

51 - Unexpected Thrills

“Are we...almost there?” Emily humbled and mumbled with her head against the side of the car.

“Getting there,” Joyce softly answered, grinning all the way through the red light. “Maybe we should start packing you a pillow for longer rides?”

“Don’t need one...” Emily muttered with her eyes closed, perfectly comfy enough as is.
“Y’know...sometimes you can really treat me like a kid.”

“Oh, do I now?” Joyce laughed. “You’re right; sometimes I can get carried away, so I’ll be better from now on!”

And hearing those words out of Joyce’s mouth surely didn’t sound quite right, but for once ignoring her own silly delusions, Emily kept her eyes soundly shut while her girlfriend playfully rambled on.

“I mean, how silly of me!” she giggled. “Treating you like a kid... Gosh, I guess sometimes I think that you’re bigger than you really are when you’re out of diapers...!”

Wait, what?

The light went green and the car rolled forward. Joyce’s eyes and content smile face forward on the road while the girl suddenly short of sound sleep was now giving the driver a concerned look.

“Uh...nuh-uh. When I’m out of diapers, I’m an adult, aren’t I?”

“Wh-?” Joyce glanced over for only half a second, showing what looked like genuine confusion, but then it seemed like it clicked for her. “Oh! Sweetheart, of course!” she nodded assuringly with just the right amount of sugar and syrup in her voice. “When you’re out of diapers you can play pretend as a big girl,” she enunciated soothingly.

“Egh...” Emily visibly and audibly ‘bleghed’ aloud, which had Joyce biting her bottom lip for as long as she could, but she couldn’t hold down the laughter any longer.

“Did you seriously just do that?” Joyce giggled.

“Yes, I did, because *you* just did *that!*”

“Did what? I’m being honest!”

“W-well, when you do that thing you always do!”

“What thing?”

“That... that whole:” And she bundled her arms and flashed her fingers like claws, deepening the pitch of her soft, lighthearted voice and did her best to boom like a creature of the night, “Mwahaha! I’m Mommy and no matter what my little Emily does, she will forever be my baby! Mwahaha!” The car went silent and Emily awaited a response.

“You know,” Joyce sighed with a growing smile, “you really do have a knack for putting the pre-K in pretend.”

In an animated fashion Emily slapped her palms on her thighs. “What?! That’s *totally* how you sound, though!”

“Do you watch cartoons when I’m not home?” Joyce’s grin didn’t stop growing with her eyes on the road.

“I think you’re just having trouble accepting the truth,” Emily put out an exaggerated sigh with a big fat shrug. “Are we there yet?”

“No,” Joyce suddenly said quite seriously, and even gave Emily a death glare. “We are *not* going to do that game, do you understand me?”

“What? It was just a question?” Emily giggled. Apparently there was some trauma with that question...

“And you’re gonna stop asking that exact question.”

“What? Why?”

“Because I used to do it all the time with my parents, and my little brother liked to do the same thing, too.” They had the tiniest age gap of just a small couple years, but it was enough for a miniature Joyce to understand the concept of patience whereas her younger sibling still had not. She’d been on both sides of the fence and knew just how annoying it could be. “We get there when we get there. Which is in a few minutes.”

“Hmmm...” Emily jutted out her chin, looking as silly dumb as she ever did. “So does that mean...*are we there yet?*”

“Are you excited about tonight? Is that why you’re being so bubbly right now?” Joyce taunted without a smile. “Sweetheart, if you think tonight’s gonna be too much for you to handle, your crib is always—”

“No! No! Okay, I’ll stop!” Emily’s glee had gone from giddy to ‘gust, a shorthand for disgust that still works for alliteration... “Do...do you think there’s gonna be teacups?”

“I think every amusement park under the sun has one of those. But for once I think we’re in the same boat since neither of us have gone here before,” Joyce openly thought. For once she didn’t do the biggest amount of preparation because it wasn’t her own plans for once. Not that she ever wanted Emily taking the lead.

A shadow briefly loomed over the car as a seemingly random bridge arched over the main road, but not one that seemed meant for vehicles.

“I’m surprised they asked us to begin with, and so close to Halloween,” Emily drummed her hands on her legs as she watched the sights go by out the window. “Michael’s got a nice friend at work to give so many tickets, though.”

“Yeah, that really was nice of them...” Joyce said as she started to look around a bit more. “Hey, does that sign say parking’s over there?”

“Uhh, yeah.” Emily nodded, and the surroundings started to change. It was far less city and emerging metal fences and hedges, tall, mighty, and concealing. They were in a line of cars now, bumper to bumper and all headed the same way to the same place.

Minute by minute the car rolled forward inch by inch, prolonging the wait more and more.

“Do you want your paci?”

“Wh-what?” Emily blinked and stuttered as she turned. Did she just hear her right?

“You’re fidgeting,” Joyce couldn’t hide her teeth. “It’s okay if you need something to calm you down?”

“You didn’t actually bring that, did you?” Emily lost the luster in her eyes and suddenly the handbag between them was far more ominous. Somehow a pacifier appeared during the business dinner at the hotel, so...what was stopping it from happening again? Did she bring one? Or wait—did she bring anything else? The more she looked, the bigger and bigger the bag seemed. More

than just a pacifier could fit now. A sippy cup? A bottle? A diaper? Baby powder? *Pip*? M...Mr. Bear sitting in the corner of her nursery? Now she was unsure. Now she had to know, just to be sure, just to be safe—

Her hand went for the bag, but without even needing to look, Joyce defensively dropped her own on the flap.

“Ah-ah!” Joyce tutted, “Noo,” she scolded like a genuine child needed a clear reminder, “We do not touch others things without permission, okay?”

And ugh! She was deflecting again! “But Joyce! You can’t bring that stuff!”

“Who said anything about bringing what? ” Joyce absolutely deflected. “Was that nap you took earlier today enough for you?” she made a concerned look. “If this is how you’re gonna be at the park...”

“It wasn’t a nap!” Emily did her best to sound serious, but giggles were a dangerously infectious sort. “But don’t do that! Don’t bring anything in! If you do, I’ll—”

“One second, sweetheart,” Joyce cut her off, then rolled down her window. She had gotten poor Emily so riled up that she never even noticed it was their turn to pay for parking. Joyce chased her to the top of the hill, and while she was still stuck at the peak, Joyce somehow had no trouble coming down. Calm and collected, Joyce played the perfect part of her composed self with the employee, then they were on their way to park. “Sorry, honey, what was that?”

“How...how do you do that?” Emily asked, determined it was somehow a sleight of hand, and yet it still looked like pure magic. “Didn’t you say you had trouble just swapping between Joyce and...Mommy?”

“Yeah?” Joyce nodded without a single sign of conflict with what she said and just did. Emily tilted her head in confusion.

“But you just talked normally in front of that person?”

Joyce was quiet for a moment, trying to discern just what exactly Emily was trying to tell her. Then her mouth opened. “Ohh! You mean like with how I treat you... Well, Em, mommy or not, I still interact with other people the same way.” More or less, depending on if Emily was one of the talking points... “I think it’s really just with you that I have a hard time keeping control of myself,” and she lightly chuckled, like they were discussing the weather.

It was quite the nugget to leave in Emily's head just as they parked. For an amusement park though, the land seemed awfully desolate when looking for rides. More specifically, the fun ones. There were plenty of cars— an entire sea of them that was only an onset to just how packed the actual place would be. Pockets of people emerged from cars or walked by, all funneling to one end of the lot closer to the park they were next to.

“Did they say where we'd meet them?” Emily briefly looked down at her phone as she undid her seatbelt.

“Over at the shuttles,” Joyce answered as she texted on her own phone. “We're gonna ride over together. Hopefully they weren't waiting too long; I can't imagine trying to keep a kid patient when they're right outside an amusement park...”

And it was then one of those unfortunate moments that there was the silent connection. Emily blushed quietly as Joyce raised her brows with a grin.

“Well, I guess I kinda get it.”

“Joyce!”

They got out of the car after both calmed down.

Emily trailed around the front just to get closer to Joyce's side where the masses were moving. She turned her head both ways and had more than enough gist of the population density to not be surprised by what she noticed next.

Casually, Joyce's hand was beside herself in open view, patiently grasping at air and waiting for it to be filled. Without argument, Emily put her hand where it was softly ordered to be.

“Thank you~” Joyce sang and they walked ahead. Holding hands, they stuck together and walked along the edge beside the other many parked cars.

“Maybe they invited us because they feel guilty about that super expensive wine you got them,” Emily hummed as she swung their hands back and forth.

“Mmm, good guess,” Joyce nodded thoughtfully, “but— I think I'll wager it's because we're all friends.”

“So we shall agree to disagree,” Emily solemnly decided while Joyce tried to put together just where all this spunk was coming from. “Oh— look!” her finger screamed ahead.

Up ahead there was a two-lane road segregated to just white truck after white truck, towing along a trolley on wheels filled with rows of empty seats underneath its canopy. The fantasy was already afoot as the carts themselves looked like hybrids of shopping stalls and train cars straight from a fantasy land. Imaginary gold trims, metal posts designed and shrouded to look like wood, and more.

“Oh that looks cool,” Joyce smiled. “Are you excited to ride on it?”

The moment her girlfriend smiled was the same time Emily caught herself from getting in too deep. “N-no, I just meant that it seemed...cool, is all.”

And before Joyce could try and call her out for being cagey again, a distant voice shouted for them.

“Emily! Joyce! Over here!”

A hand waved for them by the shuttles; one from Joyce’s vertical vantage point had a better time of seeing. The five-fingered hand waving at them came with a jovial look, along with a husband and two kids.

Carol spent all her attention flagging them down while another familiar and smaller face ran circles around her father, Michael, who tried reigning in Jackie and whoever else was in the midst of chasing her.

“Ope– Jackie, look who’s here!” Michael used his one trick to get them to stop, and Jackie’s sneakers scraped to a halt and she spun her head in the direction of the newest arrivals. And naturally, her eyes lit up like the sun.

“EMILYYYY!” she cried with glee as she sprinted right for them, and Emily bracing for the worst shuffled the slightest bit against her partner’s side. There were certainly stares and laughs from strangers as the little girl sprinted five car’s worth of length just to meet the two.

“Hi Jackie!” Emily said right back. “So good to–!” and she yelped as the girl got closer and closer, but her momentum didn’t stop, finally flinging herself forward for a hug.

“What about me? Do I get a ‘hi’ too?” Joyce teased, and Jackie pulled her face away long enough to give the taller woman a cheeky giggle.

“Hi Joyce!”

“Hi Jackie!” Joyce mimicked right back and they both laughed. And then she looked up, “Hey Carol!”

Emily noticed her now too, standing right in front of them as opposed to being by Michael where he was still standing so far away just a few seconds ago.

“Hi Joyce, hi Emily,” she sounded sincere, but the reserved look on her face clearly said she had some discipline to deal with. “Jackie?” she expectantly called. “What did we say?”

The implications for the little girl were immediate, but not for the other two adults. Still with her hands on Emily, she spun her head and cried defensively, “but Mommy...!”

“Ahp—!” Carol was quick to shut her down, and Emily was unfortunately forced to be a bystander in the physical sense. “What did we say? Jackie, do I need to bring a stroller around for you all night? If I have to I—”

“*Nooo!*” the girl whined right back. “But they were right here!”

“And that’s no excuse, *and* I’m gonna say it again here right now so every adult knows that tonight I want you and Katie nearby at all times. Do I make myself clear?”

“*Mommy...!*” Jackie whined, finally letting go of Emily just to complain in full. “Don’t tell them!” If only her tantrum could unring that bell.

“Hey Jackie,” Joyce beckoned. “See this right here?” and Emily was ready to cry Mommy herself once her hand wrapped in Joyce’s was tugged forward. “Emily’s gonna be holding my hand *all* night because I don’t wanna lose track of her, and she doesn’t wanna lose track of me.”

And now Jackie’s complaints were suddenly moot, now that the two “cool” adults that weren’t her parents and authority figures were suddenly singing to the exact opposite tune. She made a frustrated hum, not at Joyce or Emily, but maybe Carol and how things were suddenly out of her favor.

“...Fine.” Jackie pouted aloud, and the kid hath been corralled.

“Now let’s go back to Daddy,” Carol held out her hand, and the girl looked like she was staring down steamed broccoli. “Katie’s gonna wonder why you ran off, too?”

“I’ll be good! I don’t wanna hold hands!”

How poetic. Joyce silently imagined another world where Emily would be saying that exact thing to her, and the simulations alone were enough to make her heart ache. But it only went that way because their love was clearly and identifiably mutual. Between a genuine kid and their mom, though... Well, sometimes it's harder to read between the lines...

"Jackie..." Carol warned, sounding like she was ready to start her count. And just before she could, not one, but two smaller hands grasped Emily's open and free one.

"I'll hold Emily's!" Jackie declared, no consent needed, apparently, and Emily was bewildered as much as Joyce was silently amused.

And Carol tilted her head in confused, slightly humorous disapproval. Her eyes glossed over her two friends, trying her best to communicate silently just how sorry she was for putting them right in the middle of this.

"J-Jackie," Carol started after she finished buckling herself back down, "Emily's gonna be busy keeping track of Joyce. It's *my* job to watch you."

"*I'm* gonna watch you!" Jackie retorted, and it was certainly backtalk if anyone had ever heard it before.

But Carol nonchalantly rolled with the punches. "Good. Keep Mommy close then. Now are you gonna keep Katie waiting? You still wanna ride on the Hopscotch, right?"

Suddenly Emily wasn't as popular anymore and Jackie was tugging her mom in the lead like a stubborn horse.

"Hurr-y!" Jackie grunted as she tugged, giggling herself while Carol did her best to ignore her own daughter while she chatted with the two for the short walk.

"Did we keep you guys waiting long?" Joyce asked.

"Nah, your timing's perfect. And if Michael didn't mention it over the phone, we brought Jackie's friend with us today."

"We sit together in school!" Jackie chipperly added. "We play together and do lots of stuff," she explained, albeit in very meager amounts.

“That’s cool,” Emily put out the most attentive answer she could. “So what ride did she wanna go on? The Hopscotch? What’s that?”

“Oh– that’s one of the rides she’ll be able to go on this year, *with* one of us. Last year we came here she had to do a tiny bit more growing before they’d let her on.” Carol explained. Hey Michael, look who we found!”

“No, *I* found them!” Jackie proudly declared, and her mom rolled her eyes.

“*Me-me-me...*” she rambled in a mumble

“Hey guys!” Michael said as they arrived. “How’ve you been?”

“Same old same old,” Joyce shrugged with a smile, and Emily other than her own silent agreement had nothing else to add. “You two? Or– sorry, you three?”

“Same here, but first, guys, this is Jackie’s friend from school, Katie,” Michael gestured down to the shy girl hanging by her friend, Jackie.

“Hi,” she spoke meekly and waved, and Emily and Joyce warmly greeted her back.

“You guys got a lot of tickets though?” Emily asked as they lined up for the next shuttle.

“Yeah, our workplace started getting them a couple years back and the timing didn’t work for a few of my friends, so they just gave me theirs, so thanks for helping us use them up!” Michael laughed.

The next shuttle that came wasn’t a fancy train car or sort of thing. Instead it was an animal, or an imitation of one. A poor cat had been inflated and taxidermied into an entire seating area for passengers. It looked animated out of a cartoon with even a bushy striped tail curved and erect into the air.

“I guess they’re not all the same...” Emily openly pondered, but that was the one they were about to board.

“Can we wait for the dog one?” Jackie asked, and Katie wordlessly nodded in agreement with her.

“There’s a dog one too?” Joyce chuckled next to Carol who sighed with a smile.

“And a train, and a spaceship, and a sleigh...” Carol rambled on. “They have a fun variety, at least.”

“I thought you guys said you weren’t waiting long?” Emily frowned.

“Not long, but these two made sure to point out *everyone* we saw on the drive over!” Carol laughed as Michael finally convinced their daughter to compromise with riding in the imaginary cat.

“Do you promise?” Jackie looked quite firm with both her velcro sneakers planted on the ground, and Katie as her hype man seemed to nod just as diligently.

“Yes, we’ll do our best to make sure we ride back on the dog,” Michael caved, oblivious or ignoring the passersby smirking at their little negotiation. “Now let’s get you two on here before we get stuck with the spaceship!”

The open-style shuttle alternated with seats facing front and back by the row with only one opening on the end and bars on the other.

“Adults, please make sure you’re the ones sitting on the end! Keep kids closer inside!” a park worker instructed as he watched the latest herd of cattle funnel in.

“Okay, you heard him, you first,” Joyce nudged Emily and before the rides even started she was getting whiplash.

“Excuse me?”

“What? Ears, Emily! Cuties in first!”

“Can we sit next to Emily?” Jackie asked as Michael was already sandwiching her and Katie in the safest spot possible.

“She’s gonna be right across from you two,” Carol said from the furthest end.

Not one for stalling, despite being one that tried to argue with Joyce, Emily did get in first for their row, going all the way to the end, directly across from Jackie and Katie who looked to be all sorts of fidget and fun.

Carol slid right next to Joyce and looked over at her husband.

“Make sure she sits still?” she quietly asked, taking advantage of how Jackie was distracted with Emily.

“So, Jackie, how long have you two known each other?” Emily asked as the worker checked everyone’s seating.

“Mmm...” Jackie looked pensive, as did her friend, until the humming started to resonate into more of a game than genuine thought.

“Hmmm?” Emily joined right in, bursting their bubble of giggles. “Okay, so...a long time? A *really* long time?”

“Yeah! Reeaaaally long!” Jackie blurted and Katie nodded. They didn’t see Carol rolling her eyes or Michael smirking.

“Somewhere around three months...” Carol whispered in Joyce’s ear. But, in defense of the children, time *did* seem to pass slower for them...

“Are you gonna ride on the rides with us?” Jackie asked, and Emily couldn’t help but laugh.

“Of course I will! We’re all gonna ride them, aren’t we?”

“Maybe with a couple breathers in between,” Michael already sounded as if he was winded.

“After a few of these things in a row I need some time to keep my head straight...”

The trolley was already in motion and their first turn had come up on the slanted road where bottoms slid across smooth plastic seats. Jackie and Katie cheered with their arms in the air while an arm around Emily’s waist kept her from moving much.

“Girls, let’s save the screams for the actual rides, okay?” Carol laughed, then nudged Joyce on the shoulder with a whisper. “Oh hey, by the way– you never followed up with me? What happened with that whole Isabelle thing?”

It was hardly anything she wanted to share with anyone, especially if it wasn’t Emily given the subject matter. But Carol was undeniably related, and she was the broker for all of this that made it even possible in the first place. Bad or good.

“N...nothing yet. We’ll be meeting for lunch soon to discuss a little...”

“Anything I might want to set aside for?” Carol grinned and the glimmer started to flicker in her eyes.

“If there is, I’ll let you know...” But in spite of her recent revelation with Amy, the only investment she was willing to risk was with whatever was on the menu that given day.

“Just keep me in the loop!” Carol laughed and the awkward subject came to a close.

“Jackie! Look! Look!” Katie cheered with her hands on her seat. She excitedly pointed out the bridge up ahead.

“Was that the one we drove under?” Emily asked Joyce.

“Jackie, Katie, don’t stand on your knees in here,” Michael softly warned, then looked at Emily. “All the parking gets done on this side of the road while the park is on the other.”

“Oh. That’s kinda cool.” Emily shrugged, and Joyce giggled while she squeezed her.

“What?” Emily took on a defensive look.

“Nothing,” her girlfriend snickered.

The imaginary cat was bid farewell as they made their brief ascent up the stairs, across the bridge, and back down to the entrance. Only then did the park come into much fuller view. Towers and slopes were off in the distance, reaching as high as could be. Coasters and droppers, and imaginary monuments and structures stretched across the visible horizon. Cheers and screams were off in the distance and the immediate scent of warm, delicious junk food was in the air.

“So you two have really never been before?” Michael asked as they kept one eye on the kids ahead.

“Nope, never,” Joyce shook her head. “Emily and I are from the west coast, so I’ve been here for a little bit, but Emily wasn’t until a little bit ago?”

“Yeah,” Emily chipped in, “I went to some as a kid before, but never out here.”

“Well, I’m sure you two’ll have fun. October’s a great time for this park and they’ve got plenty of thrill rides!”

“Oh yeah?” Joyce smiled at that. “It definitely seems like there’s some good ones,” she said as she looked up at the highest coaster. “I used to like them a lot as a kid!”

“Then I’m sure you two are gonna be in for a fun time!” Carol leaned in. “I’m just a little afraid how Jackie’s gonna take it...”

“You’re letting her on?” Joyce blinked in surprise.

“She’s technically allowed,” Carol shrugged. “Michael and I talked about it and said we’d let her try. But, she’s only *just* tall enough; she still has to go with at least one of us.”

“So do you think you wanna ride that one, Jackie?” Joyce caught the girl’s attention and pointed nice and high.

“Huh?” and she looked up at what could have been the sun in the sky, and her face was beaming. “Yeah! Are you gonna go too?!”

“I think I’ll have to if you’re gonna,” Joyce smiled and had Jackie hopping on her shoes with her friend.

“You can sit behind us!” Jackie decided, “and Mommy and Daddy can sit in—”

“--Right next to you?” Carol cut it and her daughter’s buzz was killed completely. “Sorry, hon, but you both need to sit with a grownup. Ah—! Jackie? No groaning. We made a deal, didn’t we?”

“Did she forget?” Joyce grinned, and Carol quietly scoffed with a shaking head.

“No, she just thought the rules might not apply if we did. At least the park’s gonna back us up.”

Finally she squeezed Emily’s hand to check for a pulse. “So? Looking forward to the rides?”

Emily finally blinked, looking away from the towering titan in the sky.

“H-huh...? Oh...uhm...yeah.” But poor Emily, the mistakes she made were far too textbook. The line was dense and they didn’t have anywhere to go, nowhere private, but Joyce wasn’t smiling anymore.

“Emily?” Joyce needed only one word to make her message clear, and Emily was fidgeting.

“Wh-what...? I’m fine. Yeah, I’m looking forward to it...” It was a far from inspiring answer, as well as another one of those challenging moments when Joyce had to debate whether it was right to publicly lift her off the high horse she was far too ambitious sitting on.

She had the audacity to lie right to her partner’s face, squeezing her hand with tight fingers no less. Her arm felt rigid more and more the higher she looked, just to see the apex of where the deathly screams would begin. But it was a key thing that Joyce would never forget, and yet another important entry in her gilded book of all and everything to know about her sweetest treasure. A rather topical entry right next to her genuine fear for horror. Now right next to that was a fear of heights. Emily knew she’d been had; as well as Joyce could read Emily, she could tell when she was in the hot seat too.

After showing everyone’s tickets, they were in the fantasy land of thrills. The green hills and park structures were draped and dressed in tasteful black, orange, crimson red and purples. It was all accent to the year-round structures repurposed for the theme of the month and even included props from big to small. Tombstones, ghost posts, zombie hands sticking out of the ground, and more. Flocks of stationary bats hung from the lamp posts and pumpkins were bunched in corners like a spreading fungus.

But they were there and it was the start. The beginning of a whole night of fun. Where would they start first?

“Can we go on the Hopscotch first? Please? Please?” Jackie hopped on her feet.

“Yeah, can we?” Katie was convinced to be an advocate too.

“*That’s* what you guys wanna start with?” Michael sighed in exaggeration, getting giggles from both kids. “Why don’t we work our way up a little before that? I think you guys are gonna be disappointed the rest of the night if it doesn’t live up to it!”

“You know what they say:” Joyce included, “*always* save the best for last.”

“A *very* good point,” Carol nodded appreciatively. “So how about we take a look at the map and see what else looks fun, okay? Don’t worry, we’ll make sure to go on.”

Joyce was smiling, but on the inside it was far from similar. After all, Emily still had yet to say anything herself, and now she was looking anywhere but at anyone’s faces.

“Can I make a suggestion?” Joyce volunteered her hand and there were no complaints. “How about we go on the teacups? Emily might be too shy to say it, but she was really excited for that.”

“I-I wasn’t that excited...!” Emily blurted aloud, and suddenly Jackie and Katie had something to giggle at.

“We wanna go on the teacups!” The two tiny girls cheered, and all over again Emily became a martyr for the day’s activities.

“Don’t be afraid to speak your mind, Emily,” Michael laughed. “Don’t think Jackie’s making all the decisions today!”

“No, I mean it’s just...” she was fighting a sigh from coming out. Why did Joyce have to put her on the spot like that?

“I wanna go on the teacups,” Joyce emphasized and went as far as roping her hand around Emily’s shoulder. “Can you let me be a little selfish, Em?” and she had the nerve. The literal nerve to flutter her eyelashes. Using *Emily*’s signature move. The same look that *didn’t* get her ice cream. That *didn’t* let her stay up late, and *didn’t* get her out of a talking-to. And Joyce had the audacity to use it herself and expect it to actually work?

“Well...yeah...”

Of course I’m gonna let her win...

“Teacups!” The kids cried and dashed forward, but only for a second before Carol’s sharp and stern call froze them not more than four feet ahead. With a much tighter leash they all navigated the park.

“So did you plan on telling me you were afraid of heights?” Joyce whispered once they’d become the caboose.

Crud, so it really was obvious... “I-I didn’t think they’d have those...” Quite the poor excuse, and more so trying to avoid the embarrassment. It was an amusement park; of course there would be heart-stopping thrills.

“Mmm, guess we’re gonna have to remember that for next time. But don’t worry; when they wanna do those rides we’ll come up with an excuse.”

“Wh-what? No!” Emily adamantly refused. “You said you wanted to go on them, didn’t you? You like those rides! W-we’ll...we’ll go together.”

“Together?” Joyce raised her brows, and Emily hesitantly nodded.

“T-together...”

“No,” Joyce firmly shook her head.

“What? Why?”

“Because I said no, Emily,” Joyce insisted. “If you don’t like heights I’m not making you do that kind of stuff.”

“Then...then you’re gonna go at least, right?”

“And then who’s gonna keep you company when they’re on the rides?”

“Joyce...!” Why did she always have to be like this? It was one thing putting Emily on a pedestal, but she absolutely hated seeing Joyce step off her own because of it.

“Don’t be like that...” Joyce rubbed her arm. And it was hardly the place to make mention of her most damning reason why she wouldn’t let Emily do something that scared her so “unprepared.” She hoped Emily might make the connection herself, being that the last time she ended up in wet pants in the middle of the night. “Besides, do you know how long the wait can be for those coasters? We’ll have plenty of time to do other stuff while they do that.” She waited for her words to sink in, then fired the final punch. “Not another word about it, okay? Come on, it’s teacup time!”

And that was how the day started. With the whole party in a giant cup they spun and spun as fast as they could, giving themselves an exciting, close-to-ground, g-force experience that did make Emily smile and laugh. Longer heads of hair waved in the chaotic wind, and hardly everyone’s hands could reasonably fit on the center wheel.

“Spin harder, Daddy!” Jackie cried with glee over the sound of music and mechanical turning while her father went into overdrive.

“Yeah? Faster?” Michael grinned and the challenge was accepted. “You too, Emily! I see you slacking over there!” he called her out, and with a dumb grin Emily went right back to work. Around and around they went. Around and around... Around and—

“I...need a minute...” Joyce wobbled with a laugh, supported by her charge as they stepped back onto asphalt. “Did you really have to spin so hard?”

“I’m a simple man, Joyce. I was asked to spin harder.” Michael shrugged as Carol was a bit slow herself, but of course the two youngest ones were cheering and already itching for more.

“Can we go again? Can we? Can we?” Katie practically begged.

“Maybe later tonight, hon,” Carol softly said as she put herself back together. “We’ve still got a whole lot of park left to go through!”

And that’s exactly how it went.

The rides varied from small to big. Big to small. They went on imaginary airplanes, cars on rails, bumper cars, boats, and more. Emily could do fast and slow, but nothing that never went high.

“Can you guys do this one without us?” Joyce would apologetically ask, “I need to go use the bathroom– Emily’s gotta keep track of me!”

Things that didn’t have too high of a drop.

“I’m so sorry...I have to take a business call,” Joyce would pull out her silent phone. “Can Emily take pictures of you all while you ride it?”

As guilty as Emily felt, she didn’t argue for many reasons, especially to keep the light off herself, whether Carol or Michael was choosing to act oblivious to it or not. At least it wasn’t the entire time for just them to be sitting out. Carol and Michael were certainly taking moments to recharge as well. For the ones they were allowed on, Jackie and Katie would go together and the parents would watch close by, taking pictures all the way. Of course those would be far more tame, and far more palatable for Emily. Joyce would try to take her on, but since they were “for kids,” Emily wouldn’t allow herself.

“Did you see us when we started to scream?” Jackie hopped up and down, tugging on her mom’s jacket.

“Yes, yes, I did, so let’s not ruin Mommy’s jacket!” Carol laughed. “Okay...” she hummed as she looked at the map, “what comes next?”

“I’m hungry,” Katie quietly declared, and it set off a chain reaction within the group.

“Me too!” Jackie raised her hand, and no one seemed to disagree.

“I think food’s a good idea,” Joyce gave their vote of approval, and Carol looked around some more.

“Well, we’ve got some options. There’s pizza—”

“Pizza!” Jackie and Katie casted their votes, and Carol looked less than impressed.

“*Annnd!*” she emphasized that there was more, putting the kids back into giggle fits, “there is also tacos, sandwiches, chicken, and a few other little snacks. So, girls, do we wanna rethink our choices?”

“Pizza!”

“Yeah, can we get pizza? Please?” If only Jackie had the same manners as her friend to use the word ‘please’ unprompted.

“Well, I think they’ve made up their minds…” Carol sighed with a smile. “How about us?” She looked at everyone else. “We could always get them theirs and we can take it someplace else?”

“I don’t mind either way,” Michael abstained, and Joyce had the nerve to back out as well.

“Emily?” Carol asked.

“Uh…pizza’s fine.”

“Good-fine, or just fine-fine?” the mother tested the girl’s mettle or nearly folded underneath the question.

“Pizza’s good,” Emily chuckled.

“Can we get ice cream after?” And suddenly someone sang exactly to Emily’s tune. Though, maybe it said more about herself if the like-minded voices were the two other shortest munchkins in the party.

“We will see,” Michael kept it vague, a child’s potentially *least* favorite kind of answer.

Pizza it was. Pepperoni, to be precise, followed by juices, soda and water.

And Emily silently cringed at the sound of how expensive it all was. Just two pizzas and an array of drinks had her wondering just how many more people could have come to the park had they just fasted. But a familiar black card nosed its way through to Michael's hand sticking in his own wallet.

"What? Oh— Joyce, no," Michael tried to wave her off, but she poked forward with the personal pit of money again.

"Please? You were nice enough to invite us? It was either this or I was gonna cover everyone's ice cream!" she laughed, and reluctantly he borrowed her card.

"You didn't have to do that, you know?" Carol whispered beside her, and Joyce nonchalantly shrugged.

"I don't mind, especially after everything you two have done for us? Besides, if you don't accept this, Emily's really gonna think you two are guilty about our gift to you two."

"Why did you say that?!" Emily's mouth hung agape and the other couple shared a confused smile.

"What gift?" Michael bit first, and Joyce couldn't have been more obliged.

"On the ride here, Emily was joking that—mmfph!" but alas, she was censored.

"Don't listen to her, she's just lying!" Emily insisted, but publicly silencing her opponents wasn't always the best look. And even more unfortunately, Joyce didn't have to rely on crafty tactics, such as licking someone's hand to get it off... As a show of strength she gently pried away Emily's hand by the wrist.

"As I was saying," she laughed, "Emily was *joking* that you two might feel guilty about the wine we got you."

"Oh my gosh, really?" Carol went wide-eyed then laughed.

"Wine? What wine? Can we have some?" Jackie hopped on her toes in an attempt to be included.

"I think it's gonna be gone by the time you're old enough for grownup juice, sweetpea," Michael patted her head. "Which we still haven't opened, by the way!"

“We still wanna wait for when we can all have it together!” Carol added. “Oh– kids, can you lead the way? Find us a good seat. And make sure to thank Joyce for what’s gonna be lunch *and* dinner!”

“Thank-*youuu!*” they spoke in unison as they scurried for a large table.

“Are you really sure about dessert, too?” Carol whispered to her friend.

“Positive. Besides, Emily’s gonna want some tonight, so it wouldn’t be fair not to include everyone else.”

“Oh yeah?” Carol laughed, and Emily blushed. “Well, Emily, thanks for being spoiled so we can be too!”

“Thanks, Emily!” Michael laughed.

“Thank you Emily!” Jackie and Katie came last, too far to really understand why, but hopping on the bandwagon just because.

“...You have to get some too, you know?” Emily muttered beside Joyce, who blinked, but smiled.

“Treat everyone but not myself? As if!”

The best kind of food is free food, which is why both pizza and ice cream went down quite nicely.

“Okay, squirts, over here,” Michael squatted in front of the two girls covered in ice cream cone crumbs and stains on their mouths. In each hand he held out a white tissue. His soldiers reported and promptly had their faces scrubbed.

“That was a really smart idea packing wipes; I wish I thought of that!” Carol nudged Joyce with just a speck on the corner of her mouth.

“Oh, I just had a tiny hunch,” Joyce laughed innocently, and Emily couldn’t help but stress over the potential layers only she had a chance at being privy to. But by the end of her cone a random finger tapped her shoulder and she turned her head into an age-old trick that she least expected in a place like this. The only thing to greet her was a cold, wet wipe across her face.

Joyce spared no expense in laughing at the triumph as she wiped Emily’s face.

“Clean as a whistle,” Joyce announced, and while Emily looked bothered, she wasn’t protesting.

“Thank you...” Emily muttered.

While the others cleaned up, Joyce did have a chance for a private moment.

Her smile was somber, but earnest. Joyce said, ”Sorry...I’m not being too pushy, am I?”

“No, you’re not...” Once upon a time, maybe, but breaking down barriers once made it easier to do it twice, thrice, and more.

“Okay, good.”

And while they wiped their hands an overarching noise played over a hidden intercom.

“*Good evening, park vizitors!*” a voice reminiscent of a man with fangs and a particular pleasure for red bodily substances eerily spoke from the many speakers all around the park. “It iz now time from which the sun sets, the moon shall rize, and the creatures of the night shall come out for a fright!”

The announcement was sudden and unexpected, especially because Joyce seemed oblivious to it as well. When Joyce didn’t know that made Emily uneasy, and no rock to hold onto made things far more uncertain.

“Beware, and pre-*pare* to be scared! If you wish to remain in-tact leave the park now or stay to witness our most frightening friends amidst the crypts and castles from which we rezide! For the faint of heart, find yourself a charm at the nearest merchant to ward thyself from the most terrifying of frights! You have been warned, and I bid thee all a most chilling of nights! *Mwahahaha!*”

The speaker cut and all seemed normal. For now.

“Wh-what was that all about...?” Emily nervously asked Joyce who had no answers.

“Uh, Carol?” Joyce relayed the concern.

“Oh! That’s something they do around Halloween time. They bring out actors that go around scaring people in the park.”

Cool idea, but the fact they had no prompting on it whatsoever bothered Joyce greatly. Not for herself, but of course because of...

“W-well, when does it start? Now?” Joyce was already taking Emily by the hand who was suddenly feeling the paranoia crank up a bit. People were just going to start walking around scaring them? Not actually, right?

“Yeah...is everything okay?” Carol tilted her head. “Oh— Michael? Can you guys head over to the next ride? We just need a sec,” and she waved them off. “Everything okay?”

“Joyce, it’s—” Emily tried to interrupt, but not even her own knight in shining armor would listen.

“Where can we buy one of those necklaces? They won’t scare you if you’re wearing one, right?”

But the damage had already been done. It was clear now, and if it still needed any more clarity, the downright embarrassed look coming from the smaller girl trying to shrink away painted the picture painfully clear for the woman.

“O-oh my gosh...Joyce, I— no, Emily,” Carol stuttered in surprise. “I’m so sorry you didn’t know! We didn’t think anything of—”

“No, it’s fine, really,” Joyce calmly assured her, “but we’re gonna go take a detour to get one of those if that’s okay.”

“Of course! Yeah! Go! Or wait, I have some cash I can give you for—”

“It’s fine, really!” Joyce politely turned her down. “I just don’t want Emily getting scared. Can you guys just do a ride without us? We’ll meet up once we get back from a shop.”

“Absolutely,” Carol nodded. “And guys, I’m so sorry about that...!”

And it was Emily and Joyce now, under a much darker sky, situated in a much more ominous setting now.

“Why did you have to say that...?” Emily sniffled as she let herself be led by the hand.

“Because it’s okay to not like scary things, Emily. I think there’s a gift shop nearby...”

“But everyone’s gonna see me wearing one!”

“And plenty of others are gonna be wearing one too.” Probably. The biggest room for doubt was the fact that people came to this park in the fall for typically thematic reasons... Besides, what was the alternative? No necklace and let somebody sneak up and scare her? Joyce would have to fight the urge to punch someone as much as Emily would be fighting the urge to cry, and frankly the woman couldn’t see either of them holding out.

“B-but...”

“And I’m getting one too?” Joyce included, piling onto the guilt that the girl was feeling. “Emily, don’t give me that look. Okay, *yes*, I like scary things. You like ice cream. That doesn’t mean you like having ice cream every day, do you?”

And somehow what Joyce thought would’ve been a no-brainer was quickly becoming a bad example.

“Okay, well, you shouldn’t,” Joyce tried to retrofit her example. “My extra-important point being: I don’t want you feeling like you have to prioritize me all the time.”

“But that’s what you do for—!” and she was shushed by a finger.

“Because you *know* that’s how we work,” Joyce sighed, kissing her on the forehead. “I love it when you do things for me, Emily, but I love it the most when I get to look out for you. So let me be selfish and lean on me, okay? And speaking of which, I don’t think I’ve seen you go to the bathroom once all day since we got here. What do you say we take a detour along the way?”

After a quiet sniffle and feeling in a better place, Emily nodded her head. Now that she had time to stop and think and her adrenaline was cranking up again, her bladder was definitely sounding off the alarm. “Okay...”

“Good. Now hold my hand *extra* tight, okay?” And she leaned in for a whisper. “*Mommy’s not gonna let a single monster near you!*”

And it was the first smile from Emily since that horrible, bone-chilling announcement on the intercom. Actors or not, the spooks were coming from the screen into real life now, and that was just far too much for the girl. Diaper or not. So after a deep breath they trudged onward, embarking on a quest to protect Emily from the frights of the night.

But a loud, gasoline-scented rev roared right beside them. In a sudden burst of blaring, startling surprise a tall, wide man in a stained apron of crimson and dried brown with a big belly screamed right beside the worst person possible. His face was bloodied and marred, hiding

behind a crude imitation of a face put together by loose patchwork of dried leather that couldn't mask the seeming lack of genuine skin around his eyes. The man with a maddening noise and loud, revving chainsaw cackled as the heat from his murder weapon coated in red revved loud and high, like he was about to drop certain death on the petrified girl.

It was a cool night that had turned to cold, despite the puffy blue jacket Emily was in. So cold, but suddenly warm. Warmer and warmer. As her legs quivered and the pretend monster laughed just as he was trained to, Emily's body played its own part in leaking out everything she had in her. The world went blurry as the feeling between her legs went warm and wet, and everything fell apart at once.