

Wherever You're Going (I'm Going Your Way)

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/23547298) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/23547298>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	F/M
Fandom:	Once Upon a Time (TV)
Relationship:	Captain Hook Killian Jones/Emma Swan
Characters:	Captain Hook Killian Jones , Emma Swan , Prince Charming David Nolan , Snow White Mary Margaret Blanchard , Belle (Once Upon a Time) , Red Riding Hood Ruby , Huntsman Sheriff Graham
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Historical , Alternate Universe - 1950s
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2020-04-08 Completed: 2020-05-13 Words: 23,456 Chapters: 6/6

Wherever You're Going (I'm Going Your Way)

by [shireness](#)

Summary

1952. A lost boy without a home, Killian Jones rides America's back roads on his motorcycle, searching for a purpose that's just out of reach. This pit stop was only supposed to be a few days, a couple of weeks at most, but a pretty blonde waitress just might be his salvation. Is he brave enough to let her?

Notes

I'm pleased to present my contribution to the CS Rewrite-a-thon! This is an expansion of an earlier one-shot called "A Sunlit Night", which was about 2.3K. This finished product is about 23.6K. I think I qualified for "expand an idea", don't you?

Fic title is pulled from "Moon River." The song didn't exist in 1952, but sometimes it's all about the aesthetic. I'm running with it.

Rated T for language. Special thanks to the event mods, my beta [@thejollyroger-writer](#), and additional advice and assistance from [@snidgetsafan](#) and [@profdanglaisstuff](#).

Enjoy!

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

Chapter 1

Storybrooke, Maine could be any town in America — just as picturesque as the name suggests in a way that doesn't seem quite real. The houses have picket fences and boats bob in the harbor and there's an honest-to-god Main Street, lined with a diner and a general store and a pharmacy with advertisements for Ovaltine in the window. It's every picture of America that's ever made its way across the pond, every stereotype of small town life made real. It makes his presence all the more jarring; loners on motorcycles don't belong in this picture-perfect magazine print town.

He never meant to stop here — in fact, it's the kind of little hamlet Killian doubts anyone ever means to find themselves in. Though he may not have planned on stopping — not here, not anywhere, not for anything — he also hadn't planned on the noise his bike's engine had started making as he cruised down backroads under the emerald canopy that is rural Maine in June. Killian is used to making minor repairs to the machine — it's inevitable with the miles he's putting on the motorcycle, and besides, there's things you pick up in a war, especially when he spend much of World War II criss-crossing Europe in his plane — but for all of his handy skills, he still can't make parts materialize out of thin air.

And so, he finds himself in Storybrooke — the nearest town, according to the road map he'd picked up at a welcome center on his way into the state. He'll find a garage, he'll work for parts, he'll be on his way. It should be simple; a few days, a week at most, and then he's gone again.

(The sooner, the better, in his opinion; a woman wiping down tables outside of the diner shoots him a dirty look, and Killian can't help but feel like he deserves it for disrupting this idyll they're living in.)

Blessedly, there is a garage attached to the town's service station — NOLAN'S REPAIR, a large painted sign advertises across the top of the panelled door — but there's no sign of life inside. A quick glance at his watch, one of the few relics of the war that Killian willingly carries with him, reveals that it's already past seven. That's fine; he doesn't mind waiting until the morning.

It's easy enough to find space to park his motorcycle, conveniently alongside a park bench Killian suspects that he'll be spending the night on. As uncomfortable as it might sound to others, he barely thinks twice about the prospect anymore; he's spent plenty of nights on worse, both during the war and after it. His bedroll does more to counter the hard ground than anyone would expect.

(Sleep is hard to come by these days anyways, and when it does, it only brings nightmares — visions of falling and flames, reminders that there's no real good reason why he was pulled out of the Atlantic when so many others weren't.)

(*It should have been Liam who was saved, not you*, a terrible voice in his mind whispers. It's easier to drown out during the daytime; at night he's too tired to deny the truth of it.)

Satisfied that he's got a plan until tomorrow, Killian unbuckles the satchel containing his few important belongings from the body of his bike and sets out to locate the diner. He remembers the sign promising the establishment was open 24 hours a day, and he intends to take advantage of at least a few of them.

Sure enough, the lights of the diner still shine brightly as Killian approaches. *Granny's*, the neon letters out front read. By all appearances, it's typical of family-type joints across the nation (or at least the parts of the nation he's seen so far). A bell jingles merrily as he pulls open the door; inside, the diner is adorned with a busily patterned wallpaper that somehow avoids looking suffocatingly dark like he would have expected when paired with the red vinyl upholstery of the booths, chairs, and barstools. The jukebox plays faintly at the edge of his hearing, just low enough for him to ignore the sound. Not that he could place the song anyways. Even if there is something of a feeling that the establishment could have been located anywhere and he wouldn't have known the difference, there's a comfortable aura in the air as well.

"Seat yourself," an older woman calls from behind the counter without looking his way, apparently apprised of his entrance by the aforementioned bell. Considering the diner's moniker, Killian can't help but wonder if this is the eponymous Granny. It's probably for the best that she hasn't turned to face him; he can't imagine the woman would be as welcoming had she seen his face. He's a *bad influence*, they say wherever he goes in voices too loud to be a whisper, too loud to ignore. On a Tuesday night, the crowds here are minimal, a small blessing; after surveying his options, Killian chooses a booth in the back corner where he can watch everyone but hopefully not be disturbed. Already, his unfamiliar face is drawing attention from the few other diners. They're not used to outsiders, he can tell, and he's not surprised about it in a town this small. Already, he can feel an unnatural hush in the air as suspicious and in some cases curious faces follow him as he makes his way across the room.

Maybe, in another life, Killian might have stared back, daring his spectators with a look to do something about their staring. That life slipped away when he crossed the ocean in search of anonymity, however, and he makes a show of ignoring the stares, rustling in his satchel instead. From the cluttered depths, he extracts two books; one for his own reading, picked up from the last used bookshop he ran across, and one blank for his own use. Once upon a time, the sights he's seen and the faces he's met would have inspired verses, the words tripping over his fingers and across the page in a quest for life, but it's been a long while since that's been the case. There are many reasons Killian forges ahead on his endless, aimless ride — some of them tangible, some of them unknown even to him — but his pursuit of his words is part of it. The closest he comes these days is behind the controls of his bike, once more racing through the open sky; it's only then that the guilt quiets somewhat and he feels like inspiration could be dancing along the breeze, like a bit of dandelion fluff.

This diner, however, is not the open air or the world rushing past him without a care, and his notebook will once again go to waste.

"Can I get you something?" a different voice asks — feminine, but a little deep and throaty. Killian glances up, expecting to order tea and a ham sandwich and turn back to his own distractions. He expects a passing, forgettable interaction.

He does not expect to look up and find himself faced with an angel.

It's far too fanciful to call her that, especially when she stands in front of him, flesh and blood and bone, but it's all he can come up with when faced with such perfection. Her hair is a shade of gold that painters and pirates must have coveted in times long past, shining and catching in the light with every movement. Though her tresses are pinned back, a few tendrils have still worked themselves loose to frame her face and model the slight curl to the lustrous strands. The way it's swept and pinned makes her eyes shine brighter than any he's ever seen, highlighting their green in a way she can't possibly be oblivious to. There's an aura about her that he can sense but not quite see that practically makes her glow, even in a blue uniform dress and stained apron that's less than flattering. She's somehow entirely separate from the drab surroundings of this small town diner, yet simultaneously he knows she must be an integral part — like the purest diamond embedded in the dingiest mine.

(Maybe there's a verse in there, somewhere. It's been too long for him to even tell anymore.)

He must be gaping like a fish, because she arches an elegant eyebrow at whatever expression graces his face, the barest hint of a smile pulling at her own mouth. It ruins the goddess effect a little bit, but makes her look more human instead — someone with a sense of humor, perhaps even a bit mischievous. "Sorry?" he finally manages to stutter out, though whether that's an apology or a request for clarification is anyone's guess.

"Would you like to order?" she repeats. "Or would you like some more time to look at the menu?"

"Just some tea, please." It's some kind of miracle that he doesn't trip over his own tongue, though not enough of one to remember that ordering tea in this country is a fool's errand. "And a ham and cheese sandwich."

"Earl Grey alright?" she asks, surprising him, quickly scratching his order down on her notepad. From Killian's vantage point, he can just see her handwriting — a messy kind of script that fits his impression of her, casual and hurried and somehow still elegant.

"That's fine." Better than, really; he'd expected that terrible facsimile Americans insist on calling tea. He keeps drinking it anyways, for some indiscernible reason, like a last-ditch grab to hang onto a piece of who he used to be.

The waitress must see some of his surprise on his face, as she smiles knowingly. "Granny spent some time in England in her youth, and came back with *very* specific opinions about tea. None of the Lipton stuff here." That would explain it — though it's still unexpected in a tiny Maine hamlet. "Now, do you want that sandwich grilled or cold?"

"Grilled, please." The mere act of ordering a meal constitutes the most decisions he's had to make in a long time, and certainly the most he's spoken to anyone; his voice feels scratchy with disuse, which can't make the good impression his ego desperately needs. He was considered quite the catch once, if anyone could believe it; Killian wouldn't blame those who called him a liar, to see him now.

As he grimaces at his own ineptitude, the waitress finishes scribbling out his preferences and tucks her order pad back away in the pocket of that awful apron again. "We'll get that going for you then," she smiles. "Let me know if you need anything else."

(A name would be nice, for one, but it feels like overstepping to demand that particular snippet of information. He'd caught an E at the corner of her breast pocket, but that could be so many things. Eleanor? Elizabeth? Etta?)

"Wait, lass," he cuts in as she turns to disappear back behind the counter. Her head tilts in a sign of her attention — an adorable one at that. If he were a braver man, he might ask her a bit about herself. Unfortunately, he is not a braver man. "Is there a telephone somewhere I could use?"

"All the way down the hall," she nods. "Can't miss it."

"Thank you, lass," he murmurs as Ella-Ernestine-Elsie walks away again. There's no telling if she heard him or not, but Killian is almost afraid to bring any more attention to himself.

Sure enough, the payphone is just down the hallway. It's far enough away to offer Killian a modicum of privacy, which is more than he's come to expect in many places. It's dimly lit, and right next to the bathrooms, but he's not here for the ambiance anyways.

There's a calming ritual to making the phone calls to New York, even if they're only sporadic. He's accustomed by now to speaking with the operator, inserting the change when directed, waiting for the shrill ring as the call connects across hundreds of miles. He doesn't make these calls very often, but it's been several weeks — somewhere in upstate New York was his last call, he thinks — and this unexpected pit stop is as good an excuse as any.

It doesn't take long for the other end to pick up. "Scarlet residence," declares the softly accented voice on the other end of the line, familiar and comforting even across such a distance.

"Hello, Belle, it's me." Killian leans into the corner formed by the wall and phone as he settles in for the conversation, propping his forearm on the top of the telephone's boxy structure. Belle just might be the last family he has left — certainly the last family he's aware of — some sort of distant cousin on his late mother's side. The details of it don't particularly matter; what does matter is that she'd opened her heart and home when Killian had left, nay, fled England without any plan to speak of. London had still been in shambles, even after hostilities had long since ceased; Killian had found it impossible to live every day surrounded by ghosts and memories, all decaying and obliterated. Belle had offered to let him stay, too, help him get back on his feet again, but the itch to keep moving had been too strong under his skin.

(One thing they don't tell you when you enlist in the Air Force is this: the solid ground will lose its appeal in a way you can't imagine, and the world will start to move too slow everywhere else when you've spent enough time in a cockpit.)

Besides, Belle has a family of her own, a husband who loves her and two small boys; as kind as she is to offer, and as hard as she has tried to include him, Killian would inevitably always

be an outsider in that tableau. It was for the best that he left, to try and settle his demons and rediscover who he can be on his own.

"Killian!" It's easy to hear the warmth and excitement in his cousin's voice. "How are you? I was just thinking about you today." *Just worrying about you* is what she means, but Belle's always been too much of a lady to say it out loud. Besides, she understands why he's doing what he's doing; as settled as she is, he hadn't expected her to understand the itch to move that's settled beneath his skin, impossible to ever truly alleviate, but she'd just smiled and asked what she could do when he'd told her his plans. It's how she wound up the custodian not only of Killian's scant belongings, but also his savings account in his absence.

"I'm fine," he assures her as best he can. "I'm in Maine. I'll be here a few days, I think."

"A few days?" The worry isn't back in her voice yet, but he knows it's coming, just as soon as he shares his reason for stopping.

"Aye. There's a nail in my tire. I'll get it checked out at the shop tomorrow, but I assume they'll need to order in the new tire. I doubt they've got the right ones for the bike on hand."

"But you're alright?" Ah, there's the worry. "You don't need anything? I can wire you money, if you like —"

"I'm fine, Belle, truly," he hastens to assure her. "I'm hoping to trade my labor for parts, help out around the shop if the owner will let me. I'll need something to do around here anyways, it's a pretty small town. I'll let you know if you need to wire me money, don't worry."

"If you're sure..." Belle tries to start, but Killian cuts her off.

"I'm sure."

"I suppose I'll have to be fine with that. But now, Killian, how are you? Not your motorcycle or the roads — how are *you*?"

"I'm okay," he says truthfully. It's the best he can give most days; he hasn't quite found what he's looking for, can't even put his finger on what that might be, but he knows it's still out there, still out of reach. Still, it feels better than being cooped up in some office job, forcing himself into the boxes polite society wants him to inhabit that are slowly smothering him. It lets him try to figure out who he is now without Liam and without a clear purpose.

"But are you happy?" *It's not the same thing*, she doesn't say, but Killian hears it anyways.

"Enough." It's the best he can give her. "Listen, I just wanted to call and let you know where I am. If it seems like I'll be here more than a few days, I'll give you a number you can reach me at. Tell Will and the boys hello for me."

"I will," Belle promises. "If you need anything at all, if there's anything I can do, promise you'll call me, Killian. Promise."

"I promise. Love you."

"We love you too, Killian. You can always come here, even if it's not home."

She says that every time, and every time, Killian hangs up to avoid responding. The truth is, he still doesn't have a good answer, and as much as he loves his cousin and her family, their apartment just isn't *home*. That's something he's not yet sure he'll find again.

He's barely returned to his seat before a steaming pot of tea is placed before him, the cup following in its wake. "Your sandwich will be ready shortly," the blonde angel assures him. "Let me know if you need anything else."

"Thank you, lass," he tries to smile. At least his voice is audible this time after his conversation with Belle.

As Killian lifts the pot to pour himself a cup, he's thrilled to see the genuine article trickle out. Even with the waitress' explanation, his expectations of the promised tea had been low. This, though, is steaming and hot and just the right strength. It tastes like a little cup of the home he'd left behind, and infuses him with a warmth and comfort that he hasn't felt in... years. Not since before the war, just he and Liam sitting at the kitchen table with a cuppa and the radio.

(It's a feeling he's long since lost, and one he didn't expect to find again in the middle of nowhere, Maine. Everyday miracles can still sprout anywhere, he's learning, as long as you're looking for them.)

His dinner arrives as quickly as promised, and time begins to blur together in between warm bites and crisp pages and his thoughts. At some point, the empty plate is whisked away and another cup of tea is brought for him to enjoy. Killian is so used to entertaining himself that he doesn't truly notice any movement around him — that is, until a new plate is placed on his table and nudged into his hand. Glancing at the clock, Killian is surprised to find that the time is now just before ten; he'd been at the diner over two hours, far longer than he'd intended. Blame it on a good book and intriguing, if passing, company, he supposes.

Another quick glance reveals the small plate that the waitress had deposited to display a slice of pie — blueberry, if he's not mistaken. The thing is, he's certain that he'd never ordered it.

"Excuse me, miss," he calls before she can walk away, "I believe you delivered this to the wrong table."

"No, I didn't," she smiles back, before glancing towards the door. It must be time for her to go home; Killian will regret her absence once she departs, though he knows he doesn't have any true right to do so.

Still, he must insist. Good form and all that. "I didn't order this, I'm afraid." *I'm not sure I can afford it*, he doesn't say, though that's what he means.

"I know," she replies. "You like pie?"

"I do," he assures her, still confused.

"Then it's on the house. Granny's got a soft spot for the lonely ones." As she tears his ticket off from her order pad, Killian wonders if the woman in front of him might have a soft spot, too. Maybe she was a lonely one herself, once; something in her eyes speaks to the kind of understanding you just can't fake. "If you'd like some more tea, Ruby will be happy to help you," she nods towards a smiling brunette behind the counter. "Have a good night."

"You as well, lass."

The pie is delicious; he should have expected such just from the look of that flaky crust, but the confirmation is its own revelation. He can't say any of this was what he expected when he set out for dinner — not the blonde angel, and certainly not her unexpected kindness towards him. The more he thinks about it around bites of pie, the more he thinks the diner's proprietress had nothing to do with the sweet treat in front of him — especially since he hasn't even seen her on the premises since his server made that claim. No, he thinks that the pie must have come from the waitress herself, though he can't fathom for what reason.

He finally pays his bill and leaves, letting the diner's bell ring behind him as he exits, but it's not until he's nearly halfway back to the garage and the bench out front that he realizes:

He never actually learned her name.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

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

The bench outside of Nolan's Garage is a nice one, all things considered. Killian would know, after a summer spent sleeping on a series of them. It's got an armrest at one end that he can prop his bedroll against for a pillow and is good, sturdy wood instead of the stylized metal contraptions some towns insist on adopting for aesthetic or some such.

After months on the road, Killian is now more used to sleeping out of doors, only seeking an inn or other shelter on rainy nights to protect from the elements. He's used to the way the birds start their song at dawn, the way the sun's rays gradually wash across his face to bathe him in a brightness and warmth that eventually coaxes him back to the waking world. What he's *not* used to is the dark shadow that is suddenly cast across his form, looming and severe, tangible even in his dozing state. With great effort, Killian peels his eyes open to find a man standing over him — tall, blonde, wide-shouldered. Visibly unhappy.

"You must be the stranger," he states simply. Even in those five words, Killian can hear the judgement, the distrust, the disapproval. It's nothing he's not used to; one doesn't exactly endear oneself to the locals by showing up unexpectedly in their idyllic little towns and sleeping on park benches.

"Aye," he agrees, pushing himself into a sitting position and extending a hand in introduction. "Killian Jones."

"I don't care." The other man's arms stay crossed, his expression severe. "What do you want?"

Killian sighs. "I don't suppose you're Nolan?"

"I might be. Like I said — what do you want?"

Whoever claimed that honey worked better than vinegar was clearly a liar; either that, or Nolan is rather smarter than your average fly. Possibly both. "I'm afraid I've run into some trouble with my bike," Killian says simply, nodding towards the machine in question. "I hoped maybe I could avail myself of your services." It's needlessly formal, but it feels like the kind of thing he might have said in his past life to charm all matter of different people into doing his bidding.

"Can you pay?"

Killian hesitates. This is where things get a little more complicated. "Aye," he finally says — not a lie, per say, though not exactly the truth — "Though I'd prefer to pay with labor than with money."

The statement earns him an appraising look. "You can do auto repair?"

"At a rudimentary level, yes," he admits. Still, he hesitates before adding the next part; the next part is what could open him up to a whole series of questions he's not much in the mood to answer. "I picked up a few things during the war, though I'm more used to dealing with plane engines than cars."

For all of Killian's fears, Nolan doesn't immediately press, or offer pointless platitudes. In fact, Killian would almost say that something about his posture releases, lets go of some of the tension he'd been carrying. "Why can't you fix it yourself then?"

"Hard to fix much of anything without the right parts - in this case, a tire. I just need someone to order it for me, and a place I can replace it. I figured — if you're amenable — I could help out around here until the tire comes in or I've worked off the cost."

Nolan looks at him a moment longer, before finally nodding — slowly, thoughtfully, decisively — and jerking his head towards the garage. "Come on in, then, and we'll take a look."

Killian quickly gathers his things and moves to wheel his bike in as Nolan goes to roll up his front garage door. "You said you served? In what, the RAF?" he asks as Killian begins to push the bike inside.

"Yes, sir." Maybe he's a little bit short, but he's learned that's the best way to discourage further questioning.

Not that he needs to worry about that; the blond man just nods again. "I was in the Army. In Italy. And it's David."

It's all the explanation either of them needs; some things, they both understand, don't bear further discussion.

"We don't get much by way of excitement around here. A few flat tires, oil changes, that kind of thing," Nolan — *David* explains. "Most of our business is just pumping gas. You think you can handle all that?"

"Aye. It won't be a problem."

"Let's take a look then."

David's garage is neater than Killian expected. In his experience, auto shops are dirty, grungy places. Though there is still a bit of that — engine grease has a way of working its way into corners and sticking around for far longer than anyone would prefer — all his tools are neatly organized, clearly left in long-since-designated places. If he had to guess, he'd say it must be a bit of that military order leftover in David.

"You said something about a tire?" the other man asks, already crouching down to squeeze at the rubber.

"Aye. I drove over a nail at some point, and it's become embedded in the front tire. It's only a slow leak right now, but it needs addressing."

David runs a sure hand along the curve to find the piece of metal in question before leaning in for a closer look. “Yeah, it’s in there pretty good,” he agrees. “We can take it out and slap a patch on there, if you like, but that’s more of a temporary measure. I’d recommend just replacing the whole thing. The tread is getting worn anyways. How far have you been riding?”

“Went all the way to the gulf and back up.”

“Yeah, you’re due then. It’s up to you, but I’d like to order tires for the front and back.”

“Aye, that sounds fine,” Killian agrees. “Best to replace them at the same time, anyways. How long do you think it’ll take?”

“Hard to say,” David shrugs. “The work itself isn’t the issue — you know that will go quickly — but it’s the shipping that’s more of a problem. I’ll call today, get that ball rolling, but we’re a ways out. It can take a while for things to get all the way out here. If I had to guess... a week? Maybe two?”

It’s not ideal; that’s a long time for Killian to stay in one place, and it makes him feel anxious. He feels better when he’s moving. But what other choice does he have?

(A week, maybe two, and he’s gone. Anyone can withstand that; even he can endure it.)

“That’s fine,” he repeats. Uselessly. There’s nothing else to say, though — David can’t rush how long it takes things to get here, and Killian knows exactly how far in the middle of nowhere this town is.

“Before I agree to trade parts for labor, though, I’ve got to see what you can do. I can’t just put you to work on a promise,” David warns. “Otherwise, you’re going to have to come up with the money.”

“Of course.”

David leads them across the shop to where a sedan is lifted up to display its underside. “Routine oil change,” David explains, nodding vaguely in the direction of the car’s guts. “Think you can handle it?”

Killian doesn’t bother to confirm or deny — a waste of speech, really, when he could get down to the doing — just shrugs his jacket off to drape over a nearby tool bench. “Any gloves I could borrow?”

David passes them in equal silence, and Killian sets to work. There’s something soothing about the ritual of all this — unscrew the drain cap and let the used oil drain into a receptacle, remove the old oil filter, and replace it with a new one. The hardest bit is figuring out how to lower the car back to normal level and where David keeps the fresh oil.

“I can change a tire, too, if you need more proof,” Killian offers as he strips off the borrowed gloves again.

“That’s fine. I think I can find something for you to do around here. Let me show you the cash register, you’ll need that for gas.”

And just like that, they’ve come to an arrangement.

David doesn’t expect much by way of conversation — a good thing, since Killian doesn’t have much to give. He’s out of practice, frankly, no longer skilled in all the ridiculous little intricacies of small talk, and nowhere near ready to talk about anything deeper — especially with a man he’s only just met. The afternoon mostly passes in an easy kind of silence, with David working in the garage on a car engine he’d described as “a special pain in the ass” and Killian handling the pumps outside. The customers look at him suspiciously when he runs out to help instead of David, but that’s nothing new. He’s earned an awful lot of suspicious looks in his travels, and he knows it’s because he’s an unfamiliar face.

(Granted, the leather jacket probably doesn’t help. He knows it makes him look like he’s up to no good, but it’s warm and holds up well in the weather, and he has no intention to change that just because a few uptight townspeople look at him with narrowed eyes.)

The afternoon passes quickly in that matter, and before Killian knows it, he comes back inside the garage after serving a small rush of people to find David putting his tools back in their proper place.

“Closing time,” David comments in explanation, nodding towards the clock. Sure enough, the hands read 5:30; he should have known in a little town like this, everything would close before six. Before he can even start making plans for the evening — where he’s going to get food, where he’s going to sleep, all the little details that he’s accounted for dozens of times since he started this ride — David jerks his head towards the door in an abrupt invitation.

“Come on, Mary Margaret will have dinner on the table soon.”

“I’m sorry?” It doesn’t really process. Only hours ago, David was standing over him in a threatening manner, demanding to know what he was camping on a town bench for, and now he’s... apparently inviting Killian to his home. Surely he can’t mean that.

“My wife,” David clarifies, as if that was the confusing thing. “She’s making a pot roast, maybe some pie since we’ll have company. I called her earlier to let her know you’d be joining us for dinner.” His face turns sharp again for a moment. “You *are* coming to dinner, right?”

“I... well, yes, I suppose I am. If you and your wife want me there, that is,” Killian manages to say, tripping over the words in his surprise.

“Good,” David nods. “You’ve got to eat, after all, and the missus would kill me if I didn’t invite you. She’s got strong opinions about a home-cooked meal. For good reason, too, it’s a damn fine pot roast. Are you coming?” The last is definitely necessary prodding, as Killian is still stuck several steps from the door trying to figure out what just happened.

Still, he follows David out, making sure to snag his bag by the door on his way. Even if he’s a bit thrown off by this turn of events, that doesn’t change the fact that he’ll be lost without his

belongings for the night. “Thank you,” he murmurs as David locks up behind them. “I appreciate the invite.”

“Don’t mention it,” the other man shrugs, tucking the shop keys back into his pocket. “Like I said, my wife would kill me if I made you go scavenging on your own.”

The Nolan residence is on a quiet street maybe a ten minute walk from the garage. If Killian had thought Main Street was impressive, this is something else. Trees arch gracefully over the pavement, creating their own little world in the shade. The houses have front porches and flower beds lining the front walk. Half of them have a flag fluttering outside the front door. It looks like a cliché of American domesticity, and he hasn’t even made it off the street.

David and his wife’s house proves to be a cheery pale blue with white trim and has flowered window boxes. Before they go inside, he crouches to take off his work boots and nods for Killian to do the same. “Can’t have us tracking grease in the door,” he explains. “No need to stain the rug if we don’t have to.”

The house inside is just the same — picture perfect yet impossibly real. He can spot lace doilies on end tables and a carved hatstand in the entry hall, and the smell of something delicious wafts through the rooms. It’s obvious, too, that this isn’t just a house — it’s a *home*, evident in a carefully bookmarked novel on the coffee table some sewing discarded in the corner.

The woman who comes bustling down the hall to greet them fits his impression of the space perfectly — a cliché of the loving, welcoming wife with her big smile and apron and perfectly pinned hair. David’s a lucky man to be living this life, and Killian feels a dull pang of longing for that kind of certainty, even if he doesn’t feel ready to plant roots in that way yet.

“Welcome home!” the woman all but coos, dropping a quick kiss on David’s cheek before turning her dimpled grin on Killian, extending a delicate hand to shake. “You must be Killian — David told me you were helping at the shop and I just *insisted* he bring you home for dinner. Granny’s is all well and good, but it’s nothing compared to a good home-cooked meal, is it?”

Despite Killian’s misgivings about the trappings of this whole idyllic life (even just watching it from afar intensifies the constant itch beneath his skin, to move, to flee, to *fly*), he likes Mrs. Nolan immediately. “No, it isn’t,” he concedes, cracking a small smile. He even manages to take the hand she offers, pressing a kiss to the back of it that makes the pretty brunette blush and David glower. “Thank you for your hospitality, Mrs. Nolan.”

“Oh, you must call me Mary Margaret!” she protests as David’s glare intensifies. Faced with that kind of reaction, Killian doesn’t plan to follow the lady’s command. “I just put dinner on the table, you’re just in time. Pot roast with potatoes and green beans, and a good chocolate cake for dessert. Does all of that sound good to you?”

“It sounds delicious, ma’am.”

“Good answer,” David mumbles not quite under his breath, earning himself an affectionate whack to the chest from his wife. It sends an odd pang of longing through Killian — they’re obviously well suited for each other, and Killian finds himself wanting a partner he can share that same kind of companionship with. It’s silly, though; that kind of commitment would require a kind of stability he just can’t give. It’s still lovely to watch though, as David leads them to the dining room with one callused hand just barely grazing along Mary Margaret’s back. Quickly, they both wash their hands at the kitchen sink before taking a seat at the table.

“So David said you’ll be in town for the next week or so?” the lady of the house asks as they start to dig in.

“That’s the plan, at least. Just until the replacement tires get in,” he replies before taking a bite of potatoes. It’s been a while since Killian has had a home-cooked meal, and Mrs. Nolan’s cooking proves to be more than up to snuff.

“Well let me tell you, there’s no better place to break down than in Storybrooke — and I’m not just saying that because I’m married to the mechanic!” she gushes with a tinkling laugh. As far as Killian can tell, she seems to do that a lot — a striking contrast to David’s more reserved demeanor. “Storybrooke is just such a nice little town — I can’t imagine living anywhere else. But I understand that you’ve been driving all over the country?”

“Let the man eat, Mary Margaret,” David chides affectionately. “He can’t get a bite in between all these questions.”

Mrs. Nolan blushes a bright pink in response, somehow managing to look delicate even in her embarrassment. “Oh! Of course, where are my manners. You don’t need to answer that, Killian. I can’t insist you come to dinner and then not let you eat!”

Killian swallows a bite of roast hurriedly in order to respond. “It’s quite alright, Mrs. Nolan,” he smiles. “Yes, I’ve been driving up and down the coast since March. I’m planning to head westward after this.”

“That must be so exciting,” she smiles. “I’m more of a homebody, myself — I can’t imagine driving all over the place for so long.”

“It’s not for everyone,” Killian agrees noncommittally.

A few minutes of relative silence pass as the three of them truly dig in, interrupted only by assurances that *dinner is delicious* and *you know how I love your potatoes*. For those minutes, Killian is almost lulled into thinking that he’s in the clear, that no more questions are coming to dredge up things he doesn’t like to think about.

“So what about when you’re not on the road, Killian?” Mary Margaret asks in a tone of voice that’s almost suspiciously innocent. He’s sure she doesn’t mean anything nefarious; she’s just making conversation. Still, he has a bad feeling about where this is going. “Where do you call home?”

And there it is — a question to really set his nerves on edge. A question that he doesn’t really have a proper answer to. “Nowhere, at the moment. I’ve been travelling ever since I came to

the country.”

“And what about your family? Are they still back in England?”

If Killian was wary of the first question, his heart drops into his stomach at the second. “No,” he barely bites out. “There’s no one back in England.”

Maybe they hear the barely restrained pain in his voice; maybe they just grow tired of his poor excuses for conversation. Killian wouldn’t blame them; he knows that he’s less than good company, and isn’t remotely carrying his weight in their interactions. All he knows is the depth of his gratitude when conversation shifts towards more generic topics, ones David can answer, like about their day at the shop.

Dinner is fine, and a fine excuse to make him interact with even a little bit of the world.

It’s an even greater relief when he can bid them both a good evening and leave for the night.

Despite Mrs. Nolan's best attempts to fatten him up, Killian still wanders down to Granny's that night after dinner. Perhaps it's for the tea; perhaps it's for a change of scenery; perhaps it's for the chance to see the lovely blonde waitress again.

(It's absolutely the last option, no doubt, but Killian likes to pretend he still has a little bit of his dignity sometimes. He's not a young boy mooning over a pretty girl anymore, even if he certainly is acting that way at the moment.)

The sounds and rituals of the diner are more familiar now that it's his second visit — the right of the bell above the door, the way everyone hushes for just a moment as he walks in before hurriedly continuing on in an array of conversations, Granny's nod he's sure means *seat yourself*. The same booth as he occupied last night is still open, and Killian slides across the vinyl once again. Sure enough, only a minute or two later, the same blonde angel as before appears to take his order.

"Hello again," she smiles. Little lines around her eyes crinkle with the gesture; they suit her, Killian decides, making her look even more like a creature who's meant to spread and receive joy. "What can I get you tonight?"

"Just another pot of tea, please," he replies, trying to match her smile. It doesn't feel quite so natural on Killian's face — proof that he's long since out of practice in performing what's such a natural gesture on everyone else.

(Another thing he lost to the sea, along with Liam, along with his youth, along with his plans.)

"No sandwich tonight?" she continues, apparently oblivious to Killian's internal struggle. She doesn't even bat an eye at whatever twisted facsimile of a smile graces his face; maybe it looks better than he thought.

"Not tonight, love. I already had a bit of dinner. Thank you though, miss..." he trails off in question, arching a single eyebrow to accentuate the query.

It would be well within her right to refuse to tell him; after all, he's an odd and awkward stranger she's met all of twice. To his surprise though, she just smiles again, and offers him her name like a gift. "Emma. Emma Swan."

It suits her, he decides immediately; it's graceful and elegant and maybe just a little otherworldly, like a princess out of a fairy tale he hasn't heard before. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Miss Swan," he returns. The smile feels a little easier now, though he's not ready to admit why.

The smile on her — on *Emma's* face turns a little wry. "And you are....?"

It absolutely figures that he'd get so lost in the joy of knowing this angel's name that he would forget his own. "Killian — Jones," he hastens to reply, tripping over his own name in the process.

"It's nice to meet you, Killian Jones," she replies, clearly trying to cover a laugh. "I'll have that tea right out for you."

Though Emma returns with the small teapot and a cup on a saucer a few minutes later, more people have trickled into the diner for a late dinner and he's unable to engage her in conversation any further. That's alright; he'd borrowed *Frankenstein* from the Nolans' bookshelf for a reread, and there's no time like the present. He didn't come to Granny's just to talk to Emma, after all.

(That's what he tells himself, anyways; the truth is that something more compelling than the pie lured him back, whether or not he ever acts on it.)

Dr. Frankenstein is just as egotistical and irritating as Killian remembers, but he gets lost in that gothic world all the same, reveling in the twists and turns he half-remembers from grammar school. Before he knows it, it's 10pm again, and whether it's the tea or the story or something else entirely, Killian isn't remotely tired. It's a relief in many ways; after all, he can't dream if he doesn't sleep. Insomnia has never been a problem he's faced, for better or worse, but there are nights after a particularly intense streak of nightmares that Killian wished that the urge to close his eyes and slip into slumber wasn't quite as strong.

Regardless, he's just starting to contemplate wandering back toward the garage and the bench he's pretending is a bed when Emma slides into the seat across from Killian.

"You're a wanderer," she says. It's not a question, just a statement of fact. He can't say he's ever been called that before, but Killian supposes it's accurate. He can't think of a better descriptor, at least.

"Aye, I suppose you could say that," he concedes. "Better than some things I've been called," he mutters much further under his breath.

"I've never gone further than Portland," Emma admits. Killian can already tell by the far-off look in her eyes that it's not for lack of desire; just for lack of opportunity. "I wanted to join the Red Cross during the war, but..."

"Be glad you didn't," Killian interrupts before she can finish the thought. He knows how that story ends anyways: too much to do on the homefront and too few men to do it. "No one should see what went on over there unless they had to."

"I know," Emma replies. "I don't regret it. I was needed more here. But I worry that might have been my chance to see the world."

"You'll get another chance, Swan." He doesn't know where the instinct to call her by her last name comes from; all he knows is that it feels *right*.

"I hope so," she replies wistfully, before shaking herself back out of it. "But for now, tell me: what's it like?"

For a short, terrible moment, Killian worries that she meant what it was like to fight, and the flames flash in front of his eyes again. Something of it must show in his face, however, as she hurries to clarify her request. "I meant in your travels. On your bike." She sighs and runs a frustrated hand over her hair. "I've made a mess of this, haven't I?"

"It's alright, love," he smiles, moving to clasp her hand in reassurance before thinking better of it. "You haven't made a mess of anything."

"You're just saying that," she mumbles. "Being polite."

"It's the truth. You've got nothing to apologize for. I, on the other hand... I've rather forgotten the question." It's almost flirtatious — not that he means it to be. It's hard to imagine himself light-hearted enough to flirt nowadays, even when faced with a beautiful blonde with a smile that could light up even the darkest of nights.

There's no point to it anyways; he'll only be in Storybrooke for a few days, a week at the longest.

(No matter what he says, he's already in danger of becoming attached to this girl, his angel.)

"What's it like out there?" Emma repeats. Curiosity and excitement twinkle in her eyes and she leans against the table with crossed arms, like she'll hang onto every word. He thinks she truly will, too; he only hopes that the words he has to say won't disappoint her. She doesn't deserve that.

"It's... big," he says, knowing full well that the description is horribly inadequate, even if it's true. "Vast. I grew up thinking that Britain was so large, or Europe, but neither come anywhere close to your country. All the things you can see... it's a marvel."

"So where have you been?" Emma asks. "Or is it easier to ask where *haven't* you been?"

Killian blushes a bit at that, though he can't quite figure out why; maybe the implication that he's worldly, or some kind of expert. "I've been up and down the East Coast," he tells her.

“Started in March and rode all the way down to Florida while the heat could still feel good. And now, obviously, have worked my way back up.”

“You must have gone to the beach down there, right?” She doesn’t even wait for an answer before plowing forward. “Is it different from the ocean here? I can’t imagine anyone making that trip and not going to see the ocean.”

Maybe for other people, that’s true; it seems like the kind of cliché vacation road trip residents of a picture-perfect town might take. Killian still remembers, though, how his life almost ended in this same ocean, thousands of miles away — still remembers being tossed by the waves and scrambling to keep himself above water and the way that the cold of the Atlantic cut into his flesh. He still remembers the panic and the desperate realization that if he didn’t fight like hell, he’d be swallowed by the turbulent waters and never resurface.

Most people love the ocean; Killian no longer counts himself among them.

“It is different,” he finally says. “The shore isn’t so pebbled as it is here. There’s just sand, everywhere, even where you’d expect there to be proper soil instead. It makes the water look different, too — it moves the same, but the colors are different. It’s the dark sand and rocks that turn the water so dark, here. On the Gulf, everything is blue instead.”

“It sounds beautiful,” she sighs. “I’m going to go someday, somehow. I swear it.”

“I’m sure you will.” It’s not placating, or at least he doesn’t intend it to be; something about Emma makes him believe, even so soon into their acquaintance, that she can and will do anything she sets her mind to. If she wants to see the world, she’ll find a way.

“You really think so?” she asks, a mix of hope and uncertainty creeping into her voice.

“Of course. I think you can do anything you want to — especially a lady as bold as yourself.”

“Thanks.” She smiles at the reassurance; he likes this look on her a lot better. He likes it even more when the smile turns into a self-deprecating laugh. “That’s enough about me, though. Tell me more about where you’ve been.”

“There’s not much to tell,” he admits. “It’s been a lot of back roads and landscapes and little tiny towns, and not a lot of sightseeing.”

“What’s been your favorite part, then?”

“The speed,” he admits readily. There’s no thought even required. She most likely wanted to hear about a particularly memorable town or something like that, but the truth is, he’s been more interested in the ride itself than anywhere he might be going, as cliché as that is. “Out there, with an open stretch of road... it feels like flying. It’s exhilarating. There’s almost nothing like it.” Of course, it’s a shameless attempt to recreate the feeling of soaring across the skies in the *Jolly*, but Emma doesn’t need to know that. Discussions of how he’s desperately trying to reclaim the feeling of the last time it felt like he had a purpose aren’t exactly suitable conversation when you’ve barely learned a girl’s name.

“Maybe you’ll have to show me before you leave,” she suggests with a coy little smile. Truth be told, Killian isn’t sure how to respond to that; it’s hard to believe a woman like her would be interested in spending any time with him, and it’s far too presumptuous to believe she’s flirting with him. She must just be expressing an odd kind of kindness, just expressing interest in the things he likes for politeness’ sake. That’s a thing people do, he thinks; he’s far too out of practice with having to interact with strangers.

(After all, this is just temporary. He’s only here until his bike is fixed — a few days, a week at the longest.)

(That doesn’t stop a little part of him from wishing that she really did mean it.)

“Where else do you want to see? Besides the Florida coast,” he blurts out, looking for a way to sidestep... whatever just happened. It’s hard to know how to respond to what she just said, even if he is eager to otherwise continue their conversation. She’s good company, he finds, and doesn’t act with that cloying kind of politeness he’s used to from so many other people and never knows how to respond to. She’s... genuine. Genuinely kind, and genuinely curious.

“Oh, everywhere,” she sighs. “The Grand Canyon, the Four Corners — I want to stand in four states at once, and don’t even try to tell me how ridiculous that is — the Alamo, Niagara Falls... all of it.” She blushes fetchingly at the end of her list. “I know it’s a lot, but we had a *very* comprehensive geography book in the library when I was in school. It really captured my imagination, I suppose you’d say.”

“I don’t think it’s — well, it is a lot, really,” he chuckles, “but that’s not a bad thing. I wouldn’t say it’s excessive. I’m the one driving across the country without anything resembling a plan.” This time, his chuckle is self-deprecating, almost bitter.

“Ah, but it’s not without purpose, is it?” she says with a wry smile and a knowing tone. “Not having a plan isn’t the same thing as not having a reason.”

It’s terrifying, in a certain way, the way she can read him so easily. Those are things he’s not prepared to discuss with her, not tonight and possibly not ever.

“It’s not,” he says shortly, “but that’s not a matter for discussion tonight.”

“No, I guess it isn’t.” If he were a more optimistic man, he might almost say she looks sad that their conversation is ending. “I’ll let you get back to your book, then. Would you like a fresh pot of tea?”

Don’t go, he thinks. “That would be wonderful, thank you,” his mouth says — some stupid brain-heart miscommunication.

“I’ll get that right out to you.” Carefully she slides out of the booth, smoothing her skirt as she goes. Killian is helpless but to follow her with his eyes all the way back to the kitchen. The loveliest woman he’s met in a long, long time, possibly ever, and he’s mucked it all up.

Ah, well, it's not like it matters anyways. His stay was always meant to be temporary, after all, when he's only here for as long as it takes for his new tire to get here. There's no sense in forming attachments.

(It may already be too late for that, but he's willing to ignore it until he can't any longer.)

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for all of your wonderful comments on the first chapter! I hope you liked this one just as well!

Also posted on tumblr, where I'm @shireness-says.

Thanks for reading - let me know what you think!

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

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

Killian spends the next day kicking himself for the way things ended in the diner. The simple thing would be to go back to the diner the next day — to prove with his presence alone that it's alright, that he didn't mean to stop the conversation entirely, even if he wasn't willing to follow that one particular thread.

He doesn't.

He spends a lot of time lying awake, replaying the moment he brought things to a screeching halt over and over again. It's a form of self-flagellation, for certain, but it's still better than the nightmares his mind conjures up night after night. There's only so much the stars can do to calm him when he sees the same flames and crushing waves night after night. Reveling in his shame and recriminations is much preferable.

(The sensible thing, of course, would be to stop lying awake in the dark and to just go to the diner for a pot of tea and a distraction. It'd give him a chance to make up for his own stupidity.)

(Killian Jones is not nearly that sensible.)

What really gets him is that he felt like there was a genuine connection between the two of them. It's been a long while since Killian has felt so comfortable talking to another person, able to leave some of his regular self-consciousness behind. It had seemed to go both ways, too — like she understood him on some level, and wanted to hear what he had to say. Maybe if he hadn't been so curt; maybe if he had been willing to open himself up more... but it's no use. What's done is done, and besides, Killian can't truly regret not sharing more, even if he does regret what that meant for whatever was shared between him and Emma in those moments. He's not ready, or willing, to talk about all the reasons he fled — not yet. Not even with blonde angels who make him feel like a man again.

It's an unspeakable surprise — not to mention, relief — when Emma shows up at the garage with a sack lunch from Granny's two days after their unceremonious parting. His pulse picks up the moment she walks in the open garage door with paper bags in each hand, evidently not feeling any of the same anxieties he is.

"Anyone hungry?" she calls lightly, smiling at Killian like any awkwardness is forgotten. Maybe it is. He'd be a fool to bring it up again.

"Is that you, Emma?" David hollers from across the shop where he's camped out under the hood of a truck, replacing one of its radiators.

"Sure is," she responds easily. "I've got a tuna salad sandwich here with your name on it, too. Unless you'd rather knock around under the hood..."

“Don’t be silly,” David responds with a fond tone to his voice as he wipes his hands on a spare rag to get rid of the worst of the grease. “You know I’ll never say no to food, especially not Granny’s tuna salad. Fries?”

“Of course, I know how this works.”

Killian looks back and forth between the two of them in confusion; there’s a level of familiarity here that he hadn’t expected. “I’m sorry, do you two know each other?” It’s a bit of a silly question, considering the interaction he just witnessed, but truthfully, he’s a little lost. This was not remotely what he expected to happen. Then again, Storybrooke is a small town; it stands to reason that everyone knows everyone. He’s still stuck in that big-city mentality, he supposes.

“Emma’s like a little sister to me,” David explains as he slings his arm around her shoulders.

“Am I little, or are you just *old*?” she jabs back. The familiarity of that exchange sends a brief jab of pain shooting through Killian’s heart; it’s so reminiscent of the way he and Liam used to poke at each other, the way Killian constantly had to insist that he was *younger*, not little.

(He’ll never have that again, and it *hurts*. He’d put up with all matters of teasing, if it meant he could have his brother back.)

“We’ve known each other since we were, what, teenagers?” David continues, obviously ignoring Emma’s teasing. “Ever since she came up from Portland to stay with Miss Ingrid, God rest her soul.”

“Twelve years now,” Emma nods. “And he’s been insufferable ever since.”

(There’s more of a story there, Killian thinks, but he knows not to push. He’s got things he’s not willing to share either, after all, as they more than proved the night before last.)

“Anyways, I brought you lunch, too, Killian,” Emma says. “I didn’t know what else you’d like, so it’s just ham and cheese again.”

“Again?” David butts in. Killian can practically see the other man’s big brother instincts kick in, which has rarely meant good things for him. People say he’s a bad influence, after all, and Killian isn’t sure he disagrees. “You two have already met?”

“At the diner, you pest. Stand down, soldier, or… something.” Emma rolls her eyes, but the affection is still obvious between the two of them. That’s not something you can mask, even if one is exasperated and the other’s an arse. That’s siblings, really — you love them, even when they grate on your nerves. Even when they’re just connected by love, rather than blood. “Anyways, I just wanted to make sure you were both fed. I’ve got to get back to the lunch rush, actually. I’ll see you later?”

She must be talking to David — she *must*. Nothing else makes sense. That doesn’t change the fact that she makes eye contact with Killian as she speaks, holding his stare until he gives a small nod in the affirmative. David says something in the background — probably

agreeing, if Killian had to guess — but he's not listening in the least, far more interested in anything Emma is doing. It's because of that single-minded attention that Killian can see the small smile she offers him in return, just large enough to begin to round her cheeks and crinkle her eyes. Maybe she did mean to say it to him after all; why else would she smile at him like that? Killian is left with so many questions, but at least he knows she wants to see him again — that he hasn't mucked things up beyond any repair.

"So were you going to mention that you knew Emma?" David asks, taking a hearty bite of his sandwich.

"I didn't know I needed to, mate. I didn't realize you two even knew each other, let alone so well, until just now." His own sandwich is just the way he likes it, and the fries somehow still nice and warm. It's astounding to him that Emma would think to bring him lunch as well; he's a lucky man, to have earned her kindness.

"Hmph." David picks a few fries of his own out of the bag. "I don't need to give a warning talk or anything, do I?"

"No," Killian answers immediately — perhaps too hastily. "I mean, she's a lovely girl — sweet and beautiful and... Maybe under other circumstances, if I wasn't just passing through..." *If I was a different, better man*, he thinks — just another thing he can't say.

David huffs again. "Well, just... be careful."

"Aye. I will."

He'd promised David he'd be careful, but he never promised he'd stay away — even if he maybe should have. That doesn't change the fact that it's 7pm, and while he ought to stay away, he's back sitting in Granny's booth yet again.

Emma doesn't even ask tonight — just brings him a pot of tea, their own little routine that Killian hadn't realized that they'd fallen into.

"What else can I get you?" she asks, pen poised and ready to take his order.

He hasn't even looked at the menu, truthfully, and it seems foolish to frantically scan now. "What would you recommend?" he asks instead.

"Granny makes a mean lasagna."

"I'll take that then," he replies with a smile, tucking the menu back away behind the napkin holders from where it had been resting on the table.

"Can I get you anything else?" She smiles back.

Just that little gesture makes him bold, gives him the courage to ask a little more. "I wouldn't be opposed to the company, if you've got the time." Just as soon as he speaks the words, his bravery flees again. "Only if you'd like to, of course, I'd never presume —"

“Yeah, that sounds nice,” she replies with a laugh. “I’m off in an hour, we can chat a little after that.”

The lasagna is just as good as promised, but Killian doesn’t remember most of the taste, spending an anxious hour anticipating Emma sliding into the booth. It’s still hard to believe his eyes when she finally does, slipping across the vinyl with a small plate of pie so casually like it’s a habit of theirs. Killian feels like his heart is about to thunder out of his ears, but she looks undisturbed — happy and confident and calm. God, he envies her for that calm right now.

“So, we meet again,” she teases, nudging the plate his way. Chocolate meringue tonight — an excellent choice in Killian’s opinion, not that that matters for much of anything. What’s more, there’s two dessert forks propped against the edge of the ceramic saucer. Clearly, and for some reason Killian can’t begin to imagine, she intends for them to share — and damn if that doesn’t put a nervous flutter in his stomach to match his frantic pulse.

“We meet again,” he echoes. “You’re off for the evening, then?” It’s a stupid question, something he realizes as soon as the words leave his mouth; she’d said she’d join him once she was off work for the night, and now here she is. It doesn’t take an idiot to connect the dots... and yet here he sits.

Angel that she is, she thankfully doesn’t hold it against him. “Yep. No more night shift until Monday. No book tonight?”

“I tucked it away before you came back,” he admits. Lord, he’s even *blushing* to talk to her — can already feel the heat in his ears. “If I didn’t say it earlier, thank you for lunch today. I’ll pay up tonight.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Emma says, waving her fork through the air in dismissal. “David’s got a tab, I just tucked it on there. Trust me, a ham sandwich is not going to put him into financial straits.”

“Thank David, then,” he grins cheekily, in a burst of confidence. As he and Emma settle into conversation, speaking becomes easier, some of his old surety trickling back into his voice.

“Oh, we’ll be sure to,” she grins right back. He’d almost say she looks a little mischievous, and though he probably should have expected that from a younger sibling, that doesn’t mean he expected it from Emma Swan.

(He likes it — the way it makes her a little less perfect and a little more real.)

“I had assumed you were born and raised in Storybrooke,” he comments as he swipes a bite of pie with his fork. “So when you said you hadn’t been any further than Portland...”

“It’s because I grew up there, yeah,” she nods.

“So how did you end up in Storybrooke, then?”

The smile is less happy this time. “It’s not exactly a happy story,” she tells him.

“I’ve got time and rum,” Killian offers, earning a disbelieving look in return.

“Seriously?”

Quickly, he pulls the flask out of the inner pocket of his coat. It’s a terrible habit, and he knows he shouldn’t, but on nights when nothing else helps, sometimes the alcohol can help relax him enough to find sleep.

“You’re a regular pirate, aren’t you?” she teases as she plucks the flask from his hand.

“Can’t say I’ve been accused of that before.”

“Well, there’s a first time for everything.” She punctuates the statement with a swig from the flask, pulling a face as the alcohol hits her throat. “Whoo, that’s got a kick.”

“Well, it is rum, darling,” he teases back. “If you wanted something gentle, you should have asked for tea.”

“Hot chocolate,” she mumbles. Really, Emma looks quite fetching with her cheeks tinged blush pink. Not that it makes her mumblings make more sense.

“Come again?”

“Hot chocolate,” she repeats more clearly. “That’s my preferred drink. I like sweet stuff.”

You’re the only ‘sweet stuff’ I see here. The quip is on the tip of his tongue; he could just let it slip off. But that would be flirting, and it wouldn’t be fair to her to open that box. Besides, he promised David that nothing would happen. “I’ll keep that in mind,” he says instead. “But I think you might be deflecting, love.”

“I know,” she sighs.

“You don’t have to talk about this if you don’t want to —”

“That’s not the issue,” she interrupts. “I’ve got rum, you’re a good guy, it’s completely common knowledge... it’s fine. Just hard to get started.” She takes another swig of the rum; maybe he should order her one of her precious hot chocolates to temper it. “The gist is, I grew up in an orphanage in Portland. I was left at a church as a baby and stayed in the orphanage until I was fostered out when I was fourteen. Someone knew someone who knew Ingrid, who was willing to take in a teenager to help her out, and I ended up in Storybrooke.”

“I’m sorry that happened to you, Swan.” And he is; it’s not just pretty words. He’s been through similar, and it’s not something he’d wish on anyone.

She shrugs. “It’s fine. I mean... it’s not, but it got me here, which was the best case scenario. And Ingrid was... amazing. Just this no-nonsense woman who owned a little ice cream shop. She was soft-spoken, but you didn’t mess with her. She only died two years ago now.”

“You must miss her.”

“I do. She was... really good to me. I was really lucky that she took me in.” Emma smiles softly at the memories. “I met Mary Margaret at school — she was Blanchard, then, not Nolan — and David... I don’t even know how. He’s a year older than us. In this town, though, you get to know everyone without even trying, and sometime around when Mary Margaret and David started dating, he started treating me like his little sister. It’s kind of annoying, honestly.”

“But nice,” Killian points out. He knows that from experience.

The barest hint of a laugh joins the fond smile Emma’s worn the whole time she’s spoken of the Nolans. “Yeah. Nice too.”

“I was in a... not dissimilar situation,” Killian says as casually as he can, twiddling his leftover tea spoon just for something to do with his hands. “My mother died when I was about eight, and my father wasn’t much interested in playing that role. Just took off. After that, my brother and I got shuttled off to a never-ending series of great-aunts and distant cousins and the like.”

“At least you had family to start with,” Emma comments mournfully.

“True. But at least you ended up with one in the end.”

That brings the smile back. “I did. I take it that it wasn’t the same for you? What about your brother?”

Killian makes a conscious effort not to freeze up again, to relax the tension from his body and answer her. She’s revealed a lot of herself to him, here at this booth; it’s only right that he be willing to do the same.

“He’s gone, I’m afraid,” he manages to say, even mustering a sad smile and tilt of the head to try and show that it’s alright. It’s not, but Emma doesn’t deserve to feel like he’s angry about telling her. “Joined the Navy when the war started up and died in a German submarine attack.”

“I’m sorry, Killian.” She reaches across the table to squeeze his hand in comfort.

“It’s alright.” It’s still not, but that’s what you say to such things. “That just means I’m all on my own.”

Emma squeezes his hand one more time before releasing it. “I’m sure you’ll find a family some day, even if you have to make your own.”

And Lord, he hopes that she’s right.

“You’re not still sleeping on that bench, are you?” David asks, startling Killian. He had been, actually; in fact, David had woken him up. Most days, Killian is up and waiting by the time David gets to the garage, but he’d had a good night’s sleep for once, and apparently not

woken up in time. Either that, or David has arrived early. Either way, he's been caught in the proverbial act.

"Where else would I be?" Killian retorts as he hurriedly puts himself back together, slipping his leather jacket back on and grabbing his bag from where it'd been serving as a make-shift pillow.

"Settle down, Jones," the other man soothes, lifting his hands in surrender. "No need to get defensive. I just figured you would have checked into one of the rooms at Granny's Inn."

Killian tries to settle some of his instinctive snappish reaction; he knows it's just from embarrassment at being caught like this. "Ah, well, if the weather turns foul, I will. As long as the nights are pleasant, though, I'd rather save the money, I don't have that much on me."

"You should have said something," David scolds. "You could have slept on the couch in the garage. I've got a spare key you could use."

Killian stares at him in bewilderment for a moment. "You'd trust me to do that?"

David shrugs. "Of course. Is there a reason I shouldn't?"

"I mean, most wouldn't. It's no offense to you mate, it's just... folks don't usually trust a stranger who looks the way I do in small towns like yours."

"The way I see it, there's been plenty of opportunities for you to rob me blind already. Especially since I've trusted you with the cash register. And you haven't. Will that change if I let you sleep on something inside and cushioned?" David asks with a knowing look on his face.

"Of course not."

"That's what I thought. You've been here on that bench for nearly a week, and I don't want to think about how long you'd been doing the same before that. Besides, if you're working for me, I'll get better work from you well-rested," he winks.

"I'd hate to be a bother —"

"I can grab the spare key from the house over lunch. Let me do a nice thing for you, Killian."

And Lord help him, he accepts.

It's more than just a couch, too — it's pillows and several crocheted afghans and a volume of detective stories, all courtesy of Mrs. Nolan, when David comes back from lunch with the key. He feels *welcomed* in a way that he didn't expect when he went to sleep last night — let alone at this time last week.

Killian goes through the day with... if not *happiness* in his heart, then something close. He and David were able to finish a major repair this afternoon, he's got a place to sleep, and he'd spent a lovely evening at the diner with Emma, where she'd brought him a pot of tea without him even asking and later a serving of meatloaf to go with it. They'd talked until after eleven

at night about anything they could think of — favorite novels, stories of David as a teenager, places they've always wanted to see, until Killian couldn't justify loitering any longer as Emma worked the night shift. It's perfect, even if he has to ignore the flutter of feelings growing in his heart.

He should have known, though, that things were just a little too good to last.

Killian walks back to the garage with a feeling he might almost call hope rushing through his veins. Hope for what, he's not sure; he certainly can't think of any reason that should warrant it. Hope, maybe, that there are still people out there capable of seeing past what they believe of him: the loner, the tramp, the ungrateful bastard who won't just take their pretty words. Hope that someone thinks he might still be a good man, an ordinary man.

(The voice in his brain whispers that maybe he just hopes that *Emma* sees him that way, the first person in what feels like ages not to look at him with suspicion for even a moment and to treat him with kindness just for the simple sake of being kind.)

(It's amazing, the way a perfectly uneventful night can sink into his soul.)

In retrospect, perhaps that was the folly — an overabundance of happiness and hope. He should know better than to think that everything can go his way in more than a momentary way.

The problem comes when he attempts to get back into the garage. He has a key, of course, thanks to David, but that doesn't change just how dark it gets in this corner of Maine, every single star visible but not the deadbolt. There's a streetlight on the corner, but that doesn't do much good when Killian's own body is casting a shadow over the lock and he just can't fit the key to the lock. He's nearly got it, has got the edge of the key into the slot, when —

Gravel crunches behind him and a sudden beam of light casts right over his silhouette. "Step away from the door, please, and hands in the air."

Chapter End Notes

Sorry? (Not really.)

Also posted on tumblr, where I'm @shireness-says. Come say hi.

Thanks for reading - let me know what you think!

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

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

Killian sighs, but complies, rotating slowly to face a uniformed officer. “I have a key,” he tries. His second mistake — after the excess of hope — is falling back into flippant defense mechanisms.

“Yeah, I’m sure you do,” the officer scoffs. “Hands in front of you, you’re under arrest.”

Killian stands docile, wrists held out to let the other man snap the cuffs on. Some might call it shocking, just by what they think of him, but it’s the first time Killian has been in this situation. He can’t say he likes it. The policeman does look surprised when Killian offers the key once the metal cuffs are secured around his wrists, but his face settles into even deeper suspicion as he slides the little piece of metal into his pocket.

“Where’d you get the key, then?” he all but snaps.

“From David. Call him and ask if you like, I’m not lying.”

“Don’t think I won’t. Now into the car, we’re going to take a little ride to the station.”

Bundling him into the back of the police car seems excessive when Killian knows the station is just down the street, but he complies with the order. In a case where this truly is all a misunderstanding, especially where the sheriff doesn’t believe what he says, it’s easier to be cooperative, attempt to prove that he’s not the enemy of the law.

He hasn’t had occasion to inspect the police station, and it proves to be a small but well-kept building. There are only two cells inside, looking out into an open office space, but as the sheriff leads him into one of them, Killian is relieved to find that the cot and chair, though spartan, are neat and maintained. Someone takes pride in maintaining this place, and if he had to guess, it’s the sheriff himself. Killian would bet he takes that same pride in the whole of this little town, too.

The man in question is across the room at what must be his desk, paging through a thin telephone directory. He’s casual in his space in a way that Killian thinks must be unique to small town law enforcement — jacket draped over the back of his chair, holster and weapon removed and draped across the desktop, and the man himself leaning with crossed legs against the side of the desk.

“David? It’s Graham,” he says into the phone. The name fits; somehow straight-laced without being too regimental or dictatorial. “Listen, I caught someone trying to break into the garage...” Killian rolls his eyes as the sheriff — *Graham* pauses to listen to whatever David has to say. “He says you gave him permission to be there, but I know you wouldn’t...”

“Oh for the love of God,” Killian cuts in. “Tell him it’s Killian Jones — I swear, he knows who I am and what I’m doing.”

“That’s enough from you,” Graham snaps back. David must have heard, though, as the sheriff sighs heavily. “Yes, he said Killian Jones.” Pause. “You’re not telling me that means something to you?”

“It’s almost like I wasn’t lying,” Killian mutters to himself, just barely loud enough for the sheriff to shoot him a dirty look.

“You’ll have to come down to the station to identify him, David. I’m sure you understand, I can’t just release him without your verification that he is who he says he is -” Another pause for response. “Well, I’d hate to pull you out of bed just for this. I can keep him in the cells overnight and you can come by in the morning... Well, if you insist, then. We’ll see you soon.” As professionally concerned as Graham looked when he picked up the phone, he just looks put out when he hangs it up again.

“So he’s on his way to the station, then?” Killian calls from the cell. “Can’t say I’m surprised. Good man, that David Nolan, and good, law abiding men don’t have much cause to think that the cots in jail cells are even remotely comfortable.” As if to illustrate, Killian kicks back and lays down on the cot in question. By most people’s standards, it’s probably pretty rough, sure, but he’s a man that’s used to sleeping on the ground and park benches and in all other matter of unusual places. This is downright comfortable, bordering on luxurious.

David arrives before a half hour has passed with a distinctly displeased look on his face.

“I really could have kept him overnight,” Graham jumps to assure. “I didn’t mean to disturb you for this.”

“Believe me, you had already disturbed me as soon as the phone rang, Sheriff Humbert,” David replies back in a strained tone probably best described as *false patience*. He cranes his neck to search around the room before spotting the cells and Killian in the far corner. “You doing alright, Jones?”

“Aye, I’m fine,” Killian replies, pushing himself back to sit upright. “Sorry that you’ve had to come all the way out for this.”

“Not your fault,” David replies, before turning to address Sheriff Humbert again. “This is definitely Killian Jones — the man I gave a key to. Who was supposed to be at the garage. Is that all you need? Do we need to sign something, or...”

“No, that’s it.” Graham hastily moves to unlock the cell door, responding to the irritation in David’s voice. It’s a relief to have the handcuffs off his wrists; no matter how still he tried to keep his arms and wrists, they chaffed, scraping along his skin over and over.

“Well, thank you for your hospitality,” Killian can’t help but quip. “I suppose I’ll be seeing you around town?” Graham just glowers. “Or not.”

At a certain point, it's just easiest to take the garage key and go before anyone says something they'll regret.

Storybrooke has a whole new feeling at night as he and David walk back to the garage. Without anyone on the streets — that's a small town for you — there's an anticipatory feeling in the air, like the town is just waiting for sunrise and life to resume. Killian finds that he doesn't much like it; then again, maybe he's just still on edge from everything else that's happened tonight.

"Thanks for coming to bail me out," he tells David in a quiet voice.

David hums in response. "Is it truly called *bailing you out* if there was no bail to pay?"

"I suppose you've got a point," Killian chuckles. "Still. I'm sorry to disturb your evening."

For some reason, those words stop David in his tracks. Slowly, carefully, he turns to grasp Killian by the shoulders. "I want you to listen to me, Jones," he says with a gravitas in his voice that Killian has never heard from David before. "This isn't your fault. *I* gave you that key, and you used it. None of us could have known that Graham would arrest you; why would we think to tell him about this ahead of time? And that is *not your fault*. Do you understand?" David holds his gaze intently until Killian finally nods. "Good," he nods in return.

They walk on in silence until they reach the garage again. "Well, this looks like your stop," David says. It must be a joke, or at least an attempt at one; the side of his mouth twitches in an attempt at a smile. "I say we open up late tomorrow, what do you think?"

"I think that sounds just fine."

The key slips smoothly into the lock, tumblers shifting in welcome. David claps him once more on the back companionably in farewell. "Sleep well, Killian."

It feels like trust, and the brotherhood he lost.

(This was only supposed to be temporary — a few days, a couple of weeks at most — but the longer Killian stays here, the more Killian becomes attached.)

(The longer he stays here, the more he wonders if he might still find a home — in the people, if not the place.)

Emma is less than pleased about the debacle the next morning.

Killian hadn't planned on telling her, honestly; he's a little ashamed of it, for one, and he doesn't much relish the idea of how Emma might react. Will she be mad at him? Unsurprised? He's treasured the time they've spent together, and he's terrified that this stupid incident will color the way she sees him and cause everything to fall apart.

Emma surprises him, though, showing up at the shop with lunch only to pace furiously back and forth across the concrete floor. Lord only knows who she found out from; like any good diner, Granny's is a known hive of gossip.

"I can't *believe* he'd do that!" She fumes. "That absolute, utter — "

"It's alright, Swan," Killian tries to assure her. "Nothing happened. It doesn't really matter."

She whirls on him in a toss of curls, staring at Killian in disbelief. "Of *course* it matters — and it's not alright! This never should have happened."

"Maybe not, but David got it all straightened out," he soothes. "No harm, no foul."

"Yes, but I just don't understand how it happened. I've known Graham for *years* — " Enough to be on a first name basis, it seems, though Killian tries to control his jealousy — "and I just can't believe he'd do a thing like this — that he would think you were *breaking into the shop* , even when he knew you had a key —"

"You can't believe it?" Killian interrupts. "Because I can. You look at me and see only the best, and I — I admire that in you, but that's not what most people see. Most people look at all this —" he gestures to himself as if to illustrate, "—and see the leather jacket and the motorcycle, and they think I'm trouble. It's a damn miracle this hasn't happened before; we're just lucky it was some place someone could vouch for me."

"That doesn't make it right!"

"No, but it doesn't make it unexpected, either," he tells her. "There's nothing we can do about it now, except be grateful this just ended as a shitty story to tell someday."

Emma is quiet for several moments, as if soaking his words in. "You're a good man, Killian Jones," she finally says.

"I'm glad you believe that." *Yours is the only opinion I truly care about* , he doesn't say, though it probably is splashed across his face regardless. He's never been quite as good at playing the blank slate, devoid of emotion, as he'd like.

(*I don't know if I believe that* , he doesn't say either, but she probably knows that too.)

He expects Emma to fight him on it and insist he believe it too, or for her to finally drop it and let him have his sandwich in peace. He expects them to maintain this dynamic they've settled into of ignoring whatever current runs between them, practically electric.

"We should go out," Emma says instead.

It's... baffling, in a way. As much as Killian feels — comfort, trust, affection, all those kinds of emotions he thought were lost to him — he never dreamed she'd reciprocate so strongly as to make such a proposal, especially when they both know his time in Storybrooke is limited.

"I don't think that's a good idea," Killian forces himself to reply with the greatest regret.

“Why not?”

“It wouldn’t be fair to you. I’m not... I’ll only be here until the parts come in. You deserve more than a man who’s destined to leave.”

“Maybe that’s my choice to make,” Emma shoots back. She doesn’t seem angry, he’s grateful to see; just stubborn, like he already knew she is. “Maybe I’d rather have a handful of good memories than a bucketful of what ifs. So tell me honestly, Killian — if your leaving wasn’t a factor, if we had all the time in the world... what would you do?”

Killian knows exactly what he’d do — he’s halfway in love with her already, his angel, maybe even more, and it’d be the greatest kind of bliss to feel he could express that. What can he say, though, when being honest and being fair are at odds with one another?

“I’d be brave,” Killian finally says softly, caving to the temptation of brushing a stray curl out of Emma’s face and back behind her ear. “I’d bring you flowers and take you to dinner and everything else. I’d romance you, court you properly.”

“Then let’s be brave,” Emma smiles back. “Who cares if we don’t have long? Let’s make the most of what time we *do* have.”

And as much as Killian has told himself that starting anything will only end in pain, the truth of the matter is that he’s weak for Emma’s smile and already can’t deny her anything.

“Alright, love. Let’s be brave.”

Emma beams at him — that response alone making this all worth it. Not that he’d ever deny the kiss she presses to his cheek immediately after — more than he ever thought he’d receive, let alone deserve. It leaves a phantom sensation behind, like her gentle lips are still pressed to his skin, making him feel beloved, and maybe even precious.

“I’m off the day after tomorrow,” she winks, before sauntering back out the door like the most beautiful whirlwind.

It looks like he’s got a date to plan.

He shouldn’t have underestimated David, or at least not his wife’s ability to wheedle news out of anyone in town. It’s not that Killian wanted to hide his and Emma’s planned date from the other man; he just hadn’t known how to approach it. It’s obvious that David views himself as Emma’s *de facto* brother, and Killian knows that she sees him the same way. There’s a bond there that’s deeper than blood — one of affection, and choice, and loyalty. David has already issued him a warning when Killian and Emma’s friendship began, and Killian isn’t looking forward to whatever talk he’s earned for this.

Any attempt at that is over, however, by the time David unlocks the doors the next morning. David finishes his morning routines in a complete, uncharacteristic silence that sets Killian’s

teeth on edge, working at a pace best described as leisurely, before deigning to address Killian.

“I thought you said we didn’t need to have a talk,” he observes, deceptively mildly.

Killian fights the urge to gulp, like some exaggerated movie character. “In my defense, she was the one who asked,” he replies, his attempt at levity flopping between their feet.

“Doesn’t mean you had to say yes.”

“No. No, I suppose I didn’t.” He’s sure the nerves — hell, the entire mess of conflicting feelings must be evident in his voice when he responds to David.

“So why did you?”

Killian fiddles with the hem of his shirt as he thinks. Truthfully, he hasn’t examined this himself. *Because she asked* and *to make her happy* should be good enough answers, perhaps would be in any other circumstance, but with David staring him down, Killian feels like he needs a better explanation.

“I tried to turn her down, you know?” he says, daring a glance upwards to meet David’s eyes. “I reminded her that I’ll be leaving, that anything we had would be fleeting. I told her that it wouldn’t be fair to her, but she’s stubborn.” Killian can’t help but smile faintly at the memory, though it doesn’t hold. “At a certain point, I just figure... You know, I haven’t been particularly happy in a long while. Years, really. Not since my brother was killed. But being around her... it gives me hope that maybe I could be, again. Happy. And it seems foolish not to grab onto that, if only for a little while.” Somehow, Killian musters the courage to stare David down, hoping to show even half of the honesty and earnestness of his words. It feels like a staredown in a hokey western, the intensity of their stares making up for the mechanic’s tools around them.

It’s an unspeakable relief when David finally breaks the current to huff and shove a hand through his hair. “What am I supposed to say to that?” he complains — nearly whines. “I can’t argue with it. Hell, I might have been the same after the war if it weren’t for Mary Margaret.”

“I’m not looking for your blessing, Nolan,” Killian says quietly, making sure to maintain eye contact. “I’m just hoping for your acceptance. All I want is to make her smile — to make her happy, even if it’s only for a little while. The last thing I want to do is hurt Emma.”

“You promise?”

“Aye, I promise. And if I do... you’ve got my full permission to make me regret it.”

“I’ll be holding you to that.”

Even if they’ve reached an understanding on the matter, asking David for advice is obviously out of the question, Killian well aware that it would only cause the other man’s protective instincts to flare up again. Emma rather needs him alive if she wants him to take her on a

date. Instead, he asks Ruby's advice in the diner in a rare moment that Emma is trapped back in the kitchen. He can't say he knows Emma's friend very well, but she's one of the handful of people in Storybrooke who was friendly to him from the very beginning. Plus, he knows how much she wants Emma to be happy; if she's willing to assist, Killian thinks he can help with that goal.

Sure enough, Ruby is more than game, her regular opinionated and outgoing self. "You got that notebook ready, Jones?" she smirks at his request. "Because you're going to want to write these down."

It's not much — not nearly as much as she deserves. But he's been told that she'll love this, and Killian has to trust that it's true.

He takes her down to the beach — a little spot that Ruby had promised was secluded and where they can see the stars. Even his desire to impress Emma doesn't temper his dislike for the ocean; he doubts anything will soothe that fear. But it's a beautiful view from the sand, and besides, Ruby had told him how much Emma loves the waves.

(He probably could have guessed that, too; he remembers Emma talking during one of their late-night diner chats about how the ocean reminded her that there was a great wide world beyond her tiny hamlet. And if there's one thing he knows about Emma, it's her yearning to see all the multitude of places that exist beyond her personal horizon.)

Normally, he'd be a wreck worrying about how much Emma does or doesn't want to be on this date, but that's the small blessing of agreeing together to be brave — he knows she wants this, more than almost anything. That doesn't mean there aren't other things to worry about — the weather and the preparations and especially what the people of Storybrooke will think when they learn that he's treating their precious princess to an evening out.

Truthfully, he expects to be chewed out by Granny when he stops by the diner to pick up dinner to go. Mrs. Lucas is a fierce old broad, stern and protective over those she views as hers, and Killian knows damn well that Emma counts in that number. Storybrooke's matriarch surprises him, however, when he works up the nerve to approach the counter and collect their meal. Granny gives him a fond smile as she hands him the bag, and even pats his cheek briefly.

"Now, I expect you two to enjoy yourselves and have a wonderful time," she commands. "I don't want to hear anything else. Especially from Emma, but from you too. Is that understood, young man?"

"Aye, ma'am." Killian already knows that it's not wise to tell Granny no, and besides, he just doesn't want to.

Emma, of course, is beauty itself when he picks her up from the small apartment she shares with Ruby. It's not that she's dressed particularly fancy — the light summer dress is nice, with a lovely draped neckline, but by no means the height of fashion. But it's the exact green

of her eyes, and the skirt swishes softly around her calves, and she looks *beautiful* . With what he has planned, there wouldn't be any point to some fancy cocktail dress anyways.

"Swan," he breathes, making a valiant attempt to drink in every bit of her with his eyes. "You look..."

"Yeah?" Emma's hands nervously fiddle with her skirt, smoothing the fabric of non-existent wrinkles. She doesn't need to; Killian would still think her to be the most beautiful creature alive if she had opened the door wearing a burlap sack.

"Aye," he smiles back. "You look amazing."

"Thank you." The compliment makes her smile, and Killian can't help but grin back, leaving them a pair of idiots beaming at one another in the doorway.

They probably would have stood there half the night, too, if not for Ruby. "Are you two planning to move at any point?" she jabs, though her voice is more teasing than annoyed. "Because *some of us* have to go work the night shift while you're off on your little rendez-vous."

That's enough to snap them out of it, and after an awkward little laugh — his ears must be crimson red — Killian gladly escorts Emma down the stairs with a light hand at the small of her back.

(Never let it be said that Miss Ruby Lucas doesn't raise a good, and timely, point.)

In a fit of whimsy, he insists on Emma closing her eyes as they approach the end of Main Street where the road gives way to the pier and the beach below. It feels unimaginably silly, but Emma smiles and laughs.

"Promise you won't let me trip and fall?" she teases, eyes already shut. Her trust in him is astounding, wonderful, damn near miraculous.

"Never, love," he vows.

As ridiculous as he feels carefully leading Emma down the stone steps of the pier with a hand covering her eyes, it's easy to forget as soon as she gasps in pleased surprise to see the picnic blanket spread out on the sand. Besides their dinner from Granny's — Emma's favorite grilled cheese, onion rings, and potato chips, plus another bag with a carton of rocky road ice cream for the little parlor just down the road from the diner. Ruby had been indispensable in assisting him to arrange this all, from telling Killian about Emma's favorite foods to arranging for him to borrow a blanket and basket from Mrs. Nolan. Now it's all on him to make this memorable.

The sun was already setting when Killian picked Emma up, and by the time they're through eating, the stars are on full display. He'd been concerned about the light, simultaneously worried there'd be too much and not enough, but the street lamps along the stone wall of the pier offer enough illumination to feel like he can see Emma but not so much as to obscure the stars above them. It's the purest kind of joy to lay with Emma on the blanket, pointing out all

the constellations he knows, and he lets himself enjoy every bit of it for once without reservation.

“How’d you learn all these?” Emma asks. She’d turned into his side to ask the question, and Killian can’t help but take that as an invitation to slip his arm around her shoulders and draw her closer. Her skin beneath his fingers is indescribably soft, though dotted with little bumps — perhaps goosebumps. He’d be covered in them too, if she had dragged her fingers along his skin.

He uses that same sensation, the warm silk of her arm, to ground himself as he answers. “My brother,” he tells her, smiling faintly. Talking about Liam like this, remembering the good times, is always a gentle thing, an indulgence to lose himself in the memory, even if the melancholy of current circumstances pervades the memory. “Liam loved astronomy, loved learning about the stars and planets and all that. He used to take me out to see the stars whenever there was a new moon, and we could see them all the more clearly. Came in handy when I joined up later, let me tell you.”

“I’ll bet,” she replies, just as softly. “I’m glad you could share that with him.”

Killian hums before steering the conversation back towards safer ground. “You want to know my favorite constellation, though, love?”

“Which one?”

“Give me your hand.” Twining his fingers together with hers, leaving only their index fingers free, he guides their fingers to the right quadrant of the sky, only to trace out the shape of an X. “Right there.”

“There?” She mimics the gesture, and Killian hums in confirmation. “What is it?”

“Cygnus,” he responds, before turning on his own side in order to whisper in her ear. “The Swan.”

In the faint beams of light that trickle over from the street lamps, Killian can see her awed smile. If he was a bolder man, less measured and patient, this might be the moment he finally leans in for a kiss, but there’s still one thing Killian wants to do. Gingerly, he pulls himself back up to a crouch, extending a hand back to Emma as she stands up herself. “Now what do you say, my Swan, to a little dance under the stars?”

Emma beams in response.

He’d managed to borrow Mrs. Nolan’s old crank-powered phonograph, and after a good bit of cranking, a dance tune finally warbles out. Something slow. Something heartfelt. Something that makes his heart soar and his feet fall into time, even as they both giggle and chuckle at the way their feet stumble in the soft sand in a search for purchase. As they settle into a swaying rhythm, he gazes down at Emma, his lovely Swan staring back with soft eyes and an even softer smile.

It’s perfect — the kind of fairytale moment he thought he no longer deserved.

Maybe it's the stars, or the moment, or the way Emma's slight build feels next to his own, but Killian feels all his hesitation and nerves wash away as if carried by the tide. Why should he feel nervous, when Emma smiles softly up at him as they sway in the sand? When she's the most beautiful thing he can remember? When she's the reason he wants to be brave?

It may be the moment, or the woman herself, but he's not scared anymore for a beautiful, blissful moment, and it's easy to lean down that last little bit to capture her lips with his own. It could be his own fanciful imagination, but Killian swears he can feel Emma sigh and sink into the kiss. It's hard to tell much over the frantic thumping of his heart in his veins and ears.

There's things he forgot in the time since he last attempted anything like this, like the logistics of noses, but even the brief moment they break apart to giggle at the attempt feels natural, feels *right* in a way that's special to Emma. It only makes Killian twine his arms tighter around her back to draw Emma close against his chest and finally cave to the desire to snake his hand up and into all those glorious golden curls. Emma gives as good as she gets, too, taking the initiative to slip her tongue into his mouth to play with his own. Faintly, Killian is aware of one of her hands clutching at the lapel of his leather jacket, but it's far easier to get lost in all the sensations than try to catalog every little detail, no matter how much he wants to.

They're finally forced to break when the air between them finally runs out, though Emma refuses to let him go. Killian is more than fine with that; it's a unique kind of joy just to lean his forehead against Emma's, sharing the same space and same air as they both fight to catch their breath. At some point, the music must have petered out, as Killian can only hear the rush of the waves behind them; he'd been too caught up in their kiss to even notice when the song stopped.

"It's about time," Emma teases. Any chiding is severely undermined by the way her fingers fiddle with the hair at the nape of his neck. "I was wondering when you'd make a move."

"I'm sorry to have ever made the lady wait," Killian murmurs, dropping his lips to just below where her head and neck meet. Goosebumps bloom along her skin where his mouth just brushes. "But I'm more than happy to make up for it now."

(And it may not have been a perfect date, but it still may have been just what they both deserve — a moment together, away from everyone else. A moment to be *them* without the pressures of family or expectations or time.)

(A perfect moment. And he intends to savor every bit of it.)

(It was only supposed to be a few days, a couple of weeks at most, but he wouldn't trade this for the world.)

There, I fixed it. Thanks for bearing with me through a cliffhanger, everyone!

Also posted on tumblr, where I'm @shireness-says.

Thanks for reading - let me know what you think!

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

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

The days to come are a kind of blissful in-between: after the date and the kiss that changes everything, but before Killian's tires have arrived and he's back on the road again. The days are simultaneously too short and wonderfully long, the days too few and yet seemingly endless as Killian savors every moment together that he can. He makes a point to spend as much time with Emma as he can, knowing that their time will be far too short, taking her for ice cream and evening strolls and even letting Emma drag him down to the local bar and dance hall. He'd tensed as she'd pulled him onto the dance floor, far too aware of the many eyes around him — he's far too aware that others think he's trouble, and can only imagine what they think to see him arm in arm with the local golden girl — but the other townsfolk never show it. He thinks he might even see a few smiles among them, though that seems like it could be too much to ask for. As happy as he is to take Emma on the kind of dates she deserves, dancing and the like, he truthfully takes just as much pleasure in simply keeping her company during her late shifts at the diner, sitting in what is now his usual booth and flashing a smile just for her. There's a gentle intimacy to this, being allowed to watch Emma in her own environment.

Still. As much he tries to revel in the moment, the future looms just ahead.

"I don't know what to do, Belle," Killian groans as softly as he can manage into the phone. Granny's back hallway probably isn't the best place for this conversation, but it begs having, and Killian isn't willing to drive up David Nolan's long distance bill. The downside of the public pay phone is that it's not exactly private; other customers pass periodically, searching for the bathrooms or winding their way back through to the attached inn. It's odd to even think, and Killian isn't sure how it truly happened, but he seems to have earned some level of acceptance amongst the locals, just by virtue of becoming a regular face at the garage and at Granny's in the last handful of weeks. Most even nod a greeting, or offer him a brief smile. It's jarring, in the most pleasant way, to be met with a kind of amiable neutrality after growing so accustomed to distrust everywhere he goes.

That's the benefit of staying in one place, he supposes: people come to know you, even just a little bit, even just enough to grow used to you and start to trust you. Those could be the seeds of a more settled life, if he wanted.

But that's the whole problem — Killian isn't sure he's ready for that. Which brings him to this moment and this phone call, because it's been nearly three weeks, and they're expecting the replacement tires any day now, and Killian has a decision to make. Three weeks ago, there'd been no question — he'd be gone as soon as the tools were put down. Three weeks ago, however, he hadn't yet met Emma — and Emma just might change everything.

The truth of the matter is that these last days with Emma have been the happiest that he's lived in a long, long time, and he likes to think he makes her happy too. Her smiles and laughter and the way she chases after him for just one more kiss would suggest that to be the

case. They went into this with open eyes, both knowing that whatever they became was subject to a ticking clock, but Killian still pauses when he thinks of leaving her behind. She deserves more than that; they both do.

At the same time, staying still isn't an option. Killian's great cross-country trek has, more than anything, been a search for a sense of self, a sense of purpose; finding someplace to call home is a far distant third on his list of concerns. Ghosts still haunt him, and though he knows the wind on his motorcycle can't permanently blow them away, it helps. It's nice to just not *think* for a few minutes. Even hours, if he's lucky.

(Then again, kissing Emma achieves much the same effect, in a much more pleasurable fashion.)

"I can't stay. I really... I don't think I can stay," Killian continues. "But how can I leave, either? What if I'm throwing away my one real chance to settle down, and be happy like that?"

"But is that really true happiness, convincing yourself into something because it's the smart or honorable thing to do?" Belle asks. "Or is that just a compromise?"

Killian stays silent, letting her words run through his head. This is why he called Belle in the first place: she has a way of pointing out the real questions he needs to ask himself without any judgement or demands.

"You don't need to have an answer now, and you don't have to tell me when you do," Belle continues, "but if you're as taken with this girl as you tell me, it's not fair to her if you stick around but constantly dream of leaving again. She doesn't deserve that."

"No, she doesn't." Killian can hear the soft tenderness in his own voice; no doubt Belle can as well. "And that's the biggest reason I can't stay. She deserves more than a man who would always wonder what he gave up. It's not just places I want to see either, Belle. It's... at the risk of sounding like some terrible cliché, I've felt like a shell of myself for a long time. The words shouldn't be *me*, but they were an important part, and I lost them. Flying down the highway, seeing all the wonders this blasted place has to offer... that's the only time it feels like the words might be in my reach again. I deserve the chance to figure out who I am after all this, even as Emma doesn't deserve a man who will otherwise always be a little bit empty." Killian sighs. "That doesn't make it any easier to think about leaving her behind."

"You could always ask her to come with."

Killian's heart leaps in excitement at the very idea, but he quickly forces reason to tamp it down. "I couldn't possibly."

"Whyever not? I thought you said she had a bit of wanderlust herself."

"Yes, but..." Killian struggles for an answer, feeling like his brain is tripping over itself. "Storybrooke is her *home*. She's got a family here, people who love her and would miss her. I can't take her away from all of that."

“Maybe that’s a decision she gets to make,” Belle replies gently. “Maybe she’ll surprise you. Maybe she wants the same thing, a chance to see what else is out there. You won’t know unless you ask.”

“Maybe.” Even as Killian says it, he knows that it’s a dream too big. He’ll never risk it — and Belle probably knows that too.

“It’s up to you, Killian,” she concludes, “but think about what’s best for you, now and later, okay? You deserve to be happy just as much as she does.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

Once Killian hangs up the payphone, he fights the urge to slide down the wall into a crumpled heap. Even after his talk with Belle, there’s still no good answers.

He’s got a lot to think about.

As long as Killian doesn’t think too closely about their looming, unknown deadline, he can luxuriate in the sheer quiet joy of spending time with Emma. It’s easy to get used to her kisses and easy affection and the way that she has a special smile just for him when he walks into the diner. It’s a beautiful respite he didn’t know he needed and is certain he doesn’t deserve.

But far too often and too quickly, good things must end.

The new tire arrives on Thursday. Killian does his utter best to ignore it. As eager as he was to get in and get out of this little nowhere town three weeks ago, that’s all changed because of Emma. The itch under his skin is as strong as ever — the desire to blow all the dreams and pain away upon the winds — but his attachment to Emma, though new and young, is deep. She’s a balm to all his lingering wounds, a bright spot in his days that he never thought he’d find again, and the idea of leaving her is near unbearable, even if the idea of staying is just as suffocating.

There’s only so long he can pretend to work off a debt he’s long since paid, though, and while David will never say anything, Killian sees the confused looks that the other man sends his way each day those tires continue to sit on a shelf.

“You know, you don’t have to leave if you don’t want to,” David mentions with an affected air of casualness as he works on the undercarriage of someone’s truck. Killian has been drafted to assist — though it seems to be just an excuse to trap him into conversation, considering that the only way he’s been helping is to hand over tools that David could just roll out and retrieve himself.

Killian braces himself against the truck’s bed, sighing heavily. He can’t help the exhalation; inside his head, all of Killian’s different desires war with each other — to stay with Emma, to leave for her own good, to leave for *his* own good. Underneath it all, though, is that same itch

that's driven him forward ever since he landed in this country, and it only grows stronger every day.

Staying was never really an option — not when he still needs wind whipping past his face to ground him every day.

"I know. But I can't," he finally replies, head bowed in a pointless instinct to hide his gaze from a man already obscured.

David rolls himself back out to the light. "Why not? Has anyone made you think you couldn't? Besides Graham, I mean, and that really was just a misunderstanding —"

"No, it's not that. I'll have to disagree about the sheriff's intentions, but you've all been... wonderful. You, and Mrs. Nolan, and... Emma." Killian stutters for a moment over her name; though they both knew going in that this wouldn't end in anything lasting, it had been easy to forget that in a week and a half of bliss, and she's the one who stands to hurt the most. Still, he must press on. "Better than I deserve, really. And I know you'd welcome me with open arms should I choose to make your little hamlet home. But it's... I've got this compulsion to keep moving. Chasing something, or running away from something, I don't even know anymore. But one day... I hope I'll figure it out, and that feeling will settle."

David hums, taking the time to replace his tools. If Killian's not mistaken, it's a stalling tactic. "You know, Emma has this theory," he finally says, "that home is the place that when you leave, you just miss it. She and Mary Margaret spent a week — not even a week in Portland shopping for wedding and household things. And that was it for her. She and Mary Margaret were still in this terrible little apartment, but I've never seen her happier to be there. Gave me the biggest hug when she saw me as I came to pick up Mary Margaret for a date." David smiles fondly at the memory. "I suppose what I'm saying is... maybe it takes some distance to realize what you want. And we'll always be happy to welcome you back, if you choose to return. You've got a job here if you decide that's what you want."

It's a lot to offer him, Killian knows — more than he expected. This entire town and all the people in it — especially the Nolans, especially Emma — are all more than he ever expected. "Thank you," he says softly. "I'll keep that in mind."

David just nods before grabbing a different wrench and wheeling back under the body of the truck, but Killian thinks there's an understanding there — that *I can't stay* doesn't mean not ever, just not now. There's a time and a place for everything in life, and the place Killian's at right now isn't nearly settled enough for tranquil little Storybrooke.

He shouldn't have counted on David keeping that information to himself, however. Half the reason he'd avoided the matter of the tire in the first place was his own uncertainty about how to broach the topic with Emma. She deserves to hear from him that he's leaving again, but all attempts he makes to imagine that conversation feel inadequate — too flippant, too detached, too lame. Decidedly not what she deserves.

Trust his Swan, however, to bring it up all on her own.

“So,” she starts, arm linked through his as they walk down Main Street together, “what’s this I hear about a tire?”

Killian’s heart jumps into his throat; without even intending, he slows their pace to barely a shuffle. “So you heard about that, then.”

“David’s not great about keeping secrets from Mary Margaret, and Mary Margaret isn’t great about keeping secrets from... anyone, really.” Emma chuckles at her little quip, but it doesn’t hold the joy Killian’s grown accustomed to in the past weeks.

(God, when did he allow himself to become accustomed to that — or anything? He was never supposed to stay longer than a few weeks, and this only makes it harder.)

“I want to tell you, but...” Killian trails off. But what? He was scared? He was conflicted?

“It’s alright, Killian,” she smiles back, albeit weakly. “We always knew this was coming.” Emma gathers a deep breath as if to steel herself for what else she has to say. “So how much time do we have left, then? I know the road must be calling you again.”

But you are too , Killian doesn’t say.

“Two days,” he says instead. “Three at most. David and I got Mr. French’s delivery van settled today, so we’ll be able to put the bike back together tomorrow and I can hit the road the next day, or the one after.”

“That’s not much time,” Emma replies softly, looking down at their shuffling feet as if she can’t bear to meet his eyes.

“No.”

(*You could always ask her to come with* , whispers Belle’s voice in his head. He’s not nearly brave enough to listen to it.)

Killian feels Emma take a deep, strengthening breath before she lifts her gaze to meet his again. “Then we’d better make the most of it.”

The next evening, Killian takes Emma for a ride on the newly-functional motorcycle, trying the whole while not to think about how this feels like goodbye. He remembers how she’d asked, one of those first nights, flirting even though Killian couldn’t see it, didn’t want to see it. Emma had gasped in surprise and delight when Killian came to pick her up after her shift (an early one, today, that lets them take a little cruise as the sun sets before them), drawn out to the diner’s front windows by the putter of the engine.

“Are we going to go for a ride?” she practically demands. Not that Killian minds, as long as he gets to see the grin that splits her face from cheek to cheek.

“As far as you want,” he promises.

(It was only supposed to be a few days, a couple of weeks at most, but *ask her to come with* echoes louder and louder in his head with each passing hour.)

Killian helps Emma onto the bike as best he can while straddling the seat himself, but she doesn't prove to need much assistance, still steady even as she swings a leg over the body. It takes some doing, but he manages to crane his body around far enough to press a lingering kiss to her lips.

(*Not their last, not their last* , his heart insists, but his brain still whirs in a panic of *not enough time* like another engine he'll have to fix.)

"Are you ready, love?" he asks when they finally break apart. Emma nods enthusiastically. "Then hold on tight."

It's almost idyllic, cruising through Storybrooke's back roads with Emma's arms twined around his waist. She particularly seems to love the straight stretches of road where he can really test their speed. As the wind whips past their faces, Emma giggles and shrieks with glee behind him. Other women might have been nervous about the bike, or fretted about the number the wind will undoubtedly do to their hair, but not his Swan. It's obvious she's having the time of her life, and Killian feels grounded in a new way to feel her body perched behind his.

(*Come with, come with, could come with...*)

"God, I see why you love that so much," she chuckles as they roll to a halt at the pier. Killian will never get back in the water, but there's still something soothing about the endless horizon. "It's *exhilarating* ."

And maybe it's the joy in her voice, or the way she smiles as she swings off the bike again. More likely, it's the result of the words that have been rattling around inside his skull ever since he talked to Belle. Whatever it is, it dissolves any filter between Killian's brain and his mouth and the words come tumbling out before he can stop them. "You could come with me," he blurts out in a rush, only to flush red as he realizes what he said. That was not remotely something he meant to say, but it's out there in the world now, his heart dropped at her feet for her to pick up or kick aside.

Not that she's done either, yet. Emma stands shocked and still in front of him, eyes wide like she can't believe what she's just heard. That's a reasonable reaction; Killian certainly can't believe that he just said it.

"What did you say?" she whispers.

"Nothing, Swan, don't worry about it. I shouldn't have said anything —"

"But you did," Emma says, interrupting his backtracking. "Did you mean it?"

Killian sighs, sweeping his hand through his hair in yet another nervous tic. She probably knows all of them by now — the hand in the hair and the scratching behind his ear and all the rest of it. He's a mess of a man, which makes him all the more certain that no matter what he

might want, he can't possibly deserve her. "Aye, I did," he finally admits. "And I know it's foolish, because I can't possibly ask that of you, not when you've got a place like this to call home, with people who love you. Not when you'd have to put up with me. But it's what I *want* ." He whispers it like a shameful secret. And maybe it is, a little bit — after all, he knows better than anyone that no matter how much he *wants* doesn't mean it can ever happen.

"And why would you ever think that's foolish?" Emma asks softly, stepping into his space to rest her hands on his shoulders.

"I mean —"

"I told you once that I wanted to be brave with you, and that it was my choice to make. I meant it then, and I mean it now, too." As Emma pauses to stare into his eyes, Killian feels hope flutter in his chest, stronger and brighter than ever before, only to burst to glorious life as she finishes. "So *ask me* ."

It only takes a moment to swallow his nerves. "Come with me, Emma. Let me show you the world."

Emma's hands move to his face, stroking her thumbs along his cheeks to coax him into a smile to match her own. " *Yes* ," she says, softly, emphatically, lovingly.

And Killian finally allows his dreams to soar in flight.

Their goodbye is sad, even though Emma assures everyone that it's not forever.

"I'll be back, I promise," she tells Mrs. Nolan, whose eyes brim with tears just waiting to fall. "We both will be."

"I know that," Mrs. Nolan insists. "But that doesn't mean I won't miss you! It won't feel right, not seeing your face around town every day."

"Promise me you'll look after her," David says quietly as Killian secures the saddlebags on the motorcycle. Emma has proved to travel light, just like him; she'd showed up with nothing more than a satchel, a tightly coiled bedroll, and a beaming smile. "Because Emma is special, and I don't know what we'll do if something happens to her. Or, more accurately, I don't know what I'll do to *you* if something happens to her," he tries to joke, stretching a weak smile before falling back to something more serious. "She's very precious to us — to all of us."

"I know," Killian replies, cracking a small smile as he watches Emma hug her friend. "She's very precious to me, too. I promise that I'll do everything in my power — everything and then some more — to watch over her and keep her safe."

"Good." David offers his hand to shake, and Killian grasps it firmly in return. Maybe it's a sealing of the promise; maybe it's a gesture of friendship; maybe it's a little of both.

Whatever the case, Killian feels something pass between himself and David: an understanding, almost a sort of peace.

Emma slides an arm around his waist, apparently done hugging and bidding farewell to her crowd of admirers. Killian could swear half the town turned up in front of the garage to send her off — Granny and Ruby, Sheriff Graham, Mrs. Nolan, and a whole slew of other people he only halfway recognizes. She's obviously much loved; Killian could tell that even without David's little speech.

"Ready to go?" she asks with a wide and happy smile. He'd understand if she was nervous, or scared, or sad, or anything else; that would be reasonable as she's about to embark on a journey into the unknown with him. There's only excitement in her gaze, however; it's obvious she's got a wanderer's heart of her own.

"Whenever you are, love," he smiles back.

It's a matter of a moment to swing his leg over the body of the motorcycle and let Emma clamber on behind him with David's help. As Killian starts the engine, the other man drops a kiss to Emma's forehead that Killian pretends not to notice.

"Godspeed," he murmurs, just loud enough for Killian to hear. "And you make sure to call and keep us posted, alright?" he concludes in a louder voice.

"Of course, *dad* ." Killian can practically hear her roll her eyes, but he can hear the fondness, too. In a last gesture, Emma leverages herself off of Killian's shoulders to press a kiss on David's cheek. "Love you."

"I love you too." Tears gleam at the corner of David's eyes, but he plasters on a grin anyways. "Now go on, hit the road before the sun gets too hot!"

Killian doesn't need to be told twice. In a flurry of waves from Emma and her crowd of well-wishers, they slowly cruise back down Main Street, picking up speed as it gives way to a country highway.

"Are you ready for an adventure, Swan?" he asks as she twines her arms tighter around his waist, craning his neck to meet her gaze.

"With you?" she smiles back. "Always."

Chapter End Notes

Just an epilogue to go now! Thanks for coming on this ride with me.

Also posted on tumblr, where I'm @shireness-says. Come say hi.

Thanks for reading - let me know what you think!

Epilogue

Chapter Notes

Here we are again - thanks again to the CSRT team, to Megan, Laetitia, and Saira, and to all of YOU for reading!

Enjoy this nice little epilogue!

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

They go... everywhere. They crisscross the country without any particular route in mind, sometimes doubling back to see landmarks Emma suddenly remembers from her elementary geography class, sometimes simply blowing where their whims might take them. They see Niagara Falls as Killian planned, becoming drenched in the spray, and make sure to ride down to the southwestern deserts as the weather turns cooler again to marvel at cacti and the Grand Canyon.

(Killian grumbles about the heat the whole time, especially the way it dries up every inch of moisture in his body “like a dead leaf, Swan, I’m serious, I might as well just crackle into little pieces — why are you laughing at me?”)

(She laughs at his pouting the whole while, especially since this particular jaunt was his idea in the first place. He plays it up a little, just to hear the sound.)

They see everywhere in between, too. Killian particularly enjoys their excursion through Yellowstone, finding a certain kind of peace in the stillness of their surroundings. The sky is so big in this part of the country, wide open and all around them. At night, stars practically litter the sky.

(Killian finds himself sleeping better these days. The dreams still come — he’s not sure they’ll ever stop, no matter how happy he is — but they’re less frequent with the warmth of Emma’s body by his side to lull him into peaceful rest. The stars aren’t his constant companion anymore; Emma is instead.)

They drive Route 66, just to say they did it. They pose in front of the Golden Gate Bridge for strangers to take their picture with a second-hand Polaroid camera. They swing through Chicago, the crowds an utter nightmare but the awe on Emma’s face pure magic. There’s hardly a corner of this country they *haven’t* touched, putting more miles on the motorcycle than Killian likes to think about. Every one of them is worth it.

(She tells him she loves him in a little town in Kansas. He can’t even remember the name of that rest stop, but he’ll never forget the rush of pure joy surging through his veins.)

Emma sends postcards to her family back in Storybrooke from every major attraction, and even a few attractions that aren't. Killian is assured that David in particular will enjoy the card from the Corn Palace in Iowa, though he also assumes that must be a joke. They call, too, as much as they can, Emma becoming just as much an expert in the ritual of long distance as he is. Though Belle may have planted the crazy, wonderful idea in his head in the first place, she was surprisingly hesitant when Killian first called to tell her the news that he had a new travel partner.

"And you're sure, Killian?" she asked in that softly worried tone she's perfected. "I know you really like this girl, but what if that changes? What if things don't work out between you? What if she wants to go home?"

(It's touching, really, the motherly concern, like he's just another one of her kids who needs to be protected from pain and bad decisions. It's just that Killian doesn't think that Emma qualifies as either one.)

"Then we'll figure it out. I'm not making her do anything she doesn't want to, and I won't start either. This is up to her as much as me," he'd replied. "But for what it's worth? I've got a good feeling."

"If you're happy..."

"I am."

Emma and Belle talk later — he can't quite remember if it was on the next call, or the one after that. What Killian does know is that something must have been settled between the two, as his cousin now asks warmly after Emma and he makes sure to pass the phone along.

He's writing again these days, too; there's something to be said for the right inspiration. It's not much, of course — he's not a prodigy, just a man trying to express himself in some small way on the page. It's a compulsion, to find a way to capture the way she looks in the freedom of the mid morning light on the back of his motorcycle and the way he feels watching her. Words will never be enough, but he's already mailed two notebooks to Belle for safekeeping and has almost filled a third.

Today, they're in Florida — at the beach, just like Emma yearned for during their first real conversation. As much as so many things have changed, Killian still is wary of the sea. He'll let the tide wash over his feet for Emma's sake — anything for her, truly, and she knows not to expect him to submerge more than his ankles — but most, he's happy to sit in the sand and watch the way Emma beams in the sunlight, still his own angel.

The sunlight catches more than just her smile, now. He'd bought the ring in St. Paul and barely held out for two days before proposing, almost two months ago now. The ring itself isn't anything particularly special — a small diamond set in silver. But for all the ways that his life has been entirely upturned, Killian still places a good amount of stock in that symbol, that Emma wants to be with him forever. Maybe it's silly; after all, they've driven from coast to coast and back again in the last year, and spent nearly every moment together. It's hard to get closer or more committed than that, and it makes any ceremony seem almost superfluous.

Still. When he looks at her, sees her joy and all the ways she makes his life better... he *wants* . And he's lucky enough that she does, too.

(He still can't quite believe that she said yes. He's still a mess of a man, even if he's trying, even if he's better. Inexplicably, she loves him anyways.)

Emma scoops up her shoes and starts walking back to his perch on the sand, tendrils of hair whipping around her head where they've escaped the messy braid he'd helped her twist that morning. "God, that sure is something, isn't it?" she laughs, collapsing onto the pearly expanse.

"Everything you dreamed of?" he asks, tugging her closer into his side. Emma flops her head dramatically onto his shoulder at the movement, right where they've learned she fits perfectly against him.

"And then some," she sighs. "You were right, it's so *different* from home — from Maine. It almost doesn't look real. But then you get in the water, and it's just the same. The tide comes in the same way, even down here. I don't know, I suppose it's a little comforting."

Killian just hums and leans down to drop a kiss on Emma's head before they lapse into a thoughtful silence, watching the birds circle and the waves roll in and out. It's picturesque; frankly, he'd even say beautiful. He doesn't regret the visit in the least.

But Emma had said *home* , and he can't stop thinking about that either.

It's not the first time he's thought about it. As much as Emma has loved finally seeing all the places she's heard and read about, he knows she misses her family, the short but frequent phone calls proof of that. Emma loves him, and she's loved their adventure, but there's unbreakable strings tying her back to Storybrooke. To her *home* .

It's not Killian's home, not truly. He hasn't spent enough time in the little town to form that kind of attachment. But he wouldn't call any other place home, either, and Storybrooke is as good a place as any if he's got Emma in his life. She grounds him — soothes that itch to always move until he finds someplace — or rather, some *one* — worth sticking around for. After months of the open road, it's maybe time for this phase of their adventure to conclude, and another one to start.

(Besides, she ought to have her little hodge-podge family at her wedding. He wants to give that to her, after all that she's given him.)

"I've been thinking about that lately," he says casually, trying not to make it all seem like quite as big a deal as he knows it is.

Emma hums a questioning note back to him, though mischief sparkles in her green eyes. "What, about the tide? That seems... odd."

"No, you ridiculous creature," Killian replies, rolling his eyes for good measure. He knows she's teasing, after all, even if he did technically set her up for that. "I've been thinking... maybe this has been enough. Maybe it's time to go home."

Emma jerks her head up to stare back at him blankly, evidently shocked by the suggestion. “Home? You mean to Storybrooke?”

“Aye. I know you miss it, and... I just think it might be time.”

“Oh, Killian, we don’t have to stop on my account. I’m fine to keep going,” she protests.

“I know. And it’s not... I’ve loved this, but I don’t need to keep going the way I once did. If you have more places you want to see, we’ll go see them, and I’ll be happy just to be there with you, but I’m not... this idea isn’t all because of what I think you might want. It’s for me, too.” He pauses for a moment to gather his thoughts; he feels like he’s not expressing things quite the way he wants to. “I shouldn’t assume though. I suppose I thought... I know you miss your family, but do you want to go home?”

Emma heaves a heavy sigh and stares out at the sea. Killian grants her the space to think; this is a turning point, he knows, and he’d never want to rush her into anything she doesn’t want. He barely hears her when she finally does speak, her soft admittance carried away on the breeze. “I do,” she tells him. “I love this, and I’m so glad we’ve seen all that we have, but... I think I’d like to settle, a little bit. Especially if we’re getting married. A little house and a pretty ceremony... I know Storybrooke isn’t your home, though.”

“It isn’t,” Killian admits, “but it could be.”

“Just like that?”

“Don’t you understand, Emma?” he asks. “*You’re* my home. Wherever you are, as long as I’m with you... I’ll be home. Whether that’s on the back of the motorcycle or in Storybrooke or on the moon. I’ll always be home with you.” He leans in to seal the sentiment, brushing his lips along Emma’s and letting her deepen the kiss when she sneaks her hands behind his neck and into his hair. She’s always been willing — eager, even — to take the lead, and Killian is still happy to let her.

“I love you,” she whispers when they break apart, foreheads still touching as they breathe the same air. “You’ve given me the world, and I love you.”

“I love you, too, Swan.” A blind man could hear his smile in his voice. “Now let’s go home.”

Together — all the adventure he needs.

Chapter End Notes

And all's well that ends well. A happily ever after, of its own kind.

Also posted on tumblr, where I'm @shireness-says.

Thanks again for reading all this way - let me know what you think!

End Notes

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