I, Jack Wright – Today's The Strike Of A Match

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Summary: *Gray comes down with a hefty kidney infection that knocks him on his arse and John asks Emily to help out with caretaker duty. Which she really doesn't want to do, but the stupid idiot is her father after all. It's awkward and there are too many unsaid things between them, but there might be a time for them to be said, and maybe it's now…*

Author's Note: Title from Our Lady Peace – Sorry

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Yet another remote video call meeting that could have been an e-mail, and Emily lets out a sigh after she hits the *End Call* button. Running a company from across the Atlantic isn't always the easiest task in the world.

She frowns when she checks her phone. There's a missed call from her uncle. No voicemail but a text to follow up on it.

'Em, please call me when you have a minute'

That doesn't bode well. It's usually about her trainwreck of a father.

When she returns her uncle's call, her first instinct turns out to be right. John tells her that her father has come down with a pretty serious kidney infection. Not serious enough to be hospitalised, but bad enough to be bedridden and in need of assistance.

"I hate to be asking, but would you be able to look after him for a day or two? I'm going to be away for the rest of the week."

A bone-deep sigh works its way out of her. "Is there no one else you can ask?"

"I wouldn't be calling you if there was."

"I don't know why you think this has to be my responsibility."

"He's your father, Em."

"Yeah, well, giving his sperm to sire me doesn't exactly make me indebted to him."

"He's really not doing so well. I don't want him to end up back in the hospital."

She sighs. "What is it he actually needs?"

"Just some help with the basics. You know, food, hydration, medication, toilet runs…"

"*Toilet* runs?!"

"Yeah, you know, just get him there and back."

"You're saying he can't walk on his own? Why the hell isn't he in a hospital?"

"No, he can walk. But it's painful and he has a fever and gets dizzy..."

"Great," she says, not able to hide the sarcasm. "I don't think I'm the right person for this, John. What about Bella?"

"They're not together anymore."

"Fuck," she mutters under her breath. "Okay. I'll do it if I absolutely have to. But just tomorrow. Find someone else for after that."

"Thanks," John says, the relief clearly audible in his voice. "You're a lifesaver. Do you have keys to his place?"

Ironically enough, she actually does. She isn't sure she's ever used them. "I do."

"Okay, you should be all set. The kitchen is stocked with what you need. There are a few tins of soup in the cupboard under the counter. He has to take the antibiotics regularly. Make sure he drinks enough. If his temperature rises above 40, take him to the hospital."

"Fantastic. Anything else I should know?"

"He was nauseous today. Vomited a few times."

"So you want me to hold his puke bucket, too."

John sighs. "Just do what you need to do. I trust you to figure it out."

"Sure."

"Thank you. I'll owe you."

"Gray will owe me. We can add it to the long list."

"Yeah. Look. He was pretty out of it when I left. Would be great if you could text me a quick update tomorrow."

"Yeah, I will."

"Okay, ta. Look, I have to go. Bye."

She signs off with a, "Bye," then presses the *End Call* button. Bloody hell. Not how she had imagined to spend the next day.

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The next morning, she packs a few things to keep her busy during the day, unsure how long these caretaking duties will actually be necessary. She hopes it won't be a lengthy thing. It

might not be that dramatic. Maybe she can be in and out. Stay an hour, feed him some food, put a water bottle by his bed and be done with it.

It's a bit of a walk from the Tube station and she feels uneasy as she unlocks his front door. By all accounts, she shouldn't be here, not to mention that she doesn't *want* to be here. But she said yes, didn't she?

The flat smells of stale smoke and dusty records, like it always has. It's funny that it actually elicits a strange sense of nostalgia. It only lasts a second or two, but it's there nonetheless.

When she enters the living area, it's in more disarray than she remembers. How long has it been since she was here the last time? A year? Two? It's not total chaos, but just enough to see that whoever lives here clearly isn't into keeping things neat and tidy at all times. She can't say she's surprised.

After she deposits her bag on a chair, she listens for any noises. The flat is quiet, save for the low hiss of a train running along the tracks behind the house. She goes to check the bedroom, tentatively stops in front of the closed door. Should she knock?

Maybe not, if he's sleeping. So she softly opens the door to peek in. There's a figure lying in bed, the familiar head of greying hair peeking out from under the duvet. He stirs as she opens the door.

"Dad?" she says in a low voice.

He lets out a low moan, turns over in bed as he blearily blinks at her. "Emily?"

"Yeah."

He groans again. His voice is laden with exhaustion. "What the hell are you doing 'ere?"

"John called me."

There's a sigh from her father. "Great."

"He said you needed help."

"I'm fine. You don't need to be 'ere."

She gives him a pointed look. "No, evidently you're not."

He straightens up in bed, pushes himself into a more upright position with a pained grimace. "I can fend for myself for a day or two."

"Well, your brother was pretty adamant that wasn't the case, so..."

He sighs again. "So what? You're going to babysit me?"

"I'll feed you. Drag you to the loo if need be, though I won't hold your knob while you pee."

"Christ, Em."

"Yeah, you know, just so we're clear."

She looks around, takes in the décor that's more coordinated and stylish than she remembers. There are modern art prints above the bed, framed posters and gold albums on the wall. A vase with dried flowers adorns his nightstand. There's an empty glass next to it that she picks up. "What do you need?"

He closes his eyes for a long moment. "To sleep this fuckin' thing off."

"What do you need that I can help with?"

He shrugs. "I don't know. Nuthin'."

"Okay," she says. It's not like she didn't expect this. The two of them aren't exactly on friendly terms. They've certainly never had any kind of loving relationship.

She turns and goes to the kitchen. Least she can do is help with hydration. It takes her a while to find her way through his kitchen storage, make a cup of tea. She's surprised there's only oat milk in the fridge. He doesn't strike her as the type.

When she gets back to the bedroom, he's still in the same position but now has his head leaned back against the headrest, his eyes closed. He *does* look ill. Something that feels like it might be a twang of empathy mixes into the resentment.

His eyes open when she puts the mug of tea and the filled up glass of water on his nightstand. He doesn't say it, but she knows he's grateful for the small gesture.

"Since when do you drink oat milk?"

"Lactose intolerance. Switched a few years ago. Got used to it, I 'spose."

"I hope you like it in your tea."

He nods. "Yeah. Ta."

"John said to make sure you drink enough."

"Did he now?" It might sound cynical, but he reaches over and takes the mug to sip some of the tea.

"So how'd this happen?"

"This what?"

"Kidney infection or whatever it is."

"How the fuck should I know? Not like I went lookin' for it."

"You still running a fever?"

"I don't know. Probably. Feel like bloody horseshite."

"Yeah, you should take some paracetamol for that."

"Jono say that too?"

"In fact, he did."

"He worries too bloody much."

Her mouth curves into a small smile. "Okay. Well, I'll let you get some rest. I'll stay in the living room for a while. Call if you need anything."

His face scrunches into a grimace. "Seriously, Em. I know you don't want to be here. So just go."

"Dad. You're ill."

"Yeah, well, I don't need your charity."

"God. You're impossible. This is just me being a decent human being. Which can't always be said about you."

He sighs. "If you just came to berate me on how much of a terrible father I've been, can you at least save it until I'm not hanging out me arse?"

"No, I didn't come to berate you on anything. And it's not like we haven't been over it a dozen times already. I'll..." She turns towards the door and vaguely points at it. "You know."

"Yeah. Living room."

He closes his eyes again and Emily takes a long last look at his face that looks just a little too pale before she exits the room, leaving the door ajar behind her.

There's a note on the kitchen counter that she didn't notice before with some instructions that John has left. There's a thermometer next to it – the kind you stick in the ear. She wonders if it's Gray's or if John bought it just for this purpose. Her father doesn't really strike her as the type to have something like this handy. Then again, he lived with Bella for a good number of years, so who knows.

She pulls her laptop from her bag and sets it up on the dining table by the window, realising she will need WiFi access somehow, so she starts looking if she can find the router somewhere. Her excursion takes her through the living space of his studio.

It's a bit of an eclectic mix of styles in there. The décor is all over the place. Industrial style furniture mixed with things you might find in a charity shop. There are odd knick-knacks that might well be souvenirs from overseas trips. Music magazines are everywhere. Some of his old bestselling album covers are framed on the walls, along with more of his gold albums.

He was always a bit of a narcissist that way, but she also knows music is his one big passion in life. One that surmounted everything else—including his daughter. She's listened to his records, of course. It isn't exactly her style but it's not terrible.

She smiles to herself when she remembers those years when she was a child and he'd made an actual effort to fulfil his parent role, when she'd sit cross-legged on the floor while he improvised riffs on his guitar, when he'd take her along to gigs in social clubs around the area and she'd hang out in the dressing rooms because she wasn't allowed to go on stage. She'd be given free soft drinks and talk to whoever would be willing to engage with her. It was a strange time.

She eventually finds the router tucked away in the bottom corner of one of the shelves, tries to find the sticker that has the password on it and takes a picture of it with her phone. She connects her laptop and finds that there's nothing urgent in her mailbox that has to be dealt with immediately.

She notices a stain on the table next to her laptop – something that's sticky and a little disgusting. Christ, Gray. When's the last time someone—anyone—has cleaned in here?

It's not even something she consciously decides, but before she knows it, she finds herself tidying up the flat. Because honestly? It's a fucking mess.

Heaps of cigarette butts have piled up in ashtrays that are placed strategically throughout the room. He's been a smoker for as long as she can remember, and when she became old enough to understand how unhealthy it actually was, it was one of those things that she would continually resent about him.

There are empty bottles of liquor on the shelf – tequila, bourbon, vodka. She doesn't recognise the brands. She picks up a few empty beer cans and bottles, too. Just one more vice – or rather one more drug he's addicted to. Not the last one, either. There's also the crack... She wonders if he's still on it.

It seems like ages ago, but she vaguely remembers one of the conversations they had before the trial. He had asked her to meet at a restaurant, had tried to clumsily reconnect, had told her he'd cut right down on his drinking, all the while downing glass after glass of red wine before it became apparent why he was *really* there. She now knows why he was so desperate for the money, but that doesn't make in any less of an arsehole thing to do.

And that's one of the things that makes her gut roil with anger when she thinks about him. If there was one word that she'd describe her father with, it'd be 'irresponsible'. It wasn't just the drugs. He could never get this shit together to manage his income, he was always in some kind of financial trouble. And then it got so bad that he continuously begged friends and family to lend him money and bail him out.

She'd done it so many times, had fallen for his empty promises every single time that he'd pay her back and then had to feel that proverbial slap in the face when she realised he wouldn't. At some stage, she'd decided she would never do it again. That's why she'd said no the last time he asked. And then that had almost killed him.

She had hoped it would have been a lesson. Something to prompt him to get his life together. But then he'd actually sued her, and things got even more complicated between them.

She puts the plastic bag with the empty bottles and cans next to the rubbish bin and wonders again why she's here and how much of a bad decision it was to come. And yet, she finds herself folding up blankets on the sofa and putting on the dishwasher that's only half full but smells like it should have run days ago. It whirrs to life with a low hum, followed by gentle swooshing.

As she leans against the kitchen counter to survey the scene, her forehead draws into a frown when there are sounds from the other room – something that sounds like a clatter and Gray's swearing. She goes to investigate.

What she finds is her father awkwardly half-crouching by the nightstand, trying to contain the mess he made. There's a broken mug of tea on the floor that's caused a bit of a spill. She's by his side in a few, quick steps.

"Dad, just leave it, I'll take care of it."

"No," he fends her off, but she can see his movements are clumsy and sluggish.

"Dad. Come on. Go back to bed, I've got it."

"Fuck's sake," he barks at her and goes for one of the ceramic mug shards, then emits a pained hiss and withdraws his hand. "Fuck!"

Emily shakes her head and turns on her heel, coming back with a roll of kitchen towels. She tears one off and holds it out to him as he clutches his index finger that's bleeding freely.

Helping him off the floor to sit on the edge of the bed proves more awkward than she imagined and she can feel the heat of the fever radiating off of him.

"How bad it is?" she asks, pointing to his finger.

"I don't know," he says wearily.

"Let me see."

The cut doesn't look too alarming. She makes a judgement call that it doesn't look like something that requires stitches.

She goes to find a plaster in the bathroom. It takes her a minute to locate it, and she helps him get it around his finger, which Gray takes with the grace of a kicked puppy. As Emily picks the shards up from the floor and mops up the spilled tea, she asks him, "Why didn't you call me if you needed help?"

He tiredly says, "Didn't think I would. Got a little dizzy. Need a slash."

"You need me to help you?"

"No," he says quickly.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. Just help me up.”

She does and he holds on to her for a moment before he pushes away and slowly shuffles out of the room, using the doorframe for support when he gets there. She has to suppress the urge to follow him. For good measure, she waits in the hallway outside the bathroom.

He looks knackered as hell by the time he emerges, and it’s shocking how a simple infection knocked him on his arse because her father’s usually a pretty lively man.

To her surprise he steers her towards the living room. “Need a change of scenery. Can’t take the bloody bedroom anymore,” he says by way of explanation.

She nods and watches him sink down on the sofa, then puts a glass of water on the coffee table, along with a dose of antibiotics and a blister of the paracetamol. He downs a dose of both, then looks around. “Did you clean up in ‘ere?”

She sits down on the other sofa. “Yeah. No offence, but it was a fucking mess.”

He exhales wearily. “You didn’t have to do that.”

She ignores that and instead says, “Couldn’t help but notice the ample signs of alcohol consumption. So that’s still an issue…” She hadn’t meant to make it sound so accusatory, but she’s long past the point where she’s willing to give him the benefit of the doubt.

He looks at his lap, the shame written all over his face. “Yeah,” he says in a low voice.

“Are you still using?”

He shakes his head. “No. I haven’t touched any of that crap since the hospital.”

She nods in a way that’s almost appreciative. “Well, at least that’s something. Would surprise me if it lasted very long, though.”

He takes a long look at her. “Why are you ‘ere?”

“I already told you. Because your brother asked.”

“You could’ve said no.”

“I tried. He wouldn’t take no for an answer. Guilted me into it, if we’re being honest.”

“Family obligation? Is that it?”

She shrugs. “I don’t know. Maybe I’m an idiot with a soft spot for my uncle. Because I’m not doing this for you.”

“Right.”

“No, seriously.”

Silence settles for a long moment, then he says, "So you've stayed in London."

"Yeah."

"You plannin' to go back to San Francisco?"

"Why? So you can feel less guilty for never actually talking to your daughter?"

He stays quiet and she turns her head to look at him. There's a frown on his forehead, his face not betraying that there's regret there.

It's not new. She's knows he has regrets about the choices he's made, but she's learned over the years that the regrets never amount to anything tangible or actionable. He's just always been too self-absorbed to make a true effort to change.

He draws in a long, heavy breath. "I know I've fucked up. I know it might not make any difference, but I *am* sorry."

"For what?"

He gives a light shrug. "Everythin'."

She lets out a cynical chuckle. "Uh-huh. Yeah. That's typical Gray Wright right there. A blanket apology, and you think that's going to make everything right."

He hangs his head. "No. I know it's too late to fix anythin'. Just sometimes I wish we could... start over, you know?"

She considers that for a moment, but they've been here before. He's promised things would change, but they never did. "It's certainly a nice notion."

"I want things between us to change. I really do."

"No offence, Dad, but you say that every single time."

"Well, this time I mean it."

"And I want to believe you. But you have to give me something. Give me *one* reason why I should give you another chance."

His mouth draws into a hardened line. He swallows. "I don't have any. I'm a fucking mess."

Her gaze lingers on his face, and he looks genuinely sad and remorseful. "You know, I think that's probably the most honest thing you've said to me in years."

"Yeah," he says quietly.

"I want to. I want to give you another chance. But I've done it so many times, and you've let me down every *single* time."

"I know. And I'm sorry about that, too."

She waits. Waits for some kind of justification why it's not his fault, why he was at the mercy of some circumstance or other, but to her surprise it never comes.

Huh. That's new.

He continues, "Look, I know it's not an excuse, but the last few years have been really fucking hard. The pandemic fucked up a lot of things, and that's not an excuse either, but the money problems, they've just... It's been such a struggle. And it got worse and worse."

She gives him a long look. "So what have you done with Jack's money?"

He shrugs. "Paid back me debts, used what I had to to keep the label afloat. Jono's been helping me to safely invest some of it. There isn't a whole lot left to spend."

She laughs lightly. "Is there such a thing as investing safely?"

A small smile spreads across his lips. "Something safer than scorin' dope and buyin' luxury collector's vinyls."

"You've always been a bit of a hedonist. But look at you, being all responsible. That's a whole new side of you."

His smile turns a little sheepish. "Doesn't suit me, does it?"

"Who cares if it means you won't be beaten to a bloody pulp again by creditors you can't pay off."

He looks away. "Not my proudest moment."

She thinks back to that time. Despite their antagonistic relationship, it had been quite a shock when her uncle sent her the news. "You know, I did come to see you when you were in the hospital. Before you came round."

His mouth twitches. "You didn't come after."

"Things were complicated." She pauses, then adds, "They still are."

He tiredly scrubs a hand down his face and sighs.

Emily looks at him. His face is still a little too ashen and there are exhaustion lines etched into his forehead. "You wanna lie down for a bit?"

"Yeah," he exhales.

Gray makes himself comfortable on the sofa, pulling the fleece blanket over him that's draped across the backrest.

With her father dozing off across the room, she sits back down at the table and works in silence for a good while. At some stage she looks up when he starts snoring lightly, can't help but smile

a small smile. She wonders how Bella put up with him all these years and what happened that she left or if she, too, eventually just got tired of his antics.

It eventually piques her attention when he starts mumbling something in his sleep and she looks up. He seems to be having a dream and her concern shoots up a notch when distress mixes into the jumbled words that he's muttering. She leaves her laptop and goes to check.

He's now also groping for something that isn't there, more distress in his voice, so she decides it's time to free him from whatever bad dream he might be trapped in.

"Dad?"

It doesn't do much, so she repeats, "Dad."

He keeps mumbling unintelligible words and it takes a shake of his shoulder to snap out of it. He blearily opens his eyes. "Emily?"

"Yeah. You were having a nightmare."

He pushes himself into a more upright position with a groan and scrubs a hand down his face. "Fuck. This thing is really knocking me on me arse."

She sits down on the edge of the sofa. "You okay?"

"No, I'm not okay. I've got a fucking kidney infection that's sucking the life out of me."

"I mean apart from that."

"Apart from that, yeah, just grand."

She gets up and walks over to the kitchen counter to grab the thermometer that's still lying there, holding it up to her father. "Your brother's orders."

"Like I said, he worries too fuckin' much."

"I'd say your brother worries just the right amount."

He sighs. "Well. Do your worst."

His temperature reading is 38.9. Not alarming but high enough that she can see it's dragging him down. She hopes the antibiotics will kick in soon. "You think you can eat some soup?"

He gives her a no-nonsense look. "You going to cook for me?"

"No. I'm going to heat up tinned food. We'll save the homecooked meals for the important occasions. You know, like introducing future spouse or announcing break-ups. Were you going to tell me about Bella leaving you?"

He rubs one eyebrow with two fingers. "That was in the middle of the fuckin' trial."

"And you couldn't have told me afterwards?"

"Why? It's not like you were ever interested in my personal life."

That part is true, she figures. Or perhaps not as true as he makes it out to be. There were times when she wished she was included more in her father's life. But then he'd turn around and do something stupid or exasperating and she'd be right back to wanting nothing more to do with him.

She sits down on the coffee table so that she can face him. "So what happened?"

He looks at her, then looks away. "I fucked it up."

Yeah. Well. That tracks. "Fucked it up how?"

"I owed that money and I was getting desperate."

"Wait. You stole from her?"

"It was more like borrowin'... I paid it back after."

"Christ, Gray. That is such a shitty thing to do. Not to mention that this is part of your problem, too. You just lie so callously. All the time. It's only a matter of time before people stop believing that what you say may actually be genuine. How is it that you don't see that?"

His mouth twitches and he presses his lips together before he says, "No, I do. But I really miss her."

"Are you still in touch?"

He shakes his head. "That ship has sailed."

"I'm sorry."

"Are you? You didn't even know her."

"You did bring her to a few family gatherings, remember? She seemed pretty level-headed."

His mouth curves into a small smile but it falters after a moment. "She told me she had bailed me out emotionally and financially one too many times."

"Yeah. We all have. You get that, right?"

He nods. "I fucking hated asking every single time."

"But you never cared enough to try and change anything?"

He lifts his head. "How? I was so deep in the shit that I was just treading water."

She shakes her head. "Christ, Dad. But at least now that's over, right?"

"Yeah."

"And you're going to try and keep it that way."

His gaze on her is steadfast and assertive. “Yeah, I don’t ever wanna have to deal with that shit again. Just wish it could have been done without you losing out.”

Her eyes bore into his. “You didn’t give much of a shit about that when you sued me.”

“No, I did. But I really needed the money.”

“It wasn’t just that, though, was it? You also wanted to get revenge on your father.”

He lets a snort of breath out through his nose. “The bastard fucked me over. Fucked all of us over except for you. And you still got a shitload of money out of it. So don’t play all high-and-mighty.”

She closes her eyes, tries to push those memories out of her head of when he’d touched her and what it had done to her. “He fucked me over, too.”

Gray frowns. “Fucked you over? What do you mean?”

She shakes her head. She shouldn’t have said that. “Nothing. Forget it.”

“Em.”

“No, just… Stop asking.”

“What did he do? Tell me.”

“God, what part of stop asking don’t you understand?”

Gray now sits up straighter and leans forward, his voice more urgent. “What the fuck did the bastard do?”

“He touched me, okay?”

“Touched you? Touched you how?”

“Inappropriately.”

There’s fresh resentment burning in her father’s eyes now. “He violated you?”

“No, just… A touch.” She indicates her breast. “Here. Once.”

Disgust mixes into Gray’s expression. A touch of anger, too. “The fucking cunt,” he snarls.

She nods. “Yeah. It was humiliating. Didn’t want anything more to do with him after that.”

“How old were you?”

“Thirteen.”

“Fuckin’ hell, Em. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“When would I have told you? You were never there.”

He turns his head to look away. After a long moment, he says, “I’m sorry.”

"Why? Your father being an arsehole and a paedophile is not your fault."

"No, but... That should never have 'appened. And maybe it *is* my fault. If I'd been—"

"A better father? Come on, don't kid yourself. You were never that person. And with someone as fucked up as Jack as a dad, it's not like I don't get it. I mean, do I wish you'd done better, tried more? Yeah. All the time. But, you know, now that I understand what was going on, some of these things are actually making a lot more sense."

"I still failed you."

"Yes, you did." It has to be said. She isn't going to make any more excuses for him.

He presses his lips together so that they form a grim line. Yeah. He's already tried to apologise. What else is there to be said?

Then her face scrunches up in pain and he clutches his arm to his gut.

Emily frowns. "Dad?"

He tilts forward as he emits a low moan and it's all she can do to hold out a hand to keep him upright. "Dad."

He lets out another moan and leans forward so that her hand pushes against his collarbone. Her other hand comes up to his upper arm and she lets it rest there.

"Hey," she says in a low voice.

He breathes through the pain for a long few seconds until he leans back and away from her.

"Sorry," he says in a voice that's awash with exhaustion.

"Do we need to get you to a doctor? Or the hospital?"

"No," he retorts quickly. "Just need some painkillers."

"Are you sure? This seems pretty serious."

"It's okay. Just need to wait for those fucking antibiotics to kick in."

"I don't like this."

He lets out a sardonic huff. "Yeah, neither do I."

"No, seriously, maybe we should take you to the hospital."

"No," he says resolutely. "No hospital. Fucking hated it the last time."

"No one likes hospitals. I just don't want you to..."

He throws her a pregnant look. "Die on you?"

"Be in pain like that. But yeah, that too."

"I'll be alright. It was worse yesterday."

"Well, *that's* reassuring," she says sarcastically. "You wanna go back to bed?"

"Weren't you going to heat up some soup or sumthin'?"

"You're actually hungry?"

"Hungry might be overstating it."

"Okay. I'll make us something." She gets up to check the supply in the kitchen again, moves around a few of the tins, then calls over to Gray, "You have a choice of tomato, lentil, cream of mushroom or minestrone."

"Tomato'll do me."

"Okay, tomato it is."

They eat mostly in silence between slightly awkward attempts at meaningless small talk. Gray gets a few questions in about her personal life, but it's hard to say if he's genuinely interested or if it's just another ruse of his to pretend he cares. After their conversation earlier, she wants to think it's actual interest, but they've been here before, and even though he is her father, he's hard to read and even harder to trust.

After finishing his bowl of soup, he makes it back to bed on his own, but she still goes to check on him to make sure he has easy access to water. When he's settled in, he gives her a tired look. "You can go home now. I'll be alright."

She smiles. "Yeah, I know. But I'll stay for a bit."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure."

"Okay," he says drowsily.

"Get some rest. I'll check in on you later."

Back in the living room, she finds that she missed a video conference she should have dialled into and writes a quick apology e-mail, then deals with some work-related fires that need to be put out, reviews those documents that came in to be approved. With that taken care of, she empties the dishwasher and tries to figure out where in the back yard the rubbish bags need to go.

She isn't even sure how it happens, but half an hour later, she finds herself cleaning her father's bathroom. Not something she ever thought she'd see herself do, or something she wants to speak of. Maybe he'll notice, maybe he won't. She could say it's the least she could do, but that's not really it, is it? She owes him nothing. Yet, there's no reason not to do him the small favour when he's laid up and not fit to do chores in the foreseeable future.

Well. Maybe he has someone who does it for him. She doesn't know his personal routines enough for that, but judging by the state of the living room earlier, she figures the answer to that is no.

She's almost done, putting the last finishing touches on wiping the sink when she hears noises, then sees the door opening and her father's surprised gaze at her recent activity. He still looks tired but maybe a little less worse for wear than earlier. She takes that as a good sign.

"Are you cleanin' my bathroom?" he asks, as if that isn't obvious.

"What does it look like?"

"Em," he sighs. "I'm not your responsibility."

"Yeah, I know. But it needed to be done, and you're not in any shape to do it any time soon."

He looks down and stays quiet for a long moment, the silence hanging there just a little too long. She frowns, the lines on her forehead deepening when he looks up and there are tears glistening in his eyes.

"I don't deserve this," he says in a low voice.

She shakes her head, putting the cloth she's holding at the side of the sink. The way he stands there in his pyjama bottoms and a washed out t-shirt, hair all dishevelled, forlorn, exhausted, stripped of all defences, something inside her makes her forget all the shit that's piled up between them. She takes a tentative few steps closer, puts a comforting hand on his shoulder when she stands next to him.

It's Gray who turns to her and draws her into a hug. She stiffens at first, then hesitantly leans in. It's tentative at best, but his hands are warm on her back, giving a gentle squeeze. It feels strange, and before she can think more on it, he's the one to sever the connection.

He doesn't meet her eyes when he steps back. It's a cautious truce, and he knows that. They both do.

She slinks out of the room, figuring he actually needs the bathroom, and Gray doesn't stop her.

A few minutes later, he meets her by the kitchen counter and she hands him another dose of antibiotics, painkillers and a glass of water, which he dutifully ingests. She also takes his temperature again. 38.4 – at least that's on the right trajectory. He doesn't look quite as ashen as he did earlier today, either.

Maybe they can have a cup of tea together and then she can leave him to his own devices because now she's a little more confident that he'll be okay on his own. When she puts the water on and gets two mugs out of the cupboard, her father homes in on the cupboard across from the cooker from which he produces a package of biscuits. It's the fancy ones – the digestives with milk chocolate and a caramel layer, and it makes sense because her father has always been a bit of a foodie.

A few minutes later, they sit at the dining table by the window, dunking digestives into their tea. She steals a look at him and he gives her the smallest of smiles. Not the kind that's coy or ingratiating – it actually looks appreciative and genuine.

"This is nice," he finally says.

"You mean us not being at each other's throats after being in the same room for more than five minutes? Yeah. You can thank your brother for that."

He smiles back. "Jono's a bloody saint that way."

Her father and her uncle have always been fairly close. They've had their differences, surely, but she wonders... "Did you and uncle John... When you were little, did you two get along?"

Gray's face darkens somewhat. "Well enough."

"But not that great?"

"Things were never great in our family. Come on, you know that."

"Dad. We never talk. How would I know about that?"

He takes another bite from his biscuit and stays quiet.

Emily decides to probe further because now she's curious. "What was it like for you, growing up?"

He sighs. "Do we really have to talk about this?"

"I'd like to know. Maybe it'll help me understand a few things better."

He sighs again, then says after a pause, "You know how your grandfather was. Mum wasn't that much better. Never had much interest in their children. Well, maybe in Jono more than me. Sent me off to boarding school when I was thirteen. I fucking hated it, along with all the kids there who hated *me*."

"You were at boarding school?"

"Left as soon as I could. It was a bloody hellscape."

"That's when you got into music."

"I was always into music."

"I meant the music business."

"Yeah. I 'spose."

"And then you met Mum?"

He nods. "Didn't have enough time with her, though, did I?"

"Enough to have me."

"Yeah, well, that was an accident."

Holy. What? She looks at her father, who looks back at her, his eyes suddenly wide, like he realised the massive fucking cock-up he just made.

"An *accident*?" she repeats, incredulous.

"No," he quickly backpedals. "I didn't mean it like that."

"Oh no? Then what *did* you mean?"

"Just... that it was unexpected, is all."

She shakes her head, lets out a sardonic scoff. "Come on, no need to sugarcoat it, Gray. You never wanted a kid and then you got stuck with one. God. That explains so much!"

"No," he tries to feebly protest. "I *loved* you from the moment I laid eyes on you. I don't have any regrets. Not about that."

"You *loved* me? Well, you had a funny way of showing it!"

His head now hangs low. "I know. I've been a shitty father. We've been over this."

"Yes, we have." She slams down half of the biscuit she's still holding and it hits the table where parts of it break into crumbs. She gets up and takes her laptop to shove it into her bag. Any desire she might have had to stay here any longer has now disintegrated.

"Emily," he says with an edge of desperation to his voice.

"Fuck you, Gray."

"Em. Please. I *love* you."

She closes her eyes, shakes her head as she goes to grab her coat. "You know what? The sad thing is that I know part of you does. But the other part... That part is so overpowered by your massive bloody ego and your daddy issues that I don't know if there's anything left to salvage."

And then Gray is in front of her. "It wasn't what you think. She left when she was first diagnosed, never even told me she was pregnant until it started showing. She moved in with some friend, didn't want to see me for four bloody months. Didn't even call me when the labour started.

"She didn't want to see me when she had the chemo and all that shit. Moved away to the Pennines for a few years. I hardly spent any time with you until you were three years old. And then, all those years later, the fucking cancer came back and it ate her up so fast and I... I was left with a kid I didn't know what to do with."

It stops Emily in her tracks. She never knew this part. "And you decided to tell me that *now*?"

He deflates. "When? When would I have told you this?"

God, why can't her father have a fucking backbone for once? She raises her voice. "I don't know. Any bloody time I was old enough would have been good. But oh no. Gray Wright can't fucking own up to anything in his life, because he's always the poor victim in everything, isn't he? The one who's never to blame for any shit that happens to him. It's always other people, or some uncontrollable circumstance, or life fucking him over. I'm so sick of it. I'm sick of the excuses, the blame shifting, the constant—"

She stops when she sees her father's face contort again in a pained grimace, holding out a hand to steady himself against the wall. "Aw, fuck," he mutters under his breath as he hunches his back.

Emily guardedly stands and watches, unsure what to do. In the end, she does nothing, watches and listens and he sucks in a few hissed breaths and works his way through the pain. When he finally straightens up, she clumsily reaches out a hand almost by instinct, but he waves it off.

He vaguely points at the door. "Just leave."

Fuck. She can't just leave now. She keeps standing where she is.

"Go," he repeats acerbically.

"No."

"For fuck's sake," he mutters. "I don't need a bloody personal nurse. It's not like you even still care."

"What the fuck, Gray? I'm your bloody daughter!"

"And you've made it abundantly clear that I've done nothing at all for you to stick around for. Just wash your 'ands off me and go. This is your chance. Just walk out. Then we can be done with this and you won't ever have to see me again."

Emily bristles. "Is that what you think I want? To never see you again?"

He shrugs. "Every conversation we have, it always lands there, how much of a fucking screw-up I am, how much you hate me for it. And maybe I am, maybe I'll never change. So why don't you just fucking go and live your life? You can have my blessing. I give it to you. Right 'ere. You can have it and leave."

His face scrunches up in pain again, but he pushes through it and points towards the hallway. "There's the door, and if you go now, you don't ever have to come back. You don't ever have to worry about me, about whether this fucking thing kills me or not."

"Are you fucking serious?" Emily can't believe it. Because, what the fuck?

His expression is hard, laced with bitterness. "As I'll ever be."

"You think I don't care whether you live or die?"

He closes his eyes for a long moment, his hand still braced against the wall, saying nothing.

Emily's eyes bore into him and her voice is now raised, bordering on angry. "We almost lost you once already. How, Dad?! How can you fucking say this?! God, you're unbelievable!"

He turns away from her and she watches him walk over to the kitchen counter, facing away from her, his back hunched as he leans forward with his arms braced against the counter. He draws in a sharp, audible breath that he releases slowly and unsteadily through his mouth.

Emily can't help but step closer, but he warningly raises his hand and then steps away. She watches him walk through the hallway to turn towards his bedroom, and Emily stands there, still stunned.

What the fuck just happened? How did they end up here again? How do they *always* end up here?

The anger in the pit of her stomach mixes with something more profound. Something that washes over her and makes her eyebrows knit with something she can't rationally explain.

She remembers seeing him lying in that hospital bed, unconscious, his face bruised and swollen, and she can feel her eyes water. Despite everything, despite all the shit he's done, she knows with an absolute certainty that she doesn't want him dead.

She finds herself walking to his bedroom, hesitating in front of it, then softly rapping on the door. When there's no response, she opens the door. He's sitting at the edge of the bed, his forehead in the palms of his hands, his elbows propped up on his knees.

Tentatively, she sits down next to him, two feet away. Neither of them say anything for a few, long moments and Emily is ready to just leave it and go, but then he looks up. His forehead is furrowed with a pain and regret that sits deep.

"I'm sorry," he says in a whisper.

He's said it a few times already today, but this time it sounds like he truly means it, like all the years of failure and regret are culminating in these two words.

She wants to meet him halfway, desperately wishes she could. But the thing is, she doesn't know if she's ready to forgive him, ready to believe he'll truly have the resilience to make a permanent change for the better. But seeing him sit there, distraught, small, powerless, it reminds her of her grandmother sitting on a chair outside Gray's hospital room, helpless and lost, not knowing if her son would regain consciousness or what state he'd be in if he did.

"When you were..." she starts. "When you were in the hospital after you got beaten up, do you even know? Do you even know that we were all worried for your life? Uncle John, your mother... Me. We all know you're not perfect. Far from it, actually. But you're still..."

She pauses there, swallowing. He asks in a low voice, "I'm still what?"

"Our family. We care, Dad. About whether you live or die. Whether you're ill or in pain. But you don't always make it very easy to be there for you."

He looks away, then his hand comes up to sweep his palm across both cheeks. "I know," he says, his voice teary.

She waits for a 'but' that never comes, so then she asks, "So what do we do with that?"

He shrugs. "I don't know."

"How about we talk some more about this when you're feeling better?"

He nods. "Yeah. I'd like that."

Silence hangs there for a moment, then she draws in a long inhale. "Look. I have to go now, but I'll check in again tomorrow, okay?"

"No," he dismisses her. "Em. You don't have to do that."

"I know. But I'll do it anyway." With a smile, she adds, "Uncle John will be up my arse if I don't."

He gives her a small smile back and she says, "Call me if you need anything."

He nods, and Emily adds, "I mean it. If you feel worse, if you need help with anything. I'll come."

"I'll be alright," he assures her and looking at him, she wants to agree with that assessment.

They say their goodbyes which are guarded, but there's also a crack in the door that both of them left ajar for further exploration of a fractured relationship that may not be beyond the point of repair after all.

As she closes the flat door behind her, she keeps standing there for a long moment. Definitely not how she had imagined this day to go. But as jarring as it had been, she can't deny that it's also been somewhat cathartic.

She lifts her head and looks up at the early evening sky that's turned into a sea of wispy pastel oranges and pinks against a light blue before she slings her bag over her shoulder and leaves the premises.

Her father may be a train wreck and a fuck-up, but deeply flawed as he is, he's also a human being. And maybe there's a chance for redemption somewhere to be found, if they both try. Until today she wasn't sure whether she ever wanted to, but now she knows that she does.

And who knows, maybe if they both do, there's a path forward that isn't riddled with ever-present resentment and blame. She truly hopes there is and that they're both willing to brave it.