

12 - Back to Normalcy

The faint whispers of bumper to bumper traffic, ongoing construction, and brisk winds could be heard from a distance. Thin, vertical strips of light stained the wall, as from the opposite side they peered through the drawn curtains. The only other presence in the room was the digital clock by the bedside, glaring its digital numbers; early hours of the morning.

Possibly the faintest ongoings could be heard from the other side of the closed door, but nothing loud enough to awaken who was asleep. Buried amongst the plush comforter and blanket, and supported by the expansive mattress which was a glorified cloud, a woman slumbered. The pillow easily capable of supporting three heads was occupied by only one, but it had selfishly thrown itself about it from one end to the other; back and forth multiple times in the night. The loose sheets and bedding had been partly folded over each other and areas were bunched more than others, whilst one of the culprit's appendages hung lifelessly over the edge.

The times between each motion and slothful stir became less and less, and became more and more restless from the waist below. It would remain like that until about fifteen minutes later, and then a groan and sigh would erupt.

“Ugh....” Propping herself up against the headboard, Emily blinked her eyes as the darkness was still leaving their corners. Her body had gone back to being wet all over, and just about the only silver lining was that it wasn't *as* bad this time...But she still felt warm again. Again, not as much; especially from her head, too. In fact, it felt pretty normal. Cold, almost? She pressed a hand to her forehead, surprised to feel a texture that wasn't skin. It was rough, wet, and cold. Luck was on her side though, because instead of her skin turning into a washcloth, she'd just had one put on her instead.

Did Joyce put this on me? Emily held the pile of wet cloth in her hand, with a gaze lost in its countless fibers while her consciousness kicked into full gear. Despite how it made her feel on the surface, it invited a new warmth inside of her; a reminder of the doting person she was in the domain of right now...However, one thing led to another, and it suddenly reminded her of the mishap she caused for Joyce last night.

She'd need to apologize properly. Emily couldn't even begin to imagine how important of a call she must have disturbed! Then again, didn't Joyce say it was her mom that she was talking to? What was she thinking? Of course that was an important call! And even if it wasn't, it probably wouldn't be the best if she found out about their relationship...How would they explain what they had? Was there even a way to describe it? The thought was too taxing to consider, and it only

reminded her of the mental blocks that were jutting outwards in the most awkward places; her headache still in mild swing.

All over she still didn't feel too spectacular, but painful still couldn't fully describe it. She felt dull. For better and worse, it meant she at the very least wasn't as uncomfortable, yet she was still trapped on the tightrope between sweet sensation and suffering. One chain of thought kept leading to another in her head, and her focus finally stumbled upon her bladder, which was making itself known with a constant knock against her lower area.

Right now? A small whimper escaped her, as confining herself to the bed was what she wanted more than anything. Her surroundings were still slightly spinning, and she was still caught in a perfect state of half-sleep to fully jump back into it. She wanted nothing more than to crash right now, but of course bodily needs had to get in the way...Peeling back the rustled covers, she suddenly stopped.

A diaper. She was wearing a...diaper. That's right...The decision weighed heavily on her shoulders, which is why she didn't want to give it much thought; she wanted to sweep it off her plate before it became crushing.

If you wanted to use your diaper too, that'd be perfectly okay with Mommy... As if on cue, the words whispered through her ears; maybe her mind? It didn't matter. Coupled with sleepiness, sickness, stress, and simple laziness, Emily almost surprised herself when she started to push slightly on her bladder.

She couldn't actually be doing this, could she? Wetting of her own complete volition? She couldn't stop questioning herself, but she didn't stop pushing. It was certainly strange, but deep down, she knew it was okay...The idea didn't sit totally well with her, but she was too tired to care, and her smaller side could only think of Joyce as she did her deed. Despite the inner turmoil, her momentum showed no signs of slowing.

Finally, after forcing herself from a sitting position, she let out a deep sigh as a sudden, warm stream invaded her underwear; her diaper. The sensation was almost relieving, oddly enough. It became one less worry, and now she could go back to sleep, as she was already trying to get comfortable again. Though, she'd had her fair share of warm temperatures already, and the sudden wet heat around her waist didn't feel amazing given the already heated circumstances. Thankfully she didn't need to go that much...but she did feel a bit bashful...But Joyce would take care of it, right? She could depend on the woman, after all.

She was...special.

Rolling over on her side and straightening the bedding somewhat, Emily found herself the maximum amount of comfort that was possible, given she was sick and in a wet diaper. She hadn't bothered to glance at the clock, and didn't let her mind escape the confines of the room. Nothing in that moment mattered more than whisking herself off to dreamland. Hopefully there will be better adventures than the ones before, though.

"Mhm. I'm just switching out her washcloth right now. I'll make sure to give her that stuff you mentioned," Emily could hear Joyce move around the room, as she slowly opened her eyes. "And yes, I'll keep on top of her with fluids and food. Thank you again, Amanda. I know weekend calls really aren't your thing..." There was another brief pause. "Just send me the bill; I'd feel bad not giving anything in return. Okay? Perfect. I'll keep in touch if things don't get any better."

Emily could now see enough to know Joyce had just hung up on her phone, and could feel the mattress shift when something new descended upon it. Beside her, it didn't take Joyce very long to turn from her phone and to her, as her stare rained sunshine and roses upon the sleepy girl.

"Good morning, sleepyhead!" She gave Emily's shoulder an affectionate squeeze. "Are you feeling any better? Worse?"

"Better, I guess." Emily tried to sit herself up a little, taking notice of how the room was much brighter now. The curtains had been drawn, and the outward city sky was spewing its torrent of light through the windows.

"Well, I can't say that I expected you to kick this is one sitting..." Joyce's voice was somber, as she stroked Emily's hair. "But as long as you're feeling better in any shape or form, it's a step in the right direction."

"I know...And thank you for taking care of me," Emily's innermost feelings were starting to feel raw again. "I even interrupted that call last night, and I took up your time because of it..." She was the absolute worst. Even the smallest of disturbances she caused felt like they held the weight of the world, and she only knew how to take, take, and take from Joyce when all she would do is give. The one opportunity she had not to be a screw-up, and she managed to-!

"Interrupted? I only remember you doing as you were told." Her words cut through Emily's mental madness like how she threw a wrench in Joyce's earlier call. "Well, maybe not

completely, because *someone* was out of bed when they weren't supposed to be," She looked down on Emily with a playfully stern look. "But even if it were an issue, how could I ever be mad at you?"

"I know, but even on top of that, this was supposed to be *our* weekend! But instead, I'm spending it being sick!" Emily's headache was throbbing the more she felt her emotions getting out of control. "It's not fair to you, and at every point I somehow demand more and more of you!" Despite being so out of it, Emily could feel her deep-seated concerns bubbling from within. Having Joyce take care of her was one of the most amazing things she'd ever experienced, but to a whole new degree was she dragging the woman down.

"Hey, hey!" Joyce helped pull Emily up, and wrapped her arms around her. "Why are you being so hard on yourself? Don't you remember? I *wanted* this kind of thing, and don't you like it too?"

"Yeah...but still-!"

"Then why are you fighting it?" She looked Emily in the eyes, who already looked to be on the verge of tears. "Have I ever been forced by you to do anything? There's never been a single moment in our time together like this where I've wanted it to stop." Her undying concern and warmth only made Emily crumble further, as she buried her face in the woman. "Never once have I thought of you as a burden, and you're a blessing that I could never appreciate enough. I'd never wish for anything bad to happen to you. *Ever*. But, I'd be lying if I said that the way you're relying on me now didn't make me happy in some way..."

She *was* happy to be Joyce's baby, but the idea of total dependency still didn't sit well with her. It was a part of the job she was still adjusting to, and each time she dipped further into the chilling pool of babyhood, it was getting harder and harder to adjust.

"Emmy, you're not *allowed* to be mad at yourself, and you're definitely not allowed to feel bad when you ask me for things, or when I do things for you."

"...Really?"

Joyce almost wanted to laugh, but she'd never want to seem like she was mocking her. Still, she had figured it was a given by now.

"Of course, silly! Do I need to prove it to you by putting mittens on your hands and booties on your feet? So then you'll really need someone else to do everything for you? Maybe then you'll

learn how to lean on me a little?” Now she was laughing at the thought, and with Emily clutched in her arms, she could tell it was lightening her mood too. “I’ve already said it a few times, but I guess I need to say it again. Don’t EVER apologize or feel guilty for having me do things for you. If you’re worried about causing me trouble, think about how stressed I am when *you’re* the one that’s sad. Your happiness is my happiness, and the same goes for when you’re glum.”

Maybe it wasn’t her way with words, as much as it was her entire character; her being. Joyce always knew how to pick up the pieces and make Emily whole again. Even Emily knew she was being ridiculous; feeling bad after all this time that had passed and how far she’d come. She *should* know better than to fret over these things...

“I can’t stop you if you’re going to feel guilty, but I’m hoping you’ll learn to not be so hard on yourself when these things happen, because I’m not going to stop providing for you, you know.” She’d just need to work a little harder drilling that into her...

“Can we stop dwelling over the unnecessary stuff, though? I’d much rather I have my bubbly little girl back.”

“I’m sorry...” Emily partly mumbled, still buried in the shirt of her caretaker. Joyce could only laugh, hearing her little girl trying to be so sincere in the most innocent way possible. “I just don’t want to be a burden...”

“It’s okay, and that’s the last time I want to hear you being sorry when there’s no good reason for it, got it? You’re not a burden, and you’re far too precious to be called otherwise.”

Meekly Emily nodded her head, as she finally let go of Joyce.

“Good. Now, let’s get you into the kitchen. We’re at least gonna try something for breakfast. I’m not asking for a lot, but I’d rather you eat something before I give you your medicine.” She had already stood from the bed and was waiting for Emily to take the lead.

Given how her head and stomach were feeling, food didn’t really seem appetizing at all right now. For Joyce, though, she’d at least give it a try...Emily was just about to comply, but was suddenly reminded by something she partly remembered doing in her half-dazed state...

“Ah, Joyce? Do you think we could...take care of something before breakfast?” Instinctively her legs shuffled; a loud plastic crinkle making itself known.

“Take care of what? I thought you didn’t want to wear clothes? You still feel a bit warm...”

“No...it’s not that. At some point, I-”

“Used your diaper?”

The words effortlessly came from Joyce’s mouth, as she looked at Emily with a knowing smile. Slowly but surely, she was having her down to a ‘T’.

“Y..yes.” It was still far too difficult to look Joyce in the eye when she responded to these sorts of things, which is why her vision took much more stock in the padding around her hips. It was crinkly, plastic, white, and lavender-scented. The wetness indicator was unperturbed; waiting to be...wet? The more Emily started to turn her gears, the loud crinkle started to make more sense, as well as the fresh smell of powder, and the pure, white crinkly exterior.

“You already...?” Stunned, Emily blinked her eyes as she found it in herself to look at Joyce, who seemed to be eating up every morsel of the abashed realization she was currently saturated in. Yet again, she’d been taken care of and handled without even being around to notice. The squishy wetness between her thighs was gone, now that she took the moment to feel it, and speaking of wetness, the spots that Joyce had so gingerly dried last night felt anew again as well.

“I *did* say don’t expect me to be waking you up, silly.” Joyce didn’t feel like waiting anymore, as she took Emily’s hands and guided her onto her feet. “I know you might still be embarrassed about the diapers, but I want to thank you for putting your trust in me,” She gave Emily another loving hug. “There’s no need to be so hung up on those things.”

As she returned the hug, Emily’s mind was still a few seconds behind, fully processing how she’d been cleaned and changed without ever waking up; consciously, at least. Maybe the novelty was starting to wear, considering this wouldn’t have been the first time. Had she simply become that comfortable around Joyce? Was that sort of thing even possible? It wasn’t that she minded so much, more that it was somewhat jarring.

“Now come on,” Joyce gave Emily’s bottom a crinkly squeeze. “Are you gonna march off to the kitchen on your own or do I need to carry you?” Her thoughts had a sudden backpedal. “Unless you want me to?”

Within the first second Emily was already out the door, followed by a chuckling Joyce. Thankful for the accommodating temperature throughout the home, Emily sat her bare thighs on the cushioned kitchen chair, while the second woman stationed herself by the counter. Even being

remotely close to food or food-related stuff was already enough to have Emily's stomach churning.

"What are we thinking? Is there anything you might have in mind that you think would be good right now?"

"Not really..." Not even Joyce's food, undoubtedly the best cuisine she'd ever experienced, could break her spell. In fact, it would likely have the exact opposite effect. "Do you have any cereal?" Maybe she'd figure something out with that...

The lack of depth to her suggestion wasn't exciting to Joyce, but it was easy to understand how much of a struggle it was to eat just about anything right now. "Let's see...I think we might have some in here somewhere..." Joyce opened one of the cabinets, finding an unopened box of Branflakes. "How about a drink? Water? Maybe I could make you your special morning drink?"

"No thank you...water's fine." Sitting at the table was already putting a mild strain on her head. It felt as if her skull was repeatedly being tapped by a large, blunt mallet; each blow erupting a mild throb as it shook her entire head. At other times it was a little black speck with legs, sitting on top of her brain, carrying a needle in its hands, and would at the slightest movement relish in plunging its tiny spear into her thoughts.

It was by far the lowest quality meal Emily had ever eaten in Joyce's presence, and despite being so meager in what was set before her, it still looked like one of the greatest challenges she'd ever faced. Second thoughts were coming in full swing.

"Joyce, I don't know if I can't eat right now..." She slightly grimaced, as the bowl of moistening flakes and innocent-looking milk taunted her insides with sheer presence alone. The glass of water was a tall cup of poison waiting to boil her insides and clog her arteries; her figurative imagination didn't make much sense, but the gist was that it all looked nauseating. They were a pair of deadly assassins ready to execute her digestive tract.

Taking a seat next to her, Joyce picked up the spoon from Emily's bowl, with a small pile of flakes soaking in a puddle of milk. "I know eating food is probably the last thing on your mind right now, but trust me when I say that there's nothing worse than taking medicine on an empty stomach. You may not be happy with me right now, but it's for the best that you at least eat a little. I won't force you to eat it all, but why don't we give it a few bites and see how you feel?" Still with the spoon in her hand, she reared it toward Emily's mouth.

The closer the food got to her, the more and more Emily could feel herself revolting at the sight and sensations which aroused her sight and smell. They occupied her nostrils like pungent perfume that had long overstayed its welcome. She wanted nothing more than to get this over with, and was almost considering death a better fate than this.

“Here, I’ll even do the hard part. Open wide!” Slowly, Joyce edged the spoon towards Emily’s sealed lips, and as soon as the metal spoon made contact, her initial resistance caused a little milk to spill from the metal rim and onto her shirt.

“Should I find you a bib and we’ll try this again?” She grinned at Emily, who then felt herself submitting to an even greater force, as a tiny slit between her lips allowed entry for the enemy substance. It was swallowed much faster than it came in, and Emily didn’t feel particularly great as it went down her throat, but not as terrible as she expected either.

“Such a good girl,” Joyce commented, and with her other hand dabbed a cloth on the corner of Emily’s mouth. “Should I give you the spoon back now? Or maybe my little girl wants to be spoiled a little bit more?” Her tone stripped her words of any potentially insulting meaning. Either choice felt equally as welcomed, yet Emily could feel herself being tempted much more by one in particular.

“You keep doing it…” Her words were brief, and her headache was limiting her ability to maintain etiquette and manners. Maybe 10 minutes ago she’d been rambling on about dragging Joyce down so much, but it was obvious how weak-willed those feelings had become; seeing as she was being spoon-fed by her now, and even asking for it.

“I like that answer, too.” Joyce smiled as she took another spoon full. “Now open up for the airplane! *Whoosh! Whoosh!* In for the landing!” Another package was delivered to Emily’s stomach, and it hadn’t felt any better than the last. Maybe it was the playful treatment that let her keep it down, though. There was a brief pause in between cereal and Joyce’s praising to allow for a sip of water, but they’d gotten through about half the bowl until Emily was calling it quits.

“I’ll say I got as lucky as I could,” Joyce wiped Emily’s face another time, thankful, but hoping she could have fed her little girl for just a little longer. She couldn’t wait to do it again, only under *much* different circumstances with a much more evident dynamic. Certainly this would be the last obstacle to overcome before that could happen. Unless father time and mother nature were really that cruel. “I’m sure you were ready to stop after the first bite, but thank you for toughing it out for me, my little soldier. All that’s left is to swallow a few pills and then you’re free to relax until your next round.”

The small capsules went down much easier, considering there was no real taste to them. After she swallowed, Joyce's forehead was pressed to Emily's, reverberating its own kind of warmth. Satisfied with the reading, Joyce pulled her head away.

"Is there any special spot you want me to set you up in? You can go back to bed or I can put you on the couch?"

"On the couch." As sick as she was, at least moving her base of operations gave her the illusion of activity. Hopefully this would be the last day of laziness. She was sick of feeling so out of it and wanted more than anything to be well again. She wanted to be able to play with Joyce again.

It didn't take Joyce very long to move a few pillows and blankets to the sofa, quickly having the girl situated and as comfortable as possible.

"Comfy?" Joyce asked as she stroked the tip of her finger across the bridge of Emily's nose.

"Mhm. Thank you."

"You're very welcome. I have a few business emails to sort through, so I'll be in my office, okay?"

Emily nodded her head, without too much emotion in her response. As Joyce started walking away, when she got into her office she started to have a sudden change of heart. Pausing just before she brought the tower to life, she veered to one of the larger drawers of her desk, and pulled out an entire laptop, carrying it back into the living room.

"Did you already finish your work?" Emily asked with a hint of surprise. She was too sick to feel like joking at the moment, and didn't feel like weighing on the things that were happening around her too seriously.

"No, but I was thinking it might be better to do it while keeping you some company." She sat herself on the couch next to where Emily was resting her head. She unfolded the top of the device and it quietly sprang to life. "Unless that's not okay with you?" She looked down on Emily with a look waiting for confirmation, tilting it the slightest bit to match the angle of Emily's; not really trying to incite a particular response.

"No...you can stay." Emily looked back towards the tv, but was quietly wiggling her toes in response to the matronly presence next to her. The pillows and blankets were one thing, but

being with Joyce invited a whole new sense of security. Almost like the diaper...In a way, it was an accessory to Joyce's care...A reminder.

Absent-mindedly, Joyce quietly stroked Emily's hair with her nearest hand, while the other navigated digital mail and typed responses at a mild pace. She wasn't in any rush to get the work done, clearly, and it served as the perfect excuse to spend some quality time with Emily despite her being sick. Not that she needed an excuse, but it was something that made the process feel much more natural.

Slowly over time, Emily gradually moved more and more until her head had completely surpassed the pillow. Instead, it found a new cushion which was Joyce's thigh. At some point the contact was hard not to notice, but the only confirmation Joyce gave was a warm smile to herself, and the slightest shift to try and accommodate the head occupying it. Emily, who was brimming with anxiety right now for being so daring wasn't so much for words either. The pillow which had at first been an aid was now nothing more than an obstacle, which is why it was soon removed from the equation, and Emily's head had unobstructed access to Joyce's firm, but cushiony leg. No words needed to be exchanged, as the feelings and atmosphere were enough to convey meaning.

Much later into the process, Emily had dozed off some time ago, and only between emails did Joyce finally notice. Needless to say, she was almost caught in a trance looking down on her; seeing the small girl be at peace. Almost unconsciously, Joyce's hand wandered to her phone, watching Emily's chest slightly rise and fall with each calm breath. Just as she was about to take a picture, she froze; realizing just what she was about to do.

How would Emily react if she was taking a picture of her like this? When she was so vulnerable? What if something like this got out? If anyone saw it; anyone close to either of them...But, the more Joyce's mind raced in a panic, the more she was allowing rational thought to intrude. The more she looked at the cute, slumbering Emily, it was becoming a bit clearer that it *was* just a harmless photo...Not to mention, the camera angle wouldn't catch anything incriminating...The shirt was a bit cutesy, but it was hard to see what was on it from this point of view, and the blanket certainly covered what definitely needed to stay under wraps.

If she doesn't like the picture, I can just delete it. I'll show it to her once she wakes up. Forming a resolve, Joyce quietly angled the shot and snapped her photo; a timeless memory permanently digitized. It was one of those moments that Joyce hoped would last forever. Something about her innocence was intoxicating, and Joyce wanted more than anything to keep coaxing it from out of its shell. Leaning over, she pecked her lips on Emily's exposed cheek. Content with what she'd done, Joyce finally used both hands to focus on her work.

“Cryostasis?” From the subject heading alone she already skipped over it. “Maybe a century from now...”

“And down the hatch!” Joyce cooed as the final set of pills for the night made their way into Emily’s mouth. She swallowed, and was hoping not only they’d be the last for the night, but for this entire ordeal as well. “What do you say we have you turn in early again for tonight? Just so we can really nip this thing in the bud?”

“I think so too...I really don’t want to feel like this in the morning.” Since she woke up it had been a winning battle, but Emily knew if there was real progress to be made, it would be through sleep. She’d been trying her best to keep up on food and water, but they were still things she wasn’t crazy about. There wasn’t a single official diaper change that night; minus the one from the morning, and dinner consisted of some extremely small stuff. Thankfully Joyce (despite being reluctant) let her off without an official lunch. Drinking water never left the picture though.

“Okay then, let’s get you settled down for the night. Probably panties would be for the best, huh?”

Oddly, Emily agreed with a small tinge of disappointment. The weekend was over, and so that meant the same for their ‘special’ time. While Emily may have been on vacation, that didn’t mean the same for Joyce. Without her in the picture it just made the moment feel empty...There wasn’t much point in acting a role if there wasn’t another to reciprocate it.

“Maybe if you’re up for it we can experiment a little over the weekdays?” Joyce perked up Emily’s ears with her suggestion. “I know I’m sometimes home earlier than you...so maybe this week if you’re up for it we can try picking up where we left off?” As she guided Emily back to her room, she could see the tiny grin Emily was trying, but failing to hide. “Oh?” Joyce leaned forward to nuzzle her cheek. “Looks like I struck a chord with someone? If I didn’t know any better, I’d have thought you’re the one asking me to do this!” Her teasing caused Emily to crumble, which only made Joyce laugh more. It was all in good fun though, and as bashful as she was being, the joy written all over Emily’s face was undeniable.

Joyce had dressed her in the pajama set with the extra length on the torso arms and pant legs, and of course, thinner underwear. She didn’t look to be one hundred percent, but at least a solid seventy. Tucked under the covers, Joyce sat on the bed with Emily for a little longer, making small talk, and simply enjoying their time together.

“Oh! I almost forgot...” Joyce’s voice trailed off as she snaked her hand into her pocket. “I have something I want to show you...”

A surprise? Emily could suddenly feel her pulse race. A surprise from Joyce could mean just about anything in the realm of tangibility. If it had a physical form and was acquirable, Emily had her doubts that it wouldn’t be possible for Joyce to get...Emily hadn’t ever tried to think about it too much, but where exactly Joyce ranked on the list of powerful people was probably a notable rank...

“I managed to catch this earlier, and I wasn’t sure how you’d take it...” Joyce turned her phone to Emily, as she looked back at a still image of herself; nuzzled against someone’s leg and covered in a blanket. She wasn’t crazy about pictures of herself...but even with that in mind it still pulled at the heartstrings a little...

“Wh...when did you take this?”

“When you were sleeping earlier today...I didn’t know how you might feel about pictures...” Suddenly Joyce wasn’t feeling too confident anymore, or at least she was trying to be receptive to Emily’s feedback. “Of course, I didn’t catch anything suggestive, and I wouldn’t show it to anyone! I’d be willing to delete it if you ask...” The slightest bit of sadness sparked within her; imagining a scenario like that. “It’s just...I don’t know...nice to have a few pictures of you, I guess...”

Pictures...Simple in their own right, yet hearing it from Joyce gave them a new sense of meaning. More than just a static moment in time, it was now a logged memory; a piece of evidence that Joyce and Emily were now interlocked. A part of her was now with Joyce, and was kept safely in the confines of her phone...It was weird, of course, to think about it so intensely, but it was exciting nonetheless.

“Keep it.” Emily briefly spoke.

“Really?” Joyce’s hopes had definitely gotten the best of her, as even she couldn’t hide her joy. “Are you sure?”

“Well...you said it yourself, didn’t you?” Her cheeks were starting to grow red. “It’s nice to have a few pictures...Thank you for asking me though...You don’t need to ask me anymore. I trust you.”

A giggle erupted from Joyce as she pulled Emily in for one last hug. She'd have to be *much* more watchful in the future for picture-worthy moments now! Past regrets were starting to dawn on her; perfect moments that could have been immortalized! Moving forward though those same regrets would not be allowed to pass.

“You get some sleep for me, okay? I want you all rested up for when I get back tomorrow. Don't worry about getting up early.”

“I won't see you in the morning?”

“I get up pretty early for work, and you know that already. You should be sleeping in though, and you should be taking advantage of your time off! Especially when you're sick.”

Emily doubted it would really affect her, but the thought of missing out on an opportunity to see Joyce was disappointing to some degree. Again, her explanation was truthful, but that didn't mean it agreed with her feelings.

“How about I say goodbye in the morning?” Joyce started to straighten out the bedding again. “If I wake you up for a second to say bye, will you go back to sleep for me?”

Quickly, Emily nodded her head; much more pleased with this new compromise.

“It's a deal then. I'll see you in the morning, sweetie.”

“Night!” Emily glanced at her phone for a few minutes, then rolled over to her side. She waited for the sound of the door closing, but it never came. Joyce always left a crack in the doorway, and Emily lulled off into a slumber just from thinking about it.

“Emily? Hellloooo? You in there?” A familiar voice eased its way into Emily's ears, and then a laugh soon after. “I knew it was a bad idea waking you up...I'm headed out now for work and I'm here to say bye, okay?”

“Okay...” Emily could only murmur, as she wasn't even aware of what was happening. Her internal clock hadn't been prepped for a time like this.

“Okay?” In a small amount of disbelief, Joyce chuckled over her loopy state. “Alright then,” She leaned in for a much calmer whisper. “You go back to sleep for me now, okay? I’ll be home later.”

“Good...night....”

The only thing Emily could really register was something soft pressing her cheek, and then the sound of heels padding across carpet and soon the clicks and clacks of colliding with a wooden floor. As the noises became more quiet, so did her surroundings and suddenly everything else. She had been in the middle of a pleasant dream, and it wasn’t so willing to let her go that easily. Besides, she was in the middle of an important spa treatment with Ashes, and just because the moon was crashing into Mars, that didn’t mean apples couldn’t be blue.

“Still, Joyce, I never really figured you the type to go to the movies.” Emily curiously poked as they exited the theater. “I didn’t really expect you to ask me to do something like this...”

“Why not?” She leaned them against a nearby wall. “I’m human too, you know!” True, she didn’t really go to the movies; at all, really, but Emily had brought change to her life in more ways than one. “Besides, doesn’t it feel good to be out and about after getting sick? I assumed you want to do something like this... I guess not though...” Obviously pretending, Joyce plastered a disappointed look on her face as she gave Emily a full view of it in its entirety.

“N-no! I didn’t mean it like that,” Clearly skipping over the sarcasm, Emily did her best to ensure damage control, despite there never being a need for it. Still, she never wanted to even insinuate the slightest idea that whenever Joyce spent a dime on her it was money wasted. “I was just surprised, that’s all.”

“I know what you mean, and I was kidding, so don’t worry so much.” Joyce patted the top of Emily’s head; paying no mind to the people around them.

“Why do you tease me so much?” Emily slightly puffed her cheeks, but of course she wasn’t really angry, but playfully annoyed.

“Because,” Joyce poked her plump cheek as if she were popping a bubble. “You’re too cute not to!” She spoke in a lowered voice, and suddenly Emily wasn’t feeling so brave to publicly challenge her again. “What do you say we go get something to eat now? Popcorn and candy doesn’t really count as a meal to me...”

She was right about that. Joyce insisted on getting a little bit of everything for Emily's sake, though she didn't put so much as a dent in it; her stomach didn't have the capacity, nor would it sit well with her conscience. Even still, when at the snack counter, if Emily gave even the slightest hint of finding something good-looking it wound up in Joyce's purse. She could go for some real food too.

"By the way," Joyce started as they walked back to the car, and Emily was all ears. "Do you have anything going on tomorrow? Anything important?"

"No, I don't think so. Why?" It didn't take much thinking, as the greater part of her time was now freed up because of work and the rest was occupied by Joyce.

Joyce was a little surprised to hear that, but it wasn't a disappointment. "Well..." Her first word was infused with intrigue and curiosity. "I was thinking that maybe tonight when we get home we could do a little bit of... 'bonding' together?" Her wording on the surface was vague, but Emily knew exactly what she meant, and truthfully, she loved the sound of it.

"Yeah...It sounds like fun." Openly warming up to the babying experience was strange, but the idea was far from foreign now. It had become too regular to consider it a stranger.

"Great! I wanted to ask because I was thinking maybe we could try and cover more than just one day?"

"More...than one?" She never really thought about it, but their play never did go beyond a single day...When she was sick a few days ago that put them in a weird place, but Emily wouldn't count it as official. What she was asking for now would be totally intentional and uninterrupted. It was certainly a commitment, but it was...exciting.

"Tomorrow's Friday and I don't have any real reason to go to the office tomorrow," She probably did, but it wasn't like Sheila couldn't fix her schedule to suggest otherwise. "And I know your workplace is still sorting through its own issues." Yes, this was true. It was hard to believe she'd gone an entire week on paid vacation. Maybe it wasn't the best way to phrase it, but how far from the truth was it? "Would you be okay if we tried something like that?"

"Yeah, I'd be fine. Actually...I think I'd kind of want to try it too."

"Then it's settled," Joyce gave her another squeeze from behind, then freed her long enough to let her get in the passenger seat. "We'll get right to it once we're home. Sound good?"

Emily nodded her head, and Joyce turned on the ignition.

“Any idea what you’re in the mood for?”

“Uhm... You pick.”

“Hmm...I have one place in mind.” Apparently Joyce was taking control early. Rather, Emily was surrendering herself much sooner. It didn’t matter though, because in the end all that really did was Emily wanting to be with Joyce, and Joyce wanting to be with Emily. They’d become inseparable, or were on the verge of becoming so. Nonchalantly Joyce checked the time on her phone, and seemed to be pleased with how things were progressing. Give it just another hour at most and the movers were likely to be done in the apartment. Even if it all had good intentions, Joyce felt a little strange deceiving Emily like this...

Today’s outing was to give Emily a sense of freedom again, but it was also to get her out of the house just long enough to move in some of the bigger purchases...The assembly would already be finished and Joyce could rearrange if need be. The painting was finished a few days ago and that’s what mattered the most. It was all for Emily, but Joyce was admittedly giddy imagining what the final products would be. Her “client” had gotten progress shots from BabyCare, but only by seeing them in the flesh could they truly be appreciated.

Her mind then stumbled upon some of the other items she was having delivered; some things that wouldn’t be limited to just the one room. Where was she going to put the chair? It was another assembled piece, but it was probably too much work to keep taking apart and putting back together. The room’s closet was probably big enough to store it...She’d need to figure it out at some point, but it wasn’t at the forefront of her mind right now...Instead, she was much more focused on getting them fed.

“So what are we gonna do tonight?” Emily started to lose herself to the hypnotic hum, as the room was filled with lavender, and her lower half descended upon a plastic-covered cushion. She was still a bit squeamish in moments like these, but routine and habit were dangerous things; stick to something long enough and you just might get used to it.

“I’m not sure about that part, yet.” Joyce drew up the plastic front and gingerly pressed the tapes. “Unless you have any ideas? You’re allowed to want things too, you know.” She started to trace her finger on Emily’s bare stomach, which expectedly caused a squirming fit.

In a stifled laugh Emily retreated to the far end of the bed in search of safety, staring dagge--well, tiny daggers, at the taller woman. The sense of play was already filling the room, and that made anger impossible. Emily was no longer the tortured, but the submissive, dancing in the palm of her caretaker.

Joyce looked at her expectantly, already formulating ideas for what they could do. She knew that she wanted this to start, but she wasn't sure what they'd do to keep it going... Though, she was a little surprised to hear a suggestion from Emily.

"Well...does it have to be something here?" Her voice was weak, as if her resolve were to crumble at the slightest breeze of objection.

"No," Joyce had corralled her charge back to the end of the bed. "What did you have in mind?"

"Then maybe..." She wasn't intentionally trying to drag her words out for the sake of suspense, but was more hung up on the idea of making demands. Not that it could even come close to being one with how she sounded, though. "Milkshakes?" Her eyes looked to almost be glimmering at the sound. "From that one place?"

"Shake Stop? The one you were so insistent on not wanting last time?"

"It's not that I didn't *want* one..."

Joyce looked to be thinking. "I'm not sure..."

"You're right. We just got home, and it's already late." It was pretty late. They hadn't got home until a handful of hours after sundown. Due to a lot of aimless browsing in stores they got derailed pretty fast; not that either of them had a schedule to keep to. In fact, it was exactly what Joyce wanted, even if the work at the apartment had been finished a while ago. "We can always do something-" A finger was suddenly pressed to her lips.

"And at what point did I say no?" She planted a kiss on her forehead. "I was just thinking about whether or not I should be giving you sugar so late! You're *much* cuter when I need to carry you to bed, you know?" The classic, telltale look was written all over her face, and Joyce could only giggle. "Come on though, I should probably get you dressed in something before we go. I think just a diaper might be a little too chilly for the outdoors. Don't you?"

Pulling her punches, Emily let herself be taken near the dresser which Joyce was already sifting through; the three shelves on the left. Since getting her things from Jack's place, they had devised a system for Emily's wardrobe in the dresser, which was to keep her more... "adult" things on the right end of the dresser. The left side...well...it was the exact opposite, to say the least.

"Left leg, nice and high!" Joyce commanded as Emily held onto her shoulders while she was kneeling on the ground. And without really paying much mind until now, as soon as Emily's first leg slipped in and past the fabric, the bottoms felt nothing like street clothes; much too soft for that. The pastel colors she could now see didn't seem to suit a public appearance so much either.

"Joyce? I thought we were going out? Why are you dressing me in stuff I'd sleep in?" Her questioning still didn't stop her body from stepping in the other leg hole.

"Isn't it easier to just get you dressed in your jammies now?" Joyce didn't sound to find the topic as interesting as Emily, and was much more complacent with the outfit choice. "Do you not like how it looks?"

No, it looked fine, but it was the context that mattered here... Sure, she'd gone outside before in the clothes she slept in, but that was maybe in sweatpants and a top! Not an outfit intentionally marketed as a pajama set! She really did look like someone who was set up for bedtime...And then there was Joyce, the person who looked to be much more suited with interacting with the outside world...But, at the same time, Emily was now truly represented by Joyce. *She* was the adult...*She* was the only one who needed to be concerned with business...Emily was supposed to be carried along like this, and be allowed the simple pleasures of letting someone else do all the heavy lifting. She had someone in charge of her outfit, and her social interactions. The lack of freedom in exchange for care had her heart beating fast. Try as she might, she couldn't refuse how much she was loving this.

Joyce took her blush and lack of eye contact as a good sign, and finished pulling the top over her head. The cuffs hugged her at the wrists and waist, and she looked simply precious. Her entire demeanor reflected a small child who needed to be cared for; needed to have things be done for them, and that need was being fulfilled to the utmost. Joyce could only notice it by sound when she moved, but the real cherry on top was the crinkle from Emily's hidden diaper; the final nail in the coffin which completed everything.

The simple white socks came next, and she then ushered the pampered girl out and into the shoe area by the door. And for just a moment while she was lagging behind, Joyce slipped a duplicate

key from her pocket and unlocked the door that shrouded countless mysteries. Peering inside, without turning on the light, the sights Joyce could then see were astonishing.

It was almost surreal; having so many individual pieces born from fantasy and imagination, suddenly realized and consolidated, all being brought together and united under one banner of infancy. With all her willpower she forced herself away from the breathtaking sight and closed the door, re-locking it. Had she seen it a day earlier, it wouldn't have been possible to contain such emotions; such a passion and burning desire to put so many fun toys and devices to their full use.

Rearing her head around the corner, Joyce watched Emily's back as she slipped on her shoes. It was just a sliver, but between her pants and the slightly raised shirt, Joyce could see the beginnings of a white, plastic waistband that contrasted so heavily with the pastel blues and purples she was dressed in, yet complemented the theme so much.

"Don't forget your jacket. I know you're in some warm clothes now, but I want to be extra prepared."

"If you gave me a chance I was gonna get it," Emily playfully jabbed. "What flavor are you gonna get this time?"

"Hmm...I'm not too sure? I've been a fan of vanilla lately."

"And like that she's fading fast, folks!" Joyce in a distant shout announced to the imaginary audience as she carried Emily in her arms. "It seems not even milkshakes can keep her going! You know, I thought cats like to nap during the day and play all night? You've got the napping part down, but not so much the other...Maybe you're defective?"

Emily in a sleepy giggle could only stare back as she collided with cushiony bedding and pillows. Joyce looked at her longingly, reflecting on the mini-speech she planned to use if Emily did stay up too late. It was all in good fun, and to be honest she was just looking for an excuse to tease her. In the time they left and she was putting her to bed, Emily hadn't felt the need to use the bathroom, and Joyce was expecting that to change at some point...She just hoped Emily wouldn't be creeping around that night. One, if she'd already used her diaper between sleeping fits, it increased the likelihood of doing it again. And two, she might see things that weren't supposed to be revealed until the morning...

“Don’t let the bed bugs bite, Emmy!” Joyce kept her voice low, so as not to disturb the already slumbering girl, and for the first time fully closed the door on her way out, rather than just stopping right before the end. She opened the door to the room she checked on before they left, and was just as pleased with the results, only that much more now that the lights were on.

“Let’s get to work...” Joyce started to move a few things around; rearranging things here and there. She even went forward with the task of moving a few things outside of the room and into other areas of the apartment. Each and every item she moved on to, it was a reminder of how far she and Emily had come; how much progress they had made, and how much closer they’d grown together. Not only as a mother and child, but as significant others who could not do without the other. All the waiting and patience was worth the look she’d see on Emily’s face in the morning; the raw emotion that would burst from within. It would only be the beginning, and it was surely going to get better. By no means had they cleared all obstacles, but the net gain would be positively glorious.

It took a good forty-five minutes before Joyce was satisfied with her work, and she could bring the night to an end by closing the door, though not locking it this time. She checked her phone for the time, and let out a sigh as she knew she’d need to get up early tomorrow. The whole day would just be her and Emily, and it would all be about her special little girl.

Quickly throwing something to sleep in on, Joyce reeled back her covers and could start to feel herself sinking into the mattress almost immediately.

The clock nearby read 12:01 AM.

Happy birthday, Emily.