

## 23 - Clear as Da

“Really, though, you got me out of a tight spot,” he looked almost judgmentally to his own mischief-maker. “No thanks to this one.” He faked a frown at her, then smiled. As he went on, his forearm was bent outwards at a 90-degree angle, so that Jackie could try and try again to leap for the hanging bar that was an arm and swing from it. She wasn’t so successful, but at least she had determination.

“Mmm...” With her eyes looking closer to the ground than anything else, she just managed enough autonomy to stay by Michael’s side. Other than that, she was lost in her own thoughts and apprehensions.

“Are you alright, by the way?” The question was direct enough to have her look right at him.

“...Yeah? Why wouldn’t I be? I’m just thinking...that’s all.”

He didn’t seem convinced, but didn’t prod any further.

“Daddy? Can we stop and see the monkeys first?” Jackie went on to ask, as she was currently trying to be one.

“We’re gonna go and get some drinks first, okay? And besides, you still need to be punished for running away like that...” He looked over to Emily once again. “What do you think, Emily? Maybe as a punishment I should keep her from the monkeys?”

Before she could even think of a response, Jackie with a sharp whine cut in.

“NooOOooo! I’m already punished! See? I’m holding your hand! See?” She went on to send waves through her arm connected to her dad’s much larger one, though his didn’t shake as much.

“And it’s going to stay like that for the rest of the day. If you keep on your best behavior for the rest of the day, *maybe* we’ll go and see them. Got it?”

The little girl nodded as if her life depended on it. She suddenly assumed the composure of a puppet that only knew how to be controlled. The kind of absolute obedience you’d see in a child already on thin ice. The kind of resolve that’d dissipate in maybe 10 minutes, at most.

Thankfully the line for drinks wasn't terribly long. The only person who seemed to mind it though was of course the demographic which equated minutes of patience to hours. Jackie gave a few moans and groans, but a small reminder of what was at stake kept her in check.

"Hi! What can I get you guys today?" The worker smiled behind the counter.

"Hi," Michael was the first to start. "I think I'll have..." he quickly scanned the board. "Actually, could I just get a coffee?"

"Sure, how would you like it?"

"Just black, please. Medium."

Emily almost looked to him for a second, but managed to keep herself restrained.

"Do you know what you want?" He asked Emily. "Don't forget, my treat." Silently, it seemed like he was trying to say 'let loose,' but she wasn't feeling so adventurous right now. She wasn't feeling anything good right now.

"Could I have a second?"

"Sure. Alright Jackie, that leaves you," quickly he hoisted her up and into the air, giving her a nice view of the board above the worker. "What's it gonna be?"

"Umm...that one!" Quickly, she pointed to what her father could only imagine was a bright, dolled up picture of some new trending drink. Her means of selection though had him rolling his eyes, as the worker helplessly looked back to see what she might've been pointing at.

"Jackie, sweetie, use your words. We can't read your mind, hon."

"The mango one!"

Clearly this wasn't the full order, as her dad filled in the rest for her. "I think she wants the mango swirl. Just a small, please."

"Okay... And have you decided yet?" The attention fell back on Emily, who was nowhere near closer to a choice. Yet, oddly enough, she had a craving for something, and it hurt to acknowledge it.

“I’ll take a coffee too, please. Just a small.”

“Daddy,” Jackie suddenly and sharply cut in. “I want coffee too.”

“Fifteen years from now, you can.”

While Jackie had her momentary gasp and whine, Emily finished her business with the cashier.

She couldn’t help but take a moment to smile at the small girl. “Ah...any special requests? Or would you like black too?”

“No,” she paused for a second. “Could I get it with milk? Like, a cup of milk?” She looked to Michael, seeming self-conscious. “Is that okay?”

“Go right ahead, I told you it’s on me!” She looked back to the worker and finalized her order.

“Alrighty, this shouldn’t be more than a few minutes. You can go find a seat while we finish your order.” Michael paid as promised, and they found themselves a table with a set of chairs to sit in. With the way Jackie was fidgeting in hers, though, you’d think she was moments away from going overboard. For extra insurance, Michael kept a hand on the chair to keep it from rocking too much.

“Why can’t I have coffee? I wanna drink some too.”

“Coffee is when you need energy, and trust me, you have plenty enough sweatpea.” Even Emily struggled to not cock a smirk as the shaking chair was practically leaking an abundance of kinetic energy.

“So does that mean your tired?”

“You’re right on the money with that one. Someone manages to keep me on my toes 24/7...” The heavy allusion still went over the girl’s head, and after a few more seconds of watching her, Michael seemed complacent enough to look back to Emily. “So! Emily, what brings you to the zoo?”

She should’ve expected it, but that didn’t mean it hurt any less.

“Uhm...well...” Why was it so much harder to speak now? Clearly she didn’t have nearly as much restraint when speaking with a six-year old, so how did it being an adult freeze her up?

Surprisingly, Michael jumped back in. “Well, I’m here with Jackie because her school’s out for the week, so I figured I’d give her a few fun days out. But with the way she’s been acting maybe I need to reconsider...” slowly he turned his head to her, whilst Jackie continued to seem innocent. “Seriously, sometimes I can’t tell whether she’s just acting or truly doesn’t care?” It was only solidified as a joke when he was the first to laugh. “How did you find her, by the way?”

“Like I said, she more or less found me,” she looked almost sheepish; thankful for an easy question. “I was sitting on a bench and she just took a seat right next to me.”

Michael blinked. “R-really? Jackie, what did I tell you about talking to strangers?” Quickly he looked back to Emily, almost panicked for damage control. “Don’t get me wrong, though! I can’t thank you enough, but unfortunately not everyone can be as nice as you’ve been...”

“I appreciate it, but really, I didn’t do much...” The praise felt unwarranted, and the further it pressed on her, the worse it made her feel. Positivity was the last thing she felt deserving of, considering the royal fuck-up she’d just caused right before this. Was this divine punishment or something? Maybe...

“You may not feel like it, but you’re definitely my hero of the day. Jackie’s too.”

“Right!” She giggled. “You’re-a superhero!”

Emily stayed silent, and before Michael could speak, their order was called.

“I’ll be just a second,” he was already standing from his seat. “And you,” he pointed to Jackie. “Not a muscle, got it?” Her response was to take a deep breath. “You two hold down the fort for me.”

Kneeling on her seat, she watched her dad walk a decent distance away, then turned her head back to Emily. “Hey Emily? What’s your girlfriend’s name?”

Why even with strangers could she not manage to run from it? No matter where she went, in some shape or form it always held her in such a tight, suffocating squeeze.

“Her name is Joyce.” Miraculously, in the company of a child, a moment of silence went by. “...Do you wanna talk about something else?”

“Did I say something mean?” The remorse she carried in her tone was heavy. As heavy as an ignorant kid could make it.

“No, Jackie, it’s fine,” she did her best to smile. “It’s just a sore spot, that’s all.”

“You should talk to my daddy about it. He’s good at fixing stuff!” If only it were that simple. Whenever emotions were involved, it always got so muddled and messy. Maybe it would help to talk about it though. Then again, Emily wasn’t so sure if she wanted help. She wanted to feel sad? Truly, her selfless nature is both her charm and unfortunate undoing.

“You two getting along?” They were interrupted by a plastic tray of cups, two of which were filled with caffeine, and the other some milk and a mango smoothie. Before she could get her hands on it, Michael had taken the liberty of plopping a straw into his daughter’s cup, then properly instructing her on drinking etiquette.

While they had their moment, Emily took her own time to figure out exactly what she ordered as well. It almost felt shameful to crave this kind of drink. Yet again, it was something special she’d felt she no longer had the right to even if she still felt the craving for it. Normally the milk would be poured into the coffee, but she went for the exact opposite strategy.

A small brown trickle waterfalled into a pool of white, slowly changing it into a light brownish hue, drifting right on the cusp of something that couldn’t be called milk anymore.

What she expected to be a solution however had her feeling even more glum. *It doesn’t look the same...* Never once did she see how it was made, and the visual result right this moment reflected that. She pulled it in for a sip, and while not displeased by it, she wasn’t happy with the taste either.

“Sure you don’t want some coffee with that milk?” Michael chuckled as he watched, sipping his own drink. “Liking yours, Jackie?”

“Mhm!” With both hands firmly secured around the cup, she sucked from her straw. Then as if brilliance itself had struck her, she suddenly popped an awkward question. “Hey Daddy, what does ‘flirting’ mean?”

Emily paused her sip to hear the question, unfortunately knowing too well where she might’ve heard such a thing. Why did this kid have to be so curious?

“Flirting? Where’d you hear something like that?”

“Emily said it! She said I was trying to flirt with her!”

Her cheeks were feeling incredibly hot right now, and suddenly started trying to explain herself, but was caught in a helpless stutter. How bad must she look right now? If he didn't think it before, Michael would definitely think she's a wacko now...

“Well?” Surprisingly, he looked to Jackie. “Were you flirting with her?”

“I dunno what that means!” She shouted back with a mix of frustration and silliness.

“Sorry about that, Emily,” he shrugged. “I guess she might even be a womanizer without even knowing it...”

Once again an awkward situation had been saved, and replaced with a well-executed humor which had Emily and Michael laughing, though only at the expense of Jackie's confusion.

“At least tell me how you got on that kind of topic?” he took another sip from his cup.

“It's kind of a long story, I guess,” Emily chuckled, losing the joy in her voice awfully fast.

“Sorry, I really don't want to pry,” Michael started, looking concerned. “But are you sure everything's alright? You seem bothered by something.”

“It...it's...”

Before she could even deflect, a much more forward, higher-pitched voice spoke in her place. “Emily had a fight with her girlfriend Joyce!” Both adults turned to the fed-up looking Jackie, one much more uncomfortable than the other. “Daddy? Can you please help her feel better? She was really sad when I found her!” In her eyes, it really seemed like that was the solution to all of this. Yet, the lack of immediate response from either adult had her suddenly shy.

“Jackie...” Emily couldn't place a definite emotion to her words. It was a terrible mix, really. Disappointment, frustration, anger, and relief. Something she was insistent on keeping hidden was crudely yanked right out and into the open, but at the same time the daunting responsibility of being honest was handled for her. Nevertheless, she wasn't happy, but it wasn't her place to scold Jackie, and truly she didn't want to.

Jackie's heart was certainly in the right place, but that didn't change the look her dad gave her, signaling she made a bad move. She looked sheepish, staring down at the ground, biting her lower lip.

Michael sighed, looking to his daughter then Emily, who wasn't making so much eye contact either. He'd apologized plenty enough for one day, and he carried the sentiment that those words had long lost their charm. Nevertheless, "Emily, really I'm--" He was cut short by the scratching of a metal chair on the rocky ground.

Michael was caught by surprise...and so was Emily, when a small pair of feet excused themselves from the table.

Though, sounding much more resolute, Michael quickly shut the situation down before it could fester. "Oh no, not this time, young lady." With a quick grip he had her by the armpits whilst she thrashed and threw a whining fit. From the corners of her eyes Emily could see a few stares, but thankfully they were sympathetic enough to not ogle for too long...

"Let me go!" Poutily, Jackie shouted to her father's face. She already sounded to be on the verge of tears.

"So you can run off again?" He lowered her just enough to sit in his lap, but still had a firm hold of her. "You were *just* punished for doing this! Are you ready to leave the zoo altogether?" The threat hit her too hard though, as her voice trembled with a quiet no.

"Then why are you trying to get yourself into trouble again? Come on, Jackie, talk to me?" With each word he spoke, Jackie seemed to whimper more and more, as she buried her face into her dad's chest.

Mumbling with a teary voice she shouted into his shirt. "B-b-because you guys are mad at me! I wanted to help! Now you don't like me and Emily doesn't too!" Her absolute truths had her crying even harder, as Michael shifted his restraint tactics into a much more soothing comfort.

"Jackie, baby, no one here is mad at you..." he rubbed her back.

"That's not true! I told Emily's secret!" It wasn't so much of a secret, but Emily'd have been lying if she said it was something she didn't mind leaving in the open... "...N-now she hates me..."

It hurt Emily more to watch than to try and empathize. Yet again she was the root of a whole new issue. It was her fault for even telling Jackie anything in the first place. She was just trying to help in the only way she knew how. How could Emily be angry at her? She never was to begin with, but it didn't change she led her to feel this way.

"Jackie? Could you please look at me?" After a little more coaxing, she did turn her head to Emily, but her arms never left her dad's torso. Her face was red and she was sniffing, but her attention was there. "Jackie, I promise I'm not mad at you. You can't get on my bad side that easily," she chuckled, hoping to inspire some sort of joy, but the girl still seemed troubled...

"But I told your secret..." Her mouth struggled to wrestle her voice into submission, as her words were a few degrees away from total incoherent, sobbing murmurs. Were all kids like this? How self-destructive could such a tiny person be? She cared about Emily, that much was evident, but she cared a little *too* much...

"You didn't spoil any secret, I promise," Emily assured with a smile, which came with a relief, as she had finally seemed to calm some.

"T-then, how come you d-didn't wanna talk about it...?"

"Because...sometimes it's a little hard to talk about stuff like that..." Now with Michael as their audience, she unfortunately couldn't be as cryptic anymore. Did she even need to be, though? "It only happened today, so I guess I'm still upset over it..." A very, very large underestimate of how she was really feeling, but she was out here to make a point, rather than illustrate a scene.

"Is that what has you so gloomy?" Michael asked in a simple tone toward Emily, still stroking Jackie's back.

"...Jackie wasn't lying when she said I had a fight with my girlfriend..." Her eyes started to shine a bit more as they became glossier. "...I..." Now it was her turn to sound shaky. "I really messed up..."

Her sister in sorrow tried to egg her father on, practically begging, "Daddy! Please! See? Can't you make her feel better?"

"Honey, I know you're trying to be nice, but we can't just step into people's private lives like that. I wish I could fix anything, but daddy isn't that powerful," he patted the top of her head. "Emily's business is hers, and we don't have the right to talk about it unless she says it's okay."



His explanation was interpreted more as a redirection than a final answer, as Jackie was now begging Emily who was wiping her eyes. “Emily? Please talk to Daddy? He can help!”

She was quiet, and Jackie stared at her with a hope that was impossible to ignore. That didn’t mean Emily would answer the call, however. She didn’t know what to do, where to go, what to say, or how to react. The table was loaded, and she could go either all in or fold. Both options seemed scary, but only one seemed to have a sensible idea of even potential resolution.

“...Emily, I’m no superhero, but I can at least be an ear for you?”

Still, she hung on the fence.

“And if it’s any incentive, I think Jackie would feel much better if we talked things over?”

That was just playing dirty... Emily slightly narrowed her brows without looking at anyone in particular. But...maybe that sort of push was what she needed.

Finally, she stared at Michael with a clear expression.

“...Okay.”

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“Alright, Jackie, Emily and I are going to be *right* here the whole time, understood?” His voice seemed to be equal parts reassuring and warning. Even when trapped in a fence pen, he still didn’t seem to put past the idea of his daughter somehow escaping unnoticed.

A much more cheery-looking six-year old nodded her head. “But what if I wanna feed them?”

“Then you come back to me and ask for some money, alright? Until then go have some fun while Emily and I talk.”

“Why can’t I listen though?”

“Because you’re already pushing your luck, missy. Don’t you want to go and pet the goats now?”

She looked frustrated, namely because he hit the nail right on the head. She was clutching the hem of her dress with both hands, slightly puffing her cheeks. “...Yeah...”

“Then what are you waiting for?” He gave a slight laugh. “Oh! See? One already noticed you!”

All three people focused their attention to a pygmy animal, topped with tiny horns as it curiously walked itself over to the girl on all four legs, covered in black fur. Without even waiting for her dad’s approval, Jackie was already off to the races to meet the tiny goat halfway.

“She’s really sociable, don’t you think?” Emily observed with a smile, watching her happily lose herself to petting the tiny friend. A nearby worker in the pen soon came over to her, getting on their knees and started petting too. Along with that, they seemed to strike up a conversation.

“Yeah, definitely,” he smiled, but in the sort of way that you’d think it was against his better judgement. “That doesn’t mean it can’t get her into trouble, though... I’m sorry she outed you like that. She’s forcing you to talk about something you didn’t want to.”

“That may be sort of true...” she twiddled her thumbs a little, thinking. “But also, maybe some force is what I needed. I don’t want to feel this way anymore... And just thinking about her...” About Joyce, where she was, how she was feeling...! In a broken voice she spoke. “...It hurts...”

A hand reached her right shoulder, and though it wasn’t her beloved, she didn’t push it away.

“So, what’s her name?”

“...Joyce.”

“Have you two been together for long?”

Maybe not in the grand scheme, but it already felt like they’d been together for an eternity. What they didn’t have in time they made up for in such intense experiences, such intimacy.

“Not too long, but we’re close.” And that’s why being separated right now hurt so much.

“So, wait, is she at the zoo right now?”

“I think so...” Was she still here? Or once the phone stopped ringing, had she completely given up and sent herself and her parents home? She squeezed her arms a little tighter. She didn’t like thinking about things like that...

“Wait, that means you’ve been with us the whole time? How did you two get into a fight?”

This was the difficult part. Trying to explain herself without fully letting the cat out of the bag. Maybe because Michael was a stranger though, she could be a little more transparent. There was something easier about confiding in a stranger than someone close. You could scream into a black hole and never feel the repercussions.

“She...she was treating me like a kid.”

“Oh? How so?”

There were a few points from today she could mention, but she decided to skip to the crux. “Since we got here she’s been trying to hold my hand, for example. It’s like she thinks I’m going to get lost like...” The irony was a little too obvious, looking at Jackie.

“Like a kid?” Michael thankfully finished her sentence, seeming in no way offended.

“...Yeah.”

“Well, okay. Did anything else happen?” He didn’t seem to have an expectation for more, or any less on her list of complaints; he was thankfully being quite neutral.

“Like, when we went to go see the giraffes, there were a ton of people already there, so I needed to get closer! You know, given that I’m kinda shorter than everyone else...” The more she rambled, it was easier to find that original annoyance that had spurred this all into motion to begin with. “Anyways, so I moved up closer for a few minutes, but then everyone is calling for my name like I was lost! Can I not be trusted?”

“Did you tell her you were gonna get a little closer?”

She was about to fire back a response, but by the way he phrased his question, Emily seemed a tad bit reluctant. “...No? But, I shouldn’t need to! Right after they started calling for me, I was making my way back, but...I thought it’d be funny if I snuck up on her.”

“To surprise her?”

“Yeah, I guess.” It made more sense when you had the context from the first time in the kitchen, but given she was wearing a diaper that day, she didn’t feel the need to include that story. “So I did sneak up on her, and when I grabbed her, she wasn’t laughing...she was angry for a few seconds, then just disappointed...”

“Disappointment...” Michael solemnly spoke. “No one ever wants to be on the receiving end of that.”

“No. No one does.”

“So is that how you wound up here then? I want to make sure I understand everything clearly.”

Emily stared off for a few moments, admiring the pygmy goats, watching a staff member show Jackie just the right way to pet one. She was kind of jealous, wanting to go lose herself to cuteness instead of tackling these emotionally difficult conversations...

“I tried talking to her about it after, but then her parents showed up, so she said she’d save it over later, then pretended like nothing happened...” Just when the ball was about to tip back into Michael’s court, she kept going. “And then I tried again when we were alone, talking about how she was treating me like a kid, but all I did was hurt her feelings! I kept messing up...so I figured it was better if I just backed off... *Now*, we’re here...”

“Alright...I think I understand everything.” The pair kept looking forward. “Do you want a hug, by the way? It usually works for Jackie when I give her one?” He gave her a smirk, and Emily didn’t look happy.

“Didn’t I just finish saying my girlfriend was treating me like a kid?”

His look didn’t change when he said it plainly. “I think that’s your first issue.”

His matter-of-factness was somewhat intimidating, which is why Emily didn’t speak back.

“What I mean is that accepting someone’s care doesn’t make you inferior, or as you put it, a kid. I think...” and as he said, he thought for a moment. “I think that plays into being a person, and what a relationship should be like. But, to be a bit more specific, why was she holding your hand?”

“...To keep track of me. But I don’t need keeping track of! Ugh...and I hate being annoyed with her like this!”

“Trust me, that’s a good thing.”

“How is that good?”

“Because after almost ten years with my wife, the occasional struggle usually does some good for a relationship. It shows that if you’re still in one piece by the end of it, you’re that much stronger together.”

“But we haven’t made up yet...”

“That part comes after a little self-reflection. Truthfully, this may not be the best time for it...” It stung, hearing that. “But, you’re doing the right thing to face your troubles, regardless.”

“It doesn’t feel very great.” Emily sourly added.

Again, he agreed. “No, it doesn’t, but you’re going to feel a lot better by the time this is over.”

She didn’t have the heart to challenge his certainty.

“Back to the hand-holding thing; if I were her, and we were together, I wouldn’t exactly want to leave you out of sight either if we were at a place like this. Not because I think you’re a kid, but because this is a pretty packed place. Even if you were taller, I’d still want you close, and in all honesty I would appreciate it if you thought the same of me. She cares like that because she’s your partner, Emily.”

It’s not that she doubted him; she believed him, even. That being said, was it that simple? There was a whole layer of context to this that Emily wasn’t giving, and it was that she practically *was* Joyce’s kid in their private life. So maybe it was a little bit of both? Maybe Emily was so used to the other side, she’d forgotten how to discern the qualities of a ‘normal’ relationship. Trying to relax herself today; was that Emily letting herself go, or was that letting Emmy back out? There were four people in the mix of all this, and they were all struggling to coexist.

“So it’s all my fault then? I’m the reason it’s all messed up?”

“I’ve only heard your side, Emily. I can’t point out faults in a person I don’t know. Instead of taking the blame in shifts, though, I suggest you look at it as a problem for both of you. Don’t think about *who* needs to improve or change; think about what you two can do *together*. No one is perfect, so I doubt this is only because of you. Besides, you really can’t think that you’ve messed everything up, do you?”

Emily gave him a look with raised brows. She didn’t seem to agree.

“Well, you’re obviously invested enough to talk it through with a stranger right now, aren’t you?”

“...”

“Unless you hate her now, is that it?”

“No!” Emily was quick on the rebound for once, firing back sharply. How could he even suggest something like that? To even voice the impossible idea, it was practically taboo!

“See? First time I’ve heard some real passion from you. Why don’t you hate her? Seems to me like you still have feelings for her.”

“Of course I do!” She sounded a little annoyed, as if her feelings were being called into question. Then, in a bit more of a reserved tone, she mumbled. “...I love her...”

“And given how she’s been treating you, I think it’s fair to say she feels the same way?”

“...Well...yeah...” She nearly called him Captain Obvious, but that only signified how natural she considered her bond with Joyce. She never once stopped to consider how it might seem from the outside looking in. Her feelings for Joyce...by this point, she nearly considered them a given.

“And *that*, is why you’re being such a dummy right now.”

A dummy? Her? She was conveying herself better through her facial expressions than actual words.

“Let me reiterate; I’m being your friend right now. If you both love each other so much, you’re taking this whole thing a bit too heavily. Have you two ever gotten into an argument before?”

There were small bouts, especially earlier on, but never as an official couple... It was always just going with the flow. Everything was either understood or accepted.

“Not to this scale, I guess...”

“Emily, trust me, you two will be fine.”

“But what about her parents? They’re here too! And I just...disappeared.”

“I can’t imagine it looks all that great to them, but if they care too, they’re going to respect how you and Joyce work things out, even if they have their own opinions.” Frank and Mary’s reactions were something she never even stopped to imagine. But...Michael had a point. It wasn’t their place to judge... At least, it wasn’t Emily’s responsibility to care. Still, she hated the idea of upsetting them.

“You being such a worrywart reminds me of Jackie.”

“I’m not worrying...I just want everyone to be happy...”

“My point still stands. You’re trying too hard to serve to please. Remember how Jackie had that meltdown back at the cafe? What upset her the most was what other people thought of her. She thought she was helping you when she said what she did, and when that didn’t work out she tried to run. I don’t mean anything rude by it, but don’t you think you’re being a bit like her right now?”

“Maybe I am just a kid then...”

“No, I just think you need to know your limits. When you tried talking to Joyce and hurt her feelings, it could’ve been something you said that was wrong, but maybe you said something that was right? If the truth hurts Joyce, you shouldn’t be the one on the run. You shouldn’t lie to her either, because then you’re just letting the problem fester. Now’s the time for discussion; to move forward as a pair. You help *her* work through her issues. If she can’t accept the facts, that’s not your burden to carry. Don’t you think she’s wondering where you are right now? I would. Taking a few steps back is always good every now and then, but is it really someone like me you want to be talking things over with?”

“...N-n-” she sniffled, rubbing her eyes. Halfway through his spiel, Emily was already losing herself. “No...!”

“Now’s the time you guys should be talking things over. I think it was right of you to try talking to her, and nipping the bud before it can bloom is always a smart move. Joyce isn’t just *your* rock, you know? It goes both ways.”

Her day was still cloudy, and the storm was crashing hard, but finally she could see. Amidst the thick, dense downpour, and the harsh blowing winds that had thrown her ship into a complete tizzy, there was finally a direction; a hope. She was too blubbering of a mess to respond, but Michael’s point was clear, and the course was set. She was part of the problem, but she wasn’t

the sole proprietor of it. She did mess up, but she wasn't the only one who did. What's been done has been done, and now all that was left was to chin-up and face it head on.

"Do you know the next step now?"

"Y-yeah..." Her hand was already fishing in her pocket.

"Daddy!" Hurriedly, a pair of shoes ran themselves across the dried mulch, almost skidding like a car on the brakes when she came close to the fence. "Why is Emily crying? Did you say something mean?" Her tone came off as accusing, as she gave her dad the evil eye.

"No, I did not," he answered poutily. "Emily is doing just fine. I think we just finished talking things through."

"Emily?" With great concern, she shuffled over to the teary girl. "Do you feel better?"

Finally she found her phone, illuminating the screen, seeing the countless calls and texts. It hurt to see so many unanswered calls, but they were momentary hiccups.

"Yeah, lots..." Oddly enough, she smiled, looking at the phone, and was already hopping over to her contacts.

"Really?" Jackie's smile was wide and bright, giving a nice view of her one missing tooth on her near-perfect rack. "Do you wanna come and pet the goats? They're really soft! Please? They taught me how to pet them!" She was nearly hopping from toe to toe, as her father had saved the day once again.

"Emily's gonna need a bit, Jackie. You're gonna have to settle for your dad on this one." He tried not to laugh when she gave an aggravated groan. "Oh? Suddenly Daddy's not good enough for you anymore?"

"Why can't Emily come too?"

"Because she needs to talk to someone very important."

"Thank you, Michael." Clear as day, she said to him. She then looked a little lower. "And especially you, Jackie. I have you to thank the most." The praise sent the tiny girl into overload, who looked unashamedly giddy.



“All in a day’s work!” He was already stepping inside the pen. “Now go do what you need to do.”

With some confidence shining in her eyes, she nodded her head. She nearly hesitated, hitting the ‘call’ button, but she soon made a clean press with diction.

While Michael managed to drag Jackie away, Emily held the phone to her ear with both hands, and apart from the silence over the line, all she could hear was the heavy thump of her heart.

How long had she been gone for? Thirty minutes? Forty? An hour? No! Stop thinking about the damage that’s been done. Now was the time for repair... The buzz came twice now. If...if that time would ever come to pass...

Maybe it wouldn’t... The third was ringing right now. It couldn’t really be over, could it? What if she...

She heard her voice, but it wasn’t the right kind. Digital, synthetic, but the worst: pre-recorded.

“Hi, you’ve reached Joyce’s personal number. I’m sorry I can’t come to the phone right now, but if you’d like to leave a message I can...” The phone slowly fell to her side. That was it then? She was gone? *Stupid, stupid, stupid--!*

“Emily?”

As she spun her head, everything was a blur, yet even in that split-second, one thing was clear enough. She was there; in the flesh. It wasn’t a phone call, because Emily could see her face for real. She looked as if she was catching a few extra breaths, as if she’d been running around quite a bit.

“J...Joyce?” Neither one seemed to change their expression, which was disbelief.

There was a weird feeling in the air, as they both slowly walked to each other. It wasn’t sparks, it was something much gloomier... Emily almost forgot the right foot came after the left. Her eyes were still working, right? Wasn’t she supposed to blink every few seconds?

“...Hi..” What was she supposed to do? She knew what the end goal was, but not the meat of it.

There was at least a foot between them, and neither one had budged. The tension was obvious, and it came from both people; fear.

“Have...have you been looking for me?”

Wordlessly, Joyce nodded her head. Emily was expecting all of this, but it didn't change how much it was shaking her, and how vast of a difference there was between imagination and the real deal.

“I...I messed up,” Emily couldn't help but hiccup. “Didn't I?”

“I did too...” Joyce cast her eyes to the ground.

“I...” she started sniffing too. “I...I don't like fighting.”

“I don't either...”

“Can, can we talk now? I...I think we need to.” The world around them started to reel back into reality as the pieces fell back into place.

They moved themselves to an empty bench, still with that awkward atmosphere. Both kept their hands in their laps as they maintained their distance.

Emily was the first to speak. “I'm sorry for running away... Please don't be mad.”

“I'm sorry for giving you a reason!” The words came fast, as they finally looked at each other, and Joyce seemed the most apologetic of the two. “You tried to talk to me, and I wasn't ready to hear the truth...I was the one in the wrong Emily, and when you tried to point that out I pushed you away... So please!” Her words sounded as if they rung from her very core. “Please, if anyone needs to be sorry, *please* don't let it be you. From the start I was scared of losing you, and I still am now, so please, don't think this is your fault!”

Seeing Joyce so frazzled, you'd think it would send Emily into hysterics. But, no, it didn't. Seeing the one she relied on the most in panicked shambles...it was sobering. Had she forgotten her own words so quickly? Even Michael's? Joyce was in the wrong, but so was Emily. This wasn't a solo, but a duet.

“No,” Emily moved her hand, paused, but then finally grabbed Joyce's. “It's *our* fault.”

Joyce's face scrunched up a little as she was getting teary now. She nodded, being the one to close the distance, now that it was clear affection was okay, and she slid Emily closer for a tight hug.

"I'm sorry for getting so carried away today...! I let my feelings get the better of me..."

"It's my fault for not considering how you felt," Emily sullenly added. "At least from the zoo, I was too busy thinking you were trying to 'mommy' me instead of just keeping me safe... I should have done the same for you."

"All I've ever wanted was to keep you safe, Emily!" She rubbed her cheek with hers. "But I can see how you must've felt after everything today. You were trying to be yourself, and I kept forcing something on you that I shouldn't have. I'm struggling to keep my feelings separate from the 'other' ones..." Hence why it was hard to see this as a normal relationship.

She didn't want to add fuel to the fire, but she needed to come clean as well. "Today, I know we talked about how we were both going to be normal adults...but it didn't feel like we were. It felt like...the usual."

Quietly, she nodded her head, sniffing. "Can you be honest with me? Were you angry at me?"

"No, I'd never be." If anything was certain, that was her one sense of immovable resolve. As if to prove it, she felt the need to hug Joyce back a little harder. "I just felt...annoyed, I guess. I don't wanna be belittled like that unless I say it's okay, Joyce. Either that, or at least when it's just us two... Please don't be upset with me?"

"I have no right to be upset with you, Emily. You've had clear boundaries since the start, yet I've slowly been ignoring them. I've always been telling myself that your feelings come first, and yet I managed to mess up what mattered most."

"Don't say that, please? After everything today, I don't think you went overboard. I think what we both messed up at was keeping level heads. You couldn't stop looking after me, and I couldn't stop seeing every little thing like I was being mocked. Maybe if we both had the right mindset, it would've been different."

"That's..." her voice trailed off the path, then suddenly found its way again. "I think you're right. It doesn't excuse me for everything, but I think that's where we fell apart... When something wasn't clear, we should have been talking about it from the start. I need to do better at remembering that..."

“I’ll try to use my words more if you do too?” Emily finally smiled, giving a slight giggle. God, did it feel good to be hugging again. She was nearly about to leap from her frozen, desolate cliff just from thinking how she’d never get to experience something like this ever again. It was a thought she couldn’t bear to live with.

“Sounds like a plan. And for starters, I’m saying this as a girlfriend, and not a parental figure; don’t disappear on me like that again? I don’t think my heart can handle losing you for a third time.”

Meekly, she apologized once again. “Just don’t leave me, either...”

“As if I’d ever leave without you.” She finished her statement with a wet kiss on the cheek, and Emily’s symptoms of withdrawal were already fading. “I can’t apologize enough for putting you in a position like that. I’m supposed to be the one that understands you the most...”

“You do.” Emily looked to her with a crease in her brows. “So...so don’t act like you don’t.” Was she actually taking charge for once?

Joyce was picking up on the strangeness as well, chuckling as she agreed. “Alright, maybe I do. Maybe I just had some...clouded judgement today, I guess. Don’t be afraid to tug on my leash a bit if I’m getting too out of hand though, okay?”

“Got it.” There was more breathing now than actual conversation. It was beyond wonderful to be whole once again, but something still felt amiss. All the boxes had been ticked off except for one...but which was it?

“...Hey Joyce?”

“Mhm?”

“I...I love you, you know.”

“I love you, too.”

*Now things were perfect.*

“Wait,” the peaceful moment came to a stop, when Emily finally pulled away. “Where are your parents? Are...are they mad at me?”

“Oh, uhm...”

“What did you tell them?”

“I wasn’t really sure what to say, so I came up with something fast?”

“What did you say?”

“You needed to use the bathroom?”

“What, like it was an emergency, or something?”

Quietly, Joyce nodded her head the slightest bit.

Emily groaned. “Great, now they’re gonna think I can’t keep my pants dry, either...” The pair’s bond felt renewed and refreshed, but already the past was starting to sully that shine...

“Emily, you really don’t give them enough credit. They’ve only said good things about you, and only time is going to set that in stone. Besides, you’ve gotta go when you’ve gotta go, even when you don’t!” She saw Emily’s look before she started to laugh. Clapping her hands together she begged, “Please let this one slide?”

“Fine...” Emily mumbled. It wasn’t like Joyce could control what she said in the past right now. Still, it didn’t exactly seem like progress...

“Do you wanna pack it in early? I know I put you through a lot...” already she was looking guilty. “I promise you won’t hear anything about babying for the rest of the night--for the whole time my parents are here,” she hurriedly corrected.

“...I mean, we *can*...” Emily’s voice hung on the fence. Joyce raised her brows in surprise. “But...we didn’t even get to see the otters, yet?”

“You mean you still...?” A finger shushed her lips.

“Your punishment for today...” Emily breathed through her nose, as if she were preparing to deal out some heavy-handed consequences. “I wanna see any--no, *every*, animal attraction here.”

“All of it?”

“Each one. And!” More demands? “I wanna go in there.” Without even needing to look, she blindly, yet with a great deal of accuracy, pointed to the petting zoo. Seeing Jackie in there was still teasing her with a few pangs of jealousy. “After we find your parents though.” Her confidence wasn’t so abundant anymore. “I don’t want to keep them waiting...U-understood?”

H...H-hahaha!“ Joyce couldn’t help it anymore, as Emily quietly blushed.

“I wasn’t kidding!” Emily whined, trying to shake the nonsense out of Joyce’s brain.

“No, no, that’s not it~!” Her silly composure then stiffened into a grave seriousness. “Your demands shall be met, o’ evil one!” Once more she softened. “It just seemed so out of character for you, that’s all. And you’re right, I know they probably liked being able to sit down for a bit, but we should get back to my mom and dad before anything else.”

“Alright. And Joyce...thank you for forgiving me.”

“I should be the one thanking you. Regardless, let’s put this behind us, okay?”

“Okay... I’m just a little scared, I guess.”

“About what?”

“About next time.” Next time at this point could mean a lot of things.

“Which next time?”

“When I start calling you...Mommy...again. I don’t want things to be awkward. I only wanted to talk about what happened in public today. Everything else has been...manageable.” Fine wouldn’t have been the best way to put it, considering messing herself was certainly not high on her list of “complacent things to do.”

“I think I still want to have a chat about where we stand...but I’ll keep that in mind. Thank you for being so honest with me. I never thought someone would ever give me the chance to fulfill myself like this, Emily. Ever before. So to not only do that for me, and forgive me for what I’ve done...” her voice was starting to become strained.

“No more tears, got it?” Emily haughtily spoke, wrists poised on her hips. “Not only because I don’t wanna see you sad, but even on my tippy-toes it’s hard to kiss you...” the second bit came as a bit more flustered.

“Then let’s get moving. If we stick around here all day I don’t think I’ll stop being so mopey,” Joyce chuckled. “I think there’s a map board nearby...”

“You don’t know where we are?”

“Well, you try chasing me in a panic and remember where you are at the same time?”

“...Sorry.”

“Don’t worry, I’m kidding. Now we can look back on this and laugh. After hearing your words of wisdom, I think I feel a lot better now, too.”

And if only they were hers. She smiled in secret, knowing she owed a huge debt to such a kind stranger, and his six-year old daughter, funnily enough. Michael was right. So easily they’d solved such a simple hiccup from talking things out... From the start Joyce has always encouraged honesty, but maybe the biggest challenge was getting them both to be champions of it.

Just as Joyce started walking forward, she felt a tug from behind on her hand.

“W-wait!”

Joyce turned her head, surprised to find Emily’s hand in hers. “Emily? But I thought...?”

“That...that was before. Now that I know what I do now...it’s okay.” She started looking from side to side. “Either that, or maybe I don’t mind so much... I need to make sure you don’t get lost.”

Joyce looked reserved for a moment, thinking to herself, but a sudden squeeze from Emily had her beaming. The pair moved as one, and Emily looked one last time to the petting zoo. Were they still there? Regardless, Emily hoped both Michael and Jackie could somehow feel her thanks and gratitude.

“Wait! Wait! WAIT!” A voice shouted desperately from a distance as it came closer and closer.

As Emily was turning, the sudden outside force caused her to topple and stagger a bit when Jackie wrapped her arms around her legs. How many surprises was today going to have?

“Jackie? What are you doing?” Taking her by the shoulders, Emily managed to pry her free, giving herself a moment to bend her knees. “Your dad is gonna get mad again, you know?”

She was at a moral crossroads, as she panicked looking behind her shoulder and back to Emily. “But you were leaving!” Heartbreaking was probably the best way to put it, considering she was just about to leave for good without saying goodbye.

It was hard to be stern with her, but that didn’t mean she condoned it either. She settled with herself with just a sigh. “Does your dad know you’re here?”

“Nnn...no...”

Momentarily, Emily forgot who was listening in, as Joyce right beside her crouched down a bit as well, all smiles as she looked to Jackie. The tiny girl grew bug-eyed once she saw her, popping an extremely blunt and forward question.

“Are you Emily’s girlfriend?”

The change in tune was so jarring, everyone was a mix of reactions; Emily slowly turned her reddening face away, while Jackie still looked to her girlfriend so innocently, and Joyce kept laughing.

“So she’s told you about me? I hope they were good things...”

Lying was obviously not part of the six-year old’s skillset, as she made odd thinking noises; gears were turning too hard to not be an indication of an unfortunate answer. Apart from looking slightly hurt, she kept smiling.

“Can you tell me your name, sweetheart?”

“Mmmm...Ja....ckie...” For some strange reason she drew out her answer by each syllable, adding some strange twists and turns to her own body as well. Was this her way of being shy?

“Jackie, huh? That’s a pretty name! My name is Joyce.” Emily, meanwhile, was keeping to herself.



The compliment inflated her ego like a balloon, as she was looking unashamedly cheerful again, feeling the need to now boast her accolades. “Mhm! I’m six!” In case if the words were too confusing, she gave a visual with her fingers as well.

“Oh wow!” Joyce kept a hand over her mouth, restraining a gasp. If only she were there the first time Jackie was having a meltdown. Joyce was the expert when it came to handling kids...

“And I’m Emily’s friend!” She shouted it like her proudest achievement, which of course tickled Emily’s heart a little, who couldn’t help but smirk as she tried to look at something else.

Joyce snickered as she looked to Emily, then to Jackie. “That’s really great, Jackie. Thank you for taking care of her while I was gone. I think we were both feeling pretty sad, earlier. Hey, do you think we could be friends, too?”

“Umm...I dunno...”

“You don’t? Why not?”

“Because you’re dissa...mmm...” she struggled to remember how the word went.

“Dis-a-poin...ted. Dis-a-ppoin-*ted*, at her.” Finally after carefully sounding it out, she was able to voice what Emily told her earlier. “I don’t wanna be friends if you’re still fighting with her.”

“Jackie, I would *never* be disappointed in Emily.” Her words were firm yet gentle. “We may have gotten into an argument, but I can promise you we made up. Right, Emily?” She looked to her with a warm expression, and Emily answered the same.

“It’s okay, Jackie, we’re not fighting anymore.”

She still seemed to be fishing for confirmation. “Promise?”

“Pinky promise,” Emily spoke with certainty. Then to her surprise Jackie called her bluff, sticking out her pinky. She couldn’t just leave the girl hanging, as Emily wringed her finger with Jackie’s.

“Okay, I believe you! We can be friends!” She started to giggle.

Joyce looked overjoyed as she received the good news, though going on to ask, “Now, can you tell us where your dad is?”

“Uhm...over there.” She pointed at a direction leading back to the petting zoo, which, funnily enough, had a tall man walking towards them.

“JACKIE!” It was obvious he was yelling, but that was partly because of the distance his voice needed to travel. When he got closer he seemed a bit more calm as he placed a hand on the girl’s head. “Are my warnings *not* getting through to you? How many times have we talked about this today?”

“But Emily was gonna leave!”

“That’s because she’s very busy. We can’t interrupt her and her girlfriend...” he sighed, then looked to Joyce. “I’m sorry about that. I’m still working on teaching her how boundaries work...”

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” she waved it off with a laugh. “It was nice meeting her. And...thank you, for speaking with Emily. She’s talked some sense into me, to say the least.”

“Yeah, thank you, really.” For once, Emily wasn’t looking sheepish as she expressed the same kind of gratitude to Michael.

“Really, it wasn’t much. Just gave her my opinion on things, that’s all. Everything else was all Emily. And sorry, I don’t think I ever introduced myself. I’m Michael,” he shook hands with Joyce.

“Joyce, a pleasure to meet you, and your daughter.”

“I’m Jackie!” The girl suddenly jumped in.

“Alright, calm down there, tiger. I think everyone here knows who you are...”

“Actually, do you think I could get your number or email?” Joyce asked. “I want to be able to thank you properly; Jackie too, of course. Really, what you’ve done goes a long way for us.”

“There’s no need,” Michael smiled. “Any kind person would have done the same thing.”

“DaaAaaaddy!!” Jackie whined. “I wanna see them again!”

Everyone except for Jackie laughed, and Michael was reaching into his pocket. “Email or phone, did you say?”

They exchanged information, and everyone bid their goodbyes.

“When can we see them again?” Hopping on her feet, she begged her dad for an answer.

“I’m not sure, hon. We’ll probably need to wait until Mommy gets back from her business trip. Don’t you want her to meet Emily and Joyce, too?”

“...Yeah...but that’s too--!”

“Long? The times gonna fly by before you know it. Now, are we gonna see the monkeys before I change my mind?”

“Monkeys!”

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“They were nice,” Joyce smiled as they continued to walk. Emily was quiet. Joyce turned her head. “What’s wrong?”

“I just feel bad...”

“About?”

“About telling them. I told them we were fighting...”

“Well,” Joyce pondered the words for a moment. “I don’t like to think that we were fighting, but maybe we were having a heated argument, at least. Don’t feel bad for confiding in someone, Emily. You needed someone, because I wasn’t there for you...” her words carried genuine guilt, as it was an attack on herself rather than Emily.

Emily purposefully swung her hips into Joyce. “Alright, that’s it. No more feeling sorry for the rest of the day, got it?”

“This feels oddly familiar...” Joyce said with a forming smirk.

“It better...it worked for me, after all...”

“Jackie, though, she was funny.”

“Yeah, she seems to get herself into a bit of trouble though.”

“Right?” Joyce laughed. “It reminds me of someone I know...”

Emily laughed, and as she grew quieter while they walked, something started to bother her; an annoying suspicion creeping from the back of her mind.

“Wait...are you talking about me?”

She looked to her, seeming clueless. “What do you mean?”

Emily looked cross as she stared daggers into her. “You were *so* talking about me.”

Instead of giving her a direct answer, Joyce merely laughed and started speeding up.

“Wait until I catch you!” Emily growled, racing after her.

“Not gonna happen~!”