "Graceful *and* witty," Regina teases, "how did I get so lucky?"

Emma shakes her head, still smiling, then drops her jacket back on the floor and crawls up the bed, props herself up with her hands just above Regina's shoulders. "Don't forget classy and charming."

Regina rolls her eyes, can't help but smile when Emma kisses her. "Definitely not charming."

"No?"

“Not a bit,” she murmurs, prepares for another kiss, but lets out a stifled shriek when Emma sits back, straddling her hips, and starts to pull back the covers. “No, it’s cold!”

“So my ass can freeze, but yours can’t?” Her grip on the edge of the comforter is the first thing Emma attacks, first trying to wrench the covers from her, then lowering her mouth to flick her tongue against Regina’s fingertips, nibble at them intermittently.

“Mine’s too nice,” she retorts, and tries to push Emma’s face away—which is the mistake. As soon as her right hand lets go of the blankets, Emma pins her free hand and drags the covers back, exposing her body to the cold and forcing another yelp from her. “Emma,” she complains.

And then she has no reason to complain, because Emma, practically hypnotized, leans forward, presses warm dry kisses around each pebbling nipple but leaves them untouched. Instead, she kisses her way to the sore spot on the inside curve of her breast, laves her tongue over it slowly. “Does it hurt?” she asks, and her breath is moist and hot.

Regina bites down on her lower lip, peers down at her chest to see the mottled mark, deep red with darker impressions of Emma’s teeth. “A little sore,” she admits, and sighs when Emma closes her eyes, noses and then grazes her lips over the bruise. “I like it.”

Emma freezes, eyes snapping open. “How much?” she whispers, and her lips seal onto Regina’s skin at the end of the question. She doesn’t wait for a response before resetting her mouth, letting her bottom teeth scrape down so she can suck the bruise into her mouth again.

Regina gasps, and arches into it, and when Emma’s fingers rake up her ribcage to finally, finally tease her nipple, she has to grab at something—Emma’s shoulder, and her messy hair, and she digs into the fabric of the sweater and fists her hand in those curls. “What happened,” she hisses, and loses her words briefly when Emma bites down, gets them back when she releases her skin with a wet *pop*, “to sneaking out without a word?”

Keeping her eyes on her handiwork, Emma just chuckles, sits up and grabs onto the hem of her sweater, strips in one smooth motion. “We don’t have to talk,” she drawls, but when she looks at Regina her eyes are bright, bright, bright, so bright that Regina doesn’t even have a choice, doesn’t stand a chance.

She sits up and kisses her and strokes the dimples beside her spine and kisses her and traces the scratches on her shoulders and kisses her and Emma loses patience, unhooks her own bra and tosses it to the side. It’s cold and they’d forgotten, and Emma whines against Regina’s mouth until she brings her hands up to lightly cup, squeeze, caress Emma’s breasts. “C’mere,” Regina murmurs, drawing back so Emma follows, pulling her close so their torsos press together and kicking her feet just enough to get the sheets out from between them. “C’mere,” she says again, and Emma kisses her distractedly, reaching back to pull the blankets over them again.

Their little cocoon of white sheets and white blankets gets hot quickly, but Regina relishes it, savors how everything slows down a little. She leaves wet, wet kisses up the column of Emma’s neck, humming into the skin every time Emma’s steadily wandering hands stroke some particularly sensitive strip of skin. The softness on the back of her thigh is a

particularly good spot, and Emma traces up and down and up again until Regina spreads her legs a little wider, draws her legs up to hook her ankles around Emma's thighs. Emma, who's been hovering, who's been propping herself up, lets out this soft sigh, right into Regina's mouth, and lets her hips drop to grind against Regina's wetness.

She doesn't expect to respond as strongly as she does, but she's not used to stiff denim scraping at her like that, or remotely prepared for the cold metal button that just misses her clit. Emma laughs at her moan, presses against her harder and squeezes her ass with one hand. "Again," Regina commands, and Emma grins, rolls her hips slowly, gentler than before. It's just right—Emma is always just right—and Regina lets her breath stutter out of her. Emma grinds once more, and Regina sucks in air, touches her cheek. "Chafing now," she says, and smiles when Emma slides down just enough to bring her lower abs in line with Regina's cunt, drops an apologetic kiss between the points of her collarbones.

They trade lazy, lazy kisses, touching slowly but confidently. Regina knows to use her nails—lightly over that taut stomach, lighter still when she touches pink nipples and pale pale breasts, hard and harder on Emma's arms and shoulders, ass and thighs. She knows to bring her own pelvis higher and make sure Emma doesn't hold a position that'll stress her back too much, to be gentle when she squeezes her thighs around Emma's waist and presses harder with her right, rolling them so she tops. She uses her teeth and her tongue to mark her path down Emma's body, both hands to unbutton her jeans, toys with the zipper for far longer than she should—but when Emma holds her breath just so, whimpers just so, how can she resist?

The alarm goes off, blaring and obnoxious, and Emma half-slaps, half-punches the little digital display, manages to silence it. "Ignore that," she orders, and Regina smirks, finally tugs the zipper down. It goes off again before she's even pulled them four inches from Emma's hips, and Emma hits it again, but it's too late; Regina releases the denim, sits back on Emma's thighs. Emma pouts, and then scowls when the alarm goes off a third time.

Chuckling, Regina leans over to the nightstand, flicks the alarm switch off and lets her body follow her shift in balance to fall onto the mattress next to Emma. "You should go shower," she says softly, and curls her body slightly, brings her knees up to rest against Emma's hip.

"Fuck a shower," Emma grumbles, and turns towards her, slides a hand up her calf and tugs at the back of her knee to try and bring her close again.

"You have to go to work," she points out, but accepts Emma's still pouting kiss anyway.

"Fuck work."

"You have to take our son to school."

"Fuck—" and Emma cuts herself off, grimaces. "—me," she sighs, and flops onto her back.

Regina laughs, low and breathy. "After your shift, dear," she teases, and just smirks when Emma glares at her.

It's maybe not the best move, because Emma suddenly throws off all the blankets, baring both of their bodies to the air, and gets out of bed with rough, irritated movements. Regina's

just moving to pull the blankets over herself again when Emma grabs her by the ankles and yanks, hard, drags her to the edge of the bed. “Emma—what—“ she sputters, before Emma slides both hands under her ass and lifts, hoisting Regina against her body. It’s sudden and startling and Regina shrieks, clings to Emma with her legs around her waist and her arms around her neck. “What the hell are you doing!”

“Going to shower,” Emma says shortly, but then lets a tiny smile sneak out. “And you’re coming.” She adds a quick wink. “Promise.”

Regina laughs so hard that she doesn’t even care that Emma almost drops her twice on the way to the bathroom.

The next time, the call comes from the hospital, right when Regina is about to put the pies in the oven. It’s the day before Christmas Eve and Henry apparently promised both David and Fred that Regina’s bourbon pecan pie would be on the menu—although she’s fairly certain Henry is merely taking the fall for Emma—so she’s baking again. It’s been... a long time, since she properly baked anything, and she has to keep stopping to remind herself that all of the ingredients are good, and safe, and unhistoried, and she was asked. She was asked, so it’s okay.

But then the call comes from the hospital and nothing’s okay, at all.

They won’t let her see him when she gets there, because he’s *not conscious* and they’re still stitching him up, and she just about loses her mind, because why does he need stitches, and what do they mean *still*, and the nurse who’s trying to handle her keeps putting *hands* on her and—

And then Emma’s there, and the nurse has her hands full with Emma, who’s shouting and demanding to talk to a doctor and honestly scaring the hell out of everyone in the waiting room. “Sheriff,” the nurse keeps saying, “Sheriff, Dr. Gulliver is still tending to your son—“

“Gulliver? Like the fucking travels? Some fucking Lilliputian who wrote a book while on *shrooms* is stitching up my kid?”

“Sheriff, he is taller than you and an excellent doctor—“

The double doors to the ER swing open, and the man who’s suddenly facing them both is so familiar, so familiar—the woodcutter. Michael Tillman. It’s Michael Tillman looking at them with shock and slight fear on his face, and his hand on Nicholas’s shoulder, and Nicholas—

“Nick?” Emma whispers, and sidesteps the nurse, takes one step towards the Tillmans and stops when Michael pulls Nick back against him. Regina takes inventory in silence: blood-stained shirt, cuts and bruises on his face, bloody knuckles, but he’s walking. He’s going

home. They can't even see Henry yet but Nicholas is going home. "Nick, they—were you with him? Did you see who did this to him?"

She wants to pull Emma back, to put distance and her whole body in between Emma and the truth, but she just can't move, her whole body is *burning*, and she can't can't can't.

So when Emma gets it, when she looks at Nicholas and sees it, she actually manages to take one more step forward, one horrible staggering step, and Regina almost falls forward in the rush to stop her from following through with that realization. "Emma—Emma," she whispers, but it's no good.

Emma looks at Michael, and then at Nicholas, and her whole body surges forward another step. "He's your *friend*," she hisses, "he's brought you *home*, you fucking little shit, he's your *friend*!"

Regina grabs at Emma's wrist and her waist, tries to pull her back, and as soon as she touches Emma it's all over because when her hands come forward, fingers splayed out in fear and desperation, Michael moves to shield Nicholas with his own body.

All the solid rage in Emma's body collapses, and Regina ends up half supporting her weight and she can't. She can't, because Emma caving like this means—means something terrible. Means the same thing it did last time they stood here without their son, the same thing it meant the last time Henry suffered because of her.

"There's no magic," Emma whispers, and turns her wrist out of Regina's grasp only to bring their hands together again, only to hold fast. "There's no magic. Don't you—why would you do this to *him*? What did he ever do wrong?"

Regina doesn't look at Michael, and she doesn't look at Nicholas, because she knows what she'll see. She just looks at Emma, and waits for her, and waits for her. When those sea-sweet eyes finally meet hers, the fire she wants to see, the fire she should be seeing is banked. Emma just looks at her with such sorrow, such resignation—Regina crumples.

The bay doors open again, and a tall, graying man in wrinkled scrubs steps through. "Henry Mills?" he calls, and Emma's hand tightens around hers.

They set Henry up in an ICU room with windows that look out over the hospital courtyard. It's the only thing about the room that she's capable of taking in: the wide, bright windows and the empty brick on the other side. The room isn't important; what's important is that his chest is rising and falling without the aid of any machines, and the muted monitors on the left of his bed flash green numbers every sixty seconds. What's important is that his ankle is compressed and elevated and his arm has been set in a cast and the split skin at his jawline has been stitched closed and his ribs have been wrapped tightly. What's important is that he's going to wake up.

Emma is gone. She'd stayed long enough to hold Regina through the worst of the tears, long enough to speak in low tones with Dr. Gulliver about what kind of weapon would cause the blunt force trauma to Henry's torso. Long enough to touch the backs of her fingers to the uninjured side of Henry's jaw, to press a kiss to his cheek and whisper something hoarse and cracking to him. And then she'd straightened up and given Regina that small, shy, all-softness smile, and left with Mulan.

And yes, Regina wants her here, but with the way the anger was vibrating in Emma's fingertips, leaving was the best thing. Leaving means Emma can *do* something, anything to make it stop for good. She doesn't care if it means the whole lacrosse team gets sent to juvenile detention; if there were magic—

She cuts the thought off just as David presses the button for the automatic door and wheels into the room, comes around the bed to stop next to Regina's chair. "Hey," he says quietly.

"Hi."

"Emma called," he says, and Regina almost smiles, nods in understanding. "Snow's getting coffee for us—if that's all right?"

"Coffee would be good," she says quietly.

"How is he?"

She runs through the list of his injuries: bruised and fractured ribs, sprained ankle, broken arm, 9 total stitches to various cuts including his jawline, and a mild-to-moderate traumatic brain injury that they can't really assess until he wakes up. She doesn't repeat any of the warning words Gulliver had said, quietly and cautiously, like aphasias and alexithymia and dysarthria.

David stays quiet while she speaks, fists clenching sporadically around the metal handrims. The monitors beep softly to mark the half-hour measurement and recording. Henry's blood pressure is getting better, up to 90 from the 65 it was when she first sat down. "You shouldn't blame yourself."

She closes her eyes, searches for just an ounce of patience. Emma gets it, at least, understands that there are actions and reactions and that sometimes the reaction travels through space and time in a curve, not a straight line. "Please don't."

"Regina," he says strongly, and when she finally looks at him, he has that same patient clarity to his eyes that Emma shows her when she's afraid. "There is no crime in existence that would justify attacking your child."

She scoffs, looks away. Stupid David. As if Emma was the only child ripped from her parents because of the curse. As if the Charmings were the only family to sacrifice.

"I know about the Tillmans. And Grace. And the Barretts. And I'm telling you now, there's *nothing* that justifies hurting Henry. You did not bring this on him."

She thinks again of the high ridge to the Hangman's Tree and how she and Snow had been knocked to the ground but David and Emma, always the vanguard, had been thrown. Thinks of the dull thud and then the sharp crack when David's body collided with the trunk of a jack pine and Emma's body had hit him. Thinks of how he'd screamed soundlessly until the pain overwhelmed him, knocked him unconscious. How he's never once looked at Henry with anything but love and adoration and yes, exasperation—but never with bitterness, never with anger.

"Not everyone has the pure heart of a shepherd," she hisses, and looks away before he can see the salt stinging at her eyes.

He clearly wants to say more, but the door clicks open and Snow hesitates with a cardboard tray of coffee in hand. Henry has her eyes—glimmering hazel, always so full of emotion. "Oh," Snow whispers, and takes a step towards the bed, lets the door fall closed behind her. "Oh, Henry."

No one speaks while Snow stands there and just looks at Henry. Regina doesn't have it in her to watch—can't stomach the tears that will inevitably rise, the *sympathy*. She knows Snow will want the doctor's report but she doesn't have that in her, either. All she has is the certainty that Henry will wake up and Emma will make this world safe for him again and Regina will learn to break bones with her bare hands to keep it that way. *Never again*. They'd promised.

There are hands on her knees, cold through the sheer tights, and she looks up to see Snow crouched in front of her. The coffee tray is on David's lap; Snow's trapped them both where they sit. "I'm sorry," Snow says, and Regina bites her tongue, hard, relishes the pain of her incisors digging in. "I handled this whole thing badly. I'm sorry. I should have done things differently, done more to protect him."

She wants to scream and yell and tear the hair out of Snow's empty little head but she can't. Can never. "Yes," she finally says, almost hisses. "Yes. You handled it wrong and you should have protected him."

Snow tears up, swallows nervously, but doesn't look away, doesn't flinch.

Exhausted, Regina brushes Snow's hands from her knees. "Get off the floor, you'll dirty your coat," she says, and gestures to the chair on her left.

Snow does as told, and David hands Regina a cup with her name on it, and she sits back in her chair and waits.

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

At four, when she is still awake because if she closes her eyes she can only see breaking bones, Henry's breathing alters, hitches twice. She's up in a flash, digging an elbow into Emma's stomach before standing up and going to the edge of the bed.

Every half hour, Nurse Fisher comes into check Henry's stats; although she's quiet and doing her best not to disturb them, Regina wakes every time. Emma, curled behind her on the cot the staff brought in, seems to drift in and out of sleep regardless of who's in the room, but when she's conscious she holds Regina just a little tighter, just a little closer. Any other time, any other person and Regina would resent it, would hate being *tethered*, but now with Henry still unconscious and with all the blame squarely at her feet—she's just thankful. Thankful that she's found one person, finally, who knows how deeply she loves, how much that love matters.

Emma hums into her hair, takes a deep breath. "Shhh," is all she gets out, though. "Stop thinking."

Regina closes her eyes again, struggles to push the guilt aside.

"Any change?" Emma asks, and shifts to prop herself up on her elbow and peer at the hospital bed, at the monitors stacked next to it.

"No," Regina says quietly, grips the edge of the knit blanket tightly. "Anything from Kathryn?"

Emma's arm leaves her waist, but returns with cell phone in hand. Two messages, one from David and one from Kathryn. Emma opens Kathryn's first, and when Regina reads the words—slightly blurry, and the brightness of the screen hurts her eyes—she just wants to curl in on herself and cry. *No consensus, no good ideas. They want to break for the night. Fred & I researching. How's Henry?*

Emma doesn't text back or open David's message, just drops the phone onto the cot and pulls their bodies together, presses her mouth against Regina's neck but doesn't do anything beyond that. "We can't worry about that, okay? They will figure something out, and we can trust Kathryn to do the right thing. Okay? We don't worry about that. We focus on him, and being here for him, and—and giving him everything we can, okay?"

She knows the truth of what Emma's saying, but love isn't enough. She wants to give Henry justice. She wants to give Henry vengeance. She wants to crack ribs and break arms and leave all five of the bastards who did this bruised and bloody and begging for mercy. She

wants an eye for an eye and no matter how much love enters her world, that violence will never leave her.

“They will get theirs,” Emma whispers, and finally places a kiss to her skin. “If I have to do it myself, they will get theirs. But for now, we trust Kathryn.”

She tries. She tries to take some of Emma’s quiet certainty, Emma’s *faith*, and wrap herself up in it. “They’re all at the station, though? They’re in custody?”

“Four of them, in the holding cells,” Emma affirms. “Just Teddy left, and Mulan said she’d keep patrolling.”

“I want them to *hurt*.”

It’s quiet for a long moment before she feels Emma nod. “We’ll find a way. They’ll do the time, somehow.”

No magic and no barrier should have made this easy. It should have meant that the five of them get sent up to Charleston until they reach eighteen and maybe a few years past that. It should have meant charges filed and pleas entered and *no deals* and quick sentencing. It should have meant *just another small town violent crime*.

Magic would have made this simple. A rib for a rib. Blood for blood.

She almost wants to say *send them anyway*. Wants to say *damn the consequences*. Let someone else deal with the self-disgust of betraying their child when the state comes investigating claims of the evil mayor splitting up families and tampering with memories. Let someone else deal with the choice between labeling their child *delusional* and exposing the whole town for what it really is. She knows which is the right choice and which is the wrong choice. She knows what all can be destroyed by the wrong choice.

Henry’s monitors beep, marking the half-hour, and Regina can hear Nurse Fisher’s clogs squeak in the hallway. She bites her tongue and closes her eyes and focuses on the scent of Emma’s hair, lush and dark, focuses on the steady steady beating of her heart.

At four, when she is still awake because if she closes her eyes she can only see breaking bones, Henry’s breathing alters, hitches twice. She’s up in a flash, digging an elbow into Emma’s stomach before standing up and going to the edge of the bed. His eyelashes are moving, just slightly, and she grips the bedrail hard enough to hurt her own hand.

She feels Emma come to stand beside her, cautious. “What is it? Should I get a nurse?”

She shakes her head, doesn’t look away from Henry’s face, reaches blindly for Emma’s hand. “No, no—I think he’s waking up.”

Emma's fingers lace tightly with her own, and she steps in closer. "Henry?" she whispers. "Kid, you ready to open your eyes?"

The lights are off and she's grateful, because when his eyes—slowly, slowly, with so many flutters—finally open fully, he pinches them shut again after half a second. "Mommy?"

"I'm here, sweetheart," she whispers, and smiles so wide that she aches with it. Emma—sweet, sweet Emma—brings their joined hands up, switches her left for her right and brings both of their hands over the bedrail to hold Henry's. Both. "Emma, too."

Henry keeps his eyes closed, takes a long, slow, labored breath. "You okay?"

She chokes, and she can feel Emma tensing next to her. "Yes, baby, we're okay. Can you—are you in pain?"

His hand grips theirs, weak but definite. "Yeah." And then he opens his eyes, and *looks* at them, and she feels so full up with love that it pushes at her bones. "Not hurt?"

Oh, God—there's damage. He doesn't understand he's hurt, or—or he doesn't know how to explain that he's hurt. There's damage. They hurt his brain, there's damage—

"No, kid. She's not hurt," Emma says, voice soothing and dangerously low. "Don't talk anymore, we're gonna get the nurse and some water, okay?"

He closes his eyes again, nods just slightly, and Regina needs him to open his eyes again, needs him to explain, to use full sentences and explain and prove that he will be okay—

"Regina," Emma murmurs, and pulls at her waist, draws her away from the bed, "go get Fisher and some water."

"Why did you say me, what—why does he think—"

"Regina," Emma repeats, stronger, looking her straight in the eye. "Go get the nurse and some water."

She stays where she is.

Emma sighs, looks up at the ceiling for a moment. "I need to figure out if we need to get a deputy down here right now to take a statement, Regina. I need you to leave the room for a minute."

A statement. A—Henry needs to give a statement.

"One minute," she whispers, and goes back to Henry, kisses his temple gently. "I'll be right back, Henry, and Emma will be right here, okay?"

He nods again, and she's sure his mouth turns up in a smile.

Mulan gets there in thirty minutes, comes in just as Dr. Gulliver is leaving. Preliminary tests—following a pen light, reciting the alphabet, counting down from one hundred by sevens—seem to check out. Some of his sounds are off, almost like he’s developed a lisp, but Gulliver says that’s probably temporary. The important thing is that Henry isn’t damaged. He isn’t damaged. He’s in pain, but wants to give his statement before they give him another dose of painkillers, because he’s strong like that, strong and undamaged.

She wants to tell him that she *knows*, that if he wants to be a little weak just for now it’s okay, no one will hold it against him, she won’t hold it against him—

Emma sits down next to her and her right leg is jumping nervously, but Regina just doesn’t have it in her to focus on tending to anyone but Henry. “You good to do this, kid? We can wait if you’re not.”

“M good,” he mumbles, takes a deep breath that seems like *work*. When he was small, brand new in her life and in her arms and in the world, she used to put him down for a nap in the middle of her bed and just lie there with him and watch his tiny chest rise and fall for as long as he slept. Missed meetings and dodged phone calls and blocked out the whole world just to see him breathing. “Hi, Mulan.”

“Good morning, Henry,” Mulan says, and steps further into the room. Her uniform is unusually rumpled, hair down and loose, and when her eyes meet Regina’s, they’re clearly bloodshot. But she smiles, comes closer to Henry’s bed. “How do you feel?”

He grunts a little, tries for a smile, and Regina reaches forward to touch the back of his hand in reassurance. She knows Emma moves to stop her, but Henry turns his hand to hold hers and Emma sits back with a sigh. “Ask me something easy,” he gets out, and finally manages a smile when Mulan chuckles.

“Do you feel well enough to tell me what happened yesterday?”

His grip on her hand tightens, then releases entirely, but she keeps her hand on the bed rail, there if he needs it. There if he needs her. “I got my ass handed to me.”

“Henry,” Emma says, quietly but with a sharp edge. He closes his eyes, but he’s grinning, she knows he is.

Flipping her notebook open, Mulan waits patiently at the foot of the bed, but something around her eyes and the corners of her mouth shows her worry. “Take your time.”

He takes another deep breath. It doesn’t seem to be as much of a struggle as a minute ago. “I was walking up to Main Street when—“

“Sorry,” Mulan cuts in. “What time was this?”

“Um—maybe twelve?”

Her gaze cuts over to Regina and Emma. “Aren’t you supposed to be in school then?”

“Half day,” Regina says quietly.

“That’s still too early,” Emma says. “They get out at 12:30.”

“Last class is gym this period,” Henry mumbles. “He didn’t see the point in having us dress for a thirty minute period so he just dismissed us.”

Mulan nods, scribbles it all down. “Okay. Sorry. Keep going.”

“Um—yeah, so, I was walking and, uh, Nick and Teddy were walking a little way behind me—Nick Tillman and Teddy Barrett—and Teddy started shouting things at me so I turned around to tell him to shut up and he kept going and kept walking towards me so then when he got close I hit him.”

Emma puts her head in her hands.

“And then Nick hit me, and then Teddy hit me, and then I was fighting both of them, and it would’ve been okay because Nick can’t punch and Teddy moves too slow, but then the others ran up and they jumped in and then they held me down. One of them had his lacrosse gear and started swinging the stick but I managed to cover my head. Everything hurt but I think I took one of them down. Maybe two. And then I guess I blacked out.”

Mulan doesn’t look up from her notebook, and Emma won’t raise her head. “Do you know the names of the other boys?”

“Um, I know John—Dorman, John Dorman—was one of them, ‘cause I punched him in the face.”

“Jesus Christ, Henry,” Emma hisses, and Regina reaches out to dig her fingers into Emma’s thigh. *Shut up*, she wants to snap, but she just keeps her eyes on Henry, focuses on him.

“One of them was really tall, I’ve seen him hanging around with Teddy so I think he’s in his grade. And, uh, the other one was—I dunno, all I know is he’s on the team with them.”

Mulan nods again, sighs heavily. “Why did you hit Teddy Barrett?”

“He was shouting at me.”

“I... need to know more than that, Henry.”

Henry says nothing, just stares at Mulan for a long moment. “Mom?” he finally says, but he won’t look at her. “Can you get me something hot to drink?”

He hasn’t asked for anything in two years. He hasn’t asked for *anything* in *two whole years* and right now—she can’t even breathe. She can’t breathe. And if he would just look at her, she’d do anything he asked. But this way—this way, she can’t. She can’t. “No, sweetheart,” she says quietly, and Emma’s hand covers hers, squeezes hard. “Not until you’ve finished answering the deputy’s questions.”

He closes his eyes again, and his jaw is clenching up and he shouldn't do that, it's only going to hurt him more. "Please?" he asks again, and his voice cracks.

She can't breathe, her throat is closing up with tears. "No, baby," she refuses, again, but takes his hand, squeezes hard.

When he finally squeezes back, finally opens his always-beautiful eyes to look at her with such *apology* in his face, she starts to cry. "I hit him because he threatened my mom," he whispers. "He said he'd get the whole team to break in one night and hold her down and beat her and run a train on her and she wouldn't be able to do anything because there's no magic, and there'd be no one to help her, and no one would even hold it against them. So I hit him. I hit him a lot and I'd hit him again—"

He's crying and she doesn't know if it's anger or pain or hurt and she just—she can't even sit up straight, has her forehead pressed to the back of his hand and can't breathe, can't stop sobbing into his fingers, can't can't can't, and when he moves his cast arm to touch his fingers to her hair, to whisper, "Mom? Mom, please don't be mad at me, please, Mommy, don't be mad at me—"

Some sound rips out of her, she can't even process it, just feels the tearing at her vocal cords, and then Emma's arms are around her, pulling her into her lap but not away from their son, and somehow, somehow, that brings her back. "I'm not mad," she manages to get out, and Emma rubs small circles on her back. "I'm not mad, Henry, I could—I'm not mad, I promise."

"But—"

"Later, Henry," Emma murmurs. "Just—keep telling Mulan what happened."

"Was this the first time Teddy made threats like that?"

She can't stop the tears, but they're quiet, non-intrusive, absorbed immediately by the blankets. She can't let go of his hand, either, can't loosen her grip on it even though she knows she should.

"No," Henry answers, and his voice is still shaking.

"How many times before?"

"Once. Maybe twice."

"The other... altercations that have happened. Were there threats against you or your mother involved in those?"

"Yeah. Some of them."

"Which ones?"

"The ones where I hit first."

Emma's whole body flinches, and the movement carries through her own body, shakes the bed slightly. Henry sucks in air between his teeth, but he's still got his fingers against her hair and his hand in hers, and—oh, *God*.

"All right. I have what I need for the preliminary report. Mayor Ladd and District Attorney Joseph will want to speak to all of you later today to follow up." There's an awkward beat of silence. "Sheriff, when you have a minute..."

"Yeah," Emma says hoarsely. "Five minutes."

The door clicks shut, and the room is still and quiet and she's still crying silently.

"Regina," Emma whispers, right against her neck. "Come back, babe. Come back."

"Mom?"

"He needs you right now. Please come back."

"Mom?"

She lets Emma pull her back, slightly, but doesn't let go of Henry's hand and Emma doesn't make her, just holds her. "Come back," she whispers again, and Regina tries.

She tries, and tries, and tries, and when she finally feels like she can breathe again, she lifts her head from Emma's shoulder, turns to look at Henry. He's staring at her, wide-eyed and worried and so clearly worn out from just this half-hour of activity. "I love you," she says, and he starts to smile. "I love you," she says again, and stands up, leans over the edge of the bed and presses a kiss to his temple, to his cheek, to the tears coming from his eyes again. "I love you, I love you, I love you."

He rasps it back, every time. "I love you, Mom. I love you."

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

“You okay?”

Even though Emma’s voice is rough—scratchy, strained—Regina keeps her eyes on Henry, keeps her hands clasped around his. “No,” she says quietly, and Emma’s warm chapped lips brush the back of her neck.

“Talk to me?”

“No,” she says again, but leans into her arms anyway.

Chapter Notes

Wow, four months later...

When Emma comes back into the room, badgeless, Henry is asleep, knocked out from exhaustion and an ample dose of painkillers. Regina worries about the dosage. Even with the little bit of muscle he’d put on lately, he’s slightly underweight—he always has been—and he’s got Emma’s metabolism and it would only take a little bit to be too much—

“You okay?”

Even though Emma’s voice is rough—scratchy, strained—Regina keeps her eyes on Henry, keeps her hands clasped around his. “No,” she says quietly, and Emma’s warm chapped lips brush the back of her neck.

“Talk to me?”

“No,” she says again, but leans into her arms anyway.

David and Snow bundle into the room just after visiting hours begin with shopping bags everywhere—hanging from Snow’s arms from shoulder to wrist, on the handles of David’s chair, in his lap, everywhere. Groggy and dry-mouthed, Regina nudges Emma awake, gestures towards the bags.

As always, Emma gets straight to the point. “The fuck?”

“It’s Christmas Eve!” Snow bursts out, and Regina pinches her eyes shut, feels Emma move a placating hand to her waist. “And hospital taupe is not a holiday color.”

A glance towards Henry shows that he’s still fast asleep. “Snow, what absolute idiocy—“

“We brought decorations,” David interrupts, and smiles at them. “And all the presents.”

“What do you mean, all?” Emma groans, and rubs at her eyes. “Half of them are at the house —“

Regina looks between Snow and David for a moment, fully aware of which one of them learned the basics of lockpicking and thievery. And then she looks closer, because there’s a strange green tubing behind David’s head—

“We brought a tree, too. Artificial, but it gets big,” Snow offers, and there’s familiar, childish glee to her smile. If she tries, Regina knows she’ll find smugness somewhere in the expression—but she’s just so tired, and her baby is in the hospital on Christmas Eve, and maybe—

“Idiots,” Regina grumbles, and pokes Emma between the ribs. “You’re responsible for them.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Emma agrees, and her smile—bright like her father’s, slanted like their son’s—is almost catching.

It’s Snow who suggests it, first, and when Regina looks down to examine her clothing, she realizes that Emma’s jeans are spattered with mud up to the knee, and there are tears at her knees and the sleeves of her sweater. “Yes. You should change.”

“We should change,” Emma counters, and gestures to Regina. “You’re all dress-and-heels.”

She’s barely noticed, but now that it’s in the forefront of her mind, she feels completely restricted in the dark blue dress, and the idea of putting her heels back on—

“Why don’t you both take a break, go freshen up at home,” Snow prompts, attempting to toss silver tinsel over the exit sign. “We’ll be here decorating, after all.”

They look at Henry, then at each other. “I could use a shower,” Emma says softly, almost sheepishly, like she’s ashamed to admit it. And Regina gets it—the need to *be there*—but if he wakes, he won’t be alone, and if they’re to be any good to him when things start to get difficult, they’ll need to be good to themselves starting now.

“An hour, tops,” Regina acquiesces, and reaches for her shoes.

She's entirely certain that Snow meant they should freshen up separately, but in the parking lot Emma had just looked at her and something about the way her mouth tightened and her sad, sea-storm eyes—

"Thinking too hard," Emma murmurs, mouth against her shoulder, and Regina sighs, shakes her head slightly but lets Emma keep working the conditioner out of her hair. "I won't—you know I'll listen, right?"

"Yes. I know."

"Your hair smells good."

She smiles, leans her head back to rest against Emma's shoulder and keeps her eyes closed. "Yours does, too."

"I won't let anyone hurt you." Her spine stiffens, and Emma's arm, loose across her hips, tightens, but she stays silent. "You don't believe me?"

The water sputters for a moment, and with an irritated huff Emma reaches around her, hits the shower wall just above the hot water knob. The spray evens out again, a little bit warmer than before. "I hate this apartment," Regina stalls, and closes her eyes, lowers her face into the spray.

"I know," Emma whispers, and kisses behind her ear.

"I want to be angry with you."

It shouldn't come out as easily as it does. She didn't want it to come out that easily. "Why?" Emma asks, softly, so softly, warm wet skin to warm wet skin and both arms around her waist.

"You made him this way. You and your whole damn clan and your hero complexes and your complete inability to strategize rationally and—you made him this way and then you showed up and stayed and you're the Savior and of *course* he'd do this, he wants to be just like you and—"

Emma holds her up, holds her close, and she doesn't get that, doesn't get how Emma is *still here* when this is her own fault and—

"You're an idiot," Emma whispers, and Regina has to turn to look at her, because her voice sounds—*he wasn't supposed to be like us and a carbon copy and me?* "You're the one who taught him how to love. He learned how to be a hero from *you*."

She shatters and Emma gathers her up, holds her together through every sob, curls around her body on the floor of the shower stall and she doesn't know how long they sit there, how long

it takes her to realize that Emma is whispering just behind her ear. “Please,” she keeps saying, “please, please, please, you taught him and he taught me so please, please—“

Oh.

She isn’t even really sure what Emma’s asking—Emma probably isn’t sure what she’s asking—but anything Emma would ask of her, anything she has the power to give—“Okay,” she gets out, and presses her forehead to Emma’s cheek, holds there. “Okay.”

Outside of Henry’s hospital room, Regina moves to let go of Emma’s hand, but the attempt at discretion goes to hell because Emma slides her free hand across the small of Regina’s back and pulls her in close. Both of their eyes are still red and Emma’s nose is raw from wiping it with paper towels on the drive back, but when Regina looks at her, she smiles.

And then it’s easy to walk back in and nod in greeting to David, who’s halfway through assembling the tree, and to Snow, who stares at Emma’s hand on her hip and just keeps hanging paper snowflakes from the ceiling. “He hasn’t woken,” Snow tells them, and Emma nods and touches Henry’s uninjured arm, clutches it tightly for a beat before stepping back from the bed and going to help David with the tree.

Regina curls up in the chair closest to the bed, toeing off Emma’s Converse and wrapping Henry’s dark green hoodie around her whole body, and reaches forward to gently touch his chin, away from the stitches. There’s a little crust at his eyelashes and she reaches for a tissue on the side table, brushes over his eyes until the dirt is knocked loose and she can wipe it away from his cheeks.

He’s going to have trouble sleeping when he’s discharged, she already knows it. He can’t fall asleep unless he’s on his stomach or completely worn out and between his arms and his ribs, he won’t be either for a long time. She’ll have to make a note to talk to Gulliver about daily exercise or blue and red lights or—or something. Something that isn’t a sleeping pill. They learned that two years ago: Henry does not like sleeping pills.

A loud clang, followed by smaller jangling, makes Regina start and look over to the other side of the room, where David’s covering his face with one hand and Emma’s making that stupid, overexaggerated “Oops” expression with four of the tree tubes at her feet on the floor. “Sorry,” she stage-whispers, and Regina rolls her eyes but can’t help but smile, a little bit.

It’s half an hour and four more tree-related catastrophes before Henry starts to stir, just a little. “Henry?” Regina murmurs, and when his mouth twitches upwards, she can’t help but reach out again and wipe at the corner of his mouth.

“Mom,” he mumbles, and his good hand lifts slightly.

She grasps his fingers tightly and smiles and smiles and smiles. “Right here, sweetheart.”

His grip is strong and solid, like it used to be when they would walk from school to her office and he would share every thought he'd saved up for her. "Hungry," he gets out. "And thirsty."

A laugh—rough, short, but a laugh—bubbles out of her before she's realized. "Nice to see you, too," she says teasingly, and his tiny smile widens to a full grin, quick but bright. "There's water here, with a straw. Don't sit up, I'll bring it to you. Small sips, okay?"

"Kay," he agrees, and just looks at her while she brings the cup and straw over to him, places the tip of the straw against his bottom lip. "Thanks," he says softly.

Across the room, Emma looks up from a fully assembled tree, just in time to meet Regina's eyes and her smile.

A sense of *time* finally settles in when Nurse Fisher comes in and kicks them all out for thirty minutes, explaining to Henry that it's time to check his catheter and change the drain bag. For a second, Regina hesitates, and because she does, Emma hesitates, and Henry's face twists up with discomfort and embarrassment.

And then David says, "Listen, champ, I'll talk you through it, all you have to do is, when they pull—"

"Oh my god, please stop talking," Henry mumbles, cheeks turning bright red, and Emma laughs, takes Regina's hand and tugs her towards the door.

"Thirty minutes," Regina repeats, looking at Nurse Fisher, who nods at her reassuringly. Emma holds up her cell phone to show the time—a quarter past two—and finally, finally, Regina leaves the room.

Thirty minutes. What the hell is she going to do for thirty minutes when her baby—

"Hey, Regina," David says, and turns away from Snow to wheel closer to where she and Emma are lingering by the nurses' station. "Would you mind doing a coffee run? The elevators down to the cafeteria take forever to call and by the time one shows up, you're already so aggravated that the coffee just makes things worse and..."

He couldn't be more transparent if he tried, but Emma's smiling indulgently at him and that's enough. "Sure," Regina agrees, and takes a slow breath. "Anything special, or...?"

"No, just black, for both of us, they've got cream and sugar hoarded right behind those folders," and David points to a stack of purple-tabbed manila folders. The nurse at the desk glares at him, to which he only responds with a broad grin.

Behind him, Snow takes two steps closer, clutching the neck of her cardigan. "Thank you," she starts, and for a moment it looks as though she's going to try and be *kind* and try to *touch*

Regina, to offer comfort—

And then Emma is there, one arm out toward her father and blocking Snow from stepping closer. “Pony up,” she says, and Regina is grateful, grateful, so grateful.

David hands her a ten, grumbling about missed allowances, and Emma turns to start walking towards the stairs when Regina tugs on her hand, pulls her back. “You stay.”

“What?” Emma demands, alarm spreading across her face.

But Regina squeezes her hand twice, waits for her to focus again. “You stay, and if—if there’s anything, you call me.” Emma gestures back towards her parents, but she already knows, it’s there in the set of her mouth and the way her eyes go heavy and dark. “I’ll be quick. And I’ll bring you chocolate.”

Her kiss is expected and not. Entirely necessary for Regina to be able to even think of turning away from their baby boy’s room. It’s soft and patient and *home*, and she lingers for a moment with her nose to Emma’s cheek, just breathing. “Quick,” Emma murmurs. “Okay?”

“Quick,” she repeats, and lets go.

The cafeteria is practically empty. A few nurses are huddled together at a table in the sun, the steady murmur of their voices washing over Regina’s exhausted mind, and when one of them—face vaguely familiar, but then they all have that general haggard caretaker look—nods at her, smiles gently, she’s so tired that she smiles back. So tired that when the cashier tells her the total, she just blinks at him stupidly like the entire concept of money eludes her.

“On me,” comes a voice behind her, gentle and deep, and she’s startled by it, turns with a shudder. But it’s just Fred. Just Fred, handing a twenty to the cashier and putting a hand on her shoulder, smiling at her. “Merry Christmas, Regina.”

“Hi,” she manages to say, and she sees the panic in his eyes before she feels the salt stinging at the bridge of her nose. “Oh—God, I’m sorry—“

He hugs her. *Hugs her*. In public and on Christmas Eve and she just—she can’t. She can’t. She can’t be expected to, either, and somehow Fred understands that, releases her quickly and hands her his handkerchief with another smile. “S’okay. Been a rough couple of days, I know.”

She wants to say it’s been so much more than rough. That it’s been a rough few months, a rough few years, but these two days—

Two trays of coffee are pushed across the counter, and Fred grabs both of them after adjusting the sport bag slung across his body. “Listen, why don’t you go on ahead, I’ll do the elevator

thing and follow,” he suggests.

That’s when it clicks. Just Fred. Not Fred-and-Kathryn, just Fred. Four cups of coffee on one tray, three on the other, but just Fred.

Her lungs feel very, very small. “She’s—she’s upstairs?”

Chewing his lip, Fred nods once. “Her and Sam,” he says slowly. “But they won’t start without you, Regina. You know she wouldn’t.”

She knows. She *knows* she can trust Kathryn, but nothing she knows means anything anymore.

Somehow, Fred gets that, too, and nods her towards the stairs.

The moment she flings open the stairway door, there’s a rush of movement in the hallway, and the only person who meets her gaze is Kathryn: calm, clear eyed and giving her that particularly kind smile. “Merry Christmas, Regina,” she says.

She wants to ask what the hell happened. She wants to know why Emma’s hiding her face behind her hair and why David is plainly *fleeing* towards the men’s room and why the DA is just standing there looking completely uncomfortable and not because of his hideous sweater.

Instead, she smiles back and lets Kathryn take her hand, squeezes back. “Merry Christmas. Fred’s bringing the coffee.”

Kathryn smiles, and Sameer whispers something that sounds like *Thank God*. “Do you want to wait for—“

“No,” she cuts her off, and then glances over at Emma, still turned away. “I mean—I don’t, but Emma...”

Finally, finally, Emma turns to look at her, and as soon as their eyes meet—equally bloodshot, equally red-rimmed, but Emma, Emma, sweet sweet Emma has tear tracks shimmering on the right side of her face. “Now,” she agrees hoarsely, and looks away again.

She keeps her distance while Sameer leads them into an empty seminar room just outside the unit, and Regina wants to reach for her but holds back, resists until they’re seated next to each other and she can just reach over to the arm of Emma’s chair and touch her fingertips to a delicate wrist. And then Emma shifts her hand until they’re palm to palm and they can both breathe again, even if Emma still won’t look up, even if her grip is tight, tight, tight.

Regina wants to tell her *I’m here*, but Sameer clears his throat and shoves his hands back in his pockets and she knows, right then. “The council’s decided that this has to be handled by

Storybrooke only,” he says, and the apology in his voice makes Emma look up. “Unanimously.”

“No.”

“They want to brainstorm... other options,” Kathryn starts, and looks away when Emma starts shaking her head, “but after the holiday.”

“There was some... discontent with keeping the boys in custody over the holiday,” Sameer tells them, and Emma’s grip tightens viciously on her hand. “But they were pointedly reminded that Henry will be one of three total inpatients for the next week or so, so...”

“They can’t *do that*,” Emma says. “That’s not—they—those fuckers—Sam, *no*.”

It would be better, maybe, if Regina could feel Emma’s indignation, this clear sense of betrayal, but there’s nothing left in her. Certainly no positive expectations of anyone outside of this hospital. “So no charges filed, then. No record of what they’ve done.”

The room is silent for a moment; Sameer is the one who steps up. “For now... no record of it. Yes.”

She feels the outburst coming and moves away from Emma just when the anger explodes out of her. The table gets shoved away from both of them, and Emma’s chair flies back and tips, clatters to the floor. “My *son*,” she hisses, and the pain in her voice hurts right between Regina’s lungs, “is—they *broke him*, Sam, with fucking *lacrosse sticks*. They beat him down and they threatened to rape my—“ and she stops, looks at Regina helplessly. “They came for my family,” she finally whispers, and Regina reaches out to her, brushes their fingers together. “And you’re telling me that they get to just walk away?”

“*No*,” Kathryn answers, and steps away from the wall with such earnestness in her eyes that Regina almost, almost hopes. “No. They don’t get to walk away from this, Emma. I promise you.”

“Then tell me what the *fuck* I have to do to make them pay.”

“That’s what we’re here to ask you, actually.” Sameer rolls up the sleeves of his sweater, finally sits down across from Regina. “We can’t go this-world on this, and no one on the council thinks going old-world on this is an option, either.”

“What’s old-world.”

“Execution,” Regina says quietly, looking down at her lap.

Emma silently puts her hand to the back of Regina’s neck, lets her thumb stroke strongly along her hairline.

“So—so they want to take time to think about it. And we thought we’d ask you what—what justice would look like for you. For Henry.”

There's a half-syllable from Emma, and then silence, and Regina can't look up to see why she's stopped. Can't look up, at all, because—what justice would look like.

What *justice* would look like. As if she's ever even known.

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

This time, when they walk back into Henry's room, Regina makes no move to adjust their hands or their shoulders or the way Emma leans into her like she's the only important thing. Henry is awake, still, and smiling at something Fred is showing him on his iPad, and no one misses the way his eyes brighten when he sees them holding hands.

Chapter Notes

Slightly shorter, but considering it's three chapters of a single day... right.

When Emma keeps walking past Henry's room and around the corner, Regina hesitates, the foot of Henry's bed in her line of sight and Emma's boots fading from earshot. It's David who makes the decision for her, wheeling away from Fred and the coffees at the nurses' station and nodding at her. "Go," he says, and his gaze gets heavier. "She needs you. We've got him."

Another second, and she can barely hear Emma's footsteps. David nods again, and for once it takes no effort to trust him, to go after Emma with nothing else in her mind.

When she finds her, pressed into the corner of the stairwell with her fist over her mouth, all she can say is "*Emma*," in a voice that rises and cracks, and then Emma is in her arms and disintegrating. Regina holds her and holds her close and just murmurs her name like if she says it enough, she'll work magic one last time.

"I just want to *hold* him," Emma finally gets out through sobs, and Regina clutches her closer still. "Hold him and keep him *safe* and I never did, Regina, I never even—"

Slowly, slowly, she strokes down the ridge of spine between Emma's shoulder blades, touch firm and rhythmic. "It's okay. It's okay."

"No—"

"It's okay," she says again, stronger and with more conviction, and pulls back just enough to look Emma in the eye, to press their foreheads together just to make her *see*. "You're here now. You can now. Hold him now. It's okay."

Those sad, sea-storm eyes close on her—can't hold her gaze, can't keep the faith—and she lets Emma retreat, lets her pull back and press back into the corner. There's silence for a while, until she shifts her weight slightly and pulls the hoodie a little closer around her body; the movements catch Emma's attention, and for a full minute, she's subjected to an unreadable gaze as Emma takes in the shoes and the jeans and the hoodie and the undoubtedly tired lines of her face.

And then she speaks, and Regina wants to shove the words back in her mouth. "What if we just go."

Regina freezes. "*What.*"

Emma's voice is hoarse and the words are timid but she's not asking, not really. "Go. Let's just... go. Pack everything up and the second he's healed enough, we *go*."

Regina doesn't know if she's shaking her head or trembling, and there are so many words crowding to get out and she's terrified to speak because—*no*.

"Start fresh, Regina. New town, new life. New names, if you wanted. Whatever you want." There's a stillness to Emma, now, a calmness, and when she slips her hands into the hoodie pockets to hold Regina's, she even—oh, she *smiles*. "Just someplace... someplace where I'm your girl, and you're my lady, and he's our son, and that's all anyone will ever know—"

All the words start at once and Regina chokes, a single unintelligible gasp before she wrenches her hands away. "You want to *run*."

"It's not—" Emma starts, but it doesn't matter because Regina *knows* what this is.

"You want to run. Now. You want—"

"With you!" And then Emma is holding her, kissing her sweetly, saying so many things—"With you. With him. *Us*. It's not running if it's *us*. It's not, it's—it's being *safe*, Regina, you and him, being *safe*. You see that, right? You get it. You know."

She's crying again. Sweet, strong Emma, weeping in her arms and not even realizing it. "We don't run, Emma," she murmurs, and Emma starts to protest, but she touches the tear tracks on one pale cheek and shakes her head. "This is *my town*. This is Henry's *home*. It's his park and his school and his diner and his first skinned knee, and the ice cream parlor that knows cookie dough in the cone—"

"And mint chocolate chip on top," Emma finishes, and she's sobbing harder.

"And it's your home, too, isn't it?" she asks softly, and kisses one closed eye, sighs against her brow when she feels Emma's hands tighten on the back of the hoodie. "Everything you ever went looking for."

"Don't need it."

"Still deserve it," she whispers, and when Emma crumples she holds on, and holds strong.

This time, when they walk back into Henry's room, Regina makes no move to adjust their hands or their shoulders or the way Emma leans into her like she's the only important thing. Henry is awake, still, and smiling at something Fred is showing him on his iPad, and no one misses the way his eyes brighten when he sees them holding hands.

"Ma, come look at this," he says, and there's still a thickness to his words, that strange semi-lisp, but—maybe it's slightly less. Maybe she's too hopeful, but maybe it's slightly less.

"If it's that damn fox song," Emma starts, and stays where she is.

Henry laughs—softly, lightly, but it's laughter. Real laughter. "No, I promise. It's this final seven seconds of a game. You gotta see it."

Emma hesitates again, and Regina gently pushes her towards their son, lets go of her hand with an exaggerated "Ugh, football," which fools absolutely no one.

"Here, Ma, you can fit up here with me, we've got a whole queue," Henry says, and pulls some of the monitor leads over his head to leave a clear space on his right.

For a moment, Regina can't believe it—can't trust that their boy could be so intuitive—but then Emma's kicked off her Tims and wedged herself into that tiny open space on the bed, lying on her side and trying to prop herself up on her elbow, and Henry's meeting Regina's eyes with that kind, knowing smile and she believes. She believes, so much.

"Mom? You gonna watch with us?"

With a knowing smirk, Fred gets out of his chair and gestures to the now open space next to the bed. "Come on, you fair-weather fan. Join the fun."

"I am not a *fan* of anyone. I prefer winning teams," she retorts. There's considerably less dignity in stalking over to a chair in a hodgepodge of her little family's clothes than in her typical business wear, but for the familiar, fondly-aggravated smile on Henry's face, she'll risk indignity.

"Ever heard of 'rooting for the underdog'?" Emma drawls, and she's got an arm around Henry's shoulders, just slightly hugging him.

The automatic speech on the nature of advantage in the NFL fails her. Just completely vanishes off the tip of her tongue, because Henry snorts, and shakes his head—gently, gently. "Winning is a perpetual state of being," he recites, almost like a reflex, and when Emma glares up at her, she smiles.

Kathryn sees him first. Or, rather, Kathryn reacts first, because Regina simply stares blankly at Michael Tillman, hovering in the doorway with a red box in his hands. “Michael, you can’t be here,” she says—snarls, really, and is there more room for gratitude in Regina’s heart? There must be; it rises up as the only feeling she can comprehend while Kathryn tries to corner Michael and back him away from the door.

But Michael’s locked in place, looking at Henry with horror. “I didn’t know,” he whispers, and behind her, Emma hisses. “Oh, God, kiddo, I didn’t know—I’m so sorry, Henry. I’m so sorry.”

“Michael,” Snow says, and takes him by the arm, “come on.”

“Let me explain,” he starts, but then stops, shakes his head. “I—I just didn’t know. I didn’t think—Nick, he’s not—“ and he stops again.

And this time, he looks straight at Regina, and she wishes he wouldn’t. Wishes he would just *go* and take all of this... this *thing* with him. Wishes he wouldn’t look at her like he can see how hard she’s trembling. She wishes, oh so fiercely, that she could wrap Henry and Emma up in her arms and take them away, where no one can ever get to any of them ever again.

“I’m sorry, Your Majesty,” Michael says, and this time Emma plainly growls, and gets off the bed, and Regina trembles and trembles and trembles. “I’m so, so sorry.” He holds out the red box in his hands, and in the full light of the room she can see that it’s wrapped in red paper, with a silver bow. “Kiddo, we got this for you a few weeks ago. Me and Ava picked it out. It’s just one of those hats, with the animal ears and the flaps, but you said you wanted one so...”

No one moves, and Henry says nothing.

Nodding again, Michael crouches to leave it on the floor. “If you don’t—they do clothing donations, here,” he says, and with nothing in his hands he looks helpless, and lost.

She wonders if anyone else sees him like that.

“I’m sorry,” Michael says again, and lets Snow pull him away.

Behind her, Henry takes a deep breath, and then another, and then calls out in a voice that sounds so much like his ten year old self. “Mr. T!”

She has to hold on to the arms of her chair, because she can hear it in his voice. Her sweet, sweet boy—he can’t be real. He can’t possibly be real.

“Merry Christmas,” Henry says clearly, and strongly. And then, softer, “Tell Ava I said hey.”

Across the room, David smiles, just for a second, and Regina stares at the corner of his mouth so that she doesn't look at Michael, so that she doesn't see the way his whole face lights up with the reflection of her baby boy's grace. "Merry Christmas," Michael says, and is gone.

In the end, it's Emma who kicks everyone out, Emma who hits her limit for civility and friendliness. There is a brief moment where Regina thinks that David will yell back, will get in her face and demand to stay because they're *family*—she can see his lip curling, his shoulders locking—but all he says is, "You sure you won't need backup, baby girl?"

It hits her, later, when they've both kissed Henry good night and of course played along just so he could sleepily murmur *good night, John-Boy*, why David caved. Why Snow caved, even after Michael showed up. Why they all agreed to wait until eleven or noon to come back. "Did you mean to call him Dad?" she murmurs when they are curled together on the cot, and Emma sighs, keeps running her fingers through Regina's hair.

"No. It just came out." Her breathing hitches again, and Regina slips a hand underneath her shirt, strokes just above her navel and then waits with her palm flat and heavy on Emma's belly. "Fuck. He's gonna think—I'm such an asshole."

She pinches, just slightly, and tilts her face up to lightly, lightly kiss the corner of Emma's mouth. "Not so much."

"Biased." But Emma's hand resumes its steady pace through her hair, oddly synchronized with the beeping monitors. "The hat is cute."

"If you think bear ears on a fourteen year old boy are *cute*."

"Can it, Regina, you think everything he does is cute. He could wear creepy clown makeup every day and you'd think it was cute."

The only thing she can think to say is that clowns *are* cute, which is a lie not worth the bickering it would lead to. "Yes, well. Coping strategies for changing diapers. I *know* my perception is skewed. You're the weirdo who thinks panda hats are normal."

"They're not just *normal*, Regina. They're *awesome*."

"Idiot," she murmurs, and kisses Emma's neck.

They're quiet for a while, Emma shifting slightly to set one foot free of the blankets, and eventually she's so still that Regina thinks she's drifted off until she takes a deeper breath. "I didn't get you anything."

Thrown, Regina says nothing, but spreads her hand wide, traces the line of Emma's last rib with her thumb until the oddly glittering reflection of the power indicators reminds her of the decorations. "Emma, *linda*, don't—"

“I had a whole plan,” Emma says in a rush. “Because we were gonna do the day at my parents’, right? So—I had a whole plan. When it was all over, I was gonna take you home, open a real expensive bottle of wine that would still taste like rotten grape juice to me, and then just... pamper the shit out of you. Foot rub and bubble bath and massage and candles and oils and the whole deal.”

She will *not* laugh, she will *not* laugh. “Yeah?” she says, and it’s too late; her smile is in her voice.

But Emma just smiles back, hugs her a little closer. “Yeah,” she mumbles, and her breath is warm against the shell of Regina’s ear. “And then when you were all relaxed and jelly-legged—“

“Jelly-legged?” she interrupts, but Emma just shushes her.

“All relaxed and jelly-legged, I was gonna lay you back—he’s knocked out, right? He can’t hear me?”

She can’t help the giggles that rise up, and when Emma gives a quick but gentle tug to her hair, she full-out laughs, tries to get out *a little late* but Emma kisses her, kisses her, kisses her. “Lay me back and?” she finally prompts, grazing her mouth over Emma’s upper lip.

It’s how she feels the bright, smug grin, how she knows to start laughing even before Emma opens her mouth and—softly, softly—drawls out, vaguely melodically, “*Pour your sugar on me.*”

When her giggles have finally subsided—most buried in the crook of Emma’s neck, some tucked into her mouth with a flick of a tongue—and the niggling panic that maybe Henry’s dosage is too high (because surely even morphine wouldn’t let him sleep through two madly giggling mothers?) has abated with the help of his stats flashing onto the screen, she props herself up on her elbow to make sure Emma can see her eyes. “I would have loved that.”

“Yeah?” Emma asks, but there’s no real uncertainty in her voice.

“Yeah,” Regina confirms anyway, and kisses her sweetly. “Raincheck?”

Emma nods, and kisses her back, tugs her closer so she relaxes onto the cot again. “You,” she murmurs, and they both smile.

“You,” Regina echoes, and closes her eyes.

Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

It doesn't feel like Christmas but they all try anyway. Some of them harder than others.

Cold feet wake her up. Her feet, being very cold, and abruptly so. She whines a little, tries to find where the blanket went with just her toes, but when she gets nothing she reluctantly opens one eye to see Emma's free leg—the other one completely wrapped up in blankets—thrown over both of hers, with the flipped up blanket trapped between their shins.

Idiot.

She realizes that she's said it aloud when a snicker from her left catches her attention, and she looks up and back to see Henry, already awake and with the bed propped up as far as he's allowed. The window shades are up and even though there's no direct sunlight, the entire room is bright, and for a second Henry looks whole, and innocent, and something close to happy.

"Morning," he says, smirking, and she remembers why she's awake at all.

"Morning," she grumbles, and tries to gently shove Emma's leg off of her.

Henry watches—she can tell by the amused huffs when her attempts at gentleness only lead to Emma hitching her leg higher and the blanket edge getting further away—and after a moment she gives up, shoots Emma's slack-muscled face a glare before looking back at him and his wide, wide smirk—which softens the longer she looks at him. "I didn't think it would feel like Christmas," he says quietly, and his smile is brilliant. "But I'm still the first one up, and you still need coffee and your slippers."

It doesn't feel like Christmas; they are not at home, he is not in superhero pajamas and jumping on her bed to wake her up, everything smells like disinfectant and not nutmeg and cinnamon and fir and fire.

Then again, that hasn't been Christmas for years.

The important things: he is here, and he is smiling, and she is here, and no one is coming to take either of them away. He will be surrounded by people who love him, and he has presents, and somehow, somehow, she's found people who love her, too.

"Move the leads, sweetheart," she says, and wiggles out from Emma's grasp. "Tradition is tradition."

When he beams at her, she feels it all the way to her very cold toes. “Comics and cuddles and cocoa?”

“Or coffee,” she amends, and grins back at him before lowering the railing, climbing onto the bed and settling into the narrow space on his right. “But definitely cuddles.”

His nose crinkles slightly—direct from Emma—and he leans into her, forehead knocking against her cheekbone. “I won’t get too big for this, right?” he asks softly, and she has to remind her lungs to stay open, remind her heart to keep going.

Kissing his forehead, though, is reflexive, automatic. “Not a chance.”

It doesn’t feel like Christmas but they all try anyway. Some of them harder than others.

In other words, David shows up in a Santa Claus onesie with cardboard sleigh cutouts taped to his chair and Regina laughs so hard that Emma has to pick her up off the floor, but she’s laughing just as hard so they’re mostly just a laughing tangled mess on the tiles, and David looks so damn *proud* of himself that it’s easy, easy, easy to welcome him and Snow—far more demure in a red sweater dress but maybe matching just enough, maybe trying a little more than she needs to—into the room.

So Regina tries. She doesn’t overdo it—it’s not like she *hugs* the woman—but she smiles, and takes her coat, and even looks her in the eye to say *Merry Christmas* while doing it. And of course there’s a moment when it isn’t enough—when Kathryn and Fred are both greeted with warm hugs and laughter and those particular half-air, half-cheek kisses reserved for *family*—and Snow’s eyes are dark and hungry and mournful and for that one moment, the old, reflexive guilt rears up in her gut.

But then Emma pulls her into her lap and demands that Henry start dictating present dispersal with both arms low across her hips, and Regina closes her eyes, listens to Henry’s stronger, semi-man voice and focuses on the scent of Emma’s hair and the way warmth comes off her body in currents.

“Thank you,” Emma murmurs against her neck, while Henry repeatedly describes the four presents with blue snowflake wrapping paper and Fred repeatedly pretends to not understand.

She’s not above acknowledging her own efforts, but doesn’t do more than hum softly, steal a kiss quickly. “Lavender oils to de-stress.”

And Emma laughs, holds her closer, murmurs mockingly, “Yes, dear.”

Regina smiles.

It's the smiles on Henry and Emma's faces that let her do it. That they can smile at all when they've just had their first Christmas *together* in a hospital room—it makes everything simple.

So she crumples up some of the ripped wrapping paper and stuffs it into the trash can just behind Kathryn, and lingers there for a moment, watching David reverently remove and refold his brand new jersey so that the “Charming” across the back faces up in the gift box, watches Henry and Fred high-five and Emma laugh and nudge Snow into actually smiling. “Kathryn,” she says softly, and those calm, clear eyes meet hers with understanding. “I want their lives.”

It feels like nothing. She should feel shame, hot in her skin and at her throat, or coldness, or fury, but it feels like nothing. Just four words: simple, direct.

Kathryn, good, good Kathryn, nods.

Nothing changes. The world doesn't crack open with rage or howling betrayal. Henry smiles at her every morning; Emma kisses her neck every night. She listens to the doctor's updates and waits to hear it, waits to hear how Henry will pay the price again but he doesn't. He doesn't. It's always, always, small steps towards healing.

A few of Henry's friends trickle in for visits in between Christmas and New Year's Eve. Ava comes every day and barely looks up from the floor, but her intermittent mutters make Henry laugh. Even though every bone in Regina's body is stiff with restraint, she holds her tongue—too afraid, perhaps, to judge anyone else's penance. Maybe too jaded.

Restraint doesn't hide anything from Emma, though, and when they steal an hour in the loft on New Year's Eve, she doesn't say a word about the way Regina touches her, crystalline and heavy. She just lets her in and in and in until everything is safe and light again, until everything is as simple and clear as her hands in Regina's hair and her soft breathy moans between kisses. Until they are just looking at each other and Emma is tracing *xs* and *os* over the dip of her waist and Regina can believe—must believe.

“Half dollar for your thoughts,” Emma murmurs, and, when Regina frowns, shrugs one shoulder. “They look pretty big.”

She curls in close, closer, kisses the softest skin on the underside of Emma's jaw. “I talked to Kathryn.”

“Ah.”

“That's it?”

Emma's nails rake lightly over the dimples at the base of her spine. "That's it."

She's silent, because faith like this—but Emma's eyes are bright, bright, bright. "I keep waiting to pay the price."

Emma's lips, whisper-soft over her eyebrows, graze her cheekbone on the way to her earlobe. "Not this time."

"How do you *know*—"

Emma kisses her, gently. "Not this time," she says again, and Regina believes.

Emma insists on watching the Rockin' New Year's Eve special, "even though Carson Daly's a tool," and sits with her toe-socked feet propped up on the foot of Henry's bed, a bowl of popcorn in her lap—separate from Regina and Henry's supply, lesson learned after their first movie night—and eyes glued to the TV. Which is why, when Henry—increasingly introspective as the day's gone on—says "Moms?" in a small, small voice, Regina is surprised at how quickly Emma flicks the remote to turn the TV off, at how fast her feet hit the floor, at how *ready* she is.

Henry's not. Ready, that is. He opens his mouth and closes it again so many times that fear wells up just behind her sternum, rushes through her ears with words like *can he breathe is he breathing please please baby don't stop breathing*.

"Did you guys have a New Year's thing?" Emma asks, and sets her popcorn aside, leans forward to rest her elbows on the edge of the hospital bed. "Before everything. Just the two of you."

Before everything. Her lungs are so full up with love that it rushes out of her in a laugh, pours out of her eyes and she wouldn't hold it back even if she could. Not when all of it can shine onto Henry and Emma and the way their smiles lean identically, just for her.

"Yeah," Henry answers, and threads his fingers with Regina's, looks at her with fondness, no fear. "Mom would send me to bed at like, eight—"

"Regina, what the *hell*."

She laughs, and Henry laughs, and he's smiling just for her, just at her. "Wait, wait, just listen. So I'd sleep until like, 11:30, when she'd come wake me up and we'd go downstairs and we'd pick out twelve grapes each, and then I'd get to dance around and sing along to whatever music I wanted, and make a ton of noise—we even had little noisemakers, every year—until the countdown started, and then—" and he stops, cocks his head slightly in confusion.

So Regina smiles at him, and just keeps looking at him and hoping that he sees, that he knows, that he understands. “And then as soon as there were twelve seconds left,” she continues, “I’d feed him a grape on every second—except for when you were very, very little. I’d mash the grapes up and give you a tiny spoonful every second. And that last year. You were ‘too big’ to be fed then.”

He looks absolutely stricken, and she wants to take it back, or change it so he *knows*.

“And then as soon as it hit midnight, we’d cheer and have an apple juice toast, and Henry got to stay up and celebrate any way he wanted. But the deal was, as soon as he yawned, it was off to bed.”

Emma laughs, and leans in a little closer. “How long did you last, kid?”

Henry doesn’t respond, still staring at Regina with something like dismay. “If you fed me, you couldn’t eat yours,” he whispers. “You never ate yours, Mom.”

All she can do is smile at him, but her eyes are wet and her smile is tremulous and she doesn’t know who’s holding whose hand tighter. “I did. After.”

“But—but it’s only lucky if they’re done by midnight.”

“It’s just a superstition, sweetheart,” she tries to say, but he shakes his head so furiously that she’s afraid he’ll hurt himself.

“*Nothing* is just superstition, Mom,” he whispers, and as soon as the first tears appear in his eyes, she wraps him up in her arms, holds him close and doesn’t know what to say, how to say it. “You never even tried, just so I could have mine.”

Emma’s hand, warm and rough, settles on her bare ankle, and she closes her eyes, hugs Henry harder, not too hard. “How could I ask for more luck when I had you?” she murmurs into his hair, and knows he hears her when his first sob breaks through. “Healthy, happy Henry. How could I ask for more?”

The hand on her ankle trembles, and Henry shivers, and it takes him a long, long time to take a full breath again. They wait for him; Emma’s free hand comes up to cover their intertwined ones and they wait and love him and wait.

And then he breathes again, one long deep breath to come back to himself, and she thinks it’s going to be okay. And then he speaks again, and—no. It’s not okay.

“I killed everyone, Mom. Everyone on Neverland. I killed them.”

Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

It's long past midnight when Henry gives in to exhaustion. Regina doesn't leave him, just shifts him slightly to relieve the pressure on her biceps, and when Emma draws the woolen blankets up over both of them, she reaches for her hand, squeezes tightly.

Emma holds on, and stares at her until finally the question rises out of her. "Is that—was that the right thing to say?"

"I have no idea," she whispers.

Chapter Notes

Some small nudges to the Rules of Magic that we are all just going to pretend are canon, because goddamnit, *someone should be thinking of these things*.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"No, sweetheart," she whispers. "You didn't."

"I *did*," he chokes out, emphatic and angry. "I stabbed Pan, I did that."

Emma's voice, low and gentle, comes closer, and Regina feels the weight of her arms settle around them, her halo of salt and pine and warmth. "Yeah, that's true," she says, and raises Henry's face with a finger under his chin, smiles at him gently. "But that fuck had you kidnapped and imprisoned and kind of wanted to eat your soul, or something—"

"You're not *listening*!" The force of his yell makes him wince, clutch briefly at his still-wrapped ribs, and Regina loosens her hold on him and goes to check but Emma's hand on her arm stops her, holds her back. "You're not—I need you to *listen*," Henry whispers.

She looks at Emma, feels her vision darkening and blurring. "We're listening, baby. We're here."

He cries. Openly and aching and it feels like her ribs are cracking every time he sucks in a breath and she can't—she can't make it *stop*. "I took the dagger and I made him tell me how to make it all stop. And then I did it, exactly like he said. Pan, at the tree, with the Dark One's dagger. I pinned his shadow back to his body and it made it all *stop*. I took all the magic out of Neverland. I put Gramps in that chair and I hurt you, Ma, *I did that*."

It takes her so long to make sense of it, to thread the pieces together, to remember the concentric rings of bodies and how everything and everyone surrounded that tree. To remember how, when she and Emma finally made it to the top of the ridge—Emma, gritting her teeth through the pain—there'd been two small boy bodies lying on the ground. Henry, unconscious. Pan, dead, blank-bladed dagger through the heart. And further back: Rumpelstiltskin, a mere man again, and withering with every breath; Hook, twisted and decaying like all the Lost Boys, three hundred years catching up at once.

“We don’t blame you, Henry,” Emma says, and the way she is still gentle with her voice and her hand on Henry’s shoulder—Regina is grateful, so grateful. “You couldn’t have known —”

Henry shakes his head again, and looks at her like if he thinks it hard enough, she’ll understand it. And, oh, God, she thinks she does, but—but she knows the rules. There are *rules*.

“Henry,” she says, so softly. “Listen to me very carefully, all right?” And she waits until he meets her eyes again, until she can see him again. “There’s no power in the dagger unless there’s darkness in the bearer. That’s the rule. You couldn’t control the Dark One unless there was already darkness in you. So whatever you think you made him do—that’s how he *worked*, Henry. He made you think it was you when in reality—“

But Henry’s shaking his head, eyes still locked with hers, and she starts to truly understand. “I know,” he whispers. “I knew. I made him tell me everything.”

His whole jaw is trembling and he’s not a little boy, not anymore, not ever again. How long has he been so old? How long did he think he could carry this alone?

She should make him say it himself, but she doesn’t know how to be cruel. “Greg was you,” she says, and when Emma—Emma who’d found Greg’s body, Emma who’d whispered *don’t look don’t look you don’t want to see it don’t look*—doesn’t flinch, she knows they are all in this together.

Henry, Henry, her baby boy Henry—Henry takes a deep breath and nods and there are still tears streaming down his face. “They both were. I—I shot them both. Tamara and Greg.” And then he closes his eyes, and his thin tiny body—too tall, now, getting lanky—trembles. “I shot them both.”

When they’d found Tamara—it came down to Regina, in the end. She’d expected no less, had been ready for murder from the moment she’d looked around an empty mine, but Tamara... Tamara had required something else from her, something she’d only learned she was capable of through Henry and his sweet, slanted smile.

From the way Henry says, “Tamara—Tamara went down first,” she knows he thinks the shot was fatal. “They didn’t realize I had the gun. Greg saw me first and he—he ducked. He tried to duck and I shot her.”

Emma had said *don’t look* for Greg but Regina was the only one who could look at Tamara. The only one who went to her side and touched her kindly. She’d quieted her cries of *please, please, it hurts, please* with a soft touch to her forehead, with a small pulse of magic to ease the pain. She’d looked at the wounds—two bullets to the gut, straight through—and even though it was far too late for magic or medicine or even miracles, she’d smiled at Tamara, who’d earned her wrath and nothing else, and told her it would be okay, that she’d be fine, just close her eyes. Rest now.

She closes her eyes and focuses on the weight of Henry’s head on her shoulder, on the tension in his fingers clutching at the material of her sweater, on the brush of Emma’s fingertips against her shoulder from where she’s clutching the back of Henry’s neck. Emma, who’d seen Greg’s body riddled by thirteen bullets, who’d dug him a grave as best she could, who hasn’t and wouldn’t recoil from Henry. “And then him,” Emma whispers, and her voice is striated and so sad, so sad.

“And then him,” Henry repeats, and she can feel his whole small body turning in on himself, turning against himself. “Until I knew—until I knew I could run and he wouldn’t come after me.” He scoffs and the choked loathing when he speaks again—all she can do is hold him. “Not that it—Pan got me anyway. But I thought—I thought I could make it. I thought I could last until you found me.”

Emma flinches, and Regina quickly shifts her hand to cover Emma’s, to press into her fingers, into the very edge of Henry’s hair, because they’d found him alive and whole and that had to count, that *had* to count. “You did make it,” she whispers. “You did.”

He’s still her boy, still her little boy, because she knows everything in his heart when he burrows further into her arms. “I *killed* them.”

Emma looks at her, then, and they could do it her way and tell him that he did what he had to do to stay alive, that it was about survival. They could.

“Yes,” Regina whispers. “You did.”

And Henry is quiet.

It’s long past midnight when Henry gives in to exhaustion. Regina doesn’t leave him, just shifts him slightly to relieve the pressure on her biceps, and when Emma draws the woolen blankets up over both of them, she reaches for her hand, squeezes tightly.

Emma holds on, and stares at her until finally the question rises out of her. “Is that—was that the right thing to say?”

“I have no idea,” she whispers.

Emma folds. Bends until her forehead is pressed against the back of Regina’s hand with silent tears falling hot against her fingertips. “If we’d kept the dust—you could do it, couldn’t you? Make him forget.”

But she doesn’t mean it. Regina knows she doesn’t mean it. “If he were like us,” she says softly, and turns her hand over, touches her thumb to the fresh tear on Emma’s cheek, “he wouldn’t feel like this.”

“I don’t *want* him to feel like this!”

Regina waits until she’s sure Henry is still asleep; he stirs slightly but his breathing evens out again. “And the alternative? Where there’s enough pain everywhere else to make this pain negligible? You wouldn’t wish that on him, Emma. Never.”

“I don’t want him to feel any pain,” Emma says helplessly.

“I know.” This time, when Regina touches her cheek, Emma turns into the contact, holds her hand there. “I know.”

She doesn’t know what time it is when she wakes; the room is that hourless, pre-dawn gray. There’s just enough light to see Emma, sitting in the chair on Henry’s left, head bent over her clasped hands, although it takes her longer to realize that Emma’s speaking, murmuring against his splinted forearm.

“I’m sorry. We should’ve been faster and worked harder and gotten to you sooner and I’m sorry, Henry, I’m so so sorry. I wish—I’d do anything for you to never have had to—I would’ve done it for you. I would’ve done it for you, I swear I would—“

Her voice breaks, and the room is quiet.

In the morning, Regina’s arm is numb and no one talks much while Nurse Fisher brings in breakfast for all three of them. But Emma—sweet, sweet Emma—steals Henry’s fruit cup while he’s struggling to cut his pancakes with a spork and there’s light in his eyes when he steals it back, a smile just starting for a moment. Just a moment, but it’s there.

She thinks of life *before*, when the light in his eyes never flickered and his smiles came as steadily as sunrise, when his darkest secrets were weightless. Of life *now*, when he watches joy and pain and she can see it soaking into his skin.

Of life *now*, when he tries to hold the weight of three worlds by himself just to show her kindness.

She reaches over and spears a piece of pineapple from his cup, kisses his cheek before feeding it to Emma with a laugh.

It isn't until Emma's hand covers hers, when they are sitting outside while Henry has his daily physical therapy appointment, that she can get real words out. "He's going to ask you to call Sam and Mulan," she says quietly, and Emma grips her hand tighter.

"Like hell."

"And you're going to do it."

"Like *hell*."

Carefully, carefully, she squeezes back, presses her thumb over Emma's black and silver ring. "You will."

Emma starts to speak, and then pauses, studies her for a moment. The wind's whipped color into her cheeks and chin, and when she looks like this—bright with cold, fired up, *open*—it makes Regina wonder how they took so long to get *here*. Here to the space between their palms. Here to side by side in the winter wind. Here to *our family*.

"That's a hell of a gamble, Regina."

"It's not a gamble." She knows better than to take offense to the word.

"Still."

She doesn't say anything more, because of course Emma is afraid, and distrustful. These years with a badge won't ever balance with seventeen years with nothing, ten years with *felon*. She doesn't say anything more, just lets them sit with it, with the wind whistling down through the courtyard.

Finally, Emma sighs and slouches lower on the bench, leans her head back and closes her eyes. "It was right there, the whole time. You know that, right? If we'd just *looked*. We would've known."

Regina frowns, turns slightly, further into the wind. "What are you talking about?"

“Greg’s wounds weren’t clustered. He had thirteen holes in him, all over his body.”

She has no idea what that means.

“When people shoot to get away, they shoot in bursts. Clusters of shots, all aimed identically, fired off in between running away. Greg’s... only three were together.” Emma won’t look at her, won’t open her eyes. “Three together, and ten paired off all over his body. Two in Tamara, thirteen in Greg. Fifteen bullets. That’s the whole mag.”

“What are you saying?” She whispers it because she doesn’t want Emma to say it. Emma shouldn’t say it. They don’t need it to be said.

Emma doesn’t say anything for a long time. “He watched you, when you were unconscious. Sponged off your burns. Fed you ice chips. Kept fussing with the blankets, trying to get you the best ones. Getting him to leave the apartment was—a fight. A fight.”

She doesn’t want to talk about that. She never wants to talk about that. It’s been put away with all the other years of her life she doesn’t talk about and she wants to keep it away.

“I thought it was Pan. I thought—that only Pan would—thirteen bullets, I thought it was Pan. But that was stupid, wasn’t it? When he’s ours like he is.”

“What are you *saying*,” Regina rasps out, and she thinks she’s shaking.

But Emma’s holding both of her hands now and finally looking at her and there, there, calm and clear and beautiful. There’s Emma. “I’m saying that I would have done it for him and I would’ve done another clip, too. I’m saying that I don’t want to call Sam and Mulan because I don’t think he did anything wrong.”

Gently, gently, she tugs her hands free of Emma’s, tucks a few loose blonde strands behind her ears, cups her cheeks, kisses her once, twice. “It doesn’t matter what we think,” she whispers, and feels Emma give in. “He needs to try.”

“What if—“

“Emma,” she whispers, and Emma is quiet. “He needs to try.”

Sameer, in another grotesque sweater, barely lets Henry finish his first sentence before he’s closing his portfolio and reaching for his coat. Henry trails off helplessly and watches him and Mulan get to their feet with wide, helpless eyes. “But—Mr. Joseph—“

“It is the decision of this council,” Sameer recites, toneless and bored, “that acts committed in other realms are not within the jurisdiction of Storybrooke and as such will not be investigated, pursued or prosecuted.”

“But that was about *before*—“

“Nope. Believe it or not, all that revising and arguing and revising, not a single phrase about when those other realms were accessed came up. Not one. Crazy bureaucracy, never manages to do the job right.”

Henry’s hands twist in his lap, and he’s biting his lip and looks so lost, so lost—Regina reaches out, but Mulan steps forward, crouches next to Henry’s chair and looks him square in the eye. “It doesn’t get lighter,” she says, “but you get stronger.” And then she smiles—kindly, brightly—and inclines her head slightly before getting to her feet again. “An honor as always, Mr. Mills.”

Emma, leaning against the wall, turns away with her fist over her mouth. Regina finally feels her hand connect with Henry’s shoulder, feels the tension and the way he’s struggling to breathe calmly, holds on until his hand comes up to cover hers, until his body is still again.

On the way out of the room, Mulan tugs Emma aside, digs the dull golden star out of her inside coat pocket and hands it back to Emma with a gentle smile. “Bring donuts when you come back in. No glazed.”

“Smartass,” Emma grumbles, but she holds onto Mulan’s fingers for an extra beat, and Regina can hear her trying to form a sentence.

Mulan cuts her off with a scoff, pulls her hand back slightly to form a fist, bumps Emma’s knuckles and then looks up, checking to see if she did it right.

Emma laughs, and nods at her, and keeps smiling.

Sunset is so early—it can’t be much past four—and Henry’s still sitting by the window, staring out into the courtyard. His face looks so much sharper, now, even from a month ago, and she’s sure that he managed to grow even while stuck in a hospital bed.

It takes her a moment to realize that he’s looking at her, now, just blinking at her quietly. “What is it, sweetheart?”

He looks at her for a few beats longer, takes a deeper breath. “I think I want to call Archie, tomorrow.”

She smiles for him. Always, always, for him. “All right. Tomorrow.”

About Tamara:

The show did Tamara wrong. Her character as treated by the narrative... it was a travesty, what the narrative put on Tamara. Let's not even get into her canon death.

It's important to me that you all understand that her story needs attention and rewriting and that I **did not do that here**. It didn't occur to me until too late that to treat Tamara right in this story would require revising most of her screen time in season 2—something that would then basically require replanning this whole story.

So, I did what I could for her within the confines of a story that already required that everyone in Neverland die, and tried to make sure that what mattered most about her, in the end, was her humanity.

The bar set by canon is already pitifully low, so—yes, this is kinder to her than canon, but it's not good enough. I know that, and I need all of you to know that, too.

If I write something that involves her again, I will do better. And I'm sorry I couldn't do that here.

Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

All of his attention is on his phone, so there's no chance of actually getting answers from him. She rolls her neck, tries not to grimace as it cracks, and pushes away the blankets all at once, goes to put her feet into her flats and freezes with her feet hanging over the edge of the cot.

On the morning of the sixth, Regina wakes up to low murmurs and intermittent shushing noises, a few snickers and the squeak of sneakers on tile. Ignoring it only works for a few minutes; without the soft furnace of Emma's body curled around her, it's impossible to stay contentedly drowsy on the cot.

She cracks one eye open and sees only Henry, sitting in the chair by the window, wrapped in the heavy woolen blanket and tapping away at his phone. "Sweetheart?"

He grins without looking up. "Morning, Mom. Hold on, I almost beat Joker."

She snorts slightly, pushes up onto her elbows and looks around the room. There's no one else there. "Were the nurses in?"

"For a bit."

"Just now?"

"Mmm."

All of his attention is on his phone, so there's no chance of actually getting answers from him. She rolls her neck, tries not to grimace as it cracks, and pushes away the blankets all at once, goes to put her feet into her flats and freezes with her feet hanging over the edge of the cot.

Both of her shoes are filled with shreds of green paper, and in her right shoe are the keys to the house. In her left, the keys to the Benz.

She looks up, not understanding, and Henry's grinning at her, wide and proud. "They have pretty strict rules about grass on the ward, so Izzy improvised."

The correction to *Nurse Fisher* dies in her throat, because then she remembers the date, and she looks at the keys again and *oh*. "You—you're cleared? We can bring you home?"

His smile turns shy, and brilliant. “Yeah. Doctor G was gonna tell you yesterday, after PT, but I asked him if I could.”

The floor is cold and probably dirty and her feet are bare, but she goes to him to hug him and kiss him and shake him for making her wait a whole night, and it doesn’t matter at all.

Emma meets them at the house—or, rather, in the driveway, bounding off the stoop and throwing open the passenger door before Regina’s even put the car in park. “Aww, man, you’re still braced,” she whines, but takes his hand to steady him as he gets out of the car. “Can we get you a cane? With flames on it?”

“Ma, can I get in the door.”

“Not if you won’t get a flame cane. Oh! A swordstick! We could totally get you a swordstick.”

They’re both grinning the same way, conspiratorial and crooked, and it almost doesn’t matter that Henry’s arm is in an electric blue cast. “Mom, can I get a swordstick?”

“Can we get in the door?” she asks, but there’s no bite to it, not when Emma’s eyes are so soft and happy with Henry’s good arm slung around her shoulders. “Go on in, let me grab our things.” They both hesitate before doing as she says and she loves them for it, even if watching Henry hobble up the walk and rely entirely on Emma to get him up the two steps makes something sour twist up in her gut. They don’t have a lot of stuff—one of Emma’s gym bags and one of her own battered totes—so she’s able to follow them in quickly, manages to catch the tail end of Henry’s surprised yelp from the den and the coordinated laughter of Fred and David while she toes off her flats at the foot of the stairs.

A gentle hand at the base of her spine and the weight of the gym bag lifting from her shoulder makes her turn, right into Emma’s one-armed embrace, and the kiss is automatic and comfortable and quick and *home*. “Hi,” Emma murmurs, and kisses her again.

“Hi,” she whispers back, and holds them there, one hand hooked over Emma’s belt and the other laying flat on her collarbones, holds them there and breathes in. “How was your shift?”

“Fit a whole bear claw in my mouth.”

“Tax dollars hard at work,” she sighs, and smiles against Emma’s mouth. “Any trouble setting up?”

“Nuh-uh. Moved the couch to the living room, against the back wall. Fred helped me bring the bed downstairs.” And then, sheepishly, Emma adds, “Might need to touch up the finish on the bannister.”

She can't even be mad. "Mmm. But no trouble."

"Nope. None at all."

"Idiot." One more kiss, and she starts to move away, stops when she realizes there's no weight on her shoulders at all. Emma's got the tote and the gym bag and is already crossing the foyer towards the back of the house. "Emma, *linda*—"

"Go on in, I'll take care of these. Laundry room, right?" She hasn't stopped moving, though, and only pauses long enough to check for Regina's confirming nod before winking and backing through the kitchen door. There's a burst of scent in the air—rich, herb-heavy, meaty—and she catches a glimpse of a stack of plates on the counter, flatware piled on top, before the door swings shut.

Home. Good.

Emma snores when she sleeps on her stomach—almost like purring, and if Regina wasn't sure it would lead to the dumbest fight ever, she would tell her so—but softly, so it's hardly disruptive tonight. No, what's disruptive is the absence of beeping monitors and footsteps in the hallway and clicking pens and charts and low murmurs from night shift nurses. What's disruptive is a real mattress and enough space between her body and Emma's to make it feel like—

Regina breathes out slowly, reaches out to check the temperature of the heating pad on Emma's back—because of course the idiot would cop to property damage but not to pain, no, why would she *ever* do that—and lets her hand ghost upwards to the dip between Emma's shoulder blades, lets her fingers comb through the ends of that thick, thick hair. The purr-snoring hitches, just slightly, before settling again, and Regina lets her whole mind close in on the tempo of her fingers, lets the fear and the stress and the tension start to flow out of her body.

Because it's okay. It's okay. Henry is home, and Emma stayed, and it's okay. Henry is home and Emma took care of everything and it's okay. More than okay.

Her phone chirps from the nightstand, and she rolls back to reach for it, freezes when Emma whines softly before snuffling and burying her face further into the pillow. She's smiling when she picks up her phone, almost stays smiling as she reads a text from Henry that just says *Mom?*

Be right down, she types out in a rush, and she's pushing the blankets away from her immediately, almost has her legs free when Emma takes a deep breath, moves slightly. "R'g'na?"

“Shh,” she murmurs, and touches Emma’s check lightly. “I’m just gonna go check on him.” Emma starts to push up, to turn over, mumbles something like *come with* before Regina can press down on her shoulder to keep her where she is. “No, *linda*. You rest. Keep the heat on.”

“Mmka,” Emma gets out, and hums a little when Regina brings the blankets back up to her neck.

Grabbing Emma’s Saints hoodie from the foot of the bed, Regina slides into her slippers and carefully nudges the door open wider, just wide enough for her to slip into the hallway. She manages the stairs in two ingrained bursts of movement and crosses straight over to the den. The bed from the guest room is there, positioned in a direct line with the tv, and the coffee table with the remote caddy is now lengthwise against the far side of the bed, within easy reach for Henry. It’s not what she wanted—he *is* supposed to move around, just not too much—but his laughter when Fred explained how they’d made him a “broke-down man cave” to recover in, his laughter, his laughter made her ease up, even on the name, even on the PS4 that most certainly does not belong to him hooked up to the tv.

She hovers in the doorway, trying to assess before she actually comes in, but Henry’s just propped up on pillows and gazing back at her. “Cocoa?” she asks, and he smiles, nods shyly.

She hurries through the preparation—as much as she can, because proper cocoa is *proper* cocoa—but Henry joins in her in the kitchen after two minutes, anyway, burrowing into his old robe as he limps in. The robe is absurdly small on him now, sleeves ending just below his elbows, and she has to look away, stare into the pot of boiling milk and not look at his sleeves. He has a newer robe—bought in that six month gap when he didn’t live with her and she had to do things like buy him new clothes and new shoes and keep his favorite snacks stocked in order to keep believing—but he wears this one. She doesn’t know why. He might not, either.

Henry’s prepped mugs for them both with cinnamon in the bottom of his and a peppermint in the bottom of hers, and when she’s poured and stirred both mugs, he leads the way back to the den, climbs back onto the bed and settles in before taking one mug from her so she can settle in next to him. And then they’re quiet, sipping intermittently and letting the steam curl up into their eyes and noses.

Her cocoa is long gone when he finally speaks. “Are you happy?”

Nothing about his face tells her anything about where the question is coming from or why now or why here or why like this; his eyes are soft and bright and his mouth is calm and even his mouth, his mouth which has always given him away, his mouth whose shape used to tell her why he was crying, even his mouth is calm.

“Henry?”

“With things. With... with how we are, now. With how things are. Are you happy?”

She looks at him again, and for longer, and all she can see is the way his eyes were always bright for her, even when he was so small he could barely see her. “If I say unbearably so,

will you know what I mean?”

Her boy, her boy, her beautiful baby boy, her boy smiles at her, and leans into her arms, sighs quietly. “So this is—this is for real?”

And then she understands, and holds him closer for just a moment, just a heartbeat or two. “Oh, sweetheart—“

“I want you to be happy, Mom,” he whispers, and his good hand tightens its grip on her sweatshirt. “I want you to be *happy*—“

He cries, harsh and heavy into her shoulder. She struggles, with his still-healing ribs, with his injured arm, with his weak ankle, to soothe him the way she always has: with strong and solid contact, with gentle touches and unwavering affirmations of love. They make do with his arm cradled in his own lap and Regina dotting kisses to the very top of his head (because he’s small enough, small enough, still small enough for that). “Healthy, happy Henry,” she murmurs, and feels her breath give out with every word. “And look what joy you’ve brought with you.”

Her little boy clings to her harder, for just a little bit longer.

Ava is in with Henry when Archie comes to the house for the first appointment of the week, and there’s a moment of fraught silence as she tries to figure out how to maneuver Archie in and Ava out and keep Henry’s privacy and protect his friendships.

It’s a moot point in an instant as Henry, in the new walking boot, hobbles out of the den and into the foyer with Ava right behind him. “Hey, Archie,” he says, and his voice is so casual, so *low*. “Can we do the living room? Feels stale in the den.”

Ava’s eyes are downcast but her jaw is set and if there’s anything Regina knows better than that expression—

No. No.

Archie opens the door to the living room and smiles, waves Henry in ahead of him. “Don’t trouble yourself, Regina,” he says quietly, with a grin that’s just shy of knowing, a grin of blatant fondness. “I’ve got water, and he’s—“

“I’m fine, Mom!” Henry calls out before easing himself onto the couch..

She remembers the first time he’d been sitting on the other side of a door from her and Archie, remembers his anger and the darkness in his eyes and the way his crooked mouth turned down with betrayal. Remembers weeks of silences and months of lies and—

A hand on her arm, just briefly, and she nods, tries to smile back at Archie. “If you change your mind, I’ll be...”

She gestures vaguely towards the kitchen, and Archie’s kind, kind eyes shine at her again before he steps into the room. “Of course. Miss Tillman,” he says to Ava, politely, and then closes the door.

And then it’s just her and Ava in the afternoon light flooding through the windows, and Ava won’t look up and Regina can’t look over. “Are you hungry?” she asks, keeping her voice gentle.

“No, but thank you.”

The answer is polite and steadily paced and such a blatant lie that she can almost, almost, roll her eyes at the audacity of it. She would, if she thought for a moment she could follow up with genuine kindness. “All right. You’re welcome to wait in the den for your ride. I’m sure you’re familiar with the Playstation.”

Hiding in a kitchen from a fourteen year old girl is hardly unfamiliar, although the luxury of having it be her own kitchen, things arranged as she likes and stocked to her preferences, feels almost absurd. Absurd and comforting, to be able to putter around and settle in, to put a girl with no grudges out of her mind in favor of grocery lists and recipes for later in the week and restocking the cereal that Emma’s decimated with her ridiculous mixing bowl servings.

It lasts fifteen minutes. Fifteen minutes, and then she sees Ava’s bright blue top and straggly braids hovering in the doorway and she wants to push her out of the kitchen and out of the house and lock the door and keep her *out*. It isn’t fair and she knows it and it doesn’t matter at all.

Sighing heavily, she leans her elbows on the island and closes her eyes. “Come on in, Ava,” she calls, and only opens her eyes when the shuffling footsteps stop across from her. “Did you change your mind about food?”

“No, Miss Mills,” Ava replies, and manages to look up for a moment. “I—um. I didn’t realize Henry had a session today. I forgot, Tuesdays and Thursdays. I wouldn’t have come over if I’d remembered.”

Regina thinks carefully, sifting through her word choices. “If he’s told you the schedule, then... He didn’t seem bothered by the transition. I think... no harm, no foul.”

Ava ducks her head again, and Regina watches the way her shoulders rise up and hunch forward, watches it and wants to close her eyes forever. “He, um, he said that he’s usually tired, afterwards.”

No, not tired. Drained, exhausted, overwhelmed, devastated. Not tired. “Did he.”

“I know I am, after mine.”

Ava still won't look up but Regina can't look away. "I see," she manages to say, and there is something so familiar behind Ava's stoic mask.

"I don't want to stay and make things... difficult. More difficult."

"That's considerate of you."

Ava's hands are twisting around each other, and Regina imagines closing the front door, turning the lock and setting the bolt. "My dad can't come get me until the garage closes at seven."

Oh.

The microwave clock reads 3:15 and if Ava is here in this house when it turns to 4:00 and Henry weeps into her skirt like he's her baby boy all over again—if anyone takes that from him—

But there are things she can't do, either. "I don't think it would be appropriate for me to drive you home, Ava."

The fact that there's no disappointment in those hard eyes, that there's just calm resignation and acceptance—Regina wants to bolt the door and set the chain. "Of course. I understand, Miss Mills."

It clears, then, the stoic mask, just for a moment, and Ava is transparent: young and sorry and resentful and alone and *lost*.

"Let me call Emma," Regina says quietly. "At the least, she'll send a deputy over."

Twenty minutes pass between the Bug pulling into the driveway and Emma knocking softly on her bedroom door. "Before you ask, yes, I put my shoes away," she says immediately, and Regina lets a smile tug at her mouth.

"I thought you were going to stay at your place tonight."

"I was." And then Emma's steps falter, and her smile fades a little. "I still can, if you—"

"Oh, shut up," she sighs, and pulls her knees in towards her chest to make space at the foot of the chaise. Emma's smile brightens again, and she drops onto the seat, leans forward until her torso is cradled by Regina's legs, and it takes only the slightest bit of movement to drop a welcoming kiss onto that sweet, frowning mouth. "How was dinner?"

Emma scoffs, and simultaneously wiggles around until her back presses against Regina's breasts; she looks ridiculous and adorable. "I mean, there was food, so it was actually a dinner."

"Oh, well, *food*, that's just unprecedented."

"Smart ass," Emma murmurs, but tugs gently at the tips of her hair until she can steal another kiss. "They started arguing before she even brought out the salad. Which, *yes*, I was going to eat."

Regina lets it slide. "Arguing about?"

"When we're sending Henry back to school. David thinks it should be Henry's call, Snow thinks we should send him by the end of the month, I didn't even get to *start* to say anything."

Her whole body tenses and she knows Emma can feel it but she can't help it. She can't *help* it, not when Snow White is taking a stand on *her son*—

"Good thing they don't actually get a say, huh?"

She looks down into those sea-sweet eyes, bright and happy, and lets the weight of Emma's body and smile and hand tracing circles on the tops of her knees push all the tension out of her. "Good thing," she murmurs, and closes her eyes, drags her fingertips from Emma's forearms to her wrists to her knuckles, weaves their fingers together.

"Wasn't so bad. Kathryn called maybe twenty minutes in, wanted to go over some more stuff for the expulsion hearing, so Snow bailed. David sent cake. It's in the fridge."

"*Sent?*"

And Emma's voice gets careful, gentle. "I mentioned sending Mulan over."

"Oh." They sit in silence for a while; Regina absently starts to comb her fingers through Emma's hair, scratching gently at her scalp. "I don't think Ava hates me."

Emma, almost boneless against her, opens her eyes, stares up at Regina for a long moment. "No, I don't think she does," she finally says, still careful, still gentle.

"I don't—I don't *understand*," Regina whispers, and Emma sits up and pulls her into her arms before her voice even cracks.

Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

It's probably a sign of progress that he catches it first. That it takes her a moment to understand why he just stops in the middle of his sentence like that. That she doesn't recoil from him but wills herself to stay exactly as she is, backs of her fingers resting against the uneven hair at the nape of his neck.

Chapter Notes

Because I'm a dolt: endless thanks to Lani for her help with Chapter 11. Thanks to Hope for the read through on this one. And Lynn for beta reading on every chapter, always.

Not ten minutes after she's gotten back from dropping Henry off at the animal shelter, her home office line rings, bold and unfamiliar after so many months of disuse. Grumbling slightly, Regina weaves her way around the kitchen island and bumps the door to the study with her shoulder, manages to grab the phone just before the call drops. "Hello?" she gets out, and rubs at her sore shoulder.

"Regina. I'm glad I caught you." Archie's voice, tremulous as ever, is still a welcome sound. "Do you have a minute to talk?"

Some nervous tension eases out of her neck; some more tension settles between her shoulders. "Hello, Archie. Yes, I'm free. Is—is something wrong?"

He chuckles softly, and she thinks she can hear Pongo snuffling in the background. "No, not at all. I wanted—well, first, I wanted to see how you're doing. We've all been focusing so much on Henry—but this all has been challenging for you, too, hasn't it?"

It's still there, the instinct to snap at him and remind him that Henry should be his *only* focus, but now... Even if she didn't trust Archie to genuinely care about *her*, she does trust him to care about how her mental state affects Henry's. "Yes, it's been... difficult."

"So how are you?"

And sometimes, sometimes she does trust him with herself. Sometimes, usually in the moments when she can look him in the eye and see true compassion. "Tired, mostly.

Confused. Frightened out of my mind.”

“Understandably, on all counts.” He hesitates, and she lets herself sink into her desk chair, waits. “Angry?”

She could almost smile. “Always.”

If she didn’t know better, she’d think Archie whispered *Good*. “You know if you want to come in, my door is always open to you.”

“I know. I’ve—the thought has crossed my mind,” she admits.

“But that would mean leaving Henry’s side.”

“Yes.”

Another hesitation from his side. “Unless it didn’t?” When she’s silent, he continues, voice steady and smooth, confident. “The second reason I called, Regina, is to ask you whether you would be open to a joint session with Henry.”

There’s not enough air in the room and she clutches the edge of the desk to try and stop everything from spinning. “I—has he—are we—“

“No, no no no,” Archie says quickly. “No, I’m sorry, I don’t—no, not like that. Not like that.” It sounds like he’s taken his glasses off; there’s some rustling through the phone. “Regina? Are you all right? I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you like that.”

“I’m—I’m okay,” she whispers, and leans back in her chair, closes her eyes and tries to slow down her heartbeat. “If not—then why?”

“Are you sure you’re—“

“Doctor Hopper,” she manages to snap out, crisp like the old days. “Explain.”

She can hear him smile. “Well, he’s in a very... the things he’s dealing with right now, his own actions—I can, to a point, help him navigate a reconciliation with himself, but—well, I’ll be frank. There’s no one better suited to help him with this than you.”

She’s misheard. She’s sure she’s misheard. “You want *me* to—you’re out of your mind.”

“What Henry needs is honesty, Regina, from someone who’s done violent, violent things out of love, and anger, and fear, and for survival.”

“I’m not—“

“Yes, you are,” he interrupts, in the firmest tone she’s ever heard from him. And then, gentler, “I’m just—this is just a suggestion. And if it’s something you’re willing to do, I’d ask that you come in alone first, so that we can prepare you, set up ground rules and such.”

“Charlatan,” she mumbles harmlessly, and he laughs. “Henry—he asked for this?”

Archie has a particular silence when he's choosing his words carefully. "We've discussed the idea a few times, now. He doesn't know I'm asking you, so if you decide not to, he won't know."

"But *I* will. You were a gifted child swindler, weren't you?"

"The very best."

She smiles, shakes her head. "I—I have to think about this, Archie."

"I understand."

"Do you?" Her voice sharpens, breaks. "You're telling me that the *very thing* that broke us apart and brought all of this down on him in the first place is—do you understand what you're asking of me? What I'd risk?"

Very, very softly, Archie breathes out, "Yes. I do."

She deflates, feels the phone slipping from her fingers. "I have to think," she whispers, and hangs up the phone.

They are more than halfway through dinner before she realizes she hasn't spoken once and Henry is staring at her openly. "What was that, sweetheart?"

He just frowns, puts down his fork. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Mom," he says, twisting his mouth like he wants to say *Bullshit* instead, and gently puts his hand on her arm. "I just said that Ringo chewed up all of Gram's money to make a nest and you didn't even smile."

"As if she'd carry cash. It would clash with her peasant-chic lifestyle."

"She had fifties."

It's impossible not to smile at that, but Henry's still watching her. "Remind me to sponsor hamster treats. For all two of them."

"Sure. As soon as you tell me what's wrong."

"Henry," she says, as if he'd be anything other than *headstrong* with his particular combination of mothers, "I appreciate the concern but—"

"Please don't say nothing's wrong, because *something* is," he says quietly. "And—if you don't want to tell me, I get it. But—please don't say it's nothing when it's not."

The kitchen lights are so much brighter than every other room and washes him out, draws her eyes to the thin sharp line on his jaw. The skin around it is oddly red; he's probably been

scratching at it again. “You did the same thing when you were small,” she murmurs, and reaches towards his face, brushes her thumb over the scar and gives him a reprimanding look. “Do you remember?”

He shakes his head, uncertainty in his eyes. “Try to get you to talk?”

His voice—she’d swear it deepens daily. “Not quite. When I’d had a bad day, or a long day, you’d sit me down before I started on dinner and make the most serious face you could—“ He scowls now, and even though his features are bigger and his face is thinner, there’s no difference. Not really. “Yes, just like that,” she teases, and pinches his nose lightly. “And you’d say, ‘We don’t hafta talk ‘bout it but we hafta hug ‘bout it.’”

Groaning, Henry claps a hand over his eyes, drags it down his face. “How many of these stories are you saving for when I bring someone home?”

“Thousands.”

He groans again, but he’s smiling, just a little bit. “That’s not even fair. It’s not like I told Ma anything—“

It’s probably a sign of progress that he catches it first. That it takes her a moment to understand why he just stops in the middle of his sentence like that. That she doesn’t recoil from him but wills herself to stay exactly as she is, backs of her fingers resting against the uneven hair at the nape of his neck.

When he looks at her again after over a minute of staring at his plate, it’s with a brave smile that doesn’t even reach his eyes. “Wanna hug about it?” he asks, and his voice wavers.

He’ll never be six again, but it’s hard to remember that when he launches himself into her arms with that same fervent and reassured love.

The doorbell rings insistently, and she practically sprints to get it, to cut off the bell before it wakes Emma. When she throws open the door, Kathryn immediately drops her hand, smiles sheepishly. “Hi,” she says, eyes so sharp and bright that Regina takes a step back, further away from the mid-morning light.

“Kathryn? What—is everything all right?”

So bright, so bright, and Kathryn practically bounces on her toes. “Can I come in?”

She steps back and gestures her in, can’t help but smile when Kathryn waits for her at the top of the steps. “Business or friendship?” she asks, closing the door, and Kathryn hesitates.

Kathryn hesitates and her bright bright eyes narrow just a little. It suddenly matters that she’s in her suit with her hair up; it matters that she’s got her briefcase and her no-nonsense heels. “Both,” Kathryn says, finally, and smiles kindly. “How about the study?”

Regina follows, sits next to Kathryn at her urging, can’t make eye contact and can’t look away. “Kathryn—if something’s happened—“

“They made a decision, Regina. The school board.”

All the heaviness she’d tried so hard to leave behind—in the bed, in the bath, anywhere it was quiet—curls around her shoulders like it never left. “Oh,” she says, and lapses into silence.

Kathryn’s pulling papers from her briefcase, and Regina vaguely recognizes the Board of Ed stationery but gets distracted by the softbound behemoth that thuds onto the coffee table. There are green flags dotting a few pages about a third of the way through, and before Kathryn flips open the packet from the BOE, Regina catches a glimpse of the state seal on the front cover of the book.

There’s bold text and a list of names and she just—she needs this to be simple. “I—Kathryn, I can’t—please—“

Those sharp, bright eyes study her face, and then there’s a hand on hers and a smile, a smile—what does a smile even mean, why a *smile*—and the packet in her lap. Next to every name is the word *expelled* in heavy capitals. “All of them. Every single one.”

She doesn’t know why Kathryn keeps looking at her like this means justice. “All right,” she says, and her eyes flicker over *For the administration: Principal M. Blanchard*. “That’s... something.”

Kathryn laughs, quietly, still kindly. “You were gifted with ordinances and budgets but you didn’t give a damn about current events, did you?”

Regina stares.

The book, the book with the state seal on the front cover, the book is a volume. Volume three. The book is volume three of the 125th session of the Maine legislature and something nags at the back of her mind. Something she’d meant to read, while the whole world fell to pieces.

Regina stares, and Kathryn flips open the book to those green flags, pulls it to the edge of the coffee table and starts to talk, softly, about *state-wide expulsion* and *reentry requirements* and it all sounds trite and useless and like so much bureaucratic red tape, until she flips to two isolated green flags and waits while Regina reads the words *the employment of minors* and sits back, uncomprehending.

Kathryn squeezes her hand, still gentle, always gentle, and breathes out slowly. “They can’t legally work unless they’re enrolled in school, Regina. They’re all minors.”

She says “I don’t understand,” but she does, she does, and oh, God, what has she—

“They can’t enroll in any other public school district in the state. And they can’t work. Not until they meet the terms for re-admittance.”

Her hands are shaking and she pulls them back against her body, flips the pages of the BOE packet until she gets to the page titled *Re-entry Plan* and almost laughs. Almost laughs,

almost cries, almost screams.

Readmittance to Maine Public Schools for all named students is conditional upon approval of the principal, currently M. Blanchard, and the board-appointed assessor, Dr. A. Hopper. Should the student relocate to another district, admittance to the new district would be conditional on approval of the new district representative in consultation with Principal Blanchard and Dr. Hopper.

Some sound escapes her, a weak and trembling gasp, and she has to cover her mouth. “Snow and Archie. They can’t—until *Snow* and *Archie*.”

And Kathryn is there again, holding her hand again, eyes sharp and bright. “Yes,” she says, and now it means something, now it means *everything*.

“How,” Regina gets out, and can’t look up from the papers. “How—if they knew any of this, they would never have—“

She stops, and looks at Kathryn’s smile.

“Snow argued a strong case,” Kathryn says, and for her to try modesty, of all things—

Regina starts to laugh but it dies in her throat. “Because you coached her.”

The smallest head tilt, and Kathryn’s eyes still so *bright*, clear and crisp. “You didn’t think I’d leave something like this up to fate, did you?”

No, not with that particularly winning smile, not with those sharp eyes gleaming. She knows if she asks, if she pushes, Kathryn will give her the whole truth. Kathryn, who does the right thing. Kathryn, who swore they wouldn’t get to just walk away. Kathryn, who listened to *I want their lives* and made it so.

“No,” she says, and squeezes her hand. “Not you.”

Emma wakes slowly, sighing and pulling Regina closer to her before making some low noise in her throat. A hum, maybe. “Time ‘sit?”

“Two.”

“Early.”

“I know. I’m sorry. Go back to sleep.”

Emma hums again and it feels good, the warm dull vibrations under Regina’s ear and the almost febrile heat of her body. “No, hol’ on. ‘M ‘wake.”

“Go to sleep, *linda*.”

Two lazy, barely qualifying kisses to her forehead. “Screw sleep,” Emma murmurs, and for a second it seems as though she’s going for a grope, but instead she just shifts them slightly so

the peak of Regina's hipbone presses into her thigh instead of her own hips. "S'rry. Flex'r actin' up. Gimme min."

Regina gives her ten. Ten minutes in which she just listens to each breath as it fills Emma's lungs, in which she traces the rough lettering on Emma's beloved T-Rex tee with her ring finger. In which Emma's hands stay still and steady on her back and her rough thumbs move in arhythmic arcs. In which their breathing mingles and settles into one easy pattern.

"Hi," Emma whispers, and presses a sweet kiss to the top of her head.

"I missed you."

"I'm here."

"Archie wants me to do joint sessions with Henry."

"*Oh*," Emma says, and holds her breath. "But for—for *now*, right? Not like before?"

"For now."

"Oh."

It's when Emma draws her chin up to kiss her—lightly, lightly—that she feels tears coming. "The board issued the decision."

She can feel the tension take control of Emma's body and hates that she brought it with her. "Regina?"

"I think your mother finally did something right," she whispers, and feels Emma's breathing stutter.

Nicholas hunches his shoulders and scuffs his feet, barely lifts his chin off his chest to speak. She remembers a boy with neat hair and decent posture and no grease on his clothes. Further back is the memory of a timid child with wide eyes, hiding behind his bigger, brasher sister, clinging to his peasant rags.

Regina watches from her parked car as Michael points to various parts of an old Toyota's engine with a wrench, watches as he gets steadily more exasperated while Nicholas sinks further into his own body. It doesn't take long before Nicholas's only reactions are shrugs, silent and barely noticeable, and when Michael starts to shout, and chucks the wrench into the shadows of the garage, she doesn't flinch.

Neither does Nicholas.

With one hand over his eyes, Michael points to the inside of the garage and when Nicholas has shuffled away, he sags against the bumper of the car, brings his other hand in to completely cover his face.

If she doesn't get out of the car now, she's going to be late. She's seen—she's seen what there is to see. It's time to go.

It takes two repetitions of *it's time to go* for her to reach for her purse in the passenger seat, and when she glances back up, Michael is staring straight at her, fingers half-dragged down his face. Just staring; there's no readable emotion in his eyes or posture and she can't even see his mouth.

It doesn't last long; he shivers, moves a hand as if to—what, to wave? She doesn't know, looks away to open her door and walk up to Archie's office door, and when she glances back while closing the door behind her, Michael's sunken into himself again, crumbling against the old Toyota.

She takes a minute at the top of the stairs. Just a minute, to cleanly cut the indentations of Michael's fingers in his own cheeks from her mind. To think of her family, her family, her real and true family, sprawled at the foot of the bed in the den with their mixing bowls of cereal and matching rapt expressions, watching Saturday morning cartoons. Of Emma and her soft, soft smile. Of Henry and his steady, steady heart.

A minute, and then she pushes the slightly-ajar office door open fully, gives Archie a tight smile in greeting and closes the door, takes her old seat on the far end of the couch. He's ready for her: two glasses of water on the end table, fire going strong, notepad pressed against his knee. He's ready for her and he's silent, letting her get settled in the space.

There's only one thing she knows to say. "Under no circumstances will I discuss the King with my son."

Archie meets her eyes with calm, clear compassion. His pen doesn't move. "Good. Let's go from there."

Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

He sounds like an ordinary teenager and just the thought, just the thought of him as just like everyone else, finally—Regina swallows her tears and sees Emma trying to do the same. “Don’t do anything heroic, okay?” Emma whispers, and pulls him into a tight hug, presses her mouth to his temple again and again. “Just—be Henry and be safe, okay?”

The cruiser is already in the lot when she and Henry pull up, Mulan leaning against the hood with the report binder in hand while Emma paces on the sidewalk. Regina grabs her purse and Henry’s backpack from the backseat, ignoring his half-hearted protest, and waits until he’s on the sidewalk and stabilized before handing his bag to him. Of course, he starts walking before it’s on properly, and she has to bite her tongue to stop herself from pulling him up short by his jacket and demanding that he situate himself before moving again.

The backpack is on somewhat properly by the time they stop in front of Emma, who looks between the two of them with that particular awkward smile. “Hey,” she says, and almost immediately yawns.

“Busy night?” Henry asks, tugging on the straps of his backpack a little more.

Regina scoffs, and stifles a yawn herself while Emma sticks her tongue out but admits, if petulantly, “No. Which is usually worse.”

Way worse, because Emma spent the whole night texting her every anxiety about today. As if Regina didn’t have her own infinite list of worries. “Yes, I can see how the adrenaline rush of rescuing cats from trees would keep you energized for a whole night.”

“Actually, studies show that fulfilling a rescue role releases a flood of dopamine and oxytocin into the system, both of which make you *feel* more alert and capable,” Mulan says mildly, without looking up, and flips another page in the binder.

She feels Henry’s eyes on her and glances back at him with uncertainty; they both look at Emma, whose frown is deeper than ever. “Bullshit,” Emma finally says.

Mulan’s placid expression doesn’t change.

“I think?” Emma adds.

It takes a second, but then the corners of Mulan's mouth turn up into a smile, and she inclines her head slightly. "Good."

Henry laughs, bright and bold, and Regina sees her own surge of affection reflected in Emma's smile. "How many times did you get her last week?" he asks.

"Twice, but, to be fair, she was coming off the night shift those times, too."

"Superpower, my butt," he teases, and Emma reaches for him, ruffles his hair until both of their noses are scrunched up with the same mix of adoration and exasperation.

"Whatever, Rambo," she retorts, and Regina clears her throat pointedly, only to be just as pointedly ignored. "So, you ready to do this?"

Henry's smile fades considerably, and she's got her hands on her car keys instantly, but then he sets his shoulders, nods. "Yeah, Ma."

"Got your books?"

"Yeah."

"Cell and charger?"

"Yeah."

"Numbers memorized just in case?"

"*Yeah*, Ma."

He sounds like an ordinary teenager and just the thought, just the thought of him as just like everyone else, finally—Regina swallows her tears and sees Emma trying to do the same.

"Don't do anything heroic, okay?" Emma whispers, and pulls him into a tight hug, presses her mouth to his temple again and again. "Just—be Henry and be safe, okay?"

"Yeah, Ma," he whispers, eyes pinched shut.

He can't be an ordinary teenager—he's still their little boy, they have to wrap him up and keep him safe and loved—

Emma clears her throat, releases Henry and roughly straightens his scarf, nods a little gruffly before stepping back. "And if you get a chance—Operation Cufflinks, yeah?"

Henry grins, and rolls his eyes. "You *know* she's gonna check on me at least twice. So yes. Operation Cufflinks."

Regina crosses her arms and clears her throat, and Emma smirks, taps her badge. "Sorry, ma'am, it's need to know."

Quirking an eyebrow, she looks at Henry; he caves in two seconds. "We're trying to convince Grams that nobody wants a fancy dinner for Gramps' birthday, not even Gramps."

“Well, well, Miss Swan,” Regina drawls, and Henry practically beams at her. “Planning an operation against your mother without *me*? I don’t know whether to admire your commitment to betrayal or mock your inevitable failure.”

“Jesus, kid, what kind of secret operative are you,” Emma groans.

“The kind who knows where dinner comes from,” he retorts, and Mulan starts coughing into the collar of her jacket to cover her up laughter. Emma scowls at her and sticks her tongue out at Henry and he just laughs, warm and light, and moves to hug Regina.

She thinks the hug will be quick and brusque and *teenagered* and so when he holds on after five seconds, when she can feel that he’s taking long, slow, drawn-out breaths, her smile fades and her grip on his shoulders tightens. Neither of them speak; when Henry finally takes a step back, she can’t quite let go, holds his face in her hands and manages a wan smile.

He covers her hands with his and just *looks* at her, with fear and faith shining from his lovely hazel eyes, and nods a little, tries to smile. “I better go.”

“Yeah,” she whispers, and takes a deep breath, nods back at him and lets him go. “Careful on the steps.”

“Kay.” He looks at her for a half-beat longer, then steps back. “See you later, moms. Bye, Mulan.”

“Mr. Mills,” Mulan says, and nods at him.

It’s only when he’s made it up the front walk and greeted a friend—Grace, she thinks—that Regina can feel herself exhale, and senses Emma’s hand on her back. “Are you okay?” she whispers.

Emma clears her throat, blatantly stalling. “Yeah. Of course. You?”

She nods, keeps her eyes on the front door of the school. “If your mother checks on him too many times—”

“I wouldn’t worry,” Mulan interrupts. Startled, Regina turns to face her and catches the surprise on Emma’s face, as well. But Mulan just taps the binder she’s still holding, face placid. “Quarterly safety inspection scheduled for today. SFD will need her to walk them through every alarm and exit protocol.” And then she grins, secretive and sly, and adds, “I’ll be monitoring the inspection. Intermittently, of course.”

Regina wants to laugh, feels it bubbling up into her throat and covers her mouth to keep it in.

“So you’ll just be... wandering the halls of the high school. All day. By pure coincidence,” Emma says flatly.

“Correct.”

Regina does laugh, then, almost hysterically, and Mulan's smile gets just the slightest bit wider. "How—" and she cuts herself off, shakes her head. "How can we thank you? For this? For everything?"

"Get your girlfriend to stop buying glazed donuts for the department," Mulan says immediately. "No one ever eats them. That's a whole donut, just wasted. It's criminal."

The spark in her warm, dark eyes is so subtle that Regina almost misses it. "You're personally ensuring the safety of our son... in exchange for better donuts."

When Mulan nods with complete seriousness, Emma gapes at her, and finally she bursts out laughing, the sound, rich and warm, floating through the cold morning air.

Archie's office is warm, just shy of stifling. Henry keeps tugging at the v-neck of his sweater, but it's hard to tell if it's from discomfort or distress and she won't interrupt him to find out. Not now, not when he's drawing words out of wherever he had them locked away for two years.

"It didn't feel like when I took the dagger," he says, and hesitates. "The dagger—taking it, using it, it felt... fast. Like sprinting in the summer. Fast and hot and a rush like—like—like that time the car spun out. That kind of rush."

Slowly, Archie shifts his gaze from Henry to Regina, nods at her gently. "But not all fear?" she asks softly.

Henry shakes his head. "Mostly, but not all of it."

She wants to reach out and hold his hand. Rub his back. Just touch him, hold him to her so he remembers the most important things.

Archie tentatively clears his throat, ducks his head slightly to catch Henry's eye. "You remember what we went over, about adrenaline?"

"Yeah. It—it sounds like that, I think. Like the rest of it was adrenaline."

His shoulders hunch up slightly and there's so much space between his words. "You think," Regina repeats, and when Henry's eyes flicker towards her but he doesn't turn, she knows she caught it. "But you doubt."

"Yeah," he whispers.

She waits, waits, waits until she knows her voice will be gentle, inquisitive, forgiving. "Why?"

Two whole minutes pass while Henry searches or struggles or self-censors. She wants, so badly, to hold his hand. “Because of the gun.” He takes more time and neither Regina nor Archie move.

Henry does. Henry fidgets, and itches, and trembles, and finally takes three slow breaths. “Because of the gun. Because that feeling... it didn’t... it didn’t go away.” He looks up at her, eyes so *sorry*. “You saw. When you saw me. Before the tree and the dagger, you—you saw it.”

She had. She knows that now, knows that she’d known it then, too. But the important thing had been seeing him alive and whole, alive and whole and real. What did it matter if he’d looked—what did it matter if he’d smiled?

“When I picked—no. When I shot Greg. When I picked it up and shot Tamara, it—it felt heavy and awful and it hurt. It hurt to shoot, at first. Less on the second. But then I shot Greg and it felt... I felt warm. I felt *clean*. I felt clean and warm and so, so strong, and I—I felt *clean*.”

“Everything here, all of the—everything felt so messy, I just—who I was supposed to love and who I did love and who was family and who wasn’t and why I had some people and not others and what I’d really done by bringing Emma here and forcing her to break the curse and who I was—it was so *messy*, Mom. It was so messy and crowded and then when I shot him, all of it just... fell away. Everything just left. I felt so clean, and new, and warm. Warm like—like when you stand in a patch of sunlight in the winter.”

“And strong.” She thinks of the first heart she took, the softness in those sweet wide eyes, the sorrow. How she’d expected the heart to be messy, bloody, stringy. How it had been instead: neat and compact, coming free with the slightest *pop*. How she’d been fascinated and horrified and frightened and exultant—

“And strong,” Henry echoes.

The first heart she took because—*because*—was different. Graham’s heart was heavy, unbalanced, but still bloodless and neat. But there had been that look in his eyes, not of betrayal or sorrow but of horror and pain and that had been *hers*. She’d made that. She’d made that and triumphed in its creation.

Archie flips a page on his notepad and nods slowly. “When you think about that feeling now, that clean and warm and strong feeling, what do you feel?”

After a long moment in which there’s no sound but Henry’s uneven breathing, he whispers, “Shame.” Archie immediately lifts the two fingers still holding his pen to warn Regina to wait. *Wait*. “I spent two years screaming about good and evil and right and wrong and the first minute—I picked up a gun and shot two people and I felt *clean*.”

She wants, wants so desperately, to *hold* him. Assure him that it didn’t matter, it didn’t matter, she loves him all the same—but that’s not the point at all. His question has never been *is he loved*.

“Regina?” Archie asks, and her gaze jerks to him, to the shine of his pen in the firelight. “Did you—you want to say something?”

“It felt right,” she says softly, and keeps her eyes on Henry’s hand planted on the seat cushion between them, fingers tense and spread. “Not the first time, but every time after. It felt right, and I felt strong, and—not clean, exactly, but above. *Above*. It all just fell away and there I was, above it.”

His hand tenses further, fingers twisting in the striped upholstery, and she can’t not, slides her own hand across the couch and wraps her fingers around his pinky, holds on tight. “But that—it wasn’t—I wasn’t. Not enough to be real. Not there. I didn’t know until—until I was here, and you were here, and you were smiling and trying to say *Mama* and meaning me. Until—until you were here and so eager to be loved, Henry. That’s when—when it became real. Being clean, and above it.”

His eyes, his lovely hazel eyes, are pinched shut, but he shifts his hand until they are palm to palm—palm to palm, as if his hand had never been small enough to fit entirely in her own, as if his hand had never been so tiny as to be dwarfed by her pinky—and he can hold on through strangled sobs.

Across the street, Emma and David are in the faintly lit window of the animal shelter, and from the way Emma is fidgeting and moving her hands around her body, Regina’s willing to bet there’s a money-gnawing hamster crawling all over her.

Clearing his throat, Henry moves to cross the street but comes up short when she doesn’t move with him, when their hands start to unlink. “Mom?” he asks, and his eyes are red and his nose is raw but he is here and walking and holding her hand.

“Go on ahead, sweetheart,” she murmurs, and lets go of his hand. “I need to make a quick stop.”

He frowns, but acquiesces. “Should we order for you?”

“Yes. Something warm, preferably sweet, and possibly artery-damaging.” His grin is just like Emma’s—delighted by ordinary rebellions—and despite the knot of tears lingering in her throat, despite the way the last hour has drained her, she feels... capable. “I won’t be long.”

She waits until he’s fully across the street and holding the door to the shelter open for David, waits until Emma is outside and looking across the street at her with curiosity. Subtly, Emma points to herself, then across to Regina, and tilts her head just enough to be asking a question.

Sweet, sweet Emma. Regina shakes her head, nods towards Granny's, and watches Emma accept it, put her arm around Henry's shoulders and let David take the lead. Then, weaving her way around the slow-melting snow, she crosses over to the Marine Garage. The main garage bay is open and that Tercel from the other day is up on the lift. The tiny sales room is empty, but the light in the adjoining office is on.

When Michael sees her he freezes, then stands up abruptly, sending his chair skittering into the wall behind him. "Your Majesty—"

"No," she says quietly.

He hesitates, then tries again. "Ms. Mills. What—what can I do for you?"

She doesn't move further into the office, doesn't sit. "The Dormans are moving to New Hampshire at the end of the month. The Barretts are trying to use lacrosse to weasel Teddy into Foxcroft."

Smiling in a way that isn't a smile at all, Michael sinks back into his chair. "And no one knows what the Tillmans are doing."

Regina stays silent.

"I don't know. I—I don't have that kind of flexibility. The garage is all we have." He spreads his hands across his desk blotter, shakes his head. "Nick, when he talks—all he talks about is leaving. Like we can just leave this all behind. Forget he ever..."

He doesn't finish and she doesn't make him. "Would you? If you could."

"Let him forget?" He won't look up and she can't help but *stare*. "No. And yes. And—I don't know. I—I don't know." The tension in his arms collapses, and the sudden movement of his head—the defeated slump he sinks into—exposes everything about him. Everything she thought she knew, everything she knows. "Do you want us to leave?"

She can hardly blame him for asking; it would make sense, her sudden arrival in his empty garage, her refusal to give an inch. "It's not up to me," she answers softly.

Michael chuckles darkly, the bags under his eyes deepening. "But if it were?"

If it were... She shakes her head sadly. Even disappointment is beyond her, now. "After everything—all of this—you want me to tell you if you're paying enough."

It takes him a moment. A long, long moment, and when she sees it settle, sees it click—

He sinks into himself again, as if he'd never even risen, and she closes the office door behind her.

Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

His eyes are calm and clear and bright, and she thinks of the first time she held him, of his small yawning mouth and how he'd looked at her like she was the only light. "A little. You know—you know how we have to be careful." He nods, and she focuses on the cedar scent of his hair, the new breadth of his shoulders. "Let me think this over, all right?"

"Okay." He says it so easily, so freely. He trusts so much.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"No. Absolutely not."

"Regina, come on," Emma drawls, fighting to get her key out of the lock. "If David wants to give—"

"No. The arrangement was that the game system could stay until you went back to school." She points at Henry, who ducks his head a little, shoves his hands into the pockets of his chinos, avoids eye contact. "You are back in school. You will give that game system back."

"But, Mom, Gramps already bought another one, what's—"

Henry shuts up when she glares at him. "Answer me truthfully, yes or no, Henry. Did you in any way coerce David into giving you the PS4?"

"No, Mom. I had nothing to do with this!"

His eyes are wide, gaze steady and earnest. "He's not lying," Emma contributes unhelpfully, and finally closes the front door.

"He might not be, but you are," Regina snips. Emma has the gall to whistle innocently while hanging Henry's coat up, and Henry's smirking before he can help it. "You, upstairs," she commands, pointing to Emma, then turns to Henry. "You—God. I can't even send you to your room, the damn Playstation is in there."

And then Henry smiles, his careful shy sweet boy smile, and takes a step towards the stairs. "I could go to my *actual* room?"

What was she thinking, being a politician for fourteen years in front of the most precocious child she's ever met. "Don't use your healing against me, Henry, it's bad form," she sighs,

and when he laughs and wraps his arms around her—top of his head brushing against her nose—she accepts defeat. “No. The den for a few more nights. But please, please, sweetheart, anything but the Playstation. Read a book, or—no, wait, don’t do that either.”

Emma, hanging the last coat up, snickers loudly, and Regina glares at her over the top of Henry’s head. Hands up in surrender, Emma toes off her heels and picks them up, one in each hand, leans over to kiss Henry’s temple and murmur “Night, kid,” and then soundlessly heads up the stairs, black leather dress catching the light as she turns.

“Ew. Mom. Can you not creep on Ma right in front of me?”

She does *not* blush. Absolutely not. There’s a tiny run in the back of Emma’s tights, that’s all. Not that she needs to explain anything to Henry. “Can you not give me more reasons to want to ground you until you’re fifty?”

His precious, changing face scrunches up. “Mom, I really didn’t ask for the Playstation.”

Sighing, she cradles his face in her hands, kisses his forehead. “I know. I’m not angry with you.”

“But you’re angry.”

His eyes are calm and clear and bright, and she thinks of the first time she held him, of his small yawning mouth and how he’d looked at her like she was the only light. “A little. You know—you know how we have to be careful.” He nods, and she focuses on the cedar scent of his hair, the new breadth of his shoulders. “Let me think this over, all right?”

“Okay.” He says it so easily, so freely. He trusts so much. “I’m gonna get ready for bed. And not read any books, ever again.”

She pinches his nose between her knuckles and can’t help but laugh when he squeals.

Upstairs, Emma is rolling off her tights, heels dropped haphazardly by the foot of the bed, and Regina takes a moment to lean back against the closed door and just watch her. “I put a run in them,” Emma mumbles, hair falling over her face. “I barely moved all night and I put a run in them. How do you even wear these all the time?”

“Habituation,” she answers, and her breath catches when Emma looks up, wry smile on her sweet frowning mouth. “So. About this Playstation.”

Groaning, Emma flops back on the bed, throws an arm dramatically over her eyes. “I didn’t *tell* him to give Henry the damn thing. I just... didn’t tell him not to, either.”

“You *know* how important it is to not spoil him now.”

“I know, but look, David feels like the kid’s been through shit for no reason and he kinda has, right?”

Regina toes off her heels next to Emma's, climbs onto the bed to sit with her hip cradled in the dip of Emma's waist. "Emma. There is *nothing* I want more than to give Henry everything in the world. Every game system, every fancy phone, every stupid flavor of ice cream. But he needs to *work* for rewards like that."

"Wait, so you don't think he's *earned* this?" Emma starts to sit up, indignant. "A broken arm and fractured ribs and a fucking walking boot and he hasn't *earned* this?"

Calm, she tells herself, and *patience*. "Every breath he takes earns him the whole *world*. In my mind, at least."

Emma's posture softens, and she drops back onto her elbows, studies Regina's face with a frown. "Then... what's the problem?"

"*He* needs to feel like he's earned it," she says, and waits for Emma to get it.

It doesn't take long; there's the signature lifting of her thin, thin brows, slackening of her jaw. "This is... part of... therapy?" Emma asks hesitantly, carefully.

Sometimes it's so hard to not touch her, with her warm smooth skin and her crisp cut arms, and sometimes it's just easier all around if Regina doesn't try to resist. She lets her thumb and index finger run along the rise and dip of her biceps, lets her eyes follow because that's easier, too. "In a way. For both of us."

Emma's watching the touch, too, frowning a little less. "So... if we set up a plan? Like, a grades plan? Would that be earning it?"

"It depends. What are you thinking?"

All of Emma's weight shifts to her right elbow when she brings her left arm across to skim over Regina's bare knees. "Weekly grades. Every week he keeps an A average, he earns a week of access. If his average for the week takes a dip, the Playstation takes a walk."

"Sounds intense," Regina murmurs, shifting her legs apart just as Emma's fingers wander to the inside of her knee, up a little higher.

"Good intense or bad intense?"

"Not sure yet," she admits, brushes her thumb over Emma's mouth. "Both, maybe."

"We can work it out."

"Okay," she agrees easily, hums low in her throat when Emma's hand returns to the outside of her thigh, starts to push her skirt up.

"And what about me?" Emma leans forward slightly, kisses her ribs through the silk dress. "What do I have to do to earn it?"

Finally. Regina smiles, gently pushes Emma flat on her back and moves to straddle her, dips her body forward until her lips can brush over smooth soft skin without much effort. Two

kisses to the very corner of Emma's mouth and there are already hands bunching her dress up, scrabbling along the side seam for her zipper. "Such a pretty girl, all dressed up tonight," she murmurs, licks lightly at Emma's lips. "Maybe I'll spoil you."

Emma's hands freeze at that, and Regina smiles, kisses her lightly twice, three times, four times until she slowly, slowly, warms up again, opening up to the kiss and lifting her back off the bed just enough for Regina to get her hands on the zipper pull, not enough to pull the zipper down in any useful way. "On your stomach, *linda*," she instructs, pressing kisses to the curve of Emma's neck. "Damn zipper."

Emma's smiling but just a little too still, movements a little too jerky as she turns onto her stomach, and Regina slows down even more, drags the zipper slowly, follows it with her mouth, kissing every freckle dotted along the ridges of Emma's spine. "So *pretty*," she whispers, flicks her tongue into the dimple to the left of Emma's vertebrae.

"Regina?" Emma voice trembles, and Regina's back at eye level in an instant, rolling off but staying tight to her side. She waits, stroking Emma's hair back, not saying a word, until Emma takes a deep breath, nods a little. "I just—I needed a minute."

"Of course." She waits more, until Emma's touching her freely again, until Emma moves to take a kiss. "If you need more time—"

"No," Emma breathes out, and her fingers dig into Regina's hip, pull them closer together. "No. Just... say it again?"

"So pretty?" she asks, and searches Emma's eyes.

"No. The—the other."

"Maybe I'll spoil you?" Emma nods, tightly, and Regina smiles for her, kisses her softly. "Why wouldn't I? Look how beautiful you are. Look how kind." Slowly, slowly, she eases Emma onto her back again, leaves wet, wet kisses along the length of her arm. "Look how strong you are. How sexy. Why wouldn't I spoil you, *mi linda*?"

She can feel Emma's body relaxing beneath her, tensing in new, good ways, and moves up to kiss her collarbones, gently tug the dress from her arms and expose her torso slowly, an inch at a time. "You're so *good*, Emma. Look how generous you are," she sighs out between her breasts, beneath them. "So smart, so funny. And oh, look how well you love, Emma, look how well you love."

Emma whimpers, lifts her hips to help Regina slide the dress down her legs and off, sits up to reach for her, pull her back on top. "Love you," she whispers, fierce and fervent against her mouth.

Saying it back—after everything, saying it back is like breathing. "I love you." Regina eases her back, drops feather-light kisses everywhere she can. "Let me spoil you, Emma."

Wide-eyed and warm and finally, finally soft, Emma nods.

Emma is quiet on the drive over to Main Street, hands gripping the steering wheel tightly and jaw locked up, set with sharp corners. It's not surprising and Regina doesn't push her, just reaches out across the front seat to rest her fingers on the back of Emma's neck, stroke along the side with her thumb.

It takes until they make the left off of Castleton for Emma to glance over at her with a begrudging smile. "That's cheating," she says.

Regina smiles, lifts her hand just enough to wave her fingers with a flourish. "*Evil?*"

At that, Emma snorts derisively, and when she brings her hand back to her neck, Regina can feel the muscles stiffening again. "For the record, I think this is a truly stupid idea."

Emma's made that abundantly clear over the last hour, but she's still here. Still here, and that means more than agreement would. Regina pushes gently with her fingertips, kneads lightly and smiles again. "I know."

"You're *sure?*"

"Very."

The defeated slump of Emma's shoulders is hard to bear, but when one chapped hand reaches over to grab her free hand, brings it up to press a kiss to her knuckles—it gets easier. "I'm tired of all this," Emma whispers, mouth against the backs of her fingers. "Aren't you tired of this? Everyone *paying*, over and over again. Can't we just—I just want us to *be*, you know? I just want to be with my family."

Sweet, sweet Emma, who of course understands more than anyone else could. Regina leaves Emma's tense, tense neck to touch her cheek, her jaw, the softness of her mouth, and just smiles at her, for her, and waits.

It takes less than a minute for it to click, comprehension easing the tension in Emma's body, and her heavy sigh sounds almost like an exhausted laugh. "That's the point, isn't it? Being with family, even if they're total shitheels."

"*Shitheels*," Regina repeats, and feels her face twisting up with distaste. "If you're going to turn our son in to a pottymouth, can you at least use decent curses?"

This time it is a laugh—exhausted, yes, but mirthful, pleased. "Shitheel is an *excellent* curse."

"You're joking, right?"

Emma grins, the first truly bright smile from her in over an hour, and reaches for the lapels of Regina's coat, tugs her in by a pinch of heavy wool and dark silk. "And what the hell would you know about cursing," she murmurs, kisses her softly. "Last time you did it was in the fucking Middle Ages."

"Idiot," Regina mumbles, but accepts a second kiss, steals a third. "You should go. You know how it gets around dismissal time—if you want to get him here on time—"

“Yeah, yeah,” Emma grumbles, but doesn’t move back, doesn’t loosen her grip. “You’re *really* sure?”

“Yes,” she affirms, and Emma nods, releases her and settles back into her seat. “Today might be a—a rough one. If we start where I think we will.”

Sweet, sweet Emma, who understands. “I’ll pick up a pizza,” she offers, and kisses Regina’s fingers one more time. “Half Hawaiian.”

“Emma.”

The Tercel is still up on the lift, but this time Ava is crouched beneath the car, an ancient SLR camera in hand. For a moment Regina feels a twist in the pit of her stomach that she hasn’t felt since—since Henry started crossing streets by himself. Since she first learned to fear the combination of cars and children.

“Hi, Miss Mills,” Ava says quietly, then holds her breath and presses down on the shutter button. The flash is quick and fierce and leaves Regina momentarily blinded in the mostly dark garage. “Sorry—I should’ve warned you about the flash.”

Blinking rapidly to try and clear the spots from her eyes, she tries for a smile. “That’s all right.” She pauses, uncertain and suddenly shy. “I—haven’t seen someone using a camera like that in a long time.”

The grin that spreads over Ava’s face is stunning in its artlessness. “Yeah, it’s a relic. Iansito—sorry, Mister Iansito let me borrow it for—um. For this project.” Her enthusiasm drops abruptly before she mentions the project.

“It’s for school?” Regina asks, and watches carefully.

Ava watches her right back. “Kind of,” she says slowly. “He—he gave us an assignment in the fall. Liked mine a lot, so… he wants me to put together a portfolio. Or something. Something about a contest. I dunno, he’s pushy.”

“Sounds like he thinks you have some talent,” Regina says mildly, and has to smile when Ava shrugs it off. “You don’t think so?”

It’s strange, to see the struggle between guilelessness and defensiveness painted so explicitly on anyone’s face. “I don’t even know what I’m doing, really.” And then, reluctantly, Ava adds, “Although I guess that’s the point. To learn.” Regina says nothing, just watches the emotions flickering over Ava’s face, the sudden tension in her grip on the camera. “My dad’s in his office, if you wanted to talk to him. I’ll make sure Nick doesn’t interrupt or anything.”

It’s tempting, to just tell her, here and now and only, but she thinks back to when Henry was ten and eleven and how they’d all suffered every time a decision had landed in his hands alone. “Thank you,” Regina says, and means it.

Michael is positioned almost exactly like he'd been the week before, but this time the phone is cradled to his ear and he's rubbing at his hands with a rag. It's hard to tell if the pained expression on his face is from what he's hearing or the roughness of his movements. When he sees her, he freezes, just like last week, but recovers much faster. "Look, Tom, that's the estimate, I'm already cutting you as many deals on this as I can. I gotta go, the Mayor just walked in, all right? Think it over, let me know."

When he hangs up, Regina clears her throat. "I'm not the Mayor anymore."

Michael shrugs, tosses the rag into a bucket of them in the back corner of the office. "And Tom Clark's got a loose tongue." After a moment's hesitation, he points to the chair in front of his desk. "But you're not here for small town chit chat."

This time she sits, closer to the edge of the chair than the back, and takes a breath to center herself, still her hands. One breath, and then another. "I—" The sentence sticks in her throat, and she can feel a grimace flicker across her face. One more breath; she covers a fourth by opening her purse and pulling out a business card, placing it on the edge of the desk and pushing it towards him with just her fingertips. "This is the contact information for a banker in Stamford."

Michael stops with his hand just stretching forward.

"I've made... arrangements. Call her and identify yourself as Michael Tillman from Maine. She will ask you for a code word which is *woodcutter*. She will then ask you if the terms of the trust are agreeable—"

"Wait—"

"—and, if they are, she will process all of the necessary paperwork—"

"Stop—"

"—and be in touch with you to confirm arrangements and expenses—"

"*Stop*," he says again, voice shaking with desperation. "What—what are you doing. What have you done."

She should have practiced this. She should have planned this better. She should have known that this would be—excruciating, maybe, is the word. "Made arrangements. For your daughter. If—if you agree, and she agrees, there will be a fund, a trust, set up. For her. For any living and educational expenses, from now until she turns eighteen. Any money remaining then becomes hers to do with as she pleases."

"What are you doing?" he says again, whispers. "Why—I don't understand. Why would you do this?"

Regina sighs, and closes her eyes, tries to steady her voice but knows she's failing. There's no room in her to be anything but honest and she doesn't want to be. Doesn't want to open herself like that ever again. "I wish you *would* leave town. I wish I would never have to look

at your son's face or hear his name ever again. I wish you would stay so I can watch your son grow into nothingness. I wish he were locked up in a small, dark cell where all he could see would be my son, walking and talking and laughing in the freedom that your son would never have again."

It's too much. It's too much and she can feel it, tight in her throat and curling her lip, hot in her cheeks and fingertips. "But I am so, so tired of little girls paying for sins they had no part in." She opens her eyes and stares at him, waits for him to finally meet her eyes again, watches him shudder, watches his eyes which are burning with shame. "Can you understand that, Michael?"

"I just—I can't figure it out. I don't—sometimes I just want to be an ordinary kid, I feel like laughing and joking around and just—and then I remember and I know I shouldn't, I can't, I—" Fumblingly, Henry grabs the water from the end table, drinks as if he's parched. "I don't know how to balance it, Mom. Knowing what I've done and wanting to forget it. Wanting—wanting my life and feeling like I—like I don't deserve it."

Archie's pen hasn't moved since Henry started talking and she wishes for just the softest scratching to cover for her. Her whole body is stiff and tense, has been since she sat down, has been since she left the garage. It was stupid, going there before this. Stupid, because now—

Henry sets the glass back down, massages his own throat briefly and lets his free hand come to rest against hers. Another shift and he's got his ring finger and pinky wrapped around hers, eyes still closed like it's all unconscious movement, pure instinct.

"Having darkness, knowing your darkness—" and her voice cracks. She clears her throat, tries again. "Knowing that part of you—no one becomes unworthy of love from knowing their own darkness. Because it's everywhere. You know that, now. That there's a place like that in everyone. Everyone you love, everyone who loves you."

Sometimes she can't stand to be looked at by him. Not like this, not the way he's looking at her now—like he did when he finally woke up, on the ship and in the hospital and on his fifth day of being Henry Mills. She can't stand it and those years when she thought he might never look at her like that again—

"It's—it's when you deny it, deny that it's darkness, deny its existence—that's when it changes. That's when *you* change, when you succumb. But *honesty*? Knowing what you've done and that you never want to do it again? That could never make you unworthy of love, Henry."

It takes effort to remind herself that she can be brave. That for once, there is no cost to it. "I used to wonder, when I was—the first few times. The first few years. If—if maybe I needed love, a good life, a safe place, maybe I needed those things *more*. If maybe I was most worthy *because* I was on that edge, and if I could get just a little bit, if someone could just reach for me a little bit further—"

Her vision blurs and her eyes burn and Henry's next to her, hugging her tightly, and there's a jerkiness to his breathing that tells her he's crying, too. "Do you still think that?" he whispers.

A sob rises up and she covers her mouth quickly, tries to push it down and away and back. *Focus*, she tells herself, and *strength*. "Sometimes. Sometimes I don't even know where the edge really was. Sometimes I think it would have been cruel, to ask someone to come down into my darkness with me."

The office is quiet for a long moment. Archie doesn't move, and through damp lashes she can see that his face is red and his eyes watery. When Henry slowly shifts to rest his head in her lap, intermittent sobs shaking his shoulders, Archie finally leans forward, shaking his head, and starts to speak. "Henry, you know—"

"Please," Regina whispers, and Archie stops, stares at her. "Please—just for now. Please."

Rubbing at his eyes, Archie sits back with one quick nod and an echoed, "Just for now."

She isn't sure how long it's been when Henry speaks again, just a hoarse whisper. "What do I do, Mom? How do I—how do I live with this? How do I—what do I do?"

Gently, she brushes his hair back from his forehead, keeps a steady pace until the lines in his forehead ease away. "You live a good life. And you atone. Every day, every moment. Choose to live a good life, and choose to atone." She thinks of his first split lip, and touches the scar at his eyebrow, and feels her heart tightening. "I know you tried. I know you thought that's what you were doing. But that—atonement isn't suffering, baby. I need you to understand this, Henry. Your suffering benefits no one. Atonement is about reparation and making amends; taking abuse and pain heals nothing and no one."

He stares up at her and for a moment he is three, he is seven, he is twelve and he is *hers*. "Then—how?"

She remembers the weight of him after nightmares—his own, hers. The weight of him and how he'd fit with his forehead against her neck, so ready to be loved to safety. "You give. You give all the good things of yourself. You give enough to offset what you took."

His eyes are closed again, tears leaking from them anyway. "But—what if—what if there's nothing good left. What if—and how do you know when it's enough—and—what good do I give, Mom?"

The sob finally rises from her throat, cracks in the air. "My sweet, sweet boy," she murmurs, and gently thumbs some of the tears from his cheeks. "Love, baby. You and I, we give love."

"Love?" he repeats, and when his eyes open she can *see* it, see it taking root and lifting him, rising in him.

"Love," she affirms. "Love is the only magic we have left to us, Henry. And we must give it endlessly."

Chapter End Notes

This is, for all intents and purposes, the final chapter of the story. 16 will be an 'epilogue' of sorts.

Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

The end in a beginning.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Morning sex, she decides, is the best sex. Lazy and hazy and soft sounds and easy, comfortable, drowsily familiar.

And maybe a little dumb.

“C’mon, answer the question,” Emma murmurs, drags her mouth across Regina’s clavicle, down to that spot on the inner curve of her breast.

More than a little dumb.

“It’s a stupid question,” she retorts, no bite to it, and presses her lips along Emma’s jawline, lets the easy rocking of their hips intensify for a beat or two. Her jaw is still a little tired, and her kisses are sloppy, unfocused. “When would the fate of the world *ever*—“

Emma’s fingers jerk and she loses her thought. Deliberate sabotage, and they both know it. “Shh, no logic. Just choose.” That sweet frowning mouth returns to her breast, covers her nipple and there’s teeth and tongue and wet wet warmth. “Ass or tits. What would you sacrifice.”

She wants to laugh as much as she wants Emma to just *shut up*. “My own?”

Emma snorts, and shakes her head, kisses her sternum. “Yes, your own, smartass.”

Grinning wide, Regina cups Emma’s jaw with both hands, kisses her slow and deep. “And I can’t say, ‘Screw you, world,’ can I?”

“Nope.”

“Even though I’m the—“

“Cut the shit, you bleeding heart do-gooder,” Emma grumbles, and her hand scrapes up Regina’s back to tug at the ends of her hair. She has to bite down on her lip to keep the moan in, sees Emma watching her with eyes that know exactly how much she likes that. “Ass or tits.”

Bull-headed little— “And if,” Regina says carefully, runs the edge of her nail down that particular line of Emma’s neck, leans in and scrapes up with her bottom teeth, “if I ask the Savior to choose? With all her... *experience* with these things.”

Emma’s breathing hitches and shallows but she’s grinning back anyway. “Choose between these tits and this ass?” she asks, nipping at Regina’s breast and letting her free hand drop to squeeze her ass.

“Mmhmm.”

That stupid, stupid grin gets bigger and then there’s pressure to her clit again and everything gets brighter, blurrier. “Screw the world,” Emma murmurs, and kisses the laughter right out of her lungs.

Breakfast is a little less chaotic than usual, because Henry’s been back from his run for a while and sets the table for three in a more systematic way than Emma ever can manage. They’re both still blurs of movement, though, shuffling between the pantry and the fridge and the dining room to set out three types of cereal and jelly and Nutella and this year’s apple butter, and Regina just turns her back and focuses on the eggs, making sure they don’t get burned while the chorizo cooks thoroughly.

Henry appears at her elbow, hair still damp from the shower, and watches quietly. “There was ham in the fridge,” he says, but he’s grinning.

“Your mother likes chorizo,” she says, even though he already knows. “Everything set?” A flash of uncertainty in his eyes and smile, and she puts down the wooden spatula, grasps his chin lightly. He looks directly into her eyes now, and she wishes he were still small enough to believe that she can fix the whole world to his liking. “No matter what, we will be okay, sweetheart. You know that, right?”

He nods slightly, and he’s trying so hard to believe. “Do you think—“

“I do,” she whispers, and kisses his forehead.

A pop from the skillet startles them both; with a laugh, he steps back and gets a serving bowl from the cabinet for her. “I’m gonna go print—“ and he gestures towards the study while she transfers the eggs to the bowl.

Emma’s already at the table, distributing toast to each plate, and when she sees Regina she winks in that completely ridiculous way of hers. “Henry! Food!” she hollers, and reaches over to clear a trivet for the eggs. “Is that chorizo?”

“Don’t say I never do anything for you,” Regina replies, shooting Emma a warning look when she feels a hand on her ass.

The grin she receives is downright obscene. “If I *ever* say that, feel free to spank me.”

“Ugh, *seriously*, I’m about to eat,” Henry whines, rushing in from the kitchen with steady, steady steps.

“If you’d been at the table already, there wouldn’t have been anything to hear,” Emma counters, and serves him first.

Everything is normal for a while, intermittent silence mixed with planning for the day, reminders of tasks, and then she feels Henry’s foot—boot free, brace free, ordinary if still just a little weak—push tentatively against her heel. His plate is only half empty, and she smiles, just for him, and nods.

“Ma,” he says, mouth full of toast, “can you get the tabasco sauce?”

Emma, sitting closest to the kitchen, looks at him in disbelief. “You want to poison your mother’s cooking with *tabasco*?”

Henry’s eyes are wide and nervous and neither of them saw this reaction coming. “Emma, it’s fine,” Regina soothes, and reaches over to pat Henry’s hand. “He’s used to eggs with a little more kick, that’s all. Would you?”

Wiping her mouth on the back of her hand, Emma gets up. “Are you saying you water things down for me? Because listen, I can handle a little spice, okay.” She pushes the kitchen door open just as Henry snickers. “I heard that, you little gremlin,” Emma hollers through the door.

For the way Henry’s relaxing, for the way Emma’s abrasive humor always takes the edge off, Regina is so, so grateful.

When Emma pushes back through the door, she’s got the tabasco in one hand and a sheet of paper in the other, cellophane tape shimmering at the top. “Chore chart?” she asks, and frowns. “What—look, I know I’m here a lot and if I’m not pulling my weight, I’ll do better —”

There’s something darker and frightened behind that frown, and it’s making Henry’s nervousness worse, so Regina slides out of her chair, moves to stand behind him with her hands on his shoulders, steady and reassuring. “That’s more for Henry’s use,” she says calmly, ignoring the tightness in her lungs, “and your benefit. So he can’t con you into doing *his* chores again.”

“*One* time,” they say together, and grin at each other, and her whole ribcage flutters open.

“But, um,” and Emma’s shifting her weight nervously, and the way she’s almost hopeful and staunchly not makes Regina *ache* for her. “There’s things every day. And I’m not here every day. I mean, a lot of days, but I don’t want either of you to have to pick up my slack...”

She trails off because she’s looking up now, and she’s not almost hopeful, she’s *there*.

And Henry, nervous and sensitive Henry, Henry takes a deep breath, and Regina squeezes his shoulders lightly, because—

Because this is happiness and they can *have* it.

Henry takes a deep breath. “Ma, will you move in with us?”

And there, slowly, there’s that smile. Soft and slanted and sweet, sweet, sweet.

Chapter End Notes

This journey has been unreal. Also far longer than expected (fuck you, real life, fuck you). A million thanks to Lani, Hope and Steph for desperately needed input and reassurance at all of the wobbly ouchy places. (These are, in fact, technical terms.) The most thanks to Lynn, who served as legal/financial consultant, listened to me whine and whimper and flail about this fic for a whole year and still always came back with enthusiastic praise.

And, of course, gratitude to you, for reading and responding with as much genuine emotion as this little family deserves.

Happily ever after. The end.

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