

18 - Tub Time

The tiny bronze bell jingled and jangled as a pair of brisk heels shifted from concrete steps and over to a polished floor. The blaring noises and shining sun on the backs of her heels dulled as the door closed. She gave the victorian-styled shop a few simple glances, but with an overall indifferent attitude, moved over to the finished wooden counter.

The hum of cars and beeps of horns polluted just the outer edge of the shop and unapologetically rapped against the glass. Mannequins in their plastic poses flashed their cloth trinkets, each one dressed and decorated in some form of fashion. One brandished a two-piece suit, and the other a simple, yet elegant, red party dress. The last was what could be best described as casual high fashion; wrapped in a scarf, small jacket, pants similar to, but not quite jeans, and some form of a shoe the spectator really couldn't care to identify. The kind of fashion you needed to be rich enough to understand.

The vibrant, yet synthetic displays beckoned for the attention; just to have a pair of eyes ogle their most defining features. The freedom to express was as much their own as the ability to hear, think, feel, and speak. Despite being of such rigid and regulated mindsets, the customer looked on with envy.

Bundled at her side was the fur-lined jacket she'd just removed, trying to alleviate herself from the newfound warmth in the shop. Underneath she wore a blouse, and her face was dolled up in the kind of makeup that screamed business and professionalism. Her face stayed neutral, and harbored little enthusiasm. There was little expression at all. No indication of anything, really.

After a thoughtful glance and her phone, and allowing an exact minute to go by, she let a small sigh as she pressed the tiny head to the second bell on the desk. A ding rang with a considerably higher pitch compared to the doorbell, but lasted half as long.

“Coming! Coming!” With each frantic response, the distance between the two closed further and further. While the customer waited, she'd taken to admiring the countless rolls of fabric stored inside the wall. Admiring may have been too strong of a word. Observing them, at least.

The door behind the desk suddenly opened, and a face familiar from countless business dealings had emerged. With a pencil sticking from her ear, and her blonde, shiny hair tied back, she raised the rimmed glasses she was wearing just the slightest bit.

“Joyce! How have you been?”

The looming gray over her expression seemed to fade somewhat, as an albeit small, yet sunshine crept between Joyce's sealed lips, and a true smile came. "I've been fine, Amy. And you?"

"Same old same old, I guess," her pupils drifted to the upper right as if it reflected her thought process. Then she looked at Joyce with a puzzled look. "I can't remember, was I supposed to have something ready for you?" She partly chuckled, as her confusion managed a lasting smirk on Joyce.

The mental image of her spacious office, and empty home started to fade the slightest bit. If she had any real friend, surely it was Amy. The one and only person she had a soft spot for.

She slightly laughed herself, as she seemed angry with herself for letting the same trick get her time and time again. "No, did you already forget? I thought I said I needed to be remeasured?"

Once clueless, her eyes suddenly lit up. "Oh! Right! You have a dinner coming up in a few months, right? Did you want something new altogether?"

"Ideally, yes," Joyce spoke with a slight passiveness, already trying to formulate the perfect image in her mind. What *would* be appropriate? Taking the business climate and occasion into account, she at least knew where to start. Then again, Amy usually handled the creative process for her. Then she looked at Amy disapprovingly. "You didn't schedule something over me, did you?"

"Other than getting a coffee started without you? Nope!" She lifted the side panel of the desk. "Come into the back. We can get started right away."

The pair's heels clicked to their own tunes as they moved into the back. Joyce had already set her jacket on the sofa, and was stepping out of her heels.

"Not that I mind, and from one friend to another, why did you want to be remeasured?" Amy asked, already sifting through her small basket. With her small roll of measuring tape, she turned back to the CEO who was already unbuttoning her shirt.

"I've been doing a bit more exercise lately," without giving Amy her full attention, she unzipped her skirt next. Considering the bitter cold outside, it was at times like these she hated being a slave to business culture. Forget the stockings, she may as well have been naked from the waist down when it came to the wind and freezing temperatures. The seasons were ever-changing, but the clothing expectations always seemed to remain static. Or at the very least, no theme seemed to appeal to the winter... "I just want to make sure I still fit my normal sizes?"

Amy silently gave her figure a split-second scan. “I can understand that. Should I get something started for you too, by the way?” She gestured to the stairs leading up to her apartment. “I don’t mind making you a drink too.”

“I’ll take a coffee after,” Joyce fixed her hair as in just her underwear she stepped onto the small platform, looking into the mirrors. “Am I good to go?”

Amy wrapped the tape around her skin in various places, capturing all the digits that defined her as a person. With the most recent numbers by her side, Amy had supplemented her last few suspicions with visual truths. The measurements hadn’t deviated much really at all, but for the kind of money Joyce paid, the deviations were by a significant margin.

“You know, if the whole CEO thing doesn’t work out, I’d say you’d make a pretty good model for a magazine or fashion in general.” Amy eyed her with the look of an inspired artist. “I could always hire you as a mannequin?”

Craning her neck back, Joyce looked down on her backside. “...I’ll keep it in mind, but right now I think I prefer the entrepreneurship kind of business.” Taking advantage of the mirror, Joyce had taken to adjusting her hair the slightest bit.

“You’d be pretty surprised...” underneath her subject’s arm and close to her waist, Amy eyed the amount of inches with squinting eyes. “Fashion can be a dangerous game!”

“Really.” Her words carried off into the void. It wasn’t a question, or rebuttal to Amy’s claim. Her bland response killed what smalltalk they had going, and the rest of the review went on in silence.

“There *is* some difference...” Amy glanced from an old page to the new. “But not a terrible lot. Are you sure you want me to use these numbers? Didn’t you say it was a few months from now? Shouldn’t I expect an even greater difference then?”

About a second went by until Joyce had responded. “...I’ll have it fitted from there. I just felt like setting a new baseline, that’s all.”

“That’s all?” Amy muttered in a lowered voice, clearly unconvinced.

And as Joyce remained still on the platform, with no one watching Amy’s face, the corners of her mouth slowly rose as Joyce’s intentions were as bare as her skin. With money being no object to

Joyce, trivial visits like these were considered more of a social gathering interaction than a sizeable bill. If it only took a thousand to schedule a simple chat, or the company of a friend, even if Joyce wasn't honest with herself, clearly she was willing to go through with it.

“A new baseline? You mean to tell me I reserved 45 minutes of my day just for me to spend only 10 of them measuring you?”

Suddenly flustered a tad bit, clearly hitting a sore spot, Joyce looked finally from the mirror and to Amy. “W-well...what do you care?” she countered with shaky nerves that did a poor job of shrouding the truth. “You’ll get paid.” With a small ‘hmmf,’ Joyce curtly turned herself back to her clothes and started to dress herself again.

“You drink yours black, right?”

“...Yes.”

“Just tell me if you want to chat for a while. I’m not cheap, but you don’t need to buy my friendship, you know?”

Genuinely trying to play dumb, Joyce feigned ignorance, saying, “What are you talking about? I just didn’t know how long it’d take.” Her hand clutched the jacket’s arm. “But I guess you’re right, there is a bit of time left. Forget the coffee, I’ll just head back early,” after finishing putting the rest of her clothes on, Joyce already turned swiftly for the door.

“Wait.”

Amy spoke simply, and without even giving her a meager glance. And Joyce did so, reluctantly, yet ultimately turning back to the couch. So little was Joyce ever talked to as an equal, and ordered around like this. She hated it, namely because it meant that they knew her down to a ‘T.’ Considering Amy knew her cup size, that probably made sense...

They saw past the empire she had built and what might she wielded. Rather than the hard facts and monumental numbers, they saw her in a light where she was stripped of all superficial qualities. Without her highrise, she was nothing more than a cocky and crude unpleasantry, which is why it was so hard for her to stay that way like this.

“Pretend all you want, but you’re a pretty bad liar. At least when it comes to this stuff,” Amy snickered as she briefly excused herself. She supposed the one perk to black coffee was how she

could make it without even intending to. It was the same recipe as her own brew, except all you needed to do was stop at step 1: make the coffee.

Joyce with an annoyed sigh quit while she was behind, and waited until Amy came back down with two mugs in hand.

“So, what’s new?”

Joyce accepted the warm mug. “Nothing noteworthy, I guess. I just moved into my new apartment about a week ago.”

“Oooh. Anything nice about it?”

“I guess.” She didn’t seem to look so enthusiastic about her monumental purchase. “Once you pass a certain price threshold, they’re all nice, I suppose.” It’s all it ever was. The same bells and whistles across the board, just under a different roof and different by a margin of a mere couple tens or few hundred thousands of dollars... Nothing that really affected the numbers too much.

“I guess,” Amy mimicked in a mocking voice, sipping from her mug. Joyce stared with a mindful look, trying to determine if she should be offended or not. “Really? Tell me more!” Amy slightly shook Joyce’s knee with her hand. “How many rooms does it have? Bathrooms? A garage? Balcony?”

“Two bedrooms. Well,” she paused, “three, I guess, but only two were furnished to begin with... I don’t think I’ll bother with the third.” The empty white walls echoed in her head.

“How’s the bathroom?”

“Good. Better than my last place, I’ll give it that. It’s one of those models where the showerhead is built into the ceiling?”

Her nonchalant attitude earned an obvious look of jealousy from Amy, raising a brow in disbelief while Joyce continued to seem oblivious, or rather, continued to stare off into space.

It never was easy talking to Joyce. Sometimes she was so absorbed in her mind at times, she was too deep in her own thoughts to hear the outside world. It was a silent and unspoken suspicion that Joyce didn’t know how to socialize outside of a work setting. Maybe she’d forgotten how to. Maybe she didn’t want to.

“Well, not all of us can live in a highrise with our sky showers!” Playfully, Amy joked, mostly, and even causing Joyce to laugh when she slowly started to realize how ridiculous she may have seemed.

“Sorry. I know I can’t be easy to talk to, sometimes...”

“Maybe if we did this more often you’d be a bit more relaxed?”

Joyce simply breathed through her nose, wishing for the same, yet regarding it like it were an impossible dream.

“Sometimes I miss not having all of this, you know.”

“What? Money? Fame? Status?”

“Yeah.” Joyce spoke simply, despite there being a chance that Amy was being rhetorical. Then she looked at Amy with an odd sense of seriousness. “All of it.”

“...Really?”

Suddenly with a much more forced attitude, Joyce backpedaled. “Yes...and no...I do like it, and I do feel accomplished, but I feel like I miss out on other, simpler stuff.”

“Well, what’s a normal week like for you?”

“Wake up, check the news, drive or be driven to work,” her ‘be driven’ part struck yet another unfortunate chord with Amy. She listened on though. “Work, maybe leave early if I need to make a dinner meeting or party, then...”

“Then?”

“Go home. Wash, rinse, and repeat. The weekends don’t exactly get much more exciting.”

“Have you tried taking up a hobby?”

“You mean exercising?”

“I don’t know... Actually, wait!” A bulb had lit above Amy’s head. “Didn’t you say you used to cook with your dad? Why not that?”

“Cook for who? Myself? You can’t exactly make spectacular one person meals...” she spoke somberly.

“Well what about...you know...”

Joyce looked at her with a puzzled expression, clearly indicating she did in fact not ‘know.’

“Dating? Meet someone?”

Joyce looked as if she were told to jump off a bridge; plagued with uncertainty and apprehension.

“I don’t know about that... I don’t think I’m very interested in meeting someone...”

“Come on, really? You’re gonna shoot it down without even considering it? There could be a great guy out there for you!”

Joyce didn’t look any more convinced.

“Or a great gal?”

She looked at Amy with strangeness, and Amy decided to cut that avenue short. “Fine, fine. Don’t blame me for trying though...” She sighed, as no other immediate ideas seemed to strike her. Thankfully though, for comedic relief and to alleviate some of the tension, a silent predator pounced from the ground below and onto the top of the sofa between Amy and Joyce.

Each surprised in their own way, Amy was the first to speak. “Ashes!” She tutted disapprovingly, but of course she couldn’t really be mad. The cat meanwhile seemed to care little for the scolding, and positioned itself next to Joyce.

“Ugh...he always manages to slip out when I move up and downstairs...” Setting her mug down, she moved over to the furry friend nuzzled against Joyce’s leg, who was currently watching the cat with a pleasant fascination. “Sorry about that, I’ll move him back upstairs, where he *should* be,” with her last few words being heavily directed at the culprit.

The only thing that stopped her from grabbing him though was Joyce’s polite refusal. “I don’t mind,” a small smile crept over her face as she started to pet him, and a quiet purring ensued. “I don’t get to see him much, anyway. He can stay like this.” As she looked over to Amy, the warmth in her face seemed to dissipate a little. “Is that okay?”

Suddenly realizing the dynamic, Amy conceded with her own smile, sitting back down, admiring the exchange silently for a few moments. She then gave her expressionless cat the kind of eyes that spoke “You got lucky, buster.” But as she watched Joyce calmly continue her pets and light scratches, she spoke simply.

“Isn’t the answer pretty simple?”

Somewhat lost in petting the cat, Joyce turned over to Amy. “What is?”

“Your loneliness issue? Why don’t you just get a pet? A cat would probably be good.” Amy then interjected the brief silence though, adding, “But Ashes is off the table. He may be my little troublemaker, but he’s still my furball.”

Joyce danced her index finger along the top of his head, and it earned a wonderful meow, warming her seemingly cool and collected demeanor. But it did little for her response to Amy.

“I don’t think a pet is really for me, so he’s all yours.” She spoke simply, ending it on a small chuckle. “I guess I like the idea of something or someone to be with...but, I’m not so sure. I don’t know what I want. Besides, I wouldn’t be home enough. Even if it was a cat, then they’d be just as lonely.”

“So get two?”

“One of anything is plenty.”

“Then just spend more time at home?”

It was doable, which was exactly why Joyce knew she was making excuses for herself. It didn’t stop her refusals though. “That’s not what I mean...”

“It won’t get any better unless you try to *make* it better, Joyce,” Amy took a sip from her mug. “There’s a difference between trying to solve your problems and learning to live with them. I’d like to think that someone will come along the way and change your mind, but really, I’m not so sure considering we’ve known each other for so long, and nothing seems to have happened yet...”

It was enough to make Joyce remorseful over her own inaction, but Ashes, meanwhile, had rolled onto his other side, purring as he rubbed more against Joyce’s thigh, beckoning for the the

pets to continue. Amy watched with a tad bit of annoyance, realizing just how much of a drama queen her cat really was, muttering to herself. “Always trying to be in the limelight...”

“I want a relationship, but I don’t know what kind I want. It’s hard to talk about...” She had moved on to testing the squishiness of his paw pads. “Does that make any sense?”

“As much sense as using a seamstress for therapy?”

“What can I say? You haven’t steered me wrong before?”

At the lighthearted comment, both women shared an equally genuine laugh, polishing off the rest of their coffee.

“Something *will* change, Joyce. I’m sure of it. When something does come along though, I wouldn’t pass up on it. Chase it, and see how far it goes!”

She wanted something to come, and she’d earnestly try to never let go, but it’d already been so long, and never once had an opportunity come. She figured her chance at happiness would never present itself.

There wasn’t any way Joyce could confide in another person truly and wholly. She wanted such conflicting things in a partner; independence, dependence, innocence, determination. They had to be self-sufficient, and capable of doing for themselves, yet also to lean so heavily on her. Her desires were so scattered, it was likely impossible to find someone who could piece that sort of relationship together. Nevertheless, she could only hope that Amy’s words of wisdom applied to a desire as peculiar as hers. She had the business, but now she wanted the homelife... Alas, she doubted that she’d ever meet someone that’d understand her on such a level. Never.

“I think it’s about time I start heading back to the office.” She watched Ashes thoughtfully when she stood up, a little sad to disappoint the feline by ending their little cuddle session. In his relaxed position, he cocked his head awkwardly, looking for where his cuddle buddy had gone off to. He briefly meowed.

Amy walked over to the whining cat and substituted with her own petting. “You sure?” she glanced at the nearby clock. “I’m sure I could find a way to kill 10 more minutes?”

With the joke of today’s meeting still far from wearing thin, Joyce had taken it in stride. “No, I think I’ll be alright. Traffic will probably eat up that free time for me.”

“Mmm. I suppose you’re right,” Amy spoke somewhat pensively, already feeling the flame they had begun to forge slowly dim into nothingness. On rare occasion could she actually get Joyce to be herself, and it was times like these when it was just long enough to tease Joyce’s true personality. It took a little bit of time, but she could feel reminded that life wasn’t lived inside an office, and that there were people who cared for her. They were friends, but Amy couldn’t say she truly knew the woman. It made her a little sad to say that, despite Joyce only being a client, but as a sense of recourse she reminded herself that socializing was a two-way street.

They said their goodbyes, and after slipping her jacket back on, her dimmed attitude felt at home once again when it dived into the windy morning, just a few minutes shy of noon. Despite the crisp chill that froze her cheeks, and reddened the tips of her ears and nose, her eyes wandered aimlessly about the city street, being a silent observer to her surroundings, and a spectator to her own life. Just when her cheeks started to sting from the cold, she reminded herself that there was a heated car right next to her.

Her hands gripped the durable foam surrounding the wheel, and her directional clicked and clicked. And clicked. And clicked.

And clicked.

One hand sank to her side, and seemingly by chance fell down by her phone; just close enough to grab it. With a few simple strokes, the ringing on her phone hummed as a substitute for the silent engine.

“Sheila?”

Using her rearview mirror, forced habit begged for her to check her eyeliner, and to make sure the coffee mug hadn’t harmed her lipstick. She knew her blouse wasn’t wrinkled, thankfully, and her pantyhose were as smooth as could be.

“I wanted to tell you that I won’t be back today. I’m not feeling very well.”

A few moments went by, and the directional still continued to tick endlessly.

“I understand. George can be my stand-in for the quarterly report, and just have him give me a recap tomorrow. And if you could reschedule the meeting with Anderson for Thursday I’d appreciate it.”

...

“Then if not just shoot for Monday next week. If not then...” How much she didn’t want to deal with this right now. She wanted to drop everything... She loved her job and what she did, but sometimes it could all just be too much. “Then we’ll handle it from there.” Finalized in her decision and action, she finally pulled out and onto the road. “I’ll see you tomorrow. Bye.”

The apartment was shrouded in a daytime darkness, with the only light coming from the open doorway behind Joyce. Unlike the hallway behind her, a few thousand square feet felt terribly empty. Stepping out of her heels as she stepped into the supposedly homely part of her home, she glanced longingly at the kitchen. She couldn’t be certain, but it was probably a safe guess that three of the four chairs at that table hadn’t moved since the people she paid had put it there.

The couch was neat and orderly; a cushion to each corner, and the coffee table’s contents fitted in the proper position. She liked to keep things clean. And the biggest secret to it all? If you never used it, it couldn’t get dirty. Not a single light was turned on, and apart from the few spots light did manage to seep in through the large windows, a great deal of shade hung in varying degrees throughout the home.

Each and every room that mattered was fully furnished, and there wasn’t a touch of echo. But how could you know it echoed if you barely spoke? There wasn’t anyone to speak to. And she lied, there was an echo. Not in the verbal sense, but the emotional.

With a destination already in mind, she skipped by the tv, windows, bathroom, guest room, empty storage room, office, and stepped into the one place she could call familiar out of forced circumstance. There was a slight jostle of keys when the jacket pocketing them hit the ground, and she laid herself on the luxury mattress, yet finding absolute zero luxury in it.

A dead silence sang throughout the apartment in its tone deaf lull, and it was loud enough to make her ears bleed. The cushy pillow and memory foam knew exactly how to make her body feel comfortable, but not her emotions. Not her mind, and not her heart. And as her head sunk into the pillow, she stared into the ceiling, and nothing stared back at her.

The tears wouldn’t stop, but neither did each other’s embrace, which is exactly why her ducts showed no signs of stopping. Her cautious hand clutched the back of Emily’s head, fastening her securely to her chest as she openly wept, moved to pleasant shambles as a weight inside her seemed to be pulled away with such jarring force, she was simply stunned. There was a gaping hole left inside her heart, and almost immediately it was being filled with some inexplicable

substance that infected her with complete, total euphoria. She wanted to hear it again. She needed to hear it again. What gave her purpose, what gave her meaning. What reminded her how to feel and have emotions.

The only thing that could shock her out of such an emotional state was when she could hear a sobbing other than her own, and feel the trickles of something down her chest.

“E...Emmy?” between her sobs, Joyce managed to ask. “What’s the matter?” Tearily, she chuckled. “What’s wrong?”

“I...I don’t know...” sniffing herself, Emily rubbed one of her eyes. “You started to cry, so I started to... I don’t like seeing you sad.”

It was another innocent line from the person she loved the most, and to hear even as the provider she was still so deeply cared for, she bit her trembling lip as she rested her head on Emily’s.

“Emmy?”

“Mhm?”

“Can I be a little selfish?”

“Of course you can!” Emily spoke with disbelief, trying not to mind the slight crack in her voice from such a rapid shift in tones. After all she’d done for her, and she still felt the need to ask for one measly thing in return? Hell, at this point Emily was prepared to sign off her left kidney! Still very much using Joyce as her cushion, she still looked upwards to the loving woman that stared back at her. “What is it?”

“...again?” It sounded as if she said something before that word, but they came as tiny, incoherent whispers.

“What?” With some leeway in Joyce’s grip, she rose slightly in her lap to become better face to face. “What did you say?”

“...say it again?”

“Say it? Say what...” And as Emily began to repeat the question, she felt her nerves and anxiety creeping to an all-time high. Had she really forgotten so soon what she just said? It was hard to

believe those words came from her mouth... Nevertheless, they did, and she could feel the strange, yet pleasant remnants of the distant syllables trying to burn fiercely once again.

And as her face spelt realization, Joyce herself started to look incredibly nervous, yet with eyes that begged shamelessly for the repetition. Emily had never seen Joyce so vulnerable before. So innocent...

“M...mom...my...” Emily awkwardly played with the word, not finding it to be so easy this time, now that she had all her mental and emotional ducks in a row. The thought of Joyce being the flustered one was oddly sobering for her own mood. As if it were a trigger word though, she could feel Joyce’s arms squeeze her waist, and a gleeful noise escape the woman.

“Now the other part!” Eagerly, Joyce egged on.

Despite taking up the majority of her vision, Emily started to find it extremely difficult to look at Joyce. In mere moments the tables had been turned...

“I...ov...you...” In a tiny whisper, Emily spoke.

With the shoe on the other foot, Joyce turned her ear towards her. “I couldn’t hear you, honey. Louder?” Every part of her personality told Emily that she was on the edge of her seat, and given it was a sight so rarely seen, Emily felt compelled to satisfy.

“I...I love...you...”

A sudden, yet welcome tender exchange began as Emily felt her lips interlocked with Joyce’s. One smooth set of lips pressed to the other, one of their hands were interlocked with the other while Emily used the other for support. What Emily experienced was what she’d been teased this entire time. The seductive, dangerous lover that lurked underneath the sheets, and hid behind the matronly mother Joyce portrayed herself as. It was the third persona hiding behind the business woman and caretaker. Another friendly face Emily had only been given tidbits of, and was just only starting to understand. Only just starting to enjoy.

For a few moments, Emily forgot she could breathe through her nose, which is why she suddenly pulled away for a breath of air. Joyce meanwhile had found her bravado and confidence once more, as if she’d stolen Emily’s like a succubus.

It was certainly a strange departure from Joyce, as despite all being rolled into a single package, and considering Joyce a single entity, the name ‘Mommy’ felt oddly appropriate right now... It

was off-putting, yes, but an unexpectedly interesting privilege she now felt she had exclusive access to. Joyce only had one baby girl, and Emily only had one Mommy. The pair was intertwined, and one held all the interest of the other. Trapped in a symbiotic relationship, one's love longed for the other's.

"I'm sorry it took me so long..."

She looked down at Emily with a curious stare. "So long for what?"

"You know, to say it? To call you...M...mommy?"

The tone, circumstances, and expression didn't seem to matter. The two syllable word tickled Joyce's heart no less, and it felt just as amazing as the last time. That being said, it didn't deter her from comforting the girl.

"Awwh... Don't worry over something as silly as that," she brushed Emily's hair, but then slowly leaned forward, just enough to submerge Emily's hair in the warm water.

"But you've always thought of me as your," she paused for an embarrassed moment, "baby, and only now I'm starting to..." Her heavy hair clung to Joyce's skin as the water seeped from it, but none of it seemed to change either one's attitude. They were so focused on each other, their surroundings had lost its meaning completely.

"Maybe it was a little sad that you'd call me Joyce instead of Mommy..." Joyce spoke truthfully, and it doubled Emily's regrets. "But," with a finger underneath her chin, she slowly rose Emily's eyes to hers. "Now that you're saying it, I know that you mean it. That makes me a thousand times happier than if I forced you to." Her smile spurred one for Emily as well. "I want you to call me what feels right, okay? Mommy, mom, mama, or even Joyce. Whichever name makes you feel the most comfortable." Joyce knew what she really wanted Emily to call her, but hearing it twice already was more than enough, and her desires had been extremely humbled. Even if she could only hear it every once and while, it'd be more than enough to satisfy her.

"Well...I want you to call me what feels right, too." Emily spoke with certainty, and Joyce happily agreed, though, truthfully she'd been doing it from the very start. She wouldn't try and trample on her kindness, though.

"Are you ready to get squeaky clean, now?" Without waiting for an answer, Joyce already spun her around and into place while she reached for the shampoo.

“I can do it,” charitably, Emily reached for the bottle, but it was pulled outside her range.

Still outside her reach, Joyce poured some into her hands and was already rubbing them together. “Nice try, but I’m not gonna miss out on giving my little one a bath!”

“I was just trying to help...” Emily muttered defensively. “You need to wash your hair *too*, you know?”

“That’s very true, my little Watson.” Chuckling, she already made contact with Emily’s scalp. “But I can do that after I get started on you.”

“Whatever you say...” Emily’s eyes had already closed their curtains, as she sat lazily on her knees, slightly slouched forward while the tender scrubs forced her forward and back.

“So, have you had a good day?” Joyce spoke slow and soothingly, already aware of just how lazy Emily could get during tub time. It was a disarming voice that confirmed and reinforced Emily’s desires to eject and cruise on autopilot.

“Mhmm. It’s been the best one yet...”

Yet. Emily unknowingly had set the bar, and Joyce was already itching at the challenge of trying to top it. Too bad this one still had 6 more hours to it... Even with that in mind, it meant 6 more hours until she could give it her all yet again, but also 6 more hours to enjoy what a personal treat today had been as well. Maybe she should have put two candles on the cake?

“Well I’m very, very, glad to hear that,” a small trickle of water pouring from a cup expanded into a mini waterfall as it washed through Emily’s soapy hair. After a few more repeats it was slowly transitioning back to its sleek and shiny self. The only way of knowing anything changed was if you took a moment to smell the wonderful fragrance imbued in her hair. “And after we get all cleaned up we’ll have a little more time to play, alright? So start thinking about what you want to do.”

“Let’s watch a movie,” Emily somewhat mumbled in a murmuring voice. Joyce only laughed the tiniest bit.

“A movie? I don’t know. We just got finished with two hours of tv. More than two, I should add.” Emily could feel the scolding stare on her back, and it only made her smile, and try not to fidget. “Maybe, but I was thinking maybe we could do something else? I’d prefer for you to be a little awake before bed.”

“Huh? Why?” The idea of being awake before bed seemed a bit counterintuitive, and it didn’t make Joyce’s intentions any clearer.

“Mmm...” Joyce ‘hmed’ thoughtfully. “It’s a surprise. You’ll just need to wait.”

Emily tried to turn her gears as best as she could, but her concentration was often broken by the gentle scrubs in her particularly sensitive spots. The whole way Joyce made no comments other than positive reinforcement, taking in every moment of bathing with her baby.

“Joyce?” A small, personal trance inside of Joyce wavered the slightest bit. So did that mean it was a grownup question?

“What’s wrong?”

“Why do you have such a...nice body?”

Joyce blinked, then felt her cheeks grow a little warmer than she’d have liked. “Wh, what do you mean?” She tried to laugh it off, but Emily still looked just as focused.

“I’m serious though! I’m jealous...” Emily spoke on a more somber note, downcasted with a view of her own significantly smaller proportions. Namely her height.

“Honey...”

Emily could feel her bum slide across the bottom of the tub, and two soft cushions receive her back as they came to a halt.

“You’re beautiful, I promise. I wouldn’t want you any other way.”

“Yeah, but maybe I want myself like you...”

“Well, I want you the way you are,” Joyce countered in a matter-of-fact voice, and Emily stared back all flustered.

“What do you mean? You’re like a head taller than me! If someone didn’t know any better, they’d think I’m your adopted-” Suddenly, Emily was overcome with a sense of stupid. She slowly turned back to the bathwater.

“Wrong,” Joyce ‘bzzed’ with her mouth, pulling back the dejected girl’s gaze. “Yes, maybe a little bit your size helps with me carrying you around,” Emily wouldn’t admit it, but she probably liked that advantage to being smaller, too... “But I like it because it’s part of what makes you, *you*.” She spoke with emphasis on the last part. “When we snuggle, hug, interact, do things together, I always like having my gal. I can’t explain it very well, but just know that you’re perfect the way you are. Don’t let these things get in the way of that,” jokingly, she lifted one of her breasts then dropped it. She then decided to take a gamble, saying, “Besides, if you were as tall as me, then both of our boobs would get in the way!”

Emily tilted her brows upward, clearly hurt, yet right before Joyce was going to say something, and odd giggle escaped her. Soon it became a chuckle, then a full-on laugh. Internally for Joyce, it was a sigh of relief.

“I’m sorry,” Emily wiped a joyful tear from her eye. “You’re right. I’m just talking about stupid stuff. Sometimes I like being the smaller one, too...”

“It’s never stupid to talk about stuff like that,” Joyce had moved onto washing her own hair. “If you’re ever feeling bad about something, I want to hear about it.” It was another one of those moments where even the joking and teasing Joyce spoke with the utmost seriousness.

With nothing left to do but watch, Emily admired the sight as her caretaker and lover cleaned themselves of the day’s fatigue. Though, she had to be truthful when she said that it can get boring even to watch the one you love the most.

As if reading her mind, Joyce said, “I know, I should’ve thought of this.”

“Thought of what?”

“A bath with no bubbles?” Joyce spoke as if the answer were practically a given. “No toys, either?” Her second comment came with a little more personal disgust.

“Er, Joy- M...Mommy,” clearly she was still getting used to that. “I’m fine though?”

“Well I’m not.” Despite acting like the grown adult, Joyce’s small aggravation came off as a tiny temper, and Emily watched with amusement. Still, maybe bubbles could have been fun? The idea of trying to be imaginative with toys though felt like another task she wasn’t up to. For the time being, she’d take a simple soak over clashing plastic boats and rubber ducks together any day of the week. She looked over at Joyce who still seemed to be internally feuding. Maybe six days of the week?

Joyce finally sighed, then looked over to Emily. “I guess until then you’ll just be my little sea otter.”

“I thought I was a cat?” Emily narrowed her eyes.

“Kitty,” Joyce corrected. “And only on land. Cats don’t like swimming, you know? We need to keep the story believable, silly.”

The bewildering logic only made Emily snicker, trying to piece together just who they were trying to prove something to. At some point she’d drifted to the far end of the tub, and turning back to the relaxed Joyce, she crouched on her feet, then tensed her muscles, propelling herself towards her target. A large swish and swosh of the water resounded in the waves she left in her wake, poised like an arrow soaring through the water. Her momentum was absorbed by the water and Joyce’s body as she wrapped her arms around the woman, slightly surprised by the sudden attack.

Fixing her hair, Emily looked up to Joyce with a smile, both of their hair swept behind their heads, hanging heavy from the water.

“You know, I’ve never seen a sea otter before?” with no real reason, Emily said.

“Really? I know the city aquarium has them... You haven’t been there?”

“No, I’ve only been here for about two years, you know?”

“Two years is a lot of time, you know?”

“Besides,” Emily dodged the question. “You wouldn’t really catch someone like me at a zoo or aquarium...” Her face partly sunk into the water, just enough to make bubbles with her nose.

“Why not?”

“That’s where people bring their kids, or, people go on dates. Jack and I didn’t ever go there...” The last bit seemed to have dampened her mood a little bit.

“Well isn’t that convenient then?”

Emily wordlessly looked up to Joyce. Only then did the words ‘kid’ and ‘date’ strike her.

“But-!” She’d been through this song and dance too many times before to not know where this was going.

“No butts,” Joyce pulled Emily a little closer. “The more that I think about it, either the zoo or aquarium sounds like a fun outing. I don’t think I’ve ever took my mom and dad?”

Double panic started to sink in.

“Wait! No! We can’t go with them!”

Joyce smirked. “So is that your way of saying you’re okay with it?”

“No! Well...” she started to look sheepish. “Yes. But, they probably have things they want to do too, right? Won’t we just be getting in the way?”

“That’s very thoughtful of you, sweetie, but we actually needed some stuff to do. Now that’s one day taken care of. Such a good helper...” Joyce quietly remarked as Emily’s nervous thoughts were coming into play.

“Won’t they think it’s kiddish?”

“No? Going to see animals isn’t as silly as you think, Emmy. In fact, the more I think about it, the more I want to go too,” Emily couldn’t help but agree, as she watched Joyce’s conviction quickly cement and become absolute. Why did she have to be so good at churning out ideas? “I’m sure they’ll like the idea too. And how else am I supposed to show you what a sea otter is?”

“I can google some videos?”

Joyce scoffed in an exaggerated manner, looking at Emily with pretend-condescending, yet still just as loving eyes. “I think you’ve had enough screen time for one night.”

Emily puffed her cheeks at that one.

“Trust me, you’ll be happy I showed you the real thing.”

Emily could only hope so, because her immediate feelings right now weren’t too stellar. She could only hinge herself on her genuine excitement of seeing the animals. It was more about the

mixed setting that involved Joyce's parents. Nothing against them, of course, but where she was with Joyce still felt awkward to publicize.

Their watery cuddles were then interrupted by the taller of the two rising from the water. Losing her cushion, Emily suddenly looked up to her, dreading the fallout.

"End of the line, kiddo." Joyce leaned over to the console and pressed a button, and Emily could already start to hear the water drain.

"Do we have to? Just five more minutes?" Emily tried to use a pleading look.

"You may have me wrapped around your finger, but not this time." Emily suddenly felt Joyce's hands under her pits, and she was lifted to her feet. The sudden emergence from the water sent a wave of chill down her body, even with the bathroom fan humming away. Almost immediately with goosebumps, she was beyond thankful for the towel that wrapped around her like a cloak. While she was busy holding it together, a pair of hands bunched her hair while it was wrapped in a much more manageable-sized towel. Turning to the culprit, Joyce was almost exactly like her, except her towel gave her feet and arms free access.

"I want a towel that fits me like it does for you..." Emily passively spoke.

"And so it shall be." Joyce spoke simply, stunning Emily over her casualness.

Snapped out of her thoughts, Emily tried to protest. "Wait, no, I wasn't being serious! I was just venting!"

"Why not?" Joyce gave Emily a brief look while staring into the mirror. "It is cute using the bigger towels on you, but I know convenience is pretty important too."

"Then just tell me how much it costs and where I can get it." Emily knew she wasn't going to get out of this one, but she could at least minimize the damage.

"No, and double no."

How quick she was to forget Joyce's signature trait...

"What? How come? J...Mommy, I can pay for it myself."

“And that’s *especially* why I said no.” Joyce booped the annoyed girl on the nose, which simultaneously excited her as well as aggravate. “Mommy’s don’t give their babies an allowance, much less expect them to buy something on their own. If you want something, all you need to do is ask. And you did, which I’m very happy about, by the way~!”

Calling it asking was a stretch, considering it came off as a fleeting comment than a genuine complaint. She didn’t like the idea of having to watch her words around Joyce, but she knew if she didn’t then there would probably be a few too many unexpected purchases on their doorstep. If she wanted anything henceforth, she’d need to be discrete about it on her own time...

“What are you thinking about?”

Emily’s eyes wandered to the window. “...Nothing.”

Clearly unconvinced, Joyce shrugged for now and checked the wall-mounted screen.

While Emily’s eyes wandered, she noticed Joyce’s small pile of discarded clothes, right next to her pile. Well, where her pile should have been. Instead, all there was on the ground was a used diaper. Slightly used...

“Do you wanna get in your jammies now, or later?” Joyce asked in a small shout over the hairdryer.

“Already? I can’t be that late, can it?”

Another glance at the clock read close to eight, and Joyce gestured to Emily to come closer with an authoritative finger. Emily took a few steps, then slowed to a halt as the door to the hallway came into her vision and mind. There wasn’t any real reason for it, but a strange idea popped into her head. Something totally unusual and unlike her typical self. It was odd, and devious? Devious, yet tempting...

“Emmy? Yoo-hoo?” Joyce wiggled the dryer as a reminder. What was she thinking about?
“Coming?”

Blankly, Emily looked back to Joyce, then the door, then Joyce. And then as a smile crept on her face, she gleefully shouted, “Nope!”

Joyce didn’t even react when it happened, or was at least too surprised to. While it sunk in her head Emily just refused a simple gesture to have her hair dried, Emily’d done something so out

of left field to the point where she quite literally ran for it. Darting to the exit, she swung the door open, still in her towel and slipped into the hallway. Joyce could hear the rapid thumping of her feet across the floor. Wordlessly, with a cocked eyebrow, she clicked off the dryer and poked her head out.

“Emmy? What’re you...?” Poking her head outside the doorway, she noticed the sudden draft as the apartment wasn’t nearly as heated as the bathroom. She slightly shivered peering down the hall. She could see into the far end of the living room where Emily was, positioning herself behind the couch as she stared back with eyes of mischief. Only then did it finally click for Joyce.

“Ohh?” with an amused laugh hidden in her taunting voice, Joyce looked to the girl who seemed to be troubled with keeping down a laugh herself. “Emmy? You know I’m supposed to finish dressing you before you leave? Running around like that is going to get you hurt!”

“Not true!” Emily countered, balling her fists into the edge of the couch as she crouched in front of it as her pearly whites flashed themselves.. “I’m wearing a towel!”

Joyce excitedly paced her own mental steps; pleasantly surprised by the sudden naughtiness in her charge. “Maybe, but we both know that you’re not wearing your diaper.” Emily’s laugh slightly stuttered, and she blushed, but she still seemed adamant. “Emmy,” taking a small breath, she stood fully in the hallway. “I’m going to give you to the count of three, and by then your tooshie better be back in this bathroom. You’re going to get the apartment covered in water!”

It was a real issue, but Emily knew how to distinguish between Joyce and Mommy. The threat seemed real enough, but so did the desire to cause a little havoc. She didn’t know why, but there was something about chaos that suddenly tempted her. The only reason she kept it going was that Joyce seemed to be enjoying it too.

“One,” sternly, Joyce tapped her foot. Emily hadn’t moved an inch.

“Two.” She was really going through with this? Joyce’s heart was in full swing.

Joyce opened her mouth for the final call, until Emily spoke.

“Wait!” Emily suddenly blurted, and her face shifted to one of remorse. “I’m sorry... I shouldn’t have left...”

“Are you ready to apologize?” And so the thrill had come to an end...

Emily slowly walked around the couch, and Joyce could already see a few drops of water trickle down her legs and onto the floor. Thank goodness the floors weren't carpet...

Joyce kept her hands around her hips, doing her best to impersonate a scolding mother, and Emily had just reached the entrance to the hallway.

“Just kidding!”

Joyce simply blinked yet again, when from Emily's perspective she pulled a sharp left and scurried off to the kitchen, past the shoe area by the door.

Out of sight, Joyce held a hand over her mouth as she silently laughed and giggled. Apparently her little princess had become a bit of a trickster, and she was loving every second of it.

Back to her stern self, she called, “Three! That's it missy, you had your chance!” She followed the trail of giggles and water into the kitchen, which sure enough harbored the runaway toddler.

“Last chance,” Joyce warned, already looking ready for a chase. She held her arms open, equally meant for receiving a willing participant, or a rebellious runaway.

Emily as best as she could to keep the tension high and the atmosphere bubbly, regarded Joyce's sweet embrace as certain death, and was determined to do anything she could to avoid it.

Joyce started with a calm, yet brisk walk around the left side of the island to where Emily was, and Emily in response already made an even faster motion to the right. The advanced moves were already in play though, because Joyce even faster pivoted on her heel to swap directions. She near-leaped around the side, and Emily's reaction was just soon enough to space her a foot away from Joyce's reach. The sudden surprise and narrow victory caused her to squeal, and at Joyce's failed attempt, Emily stuck out her tongue in a teasing reaction.

“Oh, you're gonna get it now...!” Joyce quickly abandoned her feints and went for a much more direct approach, and for Emily to counteract the disadvantage she had in stride, she worked twice as hard to move her legs. The whole way she needed to hike up her towel to keep her range of motion free, but in the process the towel on her head slipped off and her damp hair flowed freely.

They did two close laps around the island, and then the table, which nearly once again spelt Emily's defeat. She was breathing fast as the adrenaline worked through her veins, and even though Joyce was much more composed, and obviously less tired, she looked to be working a

small sweat up herself. And even though she still fully intended to maintain the chase, Emily started to wonder in the back of her head, what *would* Joyce do once she caught her? Suddenly she didn't like thinking about the consequences so much... She went back to focusing on the fun of the process.

"Never gonna catch me!" Emily cheered as she made a beeline back into the hallway, and Joyce followed right behind.

Joyce knew she would catch her, of course, which is why she prolonged the chase so she could think of an appropriate punishment. Nothing actually bad, but something to 'punish' her for being 'naughty.' Did she have a stool for the corner? Maybe an earlier bedtime? The last one would be certainly severe... Emmy probably wouldn't appreciate that one... Emily too...

As Joyce followed her down the hall, she noticed the wet trail they were on since their entrance. It was all fun and games, but Joyce called, "Careful! Don't slip on the-" It was too late, because with each step Emily suddenly became much more shaky as her center of balance wobbled and collapse, tumbling forward and hitting her face against the backside of the couch. As friction left the building, so did her feet, rising into the air along with the rest of her body as it hit the floor. She must have hit a slight stud on the sofa, because there was a bit of a sound to it upon the collision.

"Emily!" Gasping, Joyce hurried with caution over to the girl, who was already collecting herself. The thrill and fun they were having quickly drained as Emily pushed herself up from her position, and Joyce was already there helping her.

Joyce didn't know how to react, whether as a mother or a lover. She carefully looked Emily's face over, likely still red from the heated bathroom. Emily looked a bit uncomfortable though, and she was, considering she just hit a couch face first. There looked to be no lasting damage, but it really did hurt. She clutched her nose as her eyes became teary from the stinging and pain.

"Emily? Are you okay? Does it hurt anywhere?" She held Emily close and she continued to inspect, meanwhile Emily started to sob. Joyce knew the nose was an area of concern, but was otherwise relieved to see nowhere else looked bad. "Can I see your nose, sweetheart?" She resorted to the much more cushy language to be all the more comforting.

Emily had been through worse, but that didn't mean this was any less bad. She carefully exposed her nose for Joyce to take a look.

It definitely looked a little bit redder, but thankfully nothing lasting.

“It’s alright, you’re okay. Just a few boo-boos, huh?” Joyce comforted, whilst Emily still tried to brace the lingering effects of the fall. Why was she running around in the first place? Didn’t she know how stupid of an idea that was to begin with? Her adult mindset was already back and waiting to scold her. Meanwhile, the very person who warned her not to do what she did was nurse her.

“I’m sorry...” Emily tearily mumbled as she leaned into Joyce.

“Well, I’m not going to say I told you so, but I think you’ve learned your lesson, huh?”

Emily meekly nodded, just beginning to feel the throbbing pain die down.

“Still, that wasn’t like you? What happened to being my good girl?”

“I don’t know...” she rubbed her eyes, slowly standing up with Joyce. “I thought it would be fun...”

“There’s much safer ways to have fun, silly.” She patted her head. Joyce had nearly broke into her own hysterics had Emily seriously been injured. It genuinely scared her to think of what else could’ve happened if they got a bit too careless. They could consider themselves lucky on this one...

“No more leaving the bathroom unless I say so, okay?”

Once again, she agreed.

A wet and cool kiss planted itself on Emily’s nose.

“Pain, pain, go a-way! Come a-gain a-nother day!” With swirls and twists of her two index fingers, she finished the small ritual with imitated fireworks using her hands.

“Better?”

Emily nodded her head, smiling.

“Lots.”

“Good. Once you’re all dried up, we’ll get you in some nice and soft jammies, *then* you can help me clean up the little mess you made.” her voice nudged to the small puddles of water.

Emily slightly giggled, knowing the punishment was well-deserved.