

20 - Starting the Day

Stripes.

The image of failure was burned into her mind, and the remnants of it still poisoned her eyes. It was probably as vivid of a memory for herself as it was for everyone else in the room. Clearly it was a group effort to continuously try and shift the spotlight off of her, and lord did she prefer it that way. Nevertheless, she managed time and time again to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory in such a short span of time. She was probably breaking records and setting an unheard of streak. Even as she stood up she could feel her legs desperately trying to wade themselves through the thick, mucky atmosphere she was drowning herself in.

She nearly snapped when she found herself unconsciously eyeing the back of her dress, as if it would've been pinned upwards again. If she thought she was embarrassed before, well, her face in other words would make a great alternative to a traditional stove right about now. If it didn't look so childish, she wouldn't have taken much issue with holding onto the bottom of her dress until the end of time. Beating herself in the back of the head, why didn't she just go put some shorts on earlier? Alongside her anxiety, she was drowning in regrets right now too, but she knew what's been done is done. All she could hope for was trying not to slip any further.

“Frank, what did you do?” Mary accusingly looked over to the quiet man who was setting the fallen suitcase upright.

“Well, I uh, I figured she could use a hand?” His intentions were obviously good, but the end result couldn't be called the same...

“And what good that did her... Emmy hon, are you sure you're alright?” Casually, she put a hand on her shoulder.

Still flustered, and definitely trying to avoid eye contact, she was too shaken to even correct her mom's misuse of her name. Emmy was a special title, one that not only did she not want to don right now, but it was also a name exclusively reserved for Joyce. More so, Emily didn't know whether her compassion made her simply feel cared for, or downright like a kid that needed consoling.

“Mom? She's fine, but you're calling her Emmy again.” Joyce again had taken the liberty of being Emily's voice.

“Sorry about that,” she looked a bit sheepish as she apologized. “I think I already set myself up for a habit before we even got here...”

Emily wanted to die when Joyce’s dad came closer and got on one knee, indirectly highlighting the monumental difference in height.

“Sorry about that Emily, I thought I was helping. You sure you’re alright?”

“...ye,” she paused to clear her throat, hoping to find some of that ‘gusto’ hidden in the cupboards. “Y-yes. I think I should have let you taken the bags from the start, though,” she tried to laugh it off, but the pressure didn’t seem to dissipate much.

“Okay, come on,” Joyce clapped her hands together. “Let me show you guys your room? Dad, could you get all the bags please?”

“Way ahead of ya,” with the duffle over his shoulder and the two suitcases in tow, he was the first to be following behind Joyce, meanwhile Mary and Emily shared the caboose.

“And you’re sure you alright?” In a lowered voice, Mary looked over to Emily. “That tumble didn’t look too fun...”

“Yes, I’m fine,” Emily tried to stay neutral as they followed behind. Suddenly a walk that would normally take Emily 10 seconds was starting to feel stretched to the point of 10 years. She could hear the slight ‘Oohs’ and ‘Ahhs’ from Mary as they passed by the living room.

“Joyce, I love what you did with your living room!”

From the front she called back. “Well, all I really knew was a big couch would probably be for the best, considering how big the room is. I can definitely say though that Emily gets quite a bit of mileage on it in our free time.”

Mary simply laughed as she looked to Emily. “Is that so?”

“Uhm, maybe sometimes...” Unlike Joyce, Emily wasn’t feeling so boastful about her lounging habits. Anything that could be perceived as ‘cute’ or ‘adorable’ when with Joyce felt like something totally different with her parents added to the equation. She wasn’t trying to be eye candy, she was trying to be Joyce’s girlfriend! So far, she wasn’t feeling that point was well-translated. It probably would have made more sense to start calling Joyce ‘Mom’ instead...

“Whoa! Hon, check out the size of this bed!”

Emily was finally left by herself just outside the hallway while Mary and Frank marveled at the sight Emily once did not so long ago.

“Woow...” Both paced the room, and Mary gave the comforter a test feel as she then let out a sound of satisfaction when she sat on the mattress. “I don’t suppose we could start paying rent?”

“Sorry, max capacity is two,” Joyce joked, holding up her two fingers, suddenly looking around for Emily. “Feel free to use the balcony if you want, and the dresser if empty for the both of you to use.” Her gaze kept drifting elsewhere, looking for something important. “Why don’t you two unpack first, then I can show you the rest of the place?”

“Sounds good to me,” her dad answered for him and Mary, as he was somewhat gentle in setting the suitcases on the expensive fabric.

“Careful! You’re gonna wrinkle it, or probably damage it!”

“Relax hon, I made sure to clear the security deposit beforehand.”

Joyce quietly excused herself with a giggle, letting the familial warmth drain from her a bit as she looked over to the pensive Emily hanging by the wall.

“Hey, you alright?” quietly she asked, placing a hand on her shoulder, one that Emily actually didn’t mind.

“No...” Emily spoke somberly. “It hasn’t even been fifteen minutes and I already screwed everything up!” It felt like her teeth were being pulled alongside her confession. “They probably think I’m some weirdo that wound up in your care...”

“Come on, would you quit that?” Still quiet, Joyce sounded upbeat. “They do *not* think that. My dad’s that way with anybody new, and obviously my mom has practically fallen in love with you...” she said her last point with a bit of apprehension.

“But what about what just...you know!”

“Well...” Joyce didn’t have an easy answer for that one. “Trust me, I doubt they even care. And even if they did, I’m sure they’ll forget about it in no time.”

Yeah right. How could you forget day one of meeting your daughter's lover, and especially seeing them faceplant within 10 minutes of meeting you, and showing off her butt to everyone in the room? Emily chose not to speak on that part. She could only be thankful that Joyce wasn't asking her about the bowing part. Maybe if her face burned enough she'd burn into ash? At least then she could be swept away...

"Do you think you wanna crash in my room while I show them around? Maybe take a breather?"

Obviously the respectful answer was 'no,' but she hated that her body was being much more honest; desperation at the mere sound of her suggestion. Her heart felt like it was going to burst from her chest, and she was one blunder away from committing total social suicide.

"But I don't..."

"Go," Joyce warmly smiled as she turned her to her room. "I'll just tell them you needed to do something. Cheer up, okay? Today's supposed to be fun!"

It was, but Emily seemed to really be screwing that part up. She tried to calm herself, but an overwhelming sense of relief washed over her the more distance there was between the guest room and herself. The silence in Joyce's room was beyond divine as she slowly closed the door behind her. Crawling onto the bed, she sat against the headboard, pulling her legs close.

Why did she have to be like this? She had no issue with meeting strangers, but Joyce's parents were obviously an exception. The added title intensified the gravity to it all, making it that much more detrimental. Thing would be so much worse if Emily were to somehow mess up, which she did. Because there was pressure, so was there the worry of failure, making her that much more prone to suffer from so. So why couldn't she just see them as normal people? Why? She rested her head on a pillow, trying to collect herself.

Meanwhile, Joyce made small talk with her parents as they unpacked.

"Wait, where did Emm-ily go?" Mary was the first to ask as she carried a bundle to the dresser.

"You really need to stop doing that."

"Like I said, it's a habit!" Mary defensively spoke, as Joyce watched her dad sort a pile of shirts.

"She, uhm, needed to call her parents. She didn't talk to them yesterday."

“What difference would today or yesterday make? Not that it really matters,” Mary once more carried the conversation, as Frank seemed content to carry on with himself for the time being.

“Oh, I mean, yesterday we celebrated her birthday.” And now that she thought about it, why didn’t Emily talk to her parents last night?

“You did *what?*” There was a sense of graveness in her mother’s voice, enough to make Joyce feel a little awkward. “You mean to tell me that yesterday was her birthday?”

“...Yes?”

“*Frank!*” Mary turned her complaints to her innocent husband, who looked just as surprised as Joyce to be dragged into the conversation. “I told you we should have come sooner!”

“Mom,” Joyce was the first to defend her dad. “Even if you wanted to, I don’t even think that would’ve been possible. And besides, you didn’t even know it was her birthday!”

“Clearly it must have been intuition,” Mary sufficed, checking a few more drawers. “And don’t think just because it’s the next day that we aren’t gonna do something for her,” she warned.

Just before Joyce could shut down that idea immediately, a voice cut her off. “Is she doing alright, by the way?” Frank finally spoke, and then the unspoken mood was brought into the open. Her dad seemed himself, but her mom didn’t look as fiery anymore. She always got like that when someone’s feelings were involved.

“She’ll be fine,” Joyce tried to give her best fake smile. She knew she would, but that didn’t change how she felt right now. Unfortunately, only time seemed to be the most effective solution here. She’d simply have to learn that her parents were just like anyone else... “But I mean, I can’t imagine I’d be feeling too great right now either if I were her.”

“She meant well though...” Mary added.

“She did, and I told her that you guys were going to love her.”

“Of course!” her mom nearly shouted, looking almost offended as if that weren’t a given. “It’s only been a little bit, but she’s adorable!”

“She seems nice,” Frank added. “I can’t say your mom has told me too much about her though.”

Joyce was going to curb the cutesy descriptions her mom kept using, but was caught by the tide of a shifting conversation. “Really? You never told dad anything?”

“I told him her name...and how she likes sleeping?”

“Oh my god. You told him nothing,” Joyce was one second away from laughing, and her mom was trying to keep herself composed. Frank looked amused, but saved her wife from total embarrassment.

“Well, I think I’ll be able to get to know her a lot better than what a middle man could tell me. You included, hon,” he pat his wife on the shoulder.

“Right, I think so too,” making good use of her fallback, Mary seemed confident once again. “By the time we go out for brunch I think we’ll all be ready for a fresh start.”

“Brunch?” Joyce asked.

“What? Did you really think airplane food was going to tide us over?” Mary looked a little surprised by her daughter’s confusion, and Frank didn’t seem to be disagreeing with his wife’s sentiment either.

“You know the airplanes don’t exactly give gourmet food...” Frank added, obviously qualified to make such a statement.

“No,” Joyce sighed. “They don’t.”

“It’s settled then,” Mary finally set aside the last of her clothes, and Frank had finished earlier. “After we finish up here, let’s go grab a bite to eat. What are you in the mood for?”

“Me?” Joyce shrugged. “I suppose I could eat anything right about now. Dad?”

“Maybe breakfast more than lunch, but I’m as flexible right now as anyone else.”

“So maybe breakfast? That doesn’t narrow things too much...”

“How about we have Emily decide?” Mary suggested.

Joyce could already imagine Emily’s distaste for the spotlight, but picking a place to eat couldn’t be too bad for her, right? “Okay. Once she wraps up with her parents on the phone we can ask

her. In the meantime, I can show you guys the rest of the apartment.” With Joyce leading the line, they all crowded into the hallway. “There’s nothing too crazy here, but it’s alright.”

“Honey, I think you’ve forgotten what it’s like to live a normal life...” Frank passively spoke as he gave the massive guest room one last glance. “You know living in a home one step away from a penthouse isn’t considered ‘not too crazy,’ right?”

It’s obvious Joyce’s tastes had been ruined by a life of self-made luxury, but the warp had been so gradual, even she knew she was losing her grip on the more subtle things. And maybe even major, considering her parents didn’t find this so subtle either...

“I thought about a penthouse, but that would’ve been too much for little old me,” she jokingly explained while walking down the hall.

“You’ve got Emily now, though? Granted, I think this would still be more than enough...” Mary admired a painting along the brief stroll. “What does she do for work by the way?”

“She could probably explain it better than I ever could, but she works in real estate.”

“Oh? Is she selling actual homes? What company is it?”

“Luxury Estate, and no, from how I understand it she’s working a desk job.” Her heart started to waver just thinking about the turmoil at her workplace. Hopefully it would sort itself soon...

“This is the first room in the house,” Joyce fully opened the partly closed doorway. “My office.”

“Two monitors?”

“One for business and the other for whatever,” Joyce took a moment to fix the blinds. “I like to keep the lives separate, you know?”

“Couldn’t tell ya,” Frank chuckled, “haven’t worked in years!”

Her dad’s simple humor had her laughing again, while her mom admired the decor, and wondered whether it was the 100th or 101st time he’d used that joke before. Such are the woes of a lengthy and healthy marriage...

“You definitely get your sense of humor from your dad.”

“Oh? And is that a bad thing?” She corralled them out of the room and onto the next.

“Yeah, what’s so bad about my jokes? You love hearing them!”

“There’s a difference between funny and living with a record stuck on repeat,” she playfully jabbed.

“Well get used to it, I’m sure we’ve got at least another good 10 years together!”

“Keep that up and I’ll make it 5.”

“Mom, dad?” Joyce looked at the two, clearly uncomfortable over the topic of inevitable demise. “Would you mind sounding a little more cheerful?”

Her dad sighed, looking to his wife. “Young people, am I right?”

Her mom mimicked his same reaction. “Something they’ll never understand...”

“Well, not never.”

“True.”

“Stop, stop, stop!”

Both parents shared a chuckle while the troubled Joyce opened up the bathroom, revealing it and all its shiny, tiled splendor to the pair.

Still annoyed by the recent discussion, Joyce’s sour mood overlooked the genuine beauty of her most prized room. “This is the bathroom... Feel free to use it as you please.”

“Wow,” and there would definitely be many more ‘wows’ to come, yet Frank went on, “Joyce, I know you keep downplaying this all, but you really can’t think this is something spectacular, can you?”

“You remember my last apartment, right?” Joyce shrugged. “It can’t be too different from this one.”

“I’d disagree,” her mom took a moment to observe the ceiling showerhead panel. “This one has to be at least twice as big! I bet you two like to spend some time in here, huh?”

“*Mom!* Would you mind being a little more discrete?” She could already imagine Emily being petrified if she were to hear this kind of stuff. She was thankful Emily listened to her request to go and cool down, but now she was really glad she did.

“Still, I don’t suppose we could come up with a few excuses to use this twice a day?” Especially for Joyce’s mom, she looked to be in a wonderland right about now. “I know our master bathroom back in California is nice, but this is... And look! You have so many shelves!” Fussing over the simple, yet elegant things, she admired the endless stock of towels and amenities.

“I was almost afraid your mirror wouldn’t be tall enough for me!” Frank with his booming voice joked as the mirror in front of the sink stretched from the bottom well-near to the ceiling. A long strip of light hidden by the wooden trim along the cabinets shined over the mirror’s indent.

“Well I knew I’d need to account for your height when I was house shopping,” Joyce explained in a serious tone. “I swear dad, sometimes I feel like you’ve grown an inch or two every now and then.” She briefly remembered seeing his comparison to Emily. Honestly she did look a little younger than her actual age standing next to him... The more she thought about it, making a judgement when comparing polar opposites didn’t seem too accurate... Emily was already a little small compared to Joyce. She could only imagine how much of a titan her dad was to her.

“Let me know when the tour is done so I can move my bags in here for the rest of our stay,” her mom almost sounded disappointed as they left probably her personal highlight of the entire venture.

“How about that room there?” Frank pointed to the one that Joyce intentionally skipped. The one locked for obvious reasons. Reasons only obvious to she and Emily, of course.

“Oh, don’t mind that one,” Joyce played it off casually. “Just a room I use for storage.”

“And what would you have for storage?” her mom asked, sending a small chill up Joyce’s spine. “I mean, what with all this space you have everywhere else in the house, might as well free up another room if it means a little more housekeeping.”

She nearly let out a breath of relief. “Quite the opposite. If for the price of one room means I can keep everywhere else spotless? That’s a fair deal to me. I know you guys got to see a glimpse of it, but just to say we did go through it, here’s the living room.”

“Now here’s where she takes after you, hon,” Frank nudged Mary. “I think I’d probably never get up again if I slept on that thing.”

“Big, soft cushions are the best, obviously.” Mary pressed her hand into the abundant cloud confined to a case with immeasurable satisfaction. “I always love visiting you, Joyce! It’s always fun to see how you’ve outdone yourself! Oh, wait! And who’s this little cutie pie?”

Joyce looked over to the item in question, and suddenly grew wide-eyed at what it was. How? After everything they’d done; combing the entire place with a fine-toothed comb, counting every grain in the Sahara, and accounting for every speck of matter?! She tried her best to stay strong as she watched her mom fawn over another squishy friend. The third member of the family.

Pip.

“What’s this fella supposed to be?” She looked as happy as the smile on its ovular body, giving it a few squeezes. “I didn’t know you liked stuffed animals?”

“It’s not mine, it’s-” Her speech froze when she realized just how big of a mistake she’d made. Instead of thinking about Emily’s sake, she considered her own first, not even considering whether or not she’d throw her beloved under the bus. What the hell was she thinking?! “N-no, I mean, it is mine. I thought it looked cute, so I...bought it.” Yeah, real convincing.

Her mom seemed no less happy, but looked a little hurt. “Honey, you know you don’t have to keep secrets around us, right?”

“What?” She really didn’t know what, or at least she wanted to pretend not to. “What do you mean?”

“I think it’s adorable Emily has a stuffed animal!” She gave Pip another hug. “I bet she looks darling with it!”

“No, but it’s not...” Joyce tried to explain, but her words were failing her because deep down she knew they wouldn’t work. The only thing she could take solace in was how it wasn’t a total reveal of the truth. Still, she was supposed to be protecting Emily! Not painting an image of her she didn’t want to show!

“Just...just don’t say anything about it?” She looked to be a meager request away from full-on begging. “Please? She’s sensitive about that stuff...” Maybe it was worth confiding in her mom at least a little. “I meant to hide that before you guys got here...” She’d need to give Pip a stern talking to later tonight...

“Joyce, there’s nothing wrong if she has something like this. This is *your* home. Even if I did care, which I don’t,” she looked fondly on the lifeless smile. “Who are we to judge? And don’t worry, I promise not to say anything.” She set Pip back down where she found him, looking back over. “Wait, where’s your dad?”

Thankfully Joyce didn’t feel the need to say anymore, as she spun her head around, looking for the mysteriously vanished giant. It only took her a moment to chuckle as she knew exactly where he was. “I think he’s in the last room I planned to show. The *pièce de résistance*, or his personal one, at least.”

“The kitchen?”

“Did you even have to ask?”

They walked in to find him exactly where they expected him to be: in the kitchen observing all the spices, appliances, utensils, fridge space, ingredients, and even the countertops. Currently he was fixed on the sink.

He could already tell they were behind him though, when he already started his questions. “Joyce! How were you able to find a sink this wide?” Indeed, it went beyond the standard, being nearly as wide as a restaurant grade one, but with the depth of a homeowner’s one.

“That one had to be custom made.” She could still remember having the space measured for a cut. “But after working under you and at the restaurant, there’s no way I was gonna go back to a regular kitchen sink!” Before Emily, she didn’t even cook too often, but that still didn’t mean she didn’t have certain wants in a kitchen.

“Good on ya, too.” He looked to Mary with a serious look, pointing to the sink. “*This*, hon, is how we know our daughter’s made it.”

Mary rolled her eyes. “Typical chef.”

“I don’t suppose your guy can do a job across the country?”

“I can find out?”

“Haven’t we remodeled the kitchen enough?” Clearly her mom didn’t share the same enthusiasm. In the end though what happened didn’t totally affect her, considering the kitchen back home was practically her husband’s 3rd child.

Suddenly the shoe was on the other foot, when Joyce leaned into her father. “Non-chefs, am I right?”

“Some things they’ll never understand...”

“Anyways,” Mary curtly interjected, “I’m sure you two are happy to be in the same kitchen again?”

“Naturally. Just because she flew the coop doesn’t mean I taught her *all* my tricks,” he pat Joyce on the head.

“Well I’ll have you know I’ve been managing just fine.” She smugly took a moment to admire her small paradise.

“Just because you’re not a master doesn’t mean you’re not good, and the best feeling is when you have someone to cook for,” he warmly added, striking an obvious chord with Joyce.

Helplessly smiling, Joyce agreed, not noticing her mom’s happy look from the kitchen table.

“I’d really like to see the ins and outs of this spot of the house, but something tells me your mom isn’t going to wait that long...”

“You’d be correct.”

“I’ll go and see if Emily’s finished up yet,” Joyce excused herself, stopping along the way to pick up Pip. “Maybe you’re the reason why she was such a troublemaker last night...” she tutted in a lowered voice, walking up to her door. She lightly knocked. “Emily? You in there? It’s Joyce.”

“Mhm. You can come in.”

She opened the door, looking relieved to see Emily was still in one piece, though obviously snuggled up on her bed. It hurt beyond words to see her so distraught, but clearly the distance and isolation had done her some good. Though, she suddenly looked stricken with a new wave of fear once she saw Pip.

“W-wait, what was he doing out there?” She looked to Pip, and back to Joyce. “They didn’t find out, did they?” Whatever time she spent calming the flames inside of her, they seemed to be roaring just as much again, if not worse.

“No, no, no, I promise they didn’t.” God, even lying felt worse. “But something tells me even if they did, my mom probably wouldn’t be as negative as you think...” Emily didn’t seem any more at ease. “I managed to find this little sucker before they could. Think we can keep him safe here?” She handed him over to Emily, who nearly gave it a squeeze of her own before setting it down.

“Did they ask where I was?”

“They did, but I told them you needed to call your parents because of yesterday.”

“What? What happened yesterday?” How could Joyce be writing her a story without her even knowing it?

“Your birthday?”

“Oh.” Clearly one she already forgot.

“They were talking about going out to eat right now.” She gave Emily’s hand a squeeze. “Feeling up to it?”

Some distance did wonders for her nerves, but she knew she couldn’t run forever. After all, she at least seemed to have a slightly positive moment with Joyce’s dad, even if it was at the expense of Joyce’s feud with her mom... She nodded her head.

“Perfect. Wanna head back out with me?”

“Sure.”

Sliding off the bed, Emily followed Joyce to the exit, then quickly stopped herself.

“What’s wrong?” Joyce watched as Emily fished through the drawers, finding exactly what she was looking for.

Sliding a pair of denim shorts up and underneath her dress, she lifted the front slightly to ensure the button and zipper were in place. “Something I should have done this morning...” She finished

her work, and the dress came back down, giving no indication that her clothing had changed.
“How do I look?”

“Like your adorable self.”

“I don’t wanna be adorable, though...”

“Then you’re my beautiful baby?”

“*Joyce!*” Emily spoke with a sense of urgency, suddenly wondering just how close her parents were.

She held up her hands, showing off their emptiness. “Sorry, but it’s one or the other!”

Emily was the first to take the lead, and Joyce amusedly watched her walk down the hall, happy to see she was back out of her shell.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t be with you guys the whole time,” Emily apologized as she found them in the kitchen. “I had to speak with my parents.”

“No problem, we only cried for the first few minutes,” Frank smiled, and Mary then stared daggers at him. “Hon, I’m sure she knows what a joke is.”

“Didn’t Joyce just get finished...” her disapproving voice trailed as Emily’s slow but growing laugh filled the room. A pleasant warmth was finally introduced into the atmosphere; one that only knew how to be itself around Joyce.

“So Joyce told me we’re going out to eat?”

“I think I can speak for the both of us when I say we’re starved. Airplanes know how to keep their customers alive just long enough so that they die of starvation only *after* they unboard.”

“Honestly,” Mary agreed. “Eight hours and we only get a small meal, tiny breakfast and a pack of peanuts? Half the bill came from Frank’s list of drinks!”

“Then tell them to get bigger cups!”

Emily kept laughing, and was briefly surprised by the touch of Joyce behind her, but was no less cheerful.

“Only thing is we’re not locals around here, Em,” Frank said. “Think you know of a place where we can get a bite?”

With all eyes on her, she became slightly meek again. “Uhm, well, what were you in the mood for?”

Frank looked to Mary, then Joyce.

“I think breakfast is the better option,” he concluded after taking a visual survey. “Sound good to you?”

“Yeah, of course!” Emily felt herself rushing along her words, but tried not to be too critical of herself. That’s how her bottom fell under the spotlight, after all.

“Then what’re we waiting for? All this talk about food’s really gonna be the end of me if we don’t get something soon,” standing up from her chair, Mary was already moving to the exit.

“I’d bring a jacket, by the way!” Joyce called after her. “The restaurants aren’t always temperature friendly!”

“Frank? Would you mind?” Mary called back.

“Do you want the purple, black, or red one?” He was already moving from his spot.

“What do you mean? I only brought the red one?”

“Whatever you say!” On his way out, he silently turned to Emily and Joyce, mouthing a ‘no’ with his lips, and holding up three fingers. He seemed a bit more perky once Emily was once again a sucker for simple humor.

An arm around Emily’s shoulder gave her arm a brief rub. Emily watched as Frank disappeared around the corner. “I better go get my jacket too... Which one do you want? Emily waited for an answer.

“Doesn’t matter, really. Just grab one you think that’ll make me look pretty?”

“So any of them?”

“I knew we started dating for a reason!”

A grin lasted Emily the whole way to Joyce’s room--*their* room, actually, and she sifted through Joyce’s massive, yet fully stocked closet for something suitable. She already had a black one for herself, and figured that’d be the best for Joyce as well. What didn’t work with black? Last time she checked her phone though, today was supposed to be nice and sunny, so hopefully the restaurant didn’t try to counter the weather too harshly...

“Thank you very much, my sweet!” Joyce took her jacket from Emily, as well as hers too.

“I can carry my own jacket?” She was suddenly a little nervous with Joyce’s mom nearby. She didn’t want to make a scene...

“Oh? Are you sure? I figured it’d be easier if I just took both of them.”

“Uhm, alright then.” Emily didn’t want to poke the bear too much, and resigned herself to putting on her shoes. Though, she silently reacted to a new pair that were suddenly sitting for her. Instead of the Converse she’d gotten used to for casual wear, a pair of strap sandals were waiting for her. They oddly looked like they would complement her current wear... How far did this woman plan ahead? Joyce was always about gambles, and sometimes Emily found it strange how she always managed to win. Then again, she *was* the House.

She would never admit it out loud, but it truly did make Emily a little happier to have the extra inch to her stature, but then she unfortunately remembered that so did everyone else not walking barefoot, negating any sort of advantage she thought she had to begin with.

The two other females had a purse slung over their shoulder, and Frank likely had everything he’d ever need in his two pockets.

There wasn’t much trouble fitting everyone into the elevator as they moved down to the sublevel garage.

“So are you still driving the Cadillac?”

“Why would I stop?”

“Fair point. But I figured you might upgrade at some point.”

“I’m not too big on cars, I guess. If it looks nice and feels nice, I really can’t complain.”

Mary turned next to Emily. “Really, I can’t understand how she does it.”

“Isn’t she *your* daughter, though?” Emily smirked.

“Very true, but sometimes I feel the same about my husband and her brother! Regardless, if it weren’t for the parking garage here, having a vehicle here must cost a small fortune.”

“I’ll say. Back where I was before having a vehicle was too difficult to manage, and given that it’s relatively easy to move around I don’t worry about it so much.”

Everything seemed to be all well and good until the last part.

“Joyce, you make sure she gets around safely, right?”

“Yes, I make sure it’s all taken care of.”

“W-well, I mean,” Emily slightly stammered, a little surprised that her personal safety fell into question. “I’m not exactly new to the city life? I can get around pretty easily?” Was her independence really being questioned?

“The city’s a big place, that’s all,” Mary explained. “And well...” As she looked to Emily, it was clear she was trying to be delicate with her answer. Parent or not, Emily had enough foresight to tell what she was getting at, and she didn’t like it. Maybe on some level because she was a girl, Emily understood, but so was Joyce. Therefore, it was clearly her size that made her vulnerable... She tried not to seem too embarrassed.

Thankfully Frank jumped in to diffuse the potential tension and embarrassment. “Still, it really is great having some personal transportation around here. I know I’d be thankful to have a car. That must be a nice perk, right?” He looked to Emily.

She supposed that she should be thankful for his kind gesture. “Mmm. I think you’re right.”

“Though, you always start to doze off during car rides...” Joyce quietly added from behind.

“What? Do not!”

“Whatever you say~”

As if she needed to clear up the misunderstanding, Emily looking to each parent tried to disprove what was likely fact. “I swear, she doesn’t know what she’s talking about. Your daughter gets these crazy ideas sometimes!”

Everyone in the moving box started to laugh over Emily’s panicked retreat, and somehow she felt as if the crowd swayed in the exact opposite direction she wanted. There wasn’t any time left to fix things though, as a mild ‘ding’ announced the parting of the doors. The walk to her car was brief, and the slight beep and flash from the tail lights identified the magnificent car as her own.

“Okay, who’s sitting where?”

“How about you and dad in the front, and me and Emily in the back?” Mary suggested. “If we’re being honest here, I think your dad and Emily make a good combo in terms of sharing leg space.” Another jab to Emily’s pride, and yet again another hard truth. She really didn’t need all that much leg room...

There wasn’t much negotiation before they crowded into the vehicle. Joyce was in the driver’s seat, and beside her was Frank. Emily sat behind him, and Mary behind Joyce.

“Seatbelts on, everyone?” Joyce asked while checking her rearview.

“So where are we really going, though?” Emily asked. She knew she was told to pick a place, but it seemed like Joyce already had a destination in mind.

Joyce spoke as she pulled out of the space. “Dawn’s Diner I heard is pretty good. I’ve only stopped by for coffee every once in a while, though.”

“Nothing like a new restaurant for an adventure,” Joyce’s dad chuckled.

“Actually, Frank and Mary,” it felt a little weird using their names for the first time, “Aren’t you two tired at all?”

Mary briefly looked to Frank as if to get a mutual read. “I think we both got a good amount of sleep on the plane. Trust me, if we’re ready to turn in early, we’re gonna do so. But at least for today we wanted to maybe overexert ourselves just a little so we can all spend a full day together.”

“Really? I mean, I’m sure Joyce wouldn’t mind either if you wanted to sleep?”

Joyce smiled, knowing full-well how her mother would answer. “That’s very thoughtful of you, but we’d much rather spend the day with you guys. I’ve been waiting a while to meet you, you know?” Her sudden forwardness had Emily a little skittish. “Trying to get rid of us so soon?”

“No! I didn’t mean it like that,” Emily tried her best to explain, completely oblivious to the joke.

“I’m only teasing. If we can go to bed at our usual time, then our sleep schedules should be safe. And also, I love your outfit by the way!” A tinge of fawning could be heard in her voice as Emily suddenly went back to her self-conscious mood. Still, she could probably consider herself lucky that she wasn’t called ‘cute’ for once, even if Mary probably was thinking it.

“So you said you haven’t been here your whole life?” Mary was the first to make small talk.

“No, I’ve been in Washington for most of it. Portland.”

“You never told me Portland before?” At the set of lights Joyce had a chance to turn her head back.

“Well I mean, it was only in the suburbs, so I guess there isn’t much to talk about?”

“What do you mean by most?” Frank kept the ball rolling. “Was there a third place?”

“Uh, I guess you could say so? Really early on I was in Japan. I was born there.”

“So you were born there? What’s it like there?”

“I was really young, so I don’t remember a lot…” Emily tried to blow some dust off her oldest memories. “It was really crowded when we went to the city, I think. It was also cleaner, too?” That last part was sort of a speculation. She just didn’t remember a lot of pollution in the past. That, and going off of what her relatives told her.

“So do you think you prefer it here than in Washington?” A brief moment went by. “Ah! Wait, that’s excluding Joyce though,” Mary stretched out an arm as if to block the visual from reaching her thoughts.

Helpless, Emily smiled as she tried to consider all the other benefits. “I mean, from the start distance was a huge thing for me… I haven’t been on my own out here for too long.” And here we are, being taken care of again. “But, as for New York, I really like all the different things

going on, I guess. There's a constant variety of stuff to lose yourself in and lots of people to meet. Also, it's not the suburbs."

"I think that's a good way to put it," Joyce chimed in.

"What about you guys? Have you always lived in California?"

"Just about. My husband and I were both born and raised there. Nothing too special about it!"

"That's not true. I think you've just gotten used to living there?"

"Maybe you're onto something?" Frank added, causing a small wave of random laughter.

"How about your parents? Are they still in Portland?"

"Yeah, last time I checked," her voice came of a little plainly. "My dad used to be in the service, and my mom runs a salon."

"Oooh," Mary continued on with her fascination. Joyce was curious to listen too. "Do you have any siblings?"

"Nope. Just an only child. I think the closest I ever got was with a few cousins," she laughed it off, hoping she didn't sound like she was fishing for sympathy.

"Well..." Mary silently looked to the person sitting in front of her, and Joyce could practically feel her stare. "Believe me when I say that having two kids isn't all sunshine and roses. Remember when you and John used to fight all the time?" The last bit she steered towards Joyce.

"Kind of, I guess," Joyce didn't think too fondly of looking back on the worst childhood memories. "We had our good moments, though."

"Few and far between," her dad chuckled.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Joyce sounded to be a mix of genuine offense and tease.

"You two were like cats and dogs!" Mary finished for her husband. "I remember you two were fighting over something, and one of your dolls wound up cracking our tv screen!"

Frank sighed over the painful reminiscence. "That wasn't a fun day..."

“No, it wasn’t,” Joyce agreed, already feeling the jagged memories cloud her mind. “Besides, he’s the one who threw a ball at me!” Joyce already started to ramble off, as if the altercation was just as fresh in everyone else’s minds as it was in hers.

“Whatever did happen,” Mary quickly dismissed Joyce’s unfinished business, “You two *definitely* mellowed out when you both got older.”

“Yeah, because we could learn to live with each other without needing to break something in the process...”

“Fair point, but you guys did have your good moments.”

“Plenty of ups and downs.”

It felt a little weird to ask, considering it might be considered disrespectful to John, but Emily asked anyways. “Joyce, did you ever wish you could be an only child?”

Everyone was quiet. Did she mess up? God! Why did she have to ask something so weird? Though, it turns out it was all in her head, because Joyce simply needed a moment to answer.

“There were definitely days where I could probably kill my little brother,” already a few days popped into her mind. “And a few days where he’d probably do the same to me. But no, I’ll always love my brother, and now that we’re adults I can actually stand being around him!” How she spoke on the last bit with enthusiasm had everyone chuckling.

“I kinda wish I knew what it was like...” Emily had an idea, going off of the cousins bit, but never had she ever spent a greater deal of her life, 24/7 under a roof with someone other than her two parents.

“Hang on now,” Joyce playfully warned. “I said it was nice, but that doesn’t mean there weren’t its bad parts either. Definitely a tradeoff. There’s stuff I envy about growing up as an only child too.”

“What do you mean?” Mary asked. “We gave both of you plenty of attention!”

“You did, but of course it felt like you guys were taking sides at times.”

“We were perfectly fair!”

“So not true,” Joyce seemed to be headstrong. “You always took John’s side because he was younger! Admit it!”

“Maybe because he was a little younger, he got a bit more leeway, but that doesn’t mean I believed you any less!”

“Okay,” Joyce answered, still unconvinced. “But I mean, that’s not a totally bad thing. I was Dad’s favorite after all!”

“Ah, well,” Frank in a dumbstruck stupor tried to interject, but it was obvious he couldn’t get his bearings. “I loved you both just the same!”

“I don’t disagree with that,” Joyce said plainly, then had a mischievous smirk on her face. “But I was your favorite.”

“Hon, you always did have a soft spot for Joyce...”

“Well, maybe a little, but that’s only because you had one for John,” Frank said, quickly turning the tables.

“Oh don’t you start getting on my case now, too! Can you believe this man?” Mary turned over to Emily, who was trying not to laugh at their mini argument.

“Relax, relax!” Joyce commanded, halting the verbal tensions if for only a moment. “We *all* have favorites, but we all know that we love each other equally. I shouldn’t have even kept the ball rolling to begin with. Can we talk about something else?”

Silence lingered, only until Emily spoke up. “So what does John do?”

“John is an electrician. He’s been working for a few years at his current company right now.”

“Where does he live?”

“California. Same as us.”

“Nearby?”

“Maybe an hour long drive to get to him, but definitely manageable. Why?” Mary started to look enthusiastic. “Think you might be down for the next visit?”

“Uhm...well...” Unsure of how to respond, Emily clearly started to lose her voice.

Before Joyce could reel her mom back in, thankfully she kept herself in check. “Don’t worry about it, I know you two are still breaking each other in. Make sure the relationship works out before all the other stuff surrounding it.” Though, her face didn’t really seem to have any doubts about their future, and Emily couldn’t see much either...

“Okay kids, we’ve arrived!” Joyce announced as they pulled into a small lot.

“Thank goodness. I almost thought I’d have to eat Emily if I got too peckish back here!” Emily blushed a little as she looked out the window, rather than the doting mother.

“Thanks for putting up with me back there,” Frank said to Emily as he undid his seatbelt. “I know it isn’t a lot of legroom with me involved.”

“No! It’s fine, really,” Emily assured, as well as note that Mary’s thought process did work out pretty well.

Frank then in a hushed voice, but still clearly audible to everyone else, “And also, thanks for putting up with my wife back there, too!”

“Keep this up and you’re sleeping on the couch.”

“Did you feel how soft that thing was?”

Mary tried to seem stern, but they both started laughing.

“Come on, chop, chop,” Joyce clapped her hands. “We’re burning daylight here!”

In a few moments everyone was out of the car and walking to the diner’s entrance. The exterior looked like one of those old fashioned ones; single-story with a curved roof colored in a deep blue. The restaurant’s sign was done in neon and had a classic font to it. As soon as they stepped inside the distinct smells and flavors of any breakfast in existence wafted through their nostrils. Coffee and bacon grease were what they could smell first, and the endless clinks of silverware against plates filled the diner.

Behind the receptionist there was a classic looking countertop surrounding the centerpiece of the restaurant, which was the kitchen. Stools with bright red cushions protruding from them surrounded it, as a handful of people occupied its seats, and a good deal of people at the tables and booths.

“Hi, how can I help you?” The receptionist behind her wooden stand was already waiting for them.

“Hi,” Joyce started. “Could we get a booth for four of us?”

She took a moment to press a few things in her console. “Sure thing!” She leaned her head to scan the party of four briefly. Grabbing a few menus and bundles of eatery, she escorted them down the aisle.

Emily always hated this part. In especially a busy restaurant, the walk to your seat was always the worst. Filled with temptations and alluring sights and smells, it was a stroll that tortured your tastebuds with the things you did not have and would need to wait until the ends of time for. One couple had their coffee, eggs, bacon and toast. Another was eating grits and scrambled eggs. Hash browns! Syrup! Jam! Bagels! Emily had half a mind to plug her nose because she was near-mouth-watering at that point. She wanted to eat badly. Clearly she’d forgotten how hungry she was, because only when she saw what she didn’t have was when she really wanted it the most.

Their destination was a sizeable booth, and before anything could be done on Mary’s part, both Joyce and Frank had the unspoken understanding of what needed to be done.

“Emily why don’t you slide in first? I’ll be right next to you.”

“Hon, I’ll hop in first if you don’t mind.” Frank was already sliding in.

The way they were arranged had Emily in the deep part of the booth, with Joyce right next to her, and across from Emily was Frank. That meant diagonal to her was Mary.

“Alright, here you guys go...” The woman started passing out menus and bundles of forks and knives. “And whoops! Almost forgot,” she chuckled apologetically, then reaching into a pocket on her front apron, she placed a small box close to Emily. “Someone will be over soon to take your order for drinks. Enjoy!” She walked away, while everyone quickly figured out what was given to Emily.

“You have to be kidding me.” Emily by no means looked amused.

“Well,” Joyce sounded sympathetic. “Maybe it’s because you looked shorter compared to us three?”

“That doesn’t make me feel any better!” Emily complained, annoyed not at Joyce, but the situation. She held up the box for a brief second, then dropped it from the few inches it was suspended from the table. “Crayons? Really? Did I look that much like a kid to them?” This had never happened to her before! What could have swayed that woman’s mind? Was it her clothes? Did she look small compared to Joyce, Frank, and Mary? Why even bother asking? She knew it was true... She looked down at her yellow sundress, finding one more reason to hate it now.

“Can we send these back, please?” Emily gestured to the crayons.

“We can, but I mean there’s no harm in keeping them around?” Joyce said, trying not to make it seem like a big deal.

Emily trying to cheer herself up went back to the menu, only to be equally as disappointed.

“Joyce...” Emily nudged over to her.

“What’s up?” She looked over from her much more adult menu.

“They gave me a kids menu...” Emily looked clearly annoyed, and Joyce tried not to see the humorous irony in it all. Of course she would never tease Emily to a point where she hurt her feelings, but that’s why this was somewhat funny. Still, it probably didn’t feel too amazing on Emily’s part. It was pretty clear by this point what that woman thought about Emily’s age from a simple glance.

“Wanna look at my menu?”

“I kinda want my own.”

“I’m sure they won’t mind if we ask for another?” Mary spoke up, quickly reminding Emily of who else was watching.

Sympathetic to her plights, but also wanting to give her some immediate relief, Joyce leaned a little closer as they both looked through her menu.

“What looks good?” Emily asked, still needing to catch up on the more adult selection.

“Simple stuff, I guess. Other things sound pretty interesting too. Sometimes I wish they’d give these menus displays like they do for the kids menu.”

Whether she agreed or not, Emily didn’t want a reminder of the waitress’ blunder, and kept looking on with Joyce. She felt guilty almost, but the pancakes still sounded just as delicious as they were yesterday morning.

“Huh, they’ve got a few breakfast sandwiches that look good,” Frank mused.

“Any sandwich in particular?” Mary looked over.

“I imagine they’re all pretty good. Though, knowing you, you’d probably just put ketchup on it?”

“And what’s wrong with ketchup?”

“Nothing at all, but you’re ruining the originality of a meal if you always add your comfort sauce to it.”

“I swear,” Mary caught Emily’s attention by chance. “He won’t let me live it down if I so much as put a speck of extra salt on the food that he makes.”

“I’m not *that* bad,” Frank turned to the smirking Emily as well, also using her as the middleman. “When I cook Emily, you can put on as much salt as you like, *and* pepper!” He looked back to Mary smugly.

“What am I going to do with you?”

The laughter came and went as everyone tried to compose themselves when the dedicated waitress came over. “Hi, how’s everyone doing today? My name’s Abigail and I’ll be your server.”

“Fine, thank you very much!” Frank answered, still high on the bubbly atmosphere. “What can we do for ya?”

“Frank!” In a hushed voice, Mary nudged his shoulder. “Quit teasing her!” She turned over to the slightly confused, but also smirking waitress. “Don’t mind him. He can tend to be like this...”

“Well, I’ll try my best,” she laughed, then pulled out a small notepad and paper. “Do you guys want to start off with some drinks?”

“I’d love some coffee, please, but,” Frank paused for dramatic effect. “Is the pot fresh?”

“I can brew a new one just for you?”

He leaned in close to the table. “I like this one, she’s a 20-percenter.”

Mary looked like she wanted to wallop him upside the head. From Emily’s angle, she could see she was holding the menu slightly above her mouth, which was currently smiling just as much as her dad’s. Emily always forgot to remind herself, but it really was like night and day with Joyce. She only had the beginning to compare to, but only when she was around familiar people (Emily included) could she really let herself go. Otherwise it was her tense, cool, and collected business self.

“Alright, coffee it is. How would you like it done?”

“Some milk and two sugars, please.”

She scribbled one last note. “And you, miss?” She was looking at Mary, who obviously was flattered by the comment. Then she whispered to Frank.

“Miss? Clearly she’s trying to get on our good side... I’ll have a coffee too, please.” She explained how she wanted it.

The waitress turned over to Joyce.

“Three for three, I guess. Coffee as well, please? I’ll just take mine black.” Her kind of order was probably a waiter’s godsend, considering it required no bells or whistles, and just pouring a substance into a cup.

“And last up is you, little miss!” Chipperly, she looked to Emily, who was trying not to blush.

She thinks I’m a kid too? Emily looked to the kids menu and the box of crayons, suddenly realizing how they forced the narrative too. She wanted to die on the inside, especially because there were three other people watching this all unfold.

“Oh, uhm, that reminds me,” Joyce interjected. “Could we get her an adult menu, please?”

“Sure, that shouldn’t be an issue.” Her simple response wasn’t what Emily was looking for. She didn’t seem surprised, shocked, or guilty. It wasn’t to her an adult being mistaken as a kid, but a parent trying to get their little one an adult menu they would have never gotten otherwise. The kind of expression she gave as she shifted back from Joyce to Emily soured the mood for her even more. She really was being looked down on.

Though, hopefully her choice in drink would change the waitress’ mind, or force her head out of the gutter. This would *not* go on for any longer, and it was about time Emily start steering the ship.

“I’ll have a coffee too, please.”

Emily nearly made a noise when she saw the waitress pause for the slightest moment, and silently look to Joyce with a tinge of uncertainty.

Did she really? Did she really just defer to Joyce as the decision maker?! On the more private days of the week, sure, Joyce was her... Mommy, but this wasn’t one of those times! She’s an adult goddammit! Emily didn’t know why she wasn’t starting an outburst by then, but of course she didn’t want to make a scene, even if all of this was beyond mortifying and frustrating. She didn’t think though that her stature and appearance would potentially prohibit her from caffeine!

Joyce blinked awkwardly for a moment, taking a second to realize what was happening. “O...oh, you think...” her voice trailed, but then was quickly refreshed. “Uhm, yes, she can.”

What was Joyce doing? This was her moment to clear up this whole misunderstanding! Her wandering eyes found Mary and Frank’s, who were either looking at the waitress or Joyce. Hell, Emily was thankful for the lack of attention, even if it were probably intentional. It was a passive comfort to know though that she could probably slip underneath the table and hide for the rest of the meal...

“Hon?” The cushy names from a stranger cut through Emily’s dignity like a knife, and she looked over to her, hoping her face wasn’t too red. “How would you like it?”

“Three sugars, please...”

“Alrighty,” she wrote a few more notes. Joyce had her hand on Emily’s thigh, and was rubbing it soothingly beside her. And it was a good thing she was, because Emily didn’t know how she

would react otherwise, especially when the waitress said her next piece, specifically to Joyce.
“Do you want me to get her something to go with it? Water, milk?”

Please, Joyce! Prove her wrong! Fix this stupid misunderstanding!

“How about milk, then?”

No, no, no, no!

“Milk it is!” Happily, she finished up her writing and slipped the pen back into her apron. “The wait shouldn’t be too long, and I’ll be right back with an extra menu.” With that she walked away, and as she did, Emily stared at Joyce with quite the opposite of enthusiasm.

“Why did you play along with her? She thinks I’m a kid!”

“I think she acted a tad bit differently to Em, too...” Frank added. Yes! Finally! Someone that was on her side!

“I know, I know, but I figured she’d be a lot more embarrassed than any one of us would be if it were in her shoes.” Really? She was more concerned about the waitress than her own girlfriend? How does that even work?

“Does it not matter how I feel?” Emily asked, obviously hurt.

“Of course it does,” Joyce gave her waist a squeeze, and Mary looked on sympathetically. “All I mean is, we all know it’s her mistake, which is why we all know you’re an adult. Besides, with how deep she’s into it now, I don’t think she’d ever live it down if she found out how she was treating you.”

“Does that mean I can?”

“It means that you have people to confide in. She doesn’t.”

“Really, Em, we know it’s her mistake,” Frank added. “Joyce does have a point though. That waitress would probably not be able to handle it as well as you can right now.”

So Emily was tough now because she was putting up with it? Maybe that was true in a way, but she didn’t like the idea of giving this woman a pass to walk all over her!

“Don’t you think it’s sort of funny, though?” Mary spoke up, garnering the attention of the table. “She really thought Emily was younger than all of us by quite a bit. You can really pull off a look, can’t you?” She seemed impressed as she looked to Emily.

Emily deeply exhaled through her nose, as popular opinion dictated the mood. No one here actually judged her for what happened, at least not negatively, and thankfully they didn’t see this in the light of Emily’s belittlement, rather the waitress’ mistake. Dearly she wanted to write this woman’s wrongs, but in a way Emily was being the bigger person by letting it slide, even if that meant being the smaller one...

“And hey, you have two drinks now, right? That’s a plus?”

Maybe. But it didn’t feel great as to how she got it. Apparently she was a kid that needed something to chase her caffeine. If she had it her way, this woman wouldn’t be getting as much as a cent for her tip. Yes she was bitter, and yes she was being unfair considering how much of a kid she probably did look like, but it didn’t change her feelings. Why was she getting so hung up on this? Was she supposed to be? Did it make her look bad? She didn’t know how to react, and that’s what made it so much worse. The only sense of reason she knew was reliable was to follow in Joyce’s stead.

“Oh, and also, Mom, Dad? What do you two say about doing something else after this?”

“I’m not sure...” Frank looked to Mary. “We’re awfully busy today...” His joking was obvious.

“Emily actually came up with the idea to go to the zoo yesterday.”

“Wh-huh?” The sudden credit caught her off guard. What would they think if she was the one who wanted to go to the zoo? “I mean, didn’t you say we should?”

Joyce smirked at Emily. “Alright, fine, it was *our* idea. What do you two think?”

“Sounds like fun! We haven’t been to one of those in a long time. Good idea, Emily.”

Emily tried to laugh it off, wondering why she still had a kids menu.

“Sorry for the wait,” Abigail, their waitress, came with a platter of four mugs and a glass. “Two with two sugars...” she placed the mugs in front of Mary and Frank. “One black,” a mug to Joyce. And of course her voice slightly changed when she was speaking to the little girl. “And finally one with three, and a glass of milk.” Thankfully she didn’t cheap out on the proportions,

because they did look like normal drinks, but the accompanying milk didn't make her feel so enthusiastic. How "lucky" was she though, getting permission from her "Mommy" to have coffee...

"So is everyone almost ready to order?" While she spoke, she also placed the fourth adult menu on the table, which was thankfully given to Emily. Way to leave her room to browse...

"Uhhh..." Joyce looked at Emily for a second. "I think we're gonna need a few more minutes?"

"Sure thing, take your time."

"Wait, am I the only one who still needs to pick?"

"Think so, but take your time, okay? Don't rush."

"Don't worry Emily, we kinda got a headstart anyways," Mary said as she set her menu down, and Frank as well.

"What are you guys getting?" Joyce made smalltalk.

"I'm gonna get a burger," Frank already sounding satisfied answered. "I know we were doing breakfast, but a diner burger always sounds good to me!"

"I'm getting a breakfast sandwich," Mary said contently. "*With* ketchup." It wasn't a mystery who the emphasis was directed towards. "How about you?"

"I think I'll do some bacon, toast and eggs. It's been a while since I've done that." She leaned next to Emily. "And what are you liking so far?"

She wanted to be original, but of course her head was screaming pancakes. She was such a broken record... Topped with banana and strawberry, she was feeling helplessly tempted. Did they do chocolate chips too? Emily couldn't help but feel compelled to ask...

"Hey Joyce?"

"What's up?"

"Do you think they'd put chocolate chips in here?"

“I don’t see why they can’t... Is your sweet tooth kicking in?”

“...A little bit.” Emily almost looked sheepish.

“It sounds good to me. You’ll need to give me a bite, though.”

“Chocolate chip pancakes?” Frank asked. Emily was afraid how he’d react. “You can get them, but I’ll warn you,” he leaned in close. “Nothing you’ll ever eat will compare to mine!”

Emily looked to Joyce for confirmation.

“I can make some good pancakes, but who do you think I learned it from? Speaking of which, you’ll be cooking for us at least once, right?”

“Did you really think I’d let Emily miss out on my cooking?” Her dad asked with offense. “Why do you think John and Hannah are getting married?” He laughed with his deep voice, and Emily couldn’t help but chuckle as well.

“Sounds like you guys are ready to order?” Like clockwork, Abigail had made a round and came back with a notepad. Giving it a second to be refused, and when she wasn’t, she asked Mary first.

“I’ll have the Bootmill Breakfast Sandwich, please.”

“And what do you wanna do for a side?”

“Fries, please.”

“And you, sir?”

“I’ll have the Monday Burger with fries, please. Just a little pink in the center.”

“...Alrighty. And you miss?”

“Bacon, eggs, and toast, please? I’ll have the eggs over easy.” She smiled over to Emily. Every interaction she hated her more. “And how about you, hon?”

“She’ll have the short stack, please,” Joyce answered for her, and oddly enough Emily kind of appreciated it. Any moment where she didn’t have to deal with this woman was a blessing counted. Again, there wasn’t anything inherently wrong with her, but they certainly did get off

on the wrong foot. She was operating on adult time right now, and really did not appreciate trying to be told otherwise. “Do you think they could put chocolate chips in it, too?”

“That’s no problem, but...” the waitress politely asked for the kids menu. “It sounds like you’re describing this?” She pointed out a display, and as curious as Emily was, she dared not look.

“Oh? What’s the difference?”

“So the Jr. Stack has all that stuff with a little extra whipped cream. They’re sized just about the same as well. I’ll just put that down for the order.”

Emily must have mastered the art of meditation, or Joyce was truly a professional caretaker, because she was somehow able to keep herself together. She quietly took a sip from her heated mug.

“So one Bootmill Breakfast, Monday Burger, Bacon and Eggs, and a Jr. Stack?” The order was confirmed, and she walked on off.

“You’re a real trooper, Emily...” Frank reassured her as she walked away. It felt good to have allies...

Emily looked to Joyce, and she could tell there was a hint of amusement in her eyes. She didn’t think of it as cruel, though. The biggest reason why this rubbed Emily the wrong way was because she was trying to present herself in front of Joyce’s parents. This was a relationship between lovers, not a mother and daughter!

Joyce looked sheepishly to Emily. “I got you whipped cream?”

“You’re so making this up to me.”