

31 - Moment of Pause

“Just...just don’t hit any bumps, okay?” Emily pleaded nervously, practically a bead of sweat rolling down the side of her head. She clutched her charge and held it close to her arms, fearing for its dear life.

“If you act like that, it makes me *want* to tease you, you know?” Joyce grinned, leaning her foot just a little more in tune to the engine’s growing hum.

“Stop! Stop!” Emily shouted, and her cries were answered as Joyce eased off the speed with an amused laugh. “Emily, it’s just a bottle, not a bomb?” Joyce giggled.

“Yeah, but it’s an expensive one!” Emily worriedly said, looking down at the luxurious item.

“You don’t even know how much it is?” Joyce said, keeping her eyes on the road.

“Because you wouldn’t tell me!” She retorted with an annoyed attitude. The day Joyce came home with it Emily had asked what it was, and her answer being a “small” gift to Michael and his wife for having them over. Well, Emily knew it to be expensive because if it hadn’t been Joyce wouldn’t have minded telling her the amount. In other words, responses like, “Don’t worry about it,” or “Not that much,” equated to a digit followed by too many zeroes for Emily’s purse.

“Does it bother you that much?” Joyce asked, though looking no less chipper. Frankly this felt like a wonderful serving of karma for Emily’s little stunt about the whole “cheating” scandal. It’d been almost a week and it still made Joyce furrow her brows, thinking how gullible she’d been...

“Mm...well, I hope they like wine...” Emily pensively spoke, looking down on the bottle. A dark crimson encased in a tinted glass, sealed by a cork wrapped in twine, shrouded by a paper covering, added with a present bow to boot.

Joyce stole her an urgent glance. “Well don’t say that now! That wasn’t cheap, you know!”

“See!? I knew it!” Emily hadn’t skipped a beat in her persecution, followed by more laughter from Joyce. Naturally she’d done it to get a rise out of the frazzled girl, and it felt great.

“You’re gonna need to calm down there, munchkin,” Joyce rhythmically ran her thumb across the steering wheel, “otherwise you’re gonna be too tired to socialize when we get there?”

“Maybe all I need is some of this fifty-thousand fun juice.” Emily mused.

“Okay, it wasn’t *that* expensive. Two digits less, please.”

“You didn’t pack me a weird bathing suit, did you?” Emily asked as she turned her head to the large canvas bag they had in the backseat.

“Cross my heart,” Joyce swore. Though, that wouldn’t be for forever... Sure, getting to see Emily in a bikini was exciting, but her other side wanted to see what kind of kiddush one-pieces she could get her into. Which begged a new question: does Amy do bathing suits too?

“...No diapers either, right?”

“Definitely not.” Joyce didn’t play with the phrasing much at all this time. It’d unfortunately become a sensitive issue in not the way she liked. “...And in regards to that, I was thinking we should finally talk about that. Either tonight or tomorrow... Is that alright?” And it had certainly been a week since the Zoo incident; the reason for their small get-together today and the tension that remained behind closed doors.

“Mm.” Emily nodded with agreement. It had become more of an awkward thing the longer they stayed away from it.

Once again, neither felt any kind of animosity to the other, yet felt a need to establish themselves clearly. What one would acknowledge though and the other would never say was Joyce’s need to be fitted with a kill switch or speed bump. Mommy Joyce, particularly. But no matter what, what both wanted more than anything was to go back to the way things had been and continue progressing as they were. Somehow they’d lost the reigns and given themselves a scare.

“It’s kinda weird, though,” Emily passively spoke as she looked out the window, “I’ve never been outside the city here.”

“Yeah?” Joyce in tune responded. “I think I have a couple times. I thought about getting a nice house out here for a short minute, but in the end, I would rather staying closer to the company, and financials aren’t too big of a factor...”

“Speaking of which, are we almost there?” Emily muttered, leaning into the GPS on the console. “Our Estimated Arrival Time is approximately three minutes.” Emily repeated verbatim from the screen.

“Roger that, navigator.” Joyce smirked. They were driving up a winding hill right now. It was an interesting neighborhood; suburbs that hadn’t prioritized the quantity in housing over quality.

Decently sized and spacious properties. Probably a few degrees less than the market Joyce might start to consider, but nice nonetheless. Clearly Michael and his wife did well for themselves.

“I was a little surprised to hear from Michael so soon,” Joyce said.

“Yeah, me too,” Emily agreed, “but it’s probably better this way. Otherwise we’d probably forget about them?” Nothing against Michael and Jackie, but that’s how relationships went. Leave them idle and you start to drift elsewhere.

“A very fair point, especially when your only connection is having given couple’s counseling to the other?” Joyce chuckled.

“True...” Emily said, not so warm to reliving the experience.

“It’ll be fun to get to know Michael a bit more, though. Him including his wife; I think he said she was back home from business?”

“What if she turns out to be like your...business enemy or something?” Emily asked in a mostly not so serious tone.

“Not gonna happen, don’t worry,” Joyce laughed. “I don’t really see my competitors as enemies. More along the lines of...potential business partners with similar interests.”

Emily only stared at her, letting the description soak in. “You sound like the business enemy...”

“Well, it’s all a matter of perspective.” Joyce curtly replied, leading to giggles from Emily.

“Regardless of what she does for work, which is very much unlikely the same as mine, I promise to play nice!”

Emily gave an accepting nod. “Mmph.” She approved, as if she were the new authority figure in their dynamic. “I’ve raised you well.”

“Raised me? We’ll see who raises who when I toss you into their pool...” Joyce muttered with a sneaky grin. Though her playful tone shifted almost immediately. “Oh look! We’re already here.” She said as they rounded the final curb. Coming into view was a nicely sized two-story home, paired with a double garage and a large, green front lawn. A tall white fence ran along the perimeter of its backyard.

“It seems kinda stereotypical? In a good way.” Emily remarked about the home. It looked nice, especially the bottom trim of rock and mortar along the base of the house.

“Well, stereotypical for an above average middle class home, I guess.” Joyce agreed.

Joyce pulled into the long driveway before killing the engine. Both got out, and Emily was closer to the path leading to the front porch, but she lingered by the vehicle, waiting for Joyce. With the mention of swimming, both Joyce and Emily opted for something more poolside, that being sandals, exposed shoulders, sunglasses and shorts.

“Actually, I haven’t swam once since I came to this state,” Emily suddenly admitted.

“Really?” Joyce was a little surprised. “Are you excited to get a chance to go back in a pool?”

“Kinda...” Emily pivoted her sandal-clad foot off the ground with her toe, as if to vent her poorly hidden feelings. “...It’d be kinda nice...”

“I’m glad to see you looking forward to something~!” Joyce commented with a kiss on her cheek.

“W-well, you’re gonna swim too, right?” She asked. After all, it wouldn’t be cool unless the cool kids were doing it.

“Who’s gonna lift you up when your feet don’t touch the bottom?” Joyce asked, though the joke became apparent faster than Joyce could keep a straight face.

“Bleeeeh~” Emily replied, in the form of a wet, flapping tongue.

Joyce slung the canvas bag over her shoulder and walked with Emily to the front door. They rang the bell and waited patiently.

“*She’s here! She’s here!*” A faint voice came from inside the house. Joyce and Emily shared a look with each other, trying to discern it.

Suddenly, Joyce was tapping Emily on the shoulder.

“I’d hate to blow her cover, so try not to make it obvious, but...” Joyce pointed Emily’s gaze to a window accompanied by curtains, only one end looked moved to the side, as a tiny pair of eyes stared from within.

As Emily leaned back to get a better look, the eyes vanished and the curtain fell back into place.

“Whoa--what? Jackie! Slow down! You’re gonna make me trip and break something!” A familiar voice chastised from inside the home.

Finally, they heard the knob turn and the door opened to Michael greeting them.

“Hey you two! Emily, Joyce, glad you guys could make it!”

“Thank you for having us,” Joyce thanked him, “Should we come in through the front or around the back...?”

Michael waved the notion off. “Come on in, we can head into the backyard from inside.” He opened the additional glass door on top of the wooden one for them.

“Pardon the diabolical Jackie Bomb that went off in the living room. Try not to look on the way by; it isn’t pretty...” And as the ashamed tour guide explained, they did pass by the entrance to the living room, which certainly did look...out of sorts. Toys were scattered everywhere, and so were some of the throw pillows kept on the couch. Emily could also hear some kind of cartoon coming from the tv.

“Where is Jackie, by the way?” Emily asked. “We thought we heard her...and saw her.” She added the last point with a small laugh.

“Well, I figured it wouldn’t be a big deal if we told her you two would be coming over the weekend for a small pool party, but apparently a week wasn’t enough to get it out of her system.” Michael sighed with a chuckle, reminiscing with questionable feelings. “Sorry in advance, Emily, but Jackie may be very well glued to you. We’ll keep her on a leash as best we can, though.”

“No problem...?” Emily answered, wondering why she got the special warning. But giving it some more thought, maybe because she met Jackie first and had some one-on-one with her...

“Joyce, sorry to say she seems to have a fixation on Emily. I’m sure she’ll be excited to see you again too, though?”

Joyce played it off nicely, laughing as she said, “Don’t worry, I promise not to take offense!” In spite of her fondness of babying Emily, that didn’t extend to being a huge fan of kids. She’d never dislike a child without reason, including Jackie, but the thought of them didn’t put her over the moon.

The closer they got to the kitchen, a conversation could be heard.

“Jackie, you need to stop tugging on my pants!” A voice complained.

“But...! Can you come with me?” Jackie could be heard begging.

“I need to finish setting up the snacks, honey. You’re perfectly capable of saying ‘hi’ on your own. Go on now, shoo!” She chastised her playfully, chuckling as Jackie could be heard making a whining noise.

And as Michael, Joyce and Emily entered the kitchen, it came to no one’s surprise when they saw the scene. Just as the voices and tone described, Jackie was clutching the woman’s pants, now hiding herself behind them with half an eye peeking at Emily and Joyce.

“What are we gonna do with you, you little monkey?” The woman laughed. She looked up and turned to the three other adults.

“Oh! You two must be Emily and Joyce! I’ve heard so much about...” She continued to smile at their entrance, though she looked at a loss for words once her eyes fell on Emily. Then after a confused pause, her expression lit up again.”Ah! I remember you!” She laughed to herself while the only other person in the room who could be capable of understanding was Emily.

“Huh?” Michael looked between Emily and his wife, Joyce in a similar fashion. “Hon, you two know each other?”

Apparently it got to the woman quite a bit, because she was wiping her eye. Emily stayed quiet though, suddenly feeling quite embarrassed.

“We saw each other at a bar almost a week ago! We didn’t exactly end on good terms though...funny how things work out.”

“G-good to see you again...” Emily felt sheepish, and quite regretful over the way she acted the first time. She really wasn’t counting on seeing her again. “I’m sorry about what I said--!”

“Oh? That?” She waved her hand dismissively with a smile. “Don’t worry about it. You had your reasons,” she looked at Michael to give him the abbreviated version, “I chatted with her for a little bit and offered to pick up her tab, but I guess I must have sounded like a shady conman with some of my comments...”

Now Joyce was starting to feel a bit more clued in, taking in the realization that this was the woman from the bar Emily went to...

Red hair...nice figure...good looks...stable financial income? She was right about to give her a narrow gaze until her inner voice of reason walloped her brain.

Idiot! She's married! How is she going to steal Emily from you?!

“So you two already met?” Michael asked Emily.

“Sort of...” Emily said awkwardly, hoping dearly they wouldn't have to go into any more detail about how bitchy she was being. She didn't see much of a profiteer anymore, rather a cheery wife and mother. “We never exchanged names, though.”

“It's great to finally meet you, I'm Joyce.” Joyce was the first to extend her hand, “I had heard some pretty interesting things about that day!” Joyce laughed, though not even herself knew if it was truly genuine.

“Sorry if you heard anything bad about me, I promise I'm not as bad as I might have seemed,” she returned the shake, “I'm Carol. And, I know you've already met her, but this is our little fireball, Jackie, who won't seem to come out from behind my legs?” True to her word, the six year old remained terribly shy. She made a vocal pout as she stayed behind cover.

Carol gave a loving sigh, leaning in to give an audible whisper. “Honestly, this little monster stretches my pants twice over every time she meets somebody new!”

“Uh, it's nice to meet you, Carol...” Emily spoke up as she came forward, “officially, this time.” Emily stuck out her hand.

Carol smiled once more, returning her gesture. “Likewise, Emily.” Though, to Emily and Joyce's surprise, she tugged on Emily's hand, pulling her in for a brief hug. While Emily tried to comprehend what had happened, Carol let out another laugh as Joyce blinked.

“Sorry, sorry!” Carol lamented, letting her go. “I figured there might have been some tension left over from our first, unofficial meeting. That, and I don't want you to get the impression I'm all business.”

“Uh...it's alright,” Emily did her best to laugh it off. As Emily stood there between Carol and Joyce, her back to the latter, she could feel herself in the way of a targeted gaze. She turned her head, expecting to see some kind of fury, but instead it was a rosy smile from Joyce.

Emily had an inkling of something in her mind however.

She's...jealous?!

“Now, if my wonderful husband could do me the pleasure of removing this tiny terror from my legs, I’ll be almost done with our snacks!” And in turn, Michael managed to get ahold of Jackie as she squirmed in his arms, pouting the whole time.

“Come on Jackie, don’t you want to say hi to Emily and Joyce again?” Michael sighed as she wrapped her arms around his neck.

“You wouldn’t believe it,” Carol added as she spoke to them, “Jackie could not stop for a second about you!” She said to Emily. “The whole week it’s been about how much fun she wanted to have with you! Even when one of her friends came over she managed to infect them with curiosity, too. You’re like a mini celebrity to her.” She laughed, as Emily sort of did too.

It was a bit odd to be obsessed over like that, but given it was through the scope of a child, it became more endearing than anything else...

“Well, I thought knowing you’d be off the market, I was safe, but maybe I still need to be on the defensive?” Joyce countered with a small joke. Carol found it funny, but Emily wasn’t sure whether she trusted Joyce’s intentions.

“That reminds me!” Emily finally spoke up. She held the bottle wrapped in a bow forward. “We wanted to get you two something for having us over...”

“Really?” Carol gave a surprised look, but accepted the bottle while reading the front. “Really, you two didn’t have to do that... Oh, honey! Look! It’s a bottle from Carmine’s!” She looked back at Joyce and Emily. “We can’t take something like this - it must have cost you a small fortune!”

“Please, we insist,” Joyce stayed her friendly self, “I’m a bit of a regular there anyways, so if you think about it, getting you a gift also puts me in good favor with the owner?”

“Jeez,” Michael made an impressed whistle as he looked at the bottle’s date. “I don’t suppose we could trade the bottle for a reservation there instead? We tried for our last anniversary, but we weren’t expecting such a long backlog for reservations...”

“I couldn’t find anyone in my circles close enough to get us in...” Carol sighed.

“Well, next time you’ll have my number?” Joyce chimed in. “I’m sure I can figure something out for you down the line.”

“Don’t joke,” Carol went back to a little more cutting and organizing on a large wooden platter, “we’ll actually take you up on that!”

“I’m counting on it,” Joyce happily replied. She hoisted the canvas bag back over her shoulder. “I don’t want to move the party, but is there somewhere we could set our bag down? Emily and I haven’t changed into our bathing suits yet...”

“Of course! If you go back down the hall, on your right you should see the opening to the bathroom. You two can change there. Michael and I need to do the same, actually, and so does Jackie.” She set her stuff down, walking to her husband and accepting Jackie into her arms.

“Sorry folks, the diva’s feeling a bit shy at the moment...” She excused herself with her daughter in arms. Emily looked back at the platter.

It looked divine.

“Oh wow, an antipasto platter?” Joyce asked Michael, admiring the handiwork. “It all looks so good!” She commented. Closely packed and dressed in varied assortments of meats, cheeses, olives, crackers and more.

“Well, especially now considering the gift you two just gave us, it’s the least we could do,” Michael said, seeming to revere their gesture much more than his own.

“Either way, it all looks really good!” Emily finally commented. She tugged on Joyce’s hand, “Wanna go change now?”

Joyce nodded. “Sounds like a plan, my little diva,” she grinned, leaving Emily puzzled over the verbiage as they walked to the bathroom.

“Any complaints if we change at the same time?” Joyce asked right before closing the door.

“Wait,” Emily’s complacent look dropped, “you mean...I’m gonna see you...naked?”

Joyce furrowed her brow. “Well, yeah...you didn’t seem to mind before when I...” Then she saw the grin on Emily’s face.

“You’ve been teasing me an awful lot, you know that?” Joyce tried to hide her smile as she already started to strip.

“What can I say? Gotta make up for lost points. I feel...reinvigorated.” She spoke with a feigned distance in her star-struck eyes.

“Hmm. Well, I’ll be needing to think about how I can knock you down a few pegs again...” She spoke deviously as she unhooked Emily’s bra, then turned for hers to be undone the same way.

“And hey,” Emily stopped to look Joyce in the eyes, “remember to play nice?”

“I promise. I was just...getting the rest of it out of my system. Wouldn’t you be surprised if someone you felt threatened by hugged me the first time we met?”

“So you *do* feel threatened by her!” Emily accused, trying to stifle a laugh. “She’s *married*, Joyce! To a guy!”

“I know, I know! I was being...irrational.” She read her lines off the ceiling. “You know that about me already. She can’t surprise me anymore. Besides, she seems nice; I’d like to get to know her more.”

Emily paused, as if to try and discern whether or not it was a lie. But it wasn’t, or either Emily could not discern well enough, because she let her off the hook.

“I believe you. And another thing to remember,” Emily said, pressing her bare self against Joyce, “I only belong to *you!*”

Joyce had raised her brows, but her look tempered into a tender smile, one Emily could feel with absolute certainty. “Yes you do,” she kissed her on the head, “And you’re the only one I take orders from.” She finally pulled out their bikinis.

Understandably, Michael was the first one to be outside by the in-ground pool when Joyce and Emily came out. Joyce carried towels for both as they sat down in some chairs next to Michael surrounding a table. In its center was a long pole, and above that was an expanded umbrella to shield them from the bright sun from above.

“Oh wow, I knew it was going to be a nice day, but the stars really did seem to align...” Joyce commented.

“Right?” Michael agreed. “It feels like you can’t make weather-dependent kinds of plans, otherwise Murphy’s Law rears its head...”

“Sorry we’re late!” Carol announced her arrival as she brought Jackie out in arms with her. Carol was in a two-piece as well, whereas Jackie was in a one-piece. Pink, polka dotted with mermaids patterned all over. Joyce fought hard not to sigh.

Definitely need to get Emily something like that...

“Jeez though, it’s been so long since I’ve even gone near a pool,” Emily briefly ranted, “I’m practically ready to be a mermaid if it means I can swim again!”

Of all things to happen, no one expected it to be the turn of Jackie’s head, a wide, glowing smile.

“You like mermaids too?”

Emily suddenly paused with surprise. “Uhm, yeah! I like them a lot. Do you too?”

“Yeah!” Jackie vigorously nodded. Taking advantage of the moment, Carol was able to let her go. She scurried over to the seat next to Emily, climbing in. “Do you like Ariel?” She eagerly asked.

“O--...of course I do!” Emily said, suddenly nervous about how much her mythical sea life knowledge was about to be called into question. “She’s my favorite mermaid!” Though, she hadn’t a clue what other ones existed, if any...

Jackie giggled, seeming overjoyed to hear this. “Me too! I like Ariel cuz she has hair like Mommy’s!”

Hair like her mom’s? Like Carol’s? Oh, duh. Red.

Emily made an agreeing noise. “That’s a good point. They both do look kinda similar...”

Carol then came back out with the platter of delicious looking food. After another quick trip inside, she was coming back out with cups of ice water. Emily had been saved from her interrogation once Carol sat down in the chair Jackie was in, opting to keep her in her lap.

“I would offer to try out that bottle you two brought, but for the sake of sensible thinking and safe decisions, maybe when we don’t need to worry about driving that night?” Carol smirked, leading to mutual agreement.

“So Joyce, you’ve gotta be pulling our leg, right?” Michael asked as she grabbed a small ball of mozzarella. “You said you’re a regular at Carmine’s? We can’t even manage to go once!”

“Mm, well...” Joyce paused to finish swallowing, “It started first as a business dinner, but I guess I had a chance meeting with the owner that night. I said I was a fan of the food so he insisted that I come again. So I did, talked a little more, and it wasn’t so hard after that getting to go again. Also, the food was good, so I may have invested a little...”

Emily from the sidelines raised a brow. *A little?*

“But, I guess I’m a regular for the owner. It’s a little embarrassing, but they sort of know my face there.”

“If we do somehow manage to go, you’ll have to go with us,” Carol added, “you seem like you’d get the red carpet rolled out for you every time you go! And Emily needs to come too, of course!”

“That definitely sounds like fun,” Joyce smiled.

“Can I come too?” Jackie chipperly added.

Joyce gave a difficult response, which was an awkward smile, unsure of how to phrase her response. It needn’t be said, but Carmine’s was closer to a business dinner establishment than a regular restaurant. Kids weren’t much of a thing there...

“I don’t think you’d like it there anyways, Honey,” Michael jumped in. “No chicken fingers,” he said solemnly, to which incited a genuine frown from Jackie. She had lost interest entirely.

“Mommy!” Jackie had already shifted her attention. “Can we go swimming?”

“In a minute, honey,” Carol said as she pacified her with half a roll of sliced provolone and gave herself the rest. “Joyce, I’m sorry for putting the spotlight on you so much, but what do you do for work?”

Joyce nodded as she chewed. “I run a medical company. Frontier?”

Quietly, Emily gave her the side eye. Not only was this the first time she'd heard the exact truth herself, but someone she *just* met could get the answer out of her immediately? By now Emily had started to draw her conclusions, but it was still vexing in its own way...

Michael lightly laughed as he took a sip of his water. "Stop joking - after that gift you gave, we really won't know what you say is fact or fiction!"

Joyce raised a brow, signaling her innocent confusion.

"...You're being serious?" Carol asked once more, and Joyce nodded.

"I don't want to make this all about me, but if you can't take my word for it, you could always look me up..."

The married couple quickly double backed though.

"No, no! We believe you; we'd never call you a liar, it's just...surprising," Michael gave an astonished chuckle. "It's kind of funny to think how one thing led to another. What were you two doing at the zoo?"

"My parents were visiting for a few days and Emily and I came up with the zoo as a place for us to go." Joyce explained.

"Ah, that's right!" Michael then remembered. "Emily mentioned something like that when we were talking." He didn't go into detail, which both Emily and Joyce appreciated. He had the politeness to not dig any further. As great as it was to meet him, their first introductions weren't caused by anything good.

"And Emily was fighting with Joyce!" Jackie suddenly said with an earnest tone, assuming her contribution to be helpful.

"A-ahm...?" Joyce gave an embarrassed laugh, unsure of how to bridge off of that. Emily looked equally as stunned as well.

"Jackie!" Carol admonished, "We don't talk about things that aren't our business to share."

"But I *was* there!" Jackie complained.

"No 'but's," Michael stepped in.

Before Jackie could start to feel upset about being scolded, Emily hurriedly interjected. “It’s okay, really! It’s just a sort of...sensitive subject, that’s all.”

“Sorry...” Jackie was the first to say, impressing her parents, even if she couldn’t look Emily in the eye.

“It’s alright.” Emily smiled. There wasn’t much point in being upset now. Not as if it could be taken back, and well...kids are kids.

“Actually, come to think of it,” Michael pivoted, “Emily, I can’t remember. Did we ever talk about work? What kind of work are you in?”

It was an odd instinct, but Emily’s surprise from the question left her looking at Carol for a split-second.

“Me? I’m...in real estate.” Her answer was slow and to herself less than stellar.

Still, Michael nodded. “That’s great. I mean, the market fluctuates, but there’s always gotta be some kind of property that needs moving, I guess? Are you someone that sells the houses?” He asked.

“Not exactly...I was...” She was starting to feel a bit warm. Her own mind was talking her into this, yet she couldn’t shake the dreadful embarrassment in having to state that she was jobless. Regardless of the reason, what good did it look to declare yourself a jobless face living it up with a wealthy company head? “I do the office work.” Emily managed to speak, but didn’t find it hard to be brief. Uncomfortably so.

Nevertheless, Michael eased the tension seemingly felt only by Emily as he nodded.

“I can definitely relate to the office work. I do detailing work for an electrical company, but no matter the medium, there’s always the same middleman stuff we have to deal with...” He sighed right then, as if reliving the workdays that just transpired. “Meanwhile,” he looked at his wife with jealousy, “this one probably spends more time outside her own office than in it.”

“You try driving and flying all over the place, five days a week, with weekends included.” Carol defensively said.

“Well, now that we’ve all had a turn, what do you do, Carol?” Joyce asked, truthfully curious herself.

“Me? I’m a bit more freeform, I guess, but I help invest in smaller and more...unorthodox establishments?”

Naturally, the use of a big word garnered Jackie’s attention.

“Mommy, what’s un...un-or-thoh-docks?” She asked.

“It means not as common. You don’t see it often.” Carol answered, kissing her on the forehead.

Joyce had asked and she wasn’t disappointed. Rather, spurred. “Really? Which kinds?”

“Well...I’d be willing to discuss more, but...” And with her hand out of view from the small girl sitting in her lap, she quietly pointed at her.

Joyce laughed, understandingly. “Actually, nevermind. Emily’s keeping me on a tight leash anyway; today is all play and no business, she said.”

“Oh?” Carol’s tone rose in mischief.

“I didn’t mean it like *that*...!” Emily made a small whine, giving Joyce the kind of look that felt quite cheated.

And just as Joyce was thinking of another playful quip to say, Jackie had once more stolen the show.

“Mommy...!” Jackie genuinely whined. “I wanna go swimming!”

“Okay, okay,” Carol relented, lifting her out of her lap as she stood. As soon as she set her down, Jackie was already bolting for the shallow end of the pool, right until Michael called for her with a stern voice.

“Jackie!” He said, freezing her in her tracks. “You know you’re not allowed in without your floaties?”

And for Emily and Joyce, unbeknownst to Jackie’s personal stance on such a controversial matter, were quickly enlightened by the erupting whine from her mouth.

“But Daddy...!”

“Absolutely not, honey.” Carol affirmed the parental law. “Floaties first, then we can go swim.”

“No!” Jackie shouted back, lightly stamping her foot. Carol set her hands on her hips.

The visiting couple remained quiet, as was tradition for these kinds of things. It was always awkward having to watch a parent discipline their child right in front of guests.

But before Carol could do any stern parenting, Michael elected the path of questioning. “Jackie, you’re always okay with wearing them; why not now?”

Joyce, much like Emily, tried to mind their business despite sitting right next to it all, but she couldn’t help but make a discerning observation. The little girl, constantly as she maintained her objections, gave a not-so-subtle glance at both she and Emily.

“I...I’m a big girl!” Jackie said simply.

“Yes, you are,” Carol agreed, “which is why big girls know to wear their floaties if they haven’t finished swimming lessons, yet.”

“I don’t wanna!” Jackie pouted.

“Then you don’t want to swim?” Carol countered.

“No!” Jackie was already getting teary-eyed.

“Then floaties it is.” Carol held her hand out. “Come on, we’ll go get your favorite pair.”

The little girl sniffled as she took her mother’s hand and they started walking to the sliding doors.

“Uhm...Carol?”

Everyone turned their heads, well except for a bashful Jackie, to Emily.

“If it’s okay...maybe I could use a pair, too?” Emily awkwardly chuckled. “After all, it’s been a while since I last swam...I might be out of practice?”

Everyone seemed to be surprised, yet the constant outlier seemed to be quite curious.

“Do you need floaties too?” Jackie asked Emily, turning her head.

“W-well...” Emily looked yet again on the spot. “I guess it’s better safe than sorry?”

“Emily, are you sure?” Carol asked, looking terribly apologetic. Above Jackie’s head all the adults could see her intent clear as day. “You really don’t need to...”

“No! Honestly, I better play it safe. Don’t wanna drown in somebody’s pool, after all.” Emily breathed an exaggerated sigh of relief, stealing a grin at Jackie, infected by the look and mumbled a giggle.

“Hmm...you make a good point, Emily,” Joyce spoke up next. “Mm...Carol? Actually, could you bring me a pair too, if you have them? I think I might have gotten a bit rusty as well.”

Emily gave Joyce a brief look, who smiled.

Carol seemed to have been caught off guard not once, but now twice. Michael seemed surprised as well.

“...Alrighty, then.” Carol nodded. “Three pairs of floaties.” Then she looked down at Jackie. “See? Emily and Joyce don’t mind wearing them, why do you?”

“No! No! I’ll wear them!” Jackie kept tugging on Carol’s hand, her attitude pulling a complete 180.

They watched the mother and daughter go inside before turning back to themselves amongst the trio.

“Thank you, you two.” Michael appreciatively smiled. “Even though she’s just a kid, Jackie can be self-conscious around others, especially people she wants to impress.” Michael said, especially looking at Emily.

“Well...it’s only a pair of floaties,” Emily shrugged. “I can swallow that kinda pill if it makes her feel more comfortable.” Really, the thought only barely crossed her mind before she was already putting it into action. Granted, opting in for a kiddie look probably didn’t do great things for her “Adult Image”.

A pair of lips kissed Emily’s temple.

“What was that for?”

“Nothing. Just proud of you.” Joyce grinned.

And so it wasn't much later on until two women and one small girl were all donning inflatable floats wrapped around their arms.

"They're...snug..." Joyce said, looking at her arms. They didn't fully reach her biceps and sat just above her elbows, seeing as they were kid-sized.

Carol paused for a breath, who was currently breathing air into Jackie's which did fit her as intended. What seemed to matter the most was that her smile was from ear to ear. "Don't worry, my husband's a great swimmer if you start to drown!" Carol joked.

Joyce smiled back before saying to Michael, "Counting on you!" to which he gave a playful nod.

"Jackie, stop fidgeting, you little rascal," Carol said, finding her mouth being dragged every which way as the little girl couldn't stop hopping around. She marveled at all the grown-ups taking after her. And how couldn't she? She felt part of something now.

"It almost feels like getting my blood pressure taken..." Emily commented on her own set, decorated in mermaid prints. Jackie had insisted Emily get her favorite pair. Which is funny to think about, that Jackie could have a favorite among things she seemed to hate...

"At least yours fit pretty well," Joyce observed, giving Emily's a little tug. Unlike Joyce, Emily's arms were just small enough to slide them up into place with a little finagling. Would it actually save her from drowning? Doubtful. But, would it keep her fashionable? ...Also doubtful.

Emily stepped over to the edge of the pool, sticking just a toe in the water. And to her pleasant surprise, it was quite warm.

"Is this pool heated?" Emily asked Michael.

He nodded. "To quote my wife, 'I wouldn't be caught dead swimming otherwise'."

"I don't think I've ever been to a heated swimming pool before..." Emily touched the water again in awe.

"Okay, honey, all set." Carol sufficed, giving her daughter a pat on the back. All four girls looked at the water. Carol said to Michael, "Coming in?"

“Maybe in a minute,” he paused to eat a piece of cheese from the board. “Gotta make up for everybody’s share!”

And in a sudden moment Emily saw the world around her turn sideways as she felt a moment of trance. It was a princess carry like the many she’d found herself in before. And there she was, in Joyce’s arms. Staring up at her with a blush, especially admiring her figure in her bikini.

This all happened in the span of a couple seconds, and Emily blushed, flustered that she’d be making such a bold and romantic advance right now...

“J-Joyce! Really? Righ--”

But it was Joyce’s devilish smile that betrayed the fantasy.

“Emily’s first!”

And for just a moment, Emily had flown. She soared wonderfully high. High enough to wail from the bottom of her lungs to the top, enough to feel her heart drop for just a moment as gravity pulled her right back down. Then, wonder and amazement quickly swam away as the girl cannonballed into the water.

Underneath the water everything was muted above, but Emily scrambled with waving arms and kicking feet as she swam to the surface.

All she could hear were Jackie’s eager giggles and laughs. “Do me! Me next!” Jackie begged, hopping from toe to toe in front of Joyce.

Joyce though gave her a confused look. “Do what?”

“That!” She excitedly shouted, pointing at Emily.

“That where?” Joyce turned her head, obviously playing dumb.

“Like Emily! Over there!” She fully turned this time to point. And now with Joyce in her blind spot, the squeal of a six year old became the new tune as Joyce whisked her in the air and dropped her in the pool, aiming for the shallow end this time. The girl immediately bobbed to the top, courtesy of her floaties, and the rush of excitement already had her begging for more.

“Is it warm?” Joyce asked.

Emily could only stare with a fire in her eyes.

“Hey Em, catch!” Michael shouted from behind.

Emily turned in the water at the perfect time for a splash from something hitting the water to hit her face. A worthy cost though for what she had received.

“Hm? What did you toss in?” Joyce asked Michael as he walked back from the small shed to his seat.

“You’ll see!”

But she didn’t see. Not until she felt it first.

A sudden gush of water shot like a weaponized faucet at Joyce, starting at her midsection before traveling up to her chest and part of her face. Now Joyce was shouting in protest, shielding herself with a hand.

Emily couldn’t stop laughing, now a super soaker in arms.

Carol looked to be in love with the spectator’s seat right then, quietly stepping into the shallow end of her own accord.

Joyce though put a hand on her hip, assessing the challenge before her. Not a moment more passed until she came diving into the water.

A war had begun.

“C-c-can we g-g-g-go back in th-the water?” Emily pleaded with chattering teeth, wrapped in a towel standing beside the outdoor table.

“Unfortunately, the one drawback to having the heated pool,” Carol agreed with her own slight shivers.

“BrrrRRRrrrrRRRrrr!” Jackie exclaimed with giggles, flapping her lips. Next, she started to open and close her mouth in exaggerated motions as she bared her teeth. “Look!” She excitedly grabbed Emily’s attention. “I can do it too!” She kept opening and closing her mouth, making sure to touch her teeth together each time.

“D-do what?” Emily asked, looking puzzled.

Michael chuckled, hoisting Jackie into the air from behind. “She means being a goofball. Looks like this little sea monster’s all pruned!” He said before playfully grabbing her hand, touching all her small, wrinkly fingers.

Still, Emily moved over to Joyce to complain.

“Why didn’t we bring those big towels?” She whined. “The ones that are big on me?”

Joyce, who was getting the last few strands of wet hair away from her face, gave her an amused smile.

“Duly noted, but those are our bathroom towels?” She reminded in a way to insinuate that the laws of the land did not permit such things. “Maybe they make those cape towels with the hoods for adults, too...?”

And in that moment, before Emily even thought to oppose such childish things, her mind immediately leaned on the convenience of it.

“Oh! Maybe we could ask Amy?” Joyce suggested. And this time, it wasn’t her putting on airs to get a rise out of Emily.

“I just need to bring two towels next time...” Emily left it at that. “But until then, somebody needs to make, like...an air heater or something. If they can heat a pool, they should heat all the outside stuff around it.”

Every adult except for Emily within earshot - so all of them, raised an eyebrow.

“Like a...heater?” Michael asked with a small laugh.

Emily’s eyes lit up. “Yeah! Like that! Only...” She paused to realize what she was saying. “...Nevermind.”

With another laugh out of the way at Emily’s expense, a new topic came up.

“Oh, are you planning to have lunch with us?” Michael asked the two. “I know I didn’t give much info over the phone, but that’s what we were planning for.”

“As long as we aren’t cutting into your time elsewhere,” Carol added.

“Stay!” Jackie commanded, yet in truth disguised by her childlike tact, begged. “Please! Please!”

Emily and Joyce shared a brief “why not?” kind of look before mutually nodding.

“I don’t see why we wouldn’t?” Joyce decided.

It was a resounding joy from the family of three, some more vocal than others (Jackie).

“I think I’ll take me and Jackie in first, then,” Michael said standing from his chair. “Less hair on our heads to deal with. Have fun, ladies!” He bid them a temporary farewell as he ushered Jackie along and back into the house.

Carol watched them leave with a smile before looking back at them.

“Thank you, you two, for playing along with Jackie like that.”

Emily smiled and waved it off. “Michael said the same thing; I don’t really mind.”

“*We* don’t really mind?” Joyce butted in with a grin, making Emily feel apologetic.

“Sorry...forgot.”

Her sheepish attitude naturally gave the other two giggles as they sat down in the chairs while wrapped in towels.

“Carol, I hate to admit it, but it’s been eating away at me...” Joyce looked at her with tingles of interest. “What kinds of businesses were you talking about?”

Carol nodded, but glanced at Emily for just a second. “Joyce, I don’t mind talking about it, but awfully bold of you when Emily has you on a leash, remember?”

Joyce gave Emily what could only be akin to her own version of puppy dog eyes.

With an upturned nose and an exaggerated ‘hmmf’, Emily turned her head. “Do as you please! I tried!” With her liability out the window, a corporate war spawning in the simple backyard of a suburban home was no longer her fault. She tried. With her daydreams out of the way though, Emily listened on with a bit of her own curiosity.

“Now I feel a bit on the spot...” Carol pretended a nervous laugh. “But, really, it’s nothing as crazy as you think. I’m not some kingpin with a monopoly on the underground drug trade, or anything!”

Emily and Joyce laughed, although inside Emily’s mind, a small voice seemed to tell her that the depths of business had no end in sight...

“Like I said earlier, I tend to help build up...niche businesses in...niche markets.” Carol explained, albeit cryptically.

Emily looked a little shocked before muttering, “D...drugs?”

“No! Absolutely not!” Carol dismissed it entirely as Joyce was in stitches and Emily with reddened cheeks. She sighed before her smile came back in full. “Niche doesn’t mean illegal, you know!” She laughed herself despite the push-back.

“To be honest, it sort of feels weird to talk about it with anyone outside the business, I suppose...” She pondered her own words for a minute. “Even to my own husband, he finds it strange, understandably.”

“Well?” Joyce edged her along. “You’ve definitely built up the suspense now if you hadn’t already?”

Carol briefly smirked, yet sighed as she opened it with a preliminary question.

“Well...I guess for starters... Do either of you know what a...erm...fetish is? Like a kink or something?”

Had the spectral plane been visible, an arching, static shock would have flashed the mother’s eyes as it sprouted between the two heads before her.

Emily and Joyce almost simultaneously felt an odd jolt, as if they’d just seen an old friend from an old life suddenly trying to integrate with the new. In other words, it was a sudden sense of discomfort.

“Mm...I think I have an idea?” Joyce gave her head the slightest tilt, opting for the sweet, plain vanilla, ignorant role.

“I’ve heard of it before...” Emily muttered, “...I think?” Yet in truth, if there had ever been a pep talk to be had before situations like these, bless Emily, but Joyce would ask her to simply say

nothing at all. Emily trying to lie about anything even remotely close to her interests, meaning sensitive emotions were involved, was nothing short of wishful thinking.

But maybe Joyce was being too over analytical because Carol didn't comment on it.

“Well, I don't want to go into much detail, for...reasons, but the gist is basically a specific theme, practice, idea - virtually anything, to be honest, that people might take to in a sexual sense.”

“Like...roleplay?” Joyce suggested, once more playing the innocent facade.

Carol nodded. “That's an example of it. I've heard it can even be on the tamer side... But I'm getting off track. From a business perspective, market potential within any group of consumers is almost always going to be less than the actual size, and the same thing applies to these groups of people tending to their...respective kinks.”

Joyce nodded, but Emily only blinked with a neutral look. It was almost surreal for the girl right then, imagining a conversation that involved Joyce, business, and diapers, quite easily two of her favorite things. But in the same sentence? Saying that Carol was talking about diapers definitely was a stretch, but didn't it fall into that category of kinkdom? It could, but the more Emily thought, maybe not for them...?

Meanwhile, in Joyce's head she was experiencing something a tad bit different. Business and kinks; broad topics she wouldn't mind peering into. That being said, what she and Emily had...she didn't see it that way. It wasn't a momentary pause for her to get her rocks off; Emily either. Joyce didn't baby Emily for sexual pleasure. No, the much more adult side of things came from their relationship as adults. What they did as a mommy and daughter remained much more pure. Well...remembering their first “trial” night with Emily in diapers nearly made Joyce visibly frown. Unfortunately she crossed a line, trying to “rub” the pleasure into Emily via a wet diaper. Never again...

“...And so,” Carol tuned back into their ears, “It works out that supporting many smaller...niche businesses, turns a good living. But, if anyone asks, I'm just a general investor.” She finished with a motion to lock her lips.

“...You mentioned roleplay being a kind of kink,” Joyce said, “but what other kinds have you seen in your work?”

“Well...” A breath of air escaped Carol's lips as she thought. “One place was a ‘costume’ shop,” she said in air quotes. “Don't get me wrong, it was -- high quality costumes, even, with...props. But meant for bedroom play, I guess.”

Joyce nodded thoughtfully, though with a look that expected more.

“Have either of you heard of something called B-D-S-M?” Carol asked.

Emily was the first to nod, but Joyce came a bit slower.

“See? Then you already know one kind of kink,” Carol chuckled. “But anyway, it’s of course something couples tend to do in the bedroom and at home, but there are gathering spots for stuff like that. These kinds of places charge you maybe a flat fee or an hourly rate to have access to their themed rooms, props and toys. They have a very...straightforward kind of name? Dungeons.”

All things considered the specifics were spared, though even at the level they were Emily wasn’t entirely vocal about what she thought. Only to Joyce had she even mentioned a word about their own kind of play, yet now she was seeing it to the same degree, only in a business sense with a woman she’d just officially met.

“Dungeons?” Joyce raised a brow. “I guess that matches the fantasy theme?”

Carol’s eyes lit up as she drank from her glass. “Good point! Never thought of that! Oh! And another one -- it didn’t pan out, but there was this store having to do with giant animal costumes and fur...”

It was an example that truly rang no bells for either Emily or Joyce, hence their confused look.

“But I think you two get the point,” Carol transitioned with a wave of her own clouded mind.

“Well, if I ever think of sprouting my own business like that, I’ll know who to call?” Joyce grinned.

“Please, give me a call and every cent I can invest is yours!” Carol begged with a laugh.

“Frankly I wouldn’t want myself at the head of that kind of operation,” Joyce spoke reflexively. “It goes without saying since I’ve said it once, but all that kind of stuff is beyond my scope of knowledge...”

“But what it sounds like is investing yourself wouldn’t be off the table?”

Joyce shrugged in defense of her opportunistic nature. “What can I say? If it looks promising...”

“If you’d like, I’m attending a dinner party a few weeks from now? If you really are serious, I can put you through to some serious business opportunities?”

“Oh? They just let anyone come? Especially for such...private stuff like that?” Joyce asked skeptically.

“No, they don’t,” Carol said, “which is interesting in a way, considering vetting your investor pool is like shooting yourself in the foot... But it leads to a healthier relationship, knowing that there’s some mutual understanding to begin with. Either way, my word should go far enough to vouch for you.”

“So it’s settled, then?” Joyce had a slightly giddy look, to which Emily rolled her eyes at.

“Oh? Trouble in paradise?” Carol grinned with her eyes on Emily.

“What?” Joyce whined at Emily defensively, to which she sighed.

“When I said no business talks in the car, I was mostly kidding, but I didn’t actually expect you to do business while we were here!”

“Uh-oh, somebody’s in trouble!” Carol laughed.

“It would appear so...” Joyce agreed. “How about we exchange numbers before we leave after lunch?”

“Sounds like a plan.” Carol nodded.

Joyce looked back at Emily who was quiet, yet obstinate.

“What?” Joyce exaggerated. “Not happy with that?”

“Outta sight, outta mind...” Emily relented with her own smile.

“No! They can sleep over!” Jackie begged as she continued to tug on Carol’s pants. Michael and Carol were seeing Emily and Joyce off at the door, but their time spent at the residence was the perfect amount for the once shy little girl to finally warm up to her guests.

Emily tried to be the gentle voice of reason. “Jackie, as much as we’d like, we didn’t bring any PJs?”

“I have some!” Jackie was quick on the rebound with hope in her eyes.

Emily had tried, and her mouth hung slightly agape, finding her own response just as obvious...yet hard to place.

Michael and Carol naturally stood above their daughter, smirking as their daughter tried to fight for the impossible.

“Goes to show how much Jackie sees you two as friends more than just grown-ups.” Carol laughed.

“Jackie, I don’t think they’ll fit in your PJs, sweetheart...” Michael said to her.

“They can use Mommy’s!” Jackie then shifted tactics.

“Joyce’d probably be fine...” Carol quietly remarked, though her words had been all used up once the unspoken said quite the opposite about the smaller Emily. “Not the point, though! Jackie, Emily and Joyce have their own home to get back to. We’ll see them again.”

“Soon?” Jackie dearly asked.

“Soon.” Joyce answered for Carol.

“When?” Certainly, this girl did not seem to skip a single beat.

“Alright,” Michael cut in, hoisting Jackie into the air. “Enough twenty questions out of you, missy.”

“But I wanna know~uh!” Jackie whined in an exaggerated tone.

“And you will once that information is declassified, private.” Michael asserted in a general’s tone.

“What’s dee-classih-fide?”

“I’m afraid that’s classified.”

And then the frustrated giggles ensued, seeming to shift Jackie's focus away.

Carol came to their rescue, seeing them out the front door while Michael had Jackie in arms.

"Bye Michael, bye Jackie!" Emily waved, and so did Joyce.

"Thanks again for having us," Emily said to Carol as they walked down the steps and over to the car.

"Don't even mention it. In all honest truth, it was mostly our daughter that kept a fire lit under Michael all week, so I've heard. She would *not* stop talking about you, Emily!" She laughed. "To be honest, I didn't really know what to expect meeting you two, but I'm really glad for us to have met."

"Michael and I had talked about meeting again, but I guess it was sort of half-hearted at first?" Joyce similarly agreed, feeling less shy about admitting her reservations now. "Same here though, I'm glad this worked out."

"*Glad you got business...*" Emily murmured from the corner of her mouth.

Joyce with a rosy smile gave a little giggle as she continued to face Carol. "Jackie's such a nice kid. I've seen too many that have no real discipline... And speaking of which, I need to go give some to Emily after all these snide comments she's been making to me today?"

"Hah?! What?" Emily stammered.

"Honestly, you two can't catch a break, can ya?" Carol cracked up. "Anyway, Joyce, we'll be in touch. Emily, lovely meeting you the proper way this time! Hope to see you both again soon! I better get back inside before Jackie can wriggle her way back outside. Drive home safe, you two!"

And with Carol seeing them off from the steps as they pulled away, the get-together was over.

"That was fun," Joyce was the first to say.

"Would it have been fun if you didn't get invited to an investor's dinner?" Emily cracked.

"Of course it would have." Joyce answered plainly. Then, after some pause, "Just...without some glow to it..."

“Uh-huh?” Emily giggled before her tone made a slight shift. “More importantly though, I can’t believe what kind of work Carol does...I sorta got the chills when it hit so close to home...”

“You too?” Joyce chuckled. “Gosh, it’s somewhat of a joke, but it seems like even when we take every kind of precaution, that kind of stuff always seems to find its way back to us...”

“Haunting of the babydom...” Emily sighed, already with an imaginative name in mind. “And hang on, that investor thing Carol invited you to, are you really gonna go?”

“I don’t see why not? Maybe I’ll find something I find interesting.” She wasn’t well-versed in kinks, and especially not when it came to business.

“Yeah but it’s all kink stuff... All I mean is that you tend to mention about keeping the really sensitive stuff private and separated from your career. Wouldn’t it be bad for your reputation if someone recognized you there?” In a world where Emily had no shame, the only thing stopping Joyce from giving Emily a leisurely diaper change wherever they may be in public was guarding her own business image... And Emily’s own embarrassment, of course...

Joyce nodded thoughtfully. “It could certainly cause issues, but being called out as an investor for that type of thing wouldn’t necessarily be damaging. Slightly surprising, at best. I thought about it a little more, but it’s a good thing that they vet their investors for these kinds of things. Not only does it keep interests at heart, but it does add a layer of privacy to it.”

“As long as you’re okay with it.” Emily said back, holding Joyce’s wellbeing above all else.

From the driver’s seat she smiled and with a free hand squeezed Emily’s thigh. “Thank you for worrying about me!”

Emily puffed her cheeks with a slight blush as she turned her gaze to the passenger window. “Well...you’d do the same for me...”

“Absolutely. No matter what.”

Both sat on either end of the corner to the couch in the living room, sharing in the silence, save for the faint noises from the city streets far below. Joyce and Emily seemed pensive as they sat there, somewhat formal and struggling to figure out what they wanted to say.

“I figured this’d be a good time as any to set us back on track...” Joyce said.

“Mm.” Emily nodded.

“Emily, I--”

“Wait!” She blurted out, cutting Joyce off. “I...I wanna make it very clear before we talk about this stuff. I know you’re a lot more worried about how we do this now...and you being my mommy... But, I said it before: whenever I was being your baby, I never had any real issues with it. Nothing I wanted to address. What I wanted to make clear was when we weren’t in that headspace, sometimes it’d feel like it bleeds over. So, I don’t wanna put any limits on what we do when we’re intending to do it. Just...outside of that space.”

Joyce held a look of silence and surprise, taking it all in, right until she burst.

“Hah...thank goodness.” She sighed with relief before collapsing somewhat into the couch.

“I said so before, didn’t I?” Emily reminded, scooching a little closer across the couch.

“You did, but...I dunno, part of me still thought we might have to reshape what we intended to have. But no,” she sat back up straight, looking more serious. “I completely agree with you. I don’t want you taking any responsibility for this; it’s my fault for being too...motherly when I’m not being a mother, but a girlfriend.”

“However,” Emily raised an important finger into the air. “Let it not be confused with being cutesy,” she explained in a professional, exaggerated manner. “The defendant is more than allowed to continue that.”

Joyce couldn’t stop laughing. “Duly noted! No more jokes right now though, I want to treat this seriously. It’s important to me that we both feel like we’re respecting each other’s boundaries. Emily, at the end of the day you are my number one priority, so what you say goes. I promise to do better when we’re both acting like adults, but I don’t want you to hesitate in calling me out when I’m doing something I shouldn’t be.”

“Just call you right out?” Emily asked.

“Yes. I don’t want to put you in an awkward spot.”

“But...I guess I was thinking about that too. I guess you could call it a safeword, maybe...”

A safe word, meant to be the hard stop or red switch that’d cease any type of kink play.

“You want a safeword?” Joyce asked, neutral in tone, but truthfully with her own sort of reservations. In her mind that kind of association almost immediately tainted what they had. In any other case it made perfect sense and she saw no harm, rather, encouraged it. That was for kinks and fetish play though. Was that what Emily saw this as...?

“Sort of...” Emily answered. “But not for when we’re a mommy and baby!” She quickly corrected herself, remembering just what they had meant to Joyce. “If there was ever a problem then, we can just talk to each other in the moment... I mean a safeword for when we’re in public, when we are just Emily and Joyce. Maybe a discreet way of letting you know that you’re doing something that bothers me...or when I’m bothering you.

“So a safeword...for when we’re both adults?” Joyce clarified, a bit confused, seeing that to be the exact opposite scenario where you’d want to have a hard-stop like that... In any other traditional sense, wouldn’t the safeword be in the private sector and the casual talks in the public one? Joyce tried not to crack a grin. It was only Emily that could come up with something as out of the box as this...But as odd as it was, maybe their unique relationship thus far is what seemed to make it click for Joyce.

“What do you think?” Emily then asked, looking self-conscious. “I guess I kind of agree that I don’t readily like a safeword either, especially when you’re my mommy...it makes it feel like it’s something less than real...and I don’t want that.”

“I think that’s a good idea,” Joyce smiled. “It gives me a safe reminder and it doesn’t affect what we already do.”

It was then a moment of mutual relief. Both had been dreading the “talk” up until now, but like most suspenseful moments, it overshadowed the reality completely. Now in place of that inhibiting and awkward knot that had seemed to bog them down since Mary and Frank’s visit, was a feeling of liberation. Everything was right again, and maybe after such trials and tribulations they were stronger because of it. Emily couldn’t hide her excited smile.

“...Mm...but...” Joyce started with a difficult expression, to which already rained on Emily’s parade.

“Huh? What is it?” She asked.

“Well, I know what we both want, and we’re definitely on the same page...but, I guess I just want some extra clarification as to what you want.”

“What I want?” Emily mimicked. “I want the usual stuff...what you want.”

Joyce furrowed her brow, tutting like a detective without all the clues. “Yes, and I completely understand that. I suppose I just need something verbatim. I want to hear clearly what you want, Emily.” And for a moment the corners of her mouth perked up, immediately confirming Emily’s suspicions.

“D-directly?” Emily stuttered slightly, suddenly feeling much less forthcoming about her desires. Already she was in Joyce’s trap.

Joyce’s expression lit up, making approving noises as she nodded her head attentively. “Yes! Just let me know what you want, and that’s what we’ll do.”

Emily narrowed her gaze, thinking before she answered. “...I want what you want...”

Joyce chuckled, in the sort of way that Emily could tell was partly forced, but also spurred by amusement.

“I know you do, silly! But, I need something a bit more specific to go off of? After all, I want a lot of things?” She didn’t bother hiding her grin this time.

Now things were starting to feel familiar, namely because of how hot Emily’s cheeks were feeling.

“F-fine...” She paused for a deep breath. “I-I...I want you to...” She murmured something intelligible at the end.

“Hm?” Joyce leaned in. “I didn’t quite hear that last part... Could you please repeat that for me?”

“I said I want you to ba...--...me...”

“Emily,” Joyce attentively said in a soft, yet authoritative voice, “louder, sweetheart.”

“I said I want you to baby me!” Emily finally shouted back.

“Ohh, I thought that might’ve been it!” Joyce planted a fist in her palm as if the lightbulb only shined just then. “Of course I’ll baby you, silly!” Joyce feigned another laugh whilst Emily looked to be just as flustered as always.

Emily was simply glad to have gotten through the spectacle. Once again, a hard lesson learned when it came to thinking she could tease Joyce and get away with it unscathed. Eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth. Balance was restored, at least...

Then, Joyce rose a finger to her chin, humming a thought. "Mm...but..."

But? Emily felt a brief moment of fear, surprised by the continuation.

"Maybe I'm being the silly one!" Joyce laughed. "I think I may have forgotten what you like about me babying you..." She put her hands together as if making a request of Emily. "Could you possibly remind me some more?"

Emily's eye nearly twitched. This woman didn't want equilibrium, she wanted domination.

"I like it when...you call me by my nickname..."

"Your nickname?"

"E-Emmy..."

"Emmy! Of course!" Again, Joyce pretended to have a revelation. "Such a cute name for such a cute girl! And? What else?"

What else? Emily internally groaned. Was she really going to put her through this?

"When you make me my special drink..."

"Uh-huh! Served up safe and secure in your ba-ba~! Anything else?"

"When I get to wear cute clothes..."

"Anything you wear is cute!" Joyce chuckled. "But I get what you mean." She still gave the look that expected Emily to continue.

"When I get big stuffed animals..."

"Mhm?"

"When I get my own special seat..."

“Your high-chair?” She smiled.

“When you force me to take naps, even when I don’t wanna.”

“Otherwise you’ll get cranky.” Joyce passively commented.

“When you give me baths.”

“Cleanliness is prettiness!”

“And...when I call you Mommy!” Emily said with a sudden outburst, catching Joyce a bit off guard. Though, Joyce quickly softened into a warm smile.

“An absolute given and inalienable rule.” Joyce smiled wide. “Now come on, what’s the last one?”

Emily’s bravado was gone hearing that. Somehow, she knew that Joyce knew, or it meant that they were thinking of the same thing.

“And I like...”

“Like...what?” Joyce asked.

“...Diapers...”

“Diapers?”

“I like wearing diapers!” Emily said. “When you check and change me...” She was feeling lightheaded. In an aggravated tone she said, “I’m sorry for teasing you! Is that everything you wanted to hear?!”

Joyce scooped even closer, pulling her into a hug as she giggled.

“Everything and more!”