

## 22 - The Bench

At first, it wasn't so much Emily that disappeared on Joyce than she did on her. Instead, the ground seemed to have consumed her; a thick muck slowing down each and every weakening stride she attempted. A metal post anchored into the ground, she was trembling more than she would've liked, and could feel the unrelenting tide of shame, self-frustration, and sorrow crash against her, forcibly coerced her into diving back into the abyss, just to avoid the storm.

The pit was bottomless, and thus had no true destination as it was a one-way trip to the void. She could only maintain a three foot radius, thanks to the many people and her blurry, wet vision. Taking straight, bending, curving and forking paths, a scrutinizing, sharp misery always seemed to find her. In fact, a terrible pain in her chest ached; begging her to stop. Yet she grit her teeth and kept moving, because deep down she knew she was a poison; one that needed to be cleansed from the one she loved the most.

Even if she was offended and angry for all the right reasons, she may as well have been a king without her castle. Why would she want to be right if it came at such a staggering price? But that's what ate away at her so terribly, knowing that this wasn't a healthy solution, and the consequences far outweighed the benefits. It was the lesser of two evils, so she thought, trying to sever their ties, but it was a brutal and savage solution. Something felt torn, and the wound was gushing.

Someone must have snapped the tiny lever inside her head, because the trauma played on repeat, allowing her to relive her mistakes millions of times over in the span of seconds. Each and every syllable to every word was vivid down to the very pitch; so memorable because it was saturated in such distinct despair, disappointment, and drear. She kept stealing worried glances at the watch strapped to her heart, but the hands wouldn't move. They had stopped since Joyce gave her that look; a look of betrayal.

She was either drowning in it, or at least all she knew how to feel by this point was it, which was pain. Even as she ran away, it didn't change the regret sinking inside of her like a ball of lead, but that's why she hated herself even more. The comfort she craved for was the very one she stabbed in the back, and yet she still longed for it? Such a precious and innocent trust had been taken to a bed of nails and grinded against sharp and jagged rocks; strangled by Emily's very own two hands. With each step, the void inside herself grew just a little wider, her heart throbbed just a little more, and the remnants of warmth in her palm, the one that had held another, began to cool just a little more. She could implode at any moment; each step potentially her last, until she finally lose herself to pure ruin, which right now seemed like a fitting punishment for herself.

And in her frantic state, catching blurs of smiles and laughs engaged in their own paradise, she thought of Mary and Frank. Joyce had her parents with her right now, right? She could take solace in that at least there was someone for her. So as Emily sat herself on a bench, realizing she couldn't run from herself, finally unable to ignore her full-on sobs, she could at least remind herself that Joyce would be okay and was among familiar faces. Emily, buried in her hands which were flooding with tears, maybe hoping to raise a pool to drown herself in, continued to weep.

She never really did deserve her; Joyce was probably just too polite to not point that out. Why did all her relationships seem to be such double-edged swords? There was a common similarity among this one and Jack, and had there been a mirror right this moment, it'd have been a joke to consider it a mystery. Maybe that's why he had left her, and why Emily just left Joyce. She was the unstable one. She was the problem, and all she did was invite pure disaster. The world continued to spin on its axis, and Emily was a violent anomaly to the natural course, as her opposing sways twisted and turned her relationships and her stomach.

Would it have been better if she were never found in the first place? As if a cruel reminder, the imaginary rain was already pouring like a waterfall over her head. Instead, left on the city streets, only to open to her eyes to a sky as bright as day, and to carry her swollen ankle to the nearest clinic. There would be no rescuer, angel, or goddess. Isolation would be her comfort; a friend that could not and would not be hurt. She was starting to heave a little, her cries were so draining, and she could feel the knife twist and turn about her; carving each and every mistake she had made these past months. And yet, despite all of this; all this damnation, self-hate, inflicted injury, punishment, beration, destruction of self-worth, even from the heap of misery she'd thrown herself into, there was still a faint light shining over her. No matter where she turned her head it seemed to be far away, yet nevertheless poised right at her.

Her legs were pulled close as she clutched her arms together, wrapped around her knees as she shielded herself from the outside world. A sickening gray had begun to infect the canvas, and the atmospheric noises began to deafen into an unintelligible murmur, as Emily finally learned what it truly meant to be alone.

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A constant stream of individual drops kept launching themselves at the large, glass window, exploding into even tinier smithereens as they slowly rolled down the surface. The tiny vibrations they made were almost therapeutic, if you took to time to lose yourself to the noise. It was hard to do that, though, when instead the pressing of keys were much louder.

She needed a moment to blink. The digital screen etched its digital LEDs into her eyes like they'd been engraved. Then of course came the tears from over-exercised eyes, long overdue for a break from an unrelenting hell of technological lights. Just as she stretched her arms, a knock came from the door.

“Yes?” Just as the silence of the rain had a chance to introduce itself, it had been interrupted.

“It’s Sheila, Ma’am.”

She didn’t answer back, and the silence was telling enough.

With the turn of the handle, the assistant entered the office. “I just got a call from security downstairs. I believe your chauffeur is waiting for you?” She adjusted the glasses poised on the rim of her nose.

Instead of answering, Joyce’s eyes panned her desk, from one massive end to the other. Her coffee was half-filled, or rather, half-empty. When did she get it again? With the details of her office taking a higher priority, she pressed a few fingers to the mug.

Cold.

She exhaled through her nose, then made no rush in turning her head to the window. Apparently the sun had clocked in early, because the moon seemed to be taking up its unexpected shift. Well, that, or...for once in who knows how long, she looked at the clock. Oh.

“Joyce?” The sound of her name finally beckoned her attention, but the lack of emotion seemed to have scared her assistant somewhat, as with a quick correction she said, “Ms.Summers, I meant to say. But, are you doing alright, ma’am?”

“What did you come to say about my chauffeur?”

“...He’s been waiting since a half-hour ago for you to come down.” Joyce gave the overturned phone set to silent a peek. There were a few missed calls on it. “Don’t you think it’s time you take the night off? You’ve already been here since-”

“Could you please send him on his way?” She was already looking back at the computer. “I have some more work I want to finish up.” She gave the coffee a second glance, as if having second thoughts, but quickly gave up on it once more.

“Work? But I thought you had finished everything for April last-”

“I’m working on next month’s,” she said, plainly. A second went by and she still wasn’t gone yet. “Why haven’t you gone home yet?” There was no real curiosity, seeing as her eyes never left the screen. There was none of anything. Simply an observation that was one of many tiny, insignificant, miniscule bits and bobs that filled the cracks and crevices which would further prolong the inevitable; building a bridge that could keep her from falling into misery, a place that she couldn’t stand to be; home.

“Because *you* haven’t. I’m concerned for your health, and with all due respect I don’t think you should be having late night after night in the office. Ms.Summers, when was the last Saturday you’ve taken for yourself?”

“You’re my secretary, aren’t you?” It’d be pulling teeth to stir some kind of emotion in her tone.

“Four weeks ago.” It was as if she were expecting to be challenged. “Is your car still here from this morning?”

“Yes, it is.” The keys on the keyboard kept moving at a rapid pace, though Joyce kept finding herself needing to blink a bit more. As soon as something interrupted her flow, it was always so annoyingly difficult to find again...

“I’ll send the chauffeur on his way, but only if you’re going to leave of your own accord right after.” It was obvious she was at a crossroads, trying to make decisions for the very woman that paid her.

“Tell him I’ll be fine, please.” She almost sounded a little annoyed, and the “magic word” came a bit forced. Granted, that’s what hours on hours of work would do to you. She couldn’t remember the last time she got a full night’s sleep, and felt her need for pleasantries were running low.

“And will you head home right after?”

She just about pinched the bridge of her nose. “Sheila, please.” It was a tone that had its patience being tried; one intolerant of anything that didn’t bend to its exact whim. The fumes she tried to tell herself she wasn’t running on didn’t seem to appreciate anything less than perfect. Adaptation and compromise were currently unwelcome guests in the executive’s realm, and even her closest ally was starting to feel like a nuisance.

The typing finally stopped, as the pianist ended their tune on a jarring, constricting note, and invited a much more uncomfortable silence into the room. The swivel chair didn't seem to turn, and the desk lamp shining on the right side of her face was finally beginning to bother her. The coffee was cold now, too. Hardly drinkable, and it'd be a waste of a mug to get another. Her rhythm and momentum had become stale, and she knew it'd all been ruined.

"Fine." Placing both hands on the desk, she used them as a foothold to push herself up, taking a moment to brush off the wrinkles in her blouse. The open binder, still-illuminated computer screen, lazily placed pen and documents all remained the same as she walked from it. She looked to Sheila with a grave seriousness. "Now do what I asked."

Sheila didn't respond when she excused herself, and the shut of the translucent glass door returned Joyce to her one true friend, someone she had a strange chemistry with; isolation. Her jacket came off the hook and around her shoulders. She hardly cared enough to make the long, begrudging trip back to the other side of the room, looking at her messy station. Once she acknowledged her lack of energy, it was impossible to ignore now. Other than the few lights left, the rest of the room began to blend with the night sky as the main lights dimmed to darkness. She rubbed her eyes once more before stepping out of the office.

"...yes, she'll be driving herself home tonight. Yes, I'll let her know. Thank you. Have a good night." That was how Joyce found her secretary by the phone on her desk, already dressed in her own jacket. Seeing her all packed up, knowing that she herself was the cause of it, Joyce now being away from her work felt a tad bit remorseful for keeping her all night...

A look around the corner gave way to the vastly empty floor, which despite being reserved for only a handful of people, truly felt empty in the company of darkness. Just a few moments ago it felt like the start of the day... She turned back to Sheila who was hanging up the phone.

"I just spoke with security. They said he'll be going on then to drop off the vehicle at your apartment's garage. Is that alright?"

"It's fine." It was hard to tell if it really was. "Can I leave now, or are you going to make sure I get through the front door to my apartment as well?"

"What makes you think I don't have a tracker on you?" She smiled, and eventually, so did Joyce, ever so faintly, looking somewhere else other than her assistant's eyes.

"Besides, this building tends to be a little creepy at night when it's so empty." Sheila, holding a bag with both hands, looked to her boss expectantly. "Think you can escort me out?"

Joyce's inner brows tilted upwards somewhat as she smirked, admittedly feeling foolish for her attitude a few minutes ago. Thankfully Sheila could be so forgiving, or at least understanding.

"Are you parked on the same floor as me?"

"Did you forget I have a reserved spot, too?"

In unison they walked down the dark hallway, to the opposite end, where an elevator door with a square light mounted above the doors stood.

"How come you've been working so much, Ms. Summers?"

"You're off the clock, so stop calling me that," again, with little expression to her voice. "Call me Joyce."

"Sorry Ma'am, but I can't do that. With you, I'm always on the clock," she chuckled, and Joyce feigned a smile.

"Is there anyone you're going to be late for at home? Because of me?" They waited for the elevator, while Joyce quietly observed a few potted plants.

"No, It's alright. Truthfully, I expected it might be another late night."

"...I see. Is there anyone you have at home?"

"A boyfriend, and a dog."

Joyce gave her a somewhat invested look. "Since when have you been dating?"

"About 6 months, now."

"And you never told me about it?"

Sheila was silent for a few moments.

"Or I forgot that you did?"

Still silent, though it seemed to say much more.

...

“Ma’am, is there anything you’d like to talk about?”

“Aren’t we talking right now?” The elevator dinged, and they both stepped inside.

“Well, yes, but I mean about you?”

“I highly doubt there’s much there to talk about...”

“Ma’am, I know that I’m your secretary, but that doesn’t mean I don’t mind talking about something that’s bothering you outside of work.”

“I appreciate the concern, but I’m fine, really.” She had to look at the metallic doors for that one. Even she knew it was a lie. There wasn’t a single person in that tiny, metal box that believed a single bit of her words. It’d been a slow, grueling decay that’d slowly consumed her before she’d even realized. Her work was her passion, but it had also become the catalyst for something much greater she had chosen to neglect for too long. Alongside it was Sheila’s care and concern that was like a low-hanging fruit; ripe for the taking, yet she didn’t feel the desire to reach for it.

“Hey,” Joyce randomly spoke, “how about we go and get a drink?”

It sounded reluctant, but Sheila went on to respectfully decline. “You need your sleep, Ms. Summers, just as much as I do. It’s nearly half-past ten, and we both need to be up for work in the morning. Still though, I never thought you’d invite me out for a drink?”

“What do you mean? I’ve offered you before.”

It stung, not hearing her respond to that. Twice now, she’d shot herself in the foot.

“Maybe Friday? Since then it’ll be the weekend.”

“Maybe...”

Sheila then looked at Joyce with a warning stare. “And *don’t* think about going to a bar tonight, or then I really will follow you home!” For once, Joyce finally laughed a little. “You’ve got a company to manage, and I can’t imagine how hectic it’d be without you...” Joyce went back to staring off into troubled nothingness, keeping once again her bottled-up issues to herself.

They both stepped out and into the parking garage, their sets of heels clicking across the asphalt.

“Gee, it’s raining quite a bit…” Sheila looked out the opening where the countless drops could be seen falling from above. “My space is the floor below this one,” She briefly spoke. “Promise me you’ll go straight home?”

“I may be a lot of things,” Joyce paused to yawn. “But a liar isn’t one of them. You have a good night Sheila.”

“See you in the morning, Ma’am. Did you bring your umbrella, by the way?”

“Yes, I have it in my car. Don’t worry.”

“...And you’re sure you don’t want to talk?” There was the faintest hint of unease in her voice; fear for overstepping her bounds.

Joyce merely smiled. “I’m fine, but thanks.”

They parted ways, one sticking by their car and the other moving to the stairwell.

The crisp air wove throughout the cement structure, whistling its woeful tune as it kicked at the fringes of Joyce’s coat, mercilessly biting at her bare ankles. Being a reserved lot, hers was the only vehicle in attendance, or better explained as staying behind. The inside of her car didn’t feel much different, though that didn’t stop her from opting to turn on the heat. Backing out, the GPS console was already routing itself for home, and the calm, digital voice was already looking for confirmation.

“Would you like me to set a route for home?”

She took a moment to check her phone, looking for something; a distraction. An excuse that would keep the night fresh and young.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t catch that. Would you let me to set a route for home?”

“...No. Don’t.” Pulling out of the garage, instead of her typical left she started with a right.

She relished in the moments she could find something even close to traffic, or catch each and every single red light. There was something beyond appealing to take the scenic route; someplace she’d never or scarcely been. If she was destined to be trapped in the company of



herself, the least she could do was at least force a change of pace. She was a sorrowful soul, and she knew it too. She had forgotten the beginning, and cared little for the end. This limbo she was caught in, once only filled with pleasure, made her realize that life wasn't so cheery if you couldn't satisfy all aspects of it.

Creatures of habit; social animals. She agreed with both of these philosophies, but that didn't mean she followed them both. She was of habit, but it was her habit to live a lonely life. No one could be her perfect other, and trying to find someone like that who existed was an imaginary needle in a very real haystack.

Something wet rolled down her cheeks, as the expression on her face remained static. What *did* it mean to be loved? To love someone else? Someone to get up for; to wake and see, look forward to spending time with and celebrate?

A piece of porcelain chipped off her face, and the storm seemed to rain heavier.

Tearily glancing to her side window, she watched the front-side windows on the street pan as she cruised forward, each and every display moving to the beat of their own drum. It was funny, in a way, watching the rain roll down the side of her car. Seeing her faint reflection in it, wet with her own tears, unable to distinguish them from the rain; it felt oddly poetic. Her sources of noise were the falling drops and swish-swash of her windshield wipers.

Store after store, display after display, nothing seemed to be exciting other than the occasional alleyway that broke up the sameness of it all. Though, even then that became dull too once you realized it had just as much repetition as everything else in the grand scheme.

Maybe it was time to go home, cut her losses, and work another late night tomorrow. She could try and send Sheila home early, then there wouldn't be any obstacles... Maybe the one thing that did make her smile was remembering Ashes. Such a cute little ball of fur. She wanted to see Amy, too. And that was the problem.

Why couldn't she just be honest with herself? She started to look bitter. Maybe it was worth getting a cat... It wasn't everything she wanted, but it was probably safe to say that for once in her life she'd just need to deal.

She rounded the corner, rearing closer and closer to home, though this wasn't one of her typical streets. The flickering lamp post was a good example of that. It was disappointing in a way to see that there wasn't any traffic on this section. That just meant she was going to her husk of a home even sooner.

Just a few more blocks and the building would be on her left. What a shame... There weren't even people on the sidewalks to people-watch. Just as she looked back to the road, something curious caught her glance, though it only amounted to a shadowy blur as she barely focused on it when passing by. What did she just see? The car kept moving forward, but her mind stayed stuck. By this point though, she was ready to vent her inner monologue.

"How pathetic..." She was willing to take an interest in anything at this point. Nothing really captivated her. It was all boring, and she knew it. They were all in the same; excuses. It really was time for her to go home...

Trying to forget, she went forward another block, and there wasn't anything exciting there.

The same for the next.

And the next.

And the next.

She took a left and pulled onto her street. She could already see the garage entrance in the distance. She pulled closer and closer, dreading every moment. But for once, she didn't feel as repelled by the home as much as she was being tugged elsewhere by something. What did she see?

*What did I see?*

Right before the entrance, she made another left. She drove a fair distance, then took another one. Another few hundred feet, and this time, a right. She didn't know whether this were more of her delusions or a genuine interest. Was there a difference anymore? She certainly had better things to be doing than looking for a shiny nickel on the street, yet here she was...

It was gone, whatever she was looking for. Or at least, never there to begin with. Her hope had finally been snuffed out, and she was already getting ready to go home.

Her car nearly jerked forward when she hit the brakes. There it was again, only this time she could see it with a much clearer view.

A lump of something? No, a lump of someone; slouched over on the steps of a building, shone down upon by one of the few functioning lights on the sidewalk, gracefully protected from most of the rain by a small overhead.

It would've been instinct to think they were homeless, but they didn't seem that way... No. Someone homeless doesn't wear flats, dress pants, and a blouse. Then why were they outside so late in the pouring rain? And why did Joyce even care? It wasn't her problem. She needed to go home and get ready for tomorrow. There were likely thousands of people sleeping on the streets tonight, and this person wasn't any different from them, so why was she stopping for this one?

Yet as she thought that, she didn't press forward on the gas. Well, not until someone behind her laid on their horn, at least. Caught off guard, she did move forward, but pulled right around the corner. She didn't keep going though. She pulled to the side. Turning in her seat to look through the back-rear window, there wasn't anything but the glow of light around the corner, just managing to shine through the dense downpour.

Her curiosity was insatiable. She needed to know. She needed to see. It was either the brink of complete and total procrastination that had her so fixated, or something much more cryptic and mysterious aroused her curiosity.

The umbrella was the first thing to exit the car, unfolding and expanding into quite the generous roof above Joyce's head. With its elegant, upturned wooden handle she was quick to pace around the puddles and onto the sidewalk, heading back around. Funnily enough, she thought how Sheila might kill her for trying to check up on strangers instead of heading home. *I'm not at a bar; at least...*

This was the third time they'd been exposed to one another, or more so Joyce exposed to them. She didn't even know why she was here, or what she was going to do. There didn't even seem to be anything distinct about them, yet the more she looked, the more intrigued she became.

They looked like someone fresh out of a 9 to 5 job on their way back home. The way some of her clothes stuck to her skin though...parts of her blouse looked chillingly transparent. Again, Joyce simply felt compelled to reach out her hand, resting just a few fingers on one of the many cold, wet spots she was covered in.

She must've been freezing... She *is* freezing. Her hair looked as if it'd taken a tumble, along with the rest of herself. It wasn't repulsive. Far from it. If anything, it was oddly endearing...

Crouching on her feet she stroked the stranger's hair she softly murmured. "How did you get like this...?" Then she noticed the streaks of bare skin coming from her eyes, almost like rivers. Tears never really did work well with makeup... Water in general.

"Down on your luck, too?" She didn't expect an answer, but the silent company in itself was something to appreciate. It was enough to make her forget what had her so troubled in the first place.

She seemed so tiny... She wasn't. Not totally, but not exactly Joyce's size either. Frail all over, shivering in the cold rain; defenseless and alone. The more she sympathized with the stranger, the less and less she wanted to leave things so simply...

"E..." She went to touch her shoulder, then hesitated. "Excuse me?... Hello?"

She wasn't expecting to feel so relieved when she saw her stir, and lazily look back to her. Then she realized just how abnormal this girl was... How do you manage to fall asleep on a set of concrete stairs in the rain?

Regardless, "You're awake, thank goodness..."

She held herself close; clearly shaken from the rain. The way she trembled... Is it okay to hug a stranger if they're cold? Wait, why would she think of that?

"Wh-who are you?" Her voice was fatigued and strained.

"Come on now, can you stand?" She needed warmth, and Joyce felt a need to please. Carefully, she supported her by the shoulder, though needing to slouch just a bit to match the girl's height.

The first step they took and the girl was already yelping in pain. What? What did she do wrong? The first thing that came to mind was to look at her feet, and just under the light she could see it didn't look normal. Swollen and discolored.

"I'm sorry, are you okay?" She'd never used so much emotion in a single day. Care and compassion were things she held in frugal and conserved amounts, yet here she was, blowing away all her reserves/ The girl didn't respond, but it didn't stop Joyce from readjusting. "Come on, I know it hurts," she continued to coax as they slowly moved back to the car. "Just a little further..."

It clearly paid to have a towel on hand, which she laid across the seats, and then her on top.

“Down we go...” An onlooker would probably think she was abducting them right now, and maybe she was... But how could she just leave her like that? Too much had happened for her to ignore this girl. Dare she say it was fate itself. All of this was so unusual, and that was exactly part of the intrigue.

Back in the front seat, behind the wheel, she could still hear the girl murmuring behind her. The police? Is that where she should take her? She spun her head around to give her another once-over. Sopping wet, freezing, injured, and tired. How was a station going to solve any of that as well as Joyce could? No, she knew exactly where to take her.

“I know you’re a bit out of it right now hon, but if you can hear me, I’m going to take you back to my house, okay? It’s just up the street.” She then realized she was speaking to a brick wall. It was her fault, honestly, considering she was dealing with a person who managed to sleep on the streets...poor thing. They had no connection, and yet Joyce felt obligated. She wanted to feel obligated.

The drive home was short, and for once Joyce didn’t take the scenic route. She parked alongside the vehicle her chauffeur had dropped off, then was thankful she and this stranger were the only ones in the garage. While appearances were the last thing on her mind, she’d prefer there not be any misunderstandings...

“Hon? Are you awake?” She still didn’t even know her name yet. The lack of familiarity should have made it weirder, but it didn’t. She gave her shoulder a slight jostle, but nothing stirred back. This was a slight issue. She needed to get this person up to her apartment, but first they needed to move to the elevator. It’s not like she could carry her.

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It was amazing how effective a princess carry could be. As her wet blouse and pants soaked into the arms of Joyce’s jacket, she minded less than she would have expected. If she was prepared to lose it to the rain, surely she would be if it meant doing a good deed.

After an awkward turn into the elevator, without hitting her “princess” head against the panel, she pressed the correct floor.

Her hair could use some tidying...she was going to need new clothes as well. Despite looking so weathered, it didn't change how soft and delicate her face seemed... It wasn't the time or place, but Joyce couldn't help herself as she marveled over the stranger's...well, beauty.

"Thankfully you're so light," she hoisted her up once more, solidifying her grip, then walked down the hall, undisturbed, reaching the front door.

It was always soul-crushing to come home and embrace her bountiful loneliness in the company of just herself. She had all this square footage, and yet the reminder of such spaciousness was suffocating.

It didn't seem that way tonight.

Nothing was straining to get through the door; to get through to Joyce. Standing there, holding her princess, the inside of her home seemed oddly tame.. Was it a trick? Had it gotten so bad her emotional struggles had become sentient?

Creaking open the door, she stepped inside, her charge in tow. A chill nearly ran up her spine, the setting was so unusual. This wasn't her home. It couldn't be. The eerie silence that hung throughout the spacious home...it didn't seem so eerie anymore. For once she could hear the silence, the normal silence, and it was euphoric. The heating system seemed to be working this time too, because now Joyce wasn't thickly wrapped in layers of contempt and sorrow and was raw enough for the temperatures to reach her.

It was the first time she used the guest room, and also the bed.

"Don't hate me, but I need to warm you up, okay?" She wasn't expecting a response, but felt herself becoming a bit flustered as she carried out her intent. One after the other, each button in an orderly fashion fell out of place, and so did her blouse. She tugged at the ends of the shirt which were still tucked into her pants, and out they came.

She stared at the small woman, tracing her from head to stomach. So out of it, unable to realize her savior had a complete view of her chest. Joyce looked away, feeling her cheeks getting a little too warm. Maybe the heat was working too well...

Setting the blouse aside, she sat the girl up, pulling her close so she could reach behind her bra.

“I’m sorry, but this is too wet to keep on...” Already experienced with her own, a simple flick had the clasp undone and the fabric fell limp. A brief second went by, and she could feel the soft breaths, coming in constant intervals, kiss the crook between Joyce’s shoulder and neck.

Was she getting excited? Taking her by the bare shoulders, she gently spaced the two apart, relieved with some distance. Maybe it wasn’t so great, now seeing her bare breasts, so in a panic to protect the sleeping girl’s modesty, she pulled her back close again.

What was she doing?! This was no time for games!

She felt truly invasive once she undid the zipper to her pants, and soon the button. You’d think she was making it into a sexual thing, she was so slow about it. It wasn’t...but her heart was beating quite a bit. Already with the first tug, she could see the fabric to her underwear, now well aware of how they matched her bra... Why was she even noticing that? The pants then totally came off, and all that remained were her panties.

“Why are you still asleep?” Despite stripping her, she couldn’t help but find herself giggling over her undisturbed process.

She grew a bit more worried though as she looked at the final piece. It seemed wet too, and she knew it wouldn’t be right to leave the job half-done.

“I promise I’ll get you something to wear, so please just bear with it for a little bit...” There was a pause before she slipped her fingers into the waistband, having the backs of her fingers pressed against an incredibly sensitive area of skin. She nearly jumped when the girl slightly shifted. Looking on for a moment too long, she nearly slapped herself for taking a moment to admire the feel, but then worked them off and over her curving thighs and calves.

Joyce did her best not to look while she collected everything, but the girl was completely naked now, still sound asleep. Thankfully, she didn’t seem to be shivering so much anymore, but Joyce made up the difference in clothes by slipping her under the covers.

Still talking to her as if she were conscious, Joyce went on to explain. “I’ll go see what I can do about something to wear. You aren’t exactly my size...” she gave her another once-over from head to blanket-covered toe, “but in the meantime, don’t go anywhere.”

She was going to need underwear, and Joyce knew that was going to be an issue. She didn’t exactly keep panties for girls with smaller waists on hand, nor bras for tinier breasts either. She

wasn't prepared to let her go unprotected either. It scared her to imagine what she might think when she wakes up; what might've been done to her.

Looking around the room, as if an idea lay somewhere between the cushions or floorboards, her eyes fell on her keys.

She could find a place that was still open, right? Another quick glance to the clock, which was past eleven now. It really was getting late...

*Please just wait a little longer...* She grabbed the keychain and was out the door.

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There was its own special kind of intimacy when Joyce slipped a new pair of panties onto her sleeping subject. She couldn't describe the relief she felt though once it was clear that they fit. Unfortunately though her breasts wouldn't be getting as much special treatment...

"I hope you don't mind nightgowns..." Picked from her personal collection, she slipped it over her head, and it certainly did look big on her, yet, charming in its own way?

The covers came back over her, and Joyce took a seat on the bedside, watching for a little longer. Her fingers drew circles into the fabric, until by the twentieth she finally felt herself yawn. Maybe she wasn't as indestructible as she thought... Sheila would probably be giving her a mouthful by now.

"Still, I never thought it'd be a complete stranger that would use this room first." She looked to the slumbering culprit with a smirk, trying not to mind the irony in how she was the very reason of it.

Never did she expect to spend the late, close to early hours of her next morning like this. Despite how heavy her eyelids felt, a part of herself felt tickled.

*No, it's not like that...* Almost painfully, she kept on looking at innocence personified. The pleasure she felt from this, she knew exactly what soft spot it came from, but how disgusting could she be to project that onto a stranger? Was it right bringing her into Joyce's home?

Maybe that's what it was; a selfish ploy just to please her own fantasies. It was never about helping this person, it was about what Joyce wanted, and what she couldn't have. Of course, what better way could she force someone into the mold of what she wanted the most than by



plucking them off the street? They'd be in-debted to her, and of course she'd be sure to collect by-

A muffled buzz came from her phone sitting on the bed

Nothing. Just useless spam.

She needed some sleep, and to calm herself. If she was going to blow up like this, it'd be better to do it in another room. Tomorrow would be a new day, and like that time would start moving again. Company couldn't last forever, and the next night this room would be empty again.

Selfish as it was, this time she so unashamedly *wanted* to be. Just when she'd discovered a new, refreshing outlet in life, she was already going to lose it. Why did life have to be so cruel? She could observe every physical feature and trait to this person, but other than that she was nothing more than a face, and that was what cut the deepest.

While Joyce gravitated so closely, this person would sleep through all of it, much less feel an inkling of emotion back. If anything, it made Joyce hate herself even more. All she could ever do was get her hopes worked up for another grand flop. If it hurts this much just to put herself out there, why did she even try?

As soon as she left this room and went to bed, that would be it. Her one-night stand would be finished by sunrise, and she'd long forget that this had ever happened. So if no one was going to remember tonight, maybe she could at least indulge herself once.

She leaned in close, right beside the stranger's ear, speaking in a low whisper.

"Have a good night, sweetheart..."

It was too faint to feel, but something lightly touched the top of the girl's forehead.

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*Gone.*

With each vibration from her phone, nestled away in the pockets of her shorts, underneath her dress, it made Emily shake and tremble with an inconsolable grief that felt like tearing flesh. She knew who it was that kept trying to reach her every waking minute, and to let each ring fall

silent and unanswered only dogpiled every negative emotion she could convince herself to invest in.

After the phone stopped ringing, the same whimpers would ensue each time.

“I’m sorry...I’m sorry...!” She must have been worried sick, and Emily was the one putting her through all of this. She was the root of this raging storm. But it was for the best, right? No matter what, it was going to be painful, but at least this way there’d only be one, big, giant, humongous hurdle to overcome... She wanted to say that, but as more and more time went on, it was her own lack of courage that seemed to be the second contender.

The perception of time seemed to have taken a backseat in the presence of grieving, as Emily was at a total loss for how much time had passed on that bench. She couldn’t bring herself to look at her phone though, because that’d bring her even closer to her sins. Minutes? Hours? Days? It could be any of the three, but who knows, being the screw-up that Emily is, it’s not like she couldn’t mess that up too.

Bubbles. That’s all she ever seemed to be trapped inside. Her own little world that enabled her to be so carefree, happy, and relaxed. But because she lived in these spheres, that’s all she knew of. While she drifted in the outside world, hardly a shine or sparkle outside her dome would catch her interest. She was naive of it. Ignorant to it. So many times in this fashion she’d set herself up for failure, and just when she’d realize that everything wasn’t fine, and the world actually mattered outside her small oasis, the bubble would pop, and she would *fall*.

Something wet lightly splashed against her forehead.

*Ignore it.*

It worked, because it didn’t happen again. This whole time she’d been staring down into the crook between her chest and bundled legs, sitting in a fetal position. She and the rest of the world didn’t seem to work so well together, so maybe it was about time they start seeing other people...

Again, another wet pop.

It didn’t aggravate her. It scared her. Not because of what it was, but because of what it could be. She wasn’t prepared to face anyone or anything. Nothing was right and everything was in shambles and ashes.

She turned her head just the slightest upwards to peek her eyes past her knees. She needed to blink for a moment just to readjust to the light.

“Hey, why’re you like that?” An innocent and high-pitched voice rung. Innocently curious, and in their hands was a plastic stick with a hoop on it, and the other a bottle of soap. Emily briefly tried looking to her forehead, finally doing something right for once by connecting the dots.

“Are you okay?”

“...No, I’m not.” She was a tiny, blonde-haired girl, dressed in sandals, shorts, and a top decorated in frills. She looked on with as much obscurity as there was in Emily’s heart.

“I’m sorry,” she seemed to have interpreted it as an invitation to come closer, because Emily now had company on the bench. “Is that why your eyes are so red? Were you crying?”

Sullenly, Emily nodded her head. Who even was this little girl?

“My daddy says I get sad a lot. But that’s because someone is being mean to me...” she seemed to passively grumble. Though, much more upbeat, she went on to ask, “Why are you sad?”

Emily stayed silent for a bit, staring off into space. That was the magic of being a kid though, because if Emily were trying to signal her unwillingness to talk, a social cue as advanced as that went well-above the tiny girl’s head.

“Excuse me?” Again, a voice oblivious to their own wrongdoing. Emily felt a small tug on her own dress. “Did you hear me? Why are you sad?”

Just when she’d learned to live with herself, already was she feeling ready to tear up again. By no means was she enthusiastic over digging out very recent trauma. At the same time, she couldn’t stand the thought of making another person sad today.

“My, uhm...” she rubbed her eyes for a moment. “My...my girlfriend, I made her disappointed in me... We got into a fight.” It was like pulling a cord covered in spikes outside her own throat, the verbalization hit her so heavily. It was taking everything she had to keep stable.

“Fights are no good,” the kid said in an imitating, pretending voice. You’d think she was repeating someone’s mantra verbatim. “My daddy always says that,” she cheekily smiled. “Hey, what does ‘disappointed’ mean?”

“It’s when someone is sad because of something you did...” Explaining it didn’t make it any less true; solidifying the gravity of her actions.

“What did you do?”

She exhaled through her nose.

“Something mean.”

“Are you gonna say sorry?”

She narrowed her brows. “It’s...it’s not that simple.”

“Why not? When you say sorry everyone is happy again, right?” She kept looking up to Emily, and it added a tinge of self-consciousness to her simmering worries.

Then in the middle of her therapy session, Emily realized something objectively important.

“Wait, why are you here?” Now it was the girl’s turn to be stared at. “Are you lost?”

She stared back clueless for a moment, then nodded her head with a giggle. “Daddy says I’m an explorer!”

Emily blinked, feeling the spotlight shine its light on a whole new conflict. Not only was she stuck with her growing depression, but a lost child now, too?

“Is...is your dad looking for you?” If she herself weren’t so sad, the small girl’s casualness to her own predicament may have been laugh-worthy.

“I think so,” she still kept smiling. “Are you lost?”

“In a few ways, yeah.” There probably wasn’t as much depth to her words as she intended, but Emily was feeling just as clueless on both the physical and emotional front. Everything was in shambles, and she had no idea how to pick up the pieces. She wasn’t good at that. But she knew who was... *No!* She couldn’t afford to hinge like this anymore. She didn’t deserve to...

“Do you wanna blow some bubbles?” She was already holding the container out to her.

“Shouldn’t we go find your dad?” She didn’t want to move, but she couldn’t leave a much more troubled soul hanging.

“Uhm, I guess.” She shrugged. “He always finds me.” A memory exclusive to herself had her giggling. “He wins a lot at hide and seek!”

“How long has he been gone?”

“Uhm...” she glanced to her fingers, as if they’d tell the time. “Two hours? Three?”

“Wh-what? Three hours?” Bewildered and shocked, Emily’s feet lost their footing on the bench, planting themselves on the ground. “He must be worrying about you!”

The outburst seemed to startle her though, because she was quickly transitioning into a hiccup. Apparently only now it seemed to click for her.

“Is-is he gonna be mad at me?” Wasn’t she the one with the carefree attitude to this? How quickly the tables had been turned, much less the massive irony in it all. She seemed to suck away all the worries though, because now a crying, lost girl had been deposited into Emily’s lap.

“Hey, hey, relax, it’s okay, see?” Almost awkwardly, Emily rubbed her shoulder, not so used to the whole ‘interacting with kids’ thing. What was she even supposed to see? This was how Joyce did it, right?

She didn’t seem to be itching for conversation, now that she was too busy crying her own river. Her storm of emotions was too distracting for Emily to prioritize her own.

“Do you know your dad’s number? His cellphone?” She made sure the tiny bottle of soap didn’t fall off the bench.

That seemed to have struck an even worse chord, as she sobbed harder. It was hard not to roll her eyes. How quickly could things have turned on its head? Regardless, she couldn’t help but feel some responsibility for bringing this whole issue up in the first place.

“Hey, uh...” What was her name again? Come to think of it, neither one had introduced themselves! Why do kids have to be so complicated? “Hon, can you tell me your name?”

Thankfully, between her breaths there was enough time to speak. “J-Jackie.”

“Jackie, huh? That’s a nice name. Mine is Emily. Uh, nice to meet you.” She did her best to smile with an outstretched hand, and Jackie’s much tinier one shook it back.

“So how old are you, Jackie?”

“Six...”

“Six? Really...” Think! What else could she say to keep her distracted? “Well, I used to be twenty-six, but just yesterday I turned twenty-seven.”

Between her dimming sobs and whimpers, Jackie kept the ball rolling. “It was your birthday?”

“Uh-huh, it was. I had lots of fun too.” Now it just felt like she was bragging.

“Did you have it with your girlfriend?” That part stung, unknowingly bringing back such heartfelt memories...

“...Yeah, I did. More importantly, are you feeling a bit better now?”

“Mhm...” Emily almost thought it would be stupid to ask. She’d barely done anything, and yet she was suddenly a kid guru.

“I’m sure your dad’s looking for you right now,” with a reassuring pat, the girl thankfully seemed to chin up a little. “He’s probably worried sick, but more than anything else he’ll be happy once he finds you safe and sound.”

She sniffled. “Really?”

“Positive. So no more crying, got it?”

“Got it!” she parroted, and Emily finally chuckled.

“You laughed!” Jackie exclaimed, laying eyes on a rare treasure.

Emily stuttered a bit at that, unconsciously trying to reel herself back in. “Yeah, I guess I did. But why is that so important?”

“Because you were sad, right? Laughing means your happy again?” She slightly tilted her head, ignorant to the complexity of human emotions; far beyond realizing the depth of them, let alone

processing the layers. If it kept her in good spirits though, Emily was willing to be that 1-dimensional being. Hell, it even helped her forget some of the struggles.

“No, you’re right. I think I do feel a bit better.” She smiled, even if it meant portraying a facade.

“You’re pretty when you smile,” Jackie unashamedly smirked. Emily laughed again.

“What, are you flirting with me?” She kept laughing.

“Hey Emily, what’s ‘flirting’?”

“Uh...?” Maybe she was relaxing too much. “It might be better to ask your dad... What does he look like, by the way? So we know when we see him?”

“He’s gotta scratchy beard!” Almost immediately, she exclaimed, though quickly started to laugh over her own silliness.

“Scratchy beard? Hmm...we better keep our eyes peeled, then.” Apparently she said something funny, because she was giggling again. “Now what?”

“You can’t peel eyes!”

“Good point.”

“Jackie!” A stern, loud voice called. It was a man’s. Almost immediately Jackie both simultaneously froze, yet spun her head before the total freeze-over.

“Daddy!”

He approached with a tired sigh. “What did I tell you about wandering off on your own?” The man seemed obviously stressed, taking a moment to run his hand through his blonde hair.

“That I’mma explorer?” She quickly hopped off the bench and made a beeline for his legs, giving them a tight squeeze. As tightly as you could squish iron poles.

“Wrong,” he sharply corrected. “I said that it’s a timeout in the corner if you did it again. And you did.” He scratched his chin for a moment. Emily silently watched. *It is scratchy...*

This clearly wasn't part of Jackie's calculations, because she almost immediately started to whine. It was at least the good kind of whining, not the same as from the bench.

"But I wanted to go and see the snakes!"

"Then you wait until we go *together*. You don't get to call the shots on your own, missy."

"Yes I do!"

"Oh?" He looked to her left, then her right, trying not to smile. "Really? Because I don't see anyone backing that up?"

"Uhhh..." She imitated his glances, then to everyone's surprise she spun back to Emily. "She did!"

"Wai...what?" Stupefied, Emily could only blink.

The man gave a look to Emily, seeming apologetic. "Sorry for bothering you, she just gets a little hyperactive..." Looking stern to Jackie again he went on. "Didn't I also say to stop calling strangers out? What am I going to do with you..."

"She's not a stranger though! She's Emily!"

Speaking of who, she happened to look to her side, seeing the bottle of soap and its accompanying tool. Before they could wander off, Emily grabbed them and hurried over.

"Wait! Jackie, you almost forgot these."

"My bubbles! I forgot!" Happily, she accepted them. She looked complacent for the moment, then another look from her dad clearly urged her to return the gratitude. "Thank you for giving them, Emily."

"Any time. Just don't go disappearing on your dad again, okay?" Both adults seemed pleased to see her accept the terms.

"Emily, was it?" Standing back on her feet, she could see he was around Joyce's height, though maybe an inch taller. "Thank you for finding her. The second I look away from this trickster she's off getting herself into more trouble..." Apologetically, he explained.



“Don’t worry about it, really. If anything, she’s the one who found me. Still, being gone for two hours...wow. I can’t believe you could keep yourself together like that.”

“Two...?” He seemed not to understand, then looked down on the supposedly innocent daughter of his. “How long did you tell her you were missing for?”

“A few hours?” She smiled.

“This little fibber *meant* to say about 10 minutes.” Emily almost wanted to roll her eyes over her own stupidity. Was it really accurate to trust a six-year old for the time?

“I’m Michael, by the way. Dad of my mischievous daughter, Jackie.” The shook, having a much more adult shake than Emily’s from moments earlier. “Could I thank you somehow for watching her? A coffee, or something?”

“Uh...well...” she almost looked back to the bench, as if a friend were waiting on her. She knew she’d be moments from a relapse if left to her own devices again, and truthfully, it scared her. What shook her heart even more was her phone stopped vibrating.

She didn’t know what to do. Even though it was like pulling teeth, running away seemed to have a motive; a goal to it. But now? No matter what she thought, nothing seemed to be clear or distinct, other than her fear of facing Joyce. Time only accumulated the shame and worry she was feeling...

“And you,” he looked to his daughter. “You’re on a tight leash for the rest of the day. Come on, you know the rules.” An open hand waited for her, and she grumpily took it, as her tiny limb was absorbed by his much larger one. Emily merely watched, silent. Observant.

“Hey, Emily? Are you okay?”

“Huh?”

“You...you’re crying?”

She wiped her cheek, and sure enough, she was.

“Are you okay? Do you want to sit down?”

“Can um,” a quick wipe had them mostly gone. “Can we get that drink?”

It was obvious she was dodging his concerns, but the middle-aged man tried to play it off, nodding his head.

“Daddy! I don’t wanna leave the zoo!” Jackie continued to whine, tugging back on his arm.

“Don’t worry, honey, we’re not leaving. We can get drinks inside the zoo.” He looked to Emily as they walked, mouthing a ‘sorry.’ She paused, but then weakly smiled too.

Was this okay?