

### 33 - The New Routine

Bewildered was Emily's first instinctual response. As she tried to figure what'd just happened, she caught her tongue absentmindedly probing the flavored teat inside her mouth.

She stared at Joyce's back in silence, watching her work away. Her hand drifted to the ring of the pacifier, dangling her finger on it for a moment before pulling it out.

"If I'd known how well that worked on you, I think I would've kept your paci on me a bit more often?" Joyce grinned as she peered over her shoulder.

Emily wasn't sharing the giddiness though as confusion reigned king in her mind.

"What...what'd you do?"

"I did what you asked me to do. I helped. Well, starting to help is a better way to put it."

She didn't respond at first, but a small frown grew on her face as she looked at the baby trinket hanging from her finger. Not that she didn't appreciate the gesture, but it wasn't that simple...

"I...thank you; but I'm serious, Joyce... What am I supposed to do?"

"You're supposed to relax for tonight," Joyce calmly instructed, "and listen to how we're going to make things better. You asked for my help, Emily, and of course I will give it to you, but you're going to need to be open-minded about this."

Emily tripped over some hesitation before she spoke. "Open-minded...?" That felt oddly vague. Vague enough to remind her of what things were like right as they were just starting to explore their "alternate" lifestyle.

Joyce turned from the stove and rested her hands on Emily's shoulders. "Nothing you haven't seen before. Just wrapped in a new bow."

Obviously Emily couldn't fully decipher the meaning, but a sixth sense told her that the dedicated trip to the nursery for a single pacifier wasn't some arbitrary thing.

Joyce could see her looking down at the pacifier with a feeling of trepidation. Joyce gently lifted her gaze with a finger supporting her chin.

"Don't be scared. I'm not going to say I've thought of everything; this is something I really only started to play with recently. That being said, I don't think what we'll do is something you'll hate. It's just going to be...different."

“Different...? Joyce, I don’t get what you mean...” Emily expressed her concerns in the form of visual, yet Joyce’s comforting smile did not falter.

“We’ll chat about it once we eat dinner, okay?” She cupped Emily’s cheeks as she kissed her forehead. “I just think maybe there’s a way we can change up the routine, is all.” She lowered her hand to raise the one Emily was using to hold the pacifier. “Why don’t you hang onto this for now?”

“Joyce...” Emily thought she could see what Joyce was implying, and it honestly felt like a diminutive fix. “I’m not an actual baby...you can’t just...” She sighed a tiny bit, realizing that she was starting to contradict the very person she begged for guidance.

“Pacifiers don’t solve problems for real babies, too, you know?” Joyce giggled as she took it from her hand. “Pacifiers do exactly what they’re called. They pacify,” she explained as she gently forced it back between Emily’s lips. “If you’re angry, sad, or even a little excited, think of this as a way to distract yourself or maybe an outlet to channel all that emotion? Emily, nothing meaningful has ever been done in a single day. You’ve been working so hard since the first day you lost your job, and I can’t tell you how proud that makes me. But now I want you to just calm down...and breathe.”

Emily wanted to speak, to contradict or express her doubts, but she felt that if this imaginary spell was going to work, maybe she should stay gullible for at least a little longer. She took a moment and breathed through her nose, leaving the pacifier right where Joyce left it.

“See?” Joyce stroked the top of her head. “We just spent a whole minute calming down, focusing on ourselves rather than anything unimportant!” Joyce chuckled. “We’re still doing just fine. You’re doing fine. We still have our house, and everything is as stable as it’s always been.”

Emily had furrowed her brow, yet admittedly the crease in her forehead had lessened.

“And you look like less of a worrywart now, too.” Joyce smiled. “Emily, I will never make light of your problems. Your struggles are mine just as much, but I need you to know that this isn’t as all-consuming as you might think. If I have to pull you aside like this to remind you of that, I won’t hesitate, understood?”

Emily instinctually wanted to reply, but reserved herself to a visual nod. She did feel calmer now.

It was more than enough for Joyce. “Good. We’ll have plenty of time to brainstorm during dinner and I can voice my suggestions then. For the time being though, just try not to have too many big

thoughts, okay?” She tapped her finger on the plastic shield. “This is your friendly reminder. Stay small for a little bit. We’ll tackle things as we need to.”

It was with reddened cheeks Emily continued to help make dinner. It was a weird limbo situation though. She wasn’t exactly Emily, but not Emmy either. As she helped cook with a pacifier in her mouth, Joyce still seemed to regard her as her normal self, albeit with a little more comfort in her words, like Emily needing handling with kid gloves in regard to her emotions.

“Howh mush lohnger?” Emily found herself asking around the pacifier. The sentence was finished before she could regret the attempt as a pacifier accent seemed to override her speech.

“Should be just a few more minutes,” Joyce flashed her an unperturbed smile, like the sight or sound itself wasn’t especially stimulating to Joyce, of all people, in any seeming way.

Emily figured there to be some kind of teasing or sly comment, but it never came. Maybe it was her way of being considerate, or how to treat this as some kind of normal.

*If I need this, she probably doesn’t want to make a big deal out of it...* Emily silently reflected.

“Okay...” Joyce decided to untie and slip her apron off. “Emily? Could you put these back in the closet?” She asked as she held the apron out for her.

Emily quietly nodded as she took her own apron off, but not quite before Joyce could give her a hand in undoing the knot behind her first.

After she pulled it off, Emily was then hit with a one-two as Joyce briefly rested her arms on Emily’s shoulders, gently tugging the pacifier from her mouth and planting a kiss on her temple.

“Thank you for helping me cook!”

“I can always help...” Emily said in a shy voice as she walked over to the closet.

As they ate, Emily couldn’t bring herself to have much conversation. Joyce did chat casually, like there wasn’t some impending bomb Emily expected her to drop at any moment.

“What’s wrong?” Joyce asked with a concerned look. “Wait...it doesn’t taste bad, does it?” A look of horror started to consume her.

“No, it tastes fine...” Emily mumbled with a slight grin as she angled her gaze closer to the table than Joyce’s eyes. “I’m just...a little scared...”

“Scared?”

Emily nodded. “I dunno...” She looked more clearly at her, “I’m just thinking that whatever it is that’s gonna happen...I might not like it cuz...it’s gonna scare me...”

Joyce nodded thoughtfully, yet with stupefying clarification she asked, “So you’re scared that this ‘thing’ will scare you?”

Of course when repeated through another mouth, Emily felt stupid...

“Emily,” Joyce left a moment to get her full attention, “I don’t necessarily think you should stop looking for work; if that’s what you want, I respect that. However, I think you need to slow down your pace.”

It was a no-brainer, yet the thought of any kind of delay did make Emily worry. It only made her think of all the potential opportunities she could have had, had she been any faster. It was the fear of missing out.

“How...how slow?” Emily hesitantly asked. She didn’t figure there was a specific number in mind, yet she needed to know how deep this went.

With, in fact, a specific number in mind, Joyce said, “An hour a day at most, kind of slow. And that’s for the weekdays only. Weekends I don’t want you stressing over that kind of stuff.”

“An hour...? But that’s...” Emily had an idea in mind, yet Joyce’s figure grossly underbid her own. She was already spending the near entirety of her day job searching, and cutting it down to a mere fraction of that was essentially killing her chances altogether, wasn’t it?

“With how things have been, Emily, I think that’s perfectly reasonable.” Joyce said firmly. “I’m going to be honest because I want to make a point to you: there’s absolutely no rush in you getting another job. I intend to be the breadwinner and I will be the financial support. Aside from that though, I’d never stop you from doing what you want, but I will regulate it, now that you’ve asked me to?” She smiled, but Emily was still looking conflicted.

Emily tried to reason Joyce’s viewpoint. It was somewhat unfortunate, but Emily had always known before Joyce saying it herself that she couldn’t ever hope to financially compare. Joyce was the foundation, and whatever Emily contributed in that sphere likely couldn’t do nearly as much. Or rather, money was such an excess for Joyce that the concept of spending had become effectively bottomless, so what did it matter adding 1 to infinity?

“Related to that,” Joyce continued, “I think this is a good chance to add some structure to your routine. Just because you aren’t working, that doesn’t mean a day can’t be productive? First and foremost, we’re going to decide on a time in the day when you can use the computer to job hunt-- Emily, don’t make a face.” Joyce paused herself just to scold the girl, who was starting to make a face...

“I don’t need a specific time...!” Emily argued with a tinge of whine. It was one thing to be imposed with a harsh time restriction, but when she was allowed for it as well?

“Yes you do,” Joyce gently, yet firmly contradicted, “otherwise you could be overlapping with all the other things that’ll keep your day busy?”

The mention of other things surprised Emily a little, but she sort of expected it... But still, “What happens if I get an email, or a reply to a job offer or interview? I need to respond as soon as possible!”

While this was constructive and it felt needed, Joyce’d be lying if she said that there wasn’t some element of “parenting” to this that she felt, and certainly enjoyed.

“We can discuss that when it happens,” Joyce decided, “But until then, I won’t budge.”

Emily felt defeated. There wouldn’t be any room for argument in getting that to expand. It was probably going to be the one thing of this entire bill that she wouldn’t negotiate on, given it being her greatest grievance... “What else...?” She asked her.

Joyce quietly sighed, now arriving to the parts she wasn’t a fan of personally. It was likely trivial to Emily, but Joyce wasn’t excited about sharing her responsibilities, at least with Emily. In a power dynamic that poised Joyce at the top as the dominant caregiver, it felt wrong to make her charge participate, like giving her housework.

“I...want to give you some chores to do on a daily basis.”

“Chores...?” Emily asked, surprised.

Joyce nodded. “Things like running the dishwasher, making the bed...vacuuming...” Now her lack of preparedness was starting to show. This was obviously something she didn’t want to dig into because she didn’t like the idea altogether. Yet, the duality was that it benefited Emily despite Joyce’s selfish suffering.

“I don’t mind,” Emily spoke truthfully, “but...are you okay with it?”

“Yes, I am,” Joyce smiled warmly as she lied through her teeth. “We can make a chart,” she did start to see the fun side of things, imagining a cute chore chart for Emily on the fridge, “and that can help keep you busy for at least a little bit.”

Call it weird, but Emily didn’t mind the idea of housework. She said it herself and quite clearly that it was eternal boredom without Joyce, as well as tiring from job hunting. Not that she wanted to stop, but she knew her body needed to rest; she just needed someone to force her into it.

“I can vacuum the rooms and wash the bedding?” Emily chimed in, better shaping Joyce’s ideas.

“Mhm, that could definitely work,” Joyce nodded.

“Oh, and I guess I could tidy up the nurse--”

“Absolutely not.” Joyce didn’t look so friendly this time, like one of her prized assets was about to be attacked. “I want to be the one in charge of the nursery; I’m your mommy, after all.” The seriousness in her look was almost absurd to the point that the uninformed would be expected to laugh, or find the look on her face quite strange. Emily, however, instantly understood just how much it meant to her. In a strange way, giving these sorts of duties to Joyce was a big step for her, oddly enough...

“O...okay...” Emily nodded, seeing that she nearly crossed a line. “Everywhere but there?”

Joyce paused, considering any loopholes she may have left. “That’s fine. But, let me know if any of this feels like it’s too much for you, okay?” Her expression softened. “I don’t want to overload you...”

“Joyce,” Emily gave a look that thought her to be a fool, “Up until recently I was working full time...I can do some chores.” She chuckled.

“I know, I know...” She smiled, happy to see that at least Emily could make mention of it now without sour feelings.

“Is that it...?” Emily asked, not implying whether she wanted more or not, just wanting to know in general.

“...” Joyce took a bite from her food first. “It can be?”

“What do you mean?”

“I’d say we’re past the point of me getting to make decisions based on what I want. Now I want to include you; what we both want.”

For once, Emily felt like she could see a little into Joyce’s headspace. “You mean, something related to the pacifier?” Again, she didn’t think that it was an unrelated, out-of-the-blue sort of thing.

Joyce nodded. “To be honest, I think it might help you out a little.”

And like that, Emily had fallen off the wagon. “How so...?”

“We haven’t even mentioned your nursery once in the past week, Emily.” Joyce tried to hide her own frustrations, because she knew that this would be good for her as well. Deep down though, this idea wasn’t out of complete self interest. “I know we’ve had obstacles in the past, but I really want to give you a space in the day where you can just unwind; forget about the complicated stuff and focus on relaxing.”

“What about you?” Emily asked after a moment of silence.

“I don’t want to talk about me because I don’t want it to influence you,” Joyce said, “I want you to be selfish, Emily.”

What she wasn’t sharing were the benefits she’s reap from this as well. It wasn’t any secret to herself that Emily being in poor sorts lately has affected Joyce and her attitude at the office. Nothing jeopardizing, but more than anything she simply wanted their old dynamic back, if not toned up a bit.

“How would that work...?” She asked hesitantly.

“Well, I guess it’d start once I get home from work each day. Assuming that all the chores have been done by then, we’ll go to the nursery and get you all set up. For the rest of the night you’ll get to be my baby girl.”

“What about in the morning, though?” Emily asked, already wondering what was to be done with her diaper. Joyce did leave early in the morning, after all.

“I’ll make sure to get you into some panties before I leave,” Joyce chuckled, “I feel pretty confident that you’ll sleep through it anyway.”

“Yeah, but, if we do it every day...doesn’t that mean I won’t ever have a chance to have...’grown-up’ time around you?” She most certainly didn’t like that. Being a baby was fun, but it wasn’t a complete end-all be all. She needed some kind of breathing room around Joyce.

“You most certainly will. First and foremost, you’ll always be the one that decides if we’re going to do it that night. If you say ‘yes’, we go to your nursery, but if it’s a ‘no’, you won’t hear me mention it until the next day. Emily, even when you are my little girl, there’s nothing stopping you from asking or talking about what you want, you know? The way I see it, all we’re really doing is giving you a space that discourages that sort of thing, but it’s not like you can’t be yourself. This isn’t meant to be you putting on an act; I want this to be an outlet for yourself.”

“It is,” Emily found herself agreeing almost immediately, “but...I dunno. Maybe too much of a good thing is a bad thing? I guess we haven’t really tried...”

“Maybe, but if we might have those kinds of limits, this is a safe way for us to explore them. At any point you make it clear that you want to stop, we stop.”

They ate some more as Emily took a deep breath, finally starting to fully wrap her head around everything. She didn’t expect this sort of thing to be the rest of her life, but she knew that it was going to be like this for at least a little bit. Her bias still couldn’t shake the urgency she felt to strive for “adult” things, but she finally caved and Joyce was telling her to stop, so stopping she ever so reluctantly was.

“So it all starts tomorrow...?” She asked as Joyce started to clear up their spaces.

“I think it’d be best,” Joyce offered, but added much more resolutely, “but regardless, your computer time is still being limited.”

Emily limited her disappointment to her mouth as she nodded. In that case, tomorrow would go back to being the sucky status quo she’d already found herself in if there wasn’t anything at all to do. “Then let’s start tomorrow.” Emily agreed.

“And about the second half we discussed,” Joyce explained as she came over to wipe Emily’s face in a casual manner, “you are always in control, and like I said, you always decide whether we’ll do it or not, but...please give me a gentle reminder if I accidentally get pushy after a while...”



“You mean if we haven’t done it in a bit?” She asked, wiping the residue of water off her mouth.

Joyce nodded with a slightly bashful look. “We’ve talked a lot about how I can sort of lose control, and I know you understand how I can get, but...it’s still sort of embarrassing.”

“It’s okay if it happens,” Emily smiled, “I mean, I’d rather not be asked every few minutes, but if it’s been what you think is a long time, please let me know; I...I get it that this is supposed to be for me, but it’s obviously something for you, too.” Need she remind Joyce that she was the one who pulled her into the rabbit hole first?

“That sounds good to me.” Joyce nodded her head. “I love you so much, you know?”

“...I love you too.” Emily reciprocated with a goofy smile and reddened cheeks. It still elicited a fuzzy feeling in her chest just to hear and say those words.

They came in together for a hug and embraced one another, yet as they shared an intimate moment, it was disrupted by a loud, sniffing.

Emily turned her head up to see a flaring nostril.

“Uh...what?” Emily giggled.

“Uh huh,” Joyce seemed unimpressed, “thought so.”

“Thought what?”

“I thought that you didn’t take a shower or bath today.”

The realization made Emily freeze up. She sniffed herself, not finding any sort of foul odor, but at least not a freshly imbued either. “I...was busy?”

“You were distracted,” Joyce disapproved. “We’re adding baths to your schedule, too. Come on, off we go,” she waved her hand to motion Emily ahead first.

“Showers are faster!” Emily complained with a sense of play, although she did feel a tiny bit embarrassed.

“Showers are for big girls that can keep themselves squeaky clean. I need to take my time with you!” She laughed after catching Emily’s grin. “Besides, I wanna monopolize every second I can get with you!” They both entered the bathroom.

---

Everything was at peace again as Emily and Joyce were dressed in their pajamas, sitting on the bed, specifically Emily in Joyce's lap as she kept a towel wrapped around her head. Both were on their phones, only Joyce's torso was a bit taller which allowed her phone to not block Emily's.

Both were quietly browsing up until there was a sigh from Joyce.

"What?" Emily asked as she comically turned her gaze up to the ceiling.

"I just got some news from Sheila..." Joyce explained with a glum attitude. "Remember that business dinner my mom asked me about?"

Emily did her best to rack her brain, but nothing of substance was bubbling to the top. "Uh..."

"I have a business dinner coming up this week and I knew it'd be a late night, but I wasn't expecting it to turn into something overnight..."

"What do you mean?" Emily started leaning back to dig her head into Joyce.

"The dinner's at a hotel," Joyce wrapped her arms around Emily's waist and flopped on her back. "It's a nice hotel, but of course the host thinks that he's doing some of us guests a favor by buying us our own rooms for the night. You'd think people would stop doing that by now...?" She mostly complained amongst herself, because the concept of buying someone a hotel room for the night seemed like a gesture beyond Emily's purse strings.

"Can't you just turn it down?" Emily partly lifted herself to turn over and rest her chin on Joyce's sternum.

"It wouldn't look good," Joyce said as she paused to groan, "being given a room usually means that there's going to be some kind of breakfast in the morning...at least with this guy."

"Maybe he has a thing for you?" Emily cheekily giggled, but Joyce didn't outwardly laugh.

"Well, if he tries to make a move like that, I'll just explain that I'm too busy managing your naps and bedtime..." She carried away with the thought like it was an honest threat.

"Take a joke!" Emily giggled as the smile did eventually come to Joyce's face. "What kinda host is it?"

“He manages breweries. I can’t say I know much about the business behind alcohol, though.” Joyce gave a ‘no idea’ kind of look. “I don’t think I’m someone special to him, though; he does this for just about any big head that gets invited to his stuff.”

“So you’re a big head?” Emily asked, sneakily prodding for information on Joyce.

“I’m a mommy who played her cards right.” She smiled as she deflected the chance for inquiry, yet went back to frowning. “But, if he makes me stay the night, I’m not going to be back to spend the night with you!” Now it sounded as if a grave injustice had been committed.

Emily didn’t exactly look pleased either as she shrugged. “It’s okay...It’s only one night, and it sounds like this is for your reputation?”

“It is...” Joyce bit her lower lip in thought. “You...you could always come with me?” Joyce perked up at the realization.

“Huh? Go to the business dinner with you?” Emily looked a tad bit nervous. “I don’t wanna intrude on that kinda stuff...”

“You wouldn’t be intruding on anything,” Joyce patted the top of her toweled head. “Believe me, plus ones are more common than not. If anything, you’d help me stand out less?”

Emily’s mind couldn’t help but drift to a slightly more sensitive area though. “Yeah but...even if you’re dating another woman...?”

Joyce didn’t seem to be fazed, however. “I don’t think it’d affect much?” Joyce chuckled. “Really, all that worries me is the *other* thing about us going public. Which it won’t,” she reassured Emily and herself. “I might just surprise a few people in my spheres,” she giggled. “Most importantly, I would be a little excited at the idea of showing you off...?”

“Showing me off? Like I’m a prize or something?” Emily asked with intrigue.

“Other than the person themselves, one of the most fun parts about having a lover is the exclusivity,” Joyce smiled even wider as she leaned her head forward to kiss her. “I get to show everyone how stunning you are *and* make it abundantly clear that no one else can have you. It goes both ways, you know?”

“What would I even say?” Emily asked. “I mean...I dunno if I could handle trying to socialize with any sorta bigwigs... I imagine if we weren’t dating and I just met you, you’d probably be sort of intimidating...”

“That’s why you’d be on a tight leash the whole night?” Joyce offered a solution. “Where I go, you go, vice versa. There’d be lots of yummy food there, too...” She added with coyness.

“Like buffet food?” Emily asked with a neutral face. Unfortunately, those never seemed to be too stellar. A bunch of heated aluminium trays filled with lukewarm food.

“Dunno, but I’d wager the food you’d have there is better than mine; probably a little above Carmine’s?”

Above Carmine’s? That was setting the bar, and Emily falling for the bait was showing. “...I don’t even have a dress ready...” Now she was simply being difficult for fun.

Joyce rolled her eyes. “Like you haven’t been pampered like a princess already. Of course you’ll have something to wear! Now come on; wanna come, or do you want to make me lonely for the entire night?”

“Fine, fine...I’ll go.”

“Great!” Joyce smiled with a giggle. “I’ll ask Amy about getting us a child leash, and--”

“Shut-uuup!” Emily groaned, rearing her head back to devour her prey like a beast as she smothered Joyce with a kiss on the lips.

Joyce could only flash her teeth with a squeamish noise of glee as she unwrapped the towel from Emily’s head just so she could run her hands through her hair. “I can’t tell you how happy it makes me to see you be so playful!” It was her way of saying how great it was to finally have her away from the computer.

“Yeah, well, you didn’t give me much of a choice...” Emily said light-heartedly, but there was some truth to it.

“Shush,” Joyce pressed a finger on her lips. “You’re going to be absolutely fine. Now let’s get to bed already; I feel like it’s been a millennia since we both went to bed at the same time!”

As Joyce leaned over for the lights, Emily oddly found herself scanning her gaze across the bed, feeling like there was something missing.

“Oops, almost forgot him!” A voice could be heard as a stuffed mochi fell into the valley between Emily and Joyce’s bodies.

“Where’d he go?” Emily asked, truthfully forgetting their last meeting.

“You left him in the bathroom,” Joyce grinned, “I made sure to blowdry him, though; it was a little humid there...”

“Since when do you dry off mochi?” Emily laughed.

“Since they started having hair.” Joyce played along, but realism quickly caught up with her mind. “Actually...” she wore a slightly grossed out look, “hairy sweets doesn’t exactly sound all that great...”

Emily shuffled herself closer against Joyce in bed. “And *I’m* supposed to be the silly one...”

“No, no, don’t worry, you still definitely are...” Joyce stretched as she found a comfortable position, one that involved Emily’s head nuzzled close against her chest.

Most certainly for Emily, it felt like the greatest sleep she’d had in a millennia.

---

*Emily,*

*Good morning! I made sure to give you a big big kiss before I left for work! Today’s the first day we’re trying out a new routine, and I haven’t made anything official yet, so I wanted to leave you a note. Today, I want you to do a couple chores around the house.*

- 1. Make the bed (Tug the corners of the bedding to get out all the wrinkles!)*
- 2. Vacuum the living room (I already plugged it in the wall by the TV for you!)*
- 3. Make yourself some lunch (You’ve earned it!)*
- 4. Call me at 12:30PM (I need my recharge!)*
- \*5. 1:00-2:00PM You may use the computer for job searching (This one is OPTIONAL!)*
- 6. Put our clothes in the washer at 3:30PM. (I have the washer all set for you, just press the ‘Start’ button. I’ll take care of the rest when I get home!)*
- 7. Don’t cry too much from missing me! (30 more minutes!)*
- 8. Wait 30 minutes*
- 9. Give me the BIGGEST hug you can when I walk through the door!*

*Make sure you don't overexert yourself today, okay? Call me right away if there's something you don't understand or if you just wanna hear my voice! I love you so so so so so so much! XOXOXO*

*- Joyce ♥*

Emily had never seen Joyce write this letter, or any kind of letter, so there was room for it being a fake message and from someone else, yet...as she finished reading with a stupid grin on her face, she knew it couldn't be anyone but the very Joyce herself. It was a lot of words and a lot of love for really three small things to do in the house, padded out by her own interests, as well as keeping herself fed and speaking with Joyce. Hopefully her list of tasks would expand, but for now this was a start.

Leaving the small note on the kitchen table, Emily walked over to the fridge to at least have breakfast before washing up to start the day. She tended to those exact things, noticing the vacuum sitting by the wall as she passed through the living room, and first moved back into the bedroom.

The bed wasn't a complete mess, but obviously it had just been slept in. Trying to channel what would have been her working energy into housework duties, Emily took the route of completely stripping the top of the bed just to neaten it down to the very sheets. Overkill most likely, yet Emily felt that if she was too average about it, she'd be out of things to do in a matter of minutes.

And while she worked she started to think to herself on the lack of things to do. If Emily could estimate it, even if she gave her all for these tasks, which she planned to, there'd still definitely be time in excess...time she could use to browse on the computer...

Her mind felt a little at odds with her heart though. She agreed with Joyce that she'd have designated computer time... But if it were in moderation, maybe? And, as long as she got the stuff done on the list that she wanted, wouldn't it bolster her case that she could balance both things? Prove she didn't have to be so restricted? As she reorganized the bed, it was coming closer to a decided conclusion...

One honest and thorough vacuuming later it wasn't even time for lunch yet; just shy of two hours off. As expected, Joyce gave her an ample amount of time. Strangely finding herself looking out for anyone in the apartment that didn't exist, Emily crept off to the office. Untouched, Emily sat down in the chair. She wiggled the mouse and the screen came to life.

*Just maybe thirty minutes to check on my emails and stuff... Maybe look at a few postings...*

---

Despite it being just another day in the office, Sheila was glad to see that her boss seemed a bit more alert and on task today. It was as if her earlier troubles had sorted themselves out. Either than, or maybe she'd detached herself from the person that she told her about. Either way, her performance was back to where it usually was, and that was a good thing.

“Oh, Sheila, that’s right,” Joyce said as she accepted her scheduled drink, “I guess I am staying at the hotel the night of the dinner.” She said it with a smile, which didn’t flag as a problem for Sheila, but it did seem a tinge of strange. She’d never known her boss to be exactly glad over gestures like that. Maybe the first few times, but they tend to add up to the point of being an inconvenience. Sheila didn’t always accompany her, but even from the sidelines it was sort of understandable...

“That’s good to know,” Sheila nodded as she made a note on her phone. “I’ll make sure to confirm your reservation later today.”

“Thank you. Oh, one more thing, can you make sure that the reservation is for two?”

“Two?” Sheila asked, signaling it as confirmation for her ears, but she was honestly surprised.

She nodded with a faint glow on her face, like the sun itself was shining from her imagination. “Oh, and that also reminds me; do you want to come, too? I heard that the food is going to be good?”

“I appreciate the offer, Ms.Summers, but I’d rather not impose on something like that... If it were for work-related things though, I’d be willing...”

“I wouldn’t want you to work the night of a dinner,” Joyce waved off the notion. Truthfully, everything with Emily had put her in a good mood. She was feeling generous, and Sheila’s hard work was always due for some kind of reward.

“What if I put you up in a room, at least?” Joyce continued to press, then she remembered hearing from Sheila something on a not so great night. “You and your boyfriend? It’s the least I could do for all your hard work?” And need she mention all the things that she asked of Sheila in excess...

“Ms.Summers, I couldn’t do that to you. I really do appreciate it, but we don’t need to--”

“But I *want* to?” Joyce pushed.

“I don’t want you to.” Sheila said politely, but firmly.

Joyce resisted a grin. Fortunately and not so fortunately, she didn't fold like Emily usually would.

"You haven't taken any vacations this year yet, right?" Joyce asked. If there was one thing she certainly could remember about Sheila, it was the times that she wasn't there, awfully because those were so few and far between. "How about that then? You take the day off and I give you and your boyfriend a hotel room? Is it not a nice hotel?"

"It is...but if I'm going to be there, I should be on the clock to help--"

"But if you were on the clock, how could I get you to justify accepting my generosity?" Joyce raised an eyebrow. "Sheila, let me pay you back a little for everything that you do?"

Accepting gifts wasn't Sheila's strongest suit. They were nice, but as the supporting role for so long, minimal recognition had simply been the norm. To disrupt that was...well, disruptive.

"I...suppose I can ask my boyfriend..." Sheila gave no definitive answer. She wasn't going to try and talk her boyfriend out of it, but she still didn't feel wholly comfortable. Maybe it was weird to think, yet it felt like she hadn't done anything to earn it? Which objective was being extremely modest, given just how much Sheila considered her tasks to be the status quo. And on another note, a dog sitter would be in line as well.

"Good!" Joyce nodded with approval. "You don't have to come to the business dinner, but try to go out to eat? Do something fun; collect receipts for me. I'll reimburse you for everything."

"I can't do that!" Sheila raised her voice a little, quickly composing herself. "A room is more than enough, Ms.Summers. I can't take advantage of you. It'd be a day off, anyway?"

Joyce sighed, but still looked happy to have made progress. "Well, if you can go, that's great; book yourself a room, don't be stingy, because at the minimum I'm at least paying for that. From there, just let me know if there's any other kind of bill."

It was most certainly all a definitive maybe in Sheila's mind, yet gratitude was of course in need. "Thank you for being so generous, Ms.Summers..."

"Thank you for always keeping me afloat," Joyce smiled. Be it in the office or the home, she always seemed to have someone supporting her now.



Sheila excused herself while Joyce continued with her work with a drink to help her move along. It was already a regular thing for her, but especially now she was eager to get back home. All the little things she wrote on the note that was left for Emily made her heart flutter and fueled the excitement she was having just to walk through the door. Would Emily really be waiting to give her a hug? She couldn't wipe a silly grin off her face just from thinking about it. But before that'd even happen, there was also the time that she'd get to talk to her; in all honesty, that was her favorite. It was like a small recharge that she could use to power herself through the rest of the day.

*Will she call first?*

Joyce had her guesses, yet continued to play the innocent schoolgirl as she worked away. As her fingers moved so did the time, passing and passing, broken up by a few more talks with Sheila and hearing from other executives. No official meetings yet, thankfully. But, beyond all that boorish routine, the clock was finally arriving at noon-thirty and it was just about time to talk to Emily. Maybe she was making a big deal out of it, but Joyce still made sure that her phone was in clear sight just in case if the ringing somehow didn't catch her attention.

Once it was past a couple minutes, Joyce set aside her work, paying direct attention to her phone.

"Maybe she's busy...?" Joyce quietly murmured, lifting up her phone. She knew she was being overly punctual. Maybe just a few more minutes.

12:35

12:39

12:44

12:49

Finally, Joyce was somewhat frowning with a concerned expression. While there wasn't much experience to make a fair judgement on something like this, Emily didn't seem the type to forget about calling her. Giving up on the waiting game, Joyce dialed for Emily on her phone.

---

Emily finally remembered to blink as she rubbed her eyes a little. She was in the midst of writing another cover letter. Easily this is what ate away at her the most, namely because it forced her to exercise her writing muscle, of which she had so little of.

Unbeknownst to her, the time she'd been on the computer grossly passed 30 minutes over 2 hours ago. After a good night's rest her body felt refreshed to find the rhythm again that put her in such a sorry state all over again. Not only that, but the rhythm apparently involved a faint vibrational buzzing noise now, yet it pulsed with its noise. Emily stopped for a second to see if she was hearing things, which she assumed she was, because eventually it did stop.

"...I'll just finish this letter, apply to the other position, then it should probably be time to call Joyce..." She muttered to herself, tracking the time on a sense of feeling rather than visual observation.

---

A missed call. Joyce didn't like the sight of that. Now it really fell out of Emily's habits. She tried calling again, but it rang right up until the voicemail. Was everything okay at home? Did something happen? Or maybe she just fell asleep... With that in mind, it certainly was likely. Yet still, losing out on her chance to hear from Emily put a visible frown on her face, like a promised surprise that wasn't going to happen.

Finally though Joyce had enough of the pointless thinking. She navigated through her phone until she had her snapshot back into the apartment via the security cameras. She didn't have any plans to snoop on Emily, she just wanted to make sure that she was okay...

Though, there wasn't anyone to be found. At least, not in the kitchen, not the living room, not the guest room, not even their own bedroom? While the nursery had no camera inside of it, a funny coincidence considering it wasn't initially planned to be one, it was locked, and only Joyce had a key. There was only one place left to check, but obviously she wasn't going to be in there. After all, she had no business there until...

And yet of course, there she was. Joyce's concern shriveled up as soon as she saw Emily, absorbed yet again on the computer as she typed away. She couldn't see what Emily was up to, but if Joyce could guess, it was an answer she would not be happy with.

She sighed as she put down her phone, feeling what she'd best equate to disappointment. Emily had promised her, and by some way or another she had convinced herself to break it. Was she mad at her? No, of course not, but it meant to Joyce that she was apparently being too soft.

---

“Done...” Emily sighed as she somehow found a moment of reprieve in the vicious cycle of job hunting. It was long enough for her to check the time, instantly feeling a worrisome feeling in her chest. It was nearly 2:30. All she could wonder in a panic was where the time had gone. Like a cold splash of water she was sobered by her technological addiction and rapidly closed everything on screen.

“Shit...! I was supposed to call her!” Emily realized far too late as she practically jumped out of the chair. “Phone, phone?!” She shouted for the inanimate companion, feeling even worse as that distant buzzing she thought to be mindless noises was actually an important call.

It was laying on the nightstand in their room where she had left it while making the bed. Sure enough, her heart sank even further once she saw the missed calls from Joyce.

Just as she was about to call her, she stopped for a moment.

What if it was a bad time to call now? She could be in a meeting or something? Emily stared down at the screen with a troubled look. Knowing Joyce, she was probably worried; she would want to hear from Emily in some way at least. If not call, then...

***TO: JOYCE***

***Emily: I'm sosososososo sorry! I was supposed to call!!***

She sat on the bed nervously with her knees pulled into her chest. Call it a small growing dependency, but she was kneading her toes into the top of Pip who had been nearby. A few minutes later and a reply came.

***Joyce: I'm in a meeting right now... can't really talk. Were you sleeping?***

Apparently she was right about the meeting part, which made her sigh with relief that she did choose to text her instead. But in her text, there weren't any warm or fuzzy words. She was busy, so it made sense why there wouldn't be, yet Emily couldn't help but let her guilty conscious already see it as a targeted message.

And that part hurt the most. The thought of disappointing Joyce. It was supposed to be day one. The start of something new; rehabilitation. And yet she'd already gone and blown it. What would Joyce think? Emily was better than this. She should know better. She could do better. She was certain to... So, with a lesson like this already taught to herself...if Joyce didn't know, maybe it'd be better to just forget about it just this once...?

It was a good scare for Emily and it still left Joyce happy. That being said, she'd have to be extra sure to make it up to Joyce when she got home, even if she doesn't know the full story...

*Emily: Sorry...I dozed off after vacuuming...*

The guilt she felt was immeasurable, yet she knew it was a plausible explanation. She wasn't lying maliciously; it was a white lie... Joyce did it all the time too, didn't she? So how was this any different? They both had their secrets, so, this was fine...It was okay...

There wasn't any response, and Emily left it alone with the assumption that Joyce didn't have time to get back to her. Feeling scared straight now, Emily avoided the office like the plague as she tried to keep herself busy. Just to make herself feel like she was still a good person, she tried to adhere to Joyce's list by making herself lunch even if it did come late.

Even if she was being an adult right now, she knew the exact feeling she was going through right now. Naughtiness. Not the sexy, fun kind. But the remorseful, troublesome one. It was what made her feel so small right then despite it being an honest mistake... Everything was going to be fine, yet she lied to Joyce to keep the peace and seemingly got away with it.

She tried to forget about it as the day went on, calming down as the time passed...

---

Joyce didn't move for a second as she stared at the door leading into the apartment, but braced herself for whatever, given what she saw this morning over the cameras. Upon opening the door there was no one waiting for her at the entrance. She frowned a little, honestly disappointed, even if it was sort of joking that she wanted a hug when she came back.

*I totally wanted one...* She silently pouted in her head.

Turning around she closed the door and slipped off her heels.

“Welcome...BACK!” A loud voice shouted with a wavering quiver as it came with a burst of energy. Joyce slightly stumbled to the door once a pair of arms assaulted her from behind, wrapping tightly around her waist.

“E-Emily?” Joyce chuckled as she tried to turn her head around, yet her eyes widened as she saw what she thought she did.

With a beet-red face Emily was pressing herself up against Joyce firmly, eyes sealed shut and keeping her lips pursed. While it was strange to see her like that despite the loud and energetic voice, it started to seem more forced than casual once Joyce noticed her distinct lack of clothes. No shirt, pants, nothing. Not even underwear.

“W-welcome home...” Emily hugged tighter still from behind as her feet touched the cold slate of the shoe area.

Joyce finally worked her hands off of her so she could swap for a frontal hug, which Emily continued to embrace strongly like her modesty depended on it. “H-hello to you too...” Joyce still kept an awkward expression, clearly not expecting this to be her greeting home. “Emily...why are you naked?”

“C-...cuz I felt like it...” She tried to look pouty with a protruded lip and pupils to the side, yet her furrowed brow and tomato-red cheeks seemed to sorely contradict whatever act she was trying to go for. Joyce figured there was more to whatever game she was playing, but she also figured Emily was too embarrassed to put it all out into words at once.

“Uh...huh?” Joyce smiled a bit, finding a bit of control again once it became obviously clear that Emily was struggling so dearly to be off-the-cuff. “And what’s the reason for that?”

“Be...cuz...cuz I...I put all my panties in the wash,” Emily says with a weak ‘hmmf’, already abandoning her stubborn, cool-guy attitude for a different, logical progression kind of trope. Her foreplay was crumbling on account of being too embarrassed to actually carry it out.

“All of them...?” Joyce seriously considered it for a second, then had a change of tune once she remembered her own promise. Was this her way of saying that she was ready for baby time?

“Well, in that case, it doesn’t sound like you’ve got any panties to wear, huh?” Joyce said, repeating Emily’s own words, yet with a hammer and stake to solidify the loose logic Emily had laid out so hastily.

“Y-yeah...?” Emily started to confirm with diction, yet it fell apart just as fast into a question.

Had this been a stage production Joyce would have scolded her for making it sound like she herself was the mastermind, but she let it slide on account of her benevolence. “Yes, that is what it sounds like. And you certainly know that my panties won’t fit you either?”

Emily had slowly been burying her face into Joyce, still in absolute personal disbelief she had willed herself to fling at Joyce butt-naked. Hopefully this was giving the effect she wanted...

“Mhm...”

Joyce tutted, slowly pulling Emily back by the wrists to bring her full naked self into view.

Emily was like a stumbling doe, nearly slipping over as she tried to follow Joyce’s movements yet simultaneously keep her knees together to mask her crotch.

“Now, now,” Joyce gave a stern look, “it’s nothing I haven’t seen before,” she chided.

And with extreme reluctance and a small whimper, Emily did shakily pull her knees apart. It was hard to believe she thought that she could pull a bratty act on Joyce while looking like this.

Joyce exaggerated a long sigh. “Well since it’s come to this and you’ve gotten rid of all your big girl undies, I guess that really only leaves us with what really seems to be the more appropriate choice for you, doesn’t it?”

Emily quietly nodded with shaky legs. “Uh...uh-huh...”

And as Joyce looked at her with a waning shock factor, she remembered that Emily already had broken her promise by using the computer so early today. Keeping that in mind, it may have made a little sense as to why Emily was acting so brazenly right now. Maybe working extra hard for brownie points to cushion the moment Joyce inevitably found out? That is, assuming she hadn’t already...

Fine. If Emily wanted to do this on account of guilt, Joyce would let her.

“And what would that be?” Joyce asked as she crouched to come eye to eye with the embarrassed, naked girl. “Hm? Tell me,” she smiled, “Since you were a silly girl and lost all your panties in the wash, what does that mean you have to wear now?”

“D-diapers...” Emily managed to say, but not without looking away. A few fingers found her chin though as they steered her gaze back at Joyce.

“I can’t hear you if you look away, honey,” Joyce put on her best chuckle, the kind of laugh a gentle villainess would use. But in Joyce’s headcanon, this was all perfectly justified. “Go on, what do we need to put you in? Say it clearly.”

“D-...diapers...” Emily said once more, only quieter as she did her best to look straight on, her face feeling hotter than it had ever been before.

“That’s right!” Joyce beamed. “Diapers! Thick, cushy diapers for my little girl,” she smiled as she raised her hand along Emily’s wrist to turn it into a holding of hands than a dragging of the wrist. Though it was virtually the same as Joyce assumed the lead in walking to the nursery.

The door was unlocked in a matter of seconds, and Emily was right on the changing table not much long after.

*It’s been too too long!* Joyce practically screamed in her head. She wanted to squeal with joy that they were finally using this space again, like they’d finally opened back up to their other halves after so long. It was like giving oxygen to just a single lung; it was wrong, unnatural, and unsustainable.

“Where did we ever get the idea of letting you get to have panties?” Joyce tutted as her outward, stern persona continued. “Maybe I’m the silly one for entertaining it...”

“Y-yeah...” Emily filled the space with whatever sounded most agreeable as her head felt fried from the overstimulation. Regardless, Joyce seemed to be in a good mood, so Emily considered it a success, especially because she looked like she didn’t find out about the computer, nor she had any suspicions...

Mission successful?

Joyce took a long breath as she smiled down at Emily from above, leaning over to take a diaper out of the basket. She giggled so sweetly as she knew this was going to be a great night; making good on the lovely, special diapered cuddles and adorable moments she’d been starved of for so long. And all the same, she’d get to force a confession out of Emily.

Emily’s generally embarrassed look froze a little as she heard Joyce chuckle and say,

“Ohh Emily...my sweet, sweet, adorable girl. My naughty, misbehaving little girl...” It was all in good fun, but there wouldn’t be fun without scolding.

As Emily laid there, the words felt out of place with how things had been moving. But they weren’t, and she knew that. The invisible chains of fate seemed to bridge her left-field comments to something she did this morning... Something she wasn’t supposed to do.

“So,” Joyce continued with still a rosy expression, “Would you like to tell me what you did first? Or should I think of my own punishment instead?”

---

There was the pleasant hum as Joyce cooked. Dinner would be ready soon and it will have been their first day trying this new routine. And so far, all things considered, it has gone pretty well.

“J-Joyce...?” A sniffling, whimpering Emily moaned.

“Yes, hon?” Joyce turned her head with a smile, facing the back of Emily’s head.

“I’m...” her voice trembled and was on the verge of tears. “I’m really sorry...!” She sobbed as she started to turn her head.

“I know you are,” Joyce tried not to laugh as she left the stove for a moment. “But keep that nose in the corner for ten more minutes,” she said as she gently steered Emily’s face back to the point where the two walls met.

“Sorry...” Emily moped, sounding even more disgusted and disappointed in herself.

“It’s alright. Once you finish your punishment, all is forgiven.” Joyce said a bit more compassionately as she straightened the waistband of Emily’s diaper, then walked back to the other end of the kitchen.

Funnily enough, once Joyce “confronted” Emily in the nursery, not more than a few seconds passed until Emily was an absolute mess. She couldn’t have spilled the truth any faster if she tried. Joyce mentioning a punishment was sort of a joke, but...obviously what Emily had done meant a lot to herself. Joyce was a little disappointed about what happened at first, though it felt unnecessary once she could see how much Emily was beating herself up over it already.

Then comes the more unusual part of the aftermath; the timeout. Emily was like a puppy that needed something to chew on. Or as another metaphor, she needed to “atone for her sins”, which wasn’t a lot, but maybe she’d feel better after? In other words, Emily essentially asked for a timeout... And as a passing thought which did make Joyce smile to herself was the likeness to an actual toddler. Then again, with the way Emily seemed to reflect so heavily, maybe even she’d give an actual kid a run for their money.

From Emily’s perspective, it was thirty minutes in a scorching hell. String her up, torture her by any means, pull out her teeth, pull out her tongue; anything! She couldn’t believe what she had done. She had promised Joyce, she told herself that she was going to commit to this. And yet, she failed on day one? Not only that, which was offensive on its own, but also her attempts to lie



about it and hide the truth from Joyce. She was absolute scum. She deserved this. Only the lowest of the low deserved a punishment like this...

And again, back to Joyce's perspective, all she could see was her girlfriend slouched over in the corner, looking like she had a teary scowl on her face. Under the guise of boiling water, Joyce sighed with a smile as she muttered, "My little crybaby..."

"Okay, Emily?" Joyce spoke up approximately ten minutes later. "It's been thirty minutes, you can come out from the corner now."

"Mhm..." Emily somberly nodded, slow in her motions to leave her grim prison.

"Don't just 'mhm' me," Joyce finally laughed as she hoisted Emily up onto her feet. "The punishment is over, so don't act like it's still going on?"

"It should be though!" Emily said. "I...what I did was bad, Joyce. I lied to you and I did what I was told not to do..."

"Yes, you did," Joyce acknowledged, "but that's why you'll prove that you learned your lesson tomorrow? It'll be the same situation, so just remember today when you start tomorrow."

While the words meant well, Emily didn't look very much inspired. Rather, the words were simply overpowered by Emily's immense, and unnecessary guilt.

Finally Joyce was losing her patience with a roll of her eyes. "Do I need to pull down your diaper next and spank you to high heaven? Is that what you want?"

The bold suggestion caught Emily off guard. "N-no..."

"I don't exactly want to do that either," Joyce agreed, "so can we please forget about this now? I was a little upset at first Emily, but I've moved on, don't you think you should too? You're making me feel like I kicked a puppy." She snickered, then gave her a toothy smile.

"O...okay." Emily nodded, finally feeling ready to put this to bed. Yet let it be known that she planned to carry this serious offense with her moving forward. A warrior steeled by their scars of the past.

"Good." Joyce nodded with approval, lurching Emily forward with a firm slap on her padded rear. "Now sit that bottom down at the table. We're eating and I want to hear all about the stuff

you did today, then I'm going to tell you about mine," She sounded almost like a drill sergeant despite the pleasant suggestion. "Understood?"

"Yes..." A smile finally started to come back to Emily's face.

"That's what I like to hear. Let me get some plates out." She said as she reached for the higher cabinets.

*For Emily's sake, I probably should give her less opportunities for failure...*

In retrospect, she probably should have seen this coming, but Emily was quite the self-destructive ball of emotions, come to find out.

*Maybe Sheila might know something about computer software...*