

11 - Off to a Rocky Start

Joyce gave her phone a quick time check, seeing it read nearly half-past six. She let out a sigh, as she'd have to postpone her little 'project' to get started on dinner. Stealing one last glance, she flicked off the light and locked the door, now giving a warm smile toward the cracked door frame, hiding away the sleeping Emily.

As she tenderized the chicken breast she carried off into her typical hum, passively listening to the news on a nearby monitor. Often though nothing really struck her as breathtaking, or at least nothing to give her undivided attention to. Mainly it was stocks and the occasional medical journal she kept on top of the most, and general news outlets wouldn't be the best place to get those.

Absent-mindedly changing channels, trying to land on something worth watching or at least listening to, she suddenly stopped on a cartoon for kids. Instinctively, it triggered a fantasy within her: rubbing the hair on top of Emily's head whilst she watched her cartoons, completely and totally devoted to one simple task that kept her happy. Then Joyce would do what was only logical and give her a diaper check, and sure enough the result would be...

She blinked for a moment when there was a sudden *ding* noise from the oven. She did often get carried away with Emily...She'd probably need to do something about that. Focus on what was happening now, and not what might never happen later. The weekend was finally upon them though, so there'd be plenty of time to realize those fantasies--or at least make some serious progress towards them. They'd be creeping further and further down the rabbit hole. She was almost starting to regret not including Emily in the cooking process, but it was better this way. The more and more Joyce stuck her to a routine, it'd reinforce the atmosphere she was working so hard to cultivate. Joyce was the authority figure and Emily was her charge, and it was clear that both of them were starting to enjoy this kind of dynamic. Still, she'd have to chase away those thoughts for just a second, as cutting scallions wasn't the best thing to be doing with someone's padded tush on your mind.

What was her expansive bed had now become the horizontal span of a couch, and the surrounding windows were pitch black, accompanied by the faint noise of a tv static in the corner. Emily leaned up from the couch, feeling all out of sorts. She had no fatigue, but she didn't feel alert either...She felt...off.

The more she looked around the room, the more familiar it felt...But there will still key items that kept her from putting a name to a face. The tv was clearly off by a foot, and the kitchen was supposed to have two sets of cabinets, not three. Was this an apartment? There was a potted plant suspended by a shelf on the wall. It had strange, red, and yellow bulbs hanging from it. They were on the other side of the room, and the more she tried to focus, the hazier they looked. Even still, she could distinctly smell them. The word *peaches* oddly resonated within her.

There was a strange disconnect in her body as she stood up from the couch; her nerves were in limbo. It was almost as if she never registered--or even processed--the actual standing motion. She had just gone from sitting to suddenly standing? But her emotions felt suppressed in a way, prohibiting any kind of natural stress one would normally feel from such a situation.

She looked down at herself for a brief moment, seeing that she was in a canvas-white tank top, and equally as white panties. None of this incited any reaction within her though. She simply observed.

“Hey hon, what’re we having for dinner?” A voice suddenly ‘existed’, as Emily turned her head with lagging motion towards the kitchen. He was tall, decently-built, dressed in a shirt and shorts meant for lounging. He looked as if he’d skipped out on shaving for a few days.

“J...Jack?” The name suddenly came to her head, and just as much to her mouth. What was he doing here? What was she doing here? It had never even crossed her mind to try and remember where she last was or what she was supposed to be doing. It was as if her consciousness had pressed the shut down button at some point, and randomly chose to power back up now.

“I’ve been waiting for a while now. You always sleep so much, jeez.”

“I already made sandwiches,” The fabricated thoughts were entering Emily’s mind. Actions she had no recollection of suddenly made sense for some reason, but it didn’t feel like she was remembering. Yet again, things had suddenly started to exist within her mind without a second thought or question. Why wasn’t she questioning it?

Surely enough, Jack opened the fridge and pulled a massive platter out. They were too much of a blur for Emily to even see if they had been appetizing, but she didn’t seem to be putting stock in anything right now.

Though, for no real reason the atmosphere was starting to turn stale--oddly fast, as with each moment she stared at Jack, she felt more and more uncomfortable. The shackles on her most negative emotions were becoming unchained.

The missing foot from the tv she so nonchalantly noticed earlier started to make her heart thump at an odd pace; and the impressed, faded cushions reminded her of helplessness. The cabinets glared at her with their inanimate grins, as they had stolen something from her. Something important. And whatever she did have, her heart was suddenly aching for it to be returned. Everything that seemed so neutral had manifested an indescribable aura of dread--invading her mind with a sense of loss and abandonment she couldn't place. Clearly she did not belong here; wherever 'here' was. But where was she supposed to go? Where did she belong?

"Aren't you gonna eat?" She looked over to Jack who was currently stuffing his face, bits of visible crust and unknown paste mixed with tomato lazily falling out of his overcapacity-mouth. The longer she stared, the more she could feel her vision tilting on its side. Her head felt upright though, so how was something like that even possible?

"You look good, by the way." On the surface it was so casual, yet so...chilling.

His words pierced the woman, as she was struck with a sinking feeling, the room beginning to spin on its invisible axis. Her own breathing was becoming louder than anything else, followed by a suffocatingly-close thumping noise that reverberated from her chest.

The whiteness on her clothes had somehow lost their purity, and almost looked stained now; turning from a bright white into an almost dreary grey. And as if instinct suddenly commanded, her body almost leaped towards the first door she could see. She couldn't remember from a few seconds earlier if what she saw now looked like salvation, but a baseless urge from within called her to it.

Her hands clasped the metal knob as if they were attracted like a magnet. Her arms twisted and turned--consumed by an irrational anxiety she was quickly drowning in. Just when it felt like her heart was going to stop, and the noises would pop her eardrums, it opened.

And there she was.

The only thing that made sense. The only thing she could recognize with absolute certainty in this twisted turmoil and catastrophic conundrum. Her figure emanated peace and serenity, coaxing the girl into forgetting what lay behind her. The chill she had felt was fast dissipating into a minor inconvenience, and soon becoming pure warmth. Emily's face was warm as well, but also covered in a flowing sensation.

Tears.

Emily reached her arms out towards safety and security itself, with her vision becoming more blurry as the thing she sought for most remained still; its position static and absolute--like an immovable pillar. She buried her face into their chest, arms wrapped around their waist like iron locks. More than anything she wanted to remain like this forever. What came before and what would come after were concepts that had simply lost their meaning in the face of the paradise she was now basking in.

The name had been so distinct to Emily, as it crept along her tongue; ready to voice a sound that was as sweet as honey and seductive as sugar. The edges of her hair danced their tiny feet across the tips of Emily's shoulders, inviting a much more pleasant and tingly feeling into her heart.

Why was there so much suspense? Why did the utterance of a single word feel so...monumental? Significant? She was too busy to consult logic and reason for the answer though. Simply forming the word with her mouth had taken a much higher priority.

And yet, the process felt so natural. It echoed so clearly as if it were like breathing.

Still enveloping herself, Emily with a wide-forming grin spoke, pleasantly surprised as her mind and mouth quickly shifted tracks.

"Joyce!"

"Joyce!"

"Joyce!"

"Momm--!"

And in the blink of an eye, the scene had ceased to be.

In a cold sweat, Emily arched forward from the bed with a jolt, trying to control her rapid breathing. She looked around her new, and suddenly different surroundings; trying to absorb the much more tame atmosphere. She was in the bed Joyce had tucked her in, with normal thoughts coming back to her--displacing the very surreal ones she had been experiencing just a few moments ago. It wasn't nearly as loud now, but she could still feel the knocking in her chest. The curtains were partly drawn, as city-darkness stared back from the other side of the glass windows. She shifted uncomfortably, as the space between her lower thighs along with the sheets felt wet.

She felt wet all over. Hot, yet cold at the same time. Everything she wore felt clammy, and the few fringes of hair that dangled in her face were oddly irritating right now. She was too occupied to pay mind to the diaper around her waist, even as it crinkled with each shift in her posture. It felt especially warm down there, but not the kind of warm she'd feel after she'd wet. Pressing a hand to her cheek, that felt warm too, but she didn't feel embarrassed. She felt strange, only now she had the agency to do something about it. Though, a small enigma inside of her wanted someone else to address it. Someone specific.

“Emmy...It's time to get up!” Joyce slowly opened the door, already eager to watch the smaller girl stir awake. Only that it wouldn't be like the usual routine this time; not when Emily had already woken up on her own, which definitely did not suit her. Hence the reason why Joyce was so concerned after seeing her unusual mannerisms.

“Emmy? Are you okay?” She sat beside the girl who was still collecting herself, just noticing Joyce's entrance now. She draped an arm around her, causing her to notice the unmistakable warmth of her skin and sweat-drenched back. “Emily, why're you so warm...? And you're covered in sweat! What happened?”

“I...” Her voice started, but it struggled to find the rest of its words. “I don't know....” It became thick as a helpless feeling welled up from within. “I had this really weird dream, and...”

“Was it a nightmare?” Joyce had taken the moment to press the back of her hand to Emily's cheek as well, feeling just like her arm. How could she have shifted like this so rapidly? Had Joyce failed to notice something when she first came home? “How do you feel right now?”

“I feel hot...and cold,” She grimaced. It was almost soothing to have Joyce come to her rescue, but old habits were still irking her for deferring her own wellbeing to someone else so easily. “And in my dream there was Jack...and something about eating?” Even though she knew it sounded ridiculous, “I think it was our apartment...and nothing looked right. I felt...lonely...But, then you were there, and then...” The dream was strangely becoming harder and harder to trace. All that she could remember were the sensations and feelings that had become so much more vivid towards the dream's climax. And then, she'd been jolted awake by who knows what.

“It's all right...I'm here now,” Joyce pulled her in for a hug, as Emily clutched tighter. “But still, how could this have happened? Have you not been feeling well?”

“Well...I don't know...” Emily partly shrugged. “I suppose I haven't been feeling 100% lately...”

“How long is ‘lately’?”

“The past couple days maybe? Four?”

Joyce sighed. Not because Emily hadn’t told her sooner, but because Joyce wasn’t able to tell until now. She was her own person, but it was hard to refute that since treating Emily like her baby, it was difficult not to see the girl as partly her responsibility. What bothered Joyce the most though was how she clearly didn’t live up to her assumed role. She’d need to do better...

“Let’s get you cleaned up, sweetheart, okay?” She lightly rubbed Emily’s back. “Then we’ll figure out what to do from there.” Joyce had already peeled back the covers, pressing her hand on the spot in between Emily’s legs--close to the crotch of her diaper. That didn’t feel dry either, but it obviously wasn’t urine. She’d certainly sweat up a storm though.

“I just need to go get something to dry you off with. It looks like you’re damp all over.” Her heart ached to see Emily so distraught. It was the first time she’d seen this kind of physical stress weigh over her. Whenever she was like this emotionally, Joyce always knew there’d be a light at the end of the tunnel, but sickness was always downright insufferable, and there were few prizes for the pain.

Emily had motioned herself to the edge of the bed, ready to follow Joyce in tow.

“Oh no,” Joyce firmly, but gently, planted Emily back on the bedside, “you stay put, got it? I don’t want you lifting a finger.”

“But...” Emily whined with the fatigue in her voice beyond evident. Even she knew arguing was an exercise in futility. Joyce had apparently read her mind though, because she left the room without another word. They both knew Emily had both little bark and bite right now.

She came back in record timing, slowly brightening the room with the dimmer, joined with a towel in hand. It was set next to Emily whilst she knelt down to be at a better level with her, working away at the buttons on her blouse--a process which Emily did little to fight.

“Sorry honey,” Joyce’s hands went behind Emily’s back, “bra needs to come off too. Gotta make sure we get you in every nook and cranny.” The clasp was undone and gently slipped off. The only things that remained were her socks and diaper. Deftly, she rolled them off her feet and laid the towel out on the bed, situating Emily’s back on it.

“I know you didn’t wet your diaper, but I think we can both say it’s probably not dry either. That’s a fair assumption, right?”

This time, Emily’s cheeks weren’t burning because she had a fever. Bashfully, she nodded her head, as the pillows beside her seemed much more interesting - much more than the caretaker who had just confronted the state of her underwear.

For a brief moment, the room was filled with the sound of adhesive tearing from plastic. Once Joyce pulled the front of the diaper off, Emily hadn’t realized just how much of a sauna it felt like in between her legs until then. A rush of cool air pressed her nether regions, stimulating an oddly refreshing sensation.

“Yep,” Joyce lifted her legs, fully removing the undergarment from underneath. “No pee this time!” She joked, hoping that she could at least improve the girl’s mood in the slightest. “And...up we go!” Joyce, taking her by the wrists, stood her on the floor, causing Emily to suddenly take hold of Joyce’s shoulders.

On the ground, she had a sinking feeling in her stomach. Not the kind like in her dream, but a physically uncomfortable one. It felt hard and heavy; like she ate something bad. But she hadn’t eaten anything in quite a while...

Joyce had taken the towel from behind and got to work, staying true to her word about every ‘nook and cranny’. Up and down on each leg, including the small pockets behind her knees, Joyce dried her off in every spot. Along the way she grabbed the other areas likely for build-up as well, including underneath the bum, between the legs, armpits, and back.

“Do you think I got everywhere?” Joyce slung the towel over her shoulder. “Any spots you want me to go back over?”

“No...I think you got everything.” She responded in an almost out-of-it voice. Everything was starting to feel exhausting. She just wanted to lay down, especially when she was starting to feel slight pains from her stomach.

Emily’s hair was brushed to the side, revealing her forehead, which Joyce pressed to her own. It certainly felt warm, which confirmed the suspicions both of them already had.

“Does it hurt anywhere? Any spot that might feel a little worse than the others?” She had half a mind to give Dr Hall a call right now. It hadn’t been more than twenty minutes, and Joyce felt terrible for letting this kind of pain persist.

“My stomach feels kind of weird...” Emily frowned just for reminding herself of it. “I keep getting pains from it.”

“Your stomach?” Joyce lightly set her palm against it. Was it the stomach bug then? She couldn’t say for sure, but it was looking more and more like the likely assumption. “Okay, well, let’s get something for you to wear at least.” Setting the naked Emily back on the bed, Joyce went over to her dresser and pulled out a shirt, along with a pair of bra and panties.

“Do I...have to wear so much stuff?” Emily wanted to chastise herself for sounding so selfish, but the idea of clothes sounded unbearably suffocating right now. Just looking at the stuff already made her want to sweat.

“I’m willing to compromise a little, hon,” Joyce had already turned back to the dresser. “But if you start sweating again, then it’s gonna go right to the sheets. I don’t mind changing you or the bed at all, but could you at least try it? If it turns out you don’t like it, we’ll try it your way. Alright?”

Emily nodded her head in response, but she wasn’t sure if Joyce even saw, as she heard the sounds of drawers opening and closing.

“Okay, how about this?” Joyce came back now with only two pieces of clothing: A pair of panties without the matching bra, and a blue short-sleeve shirt with two illustrated kittens on the front. She wasn’t even sure if it’d go past her belly-button.

“But...” Emily was hating herself even more for feeling increasingly selfish. With someone else willing to bend over backward for her, she was completely and fully taking advantage of another person. And yet, a small voice in the back of her head kept her going with these ridiculous and childish demands. “It’s the weekend...”

Joyce’s brow admittedly furrowed the smallest bit, unsure of what Emily was getting at. She’d never had trouble with deciphering Emily’s wants and needs, but with her being sick it was a little harder to tell. Only by chance when she caught the removed diaper out of the corner of her vision did she have a pretty solid idea.

“Emmy...” Joyce looked back at the girl, with a delicate and loving expression on her face. Emily became a bit teary-eyed in response, as her revealed message and stomach knots were becoming overwhelming. “You’ll always be my little girl if that’s what you want, but I want to focus on making *you* feel better. Are you sure you’d rather be wearing one over panties?”

Sniffling, all Emily did was meekly nod her head.

“Okay,” Joyce smiled. “I won’t ask anything else about it, but you need to tell me if you want to stop, or if you need to use the bathroom.” The second bit was breaking their rules, but considering how big of a first this was, Joyce was more than willing to make an exception. Being this early into the game, it felt downright cruel to force something like that on Emily; even if she was the one asking for diapers. Still, the thought of Emily being the one to request them was adorable beyond words! If she wasn’t sick, Joyce would have been smothering her little girl in kisses and hugs by now.

Making one last trip to the dresser, Joyce switched the panties out for something a bit more ‘appropriate’, and came back to Emily, still naked, who was quietly laying on the bed, waiting with the slightest bit of anticipation for what was to come. Joyce had a slight grin on her face when she saw Emily’s, as the expression was innocently written all over her face.

For a brief moment, amongst the uncertainty and strangeness which had plagued Emily’s body, the one thing that gave her the illusion of normalcy was Joyce’s intoxicating hum, as it told her everything was going to be alright. The smell of powder drifted to her nostrils as plastic and padding were unfolded, inviting her bottom to an even softer cushion than the bed itself. The snug feeling when the tapes were applied had been both literally and metaphorically solidified and emphasized. An odd sense of ecstasy washed over Emily as the atmosphere soaked her through and through. As weird as it was to say, one thing finally felt right.

“There we go!” Joyce chuckled. “Right as rain!” She pulled the kitten shirt over Emily’s head, guiding her arms through the sleeves. And just like Emily suspected, it stopped just about at her midriff. “Feel better now?”

Emily nodded, glad to be somewhat sorted again. All that could make her feel even better now was one of two things: be stuck in an ice-cold freezer or be absolved of this sickness altogether.

“Good. Just let me know if there’s anything else I can do.” Joyce soothed, brushing her fingers through Emily’s hair. “Do you feel like eating right now?”

Even the thought itself had Emily’s insides twisting and turning. “No...” She almost grimaced. “I don’t think I could eat anything right now...” She had a sudden realization, and remembered part of the reason why Joyce had her sleeping in the first place. “Wait, no...I’ll eat--!” A finger was pressed to her lips.

“I appreciate the kindness, Emmy,” Joyce smirked, with the kind of motherly smile that had Emily figured out down to a T. “But I’d much rather you stay honest with me. I don’t think my feelings matter as much as your physical well-being right now anyway.”

She felt like complete trash right now for wasting the time and effort Joyce spent making dinner. Surely she could finish one plate of food! Even that idea was hard to stomach in her mind, though... Still, Emily could only imagine how long Joyce must have spent to make one of her irresistibly delicious meals, and here she was, practically spitting in the woman’s face for turning it down. All the good vibes she had just spent soaking in paled in comparison to the guilt she was now ridden with.

“Now that’s enough,” Joyce in almost a stern voice spoke to Emily. “I think you’re worrying a bit too much about the grownups here.”

Her dominant and motherly voice had Emily’s insides suddenly squirming in all the right ways... She could feel her face growing red.

“We’re trying to make *you* feel better here, not Mommy. Got it, silly?” Her smile shined yet another ray of pleasure down on Emily. “If you want me to be happy, you’ll focus on making yourself nice and healthy again, and that means rest.”

She was at a loss for words, as the cushiony comforts of her bed and underwear were starting to call her back to someplace much more easygoing and pleasurable. Her eyes started to feel a bit tougher to keep open now.

“The only person you’re allowed to be worried about right now is yourself. I want you to call me for *anything* you need, okay? It doesn’t matter what time it is or what I’m doing. If you do start to feel hungry again, I can do something about that too. But, at no time do I *ever* want you to feel bad, selfish, or mean for relying on me so much. Let’s not forget that you’re Mommy’s little girl, after all. This is what you’re *supposed* to do when you’re not feeling well. Even when you’re not sick it’s my job to take care of you. So if I catch someone trying to be a big girl without Mommy’s help, there’s gonna be someone going over my lap for a spanking, got it?” Joyce’s words were so convincing, and impossible to refute. Emily couldn’t tell how serious her threat at the end was, but her initial spiel felt too absolute to defy. She had been put in her place, and the feeling was amazing.

“Mhm...” Emily spoke in a hushed voice. “And I’m sorry...” Though in Joyce’s mind, to be sorry was a ridiculous notion.

“I know you are...and Mommy will know for sure if you can get some shuteye for me, okay? Just worry about getting better. There’ll be plenty of time to spend together *after* you’re not feeling so groggy anymore. I’m gonna go see what we might have for that tummy of yours. Get some rest in the meantime.”

She had already started to murmur, “Thank...you...”

Satisfied, Joyce collected the towel and discarded diaper, dimming the lights and leaving the door a bit more open than she did the first time. She’d probably give the girl another half hour before she came to check in on her.

She couldn’t help but feel a tad bit glum, though, when she came back into the kitchen. Their food had become lukewarm, and she knew Emily’s plate--the one filled with a chicken breast that was cut into bite-sized pieces, likely wouldn’t be touched tonight. Still as a precaution, she wrapped the plate in plastic and set it on the counter, waiting for it to fully cool off until she put it in the fridge.

Silently she took a few bites from her own food while she searched her medicine cabinet, grabbing a few things that might alleviate Emily’s discomfort. The only silver lining there was to this whole ordeal was possibly having more time to do some painting. Maybe even browse for a few more items to buy as well... The thoughts didn’t do much to dampen the mood, however. She was far too preoccupied with Emily’s sudden and unfortunate sickness. Now she didn’t feel like eating so much herself. Clearing her plate, Joyce left the medication on the counter while she switched back to her painting clothes. She set a timer on her phone and picked up a brush.

When Emily came to, she wasn’t exactly feeling much better than before, but at least not so sweaty.

“Emmy,” Joyce cooed, feeling the girl’s forehead. “It’s time for some medicine, okay? Can you sit up for me?”

Drowsily, with blurry vision, Emily allowed herself to be positioned up against the headboard while she tried her best not to stir. She wasn’t 100% aware of what was going on, but the familiar voice was coaxing enough to listen.

“Such a good girl. Think you could swallow a few pills for me? I have some water to wash them down.”

She opened her mouth, feeling a hand deposit two pills, resting them on her tongue. A small stream of cool water came next, slowly stirring her senses back to reality. Swallowing, she could now see Joyce in front of her.

“There we go. Hopefully that’ll do something for your tummy...” She set the glass on the nightstand, turning her focus back to Emily. “Are you feeling any better?”

“Not really...” She wasn’t sure how long she’d been out, but it was true when she said she hadn’t improved. If anything, maybe the sleep helped her forget about the discomfort. “I just wish my stomach didn’t hurt so much...”

“I know...I’ll try and do everything I can to make you feel better, okay? If nothing’s improved by tomorrow, I’ll see what I can do about getting Dr. Hall to visit.”

“But Joyce, I’m sure all I need to do is--”

“Ah-ah! Did we already forget? You’re supposed to let Mommy do all the heavy lifting. Whether it’s just sleep or not, I’d much rather I have a second opinion that I can trust to weigh in on this. All you need to do is tell me how I can make you feel more comfortable. And speaking of which, do you need to use the bathroom?”

“No...” She hadn’t felt any different than before. In all good aspects and bad.

“Okay then,” Joyce helped her lay back down. “But you know...” She whispered into Emily’s ear, “If you wanted to use your diaper too, that’d be perfectly alright with Mommy, okay?” Emily’s cheeks burned at the suggestion, but her heart skipped a beat as well. “I’d have no problem changing you, if that’s what you want. Whatever makes you feel more comfy.”

Using her diaper? While she was sick? The thought bothered Emily, but then again, she was the one who asked for a diaper while Joyce was the one motioning towards panties. They had become total polar opposites indeed. Even if it wasn’t the diaper Emily was directly asking for, rather the experience of Joyce being her guardian, it was still because of herself that she was wearing one. The thought of peeing in her diaper though was a tough pill to swallow--no pun intended--but it wasn’t impossible...

“Try not to dwell on it too much, my little thinker,” Joyce laughed as she gave Emily one last sip of water, then booped her on the nose. “Just know that when the time comes, I’ll encourage any decision you make. Now, I think I’ve kept you awake for long enough. Sweet dreams, my little

kitten! If you need me, just call. I'll leave the rest of the water here if you want some more. I'll be back to check in on you a few more times, but don't expect me to wake you up." A light inside her head suddenly flickered.

"And," she brushed the top of Emily's head one more time, "if you do decide to go potty before I check on you, I'll understand that as you are asking me to change you. And if it's anything like last time, I'm sure you won't be awake for it either!" She chuckled once more, choosing not to poke at the flustered, yet excited expression on Emily's face any further.

The lights in the room faded to nothing once more, and Emily soon found her way back to her dreams.

"So how's Dad been? I know it's been a bit since we last talked..." Joyce brushed back and forth, slowly watching the colors come together.

"Oh, you know how he is," The phone loudly spoke through its speaker. "Same old, same old. You'd think he's still an official chef if you didn't know he was already retired!" The female voice laughed. "I'm sure you'll be just like him whenever you decide to retire. Only thing is that you'll probably be a lot younger than he was when you do it."

Joyce planned to keep working for a fair amount of time, but her mom wasn't exactly wrong... With just a few more years, the company was projected to experience a significant amount of growth; the kind that would set her up for multiple lifetimes, including anyone else she decided to bring with her... She liked working though. It gave her something to do, just like her moments with Emily. It made her feel...*needed*.

"Maybe..." Joyce passively spoke, her mind caught between multiple things. "I like where I am right now though, so I don't see it happening very soon. Maybe I'll just take a few more vacations in the meantime?" She laughed. "I heard London can be nice when it isn't raining. Maybe Australia when the sun isn't scorching?"

"Take me and your father with you too!" Her mother's voice jokingly butt in. "I'll do whatever it takes to get that man away from his hobbies! Maybe we could get John and Hannah to come too! I can't remember the last time we had a family vacation."

"But we do stuff with each other every now and then," Joyce reasoned. "I'm always flying down for Christmas and Thanksgiving."

“Looking for excuses to not spend time with the family, then?” Her mom sarcastically scolded. “I’d be dying to know when you might bring along your significant other with you, too! I’m sure John will someday, but I’d like some grandkids from you too, you know!”

“Mom...” Joyce tried to sound sympathetic, but was a little annoyed after this had been brought up the fiftieth time from just this past year. “I don’t know...maybe soon...”

“Wait, so that *does* mean you’ve met someone?” Joyce’s carelessness had clearly piqued her mother’s interest. “What’s their name? How long have you two been seeing each other?”

The faster her questions came, Joyce oddly found herself becoming more and more flustered. She’d never been on the defensive like this in a while, especially not when she was the one in charge of Emily...Setting down the brush with a sigh, she stood up with the phone, crinkling the plastic tarp underneath, and exited the room.

“No, I have not met anyone,” Joyce tried her best to do damage control. “What I meant by that was the idea of possibly dating soon. It’s just never been appealing, that’s all.” Her heart started to beat when she suddenly second-guessed her tone. Was that too unconvincing? Was it too mechanical?

“Right,” Her mom didn’t sound very convinced. Honestly, it was likely Joyce’s fault for thinking that she could convince the woman, who knew all her quirks, otherwise. “When you do decide to tell me though, let me know if it should be for either Thanksgiving or Christmas I should be setting out a plate!”

She wanted to groan, but kept herself reserved. She took the opportunity to slip Emily’s plate in the fridge. Christmas with Emily...It was so far away, and there was no telling for how long this relationship would continue...but...She could only imagine the sheer cuteness of getting her little girl’s padded bottom up and about on Christmas morning; changing her before opening all the presents Santa brought her, and--

“Joyce? Are you still there?”

“Uhm, yeah. Sorry about that.” Refocusing her train of thought, she poured herself a cup of coffee from the half-filled pot.

“I asked when you might be free? Your dad and I have been talking about coming down to visit you. We haven’t had the chance to see your new place, you know!”

“I don’t know, I’m always busy...” This was partly true. Her mom just tended to be an awful bit pushy. She hoped she wasn’t like her...

“So I should take that as you’re free, then?”

“Wh-...what?” Joyce stammered. “Why would you say that?”

“Coming from the certain someone who could go from one day, saying that they are ‘too busy,’ to hopping on a plane to California the next?”

“Okay, fine, yes! Or, I don’t know...Whatever,” Joyce sighed. “It’s up to you.” Ugh! How she always managed to twist her around her finger always annoyed Joyce. She loved her mom dearly, but man if it wasn’t a bit too much at times...

All she could hear was Joyce’s mom laugh over the phone. “Alright sweetheart! Just remember, your words, not mine!” Joyce took a sip from her mug. She felt especially on edge now with Emily in her life. Keeping her mom from her was like trying to dance on the beach without touching the sand. Impossible, and only a matter of time. Even when they were separated by countless states, she didn’t feel like her secrets were safe...

“Anyways,” Joyce quickly tried to change the topic. “How’s John been? I know you guys keep in touch with him more than I do.” It’s not that her relationship with her brother was bad, it was just that their communication was a bit poor. Heck, the biggest reason she was actively talking with her mom was that she was the one initiating conversation with Joyce. None of it was out of malice; just bad habits.

“A lot like your dad: same old same old. He and Hannah are engaged now, though! They’re planning for the wedding to be sometime early next year! So be ready for that, and let me know if they’re going to need an extra seat! I know you think I’m just trying to tease you, but I’m being serious!”

“Mhmm...” Now it was Joyce’s turn to sound unconvinced. She took another sip from her coffee.

“How’s the weather been there lately? I know we nearly don’t get as much of the seasons as you do, but honestly-” Her voice was drowned out by a third one entering the room.

“Joyce?” From Joyce’s perspective, it didn’t sound digital.

Casually, Joyce turned her head to the kitchen entrance, blessed with a sight that wanted to make her heart melt. In front of her was a small, little girl, with raven-black hair hit with a small case of bedhead. A brown blanket was wrapped around her shoulders almost like a cloak, and in between she could see a blue t-shirt peeking from underneath, including the slight bulge of a white, puffy undergarment. Her face screamed pure innocence, capable of no wrongdoing--yet so bashful looking for no real reason whatsoever.

“Emmy, honey, I thought I said--” The sight had been too breathtaking, as well as too distracting. Wide-eyed, Joyce quickly turned her head back to her phone, seeing that it was still on speaker.

“Uh, Mom?” Joyce wanted to cross her fingers, and hope that somehow her mom hadn’t been listening, or divine intervention itself had disconnected the call.

“Yees?” Her mother’s voice responded expectantly. Her tone had reserved curiosity written all over it. Joyce’s poorly-constructed facade had been ruined, and she knew it too. The best she could do now was hope to delay it... “I’ll...be right back. I just need to take care of something...” Without waiting for a response, she hung the call with a button on her screen, and turned back to the adorable-looking Emily.

“Emmy, you *know* you were supposed to call me if you needed anything.” The taller woman tried to seem stern, but Emily’s current look made that all near-impossible.

“I know, and I’m sorry, but--” What she’d just done seemed to click, however. “I’m sorry! Were you in the middle of a call? If I knew, I wouldn’t have--” She was quickly spun around by a second set of hands, as Joyce ushered her out of the kitchen.

“I think we’ve had enough of being sorry for one day, missy.” Being selfish was something Emily wasn’t a total stranger to now, but not completely familiar with either. “Now tell me, what’s wrong?”

“I...” Emily shuffled the slightest bit. “I needed to use the bathroom...”

“Then let’s get you on the potty!” Joyce cooed, taking the blanket from her and setting it on the couch. She wasn’t going to poke or prod over the diaper, as she’d already promised not to. She was being honest when she said that she wanted to focus on getting Emily back to 100%. Adding any unnecessary stress to that would of course not be happening.

Once inside, Joyce undid the tapes on her diaper and let it drop to the floor. Expectedly, it was dry. Not that there was any problem with that. Her being sick made it an exception.

“Would you like some privacy?” Definitely an exception.

Quietly, Emily nodded her head, too busy looking at the ground than at Joyce.

“Okay then. I’ll give you a few minutes after you flush, then I’ll come back in to put your diaper back on. Sound good?”

She again agreed, and Joyce left the room, closing the door behind her. Now alone with her thoughts, she sighed. What a treat it was to see Emily like that, but god if it couldn’t have been worse timing...It almost felt expected to pay a price for something so amazing. Probably the one person she didn’t want to reveal Emily to, or at least not for a while, and she’d done it. By no means was Emily at fault, but Joyce still didn’t know how she’d fix the situation. She only had the time there was between now, and sending Emily back off to bed to come up with some idea on how to prevent a misunderstanding--or rather, the truth. Maybe she could just hang up? Pretend her phone died? Fat chance. That would be too predictable, coming from her mom’s perspective.

The sound of a toilet flushing could be heard.

She gave it another minute like she promised, then re-entered the bathroom. Already standing, Emily waited pensively with her hands wrapped around each other behind her back.

“Okay, back to bed, Emmy. I’ll be right behind you.” Joyce leaned over and picked up the diaper, following back to Emily’s room. Laying down, Joyce re-diapered the girl, checking to make sure the fit was as snug as it had been before, then settled her underneath the covers once more.

“Still not feeling up to eating right now?” She gave her another sip of water. “Even if it’s just a small snack, I don’t mind, you know.”

Emily shook her head, giving Joyce the response she wasn’t hoping for--for two reasons, actually. The biggest, of course, was Emily’s own well-being, and the second was postponing the call she had on hold...Guess her luck had run out on both fronts.

“And *remember*,” Joyce leaned in close. “If you need me for *anything*, you...?” She looked at Emily expectantly, who looked to be a moment away from giggling.

“Call...” Emily spoke, finishing Joyce’s sentence with the correct answer.

“Good. Don’t let the bed bugs bite!” Joyce left the room, dreadfully returning back to the kitchen, already missing her bonding with Emily. Almost taking a deep breath, she hit the ‘resume’ button.

“Sorry about that, I’m back. I just needed to-”

“You ADOPTED?!” Her mother’s voice shouted, her voice being emphasized by speaker mode.

“Adop-...What? Why would you think that? I was only-”

“You mean to tell me that it wasn’t your kid you were speaking to? Unless-! You two are already that intimate? And I suppose I assumed because the other voice sounded female, but I suppose...”

“Stop! Stop, stop, stop!” Joyce could feel her own cheeks getting hot. She quickly took the phone off speaker and pressed it to her ear. “I did *not* adopt!” In a quieter voice, Joyce near-hissed over the phone.

“And you’re not dating either?”

“No! It’s...it’s...It’s complicated...” Joyce didn’t have the energy or will to explain this over the phone right now. She felt exposed in an uncomfortable way.

“Don’t tell me...married?”

“Mom,” Joyce let out a small groan. She was ready to hang up. “Stop.”

“Fine! Fine! At least tell me her name?”

Outright annoyed, Joyce tapped her fingers on the kitchen table repeatedly, debating whether or not she should release such a crucial piece of information.

“Emily. Her name’s Emily.”

“That’s a beautiful name! Though, I could have sworn I heard you call her Emmy?”

“No, I think you misheard me.” Joyce was quick to correct her, but she didn’t really consider whether or not she sounded convincing. Be it by logic or force, she wanted to steer her mom in the other direction. The cat was already out of the bag, but there was no reason the kitten had to be too... “She’s...She isn’t feeling well right now.” A sudden idea struck Joyce; a way to

somehow turn this situation around, or at least deflect some of the pressure. “I...I think she has a stomach bug.”

“Oh, that’s never any fun. Poor thing. When did she come down with it? She’s been resting, right?”

“She only told me how she was feeling after work today,” Joyce relaxed a little; relieved that she finally wasn’t being bombarded with such hard-hitting questions. “Since then it’s all been downhill. I offered to make her something, but she doesn’t feel like eating either.”

“Well, that’s no surprise. You and John weren’t very active either when you were like that. It’s no surprise, but all I know is sleep to be the best medicine for that. Maybe some over-the-counter medication too.”

“Really? There’s nothing else I can do for her?” Joyce wasn’t thrilled to hear she’d already reached her limit. “You don’t think it’s worth calling in my doctor?”

“Honestly, for a girlfriend you’d think they’re your daughter with how concerned you sound!”

“I *told* you, she isn’t my--”

“Relax! I’m kidding. You always seem to have such a temper whenever we talk about your love life...What I’m trying to say is that you’re worrying *too* much.” Her mom laughed from the other line, while Joyce’s brow furrowed. “For someone that runs a medical business though, I think you’re fretting over Emily more than you should. Call the doctor, if that will put you at ease, but I can’t imagine they’ll have much else to say. Your heart’s in a good place, and I’m sure Emily knows that you care, but a cure-all for something like the common cold isn’t feasible. Not in today’s age at least.”

“...I’m sorry...You’re right. I just want her to be okay.” Another sip of coffee wouldn’t do much to calm her nerves, but it at least set her in the right direction.

“I know you do. And if there’s one thing I could suggest, maybe put a cool washcloth over her head? I can’t say how much it’ll do for the stomach pains, but it’d probably keep her from feeling too warm. If she’s like any other person, it will.”

“Thank you...I’ll do that after I hang up.”

“Good. Now, are you planning to tell me how long you two have known each other?” Her mom’s voice gradually reeled back into its excited tone.

Rather than being irked, Joyce couldn’t help but smile with a sigh.

“Three weeks? Four? It’s on its way to being a month, I think.”

“That long? I’ve never heard of you being with someone for longer than a week! At least, no one that you’ve told me about...”

“No, mom. There’s been no one I haven’t told you about.” Though, there would have been exactly one, had Emily not wandered into the kitchen. Not that Joyce could ever be mad at her. It was impossible to be angry at someone so adorable! “She’s...special.”

“Special? You’ll need to elaborate for me. What’s she like?”

“She’s kind, considerate, thoughtful...affectionate.”

“Well, that’s great and all, but so is your father.” It felt like Joyce had been walloped over the head. “I’m asking what *Emily* is like, not for some generic person that’s as cookie-cutter as the rest!”

“Well, she’s open-minded, but can be a bit defensive whenever I try to buy her things. She doesn’t like it when I spend money on her.”

“Do you let her spend money on you?”

“...No...”

“I wonder why she might feel that way, then...”

“Anyways,” Joyce tried to usher the conversation along. “She likes to sleep a lot. She’s almost like a cat,” She couldn’t help but sound a slight giggle at the thought. “She’s always managing to surprise me in her own ways, too. Just when I think I’ve figured her out, she’s always pulling the curtain from my eyes.”

“Anything else?”

Joyce could admittedly fawn over Emily for what would feel like hours, but kept a mental block in her mind from sharing too much about her. The line between what was considered their adult, and mommy relationships was mostly there, but hazy enough for Joyce to keep her distance.

“She has trouble being honest with herself, or is at least trying to make me happy more than herself. In the end though I think we’re both in a place that’s mutually good. Oh! And she hates horror, too! Last week we were trying to watch a movie, and she picked out a scary one. It didn’t seem like she knew what she was getting into though,” Joyce couldn’t help but chuckle from remembering. “Sure enough, thirty minutes into the movie I was ready to pull the plug for her sake. But then...” Joyce let her voice trail off, as she realized the territory she was creeping into. “Well...I think you get the idea.”

There was almost a snuffle over the phone.

“Mom? Are you alright?”

“Hm? I’m fine? What do you mean? I’m just a little surprised, that’s all.”

“Surprised about what?”

“You! I don’t think I’ve ever heard you talk about anyone like this in, well, ever!”

“...Well...” Joyce could feel her face turn the slightest bit red. “I don’t know...Emily’s special...that’s all.”

“She sounds like it, dear. I look forward to meeting her!”

She could feel her heart tripping over a pebble at the sound of those words. Introducing Emily to her parents...Her parents meeting Emily...How would that even go? Would it even go? It was too much to consider; too much to think.

“But...” Joyce’s voice became a little thick. “You don’t think it’s...strange?”

“What is?”

“Because, she’s a...”

“‘She’?”

“ ... ”

“Joyce, for a dignified businesswoman, you really can quake over the smallest of things...” Her mother sighed. “Honey, for the longest time, your father and I have only ever wanted you and your brother to be happy. However you achieve that means is completely up to you, and who are we to judge that? Not that my opinion or anyone else’s matters, but no, I don’t think it’s strange, whoever you decide to be with. What concerns me the most is you being happy. Besides, didn’t I already say that I wanted to meet her? If there’s anyone that can keep my daughter on the hook for this long, clearly it means they’re a keeper!”

It was Joyce’s turn to wipe a tear from her eye, as she took the final sip from her mug.

“Thank you, mom...”

“Thank you for letting me in for once! See how productive we can be with a second set of ears?” Even Joyce couldn’t help but laugh at that. “Now let’s get into the nitty-gritty, though. How did you two meet?”

“Well...” She stopped to think for a second, then stood to get a second pot of coffee going. “I was driving back from work...”