

34 - A Social Gathering

“Toothbrushes?”

“Got ‘em!” Emily handed them forward.

“Okay...Socks?”

It was a short trip over to the dresser and back. “Don’t we only need one pair each?” Emily asked as she handed them.

“No. Go get two, just in case.” Joyce said as she played the packing game like it was an emulation of Tetris.

“Uh-huh, uh-huh,” Emily nodded along as she went back and forth.

“Perfect.” Joyce responded with gratitude as she slipped them into each suitcase. “Okay, uhm...scalpel?”

Emily was already turning on her heel to begin the retrieval. “Wait...scalpel? Ugh...” Emily nearly threw a hand over her face once she realized too late that the trap had already been sprung. “Very funny, doctor...” She shoved Joyce, or well, tried to.

Joyce shook her head with a chuckle. “Gotta make it fun at least a little...” She sighed, reviewing the job done thus far. “This is a good amount. I think there’s a few more things I want to bring, but these should be the essentials.” Essentials, barring the makeup and toiletries that were packed separately.

“Okay.” Emily agreed. “What time are we going to the hotel?”

“Let’s leave in about an hour...” Joyce said as her gaze drifted to the time. “The actual event won’t be until later tonight, but it gives us a good amount of time to settle in.”

Emily nodded, though she started to wonder if she hadn’t seen Joyce packing the entire time. “Uhm...Joyce,” Emily looked over the bags, “Did you already pack our dresses?”

“Definitely not,” Joyce said without a moment’s delay. “It’s not really the kind of thing you’d want to fold over and stuff if you can. Besides, if I ever did that to a dress Amy made for me, I think she’d disown me...”

It always seemed that the rare danger Joyce seemed to be wary of was Emily's idea of humor. "Oh yeah? What if she ever caught us packing the baby stuff?"

Suddenly the look on Joyce's face was much more rosy, unexpected by Emily's predictions.

"Oh? That stuff is fine to pack. With how hard I bet you can play, I think a little time in a suitcase is pretty minor?" She gave Emily a tender, motherly smile, in a way the girl hadn't expected and left her with a light blush.

"Oh...Uhm, yeah, that makes sense..." With the wind out of her sails, Emily tried to dismiss it now.

"Did you wanna bring something?" Joyce gave her a telltale grin.

"No!" Emily didn't need to think this time either. "I was just trying to get a rise out of you...!"

"Guess you failed~" Joyce stuck her tongue out, naturally turning the tables so easily. "That reminds me though!" She had a sudden moment of shock. "PJs!" She was already walking over to the dresser.

Emily sighed with a smile, finding it funny how Joyce could fret over the strangest things. Though, once she saw Joyce pulling out one of her sets, that answered the question a bit more. Whenever it was about Emily it seemed to hold the highest importance.

"So are we picking up the dresses on our way, then?" Emily asked once more.

"Mm?" Joyce looked at her like she was an afterthought. "No, they're being sent to the hotel..." She looked back at the pajamas, deciding to put those back. "It might be too stuffy..." She murmured to herself as she put them back.

Joyce seemed to be preoccupied with a decision that held the weight of the world, in her mind at least, so Emily saw it as a moment where she might be better to phase out for at least a second.

"Be right back," Emily announced as she left the room.

It'd been something she had been toying with reluctantly the past couple of days. As she entered the office she felt her heart getting tense all over again. She hadn't forgotten her biggest mistake on day one, and her terrible guilt that she held after the fact.

For both chore days, since then she didn't even touch the knob on the door to the office. By this point she feared it like a legitimate drug; an addiction. Yet after some time away and being scared straight, she felt a little bit better about using the computer now. It technically wasn't the time for it, since her slotted window had been this morning, but Emily reasoned that a few minutes couldn't hurt especially after staying clean for two whole days...

She sat down in the chair and wiggled the computer awake. Clicking on the internet browser icon as usual, she opened up the page, waiting for it to load, and--

Oops! This executable requires parental permissions to be used at this time. Please enter the password below:

Before the page could get beyond the initial white screen this odd warning message had popped up. Confused, Emily clicked the small button at the top to terminate it, expecting things to proceed normally. Yet, like a deadman's switch it killed the internet browser as well. Odd. Emily re-opened the browser, but was surprised and a little annoyed to get the same message.

A small worry had her though, wondering if she'd given the computer a virus two days ago? She couldn't have, could she? Joyce *was* in her office between then and now, so that couldn't be it...

"Joyce?" Emily called. Emily didn't consider herself a tech-wiz by any stretch of the means, only aware of the basics, and Joyce as well, but maybe she could fix this...?

A few seconds later and Joyce popped her head in. "What's up?"

"This internet isn't working..." Emily said worriedly as she clicked and clicked, showing Joyce the screen. "It's not a virus, is it?"

"Hm?" Joyce stared at it for a second before realizing. "Oh!" She laughed a little. "No, that's not a virus. Just something I had put on both computers."

"Both? What do you mean?" Emily asked, glancing down at the other tower. She hadn't thought to try the other...

"Since you didn't notice until now, I guess that really means you did keep away from the office all this time?" Joyce gave her an impressed, proud look. "This is some insurance to yourself to keep you from going on when you aren't supposed to."

"Hu...huh?" Emily asked again, still not quite getting it.

Joyce saw that it wasn't quite getting through and that this might turn into something slightly delicate. "Well...Emily, after what happened the first time and how beat up you were about it, I figured this would be like a last resort in case you tried using the computer when you aren't supposed to?"

"But that's..." Emily started to say. She never expected Joyce to move forward with this on her own. It was Joyce's computer, but...wasn't it also Emily's too? That sounded selfish to say even in her head. "I don't need a lock on my screen time..."

"Of course you don't," Joyce agreed, stepping in for Emily to slide the chair back. Joyce leaned over the keyboard and coincidentally blocked the screen as she typed in a way that Emily couldn't see the password herself. And like magic the internet browser was back and working as intended.

"Can't we turn it off?" Emily asked. "Or just give me the password?"

"I love you, Emily," Joyce said resolutely, "but no, and no. You can job hunt, but it's in moderation. Since you spilled over a bit last time, I wanted to try some ways that might help with that."

Emily stayed quiet. Amidst all the cuddles, baby clothes, diapers and subsequent use that came with it, this truly felt like she was being treated like a kid. Not in the ways that Emily consensually agreed to and engaged in with Joyce, which is why the effect felt so profound. This had been a one-sided decision made for her that affected her freedoms. "...But, it won't happen again?"

"I trust you and I believe you, Emily," Joyce smiled as she gave her a kiss. "But I don't want you beating yourself up again if something did happen. Listen, you won't even notice it if we just stick to our agreement? I have it set up so it won't turn on during the time of the day you're allowed to. Outside of that, all you need to do is ask me? Though, I hope you'd be browsing mostly for fun."

Emily sighed. There was some truth to it, but what rubbed her slightly the wrong way was the means of execution. Maybe it was the explicit use of parental controls that'd be used on a genuine kid that bothered her.

But, Emily swallowed the bitter pill and tried to be the bigger person. "Okay...then in that case, can I check my emails?"

“Of course,” Joyce answered without a second thought. “I’m gonna throw us together a snack soon, okay? The drive up to the hotel might take a little with traffic.”

“Kay, thanks,” Emily said as Joyce left the room. As Emily went back to her usual computer routine, while she felt a gentle leash on herself now, she did ponder things a bit more that didn’t make it seem completely oppressive...

Joyce wasn’t keeping her from the internet or access to the outside world. She clearly still had her own phone for that if she needed anything; it was just a computer that she liked to use for business and job related stuff. With that in mind, limiting her time on a specific point of access didn’t really get in the way of most things unless Emily wanted it to. And not only that, but Joyce did sound lenient on the whole thing? Lenient within the idea of keeping the parental locks, though...

And as she combed through her inbox, unintentionally the fuzzy corners of her mind started to fantasize a little too much.

Guess having my screen time limited really makes me look like her little girl, huh...?

Emily had a small grin with a blush, thinking in her mind. Holding something hostage from someone...was it normal to get excited over something like that?

“Emily!” Joyce interrupted her devious thoughts with a call from a nearby place. “Come on! Computer time’s over, let’s eat this snack before it’s time to go!”

“What?” Emily called back with confusion. Had it really been that long already? She glanced at the clock, once more dreading her inability to track the time.

“Off the computer! Now, please!” Joyce shouted again, prompt and firm, like an authority figure would be.

Emily did comply without a fuss this time as she shut it down.

“It has bananas...!” A coaxing voice called once more. Emily was already on the move, though maybe a keen eye could have discerned that she did move a tiny bit faster at the mention of her trigger word...

As they turned into the drive, a circular road attached to the main entrance of the hotel, Emily felt a little intoxicated by the magnitude and grandiose atmosphere from the front steps alone.

“Are you pressing your face into the glass?” Joyce chuckled with a side glance at her. Obviously something like this was new to her.

“Yesh!” Emily sputtered as she pressed her face against the window, just to find that even then she couldn’t see the top of the building and where it ended. The hotel looked like something you’d find a bunch of snobby yuppies lounging about in, which potentially could be true even in this reality, but the comparison stood. “Are we really staying here?”

“No,” Joyce smiled with sarcasm, “I just needed to make a U-turn back the other way.”

Emily, still staring out the window made a perplexing gesture, which was to aimlessly flail an outstretched hand back at Joyce, maybe meant to be a shove for teasing her?

But being a weak-willed opponent and no match for Joyce’s deftness, she exploited one of her many openings by slipping her fingers between Emily’s.

“Glad you came with me, you know?”

“Sorry in advance once I make you look bad...” Emily did say with some trepidation.

“Oh stop it,” Joyce said, and as they were in a short line of cars, she did have the visual freedom to land a playful shoulder squeeze on Emily. “It’s not going to be as scary as you think...” She tried to reassure her worrisome other half.

Emily was still too starstruck to fully notice the car pulling forward, aligning her passenger window with the entrance of the hotel. It took a second then to realize that a cascade of red with arrayed buttons standing right in front of the passenger window was not the hotel, but the uniform of an employee.

She pulled back with a blush as Joyce had been amusingly waiting for the realization, finally rolling down her window.

“Good afternoon,” The employee had leaned over to fit his face into view. If he had seen Emily making herself look like a complete fanatic, he was doing a good job of not showing it. “Are there any bags you’d like for us to unload for you?”

Emily couldn't find the words as she started turning over to Joyce like she was the adult in charge. But just as she looked back Joyce said, "Yes, that'd be great! Is there someone who can take the car?"

"Of course, miss," the employee nodded as he stood upright and signaled another employee who was meandering by the entrance. After hustling over they disappeared behind the car.

"Did we need them to carry it for us?" Emily asked, feeling a little weird. Hotels weren't a foreign concept to her, but thinking in the past, she'd never dealt with staff this accommodating...

Joyce seemed to catch on to this as well while she did look slightly confused, but smartened up right away. Sliding into a coy smile, instead she said, "Well, maybe with two sets of hands we could, but I need to hold your hand to keep you from getting lost, remember?"

Emily rolled her eyes. "Would you ever do this to the staff?"

"Obviously not," Joyce laughed. "I'll let you in on a little secret, Emily," she grinned, "you're *special* to me!"

Emily had to turn her gaze because she couldn't stop the oncoming smile, watching as their familiar-looking bags walked into the hotel.

"Okay, silly, our turn to get out," Joyce announced with the audible unlock of the doors.

Warm, orange lights dyed parts of the gushing water fountain. Men and women in suits, dresses, and all kinds of high-end wear flowed into the building. She couldn't help but find them all seeming so...distant. Like worlds apart. Socioeconomic worlds apart. Emily had all the pieces on paper to know that this was the kind of world that Joyce lived in, yet a literal taste of it was finally being experienced. She was nearly ready to sit back into the car from overexposure right up until Joyce stepped out herself.

"Thank you very much," Joyce smiled as she deposited a set of keys into a staff's hand, along with a neatly folded green bill. Emily couldn't have been positive, yet it seemed as if it was a two-digit number and started with a five...

She was still as mute and motionless up until Joyce grabbed her hand.

"You're not sick, are you?" Joyce began to show concern.

“What...?” Emily refocused on her. “No...just...feeling out of place.”

Along with a warm smile, Emily could feel Joyce’s thumb gently massage circles into her palm.

“Fishie out of water, huh? I absolutely promise you, you’ll be fine.” Joyce said as they walked together up the steps. Beyond the glass windows and doors it led into a massive lobby, championing a ceiling that selfishly ate away either the two or three floors that could have been there instead.

A grand, intricate chandelier hung from above, looking to span by an enormous width yet aligned with hundreds upon hundreds of illuminated pieces of foggy crystal as small as a finger a piece. Simple cream tiles decorated the floor, yet Emily couldn’t help but feel that within its simplicity was its appeal and massive expense. Even the massive plants propped in the corners or as centerpieces looked like they’d turn down the carbon dioxide exhaled from a mere commoner. Patrons occupying the lobby, which was a decent amount, were more of the same kind of people they saw from the car.

Joyce was already sighing as they got closer to the desk, or as close as they could with the few guests ahead of them.

“Another reason why I hate these overnight things...” Joyce whispered to Emily with a grin.

Emily forced a smile, yet there was still an uncomfortable chill lingering in the atmosphere.

“Do you wanna go sit down while I take care of this?” Joyce asked.

“Uhm...” Emily pivoted a foot on its toe as she squeezed Joyce’s hand a little tighter. “I...I don’t mind staying with you...?” It reminded her of the times as a kid when she’d be too nervous to go about exploring a new place on her own. She wanted her comfort objects and she currently had one right in her hand.

“Kay then,” a calm reply came. There was no pushback, yet complete understanding.

At a time of extreme uncomfortability, partly induced by Emily’s own mind, what also flooded her thoughtspace was self-conscious, worried thoughts about how close to Joyce she was being. Was she being too affectionate? Her eyes darted from side to side. Were they fully committed to showing themselves off as a pair?

“What’s got you so wiggly?” A whisper entered Emily’s ear. The finger’s Emily’s were intertwined with suddenly re-buckled and trapped hers in place. It came with a friendly smile, one that was willing to dissect beyond the broad stroke Joyce already was aware of.

“Is...” Emily whispered back, though leaning in a bit closer just to bolster a sense of privacy, “is it really okay for us to act like...you know...?”

Joyce’s reaction was unexpected as her eyebrows rose high and the corners to her mouth fell slightly low. Her pupils ran in a small circle before she slightly leaned her head back then dove in with a swiftness for Emily’s face.

“Mmmmm...!” Lips locked with lips as Emily wide-eyed only pulled away with the loud finish from Joyce, “-wah!”

Immediately Emily looked around to see if anyone had noticed. A few people had indeed stared, and some others didn’t... What was Joyce doing? How could she be so bold?!

“Does that answer your question?” Joyce gave her a cocky grin, yet melted into a sympathetic smile. “I told you, didn’t I? This is something we don’t have to hide.” Then she blinked, only realizing something as an unfortunate afterthought. “W-wait...you’re okay with this, right? I can kiss you in public, right...?”

Her lips had been folded in on each other as she pulled away, but finally, a small giggle escaped Emily as her attention and focus had been stolen so easily and reset to a status quo. Somehow, her mind felt a little less foggy and had less on its plate. A lot less seemed to matter in the face of total upset.

An answer for Joyce was by having Emily’s arm stick even closer to hers, nestling itself closer to Joyce’s side as did her arm to Emily’s.

“Sorry...” Emily muttered, hoping that the one word could communicate enough on its own.

“Don’t be.” Joyce affirmed, looking on ahead.

A little bit after Emily had been settled down, it was finally their turn at the front desk.

“Good afternoon, I’m sorry for the long wait,” the staff member apologized with seeming sincerity.

“It’s no problem, really,” Joyce waved it off with a standard expression. “We have a booked room? Under Joyce Summers?”

“Yes, of course,” they nodded, letting their eyes drift to the screen that was below and shrouded from the patron’s field of view.

“Not that I doubt it’s you...” they apologetically laughed a little.

“Here you go,” she already handed them the I.D.

After a quick confirmation and a piece of paper was signed, Joyce asked them, “As for our bags, do you think someone could bring those up for us?”

“Certainly.” They responded without hesitation. “Here’s your room key,” the staff handed Joyce a plastic card, then they glanced at Emily before going back to the woman in charge. “Would you like a second one?”

“No thank you!” It came as a chipper reply, as if the speaker had been delighted to be asked such a thing.

Emily did give Joyce a slightly odd stare, but Joyce was already walking them from the desk.

“Shouldn’t I have one too?” Emily asked in a low voice.

“Plan on doing some sightseeing on your own?” Joyce innocently asked, yet of course it was sarcasm. “You can have one if you want, but I figured this’d drive home the whole ‘leash’ thing?”

“Oh...” Emily said at a slight loss, clearly forgetting their way-back-when discussion. “That’s fine then.” Not only avoiding making waves, but committing herself to her chaperone also sounded nice too. “What about our bags...?” Emily started to ask as she was led away by the hand.

“They’ll get there. The staff use a different elevator, so we’ll probably get there before them.” Joyce explained. “Does it feel weird?” She chuckled.

“Yeah...” Emily sheepishly admitted as Joyce called the elevator. “You aren’t worried about them stealing our stuff or anything?”

Joyce laughed with a tone erring on nervousness. “Well if you say something like that, of course I’ll get worried! But no, not too much. Almost everything we brought is replaceable.” Emily felt her hand give a soft squeeze. “Almost everything.”

“Joyce Summers?” A woman called just as the elevator doors dinged and parted open. Both girls turned their heads. “Oh! It *is* you!” A head of long, blond hair made its way over, glistening in their sea green dress and sparkling pearl necklace. Emily could practically see her own reflection in the white of their unnaturally perfect teeth that peeked through her bright redly dressed lips.

“Caroline,” Joyce smiled back, yet Emily, the silent onlooker, could discern between one of her genuine expressions and a mechanical one... She was an absolute machine. “It’s great to see you! How have you been?”

The woman made a cackle as she waved her white-gloved hand. “Oh, you know, travel and whatnot...scouting properties...!”

“Expanding the business?” Joyce prodded, putting no more energy into her interaction than she had to.

“Hm?” She seemed confused for a moment, then had a eureka. “Oh! Business? No, no!” She laughed. “I have a birthday coming up soon and my husband promised me we’d finally start looking into a third vacation home!” She made a small, womanly squeal that to Emily, seemed...off-putting from this particular adult. “Have you been to Italy or France, recently? Ugh...decisions...!”

“That does sound difficult,” Joyce acknowledged with a nod, “I hope that works out for you and your husband.”

“Thank you so much!” Caroline looked sort of sincere, albeit to Emily everything about the exchange felt forced, or at least one party was trying to placate the other. But then, it was only a matter of time until her eyes fell upon Emily. “Oh? Did you bring your assistant for tonight?” She looked back at Joyce after a brief glance at Emily. “I didn’t think to bring mine...”

“No, I didn’t.” Joyce replied with a tinge of curtness, yet so small it went unnoticed by a woman blinded by dollar signs and glitter. Maybe it became a matter of pride, but in some way Emily being seen as anything but her absolute treasure seemed to irk her oddly; like a doctor’s greatest title and achievement being ignored. Emily made a small noise of surprise as an arm came from behind her back and around her waist. “I brought my girlfriend.”

There seemed to be a look of genuine surprise on Caroline's face, indicating she hadn't pegged Joyce for the type. And as Emily was used as a display item, she remained exactly that with sealed lips despite the reddened cheeks. Joyce didn't look smug or particularly angry, yet the slight crease on her forehead showed that she was determined to make a point. One to Caroline, and one to herself.

"...Oh." Caroline said only that. Her social balance had been thrown as the situation became awkward. While Emily's inner part feared the idea of somehow rejection or ridicule, it obviously didn't seem that way with the woman. She was just surprised. Only that. Had Joyce never shown any signs in the working world?

Finally, a fourth player entered the match as it dinged with opening doors.

"Well, that's us~" Joyce continued to steal the rhythm of the conversation as she escorted Emily along by the waist. "See you at the dinner tonight!" After punching in the number, the doors closed.

"Haa..." Joyce exhaled aloud, giving Emily a toothy smile. "That felt good, didn't it?"

In return she earned a dumbfounded, confused smile. "Hu...huh?"

"You and I?" Joyce made eye contact with a silly grin. "We're dating?"

Emily found the look infectious, but was still confused. "Uh...huh?"

But apparently it was enough for Joyce, as she let out her own squeal, although Emily found it to be like music this time. "It just...it really makes me excited getting to tell people that..." She laughed happily.

"You sound like a schoolgirl," Emily laughed herself, "It's like this is your first relationship?"

"...Well...it sort of is..." Joyce suddenly mentioned, which caught Emily by surprise.

"Wait, what? Really?" Emily had a double-take. While there was Jack, there were some other smaller bouts, yet all the same that meant she finally had something over Joyce?

"Not completely," Joyce said in a chastising tone, wiping the beginnings of a haughty look off Emily's face. "This is your first relationship with a woman too, you know?"

Emily looked a bit more sheepish with an embarrassed chuckle. "...Good point."

“And what I mean is that it’s my first relationship that...you know, has gone as far as this one has.”

Now that their minds were on the same wavelength, Emily could be in agreement. “So...you like getting to tell people that you have a girlfriend that you get to baby?”

“Just the first part,” Joyce corrected readily, “but the other half is what makes me so excited... It’s like...if you and your friends each had a pool, and you all said that yours was cool, but deep down, no matter what, you just *know* that yours is the coolest?”

“Uhm...” Emily laughed. “I think I get it? I guess I didn’t think of it that way... You’re my girlfriend, but there’s a lot more to it?”

“So much more.” Joyce smiled. “You’re a one-in-a-bajillion, Emily. I love you so-so-so much!”

Emily mumbled a response through the hug, but finally the elevator doors opened.

“Fancy...” Emily quietly noted as they walked down the tiled hall. It sort of reminded her of the hallway they had leading into the apartment, but a bit more dolled up. But right then, Emily found it craziest of all to think that she could even compare this kind of hotel to her everyday now. “Not a lot of rooms on this floor?” She also commented, noticing the lack of doors.

Joyce giggled as she kept Emily at pace with a hand behind her back. “You’ll see.”

They stopped in front of a door and Joyce slipped in the key, opening up to the room.

Emily was confused.

They entered the room, or entrance area, paired with a small cabinet meant for shoes. Then, the area expanded into a much larger one. Tall, glass windows stretching from floor to arches just beneath the high, high ceiling, of which a chandelier was suspended from.

A terribly long sofa spanned what seemed like a meager amount of the living space and wrapped around a large coffee table, set before a mini movie-screen. And to the left there was...even an area that looked like a small kitchen? A sink, counterspace, a fridge...

“Wh...where’s the bed?” Emily laughed nervously. Clearly the stimulus and realization was putting her into shock.

“In the next room,” Joyce laughed at the secondhand spectacle, continuing to guide her. Next over was the bedroom, a fully fledged one. But it couldn’t be right. This. *This* was what the hotel room was. A decently sized room with a bed, desk, nightstands and large tv. This is what Emily recognized as their room, clearly nice because it was such an expensive hotel. So in that case...She spun her head around from where they came, as if it were all some fever dream that couldn’t be distinguished from reality. What the hell was all that before? Some kind of communal space for everyone else on the floor?

“Is...is all that stuff part of this room?”

“It *is* a suite?” Joyce smirked.

“But we’re just staying one night?” It was too surreal. Forget a suite; Emily couldn’t think of a time she’d ever been in anything more than a 2-star hotel, if that.

“Not that we couldn’t afford it,” Joyce nonchalantly shrugged, “but the room is on another person’s dime? I might have gone a little smaller if I knew it’d do this to you...” Joyce chuckled as she ran her hand through Emily’s hair.

There was a distant knocking noise.

Joyce turned her head first. “Oh, they might be here with our stuff...” She already left the room with a stunned Emily slow from behind.

Sure enough it was, although there seemed to be some additions with their luggage. Staff came inside holding vertical spreads of dress wrapped in foggy plastic along with what could only be shoe boxes.

Joyce guided and instructed, whilst Emily remained a fish out of water standing off to the side as she silently watched them unload. Quiet and trying not to be a nuisance, she watched from over the couch as the staff brought everything in. They were deft and orderly, seeming to be gone faster than in the time it took them to come. Joyce ended their aid with more ample tips to send them along their way.

“*Now* we have everything.” Joyce declared after she closed the door. “Are you sure you’re fine? I know this might feel like a lot right now... Just tell me if this is moving too fast for you.”

“It isn’t...” Emily laughed apologetically. “I’m sort of just still trying to digest everything. I feel like this is the kind of stuff you only see in movies...” That was essentially the dilemma; feeling as if she truly was in a movie. Her first meeting with Joyce and her home was a lot in itself, but

there was her down to earth personality, the home-cooked meals, chit-chat and romance that grounded everything Emily once revered to such a point that she needed to turn away. Yet tonight seemed to reset that level of comfortability that she had and left her in a place she found so unreal and to be so undeserving of, it couldn't possibly be real.

“It's not a movie, I can promise you.” Joyce chuckled as she came closer, occupying Emily's vision. “If you ever feel like it's too much tonight, just let me know. We'll head right back here. And even then if that's not enough, I'll drive us right home.”

“Stop it...” Emily sounded appreciative, but she knew that wasn't realistic. Obviously Joyce was here for the sake of her career. She couldn't afford to make Joyce be selfish.

“So, are you going to tell me if we need to leave, or should I make the judgement call myself?” Joyce gave her a stern, yet loving look.

Emily raised her hands and dropped them on Joyce's shoulders with a smirky sigh. “I promise I'll let you know... But I'm fine, really. Getting to see you is enough...”

“I'll keep that in mind tonight,” Joyce smiled and followed up with a kiss, “you can be an attention hog all you want, okay?”

“Yah-huh.” Emily nodded as she stepped back with a small breath, feeling a bit better.

“Why don't you come watch me while I unpack?”

Emily gave her a weird look. “I can unpack, too?”

“But you do so much already now?” Joyce said in an earnest, disappointed voice.

“Joyce...” Emily came off as a bit deadpan. “I make our bed, vacuum and get clothes ready to go in the washing machine...I don't do that much...”

Joyce looked a bit troubled, but she gave up fast. “No...you're right. Okay, we'll unpack as a team.”

“Don't make it sound like I'm pulling teeth!” Emily whined as she pushed Joyce with both hands, headed back to the bedroom.

Joyce hoisted their luggage onto the massive bed and they got to work. Yet an unexpected surprise was sitting in Emily's bag once she opened it.

“Pip?” Emily’s instinctive reaction was to say its name, as if it were an actual person who could respond with just as much intrigue.

“I told you, *almost* everything we packed is replaceable? Not Pip, though.” Joyce gave her a beaming smile like her smart planning had paid off.

“You didn’t have to pack him...” Emily said with a tone that wavered on convincing. She gave him a brief squeeze as if to test by his squishiness if it were the original. And it was, meaning with the test concluded Emily flung him forward and to the other side of the bed.

“We bring Pip all the way with us and you just throw him?” Joyce teased.

Emily shrugged with a coy smile. “I dunno. But you can’t tell me how to treat my stuffed animals?”

“You’re right, I concede...” Joyce gave up with her own grin.

Emily would argue even now that Joyce overpacked for their one-night stay, given by the decent volume of things they removed from their suitcases.

“Doesn’t it make more sense to just leave all our stuff in the suitcases?” Emily asked, truthfully finding it to be unnecessary. “We’re just gonna have to re-pack it all in the morning...”

“So you volunteered to help but now you want to weasel out of it?” Joyce laughed.

“I never said I wanted to stop; but we aren’t even gonna be here for a full 24 hours?”

Joyce was bringing a few bundles of clothes over to the dresser. “That’s true, but you’d be surprised how just unpacking can make a hotel room feel a bit more like home?” And not to mention comfort objects as well, hence why Joyce couldn’t imagine a single trip that involved Emily now without bringing Pip. And the way Joyce saw it as well, she had coaxed and begged Emily into coming to this tonight. She owed it to her to make this a fun and comfortable night.

“Does it?” Emily snickered with a small bit of disbelief. “Maybe it does, guess I’ve never been in a hotel long enough to unpack though.” She finished her complaints as she put away two shirts she’d likely never wear while they were here.

“Well if you don’t, I will.” Joyce playfully turned her nose up as she moved her last few bundles over. “Could you please get me something from the fridge? I haven’t had anything to drink in a bit.”

“Kay,” Emily hopped off the bed and started walking, but stopped for just a second. “Wait, would the fridge even be stocked?”

“Usually all fridges are?” Joyce questioned back. “You’ve never been to one that is?”

“Maybe mini-fridges...” Emily recollected on the tiny cubes she was aware of, but not the home-grade size that this spacious suite had.

“I’m sure it has snacks too, so pick out some good ones.” Joyce added. “One each for us, got it?” She called as Emily was already gone.

Finally something clicked for Emily in this high-end hotel. The expensive suite, massive rooms and presence of rich folk were entirely beyond and above her. Living the high-life only seemed to reach her when it was a step-up from her usual, not a leap and a hop. Thus, getting to raid the hotel fridge without caring about the price was what spoke to Emily. This is how she knew she’d made it.

Lined with water, sparkling ciders, a few alcohols and juices, everything looked absolutely amazing. What’s more, there was no piece of cardboard waiting inside as a “courtesy” to let you know that you were about to be gouged by overpriced drinks. Was it all free? Did it come with the suite? Small questions lined with just as small prices to read as insignificant.

It was silly, yet somehow this meant the most to her because it was the easiest luxury to understand and appreciate. In her much smaller world of finance, this was a tangible prestige.

Out came a bottle of water and juice, followed by some kind of cracker and protein bar.

“Think fast!” Emily shouted as she lobbed the protein bar.

Joyce caught it unfazed, yet nearly missed the following crackers, then yelped as she defenselessly let the water bottle fall in her lap, then...just about screamed once an entire Emily came last.

“You’re gonna crush the snacks!” Joyce laughed as she wrenched the cold water bottle from underneath her bundle, gingerly laying it on the nape of Emily’s neck.

“S-stop! Stop!” Emily cried as she wriggled forward and free.

“Is this how you’re gonna be all night, huh?” Joyce grinned as her fingers wobbled and waved, closing in on the girl like voracious tendrils.

“No! Please!” She laughed with wet eyes as Joyce’s talons sunk into her sides, dancing to and fro as they lightly brushed underneath her shirt and atop her skin. She was coaxed into an infectious wail of giggle, but just as it came so did it stop, or was muffled by a hand over her mouth.

Joyce was trying to choke down a laugh of her own, still with a helpless smirk as she held her hand over Emily’s mouth. Thankfully the tickling stopped, and Joyce finally released her a second later.

“Sorry, I forgot we can’t make as much noise in the hotel...” Joyce sheepishly chuckled.

Only then did it click for Emily that they had to be a little more conscious of themselves. Home and however it was designed afforded them the privacy for their sounds, never seeming to have much of an issue. Here it was different. There was yet to be anyone with scornful expressions or neighbors beneath them to complain, yet it didn’t take a person to make Emily feel embarrassed.

“S-sorry...” Emily did apologize with remorse, even if it was arguably Joyce’s fault.

“Don’t be,” Joyce giggled as she stroked her hair. “I like when you’re playful. I should have remembered that we can’t be super noisy earlier.”

“Don’t make up excuses for me...” Emily pouted. “I should’ve known too...”

And almost immediately Joyce accepted the momentum of her unneeded apology and flipped the script completely. “You’re right,” she frowned, “you should have. I can’t believe you didn’t know any better!”

Emily was too well-versed by this point, or at least had the mental strength this time to see it coming and know that it was another act to talk her out of her own self-conscious thoughts. With the roll of her eyes and crinkling plastic packaging from their snack, they enjoyed their remaining downtime with wonderful bliss.

“You promise you won’t leave me?” Emily asked for the umpteenth time as she leaned from foot to foot in her very short heels.

“I promise, I won’t.” Joyce repeated as she had for every other time she’d asked, although with just as much patience in her voice as there’d been since the start. She stood much more confidently in her slightly taller heels. “We’ll find something banana-flavored once we get up there. I’m sure there’s lots of food being put out already.” She said soothingly

“Don’t say that...” Emily whined. “You make it sound like I need one to calm down...”

“Need what?” Joyce gave her a clueless look.

“A paci--!” Emily started to respond, but the smile from Joyce spoke volumes. “Ha-ha...funny.”

“Sorry, I *did* want to hear you say it...” She sounded apologetic, but it was still fun to hear.

“Guess we’re a bit more on the same page, huh?”

“Guess so...” Emily found it even hard to joke as her murmurs drifted toward one of the elevator walls. “How many people are gonna be here?”

“More than a couple...” Joyce gave her a sympathetic smile as she circled her thumb across the girl’s palm. “We’re gonna have to do a little socializing at the start. Don’t overthink things, alright? Just be yourself?”

“If I was myself, they’d probably think I don’t belong here...” Emily spoke with a seed of pessimism as she dreaded the coming moment more and more.

“Don’t say that...” Joyce started to chastise, but the elevator had reached their destination.

Almost immediately their small, silent space had been assimilated into the distant yet growing chatter of voices and orchestral music. Emily wasn’t shy of crowds, per say, only the ones composed of an entire socioeconomic class she’d hear about in the news rather than see face to face. Yet that came as a stretch when Emily was sharing too much of her forward vision with the floor.

“We gotta get off the elevator now, okay?” Joyce spoke gently, yet somehow her voice traveled so clearly through the noise.

“Mhm...” Emily nodded, no less anxious as she squeezed her partner’s hand a little tighter.

Their feet moved across the checkered tile floor, cleanly polished and shined, laced with just enough fog to obscure the reflection. A staff member in a clean red vest with a tablet in hand quickly and deftly seemed to admit guest after guest past the triple array of wooden glass doors.

“W-wait, what if I’m not on the list?” Emily tugged on Joyce’s hand with irrational worry.

“You’re my plus one; you don’t need to be,” Joyce hushed her as they drew closer and closer.

Beyond the entrance Emily could see pockets of empty space ahead, surrounded by many heads in suits and dresses. Beyond that were tall arching windows that exposed the night sky. Not a star could be seen though, drowned out by the flood of light from the city which they were in. Even when so high up they couldn’t seem to escape the clutches of industrial capitalism. But of course, there was irony attending a party that hosted the many hearts of it.

“Joyce Summers?” Joyce’s voice startled Emily out of her distant observations. She looked confusedly at her girlfriend, only realizing with warm cheeks that she was giving her name out to the staff member.

“...Yes,” he finally said with a smile. “Right here. Have a great night.” He gave both Joyce and Emily a polite smile as Joyce led her into the spacious dance hall. Spacious supposedly, as so much of it had already gone to the endless party-goers.

Amidst the crowds there were staff calmly patrolling the party, all with some kind of platter in hand, either dressed in filled glasses, interesting horderves, or empty leftovers from the many guests. Yet what was the entire mass this network of employees navigated through were the guests themselves. Many looked to be sitting at tables, yet just as many also stood about, drinks in hand, conversing amongst cliques of social elites.

Naturally, Emily didn’t want to go any further, yet Joyce submerged them without hesitation, caring not to even dip a toe just to see how the water felt .

“Doesn’t something sweet sound great right about now?” Joyce chatted with her as they moved wherever she intended them to go.

Emily helplessly shrugged, albeit appreciative for the words regardless. Just from standing next to so many people it was like they’d sucked the social lifeforce out of her already. But just to hear Joyce, it reminded her that she was still alive and breathing.

“Joyce Summers!” A sudden voice stopped them in their tracks; a man had stepped in front of their path, whether by coincidence or something else. “How’ve you been?”

“Tom Fender,” Joyce put on her rehearsed smile as she tried to come off as cheery. “Great to see you, too. I’ve been well, and you?”

“Great as always,” his shiny whites came right back. Emily continued to stay quiet. Their use of full names felt odd despite their positive tones; possibly a custom amongst financial titans who readied to trade blows.

“Good to hear...” Her eyes started drifting on higher priorities. “Uhm, I hate to cut this off, but would you mind if we found each other in just a little bit? We got here so late...I hate to admit it, but if it meant I could eat, I was ready to buy out an entire restaurant on the way here!”

It didn’t even sound close to a joke to Emily, much rather an awkward statement with exclamation. Yet somehow the man in turn was chuckling nonetheless.

Ah. A joke that I’m too poor to understand.

“No, no, I get it completely,” he laughed. “The food here does all look very good. See you around!”

Joyce gave a small wave as the leash on Emily’s hand became taut once more.

“Who was that...?” Emily asked in a quiet voice.

“Hm?” Joyce sunk a little beneath the noise as her once again genuine smile occupied the girl’s entirety. “Sorry, it’s a little hard to hear you.”

“Who...” Emily hesitated and considered dropping the matter entirely, lest she wate all this time over an unimportant question. “Who was that?” She tried to speak up.

“Oh, him?” Her moment of visible interest was killed almost immediately. “Pharmaceuticals. I see him about maybe two to three times a year. Not much to tell, but he’s a stubborn guy, I’ve heard. You’re doing great, by the way!”

“We just got here, I haven’t done anything...” Emily said in a low voice once more as they continued reaching the other end of the hall. Finally, beyond all the people and through the crowd Emily could finally start to smell the food. Once they emerged, it was a long banquet table of fine silver platters and ornate dishes, mini fountains, tiered displays of never-ending varieties of interesting and delicious looking foods.

Finally, Emily had her own glimmer in her eyes.

“Wanna eat?” Joyce grinned at her.

“Is...can we take whatever we want?” She earnestly asked. Becoming a glutton wasn’t her intent, but she still wanted to sample so many different things...

“Yes, but let’s take it slow,” Joyce planned to indulge her from the start, but she worried too much coddling might lead to some kind of upset. After all, she didn’t want her going to bed with a tummy ache.

Again, despite all the lavish displays, the massive hall and no less the very establishment it was held in, what spoke to Emily the most were the much smaller, comprehensible details. Stacks of plates and silverware weren’t just at the very end of the banquet table! Multiple stations all along just to break up the traffic and keep everything moving. Maybe it was spurred by logistics and not a “rich people” sort of thing, but Emily was more than willing to fool herself with the fantasy regardless.

Joyce reached first for their plates. While she had her eyes on the larger dinner meal kind of plates, instead she disappointedly watched as two considerably smaller ones were plucked from the adjacent stack.

“It’s not a one-and-done kind of thing...” Joyce quietly reminded her, finding the subtle look on her face clear as day.

It wasn’t, which is why Emily was willing to compromise. Now came the much more important task of finding the right first dishes to sample. The saying of the world being your oyster couldn’t apply more than ever in that moment. If it had to be tweaked though, the world would be your dinner for the night.

Sandwiches, sushi, pastas, curries, soups, salads, desserts, chocolate fountains, fruits, flatbreads, things in trays, cuts of meat, and so many more things that Emily couldn’t put a name nor a memory to. It felt like she saw more things she couldn’t recognize than could.

Joyce made sure her steps were in sync with Emily’s. She always stayed right behind her, truly with a watchful eye like any honest mother would.

“Joyce Summers!”

“Ms. Summers!”

“How is the company?”

“Let’s have dinner sometime?”

“Are you interested in some inside info?”

Yet as Joyce watched her adorable little girl become so lost in the simple pleasures she enjoyed best, her own face couldn’t go unnoticed by the countless others in attendance. Maybe some were being friendly, but business had taught her to recognize any kind of approach as a pretext to just that; business.

“Good to see you Howard.”

“Is your wife doing well, McKinley?”

“Figures are good; optimistic for the next quarter.”

“Reach out to my secretary, I’m sure we can figure something out.”

“It never hurts to listen?”

But unfortunately, the mama bear had lost her touch, if for just a moment. Turning her gaze back, she’d managed to let Emily get a few steps too many ahead of her, and would luck have it, a stranger stepped right in between them.

“E--” Before even the first syllable could leave her mouth, apparently the stranger wasn’t a complete stranger.

“Joyce, great to see you!” They were already trying to converse. They also hadn’t inherently done anything wrong, yet Joyce felt herself suppressing a pissy look. Instead, she allowed herself a tiny exhale through her nostrils as she smiled.

Just a quick conversation, Emily won’t be far...

Back in rose-tinted paradise, Emily found her own game of Tetris as she tried so desperately to find all the best pieces and simultaneously fit them in the tiny field she was given. Though, with how she dawdled and found herself so hung up on what wouldn’t be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, but instead a many-in-an-hour kind, she was a little surprised she wasn’t getting an

earful from Joyce behind her. But then again, Emily did have the sense to figure Joyce was likely easing her pace just a little, just so she could feel comfortable.

“What do you think looks good?” Emily asked Joyce who was presumably behind her. Turning her head as she said it though, it was like a deer caught in headlights when Joyce was nowhere to be seen. Instead, some other woman was beside her, minding her own business as she looked for food as well.

Yet Emily’s words were so directed that the stranger gave her a glance like it was meant for her.

“Uh-m, sorry, I thought someone I knew was...” Emily bashfully tried to explain, but her mind was already being overtaken by the absence of Joyce. Where did she go? She promised she’d stay with her the whole time, didn’t she? Already the modicum of comfort she was feeling from Joyce like a thin veil had been vaporized immediately.

Her brows creased as she hesitated with every step she took. Amidst a sea of people standing taller than her made the task of finding Joyce seem impossibly insurmountable. Was she supposed to stay put until she was found, or go search for her? As her stressed hands clutched the ceramic edges of her plate, instinctively the trouble inside her only swelled when she didn’t feel the squish of Pip, or anything with some give to accept her frustrations.

Every way she looked was either the back of a stranger or the face of an unknown.

Keep it together...she’s here somewhere...

Yet despite her rational mind she was raw and vulnerable, God forbid if one of these people tried to talk to her. She’d be a blubbering mess; they’d find out she didn’t belong. She was an outsider, an imposter. The only excuse she had to be here was Joyce, and without her she was nothing more than a benign tumor hogging the floorspace.

She didn’t stare at the food anymore as she nervously followed the banquet table to the very end. Her steps were slow and almost wobbly. Coordination wasn’t necessary, not when she needed to brainpower to look out for Joyce. Getting lost shouldn’t mean anything, yet being alone in a sea of capitalist sharks seemed to shift that perspective. So much for having practice at the zoo.

The feeling in her chest only tightened once beyond the thinning crowd she found the tallest attendee at the party; a wall. What now? Emily was needless to say, at a loss for what she should do.

Wait, her phone!

That's right!

Already she was pivoting on her heels, looking for a spot to set her plate of food down. She felt ridiculous now. It was just a matter of calling her... So much for feeling like an actual lost child.

She couldn't see a good spot, other than the many tables that were already dotted with strangers. But as she looked, the desire to search quickly dried itself up. Emily's memory was feeling keener by the moment. So keen, that she dutifully remembered as well that there was no phone to use. No phone on her person, anyway. Sitting right where she left it back at the hotel room.

Her face scrunched up a small bit as she remembered, thinking of how it wouldn't be necessary to bring. Joyce would've had hers, after all...

She wanted to sit down, crouch even, just to give herself a grounded place to decompress. But she couldn't do that, not here. Not at a five-star hotel, not in front of a bunch of prestigious people, and not in her special dress.

This sucked. It all sucked. She didn't want to be here. She only came because Joyce wanted her to, so where did she go? Emily just wanted to go back to the hotel room. At least Pip was there.

But what sucked the most? Crying. Since she began her relationship with Joyce that's what seemed to be the unexpected dark horse. They didn't keep secrets from each other, so emotions no less couldn't be hidden. Whenever she'd start to get herself in a mood, there Joyce was, tearing it all down just to come inside to make her feel better. It was great, obviously. But on the other hand, she was feeling slightly out of practice when it came to solidifying her emotions. Things were harder to bottle up, harder to compose. Taking rhythmic breaths and long inhales though, she was somehow managing.

You're fine...you're okay. Joyce will find you. Just stay put and it'll be okay...

"Excuse me?"

Just keep breathing...you're making a big deal out of nothing. Maybe snack a little on the food...

"Uhm...miss?"

Emily shivered like an electrical shock had hit her as her gaze fixated on the person right in front of her. For the sake of appearances she held back a frown. It wasn't Joyce. And because it wasn't, her nerves seemed to become all the more worse.

“Are you...alright?” He asked.

Emily’s eyes were all over the place, following around the navy blue threads of his suit jacket or through the stripes of his tie. Whenever her eyes seemed to be near the man’s though, she didn’t have the nerve to commit.

What was she supposed to do?! She wasn’t ready for this, she couldn’t afford to speak with others here. If they find out she’s with Joyce after what a piss-poor person she’ll inevitably make herself out to be, it’s going to be at her benefactor’s expense!

Her breath wavered as she stumbled a response. “H-...Hi...”

By the warmth in her face, Emily had a sneaking suspicion what she may have looked like to others right then, and seeing only a wordless blink from the stranger seemed to suggest that.

“Are you okay...?” He asked once more as his head turned back to the rest of the party. Damn it. Of course she looked out of place.

Emily nodded her head, trying to look cheerful, as well as conversational. “Y-yes. I’m just waiting for someone...”

“Alright then...” He said, but didn’t leave. “I noticed you’ve been over here for a few minutes,” he made a motion with his finger behind his shoulder. “If you’d like, there’s a couple seats where my friend and I are? You’re more than welcome?”

A decision. Emily’s world truly was crumbling. She could refuse and remain to be the awkward wallflower for as long as Joyce was nowhere to be found. Not only that, but make it seem that she spit in this man’s face in exchange for continuing to be a fly on the wall. Yet if she accepted, there would be the monumental task of keeping conversation with these titans and assuredly outing herself as some generic, normal person. It was a lose-lose in Emily’s dramatic eyes, so it was merely the lesser of two evils.

“Is that okay?”

He chuckled before turning on his heel. “Of course it is! Come on; I’m guessing you want a place to eat, anyway?”

Great, now she looked like a glutton to others even at first glance. She wordlessly followed the man back into the crowd, sending a silent prayer that somehow Joyce will find her. This was

nothing like the zoo. All the animals this time had no cages and there were no landmarks to find each other. They were in the jungle and Emily had already become prey.

She stayed close behind the man's back as they weaved through the crowd. Out of habit she kept her head down, only following the back and feet in front of her before reaching a clearing, nearly bumping into her supposed savior once they came to a stop.

"You didn't bring a bottle?" A woman said with a tinge of impatience. Was it coyness? Emily couldn't tell, but Emily was so out of it that her head shot forward with a startle, forgetting social cues to realize that it wasn't her that was being talked to.

"That'll be your turn then," he sighed as he set down a half-filled wine glass in front of her. "Bring me a drink' is awfully vague, you know..."

"It would seem so." She said back, seeming to imply that she still wasn't at fault. It was his mistake for not reading any deeper.

Emily remained silent, stiff as a board, unaware of how to broach the situation or whether she still needed to be introduced. Did the upper class work the same way as kings and queens? Do not speak unless spoken to?

"Well, better than a bottle," Emily felt a hand pat her half-naked shoulder. "Found someone to help me keep you entertained."

"Oh?" The interest in her voice was clear, and so was her gaze, even if Emily was too nervous to look at it. "What'd you say to her? She looks like we're about to eat her."

"She seemed sort of nervous when I found her. Waiting on her friend."

Emily could hear the low sigh from the woman's breath. "Stop talking like she's not her own person. Hon?"

Of all things, it had to be a pet name that garnered her attention. Out of reflex she did look ahead at the woman.

She was pretty. In Emily's book Joyce was always number one, but this woman was a close second. Her ginger hair was tied back into some kind of intricate bun and the deep freckles on the bridge of her nose looked like the count of people she's stared down into a submission match.

“I’m Rebecca, it’s nice to meet you,” she smiled in a way that felt like a test. She was gauging the poor girl. But for what?

“I-I’m Emily, it’s nice to meet you.” Her response was nearly robotic. She didn’t have the confidence to speak off the cuff. Not in a place like this. “I-I don’t want to bother you guys; I can always go back and--”

“Why?” Rebecca frowned, interrupting her so smoothly. “You’d rather be by yourself than sit with us?”

The sudden twist of her words incited a small panic. “N-no, it’s not that, it’s--”

“Ah, I see. You have better people to be with?”

“No, that’s not...” Normally Emily would be frustrated by the woman’s curt behavior, but somehow she was only looking distressed. Everytime she tried to find her footing through words, this person seemed to casually sweep her right off her feet.

“Rebecca,” the man found his timing much better when it came to interruptions. “Quit teasing her. Just because you hate these things doesn’t mean you have to lash out. Drink already.”

The woman seemed to be so animated in the most subtle ways. Emily watched her eyelids droop as her gaze slightly narrowed, as if agitated by the man’s gaul to even think of challenging her. Yet like it was all a game, her mood immediately vanished as she went back to being a resting predator, sipping from her glass. “Fair enough...” She looked away as she said it.

“Sorry,” he apologized to me, “Emily, was it? My name is Hank, nice to meet you.” He held out his hand for a shake, and Emily was so frazzled that she nearly went to shake with a plate of food still in both hands. Quickly realizing her mistake with a blush, she finally committed herself by setting the plate down on the table before shaking.

“Nice to meet you...”

“Did the host come by at all, yet?” Hank asked Rebecca who seemed to be boredly playing with her glass of wine.

“Not sure...” she sighed. “Walked around, chatted a little. I’m feeling ready to head back home, already.”

“Mm...” Even Hank nodded as he sipped from his own wine. “Well, appearances and all...” It must have been a mutual agreement, because Rebecca didn’t say anything back.

“Uhm...” Emily started to speak, yet her throat seemed to close entirely once both faces gave her attention. Great. She poked the bear and for some inexplicable reason expected it to stay sleeping. “Is it just you two sitting here...?” There were only a couple of empty chairs, but two to a single table was still a low number.

“Yep,” Hank nodded, though glanced at Rebecca who was with a pissy pout sort of look, already expecting the man to look at her. “Unfortunately we have a bit of a bully at our table, so we’re unpopular at the moment.”

“Oh shut it,” Rebecca frowned the smallest bit, yet all the expression seemed to happen from her eyes and up.

“Rebecca’s very...strong-willed, as you can see.” Hank whispered to me with a chuckle. The entire time Rebecca watched the exchange, knowing full well she was the topic.

Emily would never in a million years say it aloud, but being somewhat bitchy seemed to be this woman’s personality... Lucky to have the few that could stand her and be around her.

“So Emily, what brings you--” Hank started to say, but then...

“Why bother with a question that has an obvious answer?” Rebecca cut him off. “Ask her why her boyfriend or husband *brought* her here. She has ‘plus one’ written all over her.”

Plus one. The way Joyce had said it, Emily wouldn’t say she felt a charm, but it gave her some sort of fuzzy connection to Joyce in a small way. A fun little title.

From Rebecca’s voice, it was a label. An inescapable brand that defined her clearly on the hierarchy amongst nobles. She’d been curtly kicked off the pedestal and back to the ground. It was only more damaging to her self-confidence. Had she thought there was even a chance at looking like she belonged, Rebecca’s bluntness paired with Hank’s gentle approach had shattered it entirely.

Naturally, self-consciousness was the first thing to hit her bloodstream.

“Is...is it that obvious?” Emily weakly asked Hank. He looked apologetic, but he didn’t disagree.

“Not that it matters, though,” he was quick to say. “So in that case, what does your boyfriend do?”

“Boy...?” Emily started to ask, feeling confused with the disillusioned mind that everyone in the world should already know she was smitten with a female, not a male. “Oh, uhm...my girlfriend, she has a medical company.” And there would be little to offer after that. It sucked knowing she couldn’t tell much about Joyce, not in the working sphere at least. Unfortunately Joyce had made it an effort to hide the bigger things from her, likely to prevent Emily from seeing her as anything but her sweet, motherly significant other.

“Oh!” Hank had a slight tinge of guilt with his voice. “Sorry, we just assumed...”

“Sorry about that.” Rebecca chimed in, possibly sounding genuine?

“What do you guys do?” Emily asked, finally finding the courage to keep the ball rolling.

“I manage a couple accounting firms,” Hank said ever so nonchalantly. “Nothing too crazy, but it has its perks.

And just when she thought they were starting to seem like people, she’d been so graciously reminded of the gap.

“I own a couple theatres.” Rebecca added to the conversation, just in case Emily wasn’t feeling dogpiled enough already. They weren’t being insulting (barring Rebecca’s attitude), but simply crushing her with facts.

But in spite of that, Emily wanted to be brave. At least Rebecca had something tangible.

“Oh?” She spoke up in turn, “That’s cool. How often do theaters swap out movies anyways? You probably get to see anything you want for fr--”

“No, no,” Rebecca always managed to find a way to spearhead Emily’s gusto. “Not that kind of theatre. Musical productions. Plays. That kind.”

“Oh...” Her reply was quiet, desperately trying to escape sheer embarrassment. Why couldn’t she have let her run away with sheer ignorance?

“You could have elaborated?” Hank jumped in, throwing Rebecca’s feet on the coals now. “Quit being such a bully.”

“I’m not being a bully.” Rebecca slightly averted her gaze at that.

Conversation had only become a trap for Emily to make herself look even more foolish. In a twisted way it was like trying to sit at the grown-ups table. All the jargon and conversation went so far above her head that she could be disillusioned into thinking it was actually reachable. She had no reality that knew how to properly set herself apart from these people.

Then came an audible sigh from the woman as she stood up from her seat.

“Leaving already?” Hank seemed to ask, yet Rebecca somehow saw it as teasing once she shot him a glare.

Storming off, Emily could only catch the sway of her dress as she disappeared.

“Sorry about that...” Emily always seemed to feel the irrational need to apologize. If she was involved in any capacity she somehow always found fault in herself.

“I’m sorry you had to deal with that,” Hank apologized in turn. “Rebecca’s supposed to be a grown woman, would you believe it. But in all the time that I’ve known her, well, she’s not exactly great at playing nice with others...”

“How long have you two known each other?” Accounting and theater management. By this point, Emily wasn’t even going to try and fool herself into thinking she could see the connection.

“Before the adult working world,” he sipped from his glass, “Our parents sent us to the same private school. Skybrooke?”

Emily nodded attentively, deeply invested with a catalog to reference the exact detail in mind.

Smile and nod. What the hell is Skybrooke?

“She has her...quirks, but she’s a nice person, deep down. But for her to me? I dunno. Maybe she finds me tolerable?” With the sign of a grin, Emily was at least glad to hear he probably wasn’t a doormat to that woman.

And quirks she did indeed have many.

“Here.” Were her first words of return. Outstretched from Rebecca’s hand to Emily was a wine glass, but not filled with wine. It was filled with a frozen treat, drizzled in a thin wisp of chocolate, capped with scalped strawberries accompanied by skinned and sliced banana.

As Emily found herself at a loss, the helpful cue was whispered in her ear next.

“Rebecca’s idea of an apology...” Hank helpfully said.

“...Take it or don’t,” Rebecca seemed composed, yet she seemed...uncomfortable? “I don’t care.”

A gift from a queen? Emily perplexingly stared at the treat. It did look good, yet everything about this exchange was weird. A grown adult was trying to make peace through the offering of a dessert.

Before the moment became too dragged out, Emily slowly accepted the glass.

It’d be considered quite rude to refuse the Queen’s gift, wouldn’t it?

Rebecca stood there for a moment longer, to the point where Emily started to think she wanted her to prove her sincerity by eating it right then. Thankfully that wasn’t the case though once Rebecca finally did take her seat once more.

With amends apparently having been made, Hank continued to mediate the flow of conversation as they slowly crept upon their original pace, which wasn’t much to begin with at all.

“...but in the end I guess it never really...” Hank was going on with his story about another financially unrelatable situation when his head started to follow something in the background.

“What?” Emily tried to follow where his eyes went as infectious curiosity mandated.

“...Nothing.” He shrugged. “Thought I recognized someone. If your girlfriend hasn’t told you already by the way, these dinner events are usually about the social aspect. Keeping everyone fresh in each other’s minds. A lot can be inside baseball, too.”

“She did sort of say something like that...” Emily tried to reflect, but not for long until Rebecca’s glossy nails rhythmically tapped the cloth tabletop.

“We use our words when we’re ready for another drink, you know...” Hank jokingly gave her the side-eye.

“What?” Rebecca seemed to snap out of her trance then glance at her empty glass. “Sure, yes. I’ll take another glass.”

“With a ‘please’?” He added a slight stretch to his voice just to prolong the teasing.

“Red. The same bottle as the last,” she seemed to shoo him off without another look.

And again, fate seemed to draw them together as Emily accidentally met Rebecca’s gaze from the other side of the table once more.

“Bring Emily some, too.” Rebecca ordered her friend?

“Same for you, Emily?” Hank paused to patiently ask her.

“Uh...?” The hesitation in her voice was obvious. She hadn’t planned on drinking; this sort of thing was far too stressful for that. But...it was a weird time to take stock of things, yet in that moment all it felt like was sitting around with two decent friends. Maybe it was Rebecca’s gross immaturity or her snobbiness that made it all feel so unreal. An unsociable, unintentional bully who went red in the face as soon as her feet touched the coals. Then again, if she ordered a drink for Emily, was she starting to become part of “the gang” now?

“Yes...please.” Screw it. Emily could fabricate a whole list of reasons for needing a drink right then.

“Such manners!” Hank pretended to praise, albeit not to tease Emily, especially evident by the coy smile he gave Rebecca who only seemed to return a look of ire.

“Be right back.” Hank was gone.

“Your girlfriend really must be quite the busy body to misplace you so easily,” Rebecca passively commented. “I don’t suppose we should turn you into the lost and found?” Finally she smiled for once in the entire night Emily had been with her...even if it was by way of teasing.

“Yeah, maybe...” Emily sighed, choosing to pass on the bait or instead regard it as unintentional mockery. But really, where *was* Joyce? The smallest amount of air started swelling in her mouth, favoring to push out her left cheek.

“Karla, I’m glad to hear that things are going well,” Joyce cheerily nodded. She’d given this person exactly one minute of her time. Plenty. Generous, even. She should be grovelling for the saint that Joyce was; allowing such important seconds to slip through her fingers into the mediocre unimportant hands of others. “But, say...” She began, glad to be finished with useless

talks of investment and prospecting. Who cared about the first ever hover car or working jetpacks? Did she think world hunger mattered more than Joyce's own dilemma? "You wouldn't happen to have seen a smaller girl around here, would you?" She maintained her bubbly inquisitive voice, internalizing all the annoyance and agitation every living obstacle seemed to be here.

"Smaller?" Karla smiled, awaiting further explanation.

"Black hair? Green eyes?" A bottom so round and so cute that it was a crime not to keep it padded? "She's in a red dress?" Unfortunately not paired with a child leash. That's the problem with jokes; they're only jokes.

She shook her head, the conniving bitch, so eager to waste Joyce's precious time. "Sorry, can't say that I have... Why, find yourself someone you wanna goad into a venture?"

Karla started her laugh first, which Joyce did the same in unison, only she was already turning away, well-ready to punch the woman.

Where is she?! I take my eyes off her for a single minute...!

A business dinner much like Hank said is a chance for socializing and business dealings and opportunities. A chance for the rich to stay rich and perpetuate the inevitable lining of each other's pockets. During any business dinner at any time in Joyce's life, she would not have hesitated to agree. That's what these things are. That's what they've all been for.

But not tonight. Not this one. Instead, it'd become Joyce's personal hell, having thrown her precious girl into a pit of lions that all have the audacity to feign ignorance as she tirelessly searches for which one ate her!

She was supposed to be holding her hand the entire time... Why didn't she just hold Emily's plate for her? Tell Emily to point out the things she wanted? Christ! Why couldn't these stupid events have a chaperone or something, or maybe an on-site police officer? This dance hall has speakers, so why wasn't she hearing the call for a lost child-- adult?

What's more, Joyce was acutely aware of Emily not having her phone. As much as Joyce was ready to shout aloud for Emily, even she had her own warped way of thinking that simultaneously felt the need to dote on Emily so heavily, yet maintain an outward appearance. Yes, it was twisted, and yes, Joyce was aware. As Joyce fought the raging battle inside herself, she could only assume that Emily was okay. What if she was crying? What if a stranger was

talking to her? Wait, no, that's normal at an event like this... But not for Emily! They're all strangers!

Find her!

Find her!

“Joyce, is that you?” A voice called.

She spun on her heel with a trained smile.

“Leonard, so good to see you!”

A bubble rose in her chest with a fierceness, only for it to sputter out of her mouth as a sudden hiccup, throwing her entire torso forward.

Where was she? Emily was slumped forward as she barely supported her head, chin resting in both hands.

Rebecca herself still looked focused, yet her heavier blush likely spoke more of the alcohol in her system than any kind of embarrassment that could be found in the prideful lioness.

“Sheesh late...” Emily slurred grumpily with a pout. She was no timekeeper, yet she was certain that exactly too-much-time-o’clock was certainly a bad time to not have shown up by then. Emily had done her job. Stay put. What had Joyce done? Who knows, but clearly it wasn’t good enough.

“Just to let you know, I...” Rebecca seemed to lose her speech, finding the fuel needed with a final sip from her glass. “...I’m going to be charging for babysitting you so much tonight...”

“Shaddup...” Emily groaned, too far from sober to remember formalities, not that either two drunk women seemed to care. “I’ll pay Hank...” She muttered as her head finally dropped with her hands, nuzzling into her forearm. Apparently alcohol was no caffeine stimulant. Not even adult beverages could save her from her hard limits. Quite easily the festivities of the night had gone beyond a time she was comfortable being awake at.

“Alright...” Hank finished off his wine as he stood from his chair, commendably without a stumble of any sign. “Let’s go, you two. Before any of us are too intoxicated to get back to our rooms.”

“Screw you...” Rebecca suddenly blurted aloud with her eyes not even remotely aimed at Hank. Her eyes widened with surprise only known to the inner workings of her drunk mind as she shocked herself into a laughing fit.

“A-huh...” Hank waved off the words as they should have been, raising Rebecca from her seat with ease as he wrapped an arm around her waist. “You have your room key, right?”

“F-....ffffuck you...” She murmured in her own headspace yet again, laughing loud enough to get a few momentary stares.

“Really?” Hank still remained unimpressed. “I never get you to laugh, but all it takes is to be drunk and be the butt of your jokes...” He maneuvered his charge with him around the table. “Emily, can you get up? C’mon, I’ll take you back to your room. I’m taking Rebecca back, so I’ll take you too.”

“No.” Emily meant to say it adamantly, yet it was more of a pout. “I’m waiting for Joyce...She...” And for some reason she started to snifle. “She said she wouldn’t leave me...!” The sad drunk started to whimper, bleeding into the personality of a stubborn toddler.

“And she’ll be happy as can be once she sees you back at your room. Do you remember your room number? We’ll get you there.”

“Mhm...” Emily nodded as she was already standing. So much for the crying fit about staying.

Rebecca seemed to need a more hands-on approach as Hank continued to be firm with a grip on her waist. Emily stayed quiet, although holding Hank’s other hand as he led them through the crowd.

Had she been of a sober mind, Emily would have certainly been upset, yet would have been forgiving once Joyce did finally see her. Instead of that, all she felt was the cloudy dread of being a poor doe unaccounted for. She wanted Joyce right then. This sucked. She somewhat had fun tonight, even if Rebecca was a pain at first, but the only thing that could solve her unease was getting back to Joyce.

“Emily, what’s your floor?” Hank asked the quiet, daydreaming girl.

“Fifteen...” She murmured as clear as can be, backed by zero confidence. It was a crapshoot trying to guess the floor even on a sober moment, much less one where half her brain seemed to function. Why fifteen? Because fifteen felt...like a number.

Hank punched the number without question on the panel. Up they went.

Once they reached the floor with a ding Emily stepped off first.

Hank started the process of moving Rebecca who looked even more lurching over, only until she seemed to drag Hank’s suit jacket downward with all her body weight.

“Rebecca...” Hank sighed as he stood in an awkward stance, trying to get her upright. “We can’t walk like this if you’re gonna--”

A short-breathed grunt escaped Rebecca’s mouth. “G-gonna...” And as the words left her, so did her bile, reaching Hank’s ears as well as the substance reaching his pants did.

Rebecca’s arms hung over her head as she was nearly ninety degrees bent over. Hank barely managed to hold her up as his face shuddered in surprise and disgust.

“R-Rebecca...!” He cried at a sheer loss, well-conscious enough to know the pointlessness in scolding a drunk. “What the fu--!”

He didn’t get to finish his sentence before the elevator doors closed. Emily stood there dumbly in the hallway, a place her room did not belong to, now separated from the other two.

As she looked around the empty hallway, she scantily remembered why she even asked for the fifteenth floor. Was that the floor of their home back in the complex? Who knows. Too drunk to remember. She needed fresh air. It was too stuffy. It was hot...

Opting for a different elevator, back down to the lobby she went.

Thankfully her heels were short. They were like training heels compared to the ones she saw Joyce in. Emily could almost get away with normal footsteps, though needing to invest a slight bit more care in the way she walked, but thankfully within the means of her impaired mind.

Her feet clicked across the mostly empty lobby, yet seeming to be a place of internationals and big business, there was always something going on, whether it be check-outs for an international flight, or check-ins for the exact same reason.

She found a cozy bench beside the glass windows, sitting right near the entrance and exit as well as in front of the water fountain. Listening to the calming gush of water, leaning her head against the cool glass. It was nice.

“Check her out...” A distant voice chuckled. “Think she had a good night?” He sounded as if he was speaking to someone beside him.

“Oh, you’re right...Is she okay?”

“Probably sleeping off a drink? We sort of do the same thing.”

“Yes, but not in the middle of a hotel lobby; we should do something...”

“I’m sure she’ll be fine? ”

“Greg, don’t say that...Look, I’ll make sure she gets back to her room. Meet you back up at ours? Someone’s gotta put our food in the fridge anyways.”

“You got it, boss woman.” It sounded like a salute as one walked farther away while a lighter set of footsteps came closer.

Emily was dreamily dozing, half-asleep and half-awake, though she began to lose the former state of mind as a hand touched her shoulder. Emily hadn’t even the clarity to assume she was in danger or being assaulted as she lazily stirred and opened her eyes.

“Hello?” A blurry face slowly set into sharpness. Emily needed to blink a few more times just to get things into focus.

“What...?” Emily seemed to muster so casually despite them being a stranger. Maybe Rebecca’s interaction seemed to have desensitised her to new meetings. And just as things remained visually unknown for just a tinge longer, deep down, of course she hoped that it was Joyce.

“Are you okay? Can you stand?” They asked her.

“Are we going back up to the room...?” Emily murmured as she rubbed her eyes. Paired with too much drinking, she wasn’t used to being up this late.

“I can take you back to your room, yes. Do you remember which floor?”

“You forgot, too?” Emily yawned. Joyce’s touch felt lighter than she remembered. It didn’t feel as hands-on this time. She had half a mind to shove herself into the hand just to get Joyce doing it the right way again.

“Well, you never told me...” The woman said at a loss. Emily frowned a little. That didn’t sound like Joyce...

She finally fully opened her eyes, looking over.

It wasn’t Joyce.

“You’re not...” Emily frowned.

“I’m...not?” The woman confusedly blinked behind her glasses. “Listen, I think you’ve had a bit too much to drink. Why don’t we go ask one of the staff to help you--”

“Can I use your phone...?” Emily suddenly asked in a state of tired delirium.

“To call a friend...?” She cautiously asked. “If you give me a number I can dial it for you?”

Emily went quiet, biting her lower lip. She forgot Joyce’s number...for whatever reason, it slipped her mind. Digits went in some places, while others felt jumbled and scattered. Why couldn’t she think straight? Where was Joyce?

She hiccuped, but not because of alcohol this time.

“W-wait, don’t cry. What’s wrong? Hey, can you talk to me?” The voice continued to coax, yet Emily was a mess.

She took a long, drawn-out sniff as she’d gone from a moment of peace to complete confusion once again. Why did she even go down to the hotel lobby? For a moment of relaxation? How did this get her any closer to being back home? All she wanted was to be in bed right now. She wanted Joyce to find her. Why wasn’t she here yet? She always found her!

“What’s your name, hon? Can you tell me that?”

“E-Emily...” She rubbed her eyes. The chandelier above was too bright... Where was a pillow she could just smother her face with? Even having Pip to cuddle with sounded nice right then.

“Okay, Emily, what’s the name of your friend? I can go ask one of the hotel staff.” How likely of a needle in a haystack that could be, though. Lord if Emily could give her a last name to narrow the search.

“Joyce...” Emily mumbled. “Joyce S-Summer...s...”

“Joyce?” The confirmation was more than just that. Something else, like surprise? Or disbelief?

Emily thought she nodded, or gave some kind of murmur as an affirmation. Either way, no more questions came her way, so she assumed that the job on her part was done.

“Ms.Summers...?” She spoke next to Emily, though not at her. To someone else. Was she on the phone? “I...yes, I understand...I...yes, but, I think I found who you’re looking for...” She pulled the phone away from her ear. “Emily?” She fished for her attention as she put the phone up against her ear.

“Emily?” A slightly hastened voice came from the other end. “Emily? Are you there?”

“Joyce?” She answered back. It had to have been her, unless this stranger was able to pick apart Emily’s memories to manifest the perfect doppelganger to ever exist.

There was a heavy sigh of relief from the other end. “Thank goodness...Where are you? I’ve been looking everywhere for you all night!”

“I’m in the lobby...” Emily tearily yawned. Was she coming to get her now? She really did feel like a lost child. The day had been long and exhausting. She was done doing the heavy lifting.

“Don’t move an inch. I’m coming right now. Put Sheila back on, please.”

Emily lazily swapped her head to the other shoulder. “She wants to talk to you...” Emily yawned. It was hardly even a thought in Emily’s mind as she heard the name. Sheila. Maybe she’d heard it before, maybe she hadn’t. Too hard to tell at the moment if it bore any significance. Was that this woman’s name? How did she figure out Joyce’s number?

“Ms.Summers?” Sheila put the phone back on her ear. “Yes, I can wait here. I’ll watch her, yes. I’ll see you once you get down here. Yes, understood.” She soon hung up afterwards.

Emily had closed her eyes once more, nearly falling over onto nothing as she leaned the other way. Sheila thankfully was faster and pulled her back over to her, unceremoniously slumping her

onto her own shoulder. This was certainly awkward, maybe helped the slightest bit by a modicum of familiarity.

This. This was the final piece to the puzzle. The hidden cog that drove the machine. The arbiter of her boss' mood, what dictated her whims and generosity. What decides whether it'd be a good day or a bad day for the people in wake of Joyce's wrath.

She looked over at the tiny titan with an odd sense of interest, finally seeing with her own eyes the hidden hand she thought she'd never see.

Little Miss Summers herself. In the flesh.