

HIRAETH

A boring day had passed, uneventful other than Emma's customary meeting with Dr. Patel and Henry's departure the day before which still weighed on Emma.

"Can we go home now? Dr. Patel said he cleared me." Emma asked with a slight anxious whine.

"Yes, we're leaving. Your dad is scheduling your follow up with Patel and the abortion."

They walked out of the unit into the hallway; Joyce was relieved to see it mostly vacant. Emma squeezed her mother's hand, reacting to every sound and person, avoiding their faces.

The three of them approached the elevator bank, Joyce was thankful to only see one woman when the silver doors opened. Emma tensed at every passing floor, each a possibility for someone bad. They stepped out into the lobby of the hospital, Emma squeezed Joyce's hand harder, pausing like a scared child. She wanted to sprint out the closest exit, putting the darkest chapter of her life behind her for good, but something kept her in check. Every person in the room felt like a potential threat.

Joyce whispered to her, "Honey it's okay. You're okay. I'm right here."

Brian turned to see Joyce comforting Emma. "I can run to the pharmacy while you take her out to the car."

Emma hated that idea, "No. I want you to come too." He nodded understanding, feeling validated that he could help her in a unique way.

The parking garage elevators were across the lobby. Emma noticed how much more she could walk now, wondering how much she'd have to pay for it later.

"Bri we'd you park?"

"P3."

The elevator to the parking garage dinged and stopped, they stepped in. Two men joined at the minute.

Emma clutched her mother's arm with her other sweaty palm.

Joyce spoke so only she could hear her, "Just breath. They won't hurt you."

Joyce grabbed her shoulders and discretely shifted her more towards the corner. Brian side stepped in front of his daughter, remembering not to backup too far. The five passengers departed on the same floor; Emma had never been happier to see her mom's orange Subaru.

As they entered the vehicle, Emma inhaled its familiar smell hoping it would calm her. Surprised by how scared she still felt.

Joyce had left to go get Emma's medication, "Dad, can you lock the doors?"

He did as she asked, “Honey, you know I can protect you, right?”

“I know. That’s why I wanted you to come with us. It just makes me feel better if they’re locked. When Henry locked the doors on Dave’s truck, the relief I felt was indescribable.”

“I can’t even imagine, honey. He was always good to you, right?”

She looked up at his focused gaze in the mirror, slightly insulted by how little they still trusted him. “Yes, always. I already told you guys this. Mom—twice—I think.”

“Okay, just making sure. That was in front of doctors, the police and your mother. Just because you don’t want him arrested doesn’t necessarily mean he was always good to you.”

That hit her hard, sinking into her stomach like caramel in a coffee. She sifted through her feelings about the day they escaped and how terribly Henry handled it. She lied, “I know. The answer is still yes. He was always kind and gentle.”

Brian nodded before swapping to a more concerned demeanor, “Honey, I’m sorry about the elevator. I would’ve told them to buzz off but figured it was probably best to not make a scene.”

“That’s okay. I didn’t want you to.” Emma let out a chuckle, “You think mom will ever get tired of me squeezing her arm to death?”

Brian smiled in the mirror, “I don’t think so, no.”

Emma’s face washed with sorrow, “I’m sorry it’s not your arm.”

His face softened, “Honey. It’s okay. You shouldn’t be sorry for that.”

Brian noticed Joyce approaching the vehicle and unlocked the doors. She hopped in the passenger seat, the doors locking again. She sighed, exhausted but happy, “Shall we?”

She looked back at Emma who was looking out the window. Joyce noticed she was trying to conceal the fact that she was crying. “Em, what’s the matter?”

“Nothing.”

“Honey…”

She allowed herself to breathe loudly, “I really don’t want to talk about it.”

She gave her daughter space, “Okay. That’s fine.”

Brian put the car in reverse, and they finally departed.

On the thruway, Emma spotted McDonalds on the green food sign, the long-forgotten rush of happy excitement touched her. She never particularly liked fast food, not like when she was little,

and always preferred Wendy's but she was sick of sterile hospital food. "Can I have a cheeseburger?"

"Sure, honey."

Once they reached the rest stop exit, they pulled off into the parking lot, approaching the drive through.

"Em, what do you want honey?"

"Um... a quarterpounder and a strawberry milkshake."

The microphone crackled to life and Brian put their order in, parking in a remote spot in the parking lot so they could eat.

Emma sat in the backseat; her mouth watering as Brian peeked into the boxes. To Emma's surprise Joyce ordered a Big Mac, she'd never seen her mother consume one. Eating Brian's french fries were always her fast food of choice.

Joyce handed Emma her box, "Here you go, sweetie."

She immediately took a massive bite of the burger after placing her shake in her cupholder. Her eyes rolled back into her head, "Mhm." She spoke with her mouth full, "Fuck that's good."

Brian smiled in the rearview, then looked over chuckling at Joyce who made awkward eye contact after taking a massive bite.

She smiled, covering her mouth with a hand, speaking with her mouth full, "Don't look at me like that Bri."

"Like what?" Brian teased, laughing as lettuce fell from her mouth, offering her a napkin.

Emma was calmed by her parents' playful banter, something she never thought she'd miss.

She finished long before they did, the grease of the food and after taste of the strawberry shake still lingered in her mouth. Salt and sweetness, two things she hadn't tasted together in a while. She looked out the window and noticed a little girl skipping alongside her father holding his hand. So innocent and filled with joy. *Why don't I feel normal again? Or even partially normal?* The terror had ended, normal food sat in her stomach, not the bland stuff from the hospital or the eat to live stuff Dave had rationed her on, but regular, everyday food. Her parents sat in the front seat. It was like they were coming back from camp. She was finally free so why didn't she feel that way? Why did she still feel so wrong? So unsafe? She felt like a piece had been left behind, like a part of herself was missing. Her breathing grew ragged and she white knuckled her knees with both hands. Her face contorted slightly as a single tear fell, hitting her leg as she inhaled a sharp breath. The single tear turned into a heavy rain as the crying commenced. Something intensified inside of her, crescendoing into something powerful, something uncontainable. Like a

hurricane about to make landfall or the tide retreating before a tsunami. She tried to breathe through it, push down the emotions, halt the pending eruption but it wasn't working.

Her breathing became erratic and her crying grew noticeable.

Brian looked in the rearview mirror, "What's wrong sweetie?"

Joyce turned her head over her shoulder.

"Nothing, I'm fine." Emma said in a weak wavering voice.

Her breathing turned into short gasps and her cries grew louder.

"Just breathe honey."

Emma noticed the hospital band on her wrist.

Joyce chimed in with a furrowed brow, "Sweetie, you're not fine. What is it?"

"I... I just need a second."

Brian reassured her, "Just take a few more deep breaths, honey."

Her composure shattered, "Stop telling me to fucking breathe! Fuck!"

Emma shoved her face into her hands, tears leaking through her fingers. "I can't fucking do this! I've tried pretending to be okay, but I'm not! I'm done!"

Joyce unbuckled, twisting around. "Em, just calm—"

"Don't tell me to calm down! You don't understand! Neither of you do! It's not going to be okay! I was treated like—like some toy! Like a fucking object and I just let it happen! I stopped fighting and I just... took it! I let him defile me!"

Brian tried to speak again, "Em none of this is—"

"Stop! Don't tell me it's not my fault! If that's true, then why do I feel so fucking guilty!?"

Rage rushed through her veins like a flood as her fists balled tight.

Joyce's tone hardened. "Honey, please."

"Shut up! Fuck!"

Emma slammed her fists into the seat back, once, twice. The sound cracked through the car. Joyce popped open her door.

"Don't come back here," Emma snapped.

Ignoring her, Joyce got in the back seat and reached for her daughter.

"Don't touch me!" Emma barked.

“Em, stop this, please.” Joyce begged, trying to hold her gently.

Emma thrashed, and her wrist broke free, colliding with the side of Joyce’s face.

Brain froze with wide eyes, his chest tight.

Joyce went still, the sting spreading across her cheek.

Emma gasped, pulling her arms back to her face like they’d betrayed her. “Oh my god. Mom—I’m sorry, I didn’t mean—”

Joyce quickly grabbed Emma’s wrists hard. Her voice sharp, “Emma Joanne. That is enough.”

Emma squirmed against her grip, but Joyce shoved her shoulders against the seat, pinning her.

Through sobs, Emma choked, “I can’t do this. I still feel him. He’s under my skin. I hear his voice. I feel disgusting, like I—I need to scrub him off, rip him out. He’s still inside me and I fucking hate myself!”

Joyce gently grabbed the sides of her head, forcing her gaze up. “Look at me. Look at me. He is not here. He’s gone. He will never touch you again. He will never see you again. Ever. We’re right here. You’re here. He’s not. You didn’t let anything happen to you.”

Emma’s hands went slack, her body collapsing into her mother’s arms, shuddering through gasps. “I thought after leaving the hospital, I’d feel normal again. Whole. I felt more normal with Dave than I do now. W—Why?”

Joyce felt her shaking and crushed her into a loving embrace, “Because you were surviving, honey.”

Brian sat there helpless, watching the two people he loved most cling to each other. He couldn’t stop Emma’s pain. He couldn’t protect her.

“You went through hell,” Joyce whispered into her daughter’s hair, “and now it’s over.”

“But it’s not over. Part of me’s still back there. I feel like pieces of me are just... missing. Like they were stolen. And I hate what’s left. I hate it so much.”

Joyce slid one hand into her daughter’s hair, the other pressing softly against her back.

“Please don’t hate yourself, honey. Don’t burden yourself with self-loathing. You don’t deserve it.”

Emma’s words tumbled out between sobs. “I do. Mom, I died in that basement. What’s left of me is just a cold, hollow, broken shell. And sometimes—” her chest heaved, “sometimes I wish Dave hadn’t stopped me that day—when I cut my wrist. I wish I just bled out in that concrete room. At least it would’ve been over. At least I could stop feeling these feelings. How can I keep living like this? When I feel so empty, so alone, so scared.”

The car filled with silence, broken only by Joyce's and Emma's crying.

Joyce wiped her face with the back of her hand, fighting to steady her voice. She forced herself to speak through tears.

"I certainly do not wish that. I already lost one of my babies. I will not lose another. You are not alone, Emma. You're hurting right now, and I wish I could take it all away. So does your father. But we can't—and I am so, so sorry. There is so much of you left, Em. So much to live for. You're not empty. You are not broken and you are not alone. We love you more than anything. Your family loves you, we're all here for you. My sister, your uncles, your grandparents, Kate, Rachel, Alice—everyone. We're all here to help you keep going. You can't let him win."

Emma sobbed violently, her body shaking against her mother. Brian stared out the window, trying to contain his tears. He glanced in the rearview mirror and caught Joyce's eyes—her face streaked with tears as she held their daughter tight, refusing to let go. All he could do was watch, powerless, as his little girl suffered.

Eventually, Emma's sobs softened into ragged breaths. Joyce eased her upright just enough to buckle her seat belt, then guided Emma gently onto her side, resting her head in her lap.

"Brian can I have my bag?"

Joyce takes her sand Burberry Highlands Tote from him, pulling the neatly folded pink blanket out. "Here, honey."

Emma immediately grabbed it from her hands, covering her body and balling some of it up to push against her left cheek.

Joyce placed her bag on the floor. She stroked Emma's hair then her side, continuing to sooth her as Brian shifted the car into reverse and pulled away.

- + Joyce and Emma are asleep, Brian wakes them and they put their coats back on, describe Emma's clothes, cheek earlier description
- + Enter through garage, Emma notices recycling bin filled with wine bottles
- + Two steps into house hurt Emma
- + Emma sits at the counter asks, Joyce about her medication and if it's "normal" then rests her eyes.
- + Brian runs out to the car and Joyce quickly removes all wine from the kitchen. Frantically cleaning up a bit. They both finish their tasks and find Emma reading the book, crying slightly. Expand this a bit.
- + Brian asks Emma what she wants for dinner, Twin Pines. Emma: Antipasto & Brian + Joyce share a medium EBA.

- + Brian goes to get food, Emma asks Joyce about school. Joyce says she's meeting with them next week. She doesn't want to rush things but also doesn't want Emma repeating the grade and being home alone. Emma asks about their jobs and hints at causing financial problems.

Brian turned onto their street; he looked in the rearview noticing Joyce and Emma asleep. He felt terribly for his wife and daughter they hadn't had good sleep in days. Half of him wanted to just sit in the parked car and wait for one of them to wake up, but they needed to figure dinner out and tonight was also probably gonna be a long one. He unbuckled his belt brushing Joyce's jeans not trying to scare her.

Joyce's eyes shot open, she immediately thought something was wrong but was grounded by Brian's face.

"We're home," he whispered, glancing at Emma. "Should we wake her?"

Joyce nodded, taking a deep breath.

She rubbed Emma's shoulder and spoke in her quiet sing song like she did every morning to rouse her, "Emma..."

"Hm?"

"We're home sweetie."

Emma eased herself back up, pushing strands of hair behind her ears, half folding the blanket to carry it under her arm.

Joyce opened the right passenger door and motivating cool air rushed in. It was in the high thirties and around 4:30, the sun was setting.

"Honey, why don't you go through the garage, the steps are smaller."

Joyce entered the man door to the right of the single bay, to open the big door.

Brian popped the trunk collecting their

Emma turned slightly, staring at her mom's car, their driveway, the tall shrubs that stood on the property line to the right. She looked at the orange sun, retreating under the horizon, flanked by colors of blue, yellow and pink. She was unfazed by the garage opening, beyond grateful to be standing where she was. Never before had she felt so relieved to be standing in her parents shitty driveway that needed paving five years ago.

Joyce stepped around the end of Brian's truck, noticing Emma standing there. Her hands in her pocket, her blanket under her arm, staring up at the sky. *She hasn't seen it in months, Jesus fuck.* Joyce kicked her tears out and carefully approached Emma. "Em?"

She blinked, dragging her eyes, swapping to Joyce at the last second.

"We can stay out here for a bit if you want?"

Emma shook her head, rubbing her purple quilted arms, "No, that's okay. It's freezing." She walked into the garage, noticing how dirty her dad's truck was and how many wine bottles were in the blue plastic recycling bin.

Joyce came up beside her, helping with the front step which was more painful than Emma anticipated. "Ow! Mhnmm. Fuck."

"Okay. Okay. You alright?"

"Mhmm." She blew out a heavy sigh. "Yep."

"We can wait here for a second."

"No, let's get this over with." Emma took the next step entering the far end of the family room. "Tss! Ow."

"Okay, all done. You want to sit on the couch?"

Emma shook her head, she was tired of always laying down. "No, the counter."

She walked over slowly, Joyce walking behind tentatively hoping the pain of using the steps was temporary.

Emma sat with her coat still on and winced slightly before kicking off her shoes. She took a deep breath, filling her nose with the smell of her house. Or what was her house, it didn't quite feel right. After swiveling around, she noticed a cardboard box and recognized the blue cover of a picture book her mother used to read to her.

Emma placed her hands flat on the granite, extending her arms, feeling its cool touch on her skin as she stretched her back. She folded up her arms, resting her chin on them. She yawned, realizing how exhausted she was, her eyebrow zinging as she did, "Mhmn."

Joyce saw Emma holding her eyebrow as she yawned again. She walked over the cabinet and got her some ibuprofen, filling a glass with water and handing them to her. "Here, sweetie."

"Mom, what other medications am I on?"

"Uh... Zoloft, birth control and Lorazepam. This last one is Minipress, you'll take it before you go to bed."

"What do they do?"

“The Zoloft is for managing PTSD, they’ve been giving it to you the last few days at the hospital. Lorazepam is what they gave you during panic attacks. The Minipress helps with nightmares.”

Emma frowned, “Will I need to take those forever?”

“That depends on how you do over the next few weeks and months. The psychologist is probably a better person to ask about that, but nothing is set in stone. This kind of thing takes time.”

“Is it normal to be on those?”

“Considering what you went through, I think so, but it differs greatly from person to person. Defining what’s normal can be difficult.”

“What if I have really bad nightmares?” “Then we adjust the doses and go from there. We need to see how you do over the next few days first.”

Emma nodded, returning to her former position, Joyce kissed the side of her head, speaking in a whisper, “I’m so glad your home sweetie.”

“Me too. Where’s dad?”

“Doing laundry and he had to shower, I’m gonna clean up a bit okay?”

Emma pretended to rest her eyes as she watched her mother frantically remove wine bottles and glasses from the sink. The kitchen was a disaster area, the sink was full, the floors and counter tops dirty. The clanking of plates startled Emma up right. She took a few deep breaths after realizing what was happening. Joyce washed all the plates in the sink, then filled up the dishwasher. Emma sat back as Joyce spayed the counter with Windex getting them clean enough. She walked out to the front hall kitchen, spraying the mirror and vanity.

Joyce rounded the corner noticing Emma flipping through the book she’d left when they rushed out of the house. Brian was standing silently by the other entrance to the kitchen watching her.

A tear dripped from Emma’s eyes, hitting the page as she read the lullaby, hearing her mother’s voice as she read it to herself. She looked up, meeting Joyce’s gaze, watching her father slowly enter from the stair side.

“You guys didn’t think I was dead, did you?”

Joyce fought back tears, “No honey, of course not. We never gave up on you. It’s just—it’d been two months. I was becoming acquainted with the possibility that I may not see you again for a very long time. I will never give up on you. Ever.”

Brian added in, “Em, we never stopped looking. We would’ve never stopped.”

Emma began chin shook and she started crying harder, “I—I tried to get a message out. I even told Dave he could write it. Just something small, anything. He wouldn’t let me. I even tried stealing his phone, he caught me once. I never did that again. I’m sorry—I tried—I”

Joyce walked up to her hugging her briefly, “Em, It’s okay.” Emma nodded as Joyce peeled her coat off and placed her blanket on the couch.

Brian made two waters, sliding a glass near Emma.

He leaned against the other side of the counter, “Sweetheart, do you want anything specific for dinner?”

“Um... I know we got take out for lunch but can we do Twin Pines? I really want their antipasto.”

“Yeah, we can do that. Babe, what do you want? You want to split something?”

“Sure, you want to do a medium EBA with some fries?”

“Sure. I’ll call it in.”

After Brian left Joyce and Emma sat at the counter going through her terrible childhood art work and the bizarre nicknacks she’s forgotten about. Every now and then Joyce managed to get her laugh until the novelty had worn off.

Emma looked down at her hands, “Mom. How am I gonna go back to school? I don’t feel saft here, how am I gonna feel safe there? And you’re here, I need to be able to go most of the day without you. Then all the stuff I missed. Fuck—how am I—”

Joyce felt her growing anxious, “Honey, listen. One step at a time, okay. You’re not going back anytime soon, okay? I’m meeting with the school next week. I’m assuming we’ll have to pay or they may provide a tutor for you. My goal is to make sure you don’t repeat the grade.”

Emma swallowed, nodding, “I’m not being held back because of that bastard.”

Joyce gave her a small smile, then kissed her forehead.

“Mom, did I choose the wrong hospital?”

Joyce furrowed her brow, “What do you mean?”

“Well, you told Joanne it was out of network, what does that mean?”

Joyce chuckled, clicking her tongue, “I thought you were sleeping.”

Emma looked away, thinking she was bad.

“Em, it’s okay. You don’t have to worry about that.”

“I’m just gonna look it up when I go upstairs. It has to do with insurance right?”

Joyce sighed, “Yes. Earlington Community isn’t in my insurers network, meaning some things may not be covered. Please don’t worry about that stuff Em, your dad and I will take care of it.”

“When do you have to go back to work?” Emma asked, afraid of the answer.

“I got next week off, but then I need to go back. Your dad’s working tomorrow.”

Emma nodded, Joyce could sense her fear.

“Honey, I’m sure Kate will want to spend every waking moment here and winter break is coming up. I’m assuming Henry will want to spend a lot of time here too?”

Emma grinned, “Probably.”

“My sister has also offered to come over if you need her too.”

“I just feel bad for dad.”

“Why? Because of work?”

“Yeah—I guess. I can’t hug him, he can barely touch me and hasn’t seen me in months and he has to go back to work like everything is normal.”

Emma reached out for a hug.

“Oh honey, you’re gonna see him all night. We can do a movie after dinner if you want. He knows you’re trying.”

“Henry said Margret’s home by five thirty, could you call her.” Joyce smiles, “Margret actually gave me his number if you want to call him directly? Might be a nice surprise.”

Emma nodded, taking her mom’s phone from her clicking the phone next to Henry’s contact.

“This is Henry.”

“It’s Em.”

“Emma... How are you?”

“Uh... you know, tired, sore, steps suck.”

“Emma, I’m so sorry. I... Can we talk about tha—”

“Not now.” Emma snapped, quickly changing the subjects, “The house feels weird, did that happen for you?”

“Yeah, yesterday and today I’ve noticed this place just feels off. I don’t know what it is.”

“Did you sleep okay last night?” Emma asked.

“Not really. I kept having bad dreams, Margret barely slept.”

“I’m sorry, I’m worried about tonight.”

“Your parents are both there right?”

“Yeah. I should be okay.”

“Well if you need me to come over before Sunday I can. I just feel bad for my sister, I missed her.”

“Don’t feel bad about that.”

“Em, is this your new phone?”

“No, my dad’s getting me one tomorrow, this is my mom’s.”

“Oh okay.”

“How are you feeling?”

“Just really sore. My arm’s a bitch, wish I protected myself with the left one. I have to sit down to pee.” Henry’s voice grew distant, “Shut it.”

Emma could hear laughter and smiled slightly, “Who else is there?”

“Jonah and his mom.”

“Oh that’s good. I thought you were home alone all day. I felt really bad.”

“No, they came after school was over, Sofia brought dinner.”

“Speaking of dinner, my dad just came through the door with ours.”

“Yeah my sister just pulled in. Well once you get your phone let’s facetime.”

“Okay. Yeah, I’d like that. Bye Henry.”

“Bye Em, sleep well.”

“You too.”

Emma gave the phone back to Joyce.

“How is he?” Joyce asked.

“Um, he said sore. His arm hurts, but Jonah and his mom have been there since 2:15-ish she made him dinner.”

“Oh, that’s good. What’s Jonah’s mom’s name?”

“I think Sofia? Or Sofey? I don’t know, she’s Spanish. Like Spain Spanish. Their last name is Alvarez, I know that.”

Brian entered the kitchen, placing a pizza box and the white bag down on the kitchen table. He quickly left to remove his jacket and shoes. Rubbing his cold hands together as he approached the head of the counter. Joyce had put plates and forks with paper towel napkins on the table she was making water.

Emma sat down at the head of the table, the hard wooden surface, radiating pain through her backside and legs. “Ow. Ow.” She stands quickly using the table for balance.

Joyce and Brian stare at her. “Sweetie, you okay?”

“Yeah. Can I just have a pillow to sit on?”

Brian immediately ran up stairs retrieving one from the linen closet. “Here, sweetheart.”

Emma placed it under here, sitting slowly, as Joyce began dolling out food.

“Better?”

“Yeah, thanks dad.”

Emma dug out a nice bite of salad, meat and peppers, saturated in italian dressing.

Emma twirled a piece of salami on her fork, speared an olive with lettuce, and forced herself to chew slowly. She hadn’t had antipasti since the beginning of summer, and the salt and vinegar flavors burst sharp in her mouth, almost too sharp. She looked up at her father, as he took a mouth full before squeezing ketchup out of the bottle. Joyce was silently staring at him, Emma noticed her eyes filled with tears.

“Mom?”

Brian looked up at Joyce as she turned towards Emma, “Yeah, sweetie.”

“Are you okay?”

Joyce let a tear slip, “Yeah—Yeah honey. I’m just—” More tears came, “I’m just so glad we’re all sitting around this table again having dinner. Last week it was a fantasy and now it’s happening right in front of me.”

Emma reached out, squeezing her mom’s hand.

Brian got up and walked over, hugging her for about fifteen seconds, calming her.

They both sat and the quiet meal commenced again.

Emma lifted another forkful, but this time the salad fell off, her hand was shaking. Emma grabbed her wrist, trying to make it stop, letting go again, it was still shaking.

Brian had dragged his chair next to the right side of the couch where Joyce sat. It was a modern slim recliner, knock off Scandinavian. It had grey cushioning and retractable leg rests. Its four rounded walnut legs, angling inwards as they climbed towards matching wooden arm rests a few inches in width. The couch was modern, a darker grey but still matched Brian's chair. It had three cushions and was adorned with orange and white throw pillows, along with one Joyce acquired from her mother's garage sale after she passed.

Emma sat on the middle cushion, her legs wrapped in a blanket as they rested on the ottoman in the middle of the room. She leaned against Joyce, holding her hand from under her arm.

The Italian Job played on the large television, one of Emma's favorite movies. Joyce thought the series they'd been working on, *Dexter* or *Game of Thrones*, probably weren't the best choices. She looked at Emma who stared through the TV, her hand was trembling.

Joyce stared at Brian until he turned, she held a finger up to her mouth.

Brian mouthed: *What?*

Joyce held a hand up, shaking it slightly, mouthing back: *She's shaking.*

Brian looked at his daughter, noticing her hand and the thousand yard stare.

"Em?" Joyce asked gently.

Nothing.

Joyce paused the movie. "Emma?"

The TV stopping returned her to the moment. Emma looked over at Joyce, "Yeah?" She noticed her slightly concerned, puzzled face. "What? What I do?"

"Nothing, you're just trembling. Staring. What were you thinking about, honey?"

"Nothing."

"You can't be thinking about nothing."

Emma spoke with a tired, edged tone, "It doesn't matter. Can you just put the movie back on?" She didn't want to tell them. It still sounded crazy to herself, what would they think? That they took her home too early probably. But maybe her mother would understand. Maybe she could help her.

Joyce spoke in a sad, soft voice, "It matters to me. What is it, honey?"

Emma spoke flatly, “I miss him.”

Joyce thought she understood. “Oh honey, he’s coming over on Sunday. He needs to rest, as do you. Margaret needs time with him.”

Horror, confusion and guilt battled on Emma’s face as she made eye contact with her mother. “Not Henry.”

Joyce took a moment, then parted her lips, inhaling quietly. Her eyes widening as she shoots a quick side eye to Brian then settles back on Emma. “You... miss Dave?” She said, raising her eyebrows slightly.

Emma’s eyes dropped, she released her mother’s hand and was now fidgeting with the blanket on her lap. She spoke quickly, feeling a need to defend herself. “I—I know it sounds crazy. I don’t want him to hurt me anymore or—or do those things but I feel like I want to see him. Talk to him. Like he’s missing. I—I don’t know.” Tears emerged from her eyes, as she whispered to herself. “God... I sound like a fucking lunatic.”

“Honey, you’re not a lunatic.” Joyce wiped her phone out, “Bri, can you get my glasses?”

“Sure.”

Emma panicked slightly and was a little confused by her mother’s reaction “Mom, what are you doing?” She sniffled, wiping her tears.

“Thanks babe... I’m looking up your symptoms, honey.”

“This isn’t something that—what symptoms? It’s a feeling not a symptom.”

Emma gave her mother some time, watching her lips intermittently move with what she was reading. Her eyes scrolling down her phone, the screen reflecting in her lenses.

Joyce looked over her glasses at Emma with a little concern. “Sweetie, can I ask you a question?”

“Okay.”

“After Dave hurt you would he ever be nice? Care for you? Show... affection?”

Emma thought of the punishment for trying to end her life. The freezing shower, the belt, then how caring he was. The ibuprofen. The pillow. How she deserved it. How she wished he was like that all the time. How she sought his approval. *Do I still want his approval?*

“After he’d hurt me a lot he would. I mean every night before bed he was nice for a few minutes but when he punished me for trying to escape, it was entirely different. He treated me like I was his daughter, it was fucking weird.”

Brian wanted to snap the armrests and legs off his chair. He imagined harpooning Dave with the splintered wood until blood poured from his mouth and the light faded from his eyes. He grounded himself with a sip from his light beer, quietly listening.

“Okay.” Joyce said calmly. “Apparently there’s something called trauma bonding. It’s when a victim of an abusive relationship forms an attachment to their abuser. It can happen when the abuser alternates between hurting and soothing their victim. It’s often built with tactics like threats of harm, manipulation, control, shaming and gaslighting. It can lead to—”

“Lead to what?” Emma needed to know.

Joyce looked up at her, wondering if telling her was a good idea. She remembered what her daughter had said in the car about letting it happen. She knew Emma would just look up if she didn’t tell her. “It can lead the victim to experience shame or guilt—they may feel like they allowed or deserved their abuse.”

“Great. Dave and I check all those fucking boxes. H—How do I stop it?”

Joyce placed her phone down, slowly folding her glasses. She spoke softly, “You stop the relationship, go to therapy and restore your anatomy. Sweetie, it’s okay.”

Emma spoke through broken breaths, “How is any of that okay, mom?”

Joyce gently pulled Emma towards her. “He’s gone and you’ve already restored a lot of your anatomy. My first call tomorrow is going to be to the therapist and psychiatrist Patricia recommended. I’m not saying what happened or what’s happening is okay. Just that, it’s okay to feel the way you’re feeling. It’s not abnormal.”

“I don’t want to see another shrink. I liked Patel, but I was always on guard with him. It felt like he wanted something from me. Don’t even get me started on that woman the school made me see from before, he was an absolute moron.”

Joyce released her. “Honey, let’s just see how one session goes, therapy does wonders. Your father and I didn’t like the woman the school used either. Searching the internet only does so much, they’ll know better ways of helping you. Margaret already made appointments for Henry, at different ones, but still.”

Emma stared at the paused movie, Charlie was talking to the Skinny Pete with Left Ear. “Fine.” She wiped her face with her sweatshirt sleeve, repositioning on the couch, wincing, letting out a heavy sigh. “God damnit,” she whispered angrily.

“Honey, what hurts?”

She spoke quickly, her voice filled with irritation, “The tear. My eyebrow. The bruises on my ass and between my legs.” *She should have never touched that door knob.*

“You can have more ibuprofen in—well now actually. You should ice the bruises.” Joyce thought for a moment, contemplating putting frozen peas on top of a pillow until a better idea hit her. “Oh shit... um... Brian do you remember that ice pack pillow thing? The one I used after I delivered her? Do we still have that?”

Brian knew exactly what she was talking about. He shook his head slightly, speaking speculatively, “Uh... it might be in the linen closet or the attic. We may have thrown it out or sold it in a garage sale.”

“Okay.”

Brian watched Emma while Joyce ran upstairs. A lone tear traced the contour of her left cheek, but her expression remained still, almost vacant. He considered asking if he could sit next to her, unsure if the request would make her feel better or worse. He hated just sitting there watching his little girl cry. Guilty from his inaction and angered by his helplessness. He didn’t know if she wanted space and silence or to be embraced and comforted—both seemed like wrong answers. But she’d been alone in a basement for eight weeks. Space and silence filled the gaps of the atrocities she endured. They probably weren’t in high demand right now.

He took a breath and spoke, his voice low and unsure, “Em I—”

Her unfocused eyes stayed pinned to the paused movie. She wiped her flushed face and sniffled. “I know dad.” Her voice was small and sad. She knew all he wanted was to help her. To hold her, make her feel loved and safe but something prevented her from crumbling into his arms. A protective barrier she didn’t remember building.

Her parents and the warm familiar walls surrounded her with safety, but she didn’t feel that way. She felt more at ease but not truly safe. Not yet at least. Maybe not ever. Henry came the closest, but even his presence wouldn’t make this house feel like home. It felt more like a memory than a sanctuary, like old clothes that no longer fit. Even if she did eventually feel safe and at home, she couldn’t stay here forever. The three of them wouldn’t always be there to protect her. What then?

Suddenly, the furnace kicked on with a low clunk and crescendoing roar, shaking the house ever so slightly. Emma flinched, gasping sharply as her whole body tensed. Her eyes darted around the room, scanning doors and entrances. She turned towards the kitchen for a second then returned her gaze to Brian. Her breathing slightly elevated.

“It’s okay, sweetheart. It’s just the furnace.”

Emma nodded, still on edge, remembering what Dr. Patal said about home potentially being overwhelming. That even harmless noises could make her uneasy. She stood slowly from the couch, wincing, holding on to its arm until the dizziness subsided.

Brian used the armrests on his chair to stand hastily, remembering the ibuprofen. “Sweetie, sit—please. What do you need? I’ll get you ibuprofen.”

“I can get it. I’m fine,” she said, too fast and sharp. Her voice softened and became more resolute, “I want to get it.”

“Alright.” Humility stung Brian as he realized her anger towards helplessness dwarfed his completely. It felt wrong but he was slightly satisfied, being able to empathize with her on some level.

Emma carefully walked toward the counter under the medicine cabinet, unsteady but determined to do something for herself. She retrieved the four tablets, washing them down with leftover water from dinner before returning to the couch.

Joyce thundered down the stairs, speaking triumphantly, “I found it.” She stuffed the pillow in the freezer and pulled out a soft ice pack. She approached the couch, sitting carefully. “Here, honey. Hold this to your eyebrow, the pillow will take a little while to cool down.”

She looked over at Brian, slightly irritated by the fact that he hadn’t moved. “Brian did you get her ibuprofen?”

“She wanted to get it herself—I tried.”

Emma leaned back into Joyce and they watched about fifteen more minutes of the movie.

“I’m gonna go get that pillow okay?” Joyce whispered to Emma. She briskly walked to the freezer, hoping the pillow still kept cool. It was sky blue and had a wide raised section that ran down the center.

“Here you go.”

Emma stood, holding Joyce’s arm, sitting back down, positioning herself. She exhaled slightly, closing her eyes.

Joyce noticed some of the relief in her daughter’s exhausted face. “Feel better?”

“Mhm. Thanks.”

Joyce kissed her forehead, “Your welcome, honey.”

She was sad but immeasurably grateful. She sat closely to Emma letting her nestle into her light-weight grey cashmere sweater. She felt the weight of her child's head and her fingers intertwine with hers. Memories rushed through her of holding Emma for the very first time as a newborn. Her skin impossibly soft, her tiny breaths, her minuscule fingers instinctually wrapping around her thumb, the weight of new life in her arms. Just like sixteen years ago, the exhaustion and pain barely registered just the ferocity of unrelenting love. She was holding everything that mattered, sobered by the horror of having it taken from her twice. Beyond thankful that this time around was only temporary.

“It’s just a few more steps.” Emma winced three more times until she reached the top of the stairs.

“Mom, should the stairs be hurting that much?”

“You won’t. Dr. Ruiz said stairs will be painful for a few days, but they’re allowed.”

“I’m worried about showering.”

“You showered fine at the hospital. I’ll help you over the side of the tub.” They entered the bathroom and Joyce shut the door behind her.

Emma avoided eye contact, looking at the handles on the vanity. “That’s not what I mean.”

Joyce rubbed Emma’s arm maternally, “What is it, honey?”

Emma was still averting her gaze, shaking her head. “I—I can’t. I’ve already said too much—I don’t want you—burdened.”

Joyce’s voice firmed slightly, “Honey. I told you before. You can talk to me about anything. I’m your mother, I’m here for you, always. Even if you don’t want your dad knowing. It’s okay.”

Tears fell from Emma’s eyes, one hitting the soft light blue towel on the floor outside of the tub, another landing on the dark grey floor tiles. “Dave would make me shower with him sometimes.”

Joyce widened her eyes and felt stupid she hadn’t thought of that sooner. “Oh sweetie.”

Emma inhaled sharply, shaky cries following as she choked out words. “He—he’d handcuff me to a rail—he—he’d w—wash me. Huh-huh—Mnhm. Hic—huhh.”

Joyce hugged her, wishing she could squeeze all the pain out of her like a ketchup bottle. She closed her eyes, whispering in her daughter’s ear, “Shh—”

“He’d pin up against the wall sometimes and—Mmh.. Nm..”

Joyce rubbed her back, soothing her, “I’m sorry baby. Shh. I’m right here.” She held Emma until she began to calm down. “Let me just turn on the water and well see how you feel, okay?”

“Alright.”

Joyce eventually drew the shower curtain closed, “I’ll go get you some new clothes. You doing okay?”

“Yeah.”

She returned to the bathroom a few minutes later with new clothes, placing them near the sink on the vanity.

“Em, you good?” She waited for a response but got none. “Emma?” Still nothing. She silenced herself, making out near silent crying.

“Honey?” Joyce grew concerned as the third prompt went unanswered. She opened the shower curtain and found Emma sitting on the bottom of the tub, her face red from the warm water and tears.

Joyce turned the water off and got Emma something to cover herself with. “Was the shower too much, sweetheart?”

She shook her head.

“Are you just upset?”

Emma nodded.

“Alright. That’s ok. We can just—do you want to just sit here for a minute?”

“Yes,” her crying was beginning to taper.

Joyce sat on the edge of the tub, turning her body towards her, reaching out stroking Emma’s left cheek. “You need some sleep, honey. Today was too much.”

Emma looked up at Joyce, “Mom, can I ask you something personal?”

“Of course, honey. Anything.”

She gazed at her mother, eyes bloodshot, finally catching her breath. She hesitated and broke eye contact, she felt the wet porcelain on her skin and looked at the light grout between the lighter grey tiles on the wall. “Have... Have you...” she shook her head and looked towards the ceiling, squeezing her eyes shut, taking a breath. “I...”

“Just let it out Em. It’s okay.”

She found her mother's eyes, “Were you ever sexually assaulted?”

Joyce blew out a heavy sigh, deflating. She pushed her lips together, frowning and nodding. She shook her head, “Nothing compared to what you’ve been through, but yes. Once. It happened in college.”

She giggled nervously, “I never thought in a million years I’d be telling you this.”

“You don’t have to.” Emma replied, empathetically.

“Sweetie it’s alright, it’s been on my mind lately. I wanted to tell you after I found out about what happened to you, I just didn’t know when the right time would be. It happened a long time ago, right before I started seeing your dad. I’d been dating a man named Julien for almost two years, I actually thought he’d propose once we graduated. I really thought he was the one, he was kind, spontaneous, funny, he was going to med school. He wanted to be a surgeon. We were

obsessed with each other. Towards the end of my first semester junior year, after a party one night we were having sex. At one point I didn't feel right, I wanted to stop. I asked him to and he didn't. I asked again and a third time, nothing. I started crying and yelling at him to stop, he just kept going. It ended once I managed to push him off onto the floor."

Emma spoke quietly, almost afraid to ask more. "What happened to him?"

"No idea. I never saw him again after that. I didn't want to, which is part of the reason I didn't report it. I only ever told your dad and my sister. I'd assume Tommy knows as well but I never told you're Nana and Papa. I regret that, they should've known."

Emma was silent watching Joyce's eyes fill with tears as she continued.

"I trusted him. I felt safe around him. I loved him. He destroyed all of it in a few seconds. I was devastated. I'm not justifying it, but if that never happened I wouldn't have met your dad and I wouldn't have met you or your brother."

She felt Emma grabbing for her hand and latched on to it squeezing, "I'm sorry mom." She frowned at her, "Thanks honey. That's not something for you to worry about."

"How'd you get over it?"

"I hate to tell you this sweetie but it isn't something that you just—get over. At least in my experience. That's not to say you shouldn't or can't move forward."

A pause followed, "Why are men like that?" Emma asked, feeling guilty about singling out men, remembering what Avery had done to Henry.

Joyce shook her head again, "They're not all like that. Your father isn't. It sounds like Henry isn't. Your Uncle isn't."

She chuckled, "If Jared ever did anything like that to my little sister, I'd kill him." A smile tried to surface through Emma's torment.

"But the ones that are. How do they not feel bad?"

"I don't know honey." After a brief silence, Joyce brushed her daughter's sleepy cheek, "Why don't we get you out of this tub?"

Emma entered her room; it was like she'd never left. The pink comforter and purple pillowcases were exactly as she remembered, placed on her full bed which was freshly made. Her collage of pictures and drawings is still plastered on the wall next to it. The ornate white wooden bedside table had the lipstick container she'd left on it the day of her abduction. The triple-bladed white fan, which matched the small table, hung lifelessly over the round light-pink rug in the center of the room. String lights twinkled around the perimeter of the ceiling, drooping in a uniform

pattern. She walked over to her desk, flipping through her old homework which was still sprawled across its surface. Her eyes welled with tears as she reminisced over how simple things used to be. Yearning for the naivety of her past self, all her old problems and drama that now seemed insignificant and pointless. She picked up a framed image of her and Kate from their final year at summer camp, smiling like idiots in their bathing suits and sunglasses. Tears trickled over the freckles on her cheeks. Fear of how Kate might react to her entered her mind. She noticed the book she'd been reading for English in the far corner, concerned with how she'd even attempt to go back to school. What would all her classmates think of her? Eight weeks ago, all she wanted was to be popular. She sensed that was about to become true but for the wrong reasons. It felt as if everything about her had been boiled down and reduced into a single tragic event. Emma Joanne Brown, the girl that got kidnapped and raped.

Joyce entered and noticed Emma sitting on the side of her bed holding a picture frame, wiping away a tear. She sat next to her with pills in one hand and a glass of water in the other. "God you two look ridiculous."

Emma smiled and leaned her head into her mother's shoulder, yawning. She reached over, placing the frame on her bedside table. After taking the pills, she crawled into bed, blowing out a heavy sigh of relief. She placed her arms over the down covers, "I never noticed how comfy this bed was."

Joyce stroked her forehead, "You need anything, honey?"

Emma blinked slowly and gently shook her head. Her mother smiled at her for a moment longer, savoring her, memorizing her face again. She kissed her forehead, brushing her thumb gently over her brow avoiding the wound. "Good night honey. I'm right down the hall if you need anything."

"Wait, Mom?"

Joyce turned instantly, already softening.

"Can you stay with me until I fall asleep?"

"Of course."

Joyce eased down beside her, careful not to jostle the blankets too much, Emma clutched onto her arm and nestled her temple into the crook of it.

"Sorry for being so clingy lately," she murmured.

Joyce pressed a kiss to her hair, then gently ran her fingertips across Emma's chest and up her arm in slow, rhythmic patterns. Her voice was barely above a whisper. "It's okay honey. To be honest I'm enjoying it. I'm just... I'm so glad you're home. God I missed you. I love you so much."

“I love you too,” Emma replied, quickly and quietly.

Joyce watched Emma peer nervously around the room—the window, the closet, the door. Still on edge. Still halfway between reality and fear.

“Honey, you can rest now. It’s okay,” Joyce soothed. “You’re safe here. You’re home, sweetie.”

Emma tensed at a figure that silently stood in the doorway, relaxing as she noticed it was Brian.

“Goodnight, honey. Try and get some sleep.”

“Goodnight, dad.”

Brian pushed his lips together forming a sad smile, proud of her for some unknown reason.

Then, quietly, Joyce began to hum. Just a simple, wordless melody—slow and familiar, the kind of tune she used to hum when Emma was a baby falling asleep in her crib or as a toddler after reading to her at night. Emma stilled, her body softening as it vaguely remembered the cadence.

Even though the girl beside her was sixteen, bruised and broken in places Joyce couldn’t reach, she was still her little girl. Needing comfort, needing a long deserved peace.

Joyce stayed until Emma’s breathing slowed, and the tension in her hands slipped away. She kissed her temple one more time and whispered, “I’ll love you forever. I’ll like you for always. As long as I’m living. My baby you’ll be.” She paused for a moment, tears running down her cheeks as she gave Emma a final kiss on the forehead. “Please forgive me.”

Joyce carefully shut the door behind her, she paused for a moment and took a few shaky breaths, looking at the light recessed in the ceiling. She crossed the threshold of the master and noticed

Brian in his boxers, scrolling on his phone, feet planted on the hardwood floors. He placed it on the Mahogany cabinet next to his side of the bed and looked up at his wife. She hadn’t slept well in weeks and the last few days sucked the life out of her. He noticed her baggy, exhausted eyes. Bloodshot from every kind of tear.

“Is she asleep?”

Joyce nodded and sniffled, focusing on him as he made a pained smile and held out both his hands. She slowly approached and he gently grabbed her wrists.

Brian said nothing, holding back tears of his own as he watched her cry.

“What are we going to do Bri?”

“We’ll figure it out.”

“She’s still so scared, I can feel it.”

He spoke kindly but firm, “We’re going to get her through this Joyce. I promise you. She’s home honey, that’s what matters for now. One day at a time, okay?”

“Brian this isn’t something that just goes away. You know that right?”

He rubbed the tops of her caring hands with his thumbs, “I will never truly understand what either of you were forced to endure, but I can appreciate that. I... I’m so sorry. For all of it.”

Joyce wiped a tear from his cheek before it slid into his beard, “I know.” She walked over to her side of the bed and sat there for a moment, staring at the red paint chipping off her toenails eventually swinging her legs under the white covers.

Brian got close, gave her a kiss and wrapped his arms around her as she rested her head on his Foo Fighters t-shirt. “Did her shower go okay? I heard you two talking when I passed.”

“Yeah, she was sad, confused. Asked me if I’d ever been assaulted before.”

Brian began stroking her hair, “What did you tell her?”

“The truth. I told her about Julien.”

“Do you think that’ll help her?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. What happened to me is nothing compared to her.”

“Babe... You can’t belittle your own trauma because you perceive someone else’s to be greater.”

Anger stung her as she lifted her head looking at him, her tone sharp. “That someone is your daughter, and I will do with my trauma as I fucking wish.”

Silence followed for a few seconds as the rage in her face was replaced by remorse and exhaustion.

“I... I’m sorry.”

Brian held the side of her face in one hand, whispering, “Don’t be.”

She peered back into his eyes, touching his beard, kissing him one last time before falling into a long-deserved sleep.

“Joyce!”

She was scared awake and instantly registered Emma yelling from her room. “Don’t! No! Please Don’t! Don’t make me! Not again!”

“Shit!”

She tore her covers off and rushed to Emma's room, flipping on the light. She was asleep, covered in sweat, her body tensing.

Joyce shook her shoulders carefully but hard enough to wake her.

"Don't touch me!"

"Emma. Emma!"

Her eyes shot open, frantically darting around the room. She retreated in the bed, eventually recognizing her mother. Her heart was pounding and her breath was fast.

"Breathe, honey. Just breathe."

Emma took four deep breaths recounting the events of her nightmare.

"I'll be right back, sweetie," Joyce ran across the hall grabbing a towel from her bathroom returning to Emma who was curled up in bed, her eyes unfocused as she rocked gently.

"Em, I need to dry you off." Joyce sat on the bed next to her and calmly selected one of her arms removing the sweat.

"That medicine isn't doing anything." Emma said in a defeated, tired voice.

"It doesn't always work for people immediately. It can take a while."

Joyce looked behind her checking if her shirt was sweat through, but its color was uniform, and the sheets were dry. Emma's breathing was finally settling, "Honey why don't you lie back down?"

"I don't want to sleep."

"Sweetheart you need to, you're exhausted."

Her voice was filled with terror, "He felt so real. Like he was here, in this room. Like I could touch him."

Joyce got on the other side of her and pulled her back, "He's jail cell honey. He'll never touch you again. Come here." She slowly lowered Emma down, feeling her burning skin and being careful to avoid her injuries.

"Just close your eyes honey, I'm right here." Joyce stroked her forehead until her breathing became uniform and her body relaxed. She carefully exited the bed once she knew her daughter was asleep, returning to her own.

"Is she all right?"

"Bad nightmare."

"They said the medication may take a bit, right?"

“Yeah, we need to wait and see. Hopefully, she can get through the rest of the night.”

Joyce felt for the metallic handle, flushing the toilet and turning out the light, the red clock read 4:30 AM. She was magnetized towards the bed, relief rising in her as she sat down.

Screams echoed through the house.

“Don’t make me! Leave me alone! Don’t! I don’t want to! Dave please!”

Brian was startled awake and noticed Joyce as she rushed out of their room.

She swung Emma’s door open, hitting the switch, rushing to her bed. Emma was sweating again, but worse, her face was covered in it and her body tensed more aggressively. Joyce gently touched her shoulders.

“Emma. Emma. Em!” Her lids flipped open, she instantly sat up and yanked at her mothers grasp. “Don’t! Don’t! Get off me!”

“Honey it’s okay. It’s me.”

Emma saw her mother on the bed next to her, the mattress was wrong with different sheets on it and her bedframe was made of metal not wood. She could make out her mouth moving, but her words were distant, slowly growing louder. Emma’s voice was a whispering chant, “No. No. No.”

“Emma, can you hear me?” Joyce asked nervously.

She nodded, but the repeated words continued.

“Sweetheart, you’re in your room. You’re safe.”

Emma looked down at the floor and the hardwoods were gone. She spoke in an elevated whisper, “Mom, I don’t feel right. The room is wrong, the floor it—”

Joyce grabbed Penny, “Her honey, feel her. It’s Penny. You’re at home, in your bedroom.”

Emma fingered her plush ears, feeling her body. “Mom, I need lorazepam, this isn’t helping.”

“Brian!”

Heavy footsteps approached, Emma’s heart rate elevated, and her breathing became sharp. “No! Please!” He arrived and she clinched her eyes shut, grabbing on to Joyce’s arm, “No! I’m sorry! I’m sorry!”

Joyce rose quickly, ushering him out, “Can you grab a Lorazepam tablet from downstairs please?”

Brian shuffled down the stairs and Joyce returned to her daughter drying off her trembling skin. The stairs sounded off again and Joyce met him outside Emma's door, "Thanks babe."

Brian was still half asleep, "How is she?"

"Terrified. Another nightmare."

"You need anything else?" Brian asked, rubbing his eyes.

"No. I'm probably gonna sleep with her."

"Alright. I could stay up with her? So you can at least get some sleep." Brian offered knowing she'd reject it.

"No. You have to work tomorrow. It's fine."

She returned to Emma, "Here you go honey."

She took the little pill with a shaky hand and placed it in her mouth chasing it with some water. The trembling began subsiding and Joyce soothed her for about ten minutes as the medication kicked in, "Shh. Shh. No one is going to hurt you. You're safe. Your home."

Emma's shirt was drenched, and a small spot had formed in the middle of the bed.

"You need to change your shirt, honey."

There was no response, Joyce went to the dresser, grabbing a seafoam green shirt, and she touched her daughter's shoulder. Emma flinched but recognized her mother once she found her face.

"Let's change your shirt, sweetie."

Emma finally relaxed enough to remove her shirt and put a new one on, returning back to her side, curling into a fetal position. Joyce pulled her blanket up, watching over her.

"M... Mom?"

"Yeah, honey?"

"Can you sleep with me?"

"I was planning on it. Let me get my pillow."

She returned to Brian. "Lorazepam is kicking in."

She grabbed her pillow and bent over him, kissing his head. He squeezed her leg in acknowledgement.

"Love you."

"Love you too," Brian mumbled with his eyes closed.

Joyce found Emma sitting up, rocking slightly, looking around the room nervously like a little girl waiting to be picked up at daycare.

“Hey, hey, I’m right here. Em, you’re safe.”

Joyce got into her daughter's bed lying on her side looking up at her, Emma was still sitting up. She stroked her daughter's arm, “Sweetheart, let’s go to sleep. I promise you, you’re safe.”

A tear found its way to Emma’s jaw, her voice quiet, tainted by fear, “I don’t want to see him again.”

“If you have another nightmare I’ll wake you up.” Joyce grabbed her shoulders with the slightest amount of force, “Why don’t you lie down at least?”

As she did, Joyce started running her fingers up and down her arm, with the weight of cotton, avoiding bruises.

“Mom, can you hold me?”

“Mhm. Do you want me on the other side of you?”

“No, I want to face the door.”

“Okay, has the Lorazepam kicked in?”

She nodded slightly as her anxiety was beginning to dull, accompanied by a soft warm drowsiness.

Joyce pulled the covers over them and got closer to her daughter, shuttling her arm under neck, resting her hand next to Emma’s bandaged wrist, draping her other arm over her side. “I’m not hurting you, am I? Is this alright?”

“Yeah.”

Joyce gently kissed the side of her head. “Try and get some sleep, honey. I’m right here.”