

39 - Appointments

“Emily? Come on, we’re going to be late for your appointment! Let’s get your shoes on!” Joyce called from the slate entrance, dangling a pair of smaller-footed sneakers from her fingers.

“Can’t we go another day...?” a voice traveled back from a different room. “I’m not feeling too good...!”

“I’m sorry you feel that way, hon,” but Joyce wasn’t sorry that she wasn’t born yesterday, “I can schedule an appointment with Dr. Hall for you while we’re at the dentist?”

Silence. The sound of deteriorating negotiations. “...I’m not going!”

By this point, maybe Joyce was the fool for thinking she could get away with just a beck and call and expect total compliance. “Fussy, fussy, fussy...” she muttered, debating whether it was something to smile over, or find the strength to be stern.

Emily was laying on the bed, half of her face buried in Pip, but her eyes were immediately on Joyce once she stood beside the door frame. In her eyes were the fear of God and the inner child that was digging its heels. Or adult. Whichever it was, it was indignant.

“Emily. We are going to the dentist.”

“I’m fine! I brush my teeth! I floss!” Emily truly whined, and it wasn’t a gleeful one.

“And that doesn’t mean you get to just skip out on regular visits!” Joyce huffed. “What if you have a cavity and you don’t know it? Or you have something else going on that you won’t find out until it’s too late?”

Emily’s first answer was to squeeze Pip tighter. Of all places, not the dentist. A person poking around in your mouth with sharp tools? Absolutely not. Maybe once upon a time, ten or so odd years ago she had parents that forced her to go, but now she was a full-grown adult capable of making her own decisions. And yet, as Joyce stood there with a hand on her hip, even Emily felt her agency evaporating.

“I...I feel fine. My teeth are okay.”

And yet her words were only more rope to hang herself with. Joyce readily countered with, “Great, so then that means we’ll be in and out once we go?”

“I’m not going, Joyce! I hate the dentist! I’ll go when I actually need to! I’m an adult!” How did this even happen? All that stupid talk about running out of toothpaste and mentioning Joyce’s earlier appointment... Why did she have to get roped into her girlfriend’s routine? Six months a visit? Sure, that’s on her, but not Emily!

“Yes, you are an adult, but I’m only going to respect your decisions if they’re responsible and mature ones. Emily, honey, I get that you don’t like the dentist, but you know that it’s for your own good?”

Emily grumbled, pressing her hands down, determined not to move, chained to her tree no matter the bulldozer that came her way.

“Is that a yes? So you agree with me?” Joyce taunted.

An easy way to tease an answer. “No!” Emily shouted right back.

“Emily, if I have to carry you down to the car, do not think I won’t. If you want to eat tasty food and have sweets and dessert, you need to have a good set of teeth, and that means going to the dentist regularly.”

“Then I’m done having sweets!” Emily spat, finding the ultimatum that never really existed.

Joyce crossed her arms, hardly a believer in the change of attitude. “So you’re done? No sweets ever again? No ice cream, no chocolate, or those milkshakes that you like?”

“Nope.” She wasn’t even thinking, simply too focused on avoiding the dentist at all costs.

“So then you’re done with the pancakes I make too? Is that it? Same for your milk?”

“...Mhm...” Maybe she hadn’t really thought it through, but if this is what it took to call off the visit...

“No more banana pancakes, you know that, right?”

One too many buttons had been pushed and Emily for a moment was all cylinders, finally coming out with it. “--THE DENTIST SCARES ME!”

“I can tell that much...” Joyce sighed with a seat taken on the edge of the bed.

Yet somehow this put Emily for total shock. “A-and you’re still making me go?!”

“It doesn’t matter if you’re scared, Emily. It’s important for your health. I’m going to be there with you the whole time?” It was wild to think she was getting this much pushback. It felt even tougher than it was to get her in a diaper for the first time. “Please? Can you do it for me?” She gave a pause for an answer, but none came. “Do you know how that makes me feel? How worried I am that you could have something wrong with your teeth and it could’ve been dealt with much sooner?”

“That’s not fair...! You can’t guilt trip me like that...!”

“I can and I will if it convinces you, because it’s the truth, Emily. Wouldn’t you want peace of mind yourself?”

“I haven’t been to your dentist before though...what if they mess up or something?” Granted, Emily’s dentist lived on the other side of the country. What she wasn’t prepared to tell Joyce was that she hadn’t gone once since coming out here from her home state...

“They won’t. They’re paid good money not to mess up and they’ve been doing this for years. Try to think about other things, because it’s doing you no good worrying over things that aren’t going to happen. Here, I’ll even put your shoes on for you.” She phrased it like a kind gesture, but the quiet reality was Joyce forcing the notion that this was happening whether Emily liked it or not.

“Joyce...please...”

“We still have time to get your pacifier if that’s what we need?” Joyce commented as she tugged on the first shoe.

“No! That stays here!” Emily had another outburst of worry, yet her legs didn’t kick.

“I’m a minute from either making you choose between a diaper or Pip then, Emily. I love you and I’m not mad at you, but I will be stern if that’s what it takes to keep your wellbeing in check.” And if words weren’t enough, she raised off her knee to kiss Emily on the lips. “Not another word about not going, understood?”

She sniffled and started sobbing, nodding her head. Damn, why did she have to make Joyce feel so guilty? This was all certainly unexpected to Joyce. Paradoxically, for as much of a little girl she wanted to encourage Emily to be, it was quite surprising to find such a...fitting sort of stereotype embedded in her. Yet as guilty as Joyce felt, she had no qualms playing the villain if it was meant for Emily’s sake.

“You know how proud I am of you, right?”

“Mhmm...” Tearily, Emily nodded. She was upset, annoyed, and frustrated. She shouldn’t have to go if she didn’t want to. Joyce had no right forcing her to do things she didn’t want to do. So why wasn’t she fighting back? Physically resisting? That...that seemed like it would be going too far, but it also wasn’t fair that Joyce could physically force her!

“Hey,” Joyce lifted her chin, “no grumpy faces.”

Screw not being able to have any grumpiness. Grumpy was what she’d stay if she got nothing else. If Joyce was getting her way, Emily was at least entitled to malicious compliance.

Emily kept her words to herself, and most of her emotions. Like a game, whenever Joyce was watching, it was at best a dejected sort of look, otherwise it was back to frowning and sulking. Needless to say, this was far from how Emily planned their Friday afternoon going.

Finally, after walking down the hall, taking the elevator to the underground parking garage, getting in the car, and pulling onto the street, Emily finally said, “I don’t want any babying this weekend.”

Was it emotionally charged and the heat of the moment? Certainly, but in a moment of selfish spite, she was letting an absolute buzzkill of an outing affect everything to follow after it.

“Alright then.” Joyce, seemingly unfazed, answered back a second later. Her eyes were on the road, both hands on the wheel.

Emily tried to not let it show, but obviously that annoyed her a little. It was petty, of course, but she would have hoped that it might sting a little...

“We’re lucky that they were able to take you so soon, you know? I called on such short notice, yet they just managed to fit you in.”

“I wish they didn’t...” Spoken like a true mope, with a chin on her shoulder no less.

“Well I’m glad they did.”

The car ride went back to silence, save for the radio, but otherwise just that. The next checkpoint was arriving in the parking lot outside the multipurpose building, housing a hedge fund company, credit union branch, tech repairs, and a dreaded dentist...

“Okay, come on, time to get out,” Joyce spoke with basic commands every step of the way, preemptively, nipping in the bud any sort of bratty combativeness that Emily could try.

More and more Joyce was sounding less like a girlfriend and more like something else, and unfortunately it just meant that this was one of those days, or situations, given how things had gone this time. Inside the elevator Emily was quiet, but her feet were not. One would twitch, swing, maybe even tap the floor.

“Are you nervous?” The answer was obvious, but left unspoken. Joyce knew, but she wanted Emily to make it clear herself.

“No...” Emily scowled right back. This sucked. This sucked far too much. She didn’t want to be here, and if it weren’t for her girlfriend holding her hand, she’d have been long gone by now... Her foot stopped fidgeting.

The entire floor must have belonged to the tooth care place because the elevator opened right up into a waiting room. Leather seats propped on shiny metal legs lined the sides of the room, and even a grand aquarium from floor to ceiling divided up some of the chairs. Unheard of magazines sat neatly ordered on the glass coffee table and were paired with a decent view of bustling traffic down one of the many long city roads, loomed over by an endless array of skyscrapers.

One such woman was sitting by herself, reading one such magazine. She looked like a Joyce-type. Not the kind that tried to guess your diaper size and impose a bedtime, but the kind that did important work and made good money.

The whole room was clean and orderly. Emily hated it. It was all the signs to be seen in any sort of medical waiting room. And what was worse? Just in earshot the hum and buzzes of machines and machinations of horror were going off down the hall. What they did was anyone’s guess, but the less rational and easily perturbed ones might suppose they were rusty, oil-powered teeth-pullers and hand-held jackhammers for the mouth.

Whatever the equivalent for suicide watch was for a girl about to make a break for it, Joyce was on high-alert. Emily wanted to let go of her hand, but Joyce did not reciprocate.

“Hello, we have an appointment for Emily?” Joyce greeted the secretary behind the glass.

“Emily? Let’s see... Oh, yep, right here! Emily Sen, correct?”

“The one and only,” Joyce chuckled. “Is there anything she needs to fill out?”

“Yes, please,” the woman in her swivel chair navigated the tiny base of operations, assembling a paper, pen, and clipboard. “If she plans on staying with us, we’d like to use some of this information to help start a record until we can get what we need from her previous dentist.”

“Perfect. Thank you.” Started and ended on Emily’s behalf, Joyce took them over to a pair of seats. “Do you want me to fill this out, or would you rather?” she asked as they sat down.

“I want to go home...” Emily halfway sulked in her chair.

Joyce was already pushing and popping the pen’s spring-action button against the paper. “And we’ll go home after we finish up here. So am I filling this out, or are you?”

The noise was whirring now down the hall. No screams, thankfully, but it could also just mean that the dentist had started by slicing the victim’s vocal cords. Emily kept bouncing her knee, quiet and distressed.

Meanwhile, Joyce wasn’t humming any tunes this time as she quietly scribbled what she knew on-hand about Emily.

“Any allergies?” That one never came up, come to think.

“Pollen.”

“Are you seeing an orthodontist for anything right now?”

“No...” Joyce usually knew when she left the house, didn’t she?

“Any medication right now?”

“No...” Emily droned on and on to the questions. As much of a stranger as she was to a place like this, she certainly did remember the plethora of things on these sheets that were ninety-nine percent of the time followed by a resounding ‘no’ that hardly needed any sort of focus.

“Favorite animal?”

“Cat—” and her mouth slammed shut the moment she responded. An irked glare was what Emily was giving to Joyce who couldn’t help but grin.

“Just a little fun, come on...” Joyce muttered through a mumbling laugh.

“Yeah, well, you know I don’t want to be here.” Emily slumped further in the seat, grouchyly murmuring.

“And it’s only something you have to do twice a year that takes half an hour. Tops. Sit up?” Joyce’s hand on Emily’s stomach set her back on the slope of a chair somewhat. “This is only going to be as difficult as you make it...”

By the slip of her tongue in a moment of impatience, Emily groused back, “It wouldn’t be difficult if you just asked me what the stupid paper actually says...”

For being a person so in control of their words, it can always be oddly fascinating how by chance, one in a million, that your words can somehow bypass any filter or sense of rational thought you might have. Blindsided by her own words, swept by the heat of the moment. Emily tensed the second her subconscious voice finished speaking for her.

Then came the warm breath of air against her ear, but with none of the sweet coos and whispers to go with it. The warnings of consequence were just a handful of decibels from turning into a full-blown scolding that didn’t care whether or not the woman minding her own business just a few chairs down could hear.

So as a final mercy, Joyce calmly whispered into Emily’s ear.

“I know you don’t want to be here, but that is no excuse for the way you’re talking to me. I’m sorry for making you upset, but you are not going to be a grouch and take it out on me. Do I make myself clear?”

There must have been torrential downpour in the waiting room, because Emily’s tiny embers were now just soot washed away by the waves of her girlfriend’s wrath.

“...I’m...I’m sorry...”

What was far less private was the wet kiss on Emily’s cheek. “I’m sorry too.” Roses and sunshine, Joyce was back with the clipboard. Like her memory from a few seconds prior had vanished. “Okay...when was the last time you went to your other dentist?”

And like so, coincidence could be such a cruel mistress.

“Uhm...” Lie? Maybe, but truthfully, Emily was too frazzled to know whether or not it was safe to not-truth about that sort of thing. Lying to Joyce? Definitely not safe. But to the dentist? Was it that big of a deal...?

“At least six months, right?” Joyce seemed to be giving her the benefit of the doubt, but it was clear she was goading an answer.

“Yeah, six...” No eye contact worked wonders at heightening suspicion, come to find out.

“Emily? I know it’s been more than six.” Her eyes didn’t leave the paper. “You can tell me; it’s important that they know.”

“...ear...” Chin tucked over the other shoulder and seemingly enamored with the white wall to her side.

“I didn’t hear that, Emily. Speak up and look at me, please.”

Her head came halfway in a rusty, rickety fashion, jittering to the point that their gazes were parallel. “Th...three years...about...”

The absentminded twirling of the pen on paper halted immediately, like a calm and relaxing ensemble of smooth jazz music had suddenly just been stopped. Joyce gripped the pen, and Emily knew her answer wasn’t received without silent judgment. But it did stay silent, as Joyce went back to writing without a word on the matter.

Was it guilt that she was feeling? Guilt for not going to the dentist? Not quite. Maybe some of that was there, and maybe there was some for not meeting Joyce’s standards, which were quite average in this regard, honestly. But no, it was guilt owed to herself for not keeping this all a secret any better...

Joyce didn’t have any more questions as she wrote, no more than asking for a signature, and Emily tried to busy herself with something on her phone. Anything.

“Martha?”

A woman in scrubs and face mask was standing by the entrance that led deeper into the dungeon. Holding her elbows she scanned the lobby among the three (but really two, and really only one if “willingness” was taken into account) patients.

The stranger stood with a bag over her shoulder and off she went. A nostalgic queasy spell was starting up in her stomach as Emily watched from the corner of her eye. Was that woman going to come out the same? Maybe as a toothless abomination, or a battle-scarred victim of a lazy-handed drill-wielding fiend who got off on other's suffering for fun...

Deep breaths. Meditation. Maybe, just maybe, in that quiet waiting room Emily could awaken her otherworldly powers and discover the very secrets to stopping time itself. Would life move on? Hardly not, but a meager price to pay if it meant dodging—

“Emily?”

Crap. Shit! Shut her eyes tighter! Don't stop time! Reverse it! Right before she met Joyce, just so she can cover all the tracks from her medical history!

And yet the uncultured folk beside her assaulted her deep meditations with a soft poke on the shoulder.

“They're calling you?” Thank you, Joyce. Truly. Emily was blinded by all the brownie points Joyce was burning through like it was some sort of race. Hesitantly, she stood.

This must have been what convicts on death row felt like, except so much worse. Emily was guilty of no crime. She took good care of her teeth! What neglect? She was being framed! Miss one or two appearance dates every six months and suddenly she's a criminal?

Call her an attention seeker, because Emily briefly glanced at Joyce beside her, then blinked twice. No Joyce. She turned her head back farther. There Joyce was, still sitting at the chairs, browsing her own phone, like this wasn't the last time she'd ever see her girlfriend!

“Uhm...” the worker garnered Emily's attention again, “right down here.”

Emily stepped forward but just barely hid a noise of discomfort. Why wasn't Joyce coming? She had a quiet voice telling her to stomp her foot. She was putting Emily through all of this, so she had to be there the entire time!

Then Emily had a brief moment of reflection. She'd been stubborn, indignant, combative and bratty the entire way here and even in her chair. She even shut down babying privileges for the whole weekend in a heated moment of anger.

Was this punishment? Joyce's way of biting back? This sucked. This wasn't fair. Emily may have toed the line, but Joyce was sprinting right past it! She knew Emily didn't like the dentist, and she knew how much she didn't want to be here! She has to come! She has to be moral support!

But outwardly quiet and wordless, Emily let herself be led along and down the hall. Alone and afraid.

"Right in here? Go ahead and sit down in the chair, I'll be just a second." the woman quietly excused herself as Emily walked inside. On some level she was reminded of her nursery.

A vibrant cartoon sky blue on the walls, puffy happy clouds and a personified smiling sun. Happy go-lucky frogs, talking trees and overjoyed flowers by the prospect of being violated by just as happy bees to boot. Two tall cabinets beyond the dentistry tools of destruction and signature torture chair in the center were prominently housing an audience of onlookers. Stuffed with cotton and lined with fur. An array of stuffed animals looked down at her.

"E...excuse me? Is this the right room?" Emily was already leaning her head out the doorway for the returning assistant.

Maybe her words held some weight, because the woman glanced at her clipboard and then the black, yellow-font engraved label on the door before answering, "Yes, this is the right room."

"Alright..." Emily awkwardly sat on the edge of the chair, like she was only stopping by for a brief admiration of the decor. "Just seems like a room mainly used for kids..."

"Oh!" Like an afterthought had only just clicked, "I see what you mean." she chuckled behind her facemask. "Our only other room is tied up with another patient at the moment and our other rooms are going under deep cleanings. We try to use the other room for all our adult patients, but this was an appointment on such short notice..."

Emily nodded understandingly, even if she didn't like this any better. Wasn't this bad for her headspace or something? What if she started associating baby time with dentists? Definitely a bad idea. It'd ruin everything they had. So maybe she could get up and leave with that reasoning. Joyce would understand, right?

"Emily? Sorry? Could you please lay down in the chair for me?" the woman kindly asked, already in her swivel chair sitting behind the head of where Emily was commanded to lay.

"S-sure..." Emily did say, but did not do. She twiddled her thumbs, taking a moment to breathe. Was her heart supposed to be popping out of her chest?

“Is...everything alright?” the dentalcare worker asked.

“Yes...” No. No. Definitely not.

“Would you...” it was obvious how awkward of a position Emily was putting the woman in, which is why like a knee-jerk reaction she half-collapsed onto the chair.

Emily cringed with shivers as the gloved pair of hands gently adjusted her head, tugging her like a motion to slide back a bit more.

“Okay, I’m going to raise the chair now, alright?”

“Mhm...”

The sudden jerk in hydraulic motion had Emily gripping the arms of the chair like her hands were the jaws of life. An involuntary yelp escaped her mouth the moment she started to rise as her feet rocked on their heels, tapping toes together repeatedly.

“C-can we slow down? I-I need a second...” Emily begged through the nerves and stress, barely even letting her back rest on the chair just in case she needed to make a quick escape.

Then the gloved hand lightly touched her shoulder.

“Wait right here for a minute, okay?” Emily couldn’t see, but she heard the woman get up from her chair and briefly leave the room.

Like it was an excuse to get out of bed, Emily sat up from the chair, absolutely miserable. She hated this. This is why she didn’t go to the dentist. This is why she took damn good care of her teeth just so she wouldn’t ever need to go! She could only glance behind her before seeing the tray of tools that made her skin crawl. The tubes and nozzles running underneath, or the deceptive tv on the wall playing muted movies from nearly two decades prior.

It was fine to leave, right? What if she cried? What if she begged Joyce to leave? She’d understand once she saw her like this, wouldn’t she?

A knock on the doorway snapped Emily out of it, even if only temporarily, as the woman came back in. With a friend this time.

“J-Joyce?”

She wore her same as usual smile, like no bad blood had ever flowed under her bridge. The staff was sitting back down in her chair and Emily nervously took that as a note to lay back down herself.

“It’s one thing if it’s me, but you can’t go causing trouble for the people here, you know?” Joyce grinned, pulling up a chair to Emily's vacant side.

Speechlessness was all Emily could muster. She was flustered, embarrassed, aggravated, and relieved. Words were poor descriptors of the mess that her face was trying to express.

“She wasn’t causing trouble,” the woman chimed in with a small upbeat tone, “I just figured she might want someone with her.” Translation: get this adult her babysitter to make her behave.

“And was she right?” Joyce hogged the other end of the conversation, of which Emily saw before the assistant calmly turned Emily’s gaze back up to the ceiling. Cue the blinding light. Emily’s hand found itself hanging off the edge of the chair, and ever so coincidentally, Joyce’s was right there to catch it.

“You know, I didn’t even know that there was a room like this here?” Joyce looked around with curiosity and a twinkle in her eye. “I take it this is usually for kids?” And what did that say about Emily?

“Typically, but it has all the same equipment our other rooms do. Most of our other rooms are being cleaned right now.”

“Uh-huh,” Joyce nodded, and Emily listened, and squinted, just trying to squeeze anything she could out of Joyce’s hand, “I think it’s a lot more fun than the rooms I always get here.” The two women talking over Emily shared a laugh. “I don’t suppose we can make special requests for this?”

Emily tried not to throw a fit right then. Joyce *knew* what she was doing! Why was she bringing up all this stupid sensitive stuff! There was a line! A line!

But whether it was caused by oblivious nature or professional attitude, the woman didn’t take the question strangely. “Technically you can. Nothing about making an appointment says you can’t, but it could affect appointment availability.”

“Not an issue. We’ll be scheduling six months out from now right before we leave.” Joyce, the dual-edged sword said back. Loving and supporting, but in exchange committing Emily to a life of pain and suffering.

A shackle was donned around her neck next, fastened by a heavy iron padlock.

“Awh! They make those clip things for the tissue bibs look like little denchers?” Joyce remarked with pleasant amusement.

“Anything to keep someone distracted– but they are fun. I kinda like them myself.” The woman chuckled right back, then patted Emily’s trembling shoulder. “Emily?” she was looking down on Emily, who was looking up at her maker, “doing alright? I’m going to need you to open your mouth for me, please.”

Pardon the few teeth chatters on opening up, but eventually a view into Emily’s mouth did appear.

“A little wider, please?”

“Sorry, she can be a bit of a worrywart... She’s not a fan of the dentist.”

“I promise I’ll be extra gentle.” Her assurance sounded like that for a parent and their child. “Emily? Wide enough to say ‘ahh’ nice and clearly, okay?”

What was this? Torture? Was Joyce being here even helping? If there was supposed to be encouragement or moral support, it didn’t feel like she was getting what she needed.

“A-ahh...”

“A...a bit more, please?”

“A-Ahhh!”

“Wider, Emily, not louder.” Joyce added, rising just a little bit higher on Emily’s shit list.

Stretching her jaw some more and opening wide against her better judgment, Emily sounded, “A-AAHHH”

“I’m not that scary, am I?” The woman suddenly shifted gears with a grin, gently aligning Emily’s head once more.

Unfortunately Emily's face had nowhere to go, not after feeling like a fool for playing into the dentist's little fun...

"Now Emily," she held two metal tools in her hands, "I'm just going to take a look inside, alright? This is just a normal cleaning, so if I find any plaque in there I'm gonna take it out, okay?"

"U-uh-huh..." She wasn't crying, right? Definitely not. She was teary, but that was because of the light. It was a strong light. Super strong.

And so foreign bodies started to peer inside of her mouth. Sometimes the mirror tool would touch her tongue and nearly scare it down her own throat. The worst had yet to come though. The other tool was a hook. It had to be, because Emily cringed and whimpered against her will with each scrape or tug of something that made her whole head move just a tiny bit. All in all, kudos to Joyce for managing to keep a conversation while also having the life squeezed out of her hand.

"So far so good..." the preoccupied woman remarked. "Do you brush and floss normally?"

Emily through only her eyes delivered a bewildered expression. Did the dentist somehow expect her to speak? Was it a trap? If she moved her mouth, the woman might slip and cut the inside of her mouth with that horrible hook, then it'd be grounds to charge even more of a bill.

With frozen lips and a gaping mouth, Emily murmured back, "U-Uh-huh..."

By her side, Emily's better half answered for her. "She does, but she isn't very frequent with dentist visits, come to find out." Need it be said that Joyce sounded less than pleased. Emily did her best to frown from the position she was in.

"Well...dentist visits *are* important, even if your teeth are looking like they're in tip-top shape..." At least Emily had that going for her. It was enough for a silent sigh of relief, the kind that didn't make a tool inside her mouth spasm and hit something unintended.

"Yes, they most certainly are." Joyce continued to dogpile, suddenly turning the mood into an intervention for a woman laying in a chair against her will.

And finally, after a millenia of torture and uncertainty in the seat, the prodding tools came back out, no fresh wounds left behind, and the woman did seem gentle, which was nice...

“Alrighty, Emily,” the woman slipped out of view before coming right back in. “It looks like you’ve been doing a good job in there. Next up is fluoride. Mint or bubblegum?”

“Can’t...can’t I just have the normal stuff?” The last time she was asked about her preferred flavor of fluoride her age was in single digits.

“I can get some from the other room, but it may take a minute. My coworker is seeing another patient there right now. Do you mind waiting?”

And having to stay here any longer? Damn it. It all felt orchestrated. Premeditated. And Joyce, sitting behind her, could only shrug with a smile while her body language said, “Well, what can you do?”

What Emily *could* do was a mystery to herself that only grew more and more with her slipping responsibilities, but she did know what she couldn’t do, and that was being here for more than a single second in excess.

“Bubblegum...”

Maybe it was validation, or maybe it was instinctual, but for whatever reason Emily herself stole a look at Joyce, who held a quiet but observant smile.

“Come to think of it, I don’t think I’ve seen you around here? Whenever I come it’s always Hal that does my cleaning?” Joyce continued the idle chat, or so it seemed. Hearing Joyce converse with strangers always made Emily feel anxious just from trying to figure what her angle was. Joyce didn’t do things just because. She was calculating, conniving, evil! But...mostly the first thing.

“I just started here a few months ago, actually,” the smile she had was evident even from behind the mask, “my name is Kelly.” With her free hand she pointed a gloved finger underneath her nametag.

“Nice to meet you Kelly, and thank you for grabbing me; I just about had to drag my girlfriend here...”

“*Hghh-eeeey...*” Emily muttered in a half-gargle over at Joyce with a tone that implied dwindling patience.

And without a word Emily could feel Joyce's hand in hers go limp, as if trying to disconnect, which only made Emily squeeze harder with a flash of regret. One of the two brought Joyce back online.

Kelly chuckled awkwardly as she coated Emily's teeth. "W-well... believe me, I've had plenty of people before that can be a bit squeamish around dentist stuff. I completely understand... If the parents don't come in already, I usually check befor- Well, I mean- couples too, of course," she quickly backpedaled her tongue apologetically, having voiced a thought that wasn't much of a secret anymore.

Emily sighed once more. Not from the stress, fear, or any pain, but from the undeniable fact of what this all looked like to Kelly. What Emily looked like right then.

"We all have our weaknesses," Joyce promptly countered though, sort of unexpectedly? She then made an audible shiver. "Jeez, thankfully it hasn't happened yet, but I know I'll be the one crying if I find a spider in our house... Emily's definitely my knight in shining armor for that."

"No?" She chuckled back. "Not a fan of insects?"

"I can handle stuff on the screen, but not those things in real life..." Joyce spoke like she was reliving past trauma before her eyes.

Emily could only wonder about the insect comment. Was it true, or was Just just trying to put her back on equal footing in the court of public opinion? Lie or truth... it did make her feel better. A lot less like the humiliation from going to the diner with her parents...

"Okay, Emily, I'm gonna wash some of the taste out now, alright?"

"U-uh-huh."

This time a much more acceptable tool went into her mouth. Just a plastic rod that sprayed cold, refreshing water in her mouth.

"Close..." The woman in her motions instructed. "Swallow..."

Emily did so as the water nozzle in her mouth made a weird noise in response.

One, two more times they repeated the process.

“Any taste left?” She asked her as she took the paper bib around Emily’s neck to wipe the corner of her mouth.

“No,” Emily shook her head, tasting a bubble gum residue that’d been mostly washed away.

“Perfect. Alright, I’m just going to do one last routine check on your teeth with my hands and then you’ll be all set. Then the dentist is going to come in and just give you a quick look. Sound good?”

Another obedient nod from Emily. Hands, she could work with those. No metal hooks or prods, just normal handsy-ness.

“Proud of you, you know?” Joyce said for the umpteenth time, but now able to look at Emily when she said it, courtesy of a red light in city bumper to bumper traffic.

Emily, the unmovable, rested her chin on her hand as she quietly scowled out the window beside her, opposite Joyce's look.

“Mhm.”

“Don’t ‘mhm’ me. Are you still upset?”

“Yes.”

“About what?”

“About going to the dentist.”

“I’m sorry that you don’t like going, but I’m not going to apologize for that, Emily. It’s something you’re supposed to do and you know it.”

“And that doesn’t mean I have to like it!”

“No, it doesn’t,” Joyce openly agreed, “but I’ll make sure that it’s Kelly that you see from now on for your next appointment.”

Next appointment.

It was enough to make Emily physically cringe. Another appointment. Another session of suffering. Like that, the next six months of her life had been ruined just from being cursed with the knowledge of what was to come. By this point Emily wasn't sure if she was bold enough to declare that Joyce couldn't "make" her go, especially when use of force had been threatened against her once already.

"And don't worry, I'll be making sure on Monday that Sheila has my schedule clear for your next appointment." The duality of being a girlfriend and a mommy. Somehow both the support system Emily needed as well as the collar and chain that kept her in line.

"Why did you even tell me when the next one is?" Emily moaned, just short of a legitimate groan.

"Stop it, you're being silly," Joyce admonished.

"Isn't that what I'm supposed to do? Act like a kid?" It wasn't often that Emily could be irked, but the wrong buttons were being pushed right then and she was starting to become quite unapologetic about how they'd show.

"No, because you're my grown-up girlfriend right now that explicitly told me that I would *not* be getting even the chance to baby this entire weekend," finally, Joyce herself huffed back. Likewise for her, she could signal if she was upset in her own ways.

"Maybe if we didn't go to the dentist..."

"Really?" Joyce scoffed, "you're holding that over my head? Emily! You *need* to go to the dentist!"

"I was fine though! I had no cavities! I brush my teeth! I floss!"

"And that doesn't change anything!"

"Yes it does! *You* made me go when I didn't want to, then *you* stayed in the lobby the entire time after they called me in! You made me go in by myself, then only came in once someone finally called you! You said you were gonna be with me the entire time! A-and you made fun of me while you were talking with that assistant...!"

"I..." Joyce pursed her lips with her grip tightening on the wheel. "Emily...please don't cry..."

Emily rubbed her wet eyes, spitefully sobbing back, “Why...? Do I need to be a baby to do that too?”

“I was upset, Emily...and I still kind of am. I’m sorry for making you feel like that...”

“Why are *you* upset?” Emily didn’t consider herself selfish and on better days made a point of being quite the opposite, but this was one of those days where she felt entitled to every bit of misery there was to be offered.

“Because it felt like you were shutting me off out of spite. I can handle you wanting a break from being my baby girl, Emily, but I don’t appreciate it being used against me because you’re upset.”

Emily fell silent. It was one of the few things she had said to Joyce as they were leaving for the dentist. A knee-jerk, offhand remark. Aimed and targeted, specifically out of spite. Lashing out because Joyce became the object of her frustration. It was crude. A low blow. She *knew* how much being a caregiver meant to Joyce, and it was blatant exploitation of that just to try and get her way, or at least make Joyce hurt in some way similar.

Compared to being forced into the dentist though, all Emily’s worries were superficial. She was strangling her partner just because of a minor inconvenience.

“I’m sorry...I’m sorry...I wasn’t thinking. You’re right. I said it because I was angry...!”
Retrospect was a terrible thing, with a truckload of unnoticed mistakes and mishaps sneaking up from behind and dropping a whole new load of emotional baggage.

Emily tried her best to keep her throat open and clear, though it wavered with the ongoing threat of more tears. “Th-that wasn’t right of me. I know how much it means to you...it means so much to me, too... I...I just didn’t like being forced to go, Joyce.”

“I...first, thank you for apologizing,” between bumper-to-bumper traffic, Joyce was able to give her an eye-to-eye smile, “and I understand that you didn’t want to go, Emily. I guess it’s just my first time with this sort of...friction. I should have known better that it was just the aggravation talking.”

“But you have feelings too...” Emily sulked, hitting the depression swing of her phases. “All I was thinking of was myself.”

“Stop it. It’s all okay now. We talked about it and that’s it. I promise you didn’t hurt my feelings, okay?”

“Mhm...”

And unfortunately, or somewhat fortunately, a consequence of Emily’s selflessness came the immeasurable guilt she could feel if a tangible debt (that never existed) went unpaid.

“...Do you wanna make it up to me?” And in Joyce’s mind, let it not be labeled as exploitation, but simply an opportunity ripe for the taking.

“How?” Emily asked right back, with a tone that may have even implied a willingness to commit murder, so resolute.

“When we get home, we’ll go straight up to your nursery, get you in a diaper, put you down for a nap in your crib, and I’ll have a nice dinner ready for us by the time you wake up. How does that sound?” Probably okay, as far as Joyce could guess herself, all but one thing, though this time she had the leverage to be making such unpopular demands.

Emily, kneaded her fingers in her lap for a moment. “I...okay, but no nap? Please? I take back what I said! We can do babying all weekend! Just no naps, Joyce!”

“It’s not a punishment, Emily,” Joyce laughed, “naps are good for you, and I know that you need one.”

“No I don’t!” She groaned right back, a little too frazzled to watch the tone of her own voice.

“And *that* is what a cranky little girl sounds like. You’ve been cranky all day, missy. I’m sorry for not putting you down for one any sooner. I think we could have avoided this whole argument otherwise.”

“Now you’re teasing me.” Emily frowned.

“Farthest thing from it. So I take it we have a deal?” with the raise of a brow and an expectant smile, it was game, set, match.

“For someone who can be so against them, you sure do take naps like a champ?”

“I sleep, Joyce. What else is there to it?” Emily frowned, holding out her arms, awaiting the ascent from her prison cell.

“Well,” Joyce reached in and whooshed Emily out of the adult-sized crib, “I haven’t ever had to check in on you to remind you to go to sleep?”

That was an option? Emily was quiet for a moment, feeling a retrospective wave of stupidity hitting her right then.

“And don’t think that means you can stay up now,” Joyce interrupted her thought, scaring the stupidity away entirely.

“Wasn’t planning to.” She definitely was. And still maybe was... “What’s for dinner?” Emily asked with her head over Joyce’s shoulder, still blushing as she felt the finger slip its way down the back of her exposed diaper.

“Sandwiches, cheese, and crackers,” Joyce recited on the walk to the kitchen.

Emily hardly ever complained about dinner, and if at all, it was when she was the one cooking, which thankfully had become a thing of the past. With that in mind, Emily wasn’t complaining, however things certainly felt amiss. Sandwiches and a cheese platter was fit for a lunch, maybe, or a small passive meal to munch on during a gettogether. In other words, it felt oddly uncharacteristic.

“Really? I coulda cooked if you weren’t feeling it? Maybe you needed a nap...!”

“And it sounds like I got you up too early,” Joyce taunted right back. “And when you’re diapered you require absolute supervision around the kitchen at *all* times, got that?”

“Diapers don’t make my motor skills go away, you know...”

“So when you’re out of diapers then, too?”

Time to retreat. Refocus the subject. “Why’d you not cook?”

“I was going to, but then I remembered my special girl still has bubblegum in her mouth.”

Code for, ‘you went to the dentist and still have fluoride in your mouth that needs to go away on its own.’

“Oh.”

“Yes, ‘oh’. Nothing hot or crunchy for the rest of the night. No need to brush, either,” Joyce reminded. “Had I known this was going to happen though, I would’ve planned at least one dinner that wasn’t going to be hot...”

“You know those rules aren’t that big of a deal, right? People still eat what they want all the time...”

“And unlike those people, we’re going to do what the dentist told us so that I can keep my pretty girl with pearly whites.”

“Ya-huh...” Emily sulked right before perking back up to a new question. “Do I get to sit in a normal chair, at least?”

“Why wouldn’t you?” Joyce frowned with confusion.

“I mean, I dunno...you’re making me wear a—”

“And...in we go,” Joyce softly concluded, smiling cheerily as Emily, as flabbergasted and speechless as ever, was deposited into her high chair. What’s more, the plastic tray was clicked in place before Emily could find the words, though her face was doing enough talking on its own.

“What?” Joyce tried not to chuckle, “did you need a longer nap?”

“I said *normal* seat,” Emily frowned.

“This *is* normal, Emily.”

Emily swung her legs, feeling the firm, plastic and comfily padded grip of the seat all around her. “...Please? Can I please sit at the table...Mommy?”

It certainly never got old to hear and was always just as endearing.

“Once I think you can handle it, baby,” Joyce decided then and there, kissing Emily on the cheek.

“Head back, please?” Joyce, now behind the chair with an elastic band, was sporting a ponytail next on the girl.

“I don’t need a bib...” Emily groaned as the protective neck napkin was done up as well.

“And get the kitchen covered in crumbs? You’re being one *very* combative little girl tonight, you know that?”

“Can’t help it. I had tah go to the tooth doctor today,” Emily enunciated in a carefree voice, patting the plastic table and kicking with each syllable.

Joyce then put on a look of pure, unadulterated surprise. “Really now? Well? What did the tooth doctor say about your teeth?” She kept the little game of kid conversation going as she poured juice into an adult-sized sippy cup.

Then with two fingers, Emily hooked the corners of her mouth to flash her full set of front teeth. “Alllll goood!” She couldn’t help but giggle the moment Joyce’s facade cracked just enough to give her an almost weird look, yet the endearment never left.

“Very, very good!” Joyce cooed as she set Emily’s plate of food and juice in front of her, then took her own seat at the table.

“Mmfhmm!” Emily mumbled through her mouthful of sandwich, crumbs and all. “And—” Emily stopped herself just to take a swig of juice, “Mommy said I’d get a present for being soo good!”

“Really?” Really? Joyce raised her brow. “And what did Mommy promise her little munchkin?”

Without dropping a beat, Emily fired right back, “Ice cream!”

All Joyce gave was side mouth to that. “Mmm...I don’t think Mommy would give ice cream right after the dentist. Maybe tomorrow.”

Buzz killed. Instantly. Enough to make Emily bear down and give into the pressure she’d been feeling in her bladder. Icky, warm, but not absolutely repulsive anymore.

“So how about instead, tonight, after we finish dinner we get you in the bath, then some comfy PJs and snuggle for the rest of the night?”

Damn. She really was good at negotiating.

“Can I ask-a question?”

“You just did?” Joyce set down her own sandwich to come forward and wipe her wet thumb across the corner of a crumby adult baby’s mouth.

“Can I ask two more questions?”

Joyce giggled at that, “You get *one* more before I want another bite of that sandwich in you, missy.”

“Can I bring one of those puzzle thingies in the bath with me?”

“One of your toys?” How Joyce loved to steer the narrative. “Those aren’t tub toys, silly...” then she quietly bit her lip, muttering, “and we still need to get you some...”

“I don’t need bath toys! I just wanted to tinker with one of those puzzle things, I dunno.”

“I’ll see what I can find during the week,” Joyce smiled gingerly, making it quite clear that a mother’s mind has been made. “You can play with one after your bath. And don’t forget your juice, sweetheart.”

“Blah-blah-blah,” Emily bounced her head with each ‘blah.’ “Don’t forget your juice!” She mimicked right back, and Joyce didn’t seem amused.

“Do wet diapers make you cranky too, sillypants, is that it?”

It wasn’t so much as a direct admission was it a passive drop of the hat by referencing what Emily thought was a secret to herself for at least the remainder of the meal. Unfortunately for her, she was still catching on to the fact that at least for Joyce she had a ‘potty face’, as the mother in charge liked to think of it.

She was blushing and quiet. Too quiet for too long to be able to deny it at this point.

“...No I didn’t...” But what’s to stop an embarrassed girl from trying?